

HEALING AND WOMEN HEALERS IN YORUBA RELIGION AND AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

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Abstract

Healing in African indigenous cultures is a corporate matter involving the totality of the person, family and community. Healing presupposes sickness; its practice is therefore interlocked with a people's conception of sickness and diseases. In Africa, sickness is an attestation to the fact that an individual is out of tune with nature and the supernatural, which is represented by the various deities. The physical signs are therefore a part of the story and not the whole story. Similarly, the Christian conception of disease and healing is intertwined with the individual's relationship with the supernatural and the physical signs are but part of the story. Diagnosis and prescription for treatment and healing take into cognizance all these facts and this is where the healer comes in. The healer constitutes an integral part of the patient's healing in Yoruba religion as well as in African Christianity. There are female and male healers in both religions but whereas these specialists are designated as healers/diviners/custodians of tradition in Yoruba religion, in African Christianity, they are known as prophetesses/prophets/deliverance ministers. This paper seeks to evaluate the position of the healer among the Yoruba of Nigeria. A second objective is to analyze contemporary postures on healing activities in Yoruba religion and Christianity and how women feature in these processes.

Introduction

Healing has been defined severally such as 'to make sound or whole; to restore to health; to cause an undesirable condition to be overcome; and to restore to a sound state.'¹ Further, healing could refer to 'restoration of persons who have been ill in body or mind or both to full health'.² Healing in African indigenous cultures is a corporate matter involving the totality of the person, family and community. Healing presupposes sickness; its practice is therefore interlocked with a people's conception of sickness and diseases. In Africa, sickness is an attestation

to the fact that an individual is out of tune with nature and the supernatural, which is represented by the various deities. The physical signs are therefore a part of the story and not the whole story. Similarly, the Christian conception of disease and healing is intertwined with the individual's relationship with the supernatural and the physical signs are but part of the story. Diagnosis and prescription for treatment and healing take into cognizance all these facts and this is where the healer comes in. consequent to diagnosis and prescriptions for healing, certain common features may be identified in both religions.

The apparent use of invocatory prayers in Yoruba religion and African Christianity portrays the prominent place occupied by the supernatural in the people's conception of disease and healing. While the adherents of Yoruba religion emphasis the use of incantation of various types for diverse purposes, Christians employ the use of specific portions of the Bible, like the Psalms. Also, there is the use of natural elements for religious purposes by both groups. This may include fruits like coconut, banana and orange as well as elements such as sugar and salt. These items are believed to carry within them certain connotations that could be appealed to for the effective healing of the sick. Again, water is widely used in different ways in African Christianity and Yoruba religion for healing purposes. The patient may be required to drink or bath with water in daytime or at night depending on the healer's prescriptions. More importantly however, is the position of the healer in both religions. The healer constitutes an integral part of the patient's healing in Yoruba religion as well as in African Christianity. There are female and male healers in both religions but whereas these specialists are designated as healers/diviners/custodians of tradition in Yoruba religion, in African Christianity, they are known as prophetesses/prophets/deliverance ministers.

This paper seeks to evaluate the position of the healer among the Yoruba of Nigeria. A second objective is to analyze contemporary postures on healing activities in Yoruba religion and Christianity and how women feature in these processes. Methodologies for the work are phenomenological and exploratory, utilizing research tools such as participant observations and secondary sources.

Statement of the Problem

Health and healing are crucial concerns among the Yoruba and these reflect in the people's lived experiences. Prior to Nigeria's attainment of political independence in 1960, the scope and

methodologies utilized in pursuing health and healing was unitary but this has changed. The change is due to the advent of other religions and cultures in Nigeria; especially Christianity. The contact between Yoruba religion and Christianity has resulted in mutual enrichment for both groups with attending implications including the roles and status of women in this enterprise of healing. How have women fared as women healers? What are the contributions of women in this mutual enrichment on healing between Yoruba religion and African Christianity? Are there any challenges for women healers in the contemporary Yoruba society?

Healing and the Healer in Yoruba Religion

The healer by training may be a diviner and a custodian of tradition. Healing is restoration both physically and spiritually. The healer should therefore be someone with ample knowledge about the people's worldview and belief system. He/she is usually vast in knowledge of herbs, their names, and uses as well as restrictions pertaining to each herb. In the same vein, certain deities are perceived to be custodians of herbs for healing, the healer is expected to know and be in good terms with such deities, examples include *Osanyin*, *Obatala* and *Osun* to mention a few. Prior to training, some healers are selected because of their mode of birth or due to the possession of some traits, which may be physical or non-physical. In some cases, the position of the healer may be inherited though such would need to be mediated by some degree of training. The training for the healer is multifaceted and robust because the aim is to equip her/him to be capable of handling any disease and effect healing in any sick person that may require attention. Spiritually, the healer should be in close contact with *Osanyin*, the deity of herbs and healing. The healer should observe rules and regulations of *Osanyin*, especially the taboos of the deity.³

Training of the healer is in two dimensions; observation and recitations. The trainee is attached to a master healer who instructs and directs the student in the modalities of healing on a daily basis. The trainee is required to memorize names and features of different herbs and their uses. Training period varies and is usually determined by some factors including brilliancy of the student, the needs of the master trainer and the release from *Osanyin*, the deity of herbs and healing. Because diagnosis and prescription for healing predicate on consultations with the supernatural, which among the Yoruba is chiefly through *Ifa* or *Eerindinlogun* systems, the trainee may also receive training in the

science of divination.⁴ Indeed some scholars postulate that traditionally, every healer is essentially a diviner and his/her profession is incomplete without the ability to use any of the different methods of divination. Training in the *Ifa* and *Eerindinlogun* divination system usually runs concurrently where applicable. The trainee is required to work under another healer of choice after graduation for some years before he/she starts to practise independently.

The healer is known among the Yoruba as *onisegun* and she/he should be available and accessible to all in the community. Some healers do specialize in particular areas like paediatrics, gynecology or orthopaedics. Diagnosis begins with divination, through either *Ifa* or *Eerindinlogun*. The *Ifa* divination system consists of two hundred and fifty-six chapters from which the diviner derives antecedents on the case before her.⁵ The healer may also utilize the *Eerindinlogun* which consist of sixteen main chapters in the process of diagnosis. The results of the consultations will provide indications on the process of healing and this may include sacrifice, pharmaceutical mixtures, or the giving of alms. Some sicknesses may require the healer to observe fasting and offer personal sacrifices to even arrive at the root causes of the sickness. By implication then, the proficiency of the healer would have a bearing on the efficacy and speed of healing. Usually, when some of these healers run into problem with a knotty case, they consult other healers regarded as being more knowledgeable. In addition, the healer is part of the healing process, for one, the client should be confident in the healer's capabilities and the healing of the patient, especially in serious cases has a strong bearing on the reputation of the healer.

Three types of healing have been identified among the Yoruba: healing that is purely spiritual based on ritual, incantations and mental application of certain understood natural laws; healing that is purely physical based on the use of herbs without any ritual element or incantation; and a combination of the two types mentioned above.⁶ Many healers in Yoruba land however practise the three types of healing with no marked distinction as remedies depend on the type of illness presented by each client at the point of consultation. Present practice of traditional healing however seeks to promote the use of herbs for healing especially because traditional medicine desires to be incorporated into the Nigerian medical system.⁷ Traditional medicine fairs (*ipate oogun*) encourage traditional healers to emphasise the use of herbs for healing while some of these healers have been able to produce herbal medicine in tablet, caplet and syrup forms. These fairs are common features in Yoruba cities

today because herbal remedies are widely believed to be efficacious in the healing of diverse diseases. Some of these healers have acquired western education and are knowledgeable in herbal preparations which explain their establishment of striving healing homes and maternity centres in Yoruba land and beyond. The claim to use herbs independent of any ritual for healing among the Yoruba is however considered suspect in some quarters. This does not however obliterate the independent use of herbal preparations for healing; rather the argument here is the context-Yoruba land- and the veracity of employing herbs independent of rituals in a culture where power is both visible and invisible.⁸

Healing and the Healer in Christianity

The Bible records cases of healing in the Old and New Testament. These include the healing of Abimelech (Genesis 20: 1-8), Moses (Exodus 4: 24-26) Miriam (Numbers 12: 1-15) and King Hezekiah (II Kings 20: 1-11); in the New Testament Jesus devoted substantial portion of His ministry to healing. In fact Jesus healing has been classified into three, namely, physical healing, exorcism and the raising of the dead.⁹ Hence, healing is a present reality among Christians in Yoruba land. Christianity in Yoruba land is divided along three main parts, the mission churches, the African Independent churches and the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches. All three divisions of churches have been involved with issues of healing among the Yoruba but from different perspectives. The mission churches established hospitals alongside churches to cater for the people's health. These hospitals and health centres were supervised and run by missionaries trained as medical doctors and nurses.¹⁰ Over the years however, Yoruba men and women took over these functions haven been trained in western medicine. The mission churches unequivocally rejected Yoruba traditional medicine as demonic and evil. Yoruba converts were therefore encouraged to discard any form of traditional medicine and patronize only the western hospitals and health centres.

The attitude of Christianity to Yoruba traditional medicine has however undergone some changes brought about by the influence of the people's culture and worldview. Hence, African Independent churches appreciate and utilize certain paradigms which are transferred from the culture into Christianity. One of such is the issue of healing and the position of the healer. The same assumptions that underline the practice of healing in Yoruba religion could be located among these churches i. e.

that sickness is an indication of a fall out with nature and supernatural forces. Explanation for sickness therefore goes beyond the physical alone, rather it includes spiritual attacks from malevolent forces and sometimes, sin. Two, broad categories of diseases are identified in Christianity-disease of the body and those of the mind, or physical and psychological diseases.¹¹ These churches see diseases as evil and conveyers of death and outcomes of human being's sinful acts. Sin and demonic forces are seen as roots of sickness and diseases. Consequently in African Independent churches, divine healing and forgiveness of sins go *pari passu*. Further, faith in Jesus is a crucial requirement for healing. The position of the healer is occupied by the prophetess whose diagnosis is through vision and prophecy. Treatment includes fasting and praying by both the patient and the healer, but usually, it involves certain offering or sacrifice. The Celestial Church of Christ for instance, holds prayer sessions during which revelation is given from God on the nature and the treatment of the patient. Also, the patient may be required to provide a coconut and to take a bath in a flowing stream at midnight. The coconut is broken with some pronouncements from the prophetess that 'no one knows how water got into the coconut therefore; no one would know the source of the patient's life'. The patient then baths with new sponges, which are promptly discarded. The belief is that the flowing stream has washed away all the sicknesses and mishaps that could affect the patient. In addition, there is the prevalent use of religious elements, including oil, water, fruits, coconut, candles and incense.¹²

Prayer and fasting remain the most common means of healing in the African Independent churches among the Yoruba; as confirmed in a popular saying among members of these churches that '*adura ni opa isegun*' meaning 'prayer is the Christian's rod of victory'. Apparently, sickness is also perceived as a battle with satanic powers, which should be won by the power of God. Moreover there is the extensive use of the book of Psalms as pronouncements of victory on the forces of evil. Psalms used for this purpose include 3, 23, 24, 31, 51 and 130. Some of these churches enhance their efforts towards healthcare by establishing healing centres within the church premises. The prophet in the African Independent churches is a person called by God and gifted in prophecy, visions and dreams. He/she could develop these gifts through training and practice as he/she interacts with members of the church daily. The prophetess for example, devotes time for regular prayer and fasting for greater perception of spiritual things. He/she derives information on the

patient's condition from revelation consequently diagnosis and prescription for healing are based on revelation.¹³

The Pentecostal/Charismatic group of churches view sickness as a manifestation of the works of Satan and seek to heal both the disease and the cause. These churches do not forbid the use of drugs but neither do they subscribe to the use of any other means for healing except prayer, fasting and deliverance. The act of sacrificing items, the use of religious elements and the taking of ritual baths are all prohibited. Prayer is said for the healing of physical symptoms in a healing session by a number of members usually referred to as 'deliverance ministers'. In addition, prayers are said to erase the non-physical causes of the sickness and towards the spiritual sanctification of the patient. It is difficult to speak of one person as a healer among these churches as prayers for healing are more often corporal. The Pentecostal churches see sickness and diseases as an indication that the enemy (Satan) is at work and needs to be engaged in battle through prayer. Their perception assumes victory from the onset of prayer, and this is based on the injunction of the Bible that "by the stripes of Christ Jesus, Christians have been healed" (Isaiah 53:5). This group of churches does not usually establish health centres either within their worship areas or elsewhere.¹⁴

Women Healers in Yoruba land

Medicine women are cultic functionaries who are sometimes senior officials of religious groups, whereas others may be regular worshippers of god and goddesses. Women feature prominently in the bid to ensure balance in every sector of daily living, just as there is a prevalent appeal to female principles in the same enterprise. Herbs and their use are of great importance to medicine and healing among the Yoruba. Further, the people perceive herbs as possessing life, names, taboo, and praise poems (*Oriki*); hence to approach, annex, and utilize them, a special kind of knowledge is required. Avenues for acquiring such knowledge include the religious traditions (as is the case with the *Yeye Oosa* and the *Iyanifa*) and the professional medicine women, known as *Onisegun*. Training for the *Onisegun* involves observation and the memorization of herb names and prescriptions. The apprentice medicine woman usually resides with the professional from whom she learns the names and use of herbs. The *Iya Oosa* and the *Iyanifa* acquire expertise on particular religious group (e.g. *Obatala*, *Osun*) in addition to the herbal knowledge bestowed on them as *Onisegun*. These women offer

consultation services to sick people, who often times need both spiritual and physical healing. Some individuals claim to have been born with the gift of healing; these individuals have had no training but display effective healing prowess and a profound knowledge of herbs and their use. These individuals usually attribute their healing powers to favourably disposed spiritual forces.¹⁵

Restrictions and prohibitions based on women's physiological makeup are a common denominator to women's role in religion and the medicine woman is no exception. Prohibitions on menstrual blood usually associate it with notions of mystery, awe, and pollution and this has been a bone of contention limiting women's role in religion across cultures in history. Tools for managing this paradox differ from one religion to another, and successes from such attempts remain suspect to date. The woman healer in Yoruba religion for example is prohibited from touching sacred elements and from participating in some rituals during her monthly circle because blood is perceived as a conveyor of power. The attempt to separate menstrual blood from sacred elements in Yoruba religion is therefore informed by the need to avoid a clash of powers. Whereas in Christianity, the separation required of the menstruating woman from sacred elements predicates on the assumption that menstrual blood defiles and consequently depletes sacred potency. Tools and methods employed in any analysis of menstrual blood in religion always exhibit connections with a people's conception of purity and the sacred. Most especially because notions of menstrual blood could be mediated by concepts of the auspicious in some cultures but this may not be so in other cultures.¹⁶ Moreover, these tools and methods could provide indications of a people's conception of power. As a result of these differences in perception, tools and methods employed in any consideration of menstrual blood in the two religions would differ. It is therefore significant to treat any investigation of menstrual blood in religion as a component of the total structures of a culture within which that religion operates.

Limitations for the medicine woman emanate chiefly from her social roles as wife and mother. As a wife, domestic responsibilities may limit time available for spiritual reinforcement, for instance, time for fasting and praying and visit to patients. The woman healer is required by culture to cook and care for the family, hence in a bid to combine her healing roles to these domestic duties, she may be found wanting. Again, as a mother with growing children, she may be restricted in mobility. These restrictions have however been managed over the years by these

women healers. Methods employed in this regard include, delegation of duties, understanding spouses, polygamy and discipline. It is worth mentioning that a considerable percentage of women healers in Yoruba land are separated from their spouses due to the tension discussed above. While some of them postulate that such action is because their spouses were un-cooperative towards their healing vocation, others submit they needed time off other societal expectations. This is especially true of women healers with grown up children both in Yoruba religion and Christianity.¹⁷ It is clear that women healers constitute a formidable force in the provision of healthcare to the people through Christian and Yoruba religious paradigms. We now turn to the issue of corruption and healing practices among women healers in Yorubaland.

Corruption and Women Healers

Corruption is a major challenge in the process of offering healing to patients from the perspective of the two religions. Corruption in healing activities is at first a reflection of the environment within which these healing activities occur. Dishonest and immoral activities in the healing sector proffer profound implications for the society at large because issues therein pertain to human life and existence. These activities and their implications encompass both the healing practices of male and female healers in African Christianity and Yoruba religion. Our concern is however with the woman healer. Why would a woman healer who is also a mother engage in corrupt practices that may result in loss of life? For illustrative purposes, we may consider the issue of adulterated herbal preparations and wrong dosage prescriptions. An apparent influence is the materialistic tendencies in the contemporary society which informs the quest to get rich quick. Furthermore, some healers feign expertise where they have none and this often results in complications for the patient. This is a situation that could be avoided by humility and the seeking of correct knowledge. Also worthy of mention is the overcharging of patients in a bid to acquire money by all means. Indeed one of my informants narrated an experience where she visited a woman healer of one of the white garment churches. Part of the requirement for her healing was the submission of her best traditional attire, which she later saw on the woman healer couple of months after her healing. Though she was healed, the action of this woman healer raised disturbing questions for this patient. It is therefore clear that utilitarian concerns sometimes becloud the ritual prescriptions for healing

by these healers. Education and appreciation are two steps that could be explored to eradicate corrupt practices among healers in Christianity and Yoruba religion.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has attempted an evaluation and analysis of healing activities in Yoruba religion and African Christianity. The position of a healer as a crucial constituent of healing in both religions was also considered. It became clear during the discourse that healing activities in African Christianity and Yoruba religion exhibit some similarities. The methods of training for the healer were examined and differences highlighted. Restrictions and prohibitions that concern women healers were analyzed with appreciation for a holistic cultural interpretation recommended. Corruption as a potent threat to lives and healing activities was examined. Reasons for corrupt practices and the implications of these for the patient and the society were also mentioned. The paper advocated for the education of healers and members of the society to ameliorate the effects of corrupt practices by women healers in Yoruba religion and African Christianity. We may surmise that healing is an integral part of Yoruba daily living. Consequently, healers occupy significant positions spiritually and socially and their actions or lack of it may have serious effect on the society. Women healers constitute a formidable force in the health sector and every effort should be made to understand and appreciate them and their methods of operation. The women healers on the other hand should be conscious of the responsibilities bestowed on them by the society through their position as custodians of people's health.

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