

HEALING IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY: A case study of the Ibibio People of Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

Undoubtedly man has always been faced with health challenges. The case has not been any different for the African man. The confrontations of these health issues have continued to spur many Africans from time immemorial to ways, manners and approaches in tackling them as they continue to surface. Attempts have been made to meticulously trace the forms and various practices of health and healing methods prevalent in the African society. Other methods have also been explored and discovered which have found relevance in our modern society; herbs, leaves, roots, barks, to mention but a few. Plants that are considered medicinal have also been looked into, and the medicine men have not been left out. We adopted the phenomenological approach in the discussion of this subject. It conclude that if the dimension of technology could be brought into the healing methods in African traditional society especially in this era to standardize and regulate its prescriptions, it would gain international relevance and recognition.

Keywords: *Healing, Traditional, African Society.*

Introduction

Before the invasion of the English man with his culture, beliefs and practices into Africa, the African has always had her own unique way of handling her health challenges. Various healing methods had always evolved depending on the locality and availability of raw materials which is largely herbs and leaves. It can therefore be categorically stated that the African man's medication and method of healing is the proper application of herbal mixtures. This uniqueness is what actually makes the African man.

It will not be out of place to say that one cannot understand what healing means in the traditional society without a proper understanding of our people's religious philosophy of life. Traditional religion permeates every department of life. Mbiti (1970) commenting on this has rightly said;

“Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seed or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony, and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of Parliament.”

Religion so permeates life in the traditional society that there is hardly any aspect of life that is not in one way or another influenced by religion. That was why Mbiti (1975) opines that: "There is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life."

The African firmly believes that the world of matter can neither exist nor operate without the world of spirit. Therefore every action of man is necessarily linked up with the invisible powers that steer the course of this universe. Man realizes that he can do nothing of himself without the help of the powers above him, namely, the supreme God, the divinities, the spirits and the ancestors.

Since the force of religion is universal in the life of the African, it is certain that one cannot understand the African adequately without a good knowledge of his religious beliefs and practices especially the life-long influence of those beliefs on his life, whether as a traditionalist or as a convert to Christianity or even as one who simply lives in a typical African environment no matter what his religion may be. In order to understand better the extent to which traditional religion influences the life of the African, it should be borne in mind that the African is born into religious environment. Every society has its own religious system in which people live, move and have their being. The individual naturally grows up in this system. The individual simply assimilates the system (Mbiti 1970).

The Development of African Traditional Healing

Healing in African traditional society has its root in the richly blessed natural resources which she has discovered over time to be medicinal. Owete and Gbule (2004), outline the history and origin of medicinal practice in African thus; Herbal medication which is an integral part of traditional medicine was the first system of healing which mankind knew. Looking at it from a chronological perspective, it was herbal medicine that gave birth to orthodox medicine. That means that without the herbs and herbal medication, modern medicine could not have existed. During the creation of this world, God also created a beautiful garden where He placed the trees of life; the leaves of the tree were for the healing of all the nations. The Creator told Adam and Eve to eat freely of that tree of life because it was designed to keep them well. That tree corresponds with the tree of life, which the redeemed are going to enjoy in the paradise of God. When man was expelled from the Garden of Eden because of his sin and he had no more access to the tree of life, God added herbs to man's diet when He said; "Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee and thou shall eat the herbs of the field" (Gen. 3:18). Therefore God added herbs to the diet of man and He expects man to eat these herbs to keep on being healthy. Herbs are part of the remedial agencies which God has put in place for afflicted humanity. It is God's plan that man and woman everywhere should raise herbs in their gardens. People are also expected to gather herbs that grow wild everywhere and use them

when the need arises. They further add that, right from the beginning of man's life, God has put herbs in place for our benefits. If we would come back to God's original design for all humanity, disease would be rare while abundant life would be very common.

The Medicine-Man

Medicine-men are found in every African society. They may be either men or women. They carry out the work of healing the sick and putting things right when they go wrong. Their knowledge and skill have been acquired and passed down through the centuries. Since in every homestead and every village, people fall sick or meet with accidents and misfortunes; medicine-men are considered to be extremely important. They are the ones who come to the rescue of the individuals in matters of health and general welfare. Every homestead is, therefore, within reach of at least one and often several medicine-men.

How People Become Medicine-Men

In some cases children inherit the profession of medicine-men from their parents; in other cases a person feels the call to become a medicine man. This call or inclination may come suddenly or gradually. Where it comes suddenly, people say that they are called in a dream or through constant visit by spirit especially of a living dead. The call to become a medicine man may come to a person at any stage or age.

A person then associates himself with a skilled medicine man in order to start training. This training can last up to eight years or even longer. It consists of learning the names and nature of herbs, trees, roots, seeds, bones, bird and animal dropping (excreta), and many other things which are used for the making of medicines. It also consists of learning how to diagnose diseases and people's trouble of every sort, how to handle the patients, how and what to prescribe as the cure and in general how to perform one's duty as medicine man. All these may be called the science of medicine. Owete (2013) outlined the following plants to have medicinal values and potency of healing in the traditional African society.

1. **Cascara Bark:** Plants or parts used in galenical preparations.
2. **Dioscorea Yams:** Used for hemi synthesis of medical compound (e.g. Hemi synthesis of sex hormones).
3. **The Palm Tree:** This has been in use from the pre-colonial era. Its uses cut across medicare, body skin care and nutrition. It has been well appreciated that people with body or skin infection can have their healing through the proper application of the end product of this African richly endowed natural plant.

Medicine-Men as Healers

Major illnesses and troubles are usually regarded, treated and explained as religious experiences in African societies. This is where religion comes into the picture in the work of the medicine man. Minor complaints like stomach upsets,

headaches, cuts and skin ulcers are normally treated with herbs and other medicines generally known to each community. But persistent and serious complaints require the knowledge and skill of the medicine-man. Among other things, he has to find out the religious cause of such illness or complaint? the cause is usually said to be magic, sorcery, witchcraft, broken taboos or the work of spirits. The medicine man prescribes a cure which may include herbs, religious rituals and the observance of certain prohibitions or directions. The medicine-man takes preventive measures, in addition, to assure the sufferer that the trouble will not come again. These measures also involve religious steps and observances. Therefore, the medicine-man serves as a religious leader, who performs religious rituals in carrying out his work.

Medicine-Men as Counselors

Furthermore, the medicine men act, not only as doctor but often as listeners to people's trouble of all kinds and as their counselor or adviser. When cattle's die, their owners go to him for help; when children disobey parents, the parents go to him for advice; when someone is going on a long journey, he consults the medicine man for protective medicines. This protective medicine according to Nana (2014), could be used to protect a compound or a car from accident, certain charms are put in a pot or any other container, which is either buried or hung in the compound or in the boot of a car. Some others are buried in bottles or pots with neck protruding above the surface of the ground. Some medicine men are also the priests of their areas. They pray for their communities, take the lead in public religious rituals, and in many ways, symbolize the wholeness or health of their communities. They deal in medicine which means much more than just the medicine which cures the sick. It is believed that their medicine not only cures the sick but also drives away witches, exorcises spirits, brings success, detects thieves, protects from danger and harm, removes curse, and so on. Medicine in African societies has a wider meaning.

Bone-Setting

The art of bone-setting is a rare specialty restricted to very few practitioners. The bone-setters treat cases of fractures. They are widely known in their area of practice. Bone-setters are not available in most towns in Ibibioland. As a result of this, people needing their services have to be conveyed to the nearest or most famous bone-setters known to their relations.

The traditional bone-setters were conversant with the classical signs of fracture which are swelling, pain, angulations, with or without abnormal mobility and crepitation on palpation. They, however, do not use x-rays as an aid to diagnosis. The disadvantages of this are obvious. Cases of green-stick fractures or a crack in a bone which is not a through-and-through break may be used. Also, it is not impossible that some patients, who though might have been exposed to trauma and had the clinical signs of swelling, pain, loss of function but with crepitation may in fact not have fracture but may be mistaken as having one and treated as such.

The manipulation done while resetting broken bones and hot fermentation

done without analgesics or anaesthetics cause excruciating pain to the patients. Similar practice of traditional surgery with analgesics or anaesthetics was reported in East Africa (Nana 2014). No sterile precautions were taken while testing the patient's fracture. The container and herbal lotions used were unsterilized. The risks of infection, especially by clostridia organisms, are high especially in patient with compound fractures. The use of raffia splints to immobilize the fractured limb parallels the use of Plastic of Paris (P.O.P) in modern orthopedic practice. However, the removal of the splint daily to allow hot fermentation to take place is a practice similar to that of the man-tribe in Liberia (Harley, 1941) and which has no parallel in modern practice. This constant manipulation and removal of splints would probably disturb union of the broken bones. The bone-setters claim however, that the affected part had to be placed and supported in a particular position while fermentation was in progress. Hot fermentation perse, could have the advantage of increasing circulation to the fracture site thereby hastening the process of healing, but it may also lead to myositis ossificans.

Three Aspects of Healing

We will distinguish three aspects of the healing profession, namely the Physical the Spiritual, and the Psychological.

1. **The Physical Healing:** In the traditional African society this is generally done by the use or application of some substance or material that has or is believed to have in it some medicinal value.

The following are used by the medicine man in preparing his medicine: root, barks, leaves, plants, herbs seeds, liquids, minerals, charcoal, powders, juices, bones, oil, insects, and selected parts of animal. Parrinder (1969) said:

“There is no doubt that West African doctors have a wide knowledge called 'observers of plants' in Fon, and 'workers in roots' in Furi. In Igbo they are generally known as 'Dibia', and in Ibibio, they are known as 'abiaibok'”.

The medicine-man undoubtedly relies heavily on this physical aspect of healing. Normally, he works with a material substance which belongs to one or the other of the things mentioned above. As a matter of fact, reasons why it takes time to qualify as a medicine-man is that one must study and know at his fingertips, a long litany of names and characteristics of herbs, roots, leaves, barks and so on used in treating different kinds of diseases. To gain experience also, their successful application takes time. Whatever, therefore one may say about the 'Spiritual' side of healing, there is no doubt that people believed that most of the substances applied for healing possess in themselves certain natural powers given to them by the maker.

The physical aspect of healing consists in the application or administration of the substances mentioned above either singly or in combination as means of curing a disease.

A special category of healers deserve special attention here. These are bone-setters which were discussed earlier in this article. They may be called orthopedic doctors.

2. **The Spiritual and Psychological:**

Though we have tried to emphasize the physical aspect of healing, one would have a very imperfect idea of healing in the traditional African society without adequate knowledge of the spiritual and psychological aspects of healing. Purely natural explanation of causes of events is unacceptable, unsatisfactory and inadequate in traditional society. If we try to explain that a person was bitten by a snake simply because he marched on it in the farm, the question is simply asked: "Why must that snake be waiting for him at that particular time?" Someone or some invisible power must have been responsible for sending the black snake to ambush the man". And so we say that:

"Suffering, misfortune, disease and accident are all 'caused' mystically, as far as African people are concerned" (Mbiti 1970).

It is pertinent here to mention, if only in passing, the healing of a sick soul in the traditional society. A person who has committed an abominable act detestable to the divinities and thus really a sick person, such acts like stealing particularly of commodities like yam, fowls, goats, etc) murder, incest, adultery committed by a wife and such other offences are abominable acts that call for healing from the ministry of priests. Sacrifices of propitiation and reconciliation are offered to the divinities. If this is not done, the guilty person may not live long as the divinities and ancestors may not spare him.

In this case, the doctor who performs the healing is the priest that conducts the rites of reconciliation and purification. The following should be noted in connection with the spiritual and psychological aspects of healing especially in serious cases of illness:

a. **The Cause of the Disease or Accident:**

As we observed above, practically every illness is traced back to some cause, usually preternatural which could be evil spirit, an enemy or even the divinities or ancestors in punishment of an offence like failure to perform second burial rites in time for a deceased relative. Before any effort is made to effect a cure,

"The medicine-man has therefore to discover the cause of the sickness, find out who the criminal is and diagnose the nature of the disease" (Mbiti, 1970).

b. The Choice of Medicine:

Having diagnosed the cause of illness the next step is to prepare the medicine. It is believed that the medicine-man, since his profession is sanctioned by the divinities, is guided by the divinities and ancestors in his choice of medicines. The Ibibio man talks of leaves (medicines) picked in preference to others. This picking is to be understood to mean selection under the special guidance of the divinities.

Parrinder refers to a case of this nature thus:

“A young Agni woman was asked what leaves she used for treatment she said (that) she did not know. But when she was in trance, she plunged into the forest and plucked unthinkingly those leaves that came to hand. When we asked if all sickness of the same type did not require the same treatment, she replied that no two sicknesses were alike but that they depended on the people who are sick” (Idowu 1970).

This however is an extraordinary case. The more common cases are those in which the medicine-man received general assistance in their choice of medicines for each occasion. Therefore the random collection of herbs is not common. It is also believed that medicines given by professional actors are often chosen for imagined or spiritual reasons. Parriner (1969) asserts that:

“Many medicines are selected because of some observed or fancied resemblance to the illness. A spotted leaf may be thought to be a good remedy for a spotted skin.”

This kind of cure is based on the principle that 'like produces like'.

c. The Rituals that go with the Healing:

Though an individual who does not belong to the profession may know with certainty the various herbs, roots and all forms of mixtures used by the medicine-man to cure disease, it is strongly believed that without the power in him, acquired either through some form of initiation or by hereditary, the treatment will be inefficacious. For one thing the patient will not use a treatment from a 'layman' with faith, because the psychological disposition is lacking. In preparing and administering the medicine, the medicine-man may pronounce some incantations, offer prayers and make some signs that apparently have nothing to do with the substance of the medicine but which are considered as essential for the medicine to work. For example, the patient may be told to swing the pot of medicine four times over his head before drinking, or to walk round his hut a number of times after drinking it. Without these rituals, the effect of the medicine may be considered null and void (Nadel 1954).

It is believed that in healing, as in every other aspect of human endeavor,

when all is said and done, no medicine has any effect unless God and the powers above man approve. Healings is ultimately in their hands and so we have a common expression in Ibibio "*Abasi akpon akan abiaibok*", that is 'God is greater (more powerful) than the medicine-man: Evan Pritchard quoting Mbiti says that:

The medicine-man offers prayer as he treats the sick, indicating that God is ultimately the healer. It is a common belief among many traditional medicine-men (doctors) that they do not wield final powers, skills, knowledge, and medicines given to them by God... Some of them are known to include prayer as part of their medical practice; and in addition, some make offerings and sacrifices or perform other religious rituals, in connection with their work" (Pritchard, 1970).

The relevance of Herbal Medicine for Healing:

As a major healing instrument in the traditional African society, herbs, scents, plants, seeds and barks, have continued to gain prominence in the society that appreciate and maximally use them. Some factors in no small measure contribute to this. Owete (2013), has this to say about it: In any case, indigenous psychotherapeutic approach in the total management of patients, and herbs are usually recommended. Among Africans, herbal medicine has survived today, playing different roles and adapting themselves to new situation. He further adds that herbal treatment is more readily accessible and cheaper than the orthodox one, and many patients seek treatment from traditional physicians. In another view, World Health Organization (WHO) traditional medicine programme was established in 1997 to give adequate importance to the utilization of traditional system of medicine, with appropriate regulations as suited to their national health system. It is a known fact that there is an acute shortage of medical doctors and pharmaceutical products. As a result of this, the teeming population in Africa relies mainly on local herbal products and the services of herbal physicians, traditional bone setters and birth attendants.

Herbal Medicine and Efficacy in Ibibio

Most of the plants considered under this section grow near our houses and are easily overlooked especially by urban settlers. The professional herbalist, however, grows many of them in his compound knowing that these plants are frequently required on their own or in combination with other herbs for very common ailments. Nana (2014), looked at the following diseases and cure:

a) **Convulsion: (*Nduo unam*)** This is indicated by loss of consciousness, abnormal rotation of the eye balls, difficulty in breathing very high body temperature, and breathing rapidly after muscles contraction.

Herbal Remedy: *Odokiteme/mbutekpene (clausenaanisata)*, a handful of which is collected and hand-squeezed until it brings out the juice. Three drops of the juice is dropped into the left-hand side of the nostrils and four into the right-hand side of the

nostrils for immediate and instant recovery of consciousness. The squeezed leaves then kept close to the nose for continuous intake of the odour of the leaves until full recovery.

b) Piles (*Isim ebot*) (*Hemorrhoids*): This is indicated by obesity, genetic influence, inadequate fibre intake, drinking of garri, acute diarrhea which causes skin irritation, pain around the periphery of the anus or growth around the anus caused by excessive toxic remains in the system.

Herbal Remedy

Lemon (*Citrus lemon*) that are ripe are collected, peeled and the juice squeezed out for enema and drinking. 30mls of the juice is taken three times daily for two weeks. 100mls of the juice is taken as enema two times a week. This will make the protrusion to go back inside, the growth around the anus will become feeble and the pains will reduce. The dosage is continued till the symptoms disappear.

c) Typhoid (*Utoeyin ekpo*)

It is caused by contaminated food or water, bacteria deposit in food or water. Indication includes relapsing fever, headache, sore throat, pains around the abdomen and weakness generally.

Herbal Remedy: Utasi (*Gongronemalotifolium*). Fresh leaves of *Gongronemalotifolium* is collected and crushed. It is then fixed into illicit gin and allowed to extract over one hour. One shot (30mls) is taken thrice daily for one week and fresh crushed leaves with lukewarm water is used for enema over a week for the quick relief of typhoid.

d) Epilepsy: (*Ndukpik*) A mental disorder that sometimes unexpectedly will seize up the person and cause him or her to fall down and contract muscles and release foam from the mouth.

Herbal Remedy: *IkonUduana eyen* (*Ageratum Conyzoides*). The fresh leaves of *Ageratum* is collected and ground to a paste. The victim's saliva is collected and mixed with grounded material (leaves of *Ageratum Conyzoides*), then an incision is made on the forehead of the patient and the material is applied to the spot where the blood has started to flow out for a permanent cure.

e) Asthma: (*Akpaikpai ikong*)

It is caused by dust mites, smoking, inhaling dry or cold air. This causes difficulty in breathing, chest pains and coughing.

Herbal Remedies: *Ekwong* (Snail) and *AranOwok* (Honey) is used. A good quantity of snails is collected broken and the slippery fluid is scrubbed out. The fluid should be plenty enough for use. Equal proportion of honey and the fluid is mixed that will last for 30 days. One spoonful of the mixture is taken two times daily for 30 days.

Conclusion

Before the advent of colonialism and globalization which culminated in the invasion of English and scientific method of healing, the African man was and remains, very creative and inventive in the handling of medical challenges and bringing necessary healing which over time has proven not to fade. Based on the foregoing, it is very evident that traditional medicine – animal parts, flowers, leaves, barks, roots, rhizomes is a sine qua non for effective health care management and subsequent total healing, hence, it will contribute a lot more in health service planning, implementation, evaluation and eventual intervention in Africa. This is true because of the exploits of the traditional (native) medicine in healing in the traditional African society as carefully enumerated in this paper. There is need for Africans to appreciate their own thing, thereby seeking available media for her improvement in the area of methods of diagnosis and treatment of sicknesses and diseases in Africa in line with modern technology. This, when religiously done, will refine and present the traditional African medicine (medications) into dosage and carry out diagnosis without fetishism and mysticism. This will take traditional medicine to a world class standard of science and technology.

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