

AFRICAN RELIGION, CULTURE, AND HEALTH PROMOTION

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Abstract

This paper presents African religion and culture as promoters of human health. Though, there are practices that seem to hinder health promotion in African religion and culture, for example, scarification, clitoridectomy, unhygienic traditional health services etc which were introduced without the awareness of their health hazards, but the moment the practitioners become aware of the health dangers of those practices naturally they resort to cautions, this study perceives negligence of the inputs African religion and culture have in the promotion of human health by the present generation as a problem that deserves attention. The research aims at re-addressing the significance of African religion and culture in promoting human health, advocate for serious insight to African religion (magic, medicine) and culture as standard alternative medical and health care delivery and so on. If required attention is offered, African religion and culture will be bound to shed off superstitions. It will develop more sophisticated medical and health care services beyond Africa, among other things. The research employs historical and phenomenological research methods. Data were sourced from primary and secondary sources. Data were also analyzed with descriptive method of data analysis. The paper recommends that sensitization campaign through mass media, seminars etc is needed to amend the discrepancy between modern and traditional medicine, punitive and civil penalties should be promulgated against those who are fond of hunting for shrines and traditional places of worship to demolish, and so on.

Keywords: African Religion, Culture, Health Management/Promotion, Worship

Introduction

Health they say is wealth. A healthy man is always a wealthy man. The Igbo say; *onyeahudi, ji nke ka*; meaning that he who has health has the greatest thing. Fundamentally, health is the nucleus of every achievement in life. Based on this, every religion and culture consider health first in everyday today practice. In Africa, virtually all the constituents of her religion, and culture are promulgated to make life worth living. religion generally goes beyond life on earth, but life eternity. Religion preserves healthy living for both the body and the soul. In Christianity for example, the decalogue that was handed over to Moses for man-kind, emphasizes on the relationship between man and

God (vertical) and the relationship between man and man (horizontal). These vertical and horizontal obedience grant man's soul healthy living in eternity. According to Ezeme (2011), four of the Ten Commandments tell us how to love God and the last six tell us how to love our neighbors. These two sets of conditions are presented by Christians for salvation of man's soul. Maxey et al (2011) record the healing miracles of the paralytic man, Jairus daughter, the haemorrhage woman etc as could be found in MK 2:1-12, MTT. 9:1-8, LK5:17-26, MK 5:21-43, MTT 9:18-26, and LK 9:40-56. All these healings are bodily health issues that can at the same time demand for medical treatments, but religion has taken charge in those ugly situations. In addition to what has been said about the soul, Ngele (2013) states that: "living in the Holy Spirit is the fullness of life. Anyone who lives without the Holy Spirit is dead". Life for religion connotes both the physical and the spiritual. African religion on the other hand has the same feature.

In African context, it is always difficult to separate African religion, from African culture. African religion influences African culture to a reasonable extent. African religion and culture support that magic and medicine are indispensable in traditional health care delivery. In African religion and culture while magic is out to tackle extra-ordinary evil and benevolent spiritual forces, medicine is installed with the spirit of medicine and divination that is *agwu* spirit in Igbo language to handle natural illnesses. African religion itself stands out as a general overseer that considers both punishment and reward for care or destruction of human life. That notwithstanding, there are areas of African culture that do not encourage or promote healthy living. such practices include: scarification, clitoridectomy, some obnoxious practices like forceful drinking of corpse water, etc, unhygienic nature of traditional health practices etc. in the words of Onunwa (2005), he states that the unhygienic nature of traditional health care service is a problem to traditional health care delivery. Okemadu and Emmy-Egbe (2016) state that protozoa parasite like *Giardia lamblia* can be transmitted through dirty hands, water, unwashed fruits and vegetables. Okafor (2016) points that: scarification ritual inflicts painful wounds on the skin of the bearer. Therefore, hygiene is very pivotal to health care delivery, and for a healthy living. However, African religion and culture promote healthy living in various ways. African cultural dances are physical exercises for healthy living, others include: wrestling, hunting games etc. Okafor (2016) supports that "physical activities improve the body ability to use oxygen and also improve blood flow". He adds that such exercise includes: walking, running, dancing, swimming etc.

African religion is the medium through which traditional medicine is installed and the traditional medicine has been efficacious in treating some ailments such as: fracture/dislocation, malaria, tuberculosis, tonsillitis, spiritual inflicted sicknesses, diseases caused by sorcerers, etc. This paper therefore, views African people's negligence to the significance of African religion and culture on healthy promotion as a problem facing the contemporary African society's provision of holistic and alternative health care delivery system. The study adopts historical and phenomenological research method. Data were analyzed with descriptive method of data analysis. Data were also collected from both primary and secondary sources. It is also recommended that Africans should

encourage hygienic cultural and religious practices, sensitization campaign through mass media, seminars etc is needed to close the discrepancy between modern/orthodox, and traditional medicine, punitive and civil penalties should be promulgated against those who hunt for African religious shrines, and places of worship to demolish, among other things.

Concept of African religion, culture and health

African traditional religion is the traditional and the institutionalized beliefs and practices of African which have been transmitted through various cultural means from the older generations to the younger generation in a very gradual and progressive speed. Ekwunife in Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004) defines it as: “Those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of Africans which are rooted in the past African religious culture, transmitted to the present votaries by successive African fore bears mainly through oral traditions... a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through the dialectical process of continuity and discontinuity”.

African traditional religion is religion of Africans, found by African fore-bears for Africans. It has no missionary aggression. Culture on the other hand, involves people's way of life, reasoning and perceptions of the world around them. Oyibo (2013) posits that culture is manmade and environmentally propelled. Man made both culture and religion for his wellbeing. Nevertheless, the developmental trend in an environment propels culture of a people for an adjustment. Akulue (2013) in a similar vein defines cultures as; “the distinctive way of life of a people, their complete design for living. Culture is truly distinctive among different peoples. Culture is the sum total of all the organized ways of a people's life. Health in African context is a free gift from God. Healthy living for Africans is a blessing, and serious health issues are seen as curse from God. Onunwa (1990) presents health in African context as something that; “does not entirely mean an absence of physical ailment... health therefore, is not an isolated phenomenon but part of the entire magico-religious fabric far more than an absence of disease”. Health does not end at absence of diseases for Africans. It transcends to absence of misfortune. But in this research, concern is more on ailments, diseases of physical body conditions of order or disorder.

Significance and Efficacy of Traditional Magic and Medicine in Promoting Health

Magic and medicine form part of the studies in African traditional religion. Sometimes magic, medicine, and religion appear to interwoven on the basis of their functions in the practice of magic, medicine, and religion but they have their independent salient functions. For Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), the motto of man in magic is “my will be done” while in religion, it is “thy will be done”. Traditional medicine is of prophylactic (preventive) and therapeutic (curative) while magic is of contagious, sympathetic and homeopathic types. In some cases, medicine can be simply administration of herbs, roots, ointment without any immediate spiritual attachment. Magesa (1997) states that, specialists in traditional medicine, known as herbalists or medicine-doctors, are people with knowledge of herbs, roots, or even fruits with power to prevent or cure diseases or

afflictions. There are conditions that demand for spiritual diagnosis through divinations before healing commences. African magic and medicine are so significant in the sense that even when the wicked tries to harm others with their harmful amulets, charms, talisman etc, there are always opposing magic and medicine which can effectively neutralize the dangerous magic or medicine because of the availability of strong magico-religious forces in the opposing medicine for prosperity or maintenance of balance.

Furthermore, African magic and medicine are highly efficacious in handling different areas of human health issues. For example, traditional gynecologists have been so good in tackling anxieties of young mothers. Adimora (2011) avers that, "Labour has always been seen as period when the life of an expectant mother hangs between life and death". African medicine in some communities handles such anxiety. Mr. Chinemerem Ugwu (personal communication, 12 May, 2017) states that as a traditional gynecologist he uses a consecrated medicine prepared with mud to control anxiety in pregnant women. He stated that this medicine is hung at the top the wall of the position of the pregnant woman's bed at sixth month, and it falls on the ninth month, a day or two days to the day of labour. He affirms that this medicine has not lost its efficacy till today.

In the treatment or management of other illnesses, for instance, typhoid and malaria, traditional medicine is also very effective. Mrs. Ngozi Ugwu (personal communication, 6 August, 2018) has appreciated and acknowledges the efficacy of traditional medicine in the treatment of her chronic typhoid illness. She said that it was 450cl traditional syrup which she bought at N1800 (one thousand eight hundred naira) from Rev. Fr. R. Arazu that had treated the typhoid. According to her for three years now she has been free from typhoid. The strength of bitter kola has also been stressed by Madukasi (2017) when he writes that "considerable experimental studies found the chemical constituent in bitter kola have anti-malaria properties." He adds that bitter kola improves lung functions among other health benefits of bitter kola.

Boils/furuncles (carbuncles) are usually skin diseases that cause hard, red, painful and deep-seated swellings. Mrs. Udego Ogufofor (personal communication, 4 January, 2014) advises that patients can be treated by grindings potash of a tea spoon quantity, get ashes from burnt and threshed oil palm nut head, and palm oil, a tea spoon each, mix to a pastry texture and apply on the boil(s) morning, afternoon, and evening (three hours before sleeping) for three days, and everything will clear. Traditional medicine is responsive in the treatment/management of tuberculosis. Mr. Nnamdi Enuwa (personal communication, 6 November, 2008) states that bitter kola (*Garcinia kola*) when sliced and taken with honey for four weeks will heal tuberculosis that was discovered at its early stage. Mrs. Nwanenyeobu Okafor (personal communication, 18 September, 2018) recommends that five nuts of wonderful kola (*Buchliolzacorialea*) when taken with warm water heals tuberculosis by destroying the germ tubercle bacillus.

Pediatric cases are tackled by traditional pediatricians. Such cases include: *Ntiwe-isi* (depression of anterior fontanelles as a result of severe dehydration), *Nta (sepsis)*, *Apupa-*

Ato, etc. Mr. Ume Felix (personal communication, February 10, 2013) specifies that in the traditional pediatric medicine specific cases are treated by certain traditional pediatricians based on the type of pediatric medicine *Agwu or Ogwu* installed or learned by the family or lineage. Traditional pediatricians handle the illness depending on the specializations. Some surgical related issues are treated by traditional surgeons. An example is tonsillitis. According to Mr. Uzoechi Oha (personal communication, 17 April, 2010) is of the view that tonsillitis can be handled with joking and pressing as far as the patient does not swallow the fluid. After that, he will take some leaves and herbs. He adds that when certain objects enter human body, special leaves are placed on the part affected, after 15 minutes, the objects will inject out to the skin surface of the victim. In fact, there are so many inputs traditional magic and medicine have in the promotion of human health which time will not permit to be discussed here.

Impact of African Religion and Culture in Promoting Health

There are areas African culture does not promote healthy living. the cultural habit that encourage the use of local blade by more than one person without sterilizing it, having unprotected sexual intercourse, the female genital mutilation, the superstitious beliefs on certain illnesses, for example, the belief that sickle cell anemia is an *Ogbanje* spirit inflicted illness and so on do not promote health conditions of the living rather, it hinder it. Be that as it may, there are areas African religion and culture promote health. Cleanliness they say, it next to godliness. Africans see sanitation as part of healthy living. According to Okafor and Amaechi-Ani (2019), the first assignment a prospective wife does in many communities in Igbo land is to sweep for the extended family members. Africans clear bushes around farm and homestead, they communally preserve running water within and outside seasons. Huts are built in forests to scare wild animals. There are short time preservation of food with natural substances and means. Medicinal crops, herbs, trees, are also planted around homes for daily use. All these enhance good health.

At any time, man is discovered to always be at rest, Africans conceive it as laziness. Therefore, early morning they go to farm, hunting games and do other recreational activities. They work in the morning hours, rest at sun-set (afternoon) and sum up the work for the day in the evening. These regular activities serve as exercise to their bodies. Exercise itself is very good for healthy living. Physical activities are seen by Ani (2014) as any body movement that work your muscles and requires energy resting”. That is to say, that these activities at farm, hunting, and other recreational activities performed by Africans are physical activities. The positive impact of physical activities is encouraged by Ugwu (2016) when he emphasizes that physical activities help to take one's mind off his worries. Mr. Okwu Okechukwu (Personal Communication, 7 July, 2011) points that regular exercise promotes optimum health. These regular physical activities can be suspected as one of the things that had enhanced long life among African fore-bears. For Odo (2012), “exercise increases your brain production of endorphins”. These endorphins are the “feel good” neuro transmitters that are responsible for the coveted runner's high”. The physical activities in African culture invariably is a source of good mental health.

Nevertheless, it is worthy to note that most African magic and medicine are installed with African religion under the charge of the spirit of medicine and divination that is *agwu/ogwu* spirit. Families that treat various diseases have the god of medicine and divination installed by their ancestors. The religious belief that the dead should be buried without wasting much time to allow him reincarnate and create time for funeral activities has some health benefits for the living. Even though it is attached to belief system the earlier corpse is buried the healthier the environment for the living. It again reduces the degree of emotional and psychological worries of the immediate members of the family. Mrs. Ugonu Ugwu (personal communication, 1 March, 2016) points that the earlier a corpse is buried, the earlier the funeral rites commence in most African communities. She adds that when her husband died, she was emotionally and psychologically disorganized. But within eleven hours after his burial, funeral and condolence commenced, as relations and friends kept coming, exchanging peasantries, and consoling her, for a period of seven local weeks she became healthier and mentally balanced. In fact, at anytime one's mind is distracted from its stress memory circle, he has higher chances of escaping depression. Ugwu (2014) explains that stress is better managed by introducing mindfulness-based stress reduction. This burial culture is an example of mindfulness-based stress reduction.

The African culture has the feature of getting young girls ready for marriage and procreation with the introduction of puberty rites is a health remedy for control of fibroid. Prof Onah of Mbanefo Hospital, Enugu (personal communication, 8 January, 2013) teaches that fibroid grows due to inability of the womb or uterus to grow a baby because the womb is naturally meant for something to occupy it in intervals. Therefore, when expected life does not grow therein, some other mass can grow, and that is what is called fibroid. More so, the culture of giving space in procreation is also good for mothers and their babies. It also helps to avoid experiencing fibroid and other child bearing health challenges at later years after child bearing stage. Today, mother wear high heel shoes, which is not in African culture. Such dressing system is frowned at in African culture. A nurse Mrs. Nwadiogwa Okafor (personal communication, 7 July, 2018) advises that pregnant women should avoid heel shoes because it can cause abortion or miscarriage. Young girls and ladies fix nails and eye lashes. African culture admires natural appearance. A mere look at fixed nails and eye lashes suspects a health danger to the bearer. African religion and culture condemn abortion, suicide, alcoholism, abusive drug in take. All these ethical issues constitute health hazards. For example, drug abuse has been lamented on mass media as one of the major causes of brain and heart related health challenges. Enyi (2007) agrees that, "smoking of marijuana (India hemp) damages the brain leading to lack of concentration, sense of relaxation, increased heart rate, etc. Depression and madness are common". In African society, drug abuse, suicide, abortion, alcoholism etc are at their increase because modern children are not well cultured on the health and other implications of such indulgence or intention or habit.

Recommendations

1. African health, religious and cultural practitioners should intensify efforts on

- encouraging hygienic cultural, religious and health practices.
2. Sensitization campaign through mass media, seminars, women folk meetings (August-meeting) and other community gatherings should be used to disseminate information on the efficacy and relevance of African medicine, religion and culture in promoting health care delivery.
 3. Seminars, workshops should be intensified on the need to always give reasonable patronage to African medicine as an alternative medi-care to orthodox medicine to create room for a closure of the discrepancy between orthodox/modern medicine and traditional medicine.
 4. Government should strategize more against the fanatics that always struggle for demolition of traditional places of worship and their paraphernalia. Punitive and civil penalties can be promulgated to encourage the growth of African religion and culture.

Conclusion

African culture, and religion are not just mere theoretical academic entities. They are pragmatic and multi-faceted entities. It is an emotional religion and at the same time punitive especially to the evil doers. Traditional medicine is just an aspect which hardly can exist without some other component(s) of the traditional religion. In the recent time, some Christians are careful with the use of traditional medicine that they alternate some ritual items and requirements with money or ordinary material things to avail themselves of the conviction that they are not committing apostasy. It is only death that is irreparable. Any short coming found in the discharge and use of traditional medical procedures is liable to amendments. But the words of Ekwutosi (2008) should be pondered: “therapeutic procedures that are likely to cause harm or undesirable side effect can be justified only by a proportionate benefit to the patient”.

In as much as traditional medicine has been proven to be efficacious and significant to the wellbeing of man, the negative (efficacy), significance and uses are not admired by society and are bound to be aborted. In many occasions, users of the bad medicines always face their penalties either at long- or short-term basis. In all, traditional medicine, religion, other health care delivery measures, and culture among the people do much good in promoting a healthy living society, and infuses a more careful character and qualities to the populace as it concerns health.

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Interview

S/N	Name Of Interviewee	Profession	Place Of Origin	Age	Date	Interviewer
1	Mr. Chinemere Ugwu	Farmer Herbalist	Anambra	80	12/5/2017	Okafor E.I
2	Mrs. Ngozi Ugwu	Caterer	Ebonyi	58	6/8/18	Okafor E.I
3	Mrs. Udego Ogugofor	Herbalist	Delta State	74	4/1/14	Okafor E.I
4	Mr. Nnamdi Enuwa	Hunter	Enugu	48	6/11/08	Okafor E.I
5	Mrs. Nwanenyeobu Okafor	Farmer	Abia	70	18/9/18	Okafor E.I
6	Mr. Felix Umeh	Traditional Padiatrician				
7	Mr. Uzoechi Oha	Medicine Man	Enugu	81	17/4/10	Okafor E.I
8	Mrs. Ugon Ezeaneke	Farmer	Enugu	78	1/3/16	Okafor E.I
9	Prof. Onah Mbanefo	Medical Doctor	Enugu	58	8/1/13	Okafor E.I
10	Mrs. Nwadiogwa Okafor	Herbalist	Imo	64	7/7/18	Okafor E.I
11	Mr. Okwu Okechukwu	Lecturer	Enugu	47	7/7/2011	Okafor E.I