

African Indigenous Healers and Counseling: A Case study of Babalawo

Kofi Johnson

Department of Intelligence Studies, Geospatial Science, Political Science and History, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Fayetteville State University, 1200 Murchison Road, Fayetteville, North Carolina, USA

Corresponding Author: Kofi Johnson, Department of Intelligence Studies, Geospatial Science, Political Science and History, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Fayetteville State University, 1200 Murchison Road, Fayetteville, North Carolina, USA, E-mail: kjohnson@uncfsu.edu

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Abstract

African narrative has been from the perspective of the West when it comes to medicine. However African narrative based on traditional perspective can be illuminating and enriching to Western world. This paper focuses on traditional indigenous healers and their techniques in healing their patients. The work delineates the unique roles of Babalawo... the Yoruba medicine men... the interpersonal relations with their clients and their service to community. The paper concludes for cooperation between the traditional healers and mainstream western trained practitioners because there is a correlation that exists between traditional healers and western trained medical doctors.

Introduction

The idea of writing this paper was triggered by the recent announcement by the World Health Organization (WHO) that 80 percent of Nigerians receives their health services by consulting Babalawo. The populace believes that human beings are being influenced by certain supernatural entities or power, which may or may not be conceived of personality terms. Among them they rationalized are spirits of the ancestors, orishas (deities) and Olodumare- God Almighty. Different societies have evolved and use different forms of indigenous healing methods which are often called traditional medicine (TM).

Among the Yorubas of Western Nigeria, Babalawo provide services and counseling. The reminiscent of counseling profession in the West.

The center of this paper focuses on Babalawo, who is recognized by the community where he or she lives as someone competent to provide health care by using plant, animal and mineral substances and other methods based on social cultural and religious practices. In addition the study makes an attempt as to how western trained counselor can be incorporated with traditional healers.

This paper is a multi-faceted study. It traverses social, cultural and religious practices. It also deals with the impact of traditional medicine in Western Nigeria. The paper will address the following questions: What is Babalawo? What techniques do they use in counseling patients and healing diseases? What dominant medical system available before cosmopolitan medicines?

The paper concludes by an appraisal of traditional medicine; and if it can be incorporated into the mainstream health care system.

The Objectives of the Study

- To delineate the unique roles of Babalawo
- To point out techniques utilized by Babalawo
- To examine Yoruba Traditional healers interpersonal relationship with clients
- To examine services rendered within the Yoruba cultural milieu
- To assist counseling professions how they could incorporate some of the techniques of Babalawo into metropolitan healthcare system.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative analysis. For this reason, this calls for a historical research design. It enables a researcher "to collect, evaluate events in the past." It is also a case study, as Yin states, it is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life. In support of the viewpoint [2] states, that the case studies are necessary; "when the boundaries between phenomenon and contest are clearly evident." While Chasen and Coleman clarify, by saying those case studies allow in-depth examination, and that, it enables the researcher to probe the issues in an extensive and holistic fashion. Importantly, a case study can assist us in understanding a particular phenomenon [3].

In order to address this subject matter, current literature will help elucidate on the uniqueness of Babalawo in Western Nigeria. This research should focus on the thematic analyses [1]. As a qualitative design, the study is guided via peer view journals and books. This would provide the researcher with the scope for further investigation of the subject in question. Consequently, the most appropriate

method of analysis embarked on this study would be thematic design cum Qualitative analysis. That is, whereby information gathered was subjected to thematic analysis, coded and analyzed [4].

The Yorubas

The Yorubas live in Western part of Nigeria. They are the second largest ethnic group in Nigeria with a robust culture and tradition. According to [9, 10], the Yorubas have “their own distinct, system and rationalized ideas about the mysteries of the world; their philosophy of life affirming, be it true or not (p.90).

The Yorubas are a people with their own philosophy and world view of counseling with the Babalawo as the medium through which healing and counseling are practiced. Babalawo are traditional healers of Yoruba land, comprising of diviners (Ifa priests) and herbalists (Onisekun or Adahunse) [11].

In the Yoruba world view, the “paranormal world is direct accessible by ritual specialists such as “babalawo” (Yoruba traditional priest/diviner) [5]. Furthermore, the Yorubas believe that diseases, sickness and other misfortunes are beyond human imagination and are caused by ‘extraordinary influence of the malevolent spirits. As a result, people resort to the Babalawo to find out the causes or to know the wish of Orisha (the deity gods responsible).

Culture

Hoebel [7, 8] defined culture as the integrated system of learned behavior patterns characteristics of the members of a society which are not the result of biological inheritance [2].

Taylor (1989) viewed culture as the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law custom other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society [2]. According to Cone and Pelto, 1969, they argue that culture is “Who we are and what we do is determined by our biological heritage, our surroundings, the group in which we live, and the means, the knowledge, the skills and the ways of behaving, by which the member of our group function together to satisfy mutual requirements.”

The culture in which people are socialized determines the beliefs that they hold about their problems and how they may be solved [17]. Vontress conceded that African clients’ beliefs affect extent to which they consider the counselors beneficial. This viewpoint reinforces why African clients consult traditional healers.

According to Idowu (1985) for any healing system to be helpful and effective it must be embedded on cultural background.

Similarly, it is tradition which is a belief in any field of culture to the extent that it is transmitted from the hands, lips or examples of others rather than being invented. The authors and transmitters are reliable before the tradition is valid [2]. Tradition may be verbal or nonverbal. Verbal traditions include traditional artifacts examples: icons, monuments and symbolic objects, sites, designs gestures, postures, customs and institutions. On the other hand, nonverbal traditions are healings and divination.

Techniques used by Traditional Healers

In attempt to heal their client, Babalawo use the follow-

ing techniques: Divination, Sacrifices, Herbal Therapies, Prayers, Invoking the gods and Ancestors, Incisions and Dream Interpretations [2].

Divination

This is a common phenomenon with traditional society. Divination is the traditional healers’ method of predicting their clients’ future by using Ifa. Through Ifa, the clients want to find out or know from (Orisa) deities what is responsible for his or her illness. Through Ifa, Babalawo is able to diagnose the problem of his clients. Before Babalawo begins the healing process of his clients, he will always divine in order to “get to the kernel of his clients problems and prescribes “ebo”, the ritual for solving the problem.

In this manner, Babalawo acts as the mouth piece of Orunmila for solving the problem of his clients.

Sacrifices

The core of healing in a traditional society such as Yoruba, rests on performing sacrifices known as “riru ebo.”(Performing sacrifice to the gods). The ability of the client to follow through with making sacrifices as prescribed by the healer determines sound health. In performing sacrifices some of the animals and objects that are used include: chickens, cows, goats, palm oil, snails, kola nuts, water and money.

Prayer

Prayer is a main staple of Yoruba traditional Healer. The Yorubas believe that “Adura ni ebo” meaning that –prayer is sacrifice. Yoruba Traditional Healers (babalawo) use prayers and sacrifices to appease Oludumare, the Almighty God to make it possible those clients will overcome their difficulties. Babalawo pray to enable their client to get well so as to join their community and become functional members of his people. The cornerstone of healing in traditional medicine in healing is prayer. Through prayer the healer begs Olodumare to appease the gods to set the client free of his illness.

Veneration of Ancestors

In African Traditional Religion, ancestors occupy a prime position. The Yorubas view ancestors as the mediator between themselves and God. It is believed that ancestors are living dead, who in spite of their death are still relevant to our world. That is, there is a strong belief that their lives are influenced by their dead ancestors. For this reason, they are appeased and appealed to for help in time of crises. The Yoruba world view holds that some clients’ problems are caused because they refuse, or forget their ancestors or disrespect Olodumare- the Almighty God. Consequently, Babalawo urge clients to say prayers to the ancestors or ask certain requests from their ancestors.

Incisions

Incisions known as (gbere) are cuts made into the skins with a razor blade. They are used for prevention of diseases and they are also used to vaccinate children. Significantly, incisions are used as a protection against evil spirits from coming to the clients’ lives. These rituals are likened to the western inoculations to prevent diseases.

Dreams and Interpretations

Dreams are valuable, the Babalawo use in conducting their

activities. Certain Babalawo are said to obtain instructions about solving difficulty problems from dreams. Through dreams certain herbs to cure a client are revealed. Interpretations of dreams enhance their method of heal their patients.

Sources of the Techniques used by Traditional Healers

According to Adekson, "Many of the sources used by the Traditional Healers are attributed to God (Olodumare), as the Yoruba believe that God is the giver of natural power." (p. 89). Added to this, through several years of studying Ifa.

In the process of healing clients, Babalawo creates a climate of trust, relaxation love, acceptance empathy and unparalleled mercy through interactions with patient [2]. This climate of trusts and love are created before commencing healing interactions. On the other hand, the clients on their heart believe they will receive help. Base on this expectation makes clients to visit babalawo. Clients come to Babalawo for various problems such as: matters relating to marriage, having a baby, traveling, career choices, naming a child, starting a business and solving marital problems. The Community at large trusts babalawo, and have faith in healing his clients. Because of this, the community has high expectation from traditional healers. Consequently, they are called upon to cure a magnitude of diseases like orthodox doctors. Significantly, they counsel their clients.

Implications for Counselors

There is an avalanche of literature advocating for a new paradigm for integration of traditional healing with western trained counselors. Pursuant to the proclamation by the World Health Organization, 80 percent of Nigerians receive their health care services from the traditional healers. It demonstrates that the days in which traditional healers are regarded as witch doctors are gone. In Nigeria, child bearing mother are reported that they seek care from traditional healers instead of biomedical practitioners. Evidence has shown that talking therapies-counseling have been very unsuccessful to the ethnic minority in health care practice. Bhurgh and Bhine 1998; Kareem and Moodley (1999) argued that Minority clients have mistrusted counseling psychologists because they misunderstand minority clients' representations and that they are cultural insensitive to the minority. Dien and Sembhi on the other hand argue that minority patients are uncomfortable in seeing conventional doctors. In support, many minorities rationalizes and state that the process of traditional healing is seen as holistic as it engages the mind and body and souls of individuals, as their families and communities.

Therefore, it seems critical for counseling psychologists and psychotherapist to understand the role of traditional healing in the west and how they could accommodate their clinical work. Counselors and babalawo should find a meeting ground to integrate traditional counselors –babalawo and Western trained counselors should work hand in hand in a traditional setting where trained counselors are few.

Why are traditional healing gaining supports? The answers are:

1. Failure of modern medicine to treat whole person, this has resulted in client's turning toward alternative methods of healing.
2. The growth of traditional healing, the availability in

the West of traditional healers who are highly trained and experienced from their home countries [15].

3. Traditional healing conceptualizes illness as broader concept, recognizing disturbances in the outside environment as playing part in affliction of the individual [16, 17].
4. An interesting and attractive feature of traditional healing is the fact that it can be conducted both publicly and privately. The healers and patient undertake the same experience and pain [12].

Woessner (2007) captures how traditional healer works the body when healing:

The body becomes in a sense a record of everything that has ever happened, is happening, will happen, from the smallest level to the most grand level... you take a journey through the body because everything will be held in body... and in the journey you find story manifesting in symptoms [13].

This is what Koss-Chiono calls "radical empathy." In other words, the "Journey" of healing is shared equally between the Babalawo and his clients.

Where do we go from here? The plausible answer is that there should be collaboration between western trained doctors and the traditional healers. They need to coordinate by referring their clients to traditional healers [6]. As Adekson observes: Western trained medical experts ... can learn a lot from each other, provided that they are willing to lay aside their inherent biases and prejudices that presently depriving human population of access to holistic health.

Studies after studies demonstrate that patients are comfortable in seeing conventional as well as traditional healers [5]. For example, many mental patients in Nigeria often see health professional and traditional concurrently. It can be argued that there is something going in favor of healing powers of traditional healers. In support [13], state: the healing powers of traditional healers are characterized by their ability to communicate and learn from, the ancestors and spirits. Their personal charisma, knowledge of ceremonies and rituals and knowledge of medicines and herbs are essential ingredients in healing [14].

In addition, many of the therapeutic techniques of traditional healers involve direct contacts with the clients and more personal.

Conclusion

This paper is an overview of traditional healers in the Yoruba land. The paper recommends for the integration of traditional healers and Western trained counselors in providing health care delivery. Traditional healers or babalawo perform major health delivery services to their community. They possess skills, expertise, knowledge which is learned through several years of apprenticeship. Babalawos are client focused and based their healing powers on the Olodumare- the almighty God. In treating their clients, babalawos use divining, sacrifices, herbal therapeutic, dances, invoking the gods (orisa) and ancestor worships. By doing these, they help clients to manage their lives and live in harmony in their community. The works of the healers are effective because they share the culture, experience, understanding, world view, of diseases, illnesses of

their patients [13, 14].

The part of the papers also deals with counseling and begs for how to encourage dialogues between traditional medicines and western trained practitioners. From the ongoing, a correlation exists between the traditional dealers and western trained professional counselors in understanding on how to heal patients.

Counseling profession both in the West and in the traditional settings are rooted in advice. Counseling is a way of directing some someone who is confused; as a result, a counselor offers his or her patient the path to follow to recover. In order words, this wiser individual or an older person serves as a counselor [18].

It can be argued that counseling is not the “exclusive preserve” of the West. Traditional healing counsel and healing has always been effective, and has been practiced from time immemorial among the Yoruba people through traditional healers. The issue of integrating Babalawo’s resources into modern day counseling will be beneficial to country such as Nigeria and other developing countries.

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