

Review of: "“Healing is having faith in Allah, the healer, and the medicine”: An exploratory qualitative study of Islamic-based healing practices in Northern Ghana"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Authors present interesting material, so I thank them for information that deepened my knowledge of healing-divining systems in Africa. Thank you for inviting me to review the paper. Below are my suggestions how to make the research and analysis more profound and contributing to the existing discourse.

In most African cultures, traditional medicine is based on the belief in ancestors' powers and God/gods' will. Therefore spirituality of both a patient and a healer plays a crucial role in the diagnosis and healing. This is well explained in the paper in case of the Dagbon people. What I would like to know is: do healers treat only Muslims who “believe in Allah and have faith that the medicine or prayers offered to you will work”? Don't they help people of other faiths who may need it? This is a very important issue because in many other cultures (at least in southern African countries which are my specialty) healers offer help to everyone. They believe that if someone with a different worldview comes for help, they should try even harder because the healing will be more difficult.

Methodology: Participant observation allowed the authors gather interesting material. Going back to the informants to understand their beliefs and work better was a very good idea.

Authors write that the “oral consent was recorded from four participants, while the other two participants provided consent by thumb printing the consent forms to grant their consent at the time of the interviews”. Does it mean they were illiterate? If so, how did they read the Quran? Did they just learn about it from their teachers by listening? How did they learn verses they quoted? Informants say that “one must be learned in the Quran to practice as an Islamic healer”, so it should be clarified.

Also, in academic papers one should remember that people's beliefs are just beliefs, not scientific facts. Therefore, while presenting beliefs, authors should avoid statements like “members of the Christian faith who suffer from evil spirits, demons, and sinister forces are healed” and write “members of the Christian faith who ARE BELIEVED TO suffer from evil spirits, demons, and sinister forces”; also instead of “most healers either have the gift of Allah to see beyond the physical” it should be “most healers ARE BELIEVED to either have” etc. This will show that the authors distance themselves from religious beliefs and treat them as a scientific research subject.

The problem with divination within Islam: Authors write that divination “constitutes a contested issue in Islamic

scholarship and healing in Dagbon and elsewhere”. It would be good to find verses in Quran which condemn magic and address the issue of divination. Is it always treated as magic or is it allowed in case of health diagnosis? Why are there different opinions among Muslims?

Ethical problems: I would like to know why the girl described in the beginning of the paper “was crying and struggling to take off her clothes”. Was she forced to do it herself or was she abused and her clothes were taken by other people? I know there is a cultural difference between Western and Muslim attitude towards women/girls but if she was undressed by the Iman or anyone else, then the so-called healing was a sexual abuse. If that was the case, why the authors did not address this important issue? Later in the text, the authors quote healers who say that they cannot treat female patients the same as male (e.g. give them a massage) because Quran does not allow touching a woman/girl who is not blood related. This restriction is overcome in allopathic medicine, e.g. in public hospitals. Hence, is it a worldview of a healer to treat male and female patients differently, or is the modesty issue raised by female patients? And how does the situation with the girl described above fit into the modesty problem?

The whole concept of modesty among females requires more profound study. Women/girls are accused of being immodest and therefore more prone to jinn's attacks. This sounds like a prejudice against women and is solely based on personal beliefs, as nobody can prove that jinns really exist and hence possess anyone. Authors recall Edwards and Laughlin and state that “the jinn has been acknowledged to influence human lives” but it is not a scientific proof; they should write who acknowledge the existence of jinns (simple people, whole ethnic groups, Muslims in Africa?). As this is a scientific study, authors should distance themselves from such beliefs and dive deeper into the problem, try to discover how many men think so, what is their level of education, on what grounds they base their opinions, if they are scared of female sexuality and feminisation of Dagbon women (if such feminisation takes place at all) and what Dagbon women think about it all. The authors state that “a few women these days run Islamic learning programs and hold public Islamic lectures and preaching”. Is it because they are forbidden by men or scared of potential repercussions, or are they just not interested in healing and performing rituals? Or maybe they do it in secret among other women? It would be fascinating to learn true dynamics in Dagbon society.

Final comments and suggestions: The article presents the research results conducted among six male Muslim healers. Their work based on their faith is well explained by the authors. Information analysed is based on the primal sources gathered first-hand by the authors who acknowledge the limited number healers and hence, the limitations of the results. I encourage them to broaden their research group and publish another article.

The researchers excluded one healer “because he stated that he used both Islamic and Dagbon traditional healing modalities”. In African cultures religious beliefs are often syncretic, Christianity and Islam are mixed with the belief in ancestral spirits' powers and influence. Spirits take part in the process of training healers. The authors write that their informants also gained “knowledge through dreams and inspiration” and that they whisper prayers and verses from Quran to patients' ears, they use water as a purifying agent, and charms, herbal medicines and even animal sacrifices to heal, so similarities between Islam-based healing in Dagbon Muslim society and Christian and syncretic modalities are very strong and worth examining. I understand that the researchers wanted to have a unified group. However, I encourage them to

seek more informants combining different healing modalities, especially that they report that the Islamic-based healing is not unified, e.g. some “Islamic-based healers can invoke notions of *Shirk* to argue against performing ritual sacrifices”. Such informants can provided unique information and allow more profound study which will enrich the existing discourse.