



The Role of Traditional Healers in Counseling, Health Promotion and Community Education among the Yoruba People of Nigeria: A Case Study of the Oshun Festival

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ABSTRACT

Research evidence shows that approximately 80% of the Nigerian population depends on traditional healthcare. This paper examines the role of some individuals recognized as healthcare providers (based on the culturally held unique belief and knowledge systems about health and disease) by the Yoruba people of Nigeria. The paper describes some cultural explanatory models of disease and approaches to healthcare (including medical diagnosis and treatment of diseases and cultural healthcare practices) among the Yorubas. The spiritual or religious frameworks of traditional healing by the people are highlighted, especially with regard to mind-body interactions including the moral, emotional, and spiritual aspects of healing as well as the conceptions of environmental forces which put people at risk for ill-health, cultural remedies and coping strategies in the treatment of ill-health. Also discussed, is the employment of counselor-initiated consultations/interviews and human relationships employed by traditional healers and the parallel which could be drawn between these traditional practices and Western-oriented practices such as the Rogerian client-centered approach to therapy. The conclusion of the paper is with regard to the need for collaborations between traditional healers and Western psychological and or healthcare providers. In this way, the applications of psychological knowledge for health promotion and illness prevention would be more comprehensive, holistic and context related thereby leading to the benefits of the patients and the general public.

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to examine traditional healers' roles and the ways in which they provide counseling, health promotion, and education to the people within the Yoruba communities in Nigeria. The results will help to build understanding and facilitate collaboration between traditional healers and the more mainstream health practitioners.

Traditional healing practices have existed in many or most cultures since their beginnings as a culture. Today, traditional healing practices such as Ayurveda, Shamanism, Spiritism, and many others are re-emerging in large North American and European cities, and are being practiced alongside contemporary Western forms of counseling and healthcare. These forms of traditional healing generally include a system of classifying and explaining illness and distress, as well as ideas about the best treatment for particular problems.

Evidence suggests that traditional healers in the West are visited by people both from their own cultural/ethnic communities and from other cultural groups. Members of those communities may do the following: (a) seek the help of a traditional healer instead of seeing a Western doctor or counselor; (b) go to a Western doctor or counselor for certain illnesses/problems but to a traditional healer for others; or (c) seek help from both Western and traditional practitioners for the same problem.

There are many reasons that a member of an ethnic community might go to a traditional healer instead of a Western doctor or counselor. For instance, Western mental health practices like therapy might be seen as ineffective, or not suitable for particular types of problems. A person might be intimidated or mistrustful of Western practitioners, or there may be no services offered in his/her first language. Traditional healers are qualified and legitimate within their communities and are the first (and sometimes only) resource to which many people turn for their healthcare and psychological/emotional needs.

Anjorin & Wada (2022) found out in their review that traditional healers are indispensable in the provision of mental health services in Nigeria. They posited that approximately 80% of the people with serious mental health illness are unable to access mental healthcare and these services are even more limited in

rural and undeserved areas (Demyttenaere et al., 2004). Yaro et al., (2020) reviewed several studies and found evidence supporting the claim that traditional healers in Ghana can deliver effective psycho-social therapies, enabling social engagement and enhancing coping mechanisms. Mbwayo, Ndetei, Mutiso & Khasakhala (2013) found that many countries with similar health systems like Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Kenya have utilized and showed the effectiveness of traditional healers in treating mental illness. Patel, Simunyu & Gwanzura (1997) found out that traditional healers in Zimbabwe and Nigeria may provide simple explanations, which are often absent in clinical consultations, and could provide a more holistic/spiritual concept of mental illness, which is more acceptable to patients and consistent with local cultural values and beliefs.

Johnson (2021) used analytical and thematic analysis to discover that the "Babalawo" (traditional healers) among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, provide services and counseling that are reminiscent of counseling profession in the West. They also help clients to manage their lives and live in harmony in their communities. According to Makinde (1974), the Yorubas are a people with their own philosophy and worldview of counseling with the Babalawo as the medium through which healing and counseling are practiced. Babalawos are traditional healers comprising of diviners (Ifa priests) and herbalists (Onisegun or Adahunse).

Furthermore, the Yorubas believe that diseases, sickness and other misfortunes are beyond human imagination and are caused by extraordinary influence of the malevolent spirits. As a result, people resort to the Babalawo to find out the causes, or to know the wish of the Orisha (the deity god/gods that is/are responsible). Babalawos possess skills, expertise and knowledge which are learned through several years of apprenticeship. They are client-focused and base their healing powers on the Olodunmare- the almighty God. In treating their clients, they use divination, incisions, dream interpretations, sacrifices, herbal therapies, dances, invoking the gods (Orisha) and ancestral worships. The effectiveness of the healing process is because the healers share the culture, experience, understanding, worldview of diseases and illnesses of their patients.

In order to gain an understanding of traditional healers and their practice, this review paper used the

grounded theory method to analyze and identify themes that emerge from the reviewed literature. The themes are subsequently described below. Moreover, cultural psychology provides a rich framework for understanding the intricate interplay between Yoruba traditional healers, cultural practices and community health. It also provides a lens to explore how the traditional healers perceive health, illness causation and healing processes.

African Traditional Religion and the Healing Process

African traditional religion is a vital part of the African cultural heritage, as is African art (Mbiti, 1990). The traditional religion mirrors very substantially the healing traditions of the African people as well as the spiritual and mystical character of the African culture (Parrinder, 1954). Traditional healing and curing techniques in Africa make extensive use of genuine religious-medical knowledge; and the diagnosis and treatment of illnesses seem to have a clearly modern psychotherapeutic application. The method of healing is perhaps unique because it reflects basic African beliefs, values, and attitudes toward illnesses (Bojuwoye, 2005; White, 2015; Ayinde, Ojagbemi, Makanjuola & Gureje, 2021).

Religion is by far one of the richest parts of the African heritage. It is found in all areas of a typical African human life, having dominated the thinking of African people to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, social life, political organizations, and even their economic activities. It might therefore be right to say that religion is closely bound with the traditional African way of life, while at the same time this way of life has shaped religion as well.

It is this religious distinction that gives its followers a sense of security and adjustment in life. Within the religious way of life, people know who they are, how to act in different situations, and how to go about solving their problems. As far as it goes, it seems to have supplied the answers to many of the problems of this life even if these may not have been the right answers in every case. Essentially, this is what healing is all about (Olupona & Sulayman, 1993).

African religious functions are usually carried out more on a communal than an individual basis because Africans are generally communal in nature. Religious ceremonies are performed mainly in a group of the

family, by relatives, by the whole population of one area, or by those engaged in a common occupation. It is an essential part of the way of life of each distinct group of people and its influence covers all of life, from the birth of a person to long after the person's death. Basic religious ideologies are usually taught informally to children through conversations, proverbs, incantations, and myths, as well as in practice of the religion itself (Idowu, 1985; Lambo, 1978; Prince, 1964). Young people learn about it through participating in religious activities such as ceremonies, festivals, and rituals.

Traditional Religious Healing Process of the Oshun Festival

The Oshun festival is one of such African traditional religious ceremonies held in one of the Yoruba areas of Nigeria. It definitely has a basic culture-bound healing value because people always feel relieved and relaxed after going through its prescribed activities. The major part of the festival is held once a year in a town called Osogbo, 60 miles from Ibadan, which is Africa's largest city. Inhabitants of the town speak the Yoruba language and the town is bordered by a river called the Oshun River. Historically, the river has a myth about its existence and most parts of the ceremony are held around the river. The river is viewed as a divine symbol. Oshun, as explained by Lucas (1970), is derived from "Su", an ancient Egyptian god.

On the occasion of the Oshun festival, indigenes and other followers join in a religious ceremony designed to help alleviate problems, soothe over-tensed minds, and provide succor for the needy. Worshipers are usually gathered at the Oshun river bank clothed in immaculate white robes on dates that are announced by the chief priest following the occurrence of certain sights. Priests and priestesses are normally identified in their red robes with a white background and they serve as healers and leaders of worship. Gifts, offerings, and sacrifices are made by individual worshipers according to the enormity (weight) of their problems and the diagnoses of attending priests. The festival is accompanied by music and dancing. Music gives the people an outlet to the emotional expression of their religious life and serves as a powerful means of communication and catharsis. It also helps to unite the singing and dancing groups in expressing their fellowship and participation in the healing process. Other communication tools used in the religious festival include riddles, proverbs, and

wise sayings. The ceremony is occasionally punctuated by silence, during which the chief priest prays and seeks for group formation according to the various problems identified. As soon as these groups are formed, priests and priestesses are assigned to them to conduct the group healing process. This takes the form of confession of sins, interpretation of dreams, and the traditional “bathing” in the river. The process is rounded up when worshipers get into the larger group and listen to religious messages and other means of take-home healing assignments. There is finally a dance of victory over sins, taboos, and myths, which takes all worshipers to their homes for further individual family celebrations. Those who need additional help and consultations go to the shrine- the Oshun Shrine.

The Role of Myths in the Healing Process

In Africa, and indeed Nigeria, there were no written records of ideas and events of the past, myths have formed the most effective means of keeping ideas circulating from one generation to the next. African theories are created and beliefs are constructed through myths and indeed, superstitions. For this reason, myths form the cornerstone of African traditional healing. Myths are developed in Africa to explain (a) human phenomena such as creation, death, illness, disease, and relationships among people (including the dead); (b) natural occurrences such as rains; and (c) disasters such as famine, drought and epidemics.

African myths serve various purposes. They seek to foster socialization and help to counteract anxiety caused by ontological beliefs or by the prospect of disappearing into nothingness (Frank, 1978). They also engender psychological, emotional, and mental well-being. The effects of myths on the emotional states of individuals can at best be inferred but are not usually scientifically validated.

For example, in the Oshun area of Nigeria, there are myths about God, about the origin of man, about natural forces and objects, about various habits of living and about the behavior of things around us. Such myths have been known to give answers to the “how”, “where”, and “why” questions that people have raised concerning the universe as a whole and about man’s immediate life in particular. Thus, in myths, there lies a rich wealth of African ideas, beliefs, values, literary expression, and the exercise of human imagination. It is the belief of the people in

the myth that the Oshun river is a potent force that serves as a healing tool for its worshipers. This article of faith is what has helped to maintain the continued practice of the Oshun festival.

Rituals and the Healing Environment

The Oshun river is so used because of the people’s belief in its symbolization of purification and cleansing, not only of bodily but also of mystical impurities contracted through broken taboos, the commitment of a crime, or contamination by evil magic or a curse (see Idowu, 1985). The shrine, on the other hand, is where most offerings, prayers, and some sacrifices are made. It symbolizes the meeting point between the heavens and the earth, and therefore, the invisible and visible worlds. The Oshun shrine is a man-made structure containing an altar. The priests normally sit next to the altar, on which there are numerous healing objects such as oil, water, and candles. The inside of the shrine is normally quiet and well lit with traditional candles- a symbolization of peace and brightness. Individuals seeking help are usually seen on a one-to-one basis or in small family groups.

The Yoruba Male and Female Traditional Healers

The healers are the priests and priestesses who act as intermediaries between individuals and God. They conduct the act of worship, formal and informal, and attend to people’s needs. People go to them for their needs and problems and it is their (healers’) duty to approach God through prayer, offerings, sacrifices, and the interpretations of dreams and visions. The healers are men and women who have religious knowledge and who know how to lead others in religious activities. They are professionals who are well trained and highly skilled. In some ways, they are the embodiment of what is the best in their religion. They embody the presence of God among people and uphold the faith and benefits of the people. They are keepers of religious treasures and knowledge. The priests and priestesses, as healers, are often described as wise, intelligent, and talented, often understanding abilities and personalities. They act not only as priests and priestesses but often listeners to people’s problems of all kinds (as counselors or advisers). Parents go to them for advice about their children, people consult with them for advice on traveling or when farms are not yielding good crops. Their personal magnetism, strengthened by the faith of people in what they do, is responsible for their healing effectiveness. There are women

priests (priestesses) who are seen to be married to the divinity and until permission is given, which is not easily done, they may not marry any man.

Healing Methods

Illness is generally regarded as a misfortune involving the entire person, directly affecting his or her relationship with the spirit world (with God) and with other members of his or her group. Classifications of illness bear no close relation to those of Western medicine. Illnesses tend to be viewed as symbolic expressions of internal conflicts, or disturbed relationships with others, or both. As such, they are not sharply distinguished into mental or bodily states. Healing is therefore done on an individual or group basis, mostly the latter, with the group acting as support. In individual methods, the healer makes a diagnosis by performing certain acts through prayers and vision and then offering a remedy, which may be in the form of bathing in the Oshun river or making offerings and sacrifices at the shrine. The healing power of this procedure lies in the people's expectation of help based on their perception of the healer as having special powers derived from his or her ability to communicate with the spirit world and with God. Other forms of healing involve the long-term two-person relationship at the shrine, that is, between the priest and patient, especially in typical cases of barrenness of women. For this, the woman, for example, is asked to keep a wood carving for a period of time, during which she is asked to focus her mind on the object imagining what it says. The priest (healer) then interprets what the woman relates, and this normally brings relief and cure. The third healing method is the group approach, which is marked in the form of the festival described earlier. The Oshun festival has become a "mecca" for the healing of various ailments of Yoruba people in Nigeria.

The apparent success of the healing methods based on these religious and traditional ideologies suggests that the healing power of the priests and priestesses resides in the patients' state of mind and in their faith, not in the validity and logic of the objects. The core of the techniques of healing as it is used in the Oshun festival conforms with Frank's (1973) concepts that lies in the healer's ability to arouse the patients' hopes, the ability to bolster their self-esteem, the ability to stir them emotionally, and the ability to strengthen their ties with their supportive group in the environment. For healers to be able to perform in this

manner, they must be those whom patients can depend on for help and those who hold out hope of relief to them. Definitely, patients' expectations are aroused by the healers' attributes, by their culturally determined healers' attributes, by their culturally determined healing roles, or by all of these. Healing is thus based on a conceptual scheme, consistent with the patients' assumptive worldview that prescribes a set of activities.

Conclusion

The religious system is one that African ancestors have developed in response to the people's life situation and it has served a useful purpose to them because it has given satisfactory answers to their problems. It has quenched their spiritual thirst, and it has helped them to find an integrated and meaningful interpretation and understanding of themselves and their universe.

With modernization and technological advancement, the problems and needs of African people have changed, religious practices, such as the Oshun festival, may have their place in the healing system, but they may not provide all the answers to people's needs and problems. However, any healing method designed for African people should have such indigenous practices as their base.

The structure of standard Western counseling seems to be in conflict with the African culture, especially with regard to introspection, philosophical and oratorical discussions, and attempts to commune with the "spirit" or ancestral world. Western-type counseling, therefore, will be more meaningful with African clients if the practice is modified to accommodate traditional African beliefs, myths, and cultural relevance. It may be useful for a counselor, for example, to allow African clients who have beliefs in particular traditional ceremonies and rituals to do so while continuing in counseling. This will allow them to be at home with their culture as well as relieve their anxiety.

It is therefore suggested that: (1) Counselors who wish to work with African clients need to familiarize themselves with the intricacies of the African culture. (2) Counselor education programs should focus on cross-cultural aspects of counseling to stimulate further research on cultural beliefs of peoples as they relate to Western counseling practice. (3) Cross-cultural counseling will also help equip counselors to

provide service to clients from different cultural backgrounds.

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