

Orality and Medicine: The Efficacy of the Word in the Practice of Therapeutic Cures in Traditional African Medicine

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Abstract

The practice of medicine or herbal cures in traditional societies particularly in Africa has often been viewed with mixed feelings and sometimes with outright disdain yet it has its own history of achievements particularly in the areas of bone setting and therapeutic cures or exorcism. This notwithstanding, today in Nigeria however, one notices that modern technological innovations and education have greatly impacted on traditional medical practice and medicine men are encouraged to improve upon their practices, particularly their environments. The efficacy of traditional herbal cures in most of our societies encouraged this writer to examine some of the methods employed by the medicine men. The result of this was the interesting discovery that traditional medicine men place high priority on the power of the word as evidenced in their incantations, invocations and chants. The “word” in the healing process is seen as an appeal to a supernatural being who is summoned to the aid of the patient. That supernatural force could be the supreme God or the traditional deities believed to be in control of human existence. In the end, the writer discovered that the traditional medicine men possessed the best stock of poetical expressions and dramatic dialogue which they employ to establish a relationship or rapport between man and nature or the supernatural in the process of healing.

Key words: Traditional African medicine; Nigeria; Traditional medical practice; Herbal cures

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Today in most of our traditional African societies, the practice of medicine or medicinal cures outside orthodox medicine is often associated with witchcraft, necromancy or other derogatory associations that are not worthy of mention in so called civilized society. The predominance of western medicine and the prevalence of literacy in most traditional communities have tended to eradicate traditional medical practitioners.

But perhaps the personalities and demeanor of the traditional medicine men themselves can be said to have militated against their practice. Often times these practices are frowned upon in modern day society. They include:

a) Unkempt or dirty environments around their shrines which some believe are part and parcel of their practice but which go against the concept of hygiene and enhancement of good health.

b) The lack of a specific dosage for traditional medicine.

c) The lack of education of traditional medicine men in most societies.

d) The deliberate mystification of traditional medical practice to the consternation of many gives it an aura of fetishism which people abhor and run away from.

e) The fact that traditional medical practice is not easily and willingly imparted to willing learners except through initiation into a code of secrecy which ensures continuity only within a particular lineage or trusted friends.

These obstacles notwithstanding, today there seem to be an increasing interest in shifting from western methods to our indigenous African methods of traditional medical practice. However, this shift seems to manifest more in the area of therapeutic practice particularly psychotherapeutic practices. In this perspective, even though the traditional medical practitioners still uses herbs and other curative agents, emphasis seems to be on “the word” or the potency of the word, just as in many other traditional engagements. The traditional medicine man depends much on the fluency and strength of the word which solicits faith and belief in its potency.

The word consists of chants, invocations, incantations, exhortations, commands and sometimes exorcism. These could be carried on in a mild or harsh manner as the situation demands, or depending on the understanding of the medicine man as per what spirit is involved in the sickness. Examples of these kinds of cures abound in traditional and even modern society, e.g..

a) The case of the priestess of Agbala and her chants to cure Ezinma in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

b) Prayer meetings of several cultic or even modern day Pentecostal denominations that embark on cures.

c) Atam cultic exorcism practiced among the Bakor and Bokyi in Ogoja and Bokyi Local Government Areas of Cross River State respectively. What is of utmost importance here is the therapeutic effect of the word uttered in the chants, incantations or exorcisms.

The philosophy behind this was expounded by a foremost psychologist Professor Peter O. Ebigbo (1995) in what he called the “African Cosmological Health Model”, which he advocated as the African position in psychotherapy. According to the renowned Professor of Psychiatry, the root of the ailments and their cures lies in the African cosmological belief system which links man and all concrete objects to a spirit world. Thus the African has the following characteristics:

a) He is group conscious and addresses the group with his mind and body, thus the medicine man accompanies his curative herbs with his mind through utterances which externalize his wishes. An example of speaking with his body is somatization.

b) The African believes in his world being filed with spirits. To him every concretely existing object or force has a spirit which can become active when invoked. Very important here are the spirits of the ancestors which are believed to be overseeing and protecting their lineages.

c) Over and above these, the African believes in the existence of a supreme God who superintends over everything created by him and accountable to him.

In this scheme, plants and animals become very important as media through which the spirit of man or the spirits of the gods or God Almighty or ancestors could act in the concrete world. The medicine man only plays an organizing role as the catalyst in whose words the link

is created between the tangible world and the spirit world with a view to effecting cures or bringing about tranquility in the human world.

Also, it is believed in African society that every human being has a personal god who is part and parcel of or representative of the one Almighty God from whom all things emanate, and to whom all things return. In this parlance, for any effective or successful cure, the medicine man solicits the aid of his personal god through chants and incantations.

There is therefore, a holistic view of health. Health or any form of ailment cannot be conceived of except in the context of inter-human and human-spirit relationship. All is said to be well when the individual lives in harmony with his world. Conversely everything is amiss and chaotic when there is a distortion in this relationship, the result of which is illness and death. To achieve his cures and bring about harmony in this external world of humans, the African traditional medicine man has sort of evolved a system of indigenization of psychotherapy by which process he works on the mentality of his patients along with the application of curative herbs to enhance recovery from certain ailments. The medicine man first tries to understand the background and philosophy of the patients through a process of “future telling” by which he gathers information which the patient unwittingly supplies. He then applies some valid psychotherapeutic principles to the emotionally or mentally disturbed person in order to soothe his feelings and solicit absolute faith in his cures.

Again, let me emphasize the importance attached to the word, i.e., the therapeutic effect of the word in the incantations or chants. And this involves practice of skill in the art which borders on performance.

Here we are talking of the ability of the cultist or medicine men to use the word effectively along with his gestures which may in fact hypnotize his patient. This writer has witnessed these types of situations in three different settings.

i. The treatment of headaches

ii. The treatment of fractures and

In the case of headaches, the medicine man approaches the patient and throws a simple question at him:

Medicine man: Are you sick?

Patient: Yes, I have headache.

Medicine man: You have headache?

Patient: Yes.

Medicine man: Does it pain?

Patient: It is very painful.

Medicine man: May the headache be more painful. In fact may it even kill you.

Patient: What do you mean?

Medicine man: Oh so you don’t want to die, then allow me to cure you. These medicines will attack the headache and you must allow it to work.

In this instance the burden of cure is thrown back to the patient and he is required to accept that he can be cured. Thus the patient becomes psychologically disposed to the cure and believes that the herbs being administered are potent and can effect the cure desired. This patient was interviewed on the second, third and fourth days and affirmed that he was well and felt strong even though he had taken so much treatment from the hospital and failed to recover. Many other patients I interviewed attested to the efficacy of the treatment they had received from the medicine man.

Of importance here is the dialogue and dramatization between the patient and the medicine man or as he calls himself, "head doctor". The "doctor", an amiable young man, claimed, on interview, that he normally gave his patients a guarantee period of one month during which time a recurrence would be treated with harder herbs. The treatment fee, he claimed, was just one cowry and no more. The patient could, if he pleased, entertain the doctor with some drinks, either palm wine or beer. The "doctor" also asserted that his treatment depended more on the patient's willingness to be cured which he always solicited in the drama before commencement of the actual treatment.

The second case is in the treatment of fractures. Usually, the patient is brought to the bone doctor, who summons a number of elder's readily available with local gin or palm wine provided for them to drink. (Here the writer witnessed two male and one female practitioner who is now late). While the drinking goes on, the bone doctor prepares his or her herbs. At some point, he/she solicit the attention of the entire group and launches into a session of incantations and chants. Sometimes this is accompanied by singling, drumming and dancing. At the end, the bone doctor inquires from the elders whether or not he/she should commence with the treatment. The elders either say "yes" or "no". In most cases their answer is in the affirmative but on few occasions the answer has been negative. This writer then inquired why the bone "doctor" needed the consent of the elders to treat a patient. The answer was that the elders living near the bone "doctor", with time, had been trained to observe the disposition of the patient while drinking and during the incantations and, maybe, dance sessions. They could, therefore, judge whether the patient was afraid or not to go through the process. Also they were expected to tell stories about cures that had been successful or failed and those that took a long time because of the patient's frame of mind. All these were aimed at preparing the patient for the painful ordeal of re-assembling the broken bones. The job of the elders, therefore, was to predispose the patient and watch his reaction to their stories. They would then be able, at the end, to say whether he can or cannot withstand the treatment. This is to prevent possible collapse and death of any patient.

This writer later discovered that only very skillful story tellers and singers or dancers were allowed in such occasions. The aim was not to frighten the patient but to sooth his mien and prepare his mind for the treatment. It is known that bone treatments are always painful and a patient needs be properly disposed to forestall collapse and death. Again the dancing and the manner of presentation of the cases treated in the past would give the new patient assurance that he too could be cured. However, the burden of cure lay on the patient's disposition, not the doctor. The patients' psychological disposition or the preparedness of his mind for a fast and effective cure is a paramount determinant of the treatment.

In the case of the treatment of spirit possession or exorcism, the process is more or less the same as what obtains in today's spiritual churches. However while the churches or prayer groups depend on intense prayers and commands, the traditional exorcist employs intensive chants and incantations to the accompaniment of frenzied music and drumming. This could also be the pattern in the churches. What this writer noticed in spirit possession in traditional society is that often times the possessed individual becomes so powerful that it requires extra strength and zeal on the part of the exorcist to be able to tame the spirit and effect the cure. This is displayed in the skill and dexterity of the exorcist's frenzied movement and the fast and articulate utterances or addresses to the spirit. This writer witnessed a situation where it seemed the exorcist and the spirits were engaged in a conversation. What was of interest to this writer was the aptness of the replies proffered by the exorcist to the questions posed by the spirit through the possessed individual.

Possessed: Who do you think I am?

Exorcist: The devil incarnate.

Possessed: And have you ever seen a devil?

Exorcist: Not before now but I can see him now in you.

Possessed: Me? Am I a devil and how do I look like?

Exorcist: Oh! Very horrible. Don't you see how dirty you are? (Possessed looks at herself and laughs) you are not worthy to be among men.

Possessed: And you, are you a man?

Exorcist: It depends, if you mean "man" or mankind.

Possessed: Ok, which one are you? It appears at this point the possessed loses concentration and the exorcist suddenly catches her off-guard and splashes some herbal substance on her face and shouts at the same time.

Exorcist: Shut up you fiend and get lost I'm not her to parley with you, friend.

At this, the possessed fell down and the exorcist rushed in to apply herbal concoctions all over her body and left her lying prostrate and tired out.

There is also another kind of cure which this writer noticed among the Bakor of Ogoja Local Government Area and which seems to extend to Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State. Among the Obudu people it is referred to as “maligiehe”. This is a kind of healing or therapy carried out by a group. In these two societies it is effected by the age grade to which a sick patient belongs. Here, when a member of an age grade falls ill and all cures prove ineffective, his age grade members rise as a group and visit the sick man in his home. They spend a long time with him and in most cases resolve to spend nights with him. During these nights they sing or tell stories about their brave exploits at traditional warfare or hunting expeditions. In the early hours of the morning before they depart to their own homes, they move to the playground and in a chorus, chant

Ours will not die eh?

ee

eh?

eeee

Ours will not die eh?

ee

eh?

ee

Ours will not die, will he?

No, No, No

This is done for three nights and on the fourth, it is expected that the “victim” must get well, and it usually happens. The victim who otherwise was known to be at the point of death would be seen slowly walking about in his compound.

It is believed here that the group agreement which is carried in the word or words uttered by the members of the age grade is responsible for the cure. This is in keeping with the saying, “the voice a man is the voice of God”. This same method is applied when an illustrious son or daughter of a community falls suddenly ill and it is suspected that the ailment is not natural. Here it is not the age grade but the entire elders of the community who go out to the village playing ground to chant the agreement. In this case the sick is brought before the elders by his age-grade members. Again the agreement in the potency of the word to effect the cure.

In Atam cultic exorcism, the patient or whoever wishes to be cleansed goes before the Atam masquerade bare-bodied. He is made to lie down facing the east and belly-up. Atam masquerade then runs his hands over the entire frame of the individual from head to toe three times and symbolically throws away the infirmities he removes from the individual. He then jumps over the individual seven times and walks off and the person moves away to his home. This again is done to the accompaniment of music and hand clapping or the use of clappers made from wood. No drumming is allowed in Atam.

Generally, therefore, it is believed that in most traditional African societies, the effectiveness of traditional

cures depends mostly on the potency of the utterance or pronouncement by the priest in cultic situations or the medicine man or dibia as the case may be. The effectiveness of the word derives from the traditional African world view or cosmology which links man with nature and the god-head thus empowering man to be the manipulator and link between the tangible world and the world of spirits. The word and the manner of its usage become the effective cure for ailments because it prepares the mind of the individual to receive the medicinal herbs. In fact, in some cases, as above, the word is applied without any medicinal herbs and the same healing effect is achieved.

The problem with the modern mind, given up to scientific experiments, of course, lies in the source of the power of healing. The question often asked is, is the power from God through natural herbs or from the devil and witchcraft through the same natural herbs?

This writer is of the opinion that in some traditional African societies, the devil is just another spirit who may or may not cause harm depending on people’s interaction with him. It is the mind of the individual that matters. An evil mind gives itself to the devil for malevolent practices. A good mind uses some knowledge from the devil for benevolent practices. Therefore, in traditional society, the wellbeing of the individual is of paramount importance and so the source of power from which a cure is affected is not important. The belief belies the saying “if the hospital cannot help, why not try a native doctor”, or “go and see the ground in your village, this is not an ordinary ailment”. If the ailment is not ordinary i.e. natural then group or communal healing through the word becomes the answer. If it is natural, again the word, along with the herbs effects the healing. Here it is believed, and strongly too, that there exist numerous curative herbs whose potency is enhanced through the word or utterance i.e. the strength of the medicine-men’s chants and incantations or invocations as the case maybe. Of interest again is the fact that many traditional medical practitioners do not just start a cure except to the accompaniment of music, and dancing.

These serve dual effects because:

i. The singing enhances the fluency of the chants by the medicine man while helping to take the mind of the patient off his predicament.

ii. While soothing the pains of the patient, music serves as a traditional form of relaxation and entertainment to everyone including even the doctor who uses the time to sort out his herbs in a relaxed atmosphere.

Either way the final outcome is the desired cure which brings back harmony in society and re-establishes the traditional link of man with nature.

In summary, what this writer has tried to establish is that the traditional medicine man values the word as much as the herbal medicines. That the process of healing goes beyond mere application of herbs. It is a more complex and intimate process of establishment of a link

between man and nature through the word and the mind. What the process involves or implies is that the medicine man's intention must tally with the communal cosmic perception which is expressed in the linguistic utterances that best portray the cultural milieu and prepares grounds for the healing process. This cosmic experience finds its most immediate reflection in the language thus it has even closer relationship with the particular words and phrases with which the medicine man expresses his wish or intention. The words must be apt and succinct and skillfully uttered not to distort the balance between nature and man. The words and phrases must express the desires of both the medicine man and his patient, the one through his incantations and invocations and the other simply through his acquaintance with the healing process to be administered on him. In this, the word as we conceive it becomes the product of a more intimate relationship between feeling and thought. It depicts a psychological or nervous sensitivity and conscious emotional attachment to the environment or the supernatural, not only on the part of the medicine man but also on the part of the community within which he operates. Through invocations, chants and incantations this direct link is fortified and supernatural intervention solicited in the healing process.

This explains why medicine men do not operate in isolation of their immediate neighbors i.e. elders within their spheres of jurisdiction. The writer noticed that whatever a patient is brought to a medicine man within Bakors community, he never commences treatment or the administration of curative herbs without first calling in elders of the immediate vicinity and informing them of the task before him. If they are not immediately available, he reserves whatever drinks have been provided for them and calls them together later in the evening for the purpose of information. Together, the elders drink and pray for a successful healing. Often a very powerful prayer is solicited from the eldest member of the community before healing commences. The elders, it is believed, are closest to the spirit or supernatural world and so are required to give their consent for the healing to be effective.

Even in cases where a medicine man is invited from outside the immediate environs to perform a cure in a place alien to him, his first task is often to invite all the elders of the immediate community together and solicit their support for the cure. Alternatively, he visits the elders individually and requests for their prayers and support. The elders' prayers are very important and serve two functions;

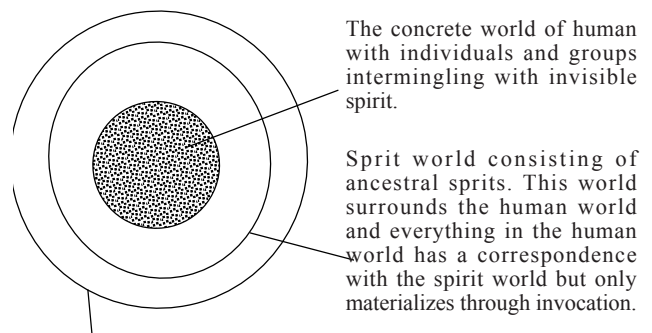
- i. They guarantee the medicine man free access into the forest to sort for his medicinal herbs.
- ii. They establish a rapport between the new medicine man and his new environment so as to enhance the blessings of the ancestors and the spirit world.

Failure to consult could render even the herbs you have brought from outside ineffective, and valueless.

It is obvious from the foregoing that word and thought or even word and feeling form part and parcel of the indivisible process of creation and therefore of healing. A healing process must also commence from the word which links the whole process to the cosmic environment before it can succeed in the task of healing which restores harmony between man and nature.

Medicine men, therefore, possess the best stock of poetical expressions which establish and maintain this link. The poetry in the chants, invocations and dramatic dialogue establish a relationship that serves as an identity of communal experiences so that it becomes impossible to separate the healing process of experience from the formal expression of the words. The word establishes the context and helps in the performance of the function desired. To separate the word, or put differently, the quality of the linguistic utterances from the curative process is to render the cure ineffective, just as removing an oral narrative from its performance context kills the vitality of the experience. It is the word that provides a true understanding of the cosmic belief system that surrounds the healing process in most traditional African societies and since these societies thrive on morality, it also pervades healing sessions, making them lively and imparting the communal cosmic consciousness of the traditional societies.

The African Cosmic Belief System



The world of the Supreme Being who superintends over all the other worlds. From him all things emanate. This serves as the unification of the human and lesser spiritual or ancestral world.

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