



## Diseases and Healthcare: The African Indigenous Religion Practitioners' Perspective in Ghana

Konadu Adam<sup>1</sup> , Dennis Tawiah<sup>1</sup>  and Amedorme Dorcas<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology – Kumasi, Ghana.

<sup>2</sup> St. Ambrose College of Education, Dormaa-Akwamu, Bono Region, Ghana.

### ABSTRACT

Issues of diseases and healthcare are very crucial to human life and survival. Africans have always sought to find holistic and impeccable remedies to diseases and sicknesses that disturb human life and survival. Africans being incurably religious have sought to employ religious perspectives in their healing systems. Ghanaians have from time immemorial employed their indigenous or traditional worldview in their healing system or approach to diseases and sicknesses. This paper explores the African indigenous practitioners' approach to diseases, their causes and solution. It also looks at the traditional healing systems in the face of the Western approach to diseases or healing systems. This work is a result of a discussion of scholarly works on African indigenous religious approaches to diseases and traditional healthcare vis-a-vis the orthodox healing systems. It is the ardent hope of the authors that readers appreciate African indigenous healing systems and how they can be combined with orthodox healing systems to ensure holistic healthcare in contemporary society.

Correspondence  
Konadu Adam  
Email: [fadayambo@gmail.com](mailto:fadayambo@gmail.com)

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### INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, there has been changing perspective of herbs as medicines went from that of "witches brew" to significant medicine. There is currently a broad acknowledgment that traditional medicine which is the medication long classified as primitive is capable of being humankind's saving grace. Per estimation, out of a population of around 6.3 billion, majority of the people use plants or herbs to meet their health needs. It is also virtually known now that about half of the individuals in industrialized or advanced countries frequently use what is generally referred to as complementary and alternative medicine. Nonetheless, this increase in consumer demand and the availability of resourceful services for complementary medicine has overtaken the creation of policy by respective governments and health professions of which Ghana is not excluded.<sup>1</sup> Due to the value put on health in African societies, traditional medicine, and its practitioners had a prominent and admirable position.

This paper discusses how African traditional religious practitioners perceive disease, its origins, and the methods used to identify and treat it. The merits and demerits of the traditional African healing technique are taken into consideration. It will be worthwhile if traditional healers and Western medical professionals, the Ghanaian government and the governments of several other nations where

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, "The African Health Monitor–Special Issue: African Traditional Medicine Day," 2010, 17.

this agenda may be relevant engage in comprehensive dialogue. This is done by deliberating on African traditional healing in the context of modern healthcare discourse.

### **Indigenous Medical Practices - The African Perspective**

The broad ideas and practices about a man and the world, as well as the factors that control how man interacts with other men and his environment, are the origin of the traditional Ghanaian understanding or worldview on health and disease, and consequently medical practice. Accordingly, there is an African perspective of the world that encompasses both the physical world, which includes animals, plants, people, and cities, and the spiritual or paranormal world, which includes spirits, powers and diseases. Therefore, many African communities still rely on traditional healthcare where leaves, roots, herbs, and the invocation of ritual or spirituality play a vital part in health treatment, despite the arrival of Western medicine and healthcare institutions in Africa. According to the WHO, African traditional medicine or health care culminates all knowledge, abilities, and procedures based on beliefs, theories and experiences that are exclusive and peculiar to various cultures, whether or not they are explainable. These methods are significantly used to sustain health as well as to diagnose, prevent, improve and treat physical and mental illnesses.<sup>2</sup>

Traditional medicine, according to Twumasi, is the service rendered using magico-religious acts and concepts.<sup>3</sup> So, traditional medicine basically involves the process of collecting, conserving, utilizing and applying medicinal plants for cures, prevention and promotion of physical and spiritual well-being and fitness of citizens. Traditional medicine today is a type of medicine that draws on both socially acceptable supernatural components and natural ingredients including herbs, roots, animals, spices and oils. According to Helms and Cook, indigenous healing refers to the beneficial practices and beliefs that have their roots in a particular culture or society and are intended to treat the people who live in that community.<sup>4</sup> Based on these discussions, it can be said that indigenous or traditional medicine is basically a form of treatment developed by Africans using their indigenous knowledge system, natural resources such as parts of plants, animals and spices, and spiritual resources such as ancestors, spirits, deities, totemic beliefs, and social codes, along with socially approved practices in African societies. Therefore, indigenous African religious healthcare is offered using natural resources such as parts of plants, animals, spices and spiritual resources including ancestral spirits, deities, totemic beliefs and social codes blended with accepted traditions of the communities in Africa. Although traditional African religion is not really opposed to Western medicine or its methods of healing, some of its practitioners and adherents harbour the conviction that there are some illnesses that Western medicine is incapable of treating and thus necessitate spiritual care, as it is occasionally provided in place of worship.

### **Indigenous African Religion Practitioner's Concept of Diseases**

According to African Traditional Religion Practitioners, disease is believed to be the consequence of an imbalance in the three anchors of the harmony and balance triangle; thus, physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual. Traditional African Religion Practitioners typically define good health in terms of a person's kinship with their ancestors. Iroegbu claims that health among Africans does not depend solely on how it affects the living, but the ancestors must maintain good health to safeguard the living. Iroegbu adds that in their understanding, maintaining good health is also a result of acting in a manner that is appropriate for one's circumstances, which includes abiding by socially accepted values and standards.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous African Religion Practitioners' therapeutic practices aim to address

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<sup>2</sup> Organization, "The African Health Monitor–Special Issue: African Traditional Medicine Day," 8.

<sup>3</sup> The term magico-religious is made up of two mutually exclusive terms (magic and religion) but used together to refer to unexplainable concept of the unseen or the lack of rationality with an element of faith. See Patrick A. Twumasi, *Medical Systems in Ghana, A Study of Medical Sociology* (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1975), 10-11

<sup>4</sup> Janet E Helms and Donelda Ann Cook, *Using Race and Culture in Counseling and Psychotherapy: Theory and Process*. (Allyn & Bacon, 1999), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick E Iroegbu, "Healing Insanity: Skills and Expert Knowledge of Igbo Healers," *Africa Development* 30, no. 3 (2005):81-82.

the three aspects of harmony and balance — physical, mental or emotional and spiritual — so that healing can take place in a very comprehensive manner. These or similar concepts are held by many African traditional religions. For instance, wrongness or offense against the ancestors or spirits can cause illness among the Akans of Ghana.<sup>6</sup>

Omonzejele claims that for the indigenous African, good health entails the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual stability of the individual or oneself, family members and the entire community. According to the traditional African, health is actually not about the proper functioning of the organs of the body. For an African, being healthy is not a matter of opinion, but a comprehensive wellness and stability of the body and social order.<sup>7</sup> As a result, sickness is viewed as a bad outcome of human encounters with the supernatural; specifically as a result of breaking taboos that govern how humans should engage with deities and spirits. In this regard, it is vital to distinguish between two categories of diseases: mild diseases and serious or epidemic diseases. Mild diseases are those for which people are aware of the underlying causes and which can be treated with traditional medical practices and medications. Such a condition is usually accompanied by numerous traumas, such as wounds, bone fractures, and colds. Serious or epidemic diseases include smallpox, anthrax, plague, rabies, venereal infections, paralysis, fever, and diseases whose cause and nature are unknown to mankind. Their treatment typically required the use of magical techniques such as rituals and conjurations.<sup>8</sup>

### **Indigenous African Religion Practitioner's Theory of Disease Causation**

In the African traditional belief system, there is the popular notion that certain diseases and sicknesses are brought into being or reality by some mystical or supernatural agents such as witches, wizards and sorcerers, and sometimes fear and anxiety. Thus, in the indigenous African belief system, everything that happens has a cause. Hence, in the African indigenous healing system, there is the use of mystical things such as magic, divination, sorcery and other supernatural manipulations to arrive at a remedy to a malady or healing to every sickness. Several cultures and traditions in Africa hold that witches and wizards cause several sicknesses, problems and health complications such as madness, epilepsy, hypertension, epilepsy and swollen legs. In recent times, it is not uncommon to find people attribute natural happenings or experiences and socio-political, economic and health-related problems to the work of witchcraft.

In the African worldview, ancestral curses cause serious harm or disaster to some families or tribes even though they make efforts to break the curse. This demonstrates the power in a spoken word that is seasoned with magical power. In effect, ancestral curses and bondage have weakened and halted the activities and might of certain people. They have reduced people to uselessness and worthlessness to the extent that their existence on earth is meaningless. The negative impact of ancestral curses culturally, morally, socially, emotionally and otherwise has rendered people to complete failure and disappointment in as much as their fates have been hijacked by some so-called unscrupulous ancestors.

Practitioners of Indigenous African religion believe that those who have had repeated deaths and have returned to the mother's womb to be born again are bad spirits who have come from the spirit realm, typically the sea.<sup>9</sup> The same mother gave birth to these spirit offspring who are born into the world but end up dying young and returning. The spirit primarily harms individuals and outweighs the good. Every good which is done by this spirit is more or less a cover-up. The spirit temporarily enters this world; it comes and goes through children who are born. It is also connected to women who deliver children, repeatedly dying and reincarnating into this world. Among the Akans, when such children

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<sup>6</sup> J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Therapeutic Strategies in African Religions: Health, Herbal Medicines and Indigenous Christian Spirituality," *Studies in World Christianity* 20, no. 1 (2014): 70–90.

<sup>7</sup> Peter F Omonzejele, "African Concepts of Health, Disease, and Treatment: An Ethical Inquiry," *Explore* 4, no. 2 (2008): 120–26.

<sup>8</sup> Marina Sodnompilova and Vsevolod Bashkuev, "Diseases and Their Origins in the Traditional Worldview of Buryats: Folk Medicine Methods," *Études Mongoles et Sibériennes, Centrasiatiques et Tibétaines*, no. 46 (2015), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel C. Anizoba, "The Place of African Belief and Germ Theory on the Causes of Human Diseases," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42, no. 1 (December 15, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2366>.

are confirmed to be those that continued reincarnating, they are marked to confirm their identity and given names such *Donko, Kaya, Adakaasa, and Ababio*. It is an evil spirit that arrives to cause mayhem for a person. As an illustration, an evil-possessed child typically gets sick. These kids make sure their parents' incomes keep on decreasing. If the child in question learns that the parents are wealthy, the illness will return until the parents try to cure the child with the money. The child then grows stronger and is in better health. These children are regarded as evil spirits who deliberately bring tragedy upon a family.<sup>10</sup>

It is said that breaking taboos and oaths leads to sickness. Magesa defines taboo as a practice of a particular culture that forbids or restricts people from discussing or partaking in a specific activity that is seen as socially or religiously sacrosanct. An oath is a vow to do something or a confirmation of something's authenticity. Taboos exist to ensure that the moral foundations of the world are not altered for the benefit of humanity.<sup>11</sup> Various Ghanaian communities have taboos regarding meat and food. Breaking these taboos may result in serious illness for the offender(s) and/or the community involved.

Once more, sickness is said to be caused by mystical poisoning. By extension, mystical refers to something that has spiritual force or attributes that are extremely difficult to understand or describe. A mystery is something or a happening that is exceedingly difficult to understand, describe or explain. Mystical poisoning can be worked in the spiritual realm to harm whoever and whatever is the target of destruction. It could be done through the air or incantations.<sup>12</sup> Apparently, mystical poisoning has no connection with medical solutions except for worsening the situation or problem. In essence, a patient suffering from mystical poisoning should never seek medical diagnosis and treatment. However, when mystical poisoning is discovered, it is important to patronize traditional medicines and other combinations of herbs and roots. For the sake of efficacy, some require the services of a witch doctor while others require the intervention of soothsayers.

### **Indigenous African Religion Practitioners' Disease Diagnosis and Treatment**

Ghana's traditional medical practices are grounded in what Turner called "social analysis."<sup>13</sup> To determine the cause of the medical issue, a precise diagnosis is required. To ascertain the biological or physical etiology of the sickness, the medicine man must carefully inspect and question the patient. The patient's family history may be obtained, as well as the patient's urine, vomit and other internal metabolic substances being examined and divination being done. Croucamp is of the view that divination is a method used to intentionally start a process of accessing and gathering relevant information through the use of randomly organized symbols and then, utilizing the brain's potential for analogical reasoning, generating correlations that are ordinarily unreachable. Consequently, a transpersonal arena of knowledge, intelligence, skills, tidings and information is used to gain therapeutic and medical knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

In the view of traditional African healers, their method of treatment is holistic. This suggests that the healer attends to the whole individual and treats social, spiritual, psychological and bodily ailments. Traditional healers do not distinguish between the natural and the supernatural, or between the spiritual and the physical. When a disease is proven to be an attack from bad spirits, the diviner offers spiritual defenses. Talismans, charms and amulets are employed to ward off harmful spirits, elements and evil forces. These rituals are intended to ward off evil spirits from the body. Sometimes, sacrifices are occasionally made to appease the gods, spirits, and ancestors. Animals are occasionally

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<sup>10</sup> Anizoba, "The place of African belief and germ theory on the causes of human diseases."5- 7.

<sup>11</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Orbis Books, 2014) 148-149.

<sup>12</sup> Anizoba, "The place of African belief and germ theory on the causes of human diseases."4.

<sup>13</sup> Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, (Chicago, Aldine Publications, 1969), 112.

<sup>14</sup> André Croucamp, "Traditional African Divination Systems as Information Technology," *Mindburst, Viewed* 23 (2013): 4.

killed or buried alive.<sup>15</sup> In other cases, a person will undergo a spiritual cleaning using prepared herbs that they will bathe in over several days at specific times. The sick individual may occasionally have an animal killed and the blood spilled on their head and feet as a form of purification. The diviner appeases the ancestors, gods or spirits by offering an animal sacrifice or libation in the case of sickness brought on by the invocation of a curse or a transgression of taboos. When it comes to physical health, concoctions are used. These involve boiling plants in water and straining the liquid, which is then given to the patient either hot or cold. Another approach is the use of tinctures, which entails soaking plants in alcohol for the patient to consume.<sup>16</sup> This class of drugs is referred to as "bitters" in Ghana.

Due to its accessibility and low cost, African traditional medicine is widely accepted in Ghana and throughout the continent of Africa. It holistically addresses concerns relating to the body, mind, and spirit. However, it does not rely on a precise diagnosis, frequently prepares itself in unsanitary settings and occasionally overlooks the significance of dosage. Those that possess information about the medication tend to hold onto it. Because some of the practitioners rely on divination, it is challenging for Christians to patronize their services.<sup>17</sup>

### **Ghana's Modern Healthcare System and Traditional African Medicine**

Traditional medications for conditions like chronic diarrhea, malaria, liver disorders, ulcers, amoebic dysentery, cough, constipation, eczema, hypertension, diabetes, mental health issues and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS, gonorrhea and Syphilis are produced in several African nations, including Ghana. In 1977, the World Health Organization (WHO) formally acknowledged the significance of the African indigenous healthcare system after realizing its significant influence.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology founded the Department of Herbal Medicine in the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences to advance plant medicine in Ghana. To guarantee high-quality traditional herbal medication on the market, Ghana founded the Akropong Centre for Scientific Research into Plant Medicine. With support from the Ghanaian Ministry of Health, certain public hospitals have developed centers for herbal medicine where people can obtain healthcare at the moment.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in Ghanaian society currently, there has been a significant blend of modern or scientific healing methods and traditional or herbal healing methods. This has resulted in a situation where there have been remedies for several complicated diseases and sicknesses.

### **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is evident from the discussion above that Africans had their own method of treating illnesses long before the development of Western medicine, and it was effective for them. The African indigenous healers or diviners were wise enough to recommend non-toxic traditional treatments for illnesses having either spiritual or physical causes. There is therefore the need for governments, health ministries, Western medical professionals and traditional healers to combine efforts for healthy and significant discourses, even though not all African traditional healers in Ghana are using the contemporary scientific method to produce their medicines and healing processes. Building trust, educating one another through workshops and reaching an understanding of how to approach health challenges from a holistic and comprehensive perspective will all be aided by this. This would also inspire Western medical professionals to recommend some of these traditional healers to patients who need spiritual care and vice versa. This discussion will also aid in regulating practitioners and ensuring the efficacy, quality and safety of traditional medicinal items and procedures.

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<sup>15</sup> Jacob K. Olupona, "Owner of the Day and Regulator of the Universe: Ifa Divination and Healing among the Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria," *Divination and Healing: Potent Vision*, 2004, 104.

<sup>16</sup> Seth Asare-Danso, "The Traditional Approach to the Management of Diseases in Ghana," *Legon Journal of Sociology* 2, no. 2 (2005): 69–80.

<sup>17</sup> Razak Mohammed Gyasi et al., "Public Perceptions of the Role of Traditional Medicine in the Health Care Delivery System in Ghana," *Global Journal of Health Science* 3 (2011): 40–49.

<sup>18</sup> World Health Organization, *The World Health Report 2000: Health Systems: Improving Performance* (World Health Organization, 2000), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Health, Ghana, "Traditional and alternative medicine." (2012):35.

In light of the discussions, it is advised that hospitals and healthcare facilities in Ghana and Africa should identify both pathogenic agents like bacteria, viruses and protozoa as reflected in germ theory and mystical agents like witchcraft, witch doctors, superstitions, divination, breaking of oaths, ancestral curses, fear or anxiety and so on, as causes of diseases. The Ghana Herbalist Association ought to inform its members that pathogenic agents, including bacteria, viruses, fungi, protozoa and others, can also result in sickness. When a person is experiencing health problems, they must take both traditional or mystical and Western medicine into consideration. An amalgamation of mystical and Western medical practitioners in our system is advised. Essentially, religion, customs and tradition have from the past and continue to serve as vital tools for the preservation of traditional medical knowledge. Nonetheless, the ability of African traditional healers to solidify and improve upon this knowledge system would determine its sustainability and the willingness of African governments to advance and protect it from over-exploitation and adulteration by Europeans and other Western-oriented practitioners. Africans must return to their traditional ways of preserving indigenous knowledge while expanding its scientific components.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the African indigenous practitioners' approach to diseases, their causes and solution. The discussion revealed that African traditional medicine differs from conventional medicine in that it emphasizes prevention and the holistic health of the entire society, not just the person. It also includes a social and religious component. African medicine is thus characterized by science, society and religion, and this makes it a holistic therapy capable of remedying every health malady. The authors call for stakeholders to appreciate African indigenous healing systems and find out if they can be combined with orthodox healing systems to ensure holistic healthcare in contemporary society.

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### **ABOUT AUTHORS**

Konadu Adam holds a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). He also holds a Diploma in Education from the University of Education, Winneba, all in Ghana. Moreover, he also holds a Master of Philosophy in Religious Studies from KNUST. His research interest has been in Religion and Society, the Comparative study of Religions and Interfaith Relations. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Religious Studies at KNUST. He is a Tutor of Religious and Moral Education at St. Ambrose College of Education at Dormaa-Akwamu in the Bono Region of Ghana.

Dennis Tawiah also holds a Master of Philosophy in Religious Studies from KNUST. His research interest has been in Religion and Society, Religion and Moral Education and Biblical Studies. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Religious Studies at KNUST. He is a Tutor of Religious and Moral Education at Seventh-Day Adventist College of Education at Agona in the Ashanti Region of Ghana.

Dorcas Amedorme holds a Master of Philosophy in Religion and Human Values from the University of Cape Coast (UCC) in Ghana. Her research interest has been in African Christianity. She is a Tutor of Religious and Moral Education at St. Ambrose College of Education at Dormaa-Akwamu in the Bono Region of Ghana.