



ISSN (E): 2320-3862
ISSN (P): 2394-0530
NAAS Rating: 3.53
JMPS 2019; 7(6): 171-174
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Received: 22-09-2019
Accepted: 24-10-2019

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Mystical medicine and body art in Asante culture

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Abstract

The study examined the role and linkage between mystical medicine and body art in the Asante community. The study adopted descriptive method of qualitative research with interviews and observation to identify the various body arts that feature in the Asante mystical medicine. Using purposive sampling technique, a sample of four communities; thirty-five (35) respondents comprising of six (6) traditional priests and priestesses, 10 spoke persons of the selected priests and priestesses, 10 devotees and 11 elderly persons who are above 60 years and are abreast with the Asante mystical therapy. The study revealed that body art is intertwined with Asante mystical medicine and without body art, Asante mystical medicine might not have come into existence at all, in that, perhaps, without the supporting body arts the supermundane beings could not have been drawn into the administration of the remedy. Since the body arts identified in the medical system are therapeutically effectual, it will be appropriate for the government to incorporate them in our medical system. These body arts can also be improved to help enhance the psychotherapy and other forms of treatment.

Keywords: Mystical medicine, body art, Asante culture, supernatural

1. Introduction

Mystical medicine is supernatural or spiritual therapy. According to Osei-Agyeman (1990), mystical medicine partly stands for or means, or is applicable to any material object or drug, word, deed, action or performances which possesses an inherent spiritual powers to accomplish healing. It involves having a certain spiritual character or import by virtue of a connection or union with God transcending human comprehension. According to Park's textbook of Preventive and Social Medicine, mystical medicine is the intangible "something" that transcends physiology and psychology. Mystical medicine does not mean the therapy is completely dissociated from physical forms of treatment. It combines spiritual and physical curative elements such as amulets, talismans and others.

If body arts is understood as arts made on, with, or consisting of, the human body, then mystical medicine and body art have traditionally always been connected and intertwined. In similar dimension, Pami (2013) contended that mystical medicine and body art were inseparable then, and this truth holds today. In the medical parlance, body arts serve as a vehicle for curing various kinds of ailments. Although the remedy is a synthesis of drugs and influence of human and spiritual beings, body arts permeates almost all the remaining facets of the therapy. Principally, mystical healing takes place with the connection and in the atmosphere of body arts. In a large extent, body art acts as a vehicle of the medical manipulation of the deities and the medicine-men (Osei-Agyeman, 1990). Body art acts as a unifier of the other dimensions (physical, psychological, spiritual and social) of the therapy, integrating them and bringing them to a whole.

Diallo (1986) ^[1] established that body art is an essential part of the daily activities of the community in all its facets. In a related matter, Ayeni (2004) ^[2] contended that there is evidence about the healing or curative role that body art has play for different ethnic groups. For instance, pregnant women may use body adornments like talisman to ensure the safety of the life they carry. Furthermore, Ayeni (2004) ^[2] elucidated that herbal doctors, priests of the god of herbalism (*Osanyin*) and body artists administer a large number of medicines via incisions on the body. Among the Egun/Egbado, when a child undergoes circumcision and cicatrization, his relatives have cuts made on themselves to remind them to handle the child gently (Drewal, 1988). Moreover, body artefacts such masks, headdresses, and clothes are worn for ritual healing. In addition, Osei-Agyeman (1990) pointed out that the body adornment are believed to house powerful spirits or to provide a means of communication with

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such spirits. In similar dimension, Micheal (2007) stated that art forms worn and made on the body with the body are seen as mediums for exploring and communicating ideas and emotions and also as a means for appreciating formal elements and mimesis or representation.

Strikingly, even though body art is interwoven with the administration of traditional medicine, their linkage since time immemorial have not been appreciated by a large number of people to the point of even portraying it as fetish. Due to the lack of knowledge of its philosophy, many people think the administration process is evil and difficult to understand. According to Ubani (2011) [18] little has been done to investigate the legitimacy of these medical practices, as many people believe that the traditional medicinal practices are pagan and superstitious and could only be suitably replaced by Western methods. It is important therefore to make the linkage known through this study in order to remove the mystery and superstition associated with the administration of traditional medicine. This study also seeks to promote the use of body art for the restoration of health since its employment has produced a tremendous therapeutic success.

2. Methods

The researcher adopted qualitative method of research to carry out the study. This approach was used to solicit insiders' perspectives in order to identify and describe the indigenous body arts and their association with mystical medication, as well as the relevant role the body arts play in mystical medication. This approach was also adopted in order to arrive at the required in-depth information and knowledge that would enrich the study. The qualitative method again enabled the researcher to get naturalistic interpretation of data. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005) [12] qualitative research is typically used to answer questions about the complex nature of phenomena, often with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participants' point of view. With similar view, Ary *et al.* (2001) [1] also explain qualitative research as understanding social phenomenon from the perspective of the human participants in the study. The qualitative approach was seen very applicable for the study because of its cultural and social context in eliciting facts, views, beliefs, philosophies and naturalistic interpretation of data.

Descriptive research type was largely used alongside the qualitative method in order to have a clear and logical presentation of ideas and facts. According to Sellgren (1991) [17] descriptive research is a factual, accurate and systematic research of a phenomenon being studied. This technique also made it possible for the researcher to give vivid account of various body art forms employed by the indigenous Asantes in their therapeutic practices, and how they contribute to the growth of the medicine.

The purposive sampling technique was employed to deliberately (Bernard, 2002) select 35 respondents for in-depth study. The selected respondents were made up of six (6) traditional priests and priestesses, 10 spoke persons of the selected priests and priestesses, 10 devotees and 11 elderly persons who are above 60 years and are abreast with the Asante mystical therapy. These respondents were seen as possessing a unique-characteristics that would generate the required data for the study. The researcher did not select whoever was available but used his judgment to select a sample he believes, based on prior information and distinct characteristics provided the required data for the research (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012) [8]. The purposive sampling

technique was effective for the study because cultural knowledge can perfectly be gained from key informants or experts. Purposive technique as stated earlier was employed to sample four Asante communities as the study areas which are *Atwima Takyiman*, *Suame*, *Tanoso* and *Manhyia*. According to Lewis and Sheppard (2006) [13] purposive sampling is most effective when selecting study areas within a cultural domain that possess specific characteristics under investigation.

Semi-structured interview guide was designed to solicit information from the respondents. According to Kumekpor (2002) [10] semi-structured interview is considered appropriate because such form of interview are more flexible. Fifteen (15) Personal Interviews and nine (9) Focus Group Discussion Interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. Thematic content analysis, which involves analyzing transcripts and identifying themes within the text, was used to evaluate the qualitative data obtained from the interview (Barbour, 2001) [3].

3. Results and Discussion

Body arts in this study as earlier mentioned, are the arts made on, with, or consisting of, the human body. The various body arts that feature in the medicine are body charms, body paintings, incision, costumes and hair styles.

3.1 Charms on the Body

The study revealed that when the cause of ailment is identified as an attack from evil spirits, amulets and talismans are given to the patient to be worn to protect and eliminate the evil that has ensued the person. These charms are sometimes worn by the client at the neck, ankle etc. in their daily activities. Some of the clients also wear these charms beneath their clothes.

It was observed that, the medicine-men and women also wear various talismans and amulets during diagnosing and curing of diseases. While talismans are said to attract benevolent spirits to support diagnosing and healing, the amulets are also said to be repulsive, neutralizing the antagonistic tendencies of evil powers that may attempt to obstruct the efficacy of the medicine and also attack the medicine-man. The talismans also attract and draw the curative deities to perform their therapeutic onuses. Moreover, the traditional healers as well as the clients wear protective evil eyes' charms to protect them from menacing people with evil eyes. Desy (2019) recounts that, the charms also guard individuals against any unseen negative forces that may intend to trouble the wearer. Some of the healers disclosed that they cover themselves with myrrh to draw powers from the medical deities in order for them to diagnose and heal people.

In most cases, an old currency (pesewas) is also hung on the neck of a child to redeem him or her from all kinds of diseases and misfortunes. Similarly, Vechgel (2013) [19] in his study of Tanzania's traditional healers recounts that a wife of a traditional healer shows an old coin that she wears to protect her body against evils. It was further established that a child may wear a waistband which is supposed to protect him or her against fever and severe malaria. By wearing charms, they are drawing on the greater power of mystical beings which inhabit the world in order to shape or control part of their lives that seem uncontrollable (Fullerton, 2010) [9].

Cowries and beads are also worn as charms to repel all malevolent powers that may attempt to thwart the medicine. Osei-Agyeman (1990) having observed the frequent use of the body charms in the Kwahu mystical medicine states that, the

charms worn by both the healer and the patients play defensive, preventive, detective, attractive, communication and curative role in the medical administration processes. The effective role played by the charms in traditional medication impelled Dadzie (1965) ^[6] to state that, before modern medical science reached our shore, our traditional priests who were our medical men were curing all diverse diseases by their charms.

3.2 Body Painting

Body painting plays a very significant role in the traditional medication. Kaolin is used by the priests and the priestesses to powder their bodies during deity possession. It was revealed that the spreading of the kaolin or white powder on their bodies attracts their deities and other kind spirits to them when diagnosing and healing. Kwakye-Opong (2014) ^[11] added that, the priests and priestesses adorn their bodies with chalk and white kaolin to signify purity, as they discharge their duties. It was explained that, the kaolin has spiritual powers of enticing benevolent deities and dispelling evil spirits. It was observed that, all the priests and priestesses visited have kaolin or powder at their sanctuaries. According to them, when they are fully possessed by their deities, their spokesmen throw kaolin on them to energise the deity during the administration processes.

The kaolin is also used by some of the deities as a means of identification. Kaolin is sometimes smeared on the patient's body depending on the type of ailment brought. Painting of the cross symbol is done on the body of a patient who is believed to be afflicted by his or her own soul. Okomfo Kofi Fofie elucidated how he cures swollen patients by throwing kaolin on their bodies.

Moreover, some of the priests and priestesses when possessed by their deities in the course of medication, paint themselves with red clay and black charcoal to signify the fierce nature of their deities (Beckwith & Fisher 2002) ^[4].

While commenting on the functions of body painting, the respondents pointed out that, a reddish brown earth colour known as *ntwuma* and ash are used to paint the body during healing of some ailments. For instance when one had swollen cheeks (*gyemirekutu*), ash and *ntwuma* are used to make dotted spots on the patient's cheeks. More so, it was explained that when *ntwuma* is smeared on the patient's body, it symbolises the patient's sorrowful mood and has the supernatural inclination to invoke the sympathy of the benevolent forces. During propitiation and atoning processes, the blood of the animal slain is sprinkled on the offender in order to redeem him or her. The blood of the sacrificed animal in some cases is smeared on the patient's body while recitations are made alongside.

It may therefore be submitted that this manner of painting performs attractive, communicative, preventive and protective function.

3.3 Incision

Incisions are made on the body of the patient in order to cure him or her. The incisions are made on the forehead, chest, arms, biceps, ankle, at the nape and other parts of the body depending on the instruction given by the healer. After the cuts, medicinal substances are inserted into them. It was revealed that incisions are made on people to prevent them from attracting diseases. For instance, babies are sometimes incised as defensive tool for preventing them from serious ailments. Mallam Abudu (a traditional healer, personal communication, October, 2018) stated that the nature of some

diseases demand incisions before the patient can be healed. Incisions are also made on medicine men and women to draw some spirits to them in order for them to function well in the therapeutic processes.

3.4 Costume

Costumes worn by the medicine men and women during the administration of the medicine feature predominantly. It was revealed that the costumes are approved by the deities themselves and are considered holy and highly revered. The type of attire the healer wears determines the *obosom* (god) by which he or she is possessed. It came to light that when a deity is a female and her medium is a male, such medium will appear as a female when possessed by the deity. Likewise the male deity whose medium is a female. In a related matter, Kwakye-Opong (2014) ^[11] established that the deities are symbolized with specific costumes and accessories and thus, requires the servant to be adorned accordingly, regardless of his or her sex. The importance of priestly attires in mystical duties is highlighted by the point that God allegedly prescribed to Moses the sort of robes which the first high priest of Israel, Aaron and his sons should wear for the execution of their priestly duties.

Among the Asantes, the priestly garments are said to have affinity with the divinities. The deities when mounted on their mediums wear smock, grass skirt, cover their breast with a piece of cloth and wears sash across their body. Some also wear locally made shorts known as *danta* with their bare chest when they are fully possessed by their deities. The smock and the grass skirt are studded with cowries, talisman, small bells and other charms. Various necklaces, armllets, cap, foot wears, and socks are used as adornments during medication.

The costume worn by the priests and the priestesses emits faith, self-assurance and guarantee to cause psychological healing. The costume with various charms is believed to protect the healer as well as the ill person during diagnosing and healing processes. The attire of the priests also wards off and prevents evil forces from rendering the medicine ineffective and attacking the possessed priest. More so, the adornment attracts other benevolent spirits and powers to use the priest in the process of medication. The costume also makes it possible for clients to easily identify the traditional healer in the midst of the shrine officials. I wish to point out that when the priests and priestesses wear their costumes, they look peculiar and probably assume an "air of mystery".

3.5 Hairstyle

Hairstyle plays a significant role in the administration of traditional medicine. The hairstyle worn by a priest or priestess depends on his or her deity's discretion. The study revealed that some healers are allowed to shave their hairs while with others, it is compulsory for them to let their hairs grow in a style known as *mpesempese* (matted locks). It is believed that the matted locks serve as a means of drawing and communicating with the deities. According to the healers, it is the most elevated point of their body, which means it is closest to divine.

The *mpesempese* hairstyle of the practitioners also serves as an antenna attracting the deities and other benevolent spirits during diagnoses and healing processes. The healers with matted hair style are easily identified in the society. This hairstyle is mostly studded with cowries and other charms. The *mpesempese* psychologically enable clients to build trust and confidence in the priest which expedite healing.

Also born-to-die children (*abagyina*) and infants who

frequently fall sick are redeemed by performing special sacrifices and leaving their hair uncut and shaggy for some years. Through these activities, the child is dedicated to a guardian spirit who protects the child from the malevolent spirits tormenting the life of such child.

4. Conclusion

Apparently, the study has examined the various body arts and their association with Asante mystical medicine and their effectiveness in healing. The study has also scrutinized the role, importance, influence and significance of body arts in the therapy. From the view point of this study, the paper has obviously concluded that body art is intertwined with Asante mystical medicine and without body art, Asante mystical medicine might not have come into existence at all, in that, perhaps, without the supporting body arts the supermundane beings could not have been drawn into the administration of the remedy. Since the body arts identified in the medical system are therapeutically effectual, it will be appropriate for the government to incorporate them in our medical system. These body arts can also be improved to help enhance the psychotherapy and other forms of treatment.

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