

Aetiological Explanations of Epilepsy and Implications on Treatments Options among Yoruba Traditional Healers in Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract

In Nigeria, traditional healers play major roles in the treatment of patients living with epilepsy and their status as well as worldview have a considerable influence on the therapies or treatments that are provided, thereby affecting the quality of care and rights of their clients. With the dearth of studies on these healers' management of clients with epilepsy, this study explored their perspectives on the aetiology of epilepsy and how their view and understanding of the condition shape the treatments and therapies that are accessible to their clients. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 traditional healers considered as experts in the treatment of epilepsy in two Yoruba communities in Southwest Nigeria. Findings showed these healers perceived epilepsy as a health condition that is highly stigmatised and fearfully avoided among the Yoruba people. A multicausal view was advanced in their aetiological explanations of the causes of epilepsy ranging from natural, hereditary, and the supernatural. Each epilepsy case requires clear divination to understand the underlying cause and possible regimen to adopt in providing help and recovery. Treatments are often in stages and mixed as the individual progresses towards recovery. Of all the aetiologies, epilepsy cases that are attributed to preternatural and supernatural forces were considered most difficult to treat. The paper concludes that with the traditional healers' status in the community, and acceptance of their treatment modalities, the absorption of traditional medical practice will aid the supervision of their practice and help reduce exploitation and improve the quality of care.

Keywords: *Aetiological explanation, epilepsy, traditional healers, Yoruba people, Nigeria*

Résumé

Au Nigeria, les guérisseurs traditionnels jouent un rôle majeur dans le traitement des patients atteints d'épilepsie et leur statut ainsi que leur vision du monde ont une influence considérable sur les thérapies ou les traitements qui sont fournis, affectant ainsi la qualité des soins et les droits de leurs clients. Avec le manque d'études sur la prise en charge par ces guérisseurs des clients atteints d'épilepsie, cette étude a exploré leurs perspectives sur l'étiologie de l'épilepsie et comment leur vision et leur compréhension de la maladie façonnent les traitements et les thérapies accessibles à leurs clients. Des entretiens semi-directifs ont été menés avec 24 guérisseurs traditionnels considérés comme des experts dans le traitement de l'épilepsie dans deux communautés Yoruba du sud-ouest du Nigeria. Les résultats ont montré que ces guérisseurs percevaient l'épilepsie comme un problème de santé hautement stigmatisé et évité avec crainte parmi le peuple Yoruba. Une vue multicausale a été avancée dans leurs explications étiologiques des causes de l'épilepsie allant de naturel, héréditaire et surnaturel. Chaque cas d'épilepsie nécessite une divination claire pour comprendre la cause sous-jacente et le régime possible à adopter pour fournir de l'aide et du rétablissement. Les traitements sont souvent par étapes et mélangés au fur et à mesure que l'individu progresse vers la récupération. De toutes les étiologies, les cas d'épilepsie attribués à des forces surnaturelles et surnaturelles ont été considérés comme les plus difficiles à traiter. L'article conclut qu'avec le statut des guérisseurs traditionnels dans la communauté et l'acceptation de leurs modalités de traitement, l'absorption de la pratique médicale traditionnelle facilitera la supervision de leur pratique et aidera à réduire l'exploitation et à améliorer la qualité des soins.

Mots-clés: Explication étiologique, épilepsie, guérisseurs traditionnels, peuple Yoruba, Nigéria

1. Background

Epilepsy is a severe nervous disorder and the most common non-communicable disease in low-resource countries (Okoye *et al.*, 2016). It is estimated that 50 million people are affected by epilepsy worldwide, and eighty percent of epileptic victims are found in developing countries (Ekeh & Ekrikpo, 2015). Epilepsy is the most prevalent nervous disorder in children and poses a serious effect on their quality of life with resultant educational difficulties due to the stigma attributed to the condition and severe seizure attack (Lunardi *et al.*, 2012).

Historically, epilepsy has been highly misinterpreted and stigmatised. The belief that an evil spirit causes it, and it is highly contagious are common explanations for seizures and people living with epilepsy are regarded as mentally insane until 1800 (Kaddumukasa *et al.*, 2018). Epileptic victims experience stigma because of the myth and misconceptions about the illness condition. In low-income countries, including Nigeria, people isolate themselves from people living with epilepsy because of the fear of contracting the disease (Nuhu *et al.*, 2010). In Uganda, people who have epilepsy are not

permitted to eat in the same plate with the rest of the family. They also face difficulties in securing jobs and education, as they may be asked to stay at home in order not to infect others. People living with epilepsy face discrimination in many ways. In some countries, the disease condition is kept hidden by family members so that the victim and other members of the family can find a suitor (Ghanean, Nojomi & Jacobsson, 2013).

Traditional medicine occupies a critical space in healthcare provisions and support for other spheres of life in Africa. This healing system was dominant until the emergence of modern medicine. Nonetheless, patronage of the African traditional medical is still high with respect to certain complex health and non-health related conditions. Traditional healers have remained active in the delivery of care for patients living with epilepsy in many parts of Africa (Kaddumukasa *et al.*, 2018). In most African countries, traditional healers are the first to be contacted for treating epilepsy conditions. This is as a result of grounded belief in spiritual factors. Traditional healers believe in the spiritual causes of epilepsy and treatment of the patient as a whole (Kaddumukasa *et al.*, 2018). Traditional healers not only focus on the biological aspects of the illness but also the social and spiritual basis of the illness (Mokgobi, 2014).

Available evidence indicates higher treatment gaps for people living with epilepsy in low resource settings compared to those living in developed countries (Mushi *et al.*, 2013). Cultural belief, cost of treatment, lack of knowledge, alternative medicine and stigma result in the epilepsy treatment gap (Mushi *et al.*, 2013). In developing countries such as Nigeria, traditional belief, limited trained medical personnel, inadequate access to the anti-epileptic drug, distance to the clinic widen the treatment gap. Patients living with epilepsy spend a substantial amount of money to get treatment from traditional healers. They may even travel a long distance to consult the traditional healers (Mbuba *et al.*, 2008).

Some researchers have argued that the definitions attributed to epilepsy in African countries influence the pathways to care for epilepsy clients. In societies deeply rooted in spiritual belief, epilepsy is explained in terms of affliction by the supernatural forces and the traditional healers are consulted for this reason. Traditional healers focus on the social issues surrounding patients' illness and attribute the causes of epilepsy to affliction by the witches and hereditary factors (Guekht, 2018). In Sudan, regardless of the impediments or complications of traditional medical practice, the majority still patronise traditional healers, place them in high esteem and value their practice or approach of healing (Mohammed & Babikir, 2013).

Culture influences people's perceptions, attitudes and misconceptions around epilepsy. It also shapes help-seeking behaviour and pathways to health among those living with the condition. Myths and misconceptions regarding epilepsy have been a dominant view of different societies and religions across the world (Vancini *et al.*, 2014). Historically, epilepsy was believed to be caused by gods because of the notion that only a god could make a man unconscious, yield to convulsing and have the power to restore a victim back

to the original state (Mushi *et al.*, 2016). People suffering from epilepsy are thought to be possessed or chosen by the gods based on the cultural belief of this particular society which impacts on the attitudes of the society to the people living with the condition and the care rendered to the victims.

In a study conducted in Saudi Arabia, the causes and treatments of epilepsy have been attributed to numerous sources. The belief is that epilepsy can occur when God is testing the patient's faith or punishment from God. This belief enables them to accept the illness as part of their destiny and see it as pre-planned and established by God. An equal proportion of participants attributed the causes of epilepsy to spiritual and medical factors (Alkhamees, Selai & Shorvon, 2015). In Northern Ghana, epilepsy causation was attributed to spiritual factors, punishment for certain actions and violation of taboos (Adjei *et al.*, 2013). In Cape Town, traditional healers regard epilepsy as an illness of falling or fitting and it is caused by witchcraft, the anger of the gods, poison, and bewitchment (Keikelame and Swartz, 2015).

Traditional healers in Namibia conceive epilepsy as a health challenge that can occur from natural and preternatural sources (Toit & Pretorius, 2018). In Batibo Health district, Cameroon, traditional healers attribute the cause of epilepsy to witchcraft or insanity and can be transmitted through sexual intercourse, blood and saliva (Njamnshi *et al.*, 2010).

Traditional healers in Kilifi, Kenya define epilepsy as a condition whereby an individual falls on the ground, shakes, becomes unconscious and this occurs repeatedly. Traditional healers in Kilifi attribute the cause of epilepsy to natural or ancestral cause. The natural spirit is believed to be the most common cause of epilepsy; a situation whereby the spirit enters into a child, causes convulsion and diminishes when the spirit leaves the child. Shaking is perceived as the effort of the individual to release himself from the spiritual force. Traditional healers in Kilifi also believe that when an epileptic victim dies, if certain rituals are not performed, the condition will be passed to the next child in the family (Kendall-Taylor *et al.*, 2007). In Uyo, epilepsy is believed to be infectious among traditional healers and can spread through close contact with the person living with the condition (Abasiubong *et al.*, 2009).

The wide variation in aetiological explanations and treatment remedies can increase vulnerability to exploitation and poor quality of care among help-seekers. Despite these possibilities, there is a shortage of studies focusing on the implications of quality of care and access to effective treatments within the traditional medical system. Hence, this article addresses issues relating to traditional healers' explanation of epilepsy and likely implications on treatment outcomes. This research examines the worldviews of Yoruba traditional healers on the aetiology of epilepsy.

2. Theoretical Framework

Social constructionism theory constitutes the theoretical framework for this study. The theory is used to explain the cultural views of the society on epilepsy and its influence on patients living with the condition. Social constructionism theory defines human life as socially and culturally constructed. According to Ian Rory Owen (1992), human existence is influenced by social and interpersonal factors. The primary interest of social constructionism is culture and society. Galbin (2014) describes social constructionism as the theory that focuses on the culture of the society and its influence on individuals and society at large. What is considered normal and abnormal in society is based on the collective agreement of the society. The system and belief of the community are shaped by the normative rules that are culturally constructed. Social constructionism also believes that individuals are shaped by the culture and traditional beliefs of society.

The culture of a particular society shapes the beliefs and values of the group of people in a society. Culture is what governs the way of life of people in the society. The culture of the society has a great influence on people's definition of what is normal and abnormal. Over the years, epilepsy is perceived as an abnormal disorder caused by evil spirits in many African countries including Nigeria because of the cultural belief and definitions attributed to it. The cultural meanings associated with the symptoms of epilepsy results in the stigmatisation of people living with the disorder. As critical stakeholders in the treatment of epilepsy, traditional healers help in promoting misconceptions and myth regarding the aetiology of epilepsy, and this also reflects on their mode of treating epilepsy clients. So, epilepsy is culturally constructed in society.

Methods

Research Design

The study employed an exploratory research design to draw information on the traditional healers' explanation of epilepsy. This method was adopted to generate extensive information on the aetiological explanation for epilepsy among traditional healers in Ile-Ife. The ancient city of Ile-Ife was considered suitable for this study due to the high presence of renowned traditional healers that attract patronage clientele beyond the town for their expertise and healing prowess. Among these healers are specialists with diverse therapies and treatments for epilepsy and their healing homes are well known and patronised by members of the communities of Ile-Ife and Modakeke-Ife. These healing homes are structured around the experience and exposure levels of the healers. Despite the less formalisation of these healing homes and the practice of

traditional medicine in Nigeria, practitioners within this medical system have unions that regulate who is accepted and what ethics should guide their practise. Some of the ethical guidelines are unwritten, but they are revered and sacrosanct in ensuring that remedies and therapies that are offered are potent and effective. Against this backdrop, all the participants were recruited from six traditional medical associations in Ile-Ife/Modakeke. The target population for the study comprised male and female traditional healers that specialise in the treatment of epilepsy.

2.2. Sampling and Recruitment Procedure

The Snowball sampling technique was used in recruiting participants across the six associations in Ile-Ife. Recruitment commenced with an initial interaction with the leaders of each association to identify members that have the requisite knowledge and expertise in the treatment of epilepsy. This approach was adopted to the selection of respective respondents in the study.

2.3. Data Collection

Data was obtained through a face-to-face interview. A structured interview guide was designed based on evidence from the literature and prior interactions with experts in the practice of traditional medicine. It was adopted to generate quality evidence on traditional healers' beliefs about the causes of epilepsy; provide insights into the cultural meanings attributed to epilepsy which shape the perception of healers to the condition and perceived therapeutic outcomes for people living with epilepsy.

The use of topic guides provided the participants ample opportunity to explore their perspectives and experiences around epilepsy and care provision. The questions on traditional healers' opinions on the aetiology of epilepsy attracted quick and extensive response. As such, in-depth information on the perspectives of traditional healers on the aetiology of epilepsy was generated. When using this method, there is a likelihood for the researcher's bias, but the researcher overcame these challenges by being objective and uninfluenced by personal belief. All the interviews took place at convenient locations for the participants.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data collected were analysed using thematic and case narrative techniques with network mapping of important findings with the aid of Atlas ti.8. All the recorded interviews were transcribed from Yoruba to English. The transcripts obtained from the field were read and re-read several times by the researchers to be conversant with the data.

2.5. Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institute of Public Health, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria (IPHOAU/12/1325). The participation of all interviewees was voluntary. Participants were well informed before the interview section that anyone who wishes to pull out from the interview would be allowed to do so. The issue of confidentiality, anonymity and the principle of non-violation was examined and confirmed. Investigators ensured anonymity among participants and maintained the confidentiality of information to avoid revealing any personal identifiers.

Results

Socio-demographic Characteristics

The socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees showed that eighteen were males; only six were females. Four of the twenty-four healers are into herb selling and twenty claimed to be diviners/herbalist. The mean age in years of male interviewees was 55.7 and 54.2 for female interviewees. Four of the traditional healers attended tertiary institution, some attained secondary education, and few did not attend school at all.

From the literature and data analysis, we generated key themes relevant to our study to examine the perspectives of traditional healers on the aetiology of epilepsy and its impact on treatment options.

Perspectives of Traditional Healers on the Aetiology of Epilepsy

The participants conceived epilepsy as a condition that is typified and categorised into three forms. Classifying the health condition this way appears fuzzy and largely subjective, going by the boundaries and symptoms that the healers presented as possible indicators. From the position of the healers, the three forms of epilepsy include *Ogun oru*, *waku* and epilepsy, also known as *warapa*. The healers illustrated that *Ogun oru* usually occurs around 1 a.m. in the middle of the night. Although it could happen during the day, it usually happens in the night when such a person is asleep, and the person will become restless and unstable as if he or she is being beaten while sleeping and at the same time makes a strange noise. The type does not see the night, and once it is dark, the illness will occur. *Waku* is described by the healers as also related to epilepsy. It is presumed to happen at any time of the day. The victim will shake, suddenly fall and be unconscious for a long period. The healers affirmed that all these three belong to the same family as epilepsy but are assigned different names, and there is not much

difference in treating them. The healers establish epilepsy as a health condition that is sensitive to noise. Once the victim is exposed to where there is noise, the illness is more likely to manifest.

When asked the relationship and disparities amongst epilepsy-*warapa*, *ogun oru* and *waku*, the traditional healers stated:

“*Ogun oru*, *warapa*, *waku* are closely associated. If *waku* happens to someone, he may suddenly fall and he may die in the process. When epilepsy happens to someone, the person will roll on the ground and will stand up again. *Ogun oru* is the same thing, it happens in the middle of the night and the person will start shouting. The person will be barking like dog. If the person regains consciousness later and they tell him or her that he or she barked, he will deny it. It can affect or seize the brain for a while, so they are in the same category?”

Male traditional healer, aged 15, *Isale Ope, Modakeke*

“The comment from another participant corroborates this:

“Epilepsy makes the victim fall at any time while *oogun oru* occurs in the night when our mothers (witches) are piercing the fellow with a needle. It occurs in the night; they sleep during the day.”

Female traditional healer, aged 55, *Oke Isoda, Ile-Ife*

These three categories described by the healers entail that the victims will be unconscious of what is happening around them, but after a while, they will regain their consciousness. However, the healers have different views on the peculiarity of saliva with epilepsy. Some are of the view that the three categories of epilepsy are closely related but slightly different with foaming from the mouth peculiar to epilepsy. However, some others affirmed that for the three categories of epilepsy, patients salivate and bring out foam from the mouth during any seizure as reported in the excerpts below:

Another is *waku*, which is different from epilepsy (*Warapa*). The sign that comes with epilepsy is that once the victim wakes up, saliva surely spills out from the mouth, but for *waku*, which also has cure, the victim will fall on the ground suddenly but will not spill out any saliva like the epilepsy victim.

Male traditional healer, aged 50, *Ajamopo Ile-Ife*

Epilepsy is divided into three: The first is *Ogun oru*. This one is prone to happen at night. Once it is in the night, epilepsy will surface. With the second, the person might be sitting and start shaking and suddenly fall and become unconscious for a long period. The third one is the one that does not like noise. These three types are epilepsy. They have different names, but they are all the same in effects. All of them involve the dropping of saliva.

Male traditional healer, aged 70, Ile-Ife

Natural Explanations of Epilepsy

Traditional healers in this study attributed the causes of epilepsy to natural and spiritual factors. For the natural causes, most of the healers believe that epilepsy could be hereditary at times. Some healers explained that if a pregnant woman was being affected by epilepsy, her unborn child might also contract epilepsy because the illness is in the blood of the woman. A healer, a female from Oke Isoda, shared the view:

Epilepsy can be inherited from a mother to the child. The child can inherit it because it is in the mother's blood.

Female traditional healer, aged 55

Findings from this suggest that many healers still assert that heredity is a factor in the causes of epilepsy. However, the spiritual factor is still more specified as a primary causal factor in the occurrence of the illness.

Preternatural Forces and the Aetiology of Epilepsy

Emphasis is placed on supernatural factors as a major cause of epilepsy. The healers revealed that epilepsy is more of spiritual than natural; it is mostly inflicted on the victims. Given this position, the healers described epilepsy as an illness of the body which can be inherited or inflicted on the person. The healers in this study regard epilepsy as a shameful illness which may be caused as a result of one's mistake. They opined that epilepsy could also be deliberately inflicted on someone as a way of hindering the person from progressing in life.

The Bad or Evil Machination as an Aetiological Cause of Epilepsy

A female healer in Oke Isoda referred to a man who was brought to her for treatment. He was supposed to travel out of the country, and when he got to the airport, he suddenly fell and had an episode that had never happened to him before. The healer explained

further by saying that the man experienced the attack because they wanted to use the illness to stop him from achieving his dreams.

This excerpt from her exemplifies this:

One boy was travelling to America. He got to Lagos airport and suddenly fell, which had never happened to him before. When they started taking him to different healing homes, those that know me in Lagos gave my number to one of his family members, and I was called. They narrated the issue to me, and I told them to send me his name and his mother's name. They later called, and I told them the root of the problem. I was asked if I could treat him and I told them that I was not the one that will do it, God will do it because he is the only one that is powerful. So, he was brought to me and I explained the issue to them. What happened to him did not come from his father's family but he was tortured because of his mother. The reason is that the people who inflicted epilepsy on him were aware that once the guy travels out of the country, the mother would also benefit from it and would become a mother to an abroad-based son. So, children can be punished because of their mother and some mothers are being punished because of their children.

Female traditional healer, aged 55, Ile-Ife

In this case, the traditionalist is of the view that many at times, epilepsy is inflicted on people because of what destiny has in store for them. According to her, the wicked ones inflicted the illness on the man because he was deemed progressive in life.

Epilepsy can also be inflicted on people in the dream through food mostly by the wicked ones. As a possible source of affliction, a healer shared a recent experience:

Epilepsy can be caused by the wicked ones. It can also be an attack from one's dream, and also amongst friends and family. The one I said I treated 6 days ago, they brought him from school, it just happened to him all of a sudden, but God took control. They inflict the illness on people both in the physical and in one's dream, also through eating and drinking.

Male traditional healer, aged 52, Pedro road, Ile-Ife

Epilepsy is perceived as a terrible illness, as the patient must not stay where there is noise. The healers explained further by stating that the illness usually manifests amidst the crowd. Maybe they are celebrating a particular festival or in the market and purpose is to disgrace the victim. So, the opinion of the traditional healers is that this illness is more spiritual than natural and that it is a shameful illness.

In our conversation with the herb seller, she said

Epilepsy is a shameful illness that brings shame because it happens to people where they will be disgraced. It happens in the midst of people. Because it is allergic to noise, anyone with epilepsy does not hear sounds from drum beats, noise, etc. They have to be far away from noise.

Female herb seller, aged 52,

I treated a boy three months ago, who has this special experience. When it happens to this boy, he will be on the same spot, and all his body looks like bone. All the body and eyes will be swollen. When we made findings, we discovered that it was inflicted on him and it is a shameful illness. They usually use it to disgrace some in the midst of people. About 98% of the occurrence of the illness is inflicted on the person. It is from the findings that we could know the remedies to use for the patient.

Male traditional healer, aged 50, London Street, Ile-Ife

For him, 98% of the epilepsy cases are caused by afflictions by the wicked ones. The healer elucidated that the reason the wicked ones inflict this illness on people is to disgrace them and through findings, he was guided on the approach to use in treating the patient.

Some healers affirmed that arrow might be shot at some people at midnight and they may fall from the bed, and by the time they want to stand up, they will start experiencing the symptoms of the illness. Some healers explained further by declaring that there are ways through which people get angry with someone. For instance, through the way we talk, through pride, being discourteous to elders, this can cause bitterness and such a person can decide to take revenge by inflicting the illness on the discourteous fellow. A healer explained further by stating that epilepsy is common amongst the black people because God did not create everyone equally. Some came to the world to do good, some to act wickedly, which is why some deliberately inflict the illness on the victims. Some healers are also of the view that the spirit can also inflict the illness on some people when they walk on the streets at certain periods.

A male healer attributed epilepsy to breaking family taboos. It is deduced that some

children are affected by epilepsy as a result of some obligations that are expected of their parents to observe but are being neglected by them as a result of their religious affiliations, belief or sentiments. For example, the failure of parents to observe certain rituals at the birth of a child or children in a family may affect such a child or children later in life.

In our discussion with a healer in Oke Ayetoro, he said
Epilepsy can be inflicted on the person or can occur due to family taboo. Another is when they want to give birth, and they inquire about the destiny of child *esentaye* and what should be done for the child as family ritual *oro ile*, and later in life the father becomes a born-again Christian or devout Muslim so he does not do the family ritual again, it will affect the children.”

Male traditional healer, aged 48, Oke Ayetoro, Ile-Ife

In his view, epilepsy can also be caused by failure to observe the family ritual, which he termed as *oro ile*. The belief is that after some parents have inquired about the destiny of their children, they desist from observing the family ritual for them because of their religious belief and this may later adversely affect the children.

As a learned person, I think two things cause epilepsy. Firstly, it can be hereditary and secondly it can be an affliction caused by the wicked ones.

Male traditional healer, aged 50, *Ogboni* lane, Ile-Ife

However, some traditional healers are of the viewpoint that epilepsy can only be caused by spiritual factors. The belief is that epilepsy is not inborn; it is not a factor of heredity or natural occurrences, but as a result of the activities of the powerful or wicked ones. Some healers affirmed that epilepsy could be inflicted on the person to punish the person or stop the person from progressing in life. The witches or wicked ones are believed to be responsible for such an ailment and that it does not occur naturally.

In our interview with a traditional male healer, he strongly believed that epilepsy only occurs as a result of spiritual factors; nobody is born with it. His belief is that all the people being affected by epilepsy are experiencing it because of the evil machinery of the wicked ones.

In our interview with him, he said

The epilepsy you are talking about now, there is no one that was born with it. They did not give birth to anybody with it. It is here on earth that they contracted it. It is caused by the wicked ones.

Epilepsy usually does not start happening to someone suddenly. One cannot walk without shaking the head (i.e., without offending people). They usually inflict illness on people most of the time.

Male traditional healer, aged 70, Iremo

The belief that epilepsy can only occur as a result of spiritual factors is also stressed by some other traditional healers.

Epilepsy is an affliction most of the time. It is not a natural occurrence. It is the wrath of the wicked ones.

Male traditional healer, aged 72, Ile-Ife

Epilepsy is an ailment caused by the wicked ones. We call them the mothers (witches). The ailment could come through eating in one's dream. It could be when someone's saliva is taken and used, but it is not an ailment that happens to someone all of a sudden. The world inflicts it on someone.

Male traditional healer, aged 70, Oke Isoda, Ile-Ife

Epilepsy is seen as totally caused by the activities of the spiritual forces by some healers. The belief is that it is not natural but solely lies on the wicked ones. When we inquired about some cases they have treated, we observed that the narrative of the healers is mostly on a spiritual cause as a dominant factor in the occurrence of the illness. Drawing from the experience of the interviewee, a traditional male healer aged 50 years narrated how envy and greed can encourage wickedness and the length some individuals could go in afflicting anyone with epilepsy. In his words:

The patient in question, the illness was inflicted on him by someone in his family over properties. He is the first son. He has a brother who is not serious, and he does not have any job. It was the brother who now thought of what he could do. He did not want to kill his brother. He felt that if he inflicted epilepsy on him, he would have been able to sit on his brother's properties before he regains his consciousness or gets someone to treat him. He would have got what he wanted. So that was why he inflicted the illness on him. When they brought this man, it was very serious. So, the illness was inflicted on him because of his properties. It was when I made findings that I realised that it is within the household that the illness was inflicted on him. So, God took control, oracle took control, and he is fine and perfectly healed.

Male traditional healer, aged 50, Ilode, Ile-Ife

In this case, the healer expressed that epilepsy was inflicted on the man by his brother to acquire his properties. The healer made findings on the genesis of the problem and found that the origin of the illness is within the family. So, this healer is of the view that spiritual factors cause epilepsy.

The one that put me into trouble was in Aba Sule, Aba Alhaji, Edo side. They are from Modakeke, but I was their customer. They had a farm in that place. There was a fight in the village. Someone went to put something on the land of the patient, and he started being affected by epilepsy. They first took the affected man to the church. They spent a lot of money. On this case, they sold a big farm before they now saw someone that directed them to me so they came to me and I started taking care of him. After the treatment, I encountered a problem, but I tried and took care of the patient then, and God took control. He spent just three days with me. After three days, I gave him some remedies to go and be using it, and he is now cured.

Male traditional healer, aged 51, Itakogun, Ile-Ife

He disclosed that epilepsy was inflicted on a man by putting a charm on the farm of the patient due to the fight that ensued regarding farmland in the village. This case is also based on affliction by the wicked ones.

This shows that though some healers recognise the role of heredity in the occurrence of epilepsy, they strongly believe that epilepsy is mostly caused by spiritual factors. It is as a result of the influence of the activities of the wicked ones that this condition comes into play. This shows the different standpoints expressed by the healers as the causal factor of epilepsy, and this can also be relayed in terms of the model of care available to the victims in the traditional setting.

Communicability of Epilepsy

The traditional belief surrounding the causes of epilepsy is strongly attached to the affliction of the illness by the wicked ones. Lizards are commonly attached to the illness and those afflicted with the condition are considered to harbour a male and a female lizard in their bodies. The lizards as presumed will dwell in their hosts and trigger the symptoms by hitting themselves against their hosts. This is explained below:

What is called epilepsy is like a lizard. They are both male and female inside. The period in which they hit one another is the period in which it manifests in the person. But we have what we use to suppress it because the affected will vomit it and you will see it vividly. It is like a lizard, but it is not as big as a lizard, but it is in the form of a lizard.

Female herb seller, aged 52, Ile-Ife

The array of media of contracting epilepsy reflects in the narratives of the healers and their prescriptions around how to avoid the illness and possible treatments that are available for those living with it. Findings in this study reveal that the healers have different views regarding the contagious nature of epilepsy. Some healers are of the view that people can contract epilepsy by stepping on the saliva of the victim. A healer explained that there is a cultural belief attributed to epilepsy that anybody who sees the patient with epilepsy when standing up after the fall will also contract it.

Firstly, if a patient with epilepsy falls, they say they do not get up in the presence of people. Anybody that sees how a person living with epilepsy stands up after falling will contract it. Secondly, epilepsy is a serious condition to the extent that if anyone steps on the saliva of the victim, the person will contract the illness through that.

Female herb seller, aged 56, Ile-Ife

However, most healers ascertained that epilepsy is not contagious and stepping on the saliva of the patient does not necessarily mean the person will contract it. The healers explained further that sharing the same plate and utensils with a person living with the condition cannot lead to an affliction:

What is happening to them is not more than forcefully falling, and foaming from the mouth, and some are hereditary. Epilepsy does not spread even if one eats together; it is not contagious, but

we must be making the affected happy every time. We should not discriminate. If they use a bowl for drinking water, and we should collect it from them and use it for drinking. We should play together so that the patient will not worry.

Female traditional healer, aged 54, Lokore, Ile-Ife

If a person being affected by epilepsy wants to eat, we can eat together, it does not spread.

Male traditional healer, aged 47, Omitoto, Ile-Ife

Findings revealed that some healers are not swayed away by the cultural belief in the fact that epilepsy can be contagious. Rather, they admitted to the fact that epilepsy is not infectious, and this may reflect a good relationship with their patient.

The Treatability of Epilepsy

Epilepsy is conceived as a health condition that could suddenly occur after months of incubation of affliction. In line with a popular view and interpretations of epilepsy among the Yoruba people, the healers reiterated the assumption that an afflicted individual would have a type of lizard in his or her body. Once the lizard in question has spent sufficient time in the host, then the symptoms would surface. At maturity, an afflicted person will manifest epilepsy by foaming from the mouth, experiencing stiffness, shaking, tongue rolling and rolling on the floor. In the words of a healer, there are no age barriers and locations to epilepsy:

Epilepsy does not know children. It can happen to anybody. There is nobody that they cannot inflict epilepsy on. Epilepsy causes sudden fall in people suffering from it. The person will be stiff, foaming from the mouth and rolling the tongue, which is epilepsy. When it occurs, after some time, without the affected using anything, it will release the patient, and he/she will get up. Then, it has started manifesting. That is when we will now know that the person is being affected by epilepsy. During the manifestation of epileptic seizure, the patient's head may hit the rock. He may die in the process due to brain damage.

Male traditional healer, aged 60, Osunle, Modakeke

All persons living with epilepsy foam from the mouth *Akiwarapa abi itofunfun lenu*. When they fall on the ground, you will think they will die, but later they will stand up. It usually causes shame for some people. By the time the person stands up and sees people, he will be ashamed.

Male traditional healer, aged 52, Pedro Road, Ile-Ife

All the healers are of the view that epilepsy is treatable once all the necessary procedures are followed if the client is well-taken care of and the necessary remedies are given to the patients. A healer revealed that once the victim vomits lizard or intestine parts, they will recover. Below is an excerpt from the interview:

It can be treated; epilepsy can be cured once all the necessary procedures are followed. If the client is well-taken care of and the necessary drugs are administered, it can be cured. That is what I said earlier that if epilepsy is caused by the wicked ones, it will take up to a month for it to be cured. Some victims could even vomit what will look like a lizard. Another vomit could look like faeces and intestine parts. When this happens to a victim, it means that the epilepsy has been cured for good. However, western medicine will hide it inside the body and after two months, it will resurface and now much worse than the beginning. It is traditional medicine that cures epilepsy.”

Male traditional healer, aged 70, Oke Isoda, Ile-Ife

The healers further explained that they have close relationships with their clients, which in turn influence their level of recovery. Some of them elaborated further on the fact that they have people working for them as caregivers that ensure the well-being of their patients. They are of the view that epilepsy is easier to cure if they spend quality time with them and ensure their comfort around them. Some of them illustrated further on the fact that they have a cordial relationship with their patients; they can eat together, play with them and spend quality time with them. The healers added that they do not make them feel discriminated against or isolated. They joke with them, play games with them and through that, they will feel elated, and anything they are using for them will work for them. The belief is that when they are happy, the medicine they are giving them will be effective. The healers admitted that everyone is equal regardless of their shortcomings and all humans are created by God but by making them happy and comfortable, they will be healed.

In the words of a healer:

It is compulsory for us to have time to take care of them since we do not have any other work. What we do is to save lives, so we save lives. What we use to take care of them, some are nearby, some are not nearby. It depends on how serious a person's problem is. It can be cured.

Male traditional healer, aged 51, Itakogun

The healers ascertained that epilepsy can be cured with the use of traditional medicine.

ti won ba n so pe ogun ki i se ebo, ogun ni solution what they call medicine is solution, it is not ritual. So, it is treatable and can be cured.”

Male traditional healer, aged 50, *Isale Ope, Modakeke*

This is also emphasised by another healer when we inquired about the treatability of epilepsy. He replied

There is a saying that when treatment is done, and the potency of such treatment should be examined. I am 99% sure that it can be cured. I know five methods for treating epilepsy. We start with the little treatment first and if it does not cure it, we use the stronger treatment. It is like giving a child paracetamol for a headache or fever, but if the paracetamol does not relieve it, you use something stronger such as Arthemeter, Fansidar and the likes.

Male traditional healer, aged 50, Ogboni lane, Ile-Ife

This is also stressed by another healer when he was asked if epilepsy is treatable. He told me:

It can be treated very well, only that it is difficult to treat. It is not just one or two methods that can be used in treating the ailment. It is not that you will use one treatment and then stop. But once I administer one at first, after a while, I change it to another method again.

Male traditional healer, aged 72, Oke Isoda, Ile-Ife

However, some healers are of the view that some patients living with epilepsy fail to recover from the condition because they are unable to give what the owners of the earth “the witches” demand. The belief is that it is the witches that can release them from their captivity and the spiritual world. Inability to appease the witches, they will not recover from the illness. An excerpt from the interview can be seen below:

By the grace of God, nobody comes here in tears and does not go back home in joy, except if I tell them what the owner of the earth “witches” says they will collect from them and they are not ready to do it. I will tell them to take the person away because I cannot come and set free and pay with my life or the life of my wife and children. I will not collect any money from anybody.

Male traditional healer, aged 60, *Osunle, Modakeke*

Evidence from these findings reveal that epilepsy is believed to be treatable and healers are well attached to their patients and show a sense of commitment towards their work. The healers are noted for the kind of relationship they build with their clients and the time devoted to their work. However, some of them are of the stance that for successful treatment, certain things must be given to the spiritual being. There is a considerable level of commitment and availability shown by these healers in the successful treatment of their clients.

Appeasement and Enhancing Therapeutic Outcomes

It was established by some healers that the first thing a healer should do for the people living with epilepsy to recover from their condition is to do appeasement. Appeasement is expressed as the primary way for the successful treatment of epilepsy which must be carried out by the healer. Some healers explained further that once appeasement is done, anything they touch will be possible. Even if it is only water they give to the patient, they will be cured. The healers explained that failure to do this will not result in fruitful outcomes.

It is common among us that are traditional healers. We will first consult the divination tool “Ifa” oracle to know if there is no involvement of the wicked ones in it. If the wicked ones are involved, we will first appease them. After appeasing them, we will now start using many remedies. If the patient has done everything that he/she is supposed to do, the illness will not re-occur again. Some are not caused by the evil forces. We do not appease for the natural ones and we will give the patient different remedies that he can be using.

Male traditional healer, aged 51, *Itakogun, Ile-Ife*

However, a healer explained further that appeasement is not done for epilepsy that occurs naturally. Different remedies are only given to patients for proper recovery. This indicates that among the healers, there is a disparity in the procedure or steps taken between epilepsy that is viewed as naturally caused and the one that is spiritually caused.

Also, it was stated that remedies should be prepared on the ground because patients may be brought all of a sudden and emergency treatment may be needed to rescue the life. It was further detailed that the healer must do everything he can to save the life of his/her patient even if it requires fetching water early in the morning without talking to anyone. It was expressed that after carrying out the necessary procedures on the water, the patient will drink it and vomit inside the bowl. Also, some healers added that part of their role is to make the patient feel comfortable around them by playing with them, watching movies together and playing games with them.

What the traditional healer can do for those receiving treatment for epilepsy to recover are that we should make them happy, we should not maltreat them. If we do not maltreat them and we treat them like other children, they will recover quickly. So, their age mates should be friends with them. They should not be left alone with people saying, and they are sick. They should be in the midst of people.

Male traditional healer, Aged 50, Ilode, Ile-Ife

This shows that the healers spend quality time with their patients, and they are more involved in their personal lives by engaging in discussions with them and giving them hope of recovery. The findings also reveal that the patients feel comfortable around the healers and are likely to have a close relationship with them.

Epilepsy Treatments as a Service to Humanity

In this study, some healers revealed that any healer treating epilepsy must treat the patient free of charge without collecting any money on it to avoid repercussion. The belief is that anyone who treats epilepsy and collects money for the treatment will suffer the consequences. They further explained that the illness would never leave the healer's lineage. The healers expatiated that if the healer did not give birth, it would affect his or her close relations' child.

In our conversation with a healer when we inquired about his opinion regarding epilepsy, he said

One does not treat epilepsy and collect money. We do not cure mental illness and collect a vow “*eje*”. Any healer that collects vow will be cursed because it will affect the children.

Male traditional healer, *aged 50, Modakeke* (code 54:4)

However, some healers are of the view that they can collect money in the treatment of epilepsy without any repercussion whatsoever. The belief is that the inability to collect money in the treatment of epilepsy is only applicable in the olden days; it is not feasible in this contemporary time. A healer further explained that any patient who does not have the money to use to buy the materials required in treating them will continue to be affected by the illness. The healers with this similar view revealed that they do collect money, but they do not collect it directly from the patient to avoid repercussions that come with it. The healers stated that they do tell the patient or family of the patient to put the money inside the hen’s cage and they later ask someone, which could be their children to help them pick the money inside the cage. When the money is brought before them, they will reply to the person by saying, “they saw the money by chance”. The healers would not admit that the money is being given to them but rather say they got the money by chance.

In addition, the healers explained further that the second option, which is more rampant among them in recent times is that they do tell the patient or the family to send the money into their account. The belief is that when these precautions are made, they will not suffer from the consequences attached to the treatment of the illness.

In our discussion with a healer, he said

We collect money but we don’t directly receive their money with our hands. Any traditional healer that wants to treat a client must not ask for money and collect it directly with the hand from the patient. During the days of our fathers, they put the money inside the cage in which a hen is usually kept, give it to the healer, and he then takes the money inside it. Another which is practised in our time now is that an account number is given so that the money can be sent there. There is no healer that will collect such money on the spot or else there could be a repercussion. That is the way it is.

Male traditional healer, *aged 70, Ile-Ife*

Based on these findings, it is revealed that epilepsy is still grounded in strong cultural beliefs. This shows the level of sentiments attached to the treatment of patients living with this condition. The belief attributed to this condition can be relayed in the kind of attitude shown in rendering care to the patients and can also influence how the healers are treating the patient.

Nevertheless, the cultural definitions attributed to epilepsy also play a role in the availability and disposition of traditional healers treating epilepsy. The belief that if money is collected directly from the patient or family, it will affect the healers' children have scared a lot of them away from rendering quality service and care to the victims.

Discussion of Findings

The result shows that traditional healing practise is embedded in cultural belief in multiple factors in the aetiology of epilepsy. The findings from this research in a way corroborate the findings of Abasiubong, Ekott, Bassey and Nyong (2009) that spiritual forces play critical roles in the cause of epilepsy in some cases. Traditional healers had a range of views regarding causal factors of epilepsy that include biomedical factors, which were heredity factors and spiritual causes which could be caused by affliction by the wicked ones, witchcraft, attack from the dream, food poisoning and family taboo. Most of the healers maintained the stance that epilepsy can be attributed to witchcraft, spiritual forces and evil activities of the wicked ones, which is consistent with some findings from previous African studies conducted in Zambia, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Namibia (du Toit & Pretorius, 2018).

Epilepsy was perceived as a shameful illness caused by natural factors, including genetics, preternatural and supernatural forces. Whether epilepsy was conceived as caused by natural, preternatural or supernatural forces, the periods of occurrence and physical spaces were described as similar. The pattern in the occurrence and spaces of manifestations was described as open and often attracts shame and stigmatisation. People living with epilepsy, for instance, would easily manifest symptoms in crowded spaces. Unfortunately, in the study settings and similar to the literature, epilepsy is stigmatised, and such people are avoided. This finding is consistent with reports from previous studies, which revealed that epilepsy is considered a shameful illness among the traditional healers. Keikelame and Swartz (2015) in a study conducted among traditional healers in Cape Town, South Africa revealed that epilepsy was perceived as a shameful illness caused by witchcraft, the anger of the gods and poison, which is in variance with biomedical explanations.

By appealing to an interpretative constructivist stance, the healers in this study espoused further the preternatural aetiology of epilepsy and the chances that certain ecological factor like the types of animals that exist in a context could provide insights

into the causal chain and the possible routes for solution to some epilepsy cases. Lizards are common reptiles that live close to residences of the Yoruba people. As reptiles, the agama lizard is forbidden and cannot be consumed but serves as an important animal material for medicine making and preparation of concoctions for different purposes. The agama lizard moves his head constantly in a manner that resonates with some symptoms of epilepsy and as such, this male type of lizard and the female counterparts are construed to possess the potentials of being used as medium of afflicting targets with epilepsy. The symptoms around epilepsy stated by some healers include neck stiffness, loss of consciousness, shaking, tongue rolling and rolling on the floor. This is supported by the findings of Kpobi, Swartz and Keikelame (2018).

Animal materials are common ingredients in how some healers prepare their remedies (Baskind & Birbeck, 2005). The animals that are considered to possess healing properties and are useful vary and also depend on the ecology of the healer, their experiences and practices within their healing occupations (Baskind & Birbeck 2005; Mohammed & Babikir 2013). The belief is widespread among the Yoruba people in Southwest Nigeria, and lizards to date remain an important ingredient in the production of concoctions or treatments for certain cases of epilepsy.

A further extension of the preternatural causation of epilepsy was the extreme views on the contagious possibilities of epilepsy. One of such construction is that epilepsy could be contracted by stepping on the saliva of an infected person. This view was shared by a few of the healers. Nonetheless, a similar interpretation was reported by Njamnshi et al. (2010) among a group of traditional healers in Cameroon. Some healers also debunked the theory of body fluid exchange as a possible source of contracting epilepsy, but the idea that saliva could spread epilepsy appeared popular. The view could be responsible for the maintenance of distance from people manifesting the symptoms of epilepsy. The fear is that drawing close to someone that had a seizure could lead to being afflicted with epilepsy. This was similar to the findings of Baskind and Birbeck (2005) in Zambia where traditional healers believed that witchcraft afflicts their victims with epilepsy through their urine, faeces and saliva. To some other healers, pepper and the edge of the broom could act as a medium through which epilepsy can be inflicted on people.

This study also revealed that epilepsy is believed to be treatable by all healers once the necessary procedures are carried out on the patients. Some healers disclosed that once a patient has vomited something that looks like a lizard, wall gecko or intestine parts, the patient will recover from the condition. Findings revealed that some patients living with epilepsy fail to recover from the condition because of the lack of social support from relatives. This is similar to the findings of Keikelame and Swartz (2017) that lack of social support from significant family members is a hindrance to patients' care and recovery. The strong religious belief that kicks against traditional medicine, inability to appease the witches who are the owners of the earth, eating abominations, such as palm wine, beans cake, okro soup, when the substance used in inflicting epilepsy

on the victim is thrown inside the river, inadequate knowledge of healers treating epilepsy, exploitation by healers and inability to collect money for treating epilepsy are hindrances to patients' recovery. The results in this study show that traditional healers do not directly collect money from the patient for the treatment of epilepsy because of the cultural belief attributed to the condition. This shows the level of discrimination attached to the condition.

Conclusion

Epilepsy is a chronic, complex and multidimensional condition deeply rooted in traditional African belief. The cultural belief attributed to epilepsy influences the patronage of traditional healers. Traditional healers attribute the causes of epilepsy to natural and preternatural forces, and this influences their disposition to the treatment of patients living with the condition. Our findings provide insight into the cultural worldviews of epilepsy among traditional healers. Traditional healers play vital roles in providing care for patients living with epilepsy. As critical stakeholders, traditional healers are germane in passing and retracting beliefs that promote misconceptions and access to quality care for epilepsy. Internal regulations of traditional medicine and quality of care are urgently required to ensure the credence of treatments, therapies and also promote the patient's right to choose treatments and quality of care.

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Authors Contributions:

OMA conceived the research idea, provided the guide and supported TA in successfully carrying out this research.

TA carried out this research as her thesis for a Master of Science degree in Sociology and Anthropology under the supervision of OMA. The data analysis was a shared responsibility. Both authors approved the submission of this article.

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