

# **Holistic Healing: An Analytical Review of Medicine-men in African Societies**

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## **Abstract**

Since the advent of modernity and Christianity in Africa, indigenous African holistic healing, and especially its psychological aspect, has been given negative publicity. This article examines ways in which African traditional medicine men made and continue to make a significant contribution to healing in their societies. It argues that due to the numerous challenges in contemporary African societies, there is need for a pragmatic approach, in which all innovations that can alleviate human suffering are taken on board and encouraged as long as they do not compromise people's health.

## **Key words**

Holistic healing, African traditional medicine, medicine-men, religious specialists

## Introduction

Since the advent of modern medicine in Africa, numerous milestones have been recorded in the management of diseases which used to claim thousands of African lives. Modern medicine has to a very large extent managed to heal or to control diseases and conditions which compromised Africans' longevity. Nevertheless, modern medicine has only succeeded in dealing with physical aspects of ill-health. According to the African worldview, ill-health comprises of aspects such as diseases, witchcraft, sorcery, curses and misfortunes. To deal with these there is need for a religious approach (Mbiti 1969, 169).

Ndung'u and Mwaura note that "The phenomenon of holistic healing is, ... not new in Africa. Long before the coming of western Christianity, Africans had their own medicine-people and diviners who provided the healing services" (Ndung'u and mwaura 2008, 41). When African medicine-men approach sickness, disease or misfortune, they strive to discover their root causes and how to prevent them from recurring. They do this by exploring the supernatural causes of ill-health.

Recently, in Tanzania, a Pastor who started using African medicine allegedly to cure all sorts of ailments caused a major stir in the entire East African region. It did not matter whether or not the Pastor was actually healing as alleged: people stormed his homestead to witness the phenomenal healing. Interestingly, some of those who went to Tanzania were not sick, but simply wanted to drink the magical concoction from the pastor to give themselves protection against ill-health (*Daily Nation*, August 27 2011).

The above experience illustrates that Africans are thirsty for healing. They are willing to pay large sums of money or travel long distances to seek effective treatment. In recent times traditional Chinese and other Oriental drugs are becoming very popular in Africa and the rest of the world. Well packed herbal medical products are to be found in pharmacies and supermarkets (Mumo 2009, 63).

Despite the demand for African traditional medicine, some of its aspects have been misunderstood, especially its psychological ones. The African view of psychological aspects of medicine was first discredited by the European missionaries, and the effects of their negative views are still with us today, giving African traditional medicine a bad name. Thus consulting African medicine-men on the psychological aspects of well-being has been viewed, especially by Christians, as being evil or satanic. As a result, although many Africans

go to medicine men when confronted with issues related to diseases, witchcraft, sorcery, curses and misfortunes, they do so secretly. They consult the medicine-men so as to be told the root causes of their suffering and to be shown the solutions to their problems. They believe that the medicine-men have the ability to discover the causes of suffering by divination which enables them to penetrate the spiritual realm to get knowledge with which to solve people's problems.

This article investigates the role of African medicine-men in the actualization of holistic healing in African societies. By "holistic healing", it refers to any measure that aims to address various aspects of the individual's well-being, rather than concentrating solely on his or her physical well-being. Thus it addresses physical, spiritual, psychological and social well-being, among others. The article has the following specific objectives:

- (a) To assess the contribution of African Medicine-men to holistic healing in traditional African societies.
- (b) To examine whether or not some aspects of traditional African holistic healing persist in contemporary African societies.
- (c) To determine whether or not some aspects of African holistic healing can be incorporated into contemporary healing processes.
- (d) To examine the main challenges that traditional African holistic healing faces in contemporary African societies.

The article sets out by analysing the way in which Western Christianity and modernity negatively viewed African holistic healing. It then examines the role of medicine-men in traditional African societies, before interrogating the psychological aspects of traditional African healing. Finally, it undertakes an evaluation of the role of medicine-men in contemporary African societies.

### **Christian and modern views of African Healing**

When the European missionaries arrived in Africa towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they found Africans with their own educational, social, political, judicial and health institutions. Africans had religious specialists who included herbalists, mediums, rainmakers, seers,

medicine-men, diviners and elders to deal with various aspects of ill-health. These specialists were believed to have God-given abilities to diagnose, explain the root cause of and treat various ailments (Best 1975, 27). African religious specialists were believed to have the ability to tap mystical powers in order to tackle both the physical and psychological aspects of ill-health. On the usefulness of African religious specialists, Mbiti observes that “medicine-men are the friends, pastors, psychiatrists and doctors of traditional African villages and communities” (Mbiti 1969, 171).

However, when European missionaries came into contact with African medicine, they outrightly condemned it, and especially its psychological aspects. Since the missionaries were introducing a new religion into Africa, they discredited African belief systems and institutions. They argued that African medicine-men derived their healing powers from Satan and not from God. They saw the African psychological healing as a manifestation of the work of the devil. For example, on the source of mystical powers, Gehman explains that “the Bible teaches that behind genuinely extra ordinary supernatural Powers of African Traditional Religions is the work of demonic spirits” (Gehman 1989,118). He goes on to say that “God forbids any involvement whatsoever with mystical powers of any sort whether they are socially acceptable or anti-social” (Gehman 1989,118).

Nevertheless, the European missionaries interpreted African medicine in the context of Christianity. For instance, when they claimed that mystical powers emanated from the devil, they were actually seeing African medicine in the light of their belief in the existence of the devil. African belief systems did not have a concept of the devil. In fact according to Idowu, mystical powers were created by God (Idowu 1973, 189). Thus ignorance, false ideas, prejudices and derogatory references belittled the concept of mystical powers (Mbiti 1969, 194). Mbiti traces the root cause of these distorted ideas to European and American popular writers, missionaries and colonial administrators (Mbiti 1969, 194).

The missionary enterprise and modernity were informed by the ideas of Western anthropologists and other Western thinkers who had misinterpreted Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. Some of these thinkers thought that there were two cultures, advanced and less advanced. The less advanced cultures were sometimes regarded as “primitive” (Benedict 1963, 64). Europeans who came to Africa tended to regard African cultures as “primitive”. For example, E.B. Tylor argued that African belief systems were animistic (Tylor 1979, 9). To him, Africans did not have a religion. It was due to this background that missionaries such

as Dr. David Livingstone talked about introducing the 3Cs in Africa, namely, civilization, Christianity and commerce (Anderson 1977,19).

Since the missionaries thought that they were introducing civilization into Africa, they denounced African institutions, including African approaches to healing. They referred to medicine-men and women who were highly respected for their services as “witchdoctors”. On the attitude of Europeans to African healing, Ndung’u and Mwaura explain that “The whole process of healing was in the eyes of the missionaries, part of a wide scheme of witchcraft and paganism and had to be eradicated in order to pave way for western civilization and the Gospel” (Ndung’u and Mwaura 2008, 46).

Consequently, the missionaries sought to replace traditional African healing with western modern healing by setting up health centres. They discouraged Africans from consulting the traditional healers and to go to the mission health centres instead. Nevertheless, in secret, Africans continued to seek African healers when confronted with situations that the missionaries and doctors could not handle. In my view, there was nothing evil or satanic about African psychological healing: it is only that the missionaries were ethnocentric and did not bother to understand African culture.

Furthermore, as a result of the prejudices of European missionaries, African healing has been bifurcated into physical healing which is acceptable and psychological healing which is not (Magesa 1997, 19). Yet according to African beliefs, mystical powers were actually created by God to enable human beings to deal with super natural aspects of healing. Africans believed that witches, wizards and sorcerers were able to tap mystical powers and cause ill-health. Moreover, they believed that the religious specialists neutralized the evil and suffering brought by witches, wizards and other evil forces.

### **The Role of Medicine-men in African traditional societies**

Of all the African religious specialists, medicine-men were the most useful, and so people consulted them frequently. They acted as the link between the people and the supernatural realm. Africans believed that the cause of ill-health, misfortunes and other afflictions could be traced to the invisible world. Since most of the people did not have the ability to communicate with the forces that controlled that world, the medicine-men became very useful (Magesa 1997,210).

Just like other specialists in African Religion, medicine-men were people who received a calling into the profession. Africans believed that some were born with the ability, having been born holding divination pebbles. The mid-wives would take note of relevant signs and inform the mothers that they had special children. In other cases, a medicine-man would pass on the profession to his son or other younger relative (Mbiti 1969, 167). Yet others received their calls through visions or dreams (Magesa 1997, 217). In addition, upcoming medicine-men went through training that involved attachment to practising medicine-men. The trainees learnt the several ways available of dealing with health issues. Africans believed that medicine men possessed special gifts or powers (Magesa 1997, 219). Through training they were shown how to utilize those gifts and powers. After training, they were officially installed through a ceremony presided over by a medicine-man.

In doing their work, African medicine-men combined a variety of techniques. They could find the causes of problems through divination. They could also dispense healing through the use of herbs, performance of rituals or uttering of words. In Kiswahili they were called “*waganga*”, that is, “those who cure”. However, European and American writers termed them as “witch doctors”. This term is derogatory because it is associated with witchcraft. It came to be interpreted to mean “those who bewitch”. Yet medicine-men never bewitched people; on the contrary, they provided antidotes to witchcraft. On the availability of medicine-men in Africa Mbiti notes that “every village has a medicine-man within reach and he is the friend of the community” (Mbiti 1969, 166).

Furthermore, medicine-men were charged with the responsibility of dealing with anti-life forces such as drought, floods, barrenness, curses and witchcraft (Ndung’u and Mwaura 2008, 43). Africans believed that these problems did not just happen, but that they were caused by unseen forces. Thus when individuals were confronted with such problems they approached a medicine-man. A medicine-man took his time to find out the root-cause of a problem using his expertise and experience. He would then decide on the line of action to take. If the disease was physical, he would give some herbs to cure it. If it was psychological, he used methods such as uttering words to chase away the evil spirits responsible for the problem, or he performed a cleansing ritual.

Many times the healing process involved the entire family. It also involved the physical, spiritual, social and emotional aspects of life. On the rituals performed Ndung’u and Mwaura note:

The cleansing rituals that followed marked a new start in life, symbolized by shaving the hair, lighting a new fire, or sweeping the house ceremoniously. Such rituals may not mean much to an observer .... They are psychologically vital and, no doubt play a great role in healing the sick or helping the sufferer (Ndung'u and Mwaura 2008, 45).

Medicine-men also prescribed preventive measures (Magesa 1997,209). These were in the form of charms and cleansing rituals. They also detected witches, sorcerers and other evil persons and forces that hindered productivity. Thus medicine-men in traditional African societies symbolised hope of good health, protection from evil forces and prosperity (Magesa 1997, 212).

### **Psychological Aspects of Healing in African Societies**

The African traditional psychological aspects of healing have been demonized, while the religious ones have found expression in Western-type Christianity and in African independent Churches.

As earlier noted, since the advent of Christianity and colonialism in Africa, African psychological healing, which involves promoting the mental and emotional well-being of the individual, has been discredited. Those who dare consult experts of African psychological healing are branded satanic (Mumo 2009, 62). Yet African psychological healing is developed in an African environment to address specific problems. Some Africans are afflicted by certain crises that can only be addressed using this approach. These afflictions include barrenness, mental disturbances, misfortunes and effects of witchcraft and sorcery in humans, combined with unproductive farms and animals (Mumo2009, 63).

According to Mpolo and Kalu, life in Africa is viewed in its totality. Health is associated with goodness, blessings, beauty, and all else that is positively valued in life (Mpolo and Kalu 1983,119). Wholeness of life in Africa is therefore a religious dynamic that informs all occurrences, and is used to interpret all events (Mpolo and Kalu 1983,118). Mpolo and Kalu also observe that "Healthy living includes not only the absence of disease, but also the presence of good relations with all as well as positive abundant living that is seen in having visible well-being symbolized by bodily strength, wealth and people especially children" (Mpolo and Kalu 1983,118). When Africans talk of well- being, they mean a state of being in good relations with both the physical and spiritual worlds. Africans believe that hidden causes can have demonstrable effects (Mumo 2009, 64). Thus medicine in Africa is conceived to have not only a physical meaning, but also metaphysical and spiritual significance (Lugwuanya 2000, 20).

In contemporary Africa, psychological healing has been expressed in faith healing. Since the advent of the missionary enterprise and modernisation, faith-healing has been carried out both in rural and urban settings. The use of medicine by missionaries attracted many Africans to Christianity. Western medicine was used as a tool of evangelisation. The Africans were attracted to the missionary's medical services where some form of spiritual healing was used. The early African evangelists used preaching and spiritual healing to attract thousands to Christianity. For example, Simon Kimbangu in Congo used prophetic and healing ministries to eradicate witchcraft, wicked spirits and bad medicine (Ngewa 1998, 291). Through the use of healing, Kimbangu removed the cause of suffering among his people (Best 1975, 162-163). Similarly, the "Akurinu" Churches in Kenya have practised faith healing since they were started. Their followers are not allowed to seek treatment in hospitals (Ndun'gu 1994, 47). In addition, many newly formed Churches in Africa promise healing as a prominent aspect of their ministry. To effect faith healing African preachers make use of the name of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, water and specially prepared oils.

### **Medicine-men and Healing in Contemporary African Societies**

African medicine-men have continued to practice their trade in spite of the changes that have taken place in the continent. In most African villages or administrative locations, there is a medicine-man who is knowledgeable in some aspects of healing. Africans regularly consult these medicine-men to get answers on health and life issues. Many Africans also combine modern drugs with traditional medicines (Mumo 2009, 73).

Thus despite the discrediting of African medicine-men, they remain a key pillar in the healing process in the continent. Condemned, disregarded or unappreciated, they continue to do what they know best. Those who approach them include both the high and low. The medicine-men do not pretend to compete with modern medicine; rather, they supplement modern health services throughout Africa. In Kenya, for example, there has been collaboration between the herbalists and Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI). Some of the African herbs have been analysed in modern laboratories and certified to cure certain ailments. African herbs are also being dispensed in liquid, tablet or powder form in well packaged containers. Some traditional medicine-men are doing extensive research and coming up with new medicines. Others have embraced modern marketing strategies and are advertising their herbs through the mass media. Vernacular FM stations scattered throughout the continent have also been effectively used to market African herbs. Some of the medicine-men engage in live radio and

TV broadcasts where they interact with their clients. Herbalists have also formed associations to create fora in which to exchange ideas.

Many times Africans consult medicine-men when other forms of treatment have not achieved desired results. For example, when they repeatedly experience misfortunes in their lives, they consult medicine-men. According to Africans, these problems do not occur by accident, but are caused by certain forces, including human agents through magic and witchcraft. They believe that medicine-men have the ability to explain the causes of these misfortunes and to prescribe appropriate antidotes. Thus medicine-men who deal with the psychological aspects of ill-health are to be found in villages and urban centres.

However, in contemporary Africa, holistic healing is besieged by a number of challenges. *First*, in recent times, some individuals who are not gifted in healing have infiltrated the field of medicine-men. A number advertise on billboards about the efficacy of their healing, with some claiming to come from different African countries. This has challenged the practice because it is difficult to determine who is genuine and who is not.

*Second*, the west continues to dominate Africa in numerous areas, not least in commerce. As a result, Africans have been turned into unreflective consumers of western industrial and cultural products. Thus medical products from western countries have been promoted as being the most effective. This has impaired the promotion of African healing products (Mumo 2009 ,71).

*Third*, although as alluded earlier there has been some collaboration between African medicine-men and Western-type medical research institutions, very little systematic study of African traditional healing has been carried out. Hence it is difficult to ascertain the efficacy of most of the African medicines.

*Fourth*, some of the African medicine-men are not genuine, having joined the profession because of a desire for quick money. Others are involved in unorthodox methods, where they are alleged to mix African herbs with some chemicals produced in the West, bringing into question the safety of the herbs they dispense. Yet it is noteworthy that even some of the pastors involved in faith-healing are questionable, alleging to cure all ailments.

*Fifth*, Christianity continues to be a challenge to the practice of African traditional healing. missionaries and Churches promote western medicine, which at times is seen as being more effective. The churches encourage their followers to consult modern medicine. Since a large

number of Africans are Christians, they are socialized to appreciate modern medicine. This discourages the promotion of African medicine. The prejudices, which were initially associated with missionaries, are now propagated by African Christians.

Despite the challenges that African traditional medicine is facing, there are areas in which it can collaborate with modern medicine. *First*, some of the African traditional herbs are known to boost body immunity, and hence to contribute to good health. As such, health institutions should collaborate more vigorously with traditional healers.

*Second*, the psychological aspects of healing, some of which are also employed by religious faith healing, can be accommodated in modern healing. Ross observes:

Religious belief is expected to reduce psychological distress especially depression, anxiety and related psychological symptoms. Religion is thought to comfort, relieve pain and suffering, make life worth living (Ross 1990, 236).

Thus the comfort, encouragement and explanation of the causes of suffering given by African medicine-men should be appreciated instead of being condemned.

*Third*, African medicine-men involve members of society in the healing process by allowing them to participate in the rituals that they perform. The western tendency to view treatment as an individual's affair should be avoided, and the communal aspect associated with African holistic healing incorporated into modern healing processes.

## Conclusion

. Despite the negative publicity that African traditional medicine-men have received since the Western incursion into Africa towards the end of the nineteenth century, they continue to make a significant contribution towards holistic healing. Due to their accessibility and familiarity with the African environment, they play a pivotal role in the management of health. Although their numbers have dwindled, wherever they are found they assist Africans in understanding and managing ill-health.

Although European Christian missionaries condemned African psychological healing, a considerable number of Africans continue to consult medicine-men when confronted with life-threatening issues such as misfortunes, curses and witchcraft. Some practising Christians consult African medicine-men in secrecy. This is confirmed by the large number of medicine-men who continue to operate in rural and urban centres. What is more, some Christians in contemporary society are approaching faith-healing ministries which operate just like the

African medicine-men. Pastors and preachers advertise in Newspapers and Television stations their ability to deal with anti-life issues such as curses, misfortunes and failure. Consequently, the line between faith-healing and African traditional medicine-men is very thin, because they basically do the same thing, that is, use super natural forces to bring about healing.

Furthermore, some aspects of African holistic healing can be incorporated into modern healing processes. The explanation and counselling that African medicine-men do can easily be incorporated into modern healing. In addition, the way African medicine-men seek to identify the root causes of ill-health can be encouraged in modern society by involving chaplains, pastors and even some African medicine-men in assisting the affected to deal with their ill-health. The communal aspect which accompanied holistic healing can also be encouraged in modern healing.

The significance of African medicine-men in contemporary African societies is summarised by Mbiti as follows:

So long as people see sickness and misfortunes as religious experiences, the traditional medicine men will continue to exist and thrive. Modern hospitals may deal with the physical side of diseases, but there is the religious dimension of suffering which they do not handle, and for that purpose a great number of patients will resort to both hospitals and medicine-men without a feeling of contradiction (Mbiti 1969,170).

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