

**YORUBA TRADITIONAL BELIEFS AND THE
TREATMENT OF MENTAL ILLNESS
IN ILE-IFE, OSUN STATE**

BY

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B.A. (GUIDANCE & COUNSELING)

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ARTS
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to *Olódùmarè* the Supreme Deity of the Yorùbá cosmology,

by whose Mighty Grace this work has become a reality.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the Yorùbá traditional religious beliefs on the causes and treatment of mental illness among the people of Ilé-Ife. It identified the traditional indigenous processes including the prognosis, explanation and control which were involved in the treatment of mental illness. It also examined the material and non-material elements employed by traditional healers in trado-medical institutions. This was with a view of assessing how the trado-medical practitioners carried out a holistic healing of mental illness.

The study employed qualitative research method. The primary data were collected through participant observation and structured interviews among the people of Ilé-Ife. Five trado-medical healing homes in Ilé-Ife were visited to observe the processes involved in the treatment of mental illness vis-à-vis diagnosis, prescription and control of mental illnesses. Fifteen purposively selected trado-medical healers including five *babaláwo* (*Ifá* priests), five *onísègùn or adáhunse* (native doctors) and five *olòrìsà* (priests and priestesses) of different (*òrìsà*) deities were interviewed. Interviews were also conducted with seven patients; three men and five women who claimed to have been healed of mental illness by traditional healers. The questions for the structural interviews were asked in Yorùbá because the medium of expression of those interviewed was Yorùbá language. Participant observation of *Ìpàtẹ̀-òògùn* sessions (display of locally produced herbal medicines) was also conducted. Secondary sources such as books,

journals, articles and Internet resources were consulted to supplement the primary data. The data collected were interpreted using the method of content analysis.

The study discovered that the causes and nature of mental illness in Yorùbá worldview were physical and spiritual. It was revealed that the beliefs in the spirits, and in the mysterious powers such as the witches, magic and medicines, and the belief in *Ori* the owner of destiny, played some significant roles in the efficacy of effecting treatment on mental illness. It was further discovered that there was a strong belief in divination as a means of diagnosing the causes of mental illness and the position of ritual and sacrifice in eliminating the mystical cause of mental illness. Also that the methods of treating mental illness included medication with preparation of herbs, leaves, barks, roots and animal relics which become magical medicine when the prepared contents were empowered with some esoteric power such as incantation, (*Oṣò, ògèdè, ohùn*) and or *Ifá* verses, ritual and sacrifice.

The study concluded that the understanding of indigenous worldview combined with western/orthodox method for a holistic application of mental health was necessary for underpinning psychotherapy in indigenous belief system.

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CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Mental illness is a disease that affects the mind in such a way that the affected person is rendered inefficient and ineffective in his or her day-to-day activities. Mental illness is a psychological or behavioural pattern, generally associated with subjective distress or a disability that occurs in an individual and which is not part of normal development or culture. Mental illness could also be the inability of a person to behave in ways that support the well-being of individual and the society. Kaplan and Sadock define mental illness as a clinically significant behaviour or psychological syndrome associated with distress and disability.¹

The causes of mental illness could be any or some of biological, psychological, environmental, spiritual and esoteric.² In any case, it is a form of malady or madness.

Mental illness in Yorùbá worldview is conceptualized in three terms; *iwín*, *wèrè* and *din dinrin*. *Iwín* is a mild form of mental illness but *wèrè* is an extreme or a complicated form of mental illness while *dindinrin* is mental retardation. Any of the three forms are claimed to be treated by specialists in the tradition. Three methods can be used in the treatment of mental illness. These are psychological, medical and spiritual. In the psychological approach, a clinic psychologist

makes use of psychoanalysis which is a branch of psychotherapy to effect the treatment of mental illness. While in the medical, a psychiatrist makes use of drugs such as the tranquilizers which contain the anti-psychotic and anti-depressant to effect treatment. Some spiritualists in the Christian, Muslim and indigenous religions claim to use spiritual approach in healing processes. However, the traditional healers make use of herbs, incantations (*Oḡòṣi*, *ògèdè*, *ohùn*) and *Ifá corpus*, and others such as ritual and sacrifice to effect healing. It is to be noted here that even though the use of traditional approach in healing processes has been neglected in the academic world, most people are now turning to traditional herbal medicine for curing not only mental illness but most diseases. Because of the scientific approach of orthodox medicine to illness, it is more appealing to people especially the elites. The traditional method of healing is not so scientific in the concept of orthodox medicine but it is more accessible to the common people especially among the Yorùbá people. In some cases scientific/orthodox diagnosis reveals that some illnesses are not curable but can be managed. This is an area where traditional medicine comes in. Traditional healers believe that all diseases and illnesses can be cured by appealing the spiritual entities. Thus people find solace in traditional healers whenever orthodox medicine fails them. However enough attention has not been given to this, and when it is treated in academics, it is done in a disdainful manner. This study seeks to establish the efficacy of traditional medicine using mental illness as a case study.

1.1. Statement of Research Problem

Existing studies on the treatment of mental illness have been done largely by scholars in medical sciences, using drugs such as the tranquilizers which contain the anti-psychotic and anti-depressant to effect treatment. No known academic research has been carried out on the spiritual

approach. This study however shows the relevance of the trado-medical approach to the treatment of mental illness.

1.2. Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are to investigate the Yorùbá traditional religious beliefs on mental illness. It also examines the roles of the trado-medical practitioners in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. The study evaluates the efficacy and impact of Yorùbá traditional religious beliefs on the treatment of mental illness.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study identified the trado-medical approach as essential to the treatment of mental illnesses among the Yorùbá people of Ilé-Ife. Though, scholars in medical sciences have done a lot using drugs. This study however shows the relevance of the trado-medical approach to the treatment of mental illnesses having evaluated the efficacy and impact of Yorùbá traditional religious beliefs on the treatment of mental illnesses.

It has also provided further information on divinatory systems as a diagnostic and explanatory approaches offered by the *babaláwo* on the causes and treatment of mental illnesses.

1.4. Limitation to the Study.

The study is limited to how indigenous beliefs of Yorùbá can effect solution to healthcare problem of the mentally ill persons among the people of Ilé-Ife. The study was limited to Ifè metropolis, comprising two local government areas of Ifè East and Ifè Central. The psychotic disorders of spiritual causes and the use of traditional medicines which include herbs,

incantation, *Ifá* corpus, rituals and sacrifice are examined as they effect curable solution on the treatment of mental illness, from the perspective of Yorùbá people of Ilé-Ifè□.

1.5. Research Methodology:

The study employed quantitative research method. The primary data were collected through observation and structured interviews among the people of Ilé-Ifè□. Five trado-medical healing homes in Ilé-Ifè□ were visited to observe the processes

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