

Religion and Spirituality in Healing and Psychotherapy: An African Perspective

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Introduction

In the African traditional worldview, everything that happened was seen in the light of vital force, the principle of life, either in the physical existence or in the spiritual form of it. Life is an institution that was so important in the Africa and anything that did not support life, anything that was opposed to the principle of life was therefore dreaded, unwished and indeed punishable. Whatever was against the principle of life was considered evil against which serious measures were taken to fight it.

Obviously in the Kamba traditional society illness, sickness and any form of misfortune – indeed anything that appeared to threaten human life and human existence was considered evil to be eliminated. Anything that violated the principle of peace and harmony in the community was considered evil; everything that promotes harmony, community peace, the well being and the life-force of the community was considered as something good and a social value for that matter. This study is an attempt to understand the concept of illness and sickness according to the African traditional world view of the Kamba community in Kenya as a case study.

African Traditional Understanding of Sickness and Diseases

For the Africans, good health is when everything in this life gradually goes on well with God, the world of the spirits, fellow human beings and the rest of creation (cf. Hubert Pinto, Class Notes on Spirituality – Personhood and Psychotherapy January- April Semester 2016. Mbiti (1969) confirms that a holistic and integral understanding of life has always been at the core of African society, alongside the sacred knowledge of how to promote, protect, transmit and heal it (p. 170). The Kamba people of Kenya are not an exception. Among the Akamba people of Kenya and the Africans in general, sickness is not something merely biological or physiological. That is why in case of an infection, the question is not why and how a mosquito causes malaria, but why do I get it and at this moment and not another person. The awareness of fate or a determination of human life tends to be very strong in the Kamba world view. Everything seems to be caused either by someone directly or through the use of mystical or magical powers. It is believed that a disease may be caused by a curse or a spell cast on someone by an enemy, for it is believed that words contain power. They can bless and cause good fortune but they can also curse and cause sorrow and suffering.

According to Omonzejele (2008), “health for the traditional African is not just about the proper functioning of bodily organs. Good health for the African consists of mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional stability (of) oneself, family members, and community; this integrated view of health is based on the African unitary view of reality. Good health for the African is not a subjective affair” (p. 120).

Good health is usually understood in terms of the relationship with one's ancestors. Health amongst Africans is not based merely on how it affects the living because it is of paramount importance that the ancestors stay healthy so that they can protect the living. In their understanding, good health is also believed to be the result of appropriate behavior; that is living in accordance with the values and norms of the traditions of society (Iroegbu 2005:81-82).

In view of the above, traditional medicine has at its base, a deep belief in the interaction between the spiritual and physical well-being of people (Setswe 1999:56-60). It is also imperative to emphasize that good health also includes the viewing of an individual as a collective member of the community; as such, good health would also include good relations with ancestors and the community.

According to Mbiti (1969) "only in terms of the other people does individual become conscious of his own being... when he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. This individual can only say: I am because we are and since we are therefore I am (pp.108-109).

The African concept of suffering and healing, in reference to this biblical precept states: "People are whole when their relationship with themselves, God, the spirit world other people and the rest of creation is good" (Mbiti 1969: 2). That is, healing in or through the atonement with God, in the African sense is the restoration of harmony and

wholeness in an individual and his relationships with physical, spiritual, psychic, social and economic factors around him.

Causes of Diseases, Sickness and Misfortunes in the African Traditional Religion

There are several ways the traditional Akamba people explained or understood the causes of diseases. It was traditionally believed that sickness and misfortunes are always related to some causes. Normally events that disrupt people's lives and the peace of the community have a cause attached to them and these causes are often quite powerful (cf. Hubert Pinto, Class Notes on Spirituality – Personhood and Psychotherapy January- April Semester 2016). According to the African traditional beliefs, there was no illness, sickness, suffering or any misfortune that happened without a cause. Indeed the causes of sickness are manifold, for example natural causes, human induced causes, breaking of taboos, supernatural powers or ancestral spirits. Whenever the illness was believed to be human induced, the major culprit were witches and sorcerers who were the most hated people in the society (cf. Hubert Pinto, Class Notes on Spirituality – Personhood and Psychotherapy January- April Semester 2016). Indeed as Mbiti observes, it was generally believed that in Africa, sickness or misfortune is caused by “the ill-will or ill-action of one person against another, normally through the agency of witchcraft and magic. It was therefore the responsibility of medicine men/women “to discover the cause of sickness, find out who the criminal is, diagnose the nature of the disease, apply the right treatment and supply a means of preventing the misfortune from occurring again” (Mbiti 1969: 169).

The first point of contact is the view that disease is often caused by attacks from evil or bad spirits. Some also believe that when the ancestors are not treated well, they could punish people with disease (Magesa 1997:175; Westerlund 2006:91–95). Thus, Nyamiti (1984) rightly points out: When ancestors are neglected or forgotten by their relatives they are said to be angry with them and to send them misfortunes as punishment. Their anger is usually appeased through prayers and ritual in the form of foods and drinks. The ancestors long for contact with their earthly kin; that is why they are supposed to visit often (p. 16). This is true because life in African traditional religion is based on maintaining the balance between the visible and invisible world. The maintenance of this balance and harmony is humanity's greatest ethical obligation and determines the quality of life (Magesa 1997:73).

Other ways one can fall sick according to the Kamba belief is through spell-casting and witchcraft. A witch is an evil person who possesses mystical/supernatural powers which he/she uses harm others or gain favors and witchcraft is the art or manipulating evil powers to harm (cf. Hubert Pinto, Class Notes on Spirituality – Personhood and Psychotherapy January- April Semester 2016). There is the view that people with evil powers could cause other people they see as their enemies or are disrespectful to them to become sick as a way of punishment (Olupona 2004:113). Furthermore, the Kamba traditionalists like many traditional African communities are of the view that certain illnesses which defy scientific treatment can be transmitted through witchcraft and unforeseen forces; these include barrenness, infertility, attacks by dangerous animals, snake bites by dangerous snakes, persistent headaches and repeated

miscarriages (Obinna 2012:137–139; Thorpe 1993:25; Hubert Pinto, Class Notes on Spirituality – Personhood and Psychotherapy January- April Semester 2016).

Disobeying taboos is another way people could become physically, spiritually and psychologically affected. For the Akamba people, taboos form an important part of their traditional religion. Taboos are things, or a way of life, that are forbidden by a community or a group of people. They are also a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place or thing (Westerlund 2006:139). Taboos exist to make sure that the moral structures of the universe remains undisturbed for the good of humanity (Magesa 1997:76, 148–149). A distinctive feature of taboos in the African worldview is that, when one violates them secretly, the person does not go scot-free. The consequences always manifest either on the person(s) concerned or the entire community in the form of diseases, and possibly death.

According to Magesa (1997), moral behavior maintains and enhances one's life force, but disobedience and disloyal behaviour towards tradition passed on by the ancestors will weaken the life force. This can, therefore, lead to punishment from the ancestors or spirits in the form of disease and misfortune (pp. 51–53).

Diagnosing Diseases, Sickness and Misfortunes in African Traditional Society

When sickness occurs, twofold diagnosis takes place. Firstly, the organic or physical cause of the sickness has to be established by careful examination and questioning by the medicine man. The second way of diagnosing diseases is through

divination of the spiritual or mystical cause for the illness. Divination is a common practice among many African societies (cf. Hubert Pinto, Class Notes on Spirituality – Personhood and Psychotherapy January- April Semester 2016). In some African cultures, it is performed using sacred divination plates made of wood or performed on the ground, within a circle (Thorpe 1993:60), or the use of divination pots and slaughtering of animals (Sarpong 2002:103).

According to Croucamp (2013): ...Divination is a technology that is used to deliberately initiate a process of accessing and collecting information, through the use of randomly arranged symbols and then, using the brain's capacity for analogical thinking, making associations that are ordinarily inaccessible. It is therefore a transpersonal field of information to gain healing knowledge (p. 4).

It is also viewed as a way to access information that is normally beyond the reach of the rational mind. Diviners base their knowledge on communication with the spiritual forces, such as the ancestors, spirits and deities (Olupona 2004:103–104). In view of this understanding, divination is, therefore, an integral part of an African traditional way of diagnosing diseases. Because of the revealing powers of divination, it is usually the first step in African traditional treatment and medicine (Omonzejele 2008:122).

Among the Akamba, diviners consult the spirit world to identify the cause of the disease or to discover whether there was a violation of an established order from the side of the sick person. This is established through putting seeds commonly known as “mbuu” into a traditional guard and shaking while uttering some divining words.

Healing Process in the African Traditional Society

The Africans has a very integrated process of restoring back the health of the community that involves the person, spirituality, family, traditions, and encompassed the whole African as a person. Indeed African psychotherapy is a method of dealing with mental and spiritual diseases that is culturally based and involve the community, diviners, mediums; seers and spirit possession (cf. Hubert Pinto, Class Notes on Spirituality – Personhood and Psychotherapy January- April Semester 2016). In the traditional African healers' understanding, their healing process is holistic (Thorpe 1993:123). This implies that the healer deals with the complete person and provides treatment for physical, psychological, spiritual and social symptoms. Traditional healers do not separate the natural from the spiritual, or the physical from the supernatural. This will cause them to address health issues from two major perspectives – spiritual and physical.

If the diviner or the traditional healer perceives the cause of the disease to be an attack from evil spirits, the person would be protected by the use of body marks called “nthoo”, amulets, and a spiritual bath to drive the evil spirits away. These are rites aimed at driving off evil and dangerous powers, spirits or elements. Their function is to eliminate the evils or dangers that may have already taken root in a family or community (Westerlund 2006:111–113).

Among the Akamba, sacrifices are sometimes offered at the request of the spirits, gods, and ancestors. Sometimes animals are slaughtered or buried alive (Olupona 2004:104). Sometimes rituals are performed in order to consecrate some herbs. Rituals

constitute the way of consecrating African traditional medicine; medicine without consecration for Africans is meaningless. Divine and ancestral sanctions are considered necessary before and during the preparation and application of medicine (Idowu 1973:201). There is also an aspect of spiritual cleansing whereby in some cases herbs are prepared for the person to bathe with at specific times for a number of days. Sometimes an animal can be slaughtered and the blood would be poured on the head and foot of the sick person; the blood poured on the sick person serves as a way of cleansing (Westerlund 2006:127).

Another element is that of appeasing the ancestors and spirits through pouring of libation and offering sacrifices. In the case of diseases that are caused by an invocation of a curse or violation of taboos, the diviner appeases the ancestors, spirits or the gods. This is done according to the severity of the case, by either sacrificing an animal or by pouring of libation. In many cases, the person would be told to buy the ritual articles for the process as mentioned by the gods or the spirits. Some of the ritual articles usually used for this purpose are spotless animals (dove, cat, dog, goat, and fowl), schnapps, “kaluvu” [traditional liquor], calico (red, white or black) and sometimes eggs and cola nuts. After the rituals, these articles are sometimes left at the required place to rot, or they are sometimes thrown into a river as required by the god or spirits. They are at times placed on a four way junction or the outskirts of the community, depending on the purpose of the ritual (Insoll 2010:234–235).

Exorcism as a practice of expelling demons or evil spirits from people or places that are possessed, or are in danger of possession by them is another aspect of healing in

Africa. Exorcism is usually performed by a person with special religious authority, such as a priest.

When it is perceived among the Akamba tribes in Kenya that a sick person is possessed by an evil spirit, exorcism is practiced to deliver the person. It is mostly done with singing, drumming, dancing, the spraying of powder to the sky and on the possessed, and the use of “kisi the” [animal tail] to drive away the evil spirit by touching the body of the possessed person several times with the “kisi the” until the person is totally free. In the process of the practice, you would see the possessed person rolling on the floor like someone under bondage looking for freedom. Once the spirit has been released, the person would become stable, mostly with a deep sense of relief.

This practice is also performed for those who are mentally challenged. Many of the traditional African communities are of the view that mental illness is mostly caused by evil spirits. In their view, until the possessed person is delivered from the power of that evil spirit, the person will not have his or her freedom. Hence, the practice of exorcism is necessary.

Pouring of libation is another practice of healing and cleansing. Libation is a rite by which some liquid is poured on the ground or sometimes on objects followed by the chanting or reciting of words. According to the practitioners, it is a form of prayer. The liquid could be water, milk wine, whisky, schnapps or gin. Some cultures also use palm wine, palm oil, and coconut water (cf. Hubert Pinto, Class Notes on Spirituality – Personhood and Psychotherapy January- April Semester 2016). Libation pouring has

three main parts, namely invocation, supplication and conclusion (Kilson 1970:169; Sarpong 1996:17; Yanka 1995:174):

According to the practitioners of libation pouring, offering the ancestors and spirits drink is a way of welcoming them (Van Dijk 2002:182–190). In this process, the person pouring the libation would be pouring the drink or liquid on the ground as he is reciting the prayers and those present would keep responding “niwo”[amen] at the end of each sentence by the pourer

When the case or sickness is deemed to have physical causes, there is prescription of herbs by medicine men/women. Depending on the kind of disease the person has brought to the diviner or the traditional healer, he would prescribe herbs to the sick person. These prescriptions come with some specific instructions on how to prepare the herb, the dose and timeframe (Ayim-Aboagye 1993:109).

In the African tradition of the Akamba, there is also the practice of counseling. Sometimes, the sick person is advised on how to live his or her life, especially the kind of food the person should or should not eat. This is mostly done when it is an issue of a violation of a taboo. They are also advised to be of good behavior should it be that it was discovered that the disease occurred as a result of impolite behavior. Good behavior, according to African traditional belief, includes following and practicing values and behavior established by society and culture, participation in religious rituals and practices, and proper respect for family, neighbors and the community. Failure to follow these behavioral guidelines often results in the good spirits withdrawing their blessing

and protection [and, therefore, opening doors for illness, death, drought and other misfortunes.

Religious Specialists Involved in Healing in African Traditional Societies

The presence of sickness and misfortunes that affect and destabilize the vital force of the community presupposed the presence of specialists whom the society tasked with the responsibility of restoring community health and well-being.

The most common of these specialists were the traditional healers. Byaruhanga-Akiiki and Kealotswe (1995) define healers as those who practice with positive results based on the tools and materials of their practice. These include *waganga wa miti shamba* (herbalists); *waganga wa mazingaombwe* (psychotherapists); *waganga wa viini macho* (placebo treatment for psychosomatic diseases; and *watabiri* (diviners who consult with spirits, including Supreme Being). The practice of *waganga* is usually pure herbs which are largely dictated by their location and/or mysterious powers (p. 1; Hubert Pinto, Class Notes on Spirituality – Personhood and Psychotherapy January- April Semester 2016).

To African societies the medicine-men, sometimes known as “herbalists” or “traditional doctors” are the greatest gift, and the most useful source of help. Medicine men and women were very useful specialists among the Kamba people. According to Mbiti (1990:162), every village in Africa has a medicine-man within reach, and he is the friend of the community. Their services were always sought and as such they had to be accessible to everybody and almost at all times. They were expected to be trustworthy,

upright morally, friendly, willing and ready to serve, able to discern people's needs, and not exorbitant in their charges" (Mbiti 1988:166,167).

Medicine persons are therefore concerned with sickness, diseases and misfortunes affecting the community. He/she was to discover the cause of the sickness, find out who the criminal is, diagnose the nature of the disease, apply the right treatment and supply a means of preventing the misfortune from occurring again. One can say that in traditional Africa, medicine men/women were a symbol of life and prosperity. They symbolized the hopes of the society: hopes of good health, protection and security from evil forces, prosperity and good fortune, and ritual cleansing when harm or impurities have been contracted (Mbiti 1990:166).

In order to be effective in this delicate issue of health, healers had to be properly, initiated, trained and guided. Although some of the medicine men/women acquired this profession through inheritance, others were initiated into it. There are those who believed that spirits or the living-dead have called them, in dreams, visions or in waking, to become medicine-persons. Swantz (1990) notes that if a parent is a *mganga*, one or more of the children invariably are initiated and trained during an apprenticeship period. Whether inherited or not, prospective healers were expected to undergo a thorough, rigorous and long training under other medicine men (cf. Hubert Pinto, Class Notes on Spirituality – Personhood and Psychotherapy January- April Semester 2016). Training is very important during which medicine men/women acquire knowledge of medicine value from different herbs, leaves, roots, barks, grasses, dead insects, bones, feathers among

many others. They would learn causes and cures of diseases and kinds of other suffering such as barrenness, misfortune, magic, witchcraft and sorcery (p. 16).

Another important specialist associated with healing is a diviner who played an intermediary role between the spirit and the physical world. In the Traditional culture if an illness is believed to be caused by inappropriate behavior on the part of the patient, a remedy or cure for the illness can only come through spiritual intervention by divination. Among the Akamba, diviners are called 'the eyes of the spirits'. When a misfortune befalls a community the family seeks the diviner's intervention in order to ascertain the cause which is assumed to be the work of the spirit. A diviner was visited to know the cause of unexplained and chronic sickness, deformities, barrenness, delay in marriage, curses, non productivity of animals. These causes would be the displeasures of offended or forgotten living dead and ancestors. In cases of curses, then the diviner appeases the spirits' anger by performing a ritual and thus restoring health of that community.

Thus whilst herbal healers use plants to treat diseases, diviners seek input from the spiritual world to understand the cause of the illness and prescribe a cure (Asamoah-Gyadu 2014:83; Cheetham & Griffiths 1982:957).

Synthesis

Sickness, diseases and misfortunes are common phenomena in the African world view. When the community is unhealthy, the general well-being of the people in the community is affected. It is not only the health and the wellbeing of the living which is affected but also the levels of relationships. Again it is not only the relationship between

the living themselves but also the relationship between the living, the unborn and the ancestors. From an African perspective, diseases, illnesses and misfortunes threaten the principle of life. That is why everything is done to make sure that the wellbeing and the health of the community is maintained and restored in case it is affected, since it affects the institution of life that is a gift from God. Since diseases and misfortunes are life threatening, the society devised means and methods to deal with them. In this, the role of the medicine men and women as well as that of diviners was taken very seriously since they were considered the hope of the society. They played a very crucial role in enhancing the principle of life in the society.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to interrogate the African traditional understanding of the phenomenon of sickness, diseases and healing with the view of contributing to the body of knowledge of what a healthy community is all about and how to guarantee a healthy society from an African perspective. Through field research the researcher has managed to unearth the way diseases and misfortunes were handled in the African traditional culture.

Long before the advent of Western medicine, Africans had their own way of dealing with diseases and it worked for them. African traditional healers or diviners were intelligent enough to prescribe traditional solutions to diseases whether it had spiritual or physical causes with little or no side effect.

Traditional African healing is a holistic approach to medicine based on the premise of interconnectedness. Disease is understood to be a misalignment or spiritual/social disorder either internal or external. It is believed that all people are made up of many levels of being which function together as a whole; moral, social, physical and spiritual, and if any of these parts are out of balance, the person will become physically ill (dis-eased) or suffer spiritually. Using myriad forms of diagnosis such as questioning, observation and touching (still used today in Western methods) as well as divination and dream interpretation to name a few...it is the role of the physician to re-align the patient with the origin of the influences so as to re-balance the disorder (dis-order). Forms of treatment include but are not limited to; surgery, dietary therapy, herbalism, psychotherapy, aromatherapy, exorcism, rituals and sacrifice. African healing is influenced by natural cycles of days, seasons and natural occurrences and the accepted realities of the physician. African culture acknowledges that real healing lies, not in a synthetic pill but in recognition of our true position on the earth and in bringing our actions into respectful balance with the natural world.

African traditional healing is a very significant contribution to the body of health enterprise that should complement the contemporary medicine. It is equally significant that the WHO in 1977 gave formal recognition to the importance of the African traditional health care system and has encouraged African countries to make the practice more formalized to ensure quality and better service delivery (Truter 2007:60; WHO 2001). Because of the important role African traditional medicine has played and is playing in Africa and beyond, currently, in some countries, public hospitals have also opened centers for herbal medicine where people can access health care. In South Africa, a Traditional Health Practitioners Bill of 2003 was drafted. Certain sections of the Traditional Health Practitioners Act, Act 35 of 2004, came into operation on 13 January

2006 (Truter 2007:60). In Kenya there has been collaboration between the herbalists and the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI). Some traditional medicine-men are doing extensive research and coming up with new medicines (Mumo 2012:118). For me this is the way to go.

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