

Conceptualization of Traditional Healing System in Yoruba Worldviews

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Abstract

Yoruba traditional healing system has been in practice for several centuries, yet, there are still certain complexities which set confusion in understanding its conceptualization. Due to lack of enough information about the practice, cynicism, religious bigotry against the practice and over-westernization of healthcare system in Yoruba society, basic features of Yoruba traditional healing system are still obscured. Conceptualization of the healing is narrowed and reduced to fetish; its epistemology is linked with Satan, and organization of Yoruba traditional healing is regarded as unscientific among other complexities suffered by the healing system. This continues to hamper the acknowledgment of its contributions to sustainable healthcare development. Through ethnographic data collection techniques using key informants' interviews, observation, case study analysis and ethno-botanical survey conceptualization of traditional healing in Yoruba worldviews is examined. Despite the wave of social change influencing the practice of healing in Yoruba society, Yoruba traditional healing system is still resilient, rational and scientific. It features organization of service, providing all-inclusive health caring; with professionalization and specialization in health care service. Since Yoruba healing system is indigenous to the people, it has to be sustained by providing enough information that can explain and contextualize its practices.

Keywords: Conceptualization; Yoruba Healing System; Worldview; Classification; Specialization

Abbreviations: POP: Plastic of Paris.

Introduction

Despite the fact that Yoruba traditional healing system has attracted intensive researches over the years, public description of the system still suggests lack of understanding of traditional healing practices in southwestern Nigeria. From its notion down to the practices and utilization of the system, a lot of confusions characterize the representation of Yoruba traditional healing system. While studies have focused explanation of Yoruba traditional healing, there is still not elaborate study that has succinctly explained different specialties in traditional healing practices in Yoruba society and contextualized the discourse of traditional healing in Yoruba worldviews. Furthermore, categorization of different forms of Yoruba healing system is blurred to the extent that all forms of Yoruba traditional healing system are lumped together into both spiritual and metaphysical forms. The gross misconception of Yoruba traditional healing system in southwestern Nigeria contributes to its undermining and absence of its official recognition, which could have enhanced its public acceptance. The system suffers conceptual dilemma where it is perceived as alternative, folk, traditional, orthodox and complimentary healing system among others [1]. All these nomenclatures point towards unofficial recognition of traditional healing system. However, traditional healing system needs to be located within the entire Yoruba worldview so as to remove some obvious misconceptualizations from Yoruba traditional healing system in southwestern Nigeria.

Relying on Ifa scripture, which is a compendium of Yoruba ethno-science and philosophy, healing is an important aspect of human livelihood, and its practice is as old as humanity itself. In one of its verses (Ogberikusa), disease (Arùn) is one of the eight unseen evil forces that are associated with human life trial. Other six are OfO (Losses), EgbA (failure in pursuit), OrAn (Criminality), Iku (Death), Osì (Poverty), Àìrìje- Àìrimu (Hunger and Starvation) and Ese (Other Problems). Of all the seven unseen forces, disease or ill health is regarded as more dangerous which can cause the occurrence of others. Disease is more apparent since human contends with biological forces in its environment causing infections that may lead to ill-health which may in turn impair its wellness, thus, both cultural and spiritual efforts are ensued to guide against the impairment of human health. Since human values life, all efforts are engineered to guarantee healthy living. Thus, according to Maroyi and Mosina [2], healing system is a cultural response to both

human spiritual and biological impairments against its wellness, which has its root in ancient time across all human societies. However, healing systems vary across human societies, based on the geography, available resources and knowledge of how to engage the available resources (fauna and flora) in the environment in quest for healthiness. In consequence there are varied healing systems. Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, healing systems feature faith-based healing that relies on the use of scriptural contents for healing and evident in all religious practices among the people. Other forms of healing system are western medicine, which is the Greek healing system, diffused into Yoruba culture due to European evangelization of Christianity and colonization in Yoruba society; the traditional healing system, which is indigenous to the people and is being practiced from time immemorial to date. The Yoruba healing system also includes syncretic healing featuring a combination of two or more of the systems mentioned above. All these healing systems are prevalently practiced, albeit western and traditional healing systems are more prevalent in Yoruba society.

Due to westernization of Yoruba educational system, encroaching elitist styled culture, and formalization in western medicine, western medicines seems to be better understood and more organized among the people. Westernization of Yoruba educational system saw the learning of certain diffused professions such as Medicine, Pharmacy, Law, Engineering and Agriculture among others that are formally learnt in school system. The practice gave birth to a new class of elites who displayed western-oriented elitism in their social, religious, political, economic and ideological patterns of livelihood. Western medicine is also formalized and institutionalized featuring organized labour and management with more support from government. The new class of elites is more favorable to western diffused cultural practices including medicine to the relegation of indigenous culture. This condition further pushed traditional healing system in Yoruba land to certain obscurities where it is not openly or formally learnt and regulated and certain aspects of traditional healing system are least known. Aspects such as the notion of healing, epistemology of healing, categorization, professionalization and specialization in traditional Yoruba healing system are either unknown or grossly misunderstood. The situation continues to affect the development of traditional healing system, and poses threat to role, which the system is supposed to have played on sustainable livelihood in Yoruba society.

Yoruba traditional healing system therefore requires a better conceptualization with a view to establish its

notion of health, epistemology, categorization and professionalization as done in this present paper. The paper relies mostly on ethnographic data featuring key informants' interviews of healing practices among some selected practitioners of Yoruba traditional healing system, ethno-botanical survey of sources and marketing of healing recipes and literary and linguistic analysis of Yoruba healing concepts.

Materials and Methods

This study engaged qualitative ethnography and ethno-botanical survey as its methodology. The research focus on perception and practice of traditional healing as conceived in Yoruba worldviews calls for the use of qualitative ethnography which featured key informants' interview and case study and literary and linguistic analyses as its methods of data collection. Ethno-botanical survey was used to enumerate the traditional herbs sellers and their knowledge of herbs in the research locations (Ibadan, Oyo, Ilobu and Osogbo). While key informants interviews used to collect data on perception and practice of traditional healing among the various types of healers, case study analysis was used to draw insights on certain specific aspects of healing. Literary and linguistic analysis was engaged to examine the structure, meanings and ethnographic usage of certain terms and notions and to explain how they inform the worldviews on traditional healing in such a way that they explain general and specific perceptions of traditional healing among the people. Through the examination of the structure and meanings of certain terms and notions there is a deeper understanding of notion of healing among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria.

Research area where four towns were chosen is Yoruba society of Southwestern Nigeria. The choice of both research areas and locations were purposively done, taking into consideration the research subject; and the determination to choose research locations where the practice of traditional healing is prevalent and where informants are more and quickly accessible. Ethical considerations such as informed consents, debriefing, guide against dangers during interview session and anonymity among some respondents who wished their identity protected were observed.

Data analysis was done qualitatively by sorting out the like and unlike terms. Inferences were drawn from both terms. The drawn inferences which reflected the general opinions of the respondents form the major ideas in the results as presented below.

Results

Notion of Healing

The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria were once predominantly traditional worshippers, believing in supreme God calls Olódùmar E and several gods and goddesses call OrìsAs. OrìsAs are deities created from Yoruba interpretation of spirituality resting on the belief that cosmic elements are spiritual entities whose existence goes beyond ordinary but having forces to cause certain actions that are beyond human creation [3]. Among the deities, certain humans possess spiritual power that made them to become deities over time, but mostly after their demise [4]. As part of the people's worldviews, certain everyday happenings are also associated with some spirits. The people, thus, hold the belief that both health and ill-health can be influenced by these cosmic forces. Health, according to Yoruba is the complete state of wellness, which includes ability to eat, drink, sleep, play, walk, work, talk, laugh, breath, defecate among others. It also includes ability to be emotionally stable. The state of health is confirmed with the expression of ability to do all the basic day to day engagements well enough in such a way that guarantees happiness. Thus, according to Jegede [5], all the inabilities in human, are illness in Yoruba construction of wellness. Illness is AisAn (not being well). As described by Jegede [5], this is a specific symptom against wellness and healthiness, which is not applicable in all senses of illness. For instance, in child health, when children are teething, they often express certain discomforts which may hamper their ability to sleep, eat and play; but Yoruba parents do not consider such as illness since it is a developmental stage which every human being undergoes. Similarly, some aspects pregnancy caring such as inability to eat well and fatigue, except when complications set in, is not regarded as illness. Nonetheless, like in Parsonian sick-role model, the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria construct illness as a phenomenon interfering with normal daily activities (healthiness) and for which immediate intervention from competent agencies must be sought [6]. The process of intervention is healing, which involves application of knowledge about disease and health and the use of biological and non-biological including ideological resources to prevent and ward-off illness. Based on organized knowledge of fauna and flora and their usage to protect human against illnesses, traditional healers having competent knowledge of healing are recognized.

As identified by a key informant¹, Yoruba healing practitioners establish the causation of ill health before assuming the healing processes. Typically, the Yoruba worldview recognizes preter-natural, natural and cultural causations of illness. In preter-natural it is believed that cosmic agents such as God, gods and goddesses and certain spirits can cause illness on human being, when they are angry against human conducts and when they are not propitiated. For instance, disaffection between human and god of iron (Ogun) can cause fatal road accident while desecration of Obatalá, the Yoruba god of creation can cause small pox. The natural causation is attributed to harshness of weather, changing climatic condition and infection from other biotic elements in the environment. For instance, fever can be caused by exposure to solar heat. Cultural causation has to do with human conducts that lead to ill health. Through observation of healing process among Ifa priests who are traditional healer, spiritual consultation using Ifa is engaged to investigate preter-natural causes of illness and medical history in addition to observation of the patients are used to investigate both cultural and natural causes of illness.

Generally, healing measures involve a diagnosis, which in Ifa healing practice, the use of Ifa divination is mostly relied on. The process involves placing the divination materials on the body of the patient usually when patient is in a critical condition. If the patient can still talk, he or she is requested to whisper his request on the divination materials. Then Ifa healer inquires the causation and extent of illness by casting the divination materials. Divination materials can either be OpELE (Ifa rosary) or Ikin (16 pieces of divinatory palm kernel) [7]. Diagnosis also involves medical observation of the patient and taking the medical history of the patient. Following the diagnosis, treatment begins. The Ifa healers mostly source the treatment from Ifa verses, as most of the verses contain herbal recipes meant for the treatment of a good number of illnesses. Since the use of Ifa divination in diagnosis is accompanied by certain verses of Ifa, which are rendered and interpreted to understand the causation of disease, the verses also contain appropriate treatment recipes which Ifa healers engage. Such herbal/treatment recipes contain herbs and animal components. Ifa verses are compilations of day to day encounters of Orunmila, who Yoruba regards as the founder and deity of Ifa. During his lifetime, he was endowed with enormous wisdom in medicine and fond of healing people. During

his healing enterprise, Orunmila would teach his disciples the materials he used in healing of different types of diseases and how he used those materials. As a poet and singer, Orunmila uses poetic means, song and mythological stories to transmit his knowledge to his disciples². It is the collections of such poems, songs and myths that now form Ifa verses. However, Ifa verses are not only limited to healing practices, as lots of verses are based on philosophy of life, ethno-science and technology, peace building, morality and orderliness in society, mythology of creation, political and economic lifestyles as well as tourism among others.

Healing may last for some hours and days depending on the severity of the illness and patients' responses to the treatment. In most cases, Yoruba healing is out-of-clinic, and on rare occasion like in mental illness, the patient admitted in healer's home. It is also seen as service to humanity, as Yoruba healers do not charge heavily for treatment. Payment of treatment fees is not tied to healing. Usually, Yoruba traditional healers command respects in the society and are mostly compensated through generalized reciprocity, whereby a farmer that was healed would voluntarily compensate the healer with some farm products such as palm oil, yams and cereals. Some young healed female patients may be given out in marriage to their healers. According to Ifadare Alabi³, this aspect of Yoruba traditional healing system is fast changing as many healers now charge their patients and run clinic mode of treatment.

Beside Ifa priests/healers (Babalawo), there are other traditional Yoruba healing practitioners. These are herbalists (Onis Egùn) and meta-physicists (Adahunse). Herbalists have vast knowledge of herbs and animal components and how they can be used for healing. While Ifa healers exclusively rely on Ifa verses to draw their healing knowledge, herbalists do not rely mainly on Ifa and neither are they Ifa practitioners/adherents, they cut across different religions. Meta-physicists mostly engage the use of incantations, spiritual forces and verbal renditions to ward off illness, but in few cases may also use herb and animal components in healing. However, the three categories of Yoruba traditional healers are interwoven in healing methodology. An herbalist may engage both Ifa and metaphysical mode of healing and Babalawo and Adahunse may also engage the use of

¹An interview held with Chief Ifadairo who is a Ifa priest and traditional healer in Oyo township. The interview was held in Oyo on 23rd of July 2015.

²Opinion of Chief Ifayemi Eleburuibon, the Chief Ifa Priest of Osogbo and Ifa healer, in an interview in Osogbo September 17th 2017.

³Ifadare Alabi isa traditional healer in Ilobu. He was interviewed in Ilobu on September 18th, 2017.

herbal medicine. The distinction is however marked by predominant mode engaged in healing to establish type of healer.

Epistemology of Healing

Yoruba worldviews suggest that the god of healing is Osanyin, from whom the knowledge of healing began. According to Yoruba legendary myth, Osanyin, taught Orunmilã (Ifa deity) the art and science of healing. Orunmilã was regarded as the first student of medicine under the founder of Yoruba traditional medicine (Osanyin). Osanyin, was reputed for vast knowledge of botany, human physiology, and application of botanical elements on healing. While Orunmilã is the chief link among the gods and goddesses, Osanyin was also reputed for his prowess in appeasing other gods and goddesses when they cause afflictions on human. With his power of appeasement, he spiritually pleads with other gods and goddesses to forgive their human victims. In the preliterate and ancient time, both Osanyin and Orunmilã started community medicine, by moving from one community to another to heal people, albeit Orunmilã was more popular as he visited more communities than Osanyin⁴.

Source of Knowledge in Yoruba healing system is highly expansive. It includes organized training, inspirational acquisition, mouth-to-mouth acquisition, inheritance, learning in trauancy, scientific observation of nature and constant healing experience. Knowledge of Yoruba healing can be acquired through organized training where individual interested in learning the practice lives with a master practitioner and acquire the knowledge. The apprentice is tutored and involved in practices of healing. Duration of training is not fixed; it terminates when the apprentice feels satisfy. However, in Ifa herbal practice, the apprentice graduates upon satisfactory conducts determine by the master practitioner. There is also a process of inspirational acquisition of knowledge in Yoruba healing system, where individuals are inspired on the art of healing. In this mode, inspired individuals acquired the knowledge of healing through sacred revelation, which occurred to such individuals in his or her daily conducts. Such revelations may also occur in dream⁵. Another source of knowledge in Yoruba healing system is mouth-to-mouth acquisition, which involves sharing of healing knowledge among practitioners.

⁴Opinion from Ifayemi Elebuibon interviewed in Osogbo on August 13th, 2018.

⁵Opinion from Ifasola Anikinikun interviewed in Oyo in December 21st, 2018.

Individual may also inherit the practice of healing from their old parents. In most cases, there are often documentation of healing practice and such documentations can be inherited by the children of an old practitioner that are interested in healing practice. Another source of knowledge in Yoruba traditional healing include the acquisition of medical herbs by the traditional itenary hunters. During their voyage in the bush, according to Fagunwa [8], Yoruba hunters examine the nature of plants and how they respond to different circumstances in the bush. They therefore sum up their findings if such plants and animals can be used for healing. Sometimes too they can receive inspiration from unseen spirits about the use of herbs for healing. Inspiration receives from ancestors about healing and examination of etymology of names ascribed to herbs and plants are sources of knowledge in healing. Part of Yoruba beliefs suggests that ancestors can tutor one in the art of healing especially when it is highly desirable mostly when the beneficiary is confronted with serious illness defying solution.

Healing knowledge is also acquired through trauancy, whereby the truant is led to a secret place unconsciously and taught the art of healing by unseen forces. In a case study account by an herbalist in Iragberi in Osun state of Nigeria, the truant narrated his ordeal in trauancy, which he experienced in 2003. The incidence was in the afternoon after returning home from his daily farm work in Iragberi. He was having a siesta, when he woke up suddenly and was unconsciously led into a bush by unseen force. In the bush, he was shown different herbal plants and informed about their uses for different types of ailments. He experienced trauancy for three days without eating or drinking with the unseen force continually showing him different herbal plants. The truant memorized all the revelation and when he was out of trauancy and returned home, he documented the revelations and began healing practice⁶. Acquiring healing knowledge through trauancy among the Yoruba is a common practice. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of key informants used in this study revealed that they had experienced trauancy.

Other sources of knowledge in healing system are scientific observation of nature and constant healing experience. In scientific observation of nature, the healing practitioner observes the reactions of herbs to the natural actions and animal reactions to the consumption of

⁶Case study analysis of trauancy experience by Chief Babalola Ishola, Aare Baseegun of Iragberi, Osun State. Interviewed in Iragberi in May 11th, 2018.

certain plants. The reactions observed after the plant consumption is taken to be the reaction that human being will experience if such herb is consumed.

Knowledge of healing is preserved through oral transmission and documentation. However, due to the problem of patenting in indigenous knowledge, Yoruba healing knowledge is mostly preserved and transmitted orally. When documentation is done, it is shared among very close associates like parents and favoured children, and among very trusted friends who are also practitioners. Knowledge sharing is sacred and mostly among the trusted practitioners.

Categorization of Healing

Yoruba healing system can be categorized into experimental, metaphysical and spiritual healing. Experimental healing is more scientific and more rational. It involves application of verifiable knowledge of healing, in which the processes are replica and can be reengaged elsewhere with same degree of result. Experimental healing is mostly engaged among the herbalists who use herbs and animal components in healing. Through their herbal knowledge, they produce powdered and liquid herbal remedies with which they heal their patients. In metaphysical healing, which relies on incantation and verbal renditions to heal, the processes may not be entirely verifiable and replicated. As it involves cursing the disease and illness to leave the patients; substance remedies are mostly ignored in metaphysical healing. Spiritual healing involves propitiation of gods and goddesses through rituals and the use of scriptural verses in healing. This category of healing is mostly associated with religions and squarely rest on belief system. The patients are made to believe that observation of rituals will heal them and ward off their disease and illness.

Professionalization and Specialization in Yoruba Healing

Healing practice among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria features professionalization and specialization in service delivery. This involves the general practitioners who have knowledge of healing several diseases and applying such in healing their different patients. Beside general practitioners, there are the specialists who show expertise in certain illnesses. Notably, the Yoruba traditional psychiatrists are commonest example that specializes in psychiatric issues. Other than psychiatrists that constitute 9% of the traditional healers interviewed, other specialists located during the course of investigation were Obstetrics and Gynecologists (17%) majoring only on reproductive health care; traditional

cardiologists (3%), abdominal illnesses specialists (12%), pediatricians (19%) and orthopedics specialists (14%). The general practitioners constitute 26% of our respondents who are traditional healers.

Traditional healing system also features botanical pharmacologists who specialize in the collection of botanical elements used in healing. They have vast knowledge of herbs and animal healing components and their healing potentials. They are experts in preservation of herbs and other herbal recipes and are commonly found in mostly all Yoruba towns and cities where they publicly displayed herbal recipes, which they sell to traditional healers [9]. Through ethno-botanical survey of these professionals in Yoruba healing system, it is established that they possess adequate local knowledge of plants and animals. They are commonly call *tewe-tegbO*. They source for herbs from forest and preserve them for sales.

Social Change and Yoruba Healing

Factors of social change that greatly influenced traditional healing system in Yoruba society are introduction of western education, trend of urbanization, introduction of foreign religion and advancement in technology. A synchronic analysis of change in traditional healing system suggests new development in cultural practices related to Yoruba traditional healing system.

Introduction of western education provides opportunity for the emergence of new crop of traditional healers who are educated and practicing traditional healing [10]. While majority of them did not read medicine in school, some that are from parents who are traditional healers, take to traditional healing with some innovative ideas that has caused changes in healing practice. Among the educated healers, there is more formalization of healing practice characterized by formal establishment of healing clinics and official registration of such clinics with government agencies. Such clinics operate as commercial entities with some level of bureaucracy where clinic services are well organized [11]. The educated practitioners also formed associations of practitioners to defend their common interests and seek collective growth of their profession. In Osogbo, associations like Ifa N' SekisA and Association of Herbal Healers were established by educated practitioners of Yoruba traditional healing. Most members of these associations have officially registered clinics. The educated practitioners also specialized in a particular aspect of healing such as maternal and child caring, orthopedics and mental healing.

Southwestern Nigeria has experienced increased rate of urbanization within the last 60 years or so; and this is not without effects on Yoruba traditional healing system. Urban communities have more population and more health challenges beyond the capacity of western medical services. Against the traditional practice, where traditional healing was more concentrated in rural communities of Yoruba society, the urban communities are opened to more operation of Yoruba traditional healing practices [12]. Commonly practiced in urban locations is traditional orthopedics which is increasingly connected with prevalence of road traffic accidents among commercial cyclists in many Nigerian cities [13].

Introduction of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam in Yoruba society has attracted cynicism against Yoruba traditional healing system. Among the Pentecostal Christians and Tablighi Moslems, Yoruba traditional healing practice is seen as satanic practice and preached against. The practice is regarded as unclean and fetish. However, orthodox churches like Anglican, Baptist and Catholics and Ansar-u deen Moslems do not preach against the use of Yoruba traditional healing. The attitudes of the orthodox churches and that of Ansar-u-deen Moslems strengthen the resilience of Yoruba traditional healing system.

Technological advancement has not also spared the Yoruba traditional healing practice from being influenced. Traditional healing clinics in Osogbo, Ibadan and Oyo are using stethoscope for diagnosis, thermometers for measuring body temperature and also having medical records in their clinics. As formal clinics are established, clinic infrastructure such as hospital beds are introduced in Yoruba traditional healing clinics, while crutches and Plastic of Paris (POP) are used in some traditional orthopedic clinics in Ibadan. Most traditional healers now have drug management skill through regulation of herbal drugs by prescribing and monitoring effective dose in drug dispensation [10]. They also develop capacity in drug protection and preservation, with the use of preservatives and refrigerators to store their formulated herbal drugs [14-16].

Discussion and Conclusion

While Yoruba traditional healing system has faced a lot of misperceptions and misunderstandings largely due to the introduction of western education, western medicine and foreign religions, its existence and continued practice in southwestern Nigeria suggests that the healing system is sustainable. Its misperception and misunderstanding is due to lack of proper

conceptualization. This has caused confusion in its proper placement as an agent of sustainable development in Yoruba society. Its encounter with western education and foreign religions has further strengthened confusion, establishing the system as fetish and encouraging cynicism against its practice among the people. This has constrained the optimum contributions of the system in health security of Yoruba society.

Proper conceptualization of a cultural system is important in the understanding of such system. Relying on ethno-scientific analysis of culture, cultural system would have to be construed according to the local structure and functions which the people using the culture ascribed to that culture. In both ethnographic and context analysis of culture, local meanings, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, practice and values of a cultural system is imperative to the deeper understanding of the culture. Of course all these are the contents of cultural system, which give expression and meaning to culture. In Yoruba traditional healing system, it is imperative to analysis the system based on the people's conceptualization of the system; without which, a deeper understanding and translation of system to sustainable development will be impaired.

In all human societies, healing is a complex system which requires not only the perfect understanding of socio-physical, biological and psychological nature of human, but also of the practice of healing as a system. In Yoruba society, traditional healing is a system that has its body of knowledge and exists as an organized system with varied services. The practitioners are specialized in its various services albeit some that are general practitioners. As in other healing practices, there is also a connection between spirituality and Yoruba healing system. Thus, without understanding how traditional healing works as a system, it will be difficult to maximally enjoy its contributions to sustainable development.

Therefore its notion of health, sources and transmission of knowledge, practices and how it has been influenced by social change need be properly conceptualized, so as to remove certain complexities and confusions that are affecting its development in Yoruba society.

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