

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Healing Beyond the Body: Culture, Beliefs and Environment in Indigenous African Health Practices

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Abstract

Indigenous health practices in Africa are not just mere traditions; they are vital pillars of culture that deeply reflect the beliefs, attitudes, and worldviews of Indigenous communities. These practices encapsulate a holistic understanding of health, recognizing that the spirit and the body are interconnected and together form a complete human being. When individuals experience physical ailments, it often signals a profound disconnection between their spirit and body, underscoring the need for healing approaches that address both dimensions. Practitioners of Indigenous healing in Africa carry a rich legacy of knowledge and practices surrounding health and wellness, inherited from generations before them. Their work transcends conventional medical paradigms, focusing on diagnosis, prevention, and the restoration of balance, drawing on a wealth of observational and practical experiences. This paper presents an enlightening ethnographic study involving 15 Indigenous healers from the Eastern Region of Ghana. It delves into their beliefs about the origins of disease, their unique healing processes, and the ways in which they strive to restore health. The findings reveal a compelling understanding: most Indigenous healers ascribe the root causes of illness to a state of disharmony, imbalance, or disruption of peace between the spirit world, which includes the Supreme Being, ancestors, deities, and gods and the physical realm encompassing our bodies and environments. To truly heal the sick, they argue, one must engage in spiritual cleansing, bridging the vital connection between an individual's spirit and their surroundings. By embracing these Indigenous healing practices, we can learn invaluable lessons about holistic health and the profound interplay between our spiritual and physical well-being.

Keywords: Indigenous healing, spirituality, African Indigenous healing practices, Ghana

Introduction

The rapidly changing environment facilitates the growth and spread of various pathogens responsible for various diseases. The frequent occurrence of epidemics or deadly pandemics such as COVID-19 has placed humans on alert. Consequently, human societies across the globe are engaged in a relentless quest for effective remedies to combat the various diseases that afflict our communities. With millions of dollars invested each year in healthcare, the burden of illness remains a pressing concern. As new disease-causing organisms surface rapidly and familiar ones morph into resistant forms, it becomes increasingly clear that we must explore and embrace

alternative forms of health care to complement orthodox Western medicine. While the advances in medical science have undoubtedly resolved many health challenges, a significant number of communities continue to seek healing through alternative methods, often integrating them alongside biomedicine. Unfortunately, these practices frequently face unjust scrutiny, with lesser acknowledgment of their value compared to conventional medicine. Despite their demonstrable effectiveness in disease prevention, management, and control, alternative medicine is often dismissed as unscientific by mainstream medical authorities. Its diagnostic and treatment approaches are routinely marginalized, rejected, or even vilified by modern healthcare systems. Yet, Indigenous communities around the world steadfastly uphold these time-honoured healing practices. In this study, we hereby reject the term "alternative medicine," which implies an inferior position in comparison to Western medicine. Instead, we assert the importance of recognizing these practices as Indigenous medicine. While many refer to it as traditional or herbal medicine, critical scholars have rightly criticized the term "traditional," as it carries outdated and negative connotations. Such labels reflect an antiquated, 19th-century perspective that reduces Indigenous peoples to simple and static existences, ignoring their capacity for knowledge and practices to evolve and address contemporary challenges (Mazzocchi, 2006; Warren, 1991). Therefore, we will confidently use the term Indigenous medicine to honour its rich heritage and vital role in modern health care.

Research indicates that a significant majority (70% to 80%) of Ghanaians turn to Indigenous medicine for treatment (Darko, 2009; Demi, 2017; UNDP, 2007; WHO Ghana, 2004). In urban areas of southern Ghana, the doctor-to-patient ratio is estimated to be 1:20,000 (Tabi, Powell & Hodnicki, 2006; Ae-Ngibise et al., 2010), while in the rural northern regions, it stands at 1:100,000 (Hill et al., 2014). In contrast, the ratio of Indigenous healers to patients in rural areas is approximately 1:200 (Tabi & Frimpong, 2003), which helps explain the widespread reliance on Indigenous healing practices. The reasons behind this reliance on Indigenous healing are compelling. Many Ghanaians face financial barriers that prevent them from accessing hospital care, while numerous communities lack even the basic presence of hospitals. Moreover, a deep-seated mistrust of Western medicine contributes to this trend (Demi, 2019). Many individuals view biomedicine as foreign and incompatible with their rich cultural heritage (Ewusi-Mensah, 2001; Fiasorgbor & Aniah, 2015), leading them to question its effectiveness in treating culturally specific ailments like piles or hemorrhages (Demi, 2019). Furthermore, Indigenous Ghanaians often perceive illness as a reflection of spiritual injury or wrongdoing, believing that true healing requires addressing both spiritual and physical dimensions—an approach that they feel is overlooked by biomedicine. Within Indigenous African healing paradigms, health is understood as a holistic concept, encompassing stability across physical, spiritual, mental, and social spheres (Omonzejele, 2008). In this context, illness is seen as an imbalance in these interconnected components of life (Opere-Henaku & Utsey, 2017; White, 2015).

Indigenous medicine has faced criticism in the past for not adhering to specific scientific guidelines, including issues like inappropriate diagnoses, unregulated dosages, and the inability of Indigenous healers to identify the individual constituents or chemical compositions of many herbal remedies. However, in recent years, a new generation of Indigenous health care practitioners has emerged in Ghana, who combine biomedical practices, particularly in terms of diagnosis and dosage regulation with traditional Indigenous healing methods, primarily using herbs to treat various ailments. This approach to Indigenous health care is gaining popularity and is increasingly recognized within Ghana's health system. Institutions such as Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology have introduced a Bachelor of Science in Herbal Medicine within their

Medical School. Graduates from this program are assigned to clinics, hospitals, and Indigenous health care facilities to provide care to the community. Nevertheless, this study focuses on rural populations who rely on Indigenous healers, as they represent a significant portion of the population in Ghana. It is crucial to investigate the practices of Indigenous healers because these vulnerable communities often depend on their services, making them susceptible to exploitation by unqualified practitioners.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the practices of Indigenous Akan healers in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The goal is to understand how Akan communities utilize Indigenous knowledge to prevent diseases and heal community members, thereby promoting overall development. To achieve this objective, the study will address the following research questions: a) How do Akan communities perceive health and illness? b) What do they believe causes ill health, and what measures do they take to address it? c) What are the processes involved in diagnosis and healing? By deepening our understanding of healthcare delivery in these Indigenous communities, we can discover meaningful ways to combine Indigenous Akan healing practices with modern biomedicine. This integration has the potential to significantly enhance the lives of Ghanaians and foster a more holistic approach to health.

The Case for Holistic Approach to Health: The Ontology Of Spiritual Healing

Scholars in health studies generally agree that there are various methods of healing practices (Adu-Gyamfi, 2016; Fante, 2009; Kpobi & Swartz, 2019). However, the dominant Eurocentric perspective, which prioritizes a biological model of health, continues to be hailed as the gold standard. This bias is concerning, as contemporary medical epistemology often subjects Indigenous healing practices to the rigid criteria of Western scientific paradigms, rendering them as inferior or even irrelevant (Kpobi & Swartz, 2019). Additionally, religious views from Christianity and Islam frequently label certain Indigenous healing practices as demonic (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2014). This narrow scrutiny is fundamentally misguided. Every form of knowledge holds validity within its own cultural context (Feyerabend, 1987). By imposing Western scientific principles on Indigenous healing, we are not only overlooking their inherent value but also dooming the evaluation process to failure. The assumption that Western knowledge reigns supreme is one that many Indigenous communities vehemently contest. Tonelli and Callahan (2001) challenge the idea that Western biomedicine is the ultimate authority on medical knowledge. Scholars have identified a wealth of equally credible healing practices, including intercessory prayers and rituals, mind-body and nature reconnection, complementary and alternative medicine, Asian healing methods, shamanistic rituals, and various African Indigenous practices, all of which align with a holistic model of health (Anderson, 2008; Boateng & Darko, 2009; Matthews, 1998).

Indigenous healing practices reveal a profound understanding of the human experience, recognizing that we are composed of both physical and spiritual elements. The spiritual dimension encompasses every facet of life, while death is understood as the moment the spirit departs from the physical body. This holistic perspective highlights the fallacy of viewing the body merely as a collection of isolated parts or akin to a machine, a notion perpetuated by the biological model of health. In the rich cultural tapestry of Ghana, particularly among the Akan people, the hierarchy of the spirit world plays a vital role in healing. The Akans believe that spiritual ailments can originate from various sources, and they identify three primary avenues for spiritual healing or intervention. At the pinnacle of these sources stands the Supreme Being, known as God in Christianity and Allah in Islam. Each ethnic group in Ghana honours the Supreme Being with its unique name: Onyame among the Akans, Mawu among the Ewes, and Ataa Nyumɔ among the

Gas, among others. This shared reverence for the Supreme Being reflects an innate understanding that transcends cultures, as expressed in the saying, “Obi nkyere akwadaa Nyame,” meaning “Nobody shows God to a child.” This idea underscores a universal truth: the Supreme Being is the creator and sustainer of the universe, wielding the ultimate power to govern all existence. The Akans hold a profound belief in the Supreme Being, who is viewed as an immensely transcendent, holy, and eternal presence, one that is both awe-inspiring and beyond human comprehension. This divine essence is so omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent that direct contact with Him is seen as impossible for mere mortals without the mediation of an intermediary. This is where the significant role of lesser gods comes into play. These lesser gods, created by the Supreme Being, do not compete with Him; rather, they serve as essential conduits of His healing power. When these deities falter in addressing human suffering and ancestral spirits seem inactive or indifferent during desperate times, the Supreme Being stands as the ultimate refuge, a beacon of hope in moments of crisis (Sarpong, 1974). This foundational belief emphasizes that, in the practice of African Indigenous healing, practitioners begin by seeking the acknowledgment, strength, and wisdom of the Supreme Being. Every step of the healing journey, from the initial diagnosis to the healing process itself, is anchored in a plea for divine assistance, ensuring that practitioners align themselves with the highest source of power available. This connection not only fosters a deep sense of spiritual reliance but also reinforces the belief that true healing encompasses both the visible and the unseen realms.

The belief that diseases may originate from the gods as a punishment for wrongdoing or poor choices leads Indigenous healers to perform spiritual cleansings to seek forgiveness from the spirit that is afflicting the individual. Healing often involves making sacrifices to appease the spirit that has caused the illness. Once the spirit accepts the sacrifice, it directs the Indigenous healer to the appropriate herb needed to cure the patient. If the spirit continues to resist and does not leave the sick individual alone, a higher spirit may be invoked to drive away the malevolent spirit. A similar approach is taken by both Christians and Muslims in Ghana when treating various spiritual ailments. For instance, many Christians engage in fasting, prayer, and the use of candles, holy water, and anointing oil as methods to heal the sick (Arias et al., 2016; Edward, 2014; Osafo, Agyapong & Asamoah, 2015). Similarly, Muslims recite specific verses from the Qur'an and perform prayers to drive away the evil spirits that afflict the sick (Adu-Gyamfi, 2014; Kpobi & Swartz, 2018).

The third source of healing originates from ancestors who follow the lesser gods in the spiritual hierarchy. Ancestors are the deceased members of a family or clan who maintain a relationship with the living and care for them. They play a crucial role in the healing process due to the interconnectedness and unity among the living, the dead, the supernatural, the divine, and the environment. Ancestors possess unique abilities as they transcend human limitations (Sarpong, 1974). They fulfil various roles, such as unifying families, providing care and support, empowering individuals, bestowing blessings, rewarding good deeds, forgiving transgressions, inspiring people, and protecting families and clans from diseases, evil, enemies, and even warfare. Ancestors also mediate between individuals and the Supreme Being, enforce discipline when social values are broken, and facilitate holistic healing (Edward et al., 2009).

References to ancestors reveal deeply held beliefs and principles that resonate through generations. First and foremost, death is not an end, but a transition from the physical realm to a spiritual existence. The deceased are not merely memories; they remain vibrant within and around the household, fulfilling vital roles and responsibilities. Secondly, the bond between the living and their ancestors is eternal. Ancestors are blessed with supernatural powers from the Supreme Being,

granting them the ability to safeguard their families, clans, and communities from harm. This sacred connection is a source of strength and guidance for the living. However, it's important to recognize that ancestors have needs just like those still on this earth. It is our duty to honour and fulfil these needs, as neglecting them can lead to serious repercussions, such as illness or misfortune. Ancestors often communicate through dreams, visions, and sounds, and they may manifest through symbols in nature, like birds, butterflies, bees, snakes, or lions. Diviners and Indigenous healers can also serve as conduits for ancestral wisdom. It's crucial to understand that not every deceased family member qualifies as an ancestor. True ancestors are those who lived exemplary lives, shunned vices, demonstrated love, and embraced piety, passing away through natural causes. To remember and honour these remarkable individuals, their names may be given to newborns, ensuring that their legacy and the family's good name endure for generations to come.

The discussion clearly illustrates that the concepts of disease and health are deeply intertwined with individual belief systems and cultural backgrounds. In numerous Indigenous communities, spirituality serves as a fundamental element of human life. By acknowledging and articulating this aspect, we engage in the crucial process of decolonization, which affirms Indigenous knowledge as a valid and insightful way of understanding the world. There is an urgent need to decolonize Western healthcare practices that dominate many communities in Ghana and across Africa, ensuring that these systems genuinely reflect the beliefs and values of the people they serve (Dahm, 2014; Taabu, 2020). Decolonization entails two vital steps: first, the revival of one's history to comprehend its contributions to the broader tapestry of world history, and second, the reframing of colonial narratives to reveal how they have led to impoverishment rather than progress (Graveline, 1998). As Fanon emphasized, the rejection of one's cultural roots—particularly the dismissal and denigration of Indigenous healing practices—constitutes a tacit acceptance of colonization. We must actively resist this trend and honour the richness of Indigenous traditions to foster true healing and growth. Fanon writes”

...colonialism is not content merely to impose its laws on the colonized country's present and future. Colonialism is not satisfied with snaring the people in its net or of draining the colonized brain of any form or substance. With a kind of perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it. (Fanon, 1963, p. 149)

Scholars such as Fanon have long observed that colonizers often distort the histories of those they colonize, and this distortion extends to traditional healing practices as well. Therefore, revitalizing Indigenous healing practices can serve as a powerful act of decolonization. By embracing and understanding the profound significance of spiritual healing in healthcare, we can bridge the gap between Indigenous wisdom and modern biomedicine. A notable example of this effort is the establishment of a spiritual healing center at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto, designed to integrate Indigenous healing methods into contemporary healthcare practices in Canada. Spiritual healing is not merely a concept; it is deeply rooted in the everyday lives of Indigenous communities around the globe. Spirituality stands as a fundamental force of existence, and to ignore it is to overlook a crucial aspect of reality. This study underscores that Indigenous practices revolve around nurturing healthy relationships with the Supreme Being, ancestors, and the vital support drawn from the land. When this connection with the spirit world is compromised, it can lead to physical illness. Therefore, true healing must begin in the spiritual realm before it can

manifest in the physical body. By recognizing and empowering these practices, we can not only restore health but also honour and reclaim the rich heritage of Indigenous cultures.

Methodology

This qualitative study is part of a broader research initiative aimed at understanding the role of Indigenous African philosophies in environmental stewardship and their health implications. The study was conducted in Ghana, specifically in the Eastern region of the country. Purposive sampling was employed to select 15 Indigenous African healers, each with several years of experience. The Principal Investigator (PI) conducted in-depth interviews with these healers or herbalists using a semi-structured interview guide. In-depth interviews were deemed appropriate for this study because they allow researchers to ask open-ended questions, enabling participants to explore the issues under investigation based on their expertise (Kumar, 2011). According to Kumar, semi-structured interviews are commonly used in research to gather information about participants' unique perspectives on their lived experiences, specific situations, relationships, and strategies in their own words. This aligns with the intent of our study, which seeks to understand the perspectives and worldviews of African Indigenous healers regarding health and wellness. Participants were asked various questions, including: What is your understanding of health and illness? What are the relationships between the body and the environment in relation to health? How do illnesses occur, and how do you address ill health? The data collected from these interviews were analyzed through coding and thematization using Excel software, as well as manual coding. Additionally, secondary information from books and peer-reviewed journal articles was analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation. The findings of the study are discussed in the following sections.

Findings And Discussions

Concept of Health and Diseases among Indigenous Communities in Ghana

In Ghana, the understanding of health care within Indigenous communities emphasizes that the human body operates as an interconnected “whole system.” When any part of this system is compromised, it can disrupt overall health. Participants advocate that there exists a vital force or energy that flows through every individual, intricately linking the physical and spiritual realms (Cajete, 2000; Wangoola, 2000). This belief positions human beings as embodiments of spiritual strength, where illness is often viewed as a reflection of spiritual injury. As one insightful participant expressed, *"No sickness just happens; everything done physically has a spiritual link or connotation."* This profound perspective resonates with Hevi's (2015) assertion that Indigenous communities perceive life as a comprehensive, integrated experience that includes all dimensions of existence: spiritual, physical, emotional, social, mental, and personal. This holistic view teaches us that our physical bodies are not merely vessels; they are manifestations of a deeper spiritual energy that fundamentally defines us. Consequently, any physical ailments should be seen as signals of underlying spiritual concerns. In other words, all illnesses are understood to have both physical and spiritual dimensions.

Participants in the research expressed the belief that illness is not solely defined by physical pain or cellular malfunction; rather, it signifies an imbalance within the individual and a disruption in the connection between humans and their environment (Darko, 2009; McNeill & Cervantes,

2008). Healing occurs when individuals are reconnected with their environment. This perspective on health suggests that a person is truly healthy only when there is a cosmic balance between themselves and their surroundings. Thus, good health is understood as well-being, stemming from both personal and communal integrity (Hevi, 1989; Worley, 2002). Healing, in this context, involves the harmonious restoration of wholeness in humanity and its relationships across multiple dimensions: physical, psychological, social, moral, economic, political, and spiritual (Hiebert & Shaw, 2000; Hiebert, Shaw & Tiénou, 1999; Moodley & West, 2005). Illness is perceived by families, clans, and communities as a sign of imbalance. The causes of such imbalances may include ancestral displeasure, evil spirits, or unfavourable natural conditions, such as lack of rest, poor nutrition, or fatigue. To identify the root cause of an illness and the appropriate healing ritual, families may consult with their ancestors directly or through a traditional healer. This process often highlights the need to restore harmony within the system.

Spirituality plays a vital role in the past, present, and future experiences of many Indigenous Ghanaian communities. Indigenous spirituality is defined as the recognition of the interconnectedness of all things, both living and non-living. It embodies the realization that humans are merely one link in a vast chain of existence (Ritskes, 2011, p. 413). This perspective was further supported by one of the research participants, Kumi, who stated, “Our great ancestors and gods surround us. We can only succeed in our endeavours when the spirits support our actions.” Kumi's quote highlights that, although our ancestors have passed, they continue to influence the lives of the living. Therefore, every action taken must align with what is considered acceptable by the ancestors. In this belief system, ancestors act as a guide for the living, deterring them from committing wrongful acts. Ignoring their guidance may provoke their displeasure.

Indigenous peoples, as highlighted by Dei (2002), possess a profound understanding of the interdependence that exists among all entities, both living and deceased. They recognize that individual desires should not overshadow the well-being of the community and the environment. This commitment to interconnectedness (Ritskes, 2011) transcends individual actions, emphasizing that the health of the community is intrinsically linked to the health of the land and its inhabitants. In Indigenous communities, true progress is measured not just by economic growth, but by the harmony achieved through peaceful coexistence and respect for both the living and our ancestors. Wangoola (2000) powerfully articulates that a community embodies “the living, the unborn, the dead, and nature as a whole” (p. 27). Spirituality is not merely a cultural aspect; it is the lifeblood that nurtures relationships and fosters meaningful connections among people. The depth of this relationship is so critical that any attempt to separate or diminish these elements can lead to collective suffering and deterioration of health. To cultivate a vibrant and thriving community, it is essential to maintain environmental stewardship and uphold the rights of all living beings. Indigenous Ghanaian communities exemplify a holistic model of health, one that stands in stark contrast to the often-narrow Western definition that equates health with the absence of disease.

Causes of Disease

When examining the causes of illnesses within communities in Ghana, it's crucial to recognize that each community possesses a distinct approach to diagnosis (Wane, 2011). From an Indigenous perspective, sickness transcends the physical realm; true healing involves a deeper understanding that embraces the metaphysical. Spirituality is not an afterthought in this context; it is a fundamental aspect of the healing journey. When illness strikes, individuals are called to reflect on the intricate relationships between known and unknown forces, the spirit and body, the natural

and supernatural, as well as the animate and inanimate elements of their environment. Indigenous healing systems often point to supernatural causes of disease (Darko, 2009; Kim, 1999), emphasizing the importance of seeking to understand the underlying reasons for illness, rather than merely focusing on the symptoms. The magico-religious dimension of disease often holds greater significance than its physical manifestations (Acheampong, 1989; Kim, 1999). As Acheampong (1989) profoundly asserts, “Seek ye first the supernatural cause, remove or treat it, and all pathological afflictions of the body will correct” (p.34). One insightful participant remarked, “Many things can bring about diseases; the gods and ancestors might be angry, one might consume bad food, face curses, exhibit stubbornness or disobedience, encounter harmful individuals, or experience witchcraft, among other factors” (Gyan). This perspective resonates with Foster’s observations (as cited in Acheampong, 1989), which highlight the diverse and complex causes of illness documented over three decades ago:

- a) Angry deities who punish wrongdoers, e.g., those who violate taboos.
- b) Ancestors and other gods who feel they have been too soon forgotten or otherwise not recognized. Sorcerers and witches who work for hire for personal reasons.
- c) Loss of the soul following a bad fright that jars it loose from the body or as the consequence of the work of a sorcerer or supernatural spirit.
- d) Spirit possession or the intrusion of an object into the body.
- e) Loss of basic body equilibrium, usually because of excessive heat or cold entry into the body as well as feeding the body the wrong or improper food.
- f) The evil eye (pp. 14-15)

Foster further categorized the causes of illness into two broad categories: the first is personalistic, characterized by the deliberate intervention of sensate agents, such as deities, evil spirits, or sorcerers. These entities, for various reasons, target specific individuals who become ill. In this scenario, aggression or punishment is directed toward a single person as a result of the willpower of a human or supernatural agent (as cited in Acheampong, 1989, p. 15). The second category is naturalistic, which explains illness in impersonal, systemic terms. In this view, the intrusion of heat or cold disrupts the body's fundamental equilibrium. Therefore, it is necessary to restore the balance between the body and its environment, which is currently in conflict (Kokwaro, 1979). These concepts reflect Indigenous understandings of the causes of ill health. To maintain good health, individuals should lead a pious life and adopt a healthy lifestyle. Piety serves as the primary defence against spiritual attacks, while practical measures such as adequate rest, nutritious eating habits, regular exercise, and environmental cleanliness help protect against physical diseases.

Indigenous Healing Practices

The Indigenous healing approach profoundly connects individuals to their spirit and fosters a sense of wholeness and reconnection. Central to this transformative process is the Indigenous healer, often regarded as a spiritual herbalist. These healers are not only respected figures within their communities but also vital mediators between the physical world and the spirit realm. They uphold a rich tradition, with structured systems in place to mentor the younger generation in these invaluable healing practices. Participants shared that Indigenous healers are often divinely chosen, guided by the ancestral spirits and the gods of the land in their sacred work. One participant encapsulated this belief beautifully, stating, “In many instances, the ancestors and the gods reveal

plants and their healing properties to us through dreams and visions; sometimes they can use the medium of animals, such as dogs, and occasionally they can use children. They reveal many things to us" (Opayin Kojo). This insight underscores the profound connection healers have with a higher power that not only shows them cures for various ailments but also supports them throughout their healing journeys. Yet, the wisdom of these healers is not something to be taken lightly. The knowledge they possess is not freely transferable; it requires the blessing of the healer. For example, one cannot simply use the herbs applied in their own treatment on others, especially if the illness recurs without the healer's permission (Demi, 2019; 2014). The necessity of seeking the healer's blessing before using these potent herbs speaks volumes about the respect and reverence inherent in this healing tradition. Participants emphasized that, beyond divine calling, the ability of healers to impart their knowledge rests firmly on the approval of the guiding spirits.

Consequently, different methods of training healers exist among the diverse Indigenous communities, but mostly the knowledge is transferred from father to son, uncle to nephew, mother to daughter or mother to niece. Participants further assert that training someone to become a spiritual healer is a holistic process that espouses the importance of spirituality and recognizes complexity in the idea of wholeness (see Miller, 1999). Training for healers among the Akans of Ghana includes the physical and the metaphysical, and their interconnection and effects on each other. It is also a fundamental belief among most Indigenous healers in Ghana that to be a spiritual healer, one needs a special calling. For example, Tsey (1997) recounts an experience of one participant:

Healing is in the family . . . but mine is spirit possession. In the beginning, it was like adava [madness]. I saw things, and I was violent when people tried to talk to me. One day I had a visitor, a strange person, I cannot give you any more description of how this person looks. It will be like showing our nakedness in public. The visitor gave me a calabash and some cowry shells and said they [the deities] had selected me. They gave me detailed directions about how to communicate with them, and they gave me the names of people in the village who will supply me with the items to start my work; is one of those people you can ask me. After that they came for me and took me into the forest several times, sometimes I stayed for three to seven days without food, and they showed me all the plants that I can use to treat people . . . even now as soon as the person comes with a problem the first thing I do is to call them [the deities] to find out what is wrong before we can do anything. The music makes them respond quicker. (p. 1065)

Tsey (1997) recounts an experience where a participant was possessed by a spirit and taken to the forest to learn about herbs. The knowledge acquired during this experience is intricate, encompassing the medicinal properties of the herbs and the optimal times and methods for harvesting them to enhance their effectiveness. Other Indigenous communities in Ghana have distinct approaches to training healers. Twumasi (1989) describes a comprehensive training process for student practitioners that begins with a ritual bath in a cemetery, allowing the candidate to connect with ancestral spirits. This training involves observing specific taboos, with a primary focus on taking a vow of celibacy; familiarizing oneself with the names of herbs and their medical and spiritual attributes; learning to dance to invoke the deity the candidate is preparing to serve; as well as learning how to create charms and perform rituals of propitiation (Twumasi, 1989). Throughout this training, various rituals are conducted to strengthen the trainees and link them to

the spiritual realm for guidance. The training period typically lasts from 3 to 10 years, or even until the mentor passes away (Bonsu, 1989).

According to participants, healing occurs in two phases: spiritual and physical (Darko, 2009; Ngokwey, 1995). The responsibility of Indigenous healers is to help the sick reconnect with the spirit world through rituals focused on mercy and forgiveness. In many Indigenous communities, the spiritual and mediating roles of healers are not defined by gender; therefore, diviners or spiritual healers can be of any gender. Healers use divination to communicate with ancestors about the causes of illness and the necessary healing rituals or processes to address the issue. Divination encompasses various practices, such as palm reading, dancing, entering trances, throwing bones, praying, and reading the stars (Addae-Mensah, 1989; Edward et al., 2009). A priest might gaze into a bowl of water or a mirror to connect with the spirits, or they may randomly throw cowry shells on the ground or a specially prepared mat and interpret their arrangement (Edward et al., 2009). Herbalists may consult a spiritualist if they feel untrained on certain spiritual matters. Once the cause of an illness is identified, the spiritualist uses divination to guide the practitioner on which remedy to apply. As Acheampong (1989) stated, divination serves as a diagnostic, therapeutic, and prognostic tool simultaneously.

Participants noted that a session with an herbalist typically lasts one hour or more, depending on the patient's condition. According to Acheampong (1989), traditional practitioners face limitations when it comes to interpreting the signs they observe or elicit during a physical examination of a patient. Consequently, the average Indigenous healer may not be very accurate in their diagnostic methods and often relies heavily on oracles, omens, or connections with supernatural or divine forces. In cases where practitioners lack proper training or divine gifts of divination, it is crucial to consult a specialist. Participants emphasize that consulting with the gods is the primary method used to diagnose a patient's illness. Such consultations may be required with or without the presence of the sick person (Tsey, 1997). It is believed that healers receive revelations at specific times of the day, particularly at night, which guide them regarding particular plants and their significance in curing diseases. Healers are shown medicinal plants based on their obedience to the wishes of the gods or deities (Tsey, 1997). These plants are said to possess healing properties only with the blessings of the supernatural. The power granted to them by the spirits enables them to effectively treat various forms of disease or illness.

One of the most compelling insights from this study is the connection between food and human health. Achieving balance within the body depends on supplying it with the essential nutrients required for vitality and strength. While indigenous peoples may not use the specific terminology associated with Western nutrition, they possess invaluable knowledge about the healing properties of various plants and their ability to nourish the human body. Healers were aware of which types of plants and foods to provide to a sick person, and they prepared these foods in ways that supported the individual's healing process.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter explored the healing practices of Indigenous Ghanaian people and their connection to the environment. Most Indigenous healers believe that the root cause of diseases stems from disharmony, imbalance, or a lack of peace between the spirit world, which includes the Supreme Being, ancestors, deities, and gods and the physical world, which encompasses the human body and its environment. Consequently, to heal the sick, it is necessary to perform spiritual cleansing that reconnects a person's spirit with their environment. This often involves acknowledging any wrongdoing and offering sacrifices to appease the spirits or to drive away any

malevolent forces afflicting the sick individual. Even though many Ghanaians rely on Indigenous healing practices, these methods are not widely accepted within the mainstream healthcare system. Indigenous healing practices are often viewed as demonic by some Christians and Muslims, even though they employ similar healing approaches.

Based on the findings of the studies, we recommend that Indigenous healing practices and spirituality be integrated into school curricula and incorporated into the country's medical training. Governments and local medical associations should implement checks and balances to prevent fraudulent spiritual herbalist practitioners from exploiting the public. This could be achieved through a registration process that tracks each practitioner, their location, and, if possible, their area of specialization. It is important, however, to ensure that this process does not impose financial or bureaucratic burdens on practitioners. Indigenous healing practices should serve as both complementary and alternative options to the modern healthcare system. To achieve effective healthcare delivery in Indigenous communities, governments and policymakers must adequately support Indigenous health practitioners for the diagnosis and treatment of patients. This support may involve allowing patients to combine biomedical health practices with Indigenous methods, recognizing that these practices can vary significantly across different communities due to distinct belief systems. Policymakers should also invest in training programs for Indigenous health practitioners, as well as legal recognition and documentation of their plant-based and medical knowledge. Unlike their counterparts in conventional hospitals and clinics, traditional spiritual healers lack legal protection. Consequently, they often face severe legal repercussions in cases of patient death or injury (CSRPM, 2000). Governments in Indigenous African communities must acknowledge the limitations of evaluating spirituality through Eurocentric medical standards. By establishing appropriate medical care standards alongside traditional healing practices, we can promote a more holistic approach to healing and healthcare delivery in Ghana.

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