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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Kaunda,Chammah J;Phiri,Isabel A
Publisher	Regnum Books International
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Download date	2026-07-03 18:28:16
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166500

(147) HEALING AND HEALTH IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Chammah J Kaunda and Isabel A Phiri

Introduction

The health and healing ministry of the church is rooted in the ministry of Jesus Christ. While acknowledging that the scope of some African churches' understanding of health and healing seem rather narrowed to miracles and physical healing, nevertheless most churches display strong beliefs in healing through prayer and various rituals. The believers are invited for prayers for good health and for relief from illness and pain. Healing is perceived as central to what it means to be a church in the context of human struggle for just access to health care. There is healing through prayer/intercession, through religious rituals, pilgrimages for healing to some renowned prophets such as T.B. Joshua in Nigeria, and also through some related forms of religious interventions.¹ Healing in some churches in Africa seems to 'fulfil certain functions not met by modern medicine' but to some extent also resonate with the Old and New Testaments, which have more commonality with 'African traditional practices than with modern medicine'.² The pertinent question for African Christianity is: How can reconceptualised traditional healing practices be broadened in scope in contemporary Africa amidst unjust access to health care, socio-political, economic, and ecological struggle?

Health and Healing in Traditional Africa

It is not possible to discuss health and healing in African Christianity without considering the traditional African conception of health and healing. In fact, some scholars see more in common between African traditional practices of healing and African Christianity than with modern medicine.³ In traditional African society, the search for health and healing is deeply entrenched in religious beliefs and practices and manifest in greetings, in the kind of food people eat and every aspect of life. African Traditional Religions have been called religious traditions of wholeness or health or abundant life as termed by Laurent Magasa.⁴ The onus of a search for health and healing is not merely on individuals but on the whole community. In African thought, an individual cannot achieve health alone, because health is embedded in cosmic relationships and can only be achieved through restoring harmony in these vital relationships. In actual fact, the sickness of an individual is an indication of a deeper communal malaise.

The community knew that dealing with the symptom is only a temporal solution. True healing requires the re-establishment of rightness in relationships.⁵ This was the concern of African Traditional Religions. Health and healing in this system of thought was more than a physical cure but a process of re-aligning the patient with the origin of the influences so as to re-balance the disorder (sickness). It was about restoring

¹ Sheila S. Walker, "Witchcraft and Healing in an African Christian Church," *Journal of Religion in Africa* (1979): 127-138; Willem Berends, "African Traditional Healing Practices and the Christian Community," *Missiology: An International Review*, 21, no. 3 (1993): 275-288.

² Berends, "African Traditional Healing," 275.

³ Berends, "African Traditional Healing," 275.

⁴ Laurenti Magasa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1997), 65.

⁵ Newell S. Booth, "Tradition and Community in African Religion," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 9, no. 2 (1978): 81-94 at 91.

the patient's balance in the universe which makes the process of healing a course of growth for the whole community 'towards ever greater and more complex wholeness'.⁶ Thus, health and healing has to do with growth in just social ordering, equal political participation, fair economic access, and religious inclusion. This is a framework within which traditional Africa approached health and healing on the premise of bondedness.

The African religious conception of health and healing is steeped in tradition; it comes and flows from God through the ancestors to the whole community. Sickness or illness was understood as a breach in spiritual or social harmony, either internal or external.⁷ There was a belief in some African societies that human beings are multi-dimensional beings (they are more than their physical bodies) with different levels which function together as a whole – communal or social, moral, physical and spiritual, and if any of these aspects are out of balance, the person is said to be sick – physically or spiritually.⁸ Every individual in the community had a moral responsibility to keep these aspects balanced so as to ensure an uninterrupted flow of life from God into the community. It was imperative for members of the community to avoid altering these rhythms and patterns as their actions had direct implications on the wellbeing of the whole community.⁹ Bondedness is the key to understanding traditional African community of life that 'whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual'.¹⁰ In this worldview, where interconnectedness and interdependence are central guiding principles of the symbiotic community, *everyone* is responsible for health and healing for the whole community.¹¹

The African sense of community refers to the critical interlink of human beings (living, dead and unborn), natural environment and spiritual world in essential ways so that unity is indissoluble.¹² This means that individuals could not regard even their 'own life as purely personal property or concern. It is the group which is the owner of life, a person being just a link in the chain uniting the present and future generations. For that reason one's health is a concern for the community, and a person is expected to preserve this life for the good of the group'.¹³ In this worldview, being healthy means that sound and harmonious relationships among human beings, the natural and the spiritual worlds are kept in intricate balance. The individual and the community must always be consciously of the symbiotic chain of relationships that constitute the category which is defined as 'life'. In short, to be in good health is to be at one and peace with all dimensions of life in the cosmos, to be within it and to interiorise the universe in its fullness within one's being. The universe and an individual are indivisible. The fullness of the universe is within an individual inasmuch as an individual is within the universe. Sickness involves the entire system of cosmic relationships within which the individual is but a tiny link in the chain of life. There is no such

⁶ Rosemary Gordon Bridges: *Metaphor for Psychic Processes* (London: Karnac Books, 1993), 158.

⁷ Magesa, *African Religion*, 65.

⁸ Shana Davis, "Traditional African Healing: Medicine & Africa," in African Code, www.africanholocaust.net/news_ah/traditionalhealing.html (accessed 15 Dec. 15).

⁹ Harvey J. Sindima "Community of Life: Ecological Theology in African Perspective," (1990) www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2327 (Accessed 15 Dec. 15).

¹⁰ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969), 109.

¹¹ Chammah J Kaunda, "Towards an African Theological Education for Gender Justice and Peace: An African Theological Reflection on the Concept of Just-Peace," *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa*, 18, no. 1 (2012): 137-153.

¹² See, Munyaradzi F. Murove, ed. *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009). See especially articles by Munyaradzi F. Murove.

¹³ Peter Kasenene, "African ethical theory and the four principles," in *Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Medical Ethics, second edition*, eds. Robert Veatch, 347-357 (Sudbury, MA, Jones and Bartlett, 2000), 349.

thing as a solitary adventurer, the individual's action 'vibrates to the rhythm of the power of the universe and of the generations'.¹⁴

The implications are that failure to maintain harmonious relationships within oneself and every member of the community of life which extends to nonhuman creation and to do what is necessary to live in reconciliation in order to strengthen the community bonds, especially through justice and peace results in disorder/sickness.¹⁵ Thus, the African sense of health and healing was based on sound relationships which should be kept in harmony. Without harmonious relationships, health and healing cannot flow in the community. Harmonious living (which includes ultimate community values such as justice, peace, hospitality, love, equality, respect and so on) was a precondition for health and healing which are prerequisites for progress and human development. The function of religion was perceived as that of enabling human beings to align their actions and understand their position in the universe and thereby continue to enjoy health and wellness which are essential characteristics of God. All moral values were based on an understanding that the good is that which promotes the well-being and wholeness of an individual and the community. Thus, African tradition's quest for health and healing was based on enabling an individual and the community members' recognition of their complex interconnectedness and their place on the earth, bringing their actions into equilibrium with the cosmos. Since the African concept of health and healing was holistic, bringing the reintegration of cosmic relationships through nurturing harmonious relationships, it remains quite difficult to understand fully the extent to which some African churches have absorbed this worldview into their healing traditions. In what follows, we look at the missional implications for healing and health ministry for churches in Africa today.

Towards a Missional Theology of Health and Healing in the African Church

From our analysis above, it is clear that health and healing are socio-relational issues rather than merely individual physical processes. This means that health and healing must be perceived within a socio-relational framework rather than in physical wholeness. Recent health issues have demonstrated the socio-relational nature of health and healing. HIV and AIDS and, more recently, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa are clear examples of the socio-relational nature of disease that affects individuals, lovers, couples, families and entire communities around the world and have profound political and economic implications. These diseases affect not just an individual but the entire universe. The Ebola tragedy demonstrated how interdependent and vulnerable human beings have become. The virus started spreading from West Africa to other countries through those who came in contact with it and crossed the borders to other countries. The airports were closed in some countries and others imposed a ban on Ebola-affected countries. Given the socio-relational nature of health and healing, the ministry of the church is intrinsically communal in which the community of believers are called alongside (*paraclete*) those suffering, into mutual transformation through justice and reconciliation.

This is what Jesus accomplished through his life, ministry, death and resurrection in which he transformed the worlds of human understanding of suffering. On the cross, Jesus became the symbol of human suffering because of sin (a breach in cosmic harmony). The effect of brokenness in the human and divine relationship was re-enacted by Jesus on the cross, as demonstrated in his loud cry, 'Why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46). The fall of humanity in Genesis 3 caused an imbalance in cosmic relational equilibrium. Jesus re-enacted this experience of brokenness in cosmic relational balance. Thus, his resurrection was the re-establishment of cosmic relational harmony. It was inevitable that the resurrection

¹⁴ Alassane Ndaw, "Unity and Value in African Thought," in *Facts and Value: Philosophical Reflections from Western and Non-Western Perspectives*, eds. MC Doeser and JN Kraay, 171-175 (Dordrecht: Martinus Nihoff Publishers, 1986), 173-174.

¹⁵ Magesa, *African Religion*, 65.

was to happen in Trinitarian socio-community of the Father and the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ The argument here is that the resurrection was wrought through relationship, and this serves as the paradigm of authentic healing and thus provides the archetype of the human search for wholeness and health. Similar to the African worldview, health and healing within a Trinitarian perspective confronts the narrow definition and application of Christian health and healing as a merely physical cure. It underpins health and healing on cosmic reconciliation so that all recognize God's vision for universal wholeness and justice. This means that while healing processes could include praying with and for the sick, confession and forgiveness, the laying-on of hands, anointing with oil, and spiritual gifts of healing as outlined in 1 Corinthians 12, it cannot be reduced to such miraculous interventions. Healing demonstrates Trinitarian *shalom* – the God who is whole. This wholeness is a result of Trinitarian pilgrimage of love and justice.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that the Church has been a healing instrument since its inception. Given this tradition, contemporary mission cannot be done effectively without engaging in the ministry of healing and health. The following conclusions can be drawn from the discussion above:

- The mission of God in the world is a healing mission. God is in the world to bring about cosmic healing and reconciliation.
- Health is an attribute of God. The Trinitarian God exists in radical wholeness and health which he seeks to share within cosmic relationships. Thus, health and healing are deeply entrenched in the concept of salvation.
- Healing is a process of relational growth. It is a dynamic holistic process rather a merely physical cure.
- The church is an agent of God's mission of healing in the world. The church is called to be a healing community through which the power of God's healing can be mediated in the world. This means the role of the church is twofold: first, healing through religious ritual. Second is advocating for a proper health care system that includes the struggle for infrastructural development, adequately equipped medical personnel, justice, fairness, accountability and accessibility.

The church must become an instrument in searching for innovative ways to promote and advocate for access to quality health care for all. The members can be encouraged to live healthy lifestyles and consider ways in which mutual access to medical aids can be secured together.

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¹⁶ God the Father raised Jesus (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15, 26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30, 33, 34, 37; Rom. 4:24; 6:4; 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; Gal. 1:1; Col. 2:12). God the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead (Rom/ 4:1; 8:11).

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