

INDIGENOUS/ CULTURAL/SPIRITUAL HEALING PRACTICES: A report of interaction with traditional healers in Ogun State South West Nigeria .

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Abstract

Background:

Traditional belief systems in Africa impact the perceptions, attitudes, and management of mental illness. Cultural beliefs play a major role in the diagnosis and treatment of many mental health problems.

Aim:

To assess the cultural beliefs and practices of traditional healers/herbalists in Ogun state South-west Nigeria

Method:

Traditional healers were invited for discussion to assess their beliefs and practices of management of people living with mental illness

Outcome/ Result:

The interaction with the healers revealed that they believed that mental illness results from spiritual attack and or hereditary. In treatment, they make use of herbal concoction with dosing depending on the severity of the illness. They place them in shackles and chains to prevent absconding.

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1. Background.

Traditional belief systems in Africa impact the perceptions, attitudes, and management of mental illness. Cultural beliefs play a major role in the diagnosis and treatment of many mental health problems.

Traditional healing centers may constitute community resources for people with mental illness in a culture where they are recognized and valued. Traditional healers often have high credibility and

deep respect among the population (Sorketi et al, 2012). They are knowledgeable about local treatment options, as well as about the physical, emotional, and spiritual lives of the people they serve, and are able to influence their behavior. Therefore, it is imperative to consider traditional healers as partners in an expanded response to mental disorders and to maximize the contribution that can be made by traditional healers in meeting the needs of those who require some form of mental health service (Anderson & Kaleeba, 2002).

There are several ethnic groups in Africa with varied beliefs and values. These ethnic groups have their own ways and practices in the management of mental disorders.

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Traditional healing systems existed in African communities before the advent of the Euro-American practice. It includes not only the indigenous ethno-religious group but also the Islamic and charismatic Christian faith healing practices. This system often provides a different explanation than psychiatry for the etiology of mental disorders. Witchcraft, sorcery, spirit possession, supernatural afflictions, and violations of taboos are frequently invoked by different healers. (Makanjuola 1989 and Matthew Heaton et al, 2013)

In Nigeria, healers with this traditional belief are still very popular among the people. Nigeria for example is made up of several ethnic groups but the three largest are the Yorubas, Hausa/Fulani, and the Igbos. The Yorubas are one of the most studied ethnographic groups in sub-Saharan Africa and this holds true within medical anthropological and psychiatric literature as well.

The traditional healers live with the people and share the same cultural values with the people. In the spirit of integrating mental health into primary health care and achieving the goal of community participation in mental health care, the traditional healers need to be well investigated and carried along to improve accessibility and affordability in mental health outcomes. It will also help to turn their negative practices into positivity.

2. Methods.

In commemoration of the WHO World Mental Health Day of 2021 with the theme, 'Community Mental Health and Sustainable Development Goals' we did a collaboration with the traditional healers in the Abeokuta metropolis in the year 2021. Three major traditional healers were visited and interviewed on their beliefs and mode of practice. Their environments were also assessed. These traditional healers alongside other traditional healers were invited to a close circle discussion at our meeting place. Orthodox mental health practitioners that were in attendance were Medical Doctors (Psychiatrists), Laboratory Sci-

entists, psychologists, pharmacists, Social Workers, and Student interns.

3. Outcome/ Result.

In the course of the discussion, it was established that traditional healers do not believe in classification of disorder. They believe all mental illness is caused by spiritual attacks and sometimes by heredity. They do not feel it is necessary for patients to bathe daily as they are always in shackles and chains to prevent absconding. They bathe patients twice a week. Patients sleep on the bare floor and some are left to sleep outside.

The management modality is appeasing the gods/deities. They also give herbal concoctions to their patients to drink. The dosing of this concoction is however not absolutely quantified. They give in volume depending on the severity of the illness. They put their clients in shackles and chains especially the uncooperative and aggressive ones to prevent absconding.

The medical team counseled the healers on the possible causes of mental illness and, the need for good hygiene. The use of chains and shackles was also discouraged as it is not dignifying and could be traumatic to the patients. A better accommodation was also advocated for their patients. They were encouraged to promptly refer patients for orthodox care in mental health hospitals.

A year after, a follow-up visit was made to the traditional healers (that was in 2022) and it was observed that patients were no longer in shackles, the place used as a center for treatment had been reorganized and more habitable and the environment more hygienic. Instead of sleeping on the bare floor as they normally do, comfortable arrangement has been made for them. They are beginning to refer patients whose cases were beyond their ability to a psychiatric hospital.

According to the traditional rulers, all these were possible because of their engagement with the medical team in 2021.

4. Discussion.

This interaction with the traditional healers has been impactful evidenced by the outcome and it

is also very revealing. The revelation is also in keeping with the documented traditional beliefs and practices on mental illness. This engagement was done in Ogun state South-west Nigeria which is a domain of the Yoruba ethnic group. Roger Makanjuola (1989) in his article ‘Yoruba traditional healers in psychiatry’ opined that customarily, traditional healers had been responsible for the treatment of mental illnesses in Nigeria. He identified factors in the healers-patient relationship in Yoruba culture that Promoted efficacy in treatment. The “omnipotence” of the healer through his dealings with the spirit world, and the healer’s impressive performance. During divination, the patient does not even tell the diviner what his problem is the diviner learns it through his spirit contacts. He is often a good intuitive psychologist and very much in tune with the peculiar stresses of his culture. He often makes impressive “blind” diagnoses.

His use of sacred and magical formulae, gestures, and paraphernalia. The anxiety of the patient, is often deliberately increased by the healer who may warn him of serious consequences should he fail to follow directions. The patient’s anxiety is in marked contrast to the healer’s confidence and optimism. The diviners and other traditional men had the power to heal many cases of mental disorders by virtue of the fact that they were able to convince their patients that they had the power to heal mental disorders

Their patients got better because they believed that healers were making them better, an idea that had explanatory powers within prevailing psychotherapeutic models. Ultimately, the traditional beliefs of the people are in tandem with the explanation of the healer so it is easy for people to fall easily for the treatment model.

The healers are closer to the people and easily assessable hence they are the first point of call when people are confronted with the challenges of mental illness. It is vital to establish channels of collaboration and common understandings between traditional healers and mental health professionals in those countries where the majority of people with mental illness consult traditional healers first

The belief of the healers in the heredity causation of mental illness is significant. This is an established reason why among the Yorubas they do home visits/ investigations to be sure there is no significant chronic disorder before they will consent to marriage. This is indeed preventive but is also stigmatizing.

5. Challenges of Traditional Treatment.

- Shackling of Patients: This infringe on their right according to articles 1 and 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- Herbal medications used in treating mentally sick patients are mostly prepared in
- Non-hygienic environments, exposing them to contamination.
- Lack of knowledge of drug interactions by Traditional healers.
- Lack of regulatory framework or policy.
- Mutual suspicions between Traditional healers and trained medical practitioners

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Author biography

Larry Olawunmi Salako is a Nigerian social worker with over 16 years of experience. She had her national certificate of education in languages (1994 – 1997) OSIELE ABEOKUTA NIGERIA, after her secondary school education in Nigeria. She proceeded to the University of Ibadan Nigeria to obtain her 1st degree in (B.A) YORUBA.

Of her passion for caring for people and community welfare, she went back to the University of Ibadan Nigeria to obtain her master's degree in social work (MSW 2003 – 2006). Also had another master's degree in drug and alcohol studied from Universita del Piemonte Orientale, Italy.

She was employed in the service of Federal Neuropsychiatric Hospital Aro, Abeokuta in the year 2007 and has risen to the post of Chief Social Welfare Officer. She equally works with several Non-governmental Organizations as their Community Liaison Officer. Some of the NGOs include Tunde and Friends (TAFF), and HOPE INITIATIVE RESOURCES. She had attended several conferences both locally and internationally.

She is happily married with children.