

A Spiritual Investigation Into Sickness Versus Healing Dynamics In Traditional Igbo Society And Its Implications To Christianity

By
Nnatuanya Chinedu Emmanuel
Department of religion & human relations
Nnamdi azikiwe university, awka

Introduction

In recent times, the quest for the development of the Igbo man has been a burning issue. This is because of the problems associated with sufferings, hardships and challenges facing the Igbo man on daily basis. The implication is the quest for holistic healing because of the importance which the Igbo place on human life and the belief that there is always a cause for some happenings in nature. Life is precious and highly valued and any attempt to disrupt life is absolutely not accepted. Suffering of all kinds is seen as a disharmony between the spiritual and the physical world. Therefore, sickness is a disorder in the spiritual world and for effective and holistic healing, the causes of the disorder in relationship must be sought for in order to bring a harmony that will bring a holistic healing. This paper highlights the causes of sickness in Igboland, solutions to the problems of sickness and advocates proper re-orientation of the Igbo people in the modern scientific solutions to problems of man rather than maintaining the status-quo of the primitive age.

Introduction

Among the Igbo, as among peoples all over the world, the problem of suffering remains a mystery. Why should one person suffer and another not? Who is responsible for misfortune in the world? These are some of the perplexing questions seeking for answers among the Igbo. An enemy is often the assumption. This captures the rate at which the Igbo man seeks solution to otherwise accidental or her calamitous happenings that befall him and this indicates his prime value and its importance to the Africans. Under difficult circumstances, the wage Igbo man can go to any length to procure solution to the problems that beset him, his family or relations. This is a clear indication that Igbo worldview is religious in nature and in character and for the Igbo, religion reweaves the fabrics of their lives.

In this vein, Onuwa (1990) maintains that "the African world is said to be suffused with religion. In other words, an African sees his world and interprets it in a religious perspective" (p. 80). Ejizu in Madu opines:

The traditional Igbo cosmology is essentially a religious one. Religion provides the basic and unifying vision through which everything is perceived. It is therefore not surprising that the traditional value system and the attitudinal orientation of the Igbo are prevalently religious (p. 21).

For the Igbo the *sumumbonum* the highest value is *Ndu*(life). They expressed this belief in their name: *Ndubuisi*(ie life is of prime importance), *Nduka*, *Ndukaku*(life is better than wealth) and so on. For the Igbo, Nwala echoes: "Life is supreme importance; both in the cosmological order and in the day to day life and activities of the people this important belief in the supremacy of life is

reflected" (p. 144). No wonder that Africans abhor any threat to life and can do anything humanly possible to restore life.

Then, why is it that an Igbo man abhors suffering, and sickness? Why is it that any threat to life or his existence disturbs him? For the Igbo man, what are the causes of sickness? Can the orientation of the Igbo on the causes of all sickness be scientifically justified in modern times? What does healing really mean to an Igbo man? These are questions which will lead to the justification of the steps the Igbo take in search of solution towards sickness. In the contemporary time, can the opinion of the Africans concerning sickness be absolutely accepted? Can the measures and methods adopted in finding solution be still effective or has it failed the Igbo man? Considering the scientific waves of the present age, Igbo ought to rethink and re-strategize ways of addressing certain problems confronting her.

It is important to note that despite the advance in the use of laser in operations and use of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) for cross- continental consultations and diagnosis, in medical sciences in this 21st century yet, there are illnesses that defy medical treatment. Those illnesses have spiritual undertones which can only be treated in the religious way. The point here is that doctors' care, God heals. Medical practitioners use their empirical knowledge of human body system and their functions as a basis for diagnosing any malfunction of the system. Consequently they proffer solutions where possible and do not claim to have all the answers. They provide very valuable care, prevention and therapy for many diseases and disorders that plague mankind. The question now is, Can this limitation justify the Igbo man?

Investigations into sickness and healing activities in Igbo society will expose us to the world in which the Igbo live. It will also give an insight into why Igbo embrace the new religious movement that gives emphasis on healing and deliverance. Igbo cannot be absolutely blamed for not accepting the wind of change holistically because of the inability of the government to provide facilities that will enhance knowledge and creativity. This supports the Igbo adage "amaghikaeme, emek'afuru" (if I do not know what to do, I do the one I know). No sane person will fold his arms while his household is on fire. Hence, this work is limited to the Igbo cosmological worldview and will unravel and appraise the concepts of sickness and healing in Africa thereby.

Health, sickness and healing: Definition.

For the Africans, especially the Igbo, Onuwa (1990) asserts, "Health is far more social than biological. It does not entirely mean an absence of physical ailments" (p. 81). He went further to maintain that health is not an isolated phenomenon but part of the entire magi co-religious fabric - far more than an absence of disease. While Madu (2004) maintains that for the Igbo it means "a harmonious existence between the different spheres for cosmic order in which man is a member" (p.25). Madu explains that for man to say that he is healthy or alive means that man should atune himself with the other forces of the cosmic order.

In the same vein Onunwa (1990), writing on orthodox medicine in West Africa, states that *a comprehensive understanding of human health includes the greatest possible harmony of all man's forces and energies, the greatest possible spiritualization of man's bodily aspect and the finest embodiment of the spiritual. True health is revealed in the self-actualization of the person who has attained that freedom which marshals all available energies for fulfillment of total vocation (p. 81).*

A healthy man is therefore one who has not been uprooted from his solidarities: that is one who is not destabilized or incapacitated and the one who is in harmony with his fellow and the deities. He is the one that can boldly say that "I am because we are and because we are, I am".

Health implies to be alive (i.e.Ndu). Ndu (life) in this perspective does not include what the Igbo says (Odinduonwukanma) (life that death is better than). Nwala (1985) explains that for the Igbo, "Ndu is the dynamic quality of material and human existence. Ndu is also the existence itself (p. 114). Therefore, health is the maintaining of cordial relationship between man and the entire cosmic orders. Any violation of the said web relationship between man and the orders brings sickness.

From the explanation of health, sickness is the opposite. For the Igbo it means a violation of the web relationship between man and the cosmic orders. Shorter in Onunwa (1990) echoes: "sickness for the Africans is the diminution of life and a threat posed to life" (p. 81). Sickness is among the unfriendly agents that threaten the material and spiritual well-being of man. Madu (2004) observes that "sickness or illness is the deviation from the natural, from the normal bodily and cosmic harmony" (p.26-27).

For Onunwa (1990) "healing is a part of that whole complex religious attempt by man to bring the physical and the spiritual aspects of the universe as well as man who lives in it into that desired consistent harmony" (p. 80). He elaborates that the idea of wholeness is not alien to the African religious practice because African cosmology demands that life in the world must be kept free from problem especially ill-health and obstacles which may hinder the fulfillment of the desired goals.

Healing implies the restoration of the harmony between man and the cosmic orders so as to maintain an equilibrium relationship that will promote the welfare of man. Therefore, in Igbo worldview, health and healing are connected. They involve both rational and mystical processes so much that a substantial aspect is kept in view of the ordinary man but shrouded in mystery of religion and magic. Healing ministry is an elaborate one in which the practitioner seeks to attend to the patients' physical well-being as well as his spiritual and psychological dimension while trying to reintegrate the person to the full membership of his community

Causes of sickness

In Igbo land the causes of sickness are not like that of the causes in the western setting. For the Westerners, Donovan (1992) explains that

sickness is caused by very small living organism which can only be seen under a microscope. Those living organisms are viruses, bacterial or amoebas. Also, some types of sickness are as result of defective genes in the human reproductive cells while others are related to mental and emotional conditions of people (p. 307).

This may not be the exclusive cause of sickness and diseases in the western world. There are reported and documented cases of spiritual problems leading to deliverance, exorcism and pastoral care and counseling in the western world. Most scholars including those of Igbo decent seem to

ignore the above reality. Notwithstanding, Ndiokwere (1995) admits that "the complex causes of sickness include the activities of enemies, evil persons who indulge in poisoning others, sorcerers, witches and spirits" (p. 28). He goes further to maintain that unless the root causes of ailment are discovered no satisfactory cure can be take place. Therefore, sickness in the mindset of the Igbo may not respond to scientific therapy because the causes may be physical, social, psychological and spiritual.

Moreover, in Igbo cosmological setting, the causes of sickness are sometimes connected to cause and effect relationship. No wonder that the Igbo usually make the following statements: "Isi kotaebu, ogbaya", (the head that pushes the beehives receives the sting), "Theonyemetara, oweluisiyaburu" (whatever a man sows, he reaps), and "Awoadighiagbaosoehihien'efu" (the toad does not run in the day time for nothing). These statements indicate that the Igbo strongly believe that anybody that offends the customs and tradition of the land receives the punishment for such offence. The violation of socio-religious taboos in Igbo ociety may inflict sickness. (Madu 2004) observes that the ancestors, and other deities like "Ani/Ala" goddess can inflict ill- health on any person who commits an abomination against the land. For instance, if a man lies with her daughter or half sister or a mother lies with her son or brother, the Ani goddess or deities may be offended and the next thing is illness which cannot be scientifically diagnosed.

It is therefore not surprising that Henderson (1979) asserts:

The world of the Igbo is in different universe. Nothing happens in this universe by chance or isolation. Thus, every type of sickness from severe headache to stomach upset is caused by forces, evil spirit, witchcrafts, angry divinities, machination of enemies in the form of sorcery (Ogwu or Nsi).

In that vein, Igbo believe that evil spirits dwell in bushes, dark places, odd corners where they wander aimlessly. It may be dangerous therefore, for anyone without a resisting spirit to approach such places at odd hours. The implication of coming in contact with these spirits is death or sickness.

Sickness and healing: An Igbo perspective

The concept of sickness and healing has been delineated in the scope of this article. How does the Igbo attend to sickness? Which methods do they adopt to find a holistic solution to the problems of sickness? In Igboland, the art of healing has been traditionally associated with the thorough knowledge of the use of herbs and roots and the appropriate rituals to perform at appropriate time. When sickness befalls a man in Igbo society, he consults the diviner to know or ascertain the major causes of the illness. It is the duly of the diviner (i.e. dibia) to explain the type of treatment to be given to him after due consultation with the spiritual realm. When the causes of the illness are traced to be spiritual, special physicians are needed. In such situation, traditional priests may be consulted. Such a healer is forced into spiritualism in order to find out the cause of illness and how to treat it.

The first step in the healing process in Igbo society is the application of divinatipn (that is the process of doing the mind of the gods and deities concerning the causes of the problem in question). In such process, if the diviner discovers that a taboo or covenant has been broken, or the ancestors have been offended or a witchcraft is the result, then the divinity in-charge of medicine (e.g Agwu in Igbo land) should be consulted for proper cure for the illness. Hence, spiritual healers in general

do a lot of consultation with the other side of life. Some of them practice magic, occultism or necromancy. They do confess that they commune with the divinity or spirits or ancestors that give them power. According to them, it is through dreams, visions, trances or divinations that they are taught the herbs or medicine or appropriate rituals for healing every spiritual illness. Therefore, divination, rituals and sacrifice form an important aspect of healing process in Igboland.

It is important to note in Igbo cosmology that we have various diviners or categories of dibias as they are in the western setting. The Igbo have categories of dibias who specialize in various health problems in Igbo society. This specialization enhances effectiveness of treatment. Ekechukwu in Madu (2004) categorizes dibias into two: the herbalist and the diviner (dibiaafa), while Mume in Madu (2004) identifies eight types of dibias as follows:

- * The general practioners
- * The herbalist and native doctor; the herbalist centering his mind on the knowledge of herbal application, taking care of visible ailments and curing them with herbal medication while the native doctor is more inclined to supernatural powers and always associates himself with a form of worship.
- * Faith healers
- * The bone setter
- * The native gynecologist and midwife
- * The witch doctor that specializes in wizard causing disease, most of them formerly witches and wizards.
- * The blood letter
- * The traditional surgeon.

Healing is a vital aspect of the religious ritual in Igbo religion. There is nexus between divination, healing by the use of herbal medicine depending on the type of sickness and ritual healing through the use of sacrifice.

In Igboland, when an illness fails to respond to treatment, a diviner is consulted who recommends procedures to be followed because it is believed that he has spiritual insight into what goes beyond the physical world. Harris and Sawyer (1961) maintain that in Africa when sickness refuses to respond to treatment, a diviner is consulted. He elaborates thus:

Oracular powers are invoked in cases of illness... which does not readily respond to simply herbal cure... in cases where a person is laid up, the relations approach the diviner on his behalf. The diviner then after his special acts, diagnoses the causes of the illness, (p. 51).

There are different methods of healing in Igbo world. Sometimes there are ritual washing performed by the medicine man. In some occasion, therapy is used. Therapy for some diseases varies from one traditional heater to the other. Some of the methods are rational, scientific and open while others are mystical and psychological as well as subjective. For instance, light headache is treated in several ways. Some treat it by burning a type of plant and giving it to the patient to inhale its smoke while others pour some fluids extracted from some undisclosed leaves into the patient. In some cases, some incisions are made on the face of patients as a cure for severe headache. The aim of the incision is to allow some quantity of blood to flow and reduce in the nerves which are believed to be pumping much blood to the brain and causing the ache.

Stomach trouble is treated by means of various potions: eating some leaves, herbs and roots raw or boiled with palm oil, open wound and sores are treated with roots of trees, crushed ink powder and spread on the surface of the wound. Hence, the traditional therapy is not only curative but also prophylactic by preventing the attack of disease. For instance, a padlock is hung on the neck of a child to protect him from getting whooping cough. Africans rely mostly on the spiritual causes and solutions to sickness.

An x-ray

In the spirit of the 21st century scientific discovery, can these traditional methods of healing in Igbo society be absolutely accepted? Can the exceptional cases where scientific methods fail and Africans succeed be enough evidence to prove the return to the traditional status-quo of the African man? For instance, can the cases where medical diagnoses indicate that nothing is wrong medically while the patient is dying or situations where all medical solutions fail to effect a change be enough evidence to support the maintenance of the status-quo. Although, cases of this type abound yet, traditional ways have their own shortfall in different areas.

The recent prevalence in Igbo land of moral degeneration does not help matter. Unlike before, when traditional healers have their areas of specialization in the society and as such any case that is not in your area you refer it to the person concerned. Nowadays, what we have are claims whereby a person cures all types of illness (Ogwonnuoria) because of the monetary values attached to it. For such reasons, many medications are no longer relevant because the deities involved are no longer in support of such person due to his or her motives. This attitude has sent many into their grave.

To make the matter worse, waves of the new independent churches have created more challenges as if it seems that return to traditional African view is unavoidable. The situation of our nation where un-employment, social insecurity and criminality, the rich becoming richer and the poor getting poorer, educational decay, poor equipments/ dilapidated hospital and abject poverty have caused catastrophe, confusion and moral aberration in the society. No wonder, there is a widespread frustration, disorientation, disenchantments and lack of prospects among our youths. In the midst of the above social maladies, people no longer look forward or turn to the government for help and orientation: rather they directly or indirectly turn to God. This has caused an increase in the proliferation of African churches with an immense emphasis in faith healing which has sent many to their early grave. It does not mean that God cannot heal miraculously or that traditional method cannot proffer meaningful solutions, but situations abound where many are sent to their early grave due to ignorance. The truth is that there are cases where terminal illness which scientific diagnoses cannot cure is healed by God or through traditional ways may not prove its authenticity. But, is it enough to justify the total dependence on those methods in this scientific age?

How long will the Igbo live in ignorance? It is important to know that the watch word of medical practitioners is that "we cure, but God heals". This is an indication that everything solely depends on God. Total dependence on God is necessary at all times and at the same time wisdom and knowledge of God is paramount. The 21st century world is an era where knowledge is power. It is an age of new discoveries and inventions that assist conform with the Igbo cosmological beliefs of abundance of life. These inventions cannot be abandoned when available and affordable.

Hence, this age calls for a shift from some of the traditional views about the working of the cosmos to the proved established facts about nature. Change is important in life. Therefore the Igbo need to understand that diagnosing an ailment is the first step before treatment. They seem to establish this through spiritual consultations. But considering the effects of underdevelopment, abject poverty, and inaccessible of medical facilities to majority of the Igbo, it becomes understandable why the Igbo resort to traditional treatment which is cheaper and affordable. There is substance in appreciating the healing processes in traditional and western healthcare systems in Igbo society. This could be better achieved through collaborative efforts of experts or specialists in traditional and western medicine in pooling their human, material, financial and spiritual resources in having breakthrough in areas of health and spiritual needs in Igbo society. For proper orientation and understanding Governments need to be aware that they hold the key to change in the people's mind through the provision of necessary facilities that will help to educate the people. All hand must join together to fight the battle of mass ignorance in Igbo society.

Conclusion

Sickness is a general phenomenon that is clearly known. It is an accepted fact that it has cause and effect relationship. Even disorder in the cosmic realities can cause sickness but not in all cases. Nevertheless, for a holistic healing, the causes must be clearly ascertained through scientific and spiritual means. No one will be neglected to the detriment of the other. Both are highly important. In order to achieve this, proper re-orientation; provision of conducive atmosphere by the government will help tremendously to change the status-quo of the Igbo mentality.

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