

Africa, Spirituality and Mental Illness

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Mental illness has long had a stigma among African Americans. Churches do not address it very well, and many African Americans are squeamish about discussing it.

However, as bad as the problem is in the Black community of the U.S., Black Africans have it much worse. People suffering from mental illness in many African nations are literally chained in Christian prayer camps. Some of them wander the streets completely nude. Many African Christians believe they can cure mental illness through prayer.

This outdated idea has its roots in the false Christian notion that mental illness is caused by demons (just as theists believed that physical illness was caused by demons before the advent of the germ theory.)

Sadly, though understandably, good mental health is not very high on the list of priorities in Africa. People in African nations are struggling with poverty, Ebola, AIDS, crumbling infrastructure, and so on.

According to a story in the *New York Times*, African countries devote less than one percent of their health spending to mental health, compared to six to 12 percent in rich Western nations. The story further relates that, "At last count, Liberia had just one practicing psychiatrist, Niger had three, Togo four and Benin seven. Sierra Leone had none." ("The chains of mental illness in Africa: Lack of care forces desperate measures," by Benedict Carey, reprinted in the *Buffalo News*, October 12, 2015, p. A8.)

Many Africans suffering from mental illness are forced to live in squalid conditions. The *Times* story points out that:

In...Ghana, Human Rights Watch visited eight prayer camps with roots in Pentecostal or evangelical denominations that held close to 200 people. Nearly all the residents were chained by their ankles to trees in open compounds, where they slept, urinated and defecated and bathed, the group reported in 2012. None of the camps employed a “qualified medical or psychiatric practitioner.” (ibid)

These African prayer camps have such names as “Jesus is the Solution.” Yet they do not treat mentally ill persons with anything that looks like “Christian” love or charity. As the *Times* story makes clear:

Chaining people against their will violates the United Nations’ disability rights convention, which most West African countries, including Togo, Ghana and Nigeria, have ratified. But religious feeling is strong in this part of the world, and the pastors who run the camps preach that, through them, God can heal almost any ailment – especially ones thought to be essentially spiritual, like psychosis. (ibid)

Of course, this is all absurd. Africans are the most religious people in the world. If prayer could cure any kind of illness, measles, malaria, polio, HIV and other diseases would have never ravaged the continent. On the other hand, wealthy secular nations with good health plans are mentally and physically healthier by far. Yet many people continue to talk about African spirituality as though it were some great virtue. It all raises the question: At what point is this much ballyhooed spirituality supposed to pay dividends?

The problem of mental illness in Africa is compounded by the fact that some mentally ill people are considered to be witches or wizards. They are persecuted and in some cases killed by self-righteous religious fanatics.

Poor people in Africa are doing the best they can. They cannot afford to take proper care of their mentally ill loved ones. This makes it that much easier for unscrupulous religious charlatans with fake promises to fill the void.

However, the response to this problem is not bleeding-heart pity about how hard Africans have it. The proper response is to hold religious hucksters accountable for their actions and to educate the populace. Anti-poverty programs must be put into place and superstition must be strongly discouraged – even stigmatized for the good of the people. Cultural relativism must be kicked to the curb and everyone must understand how negative cultural beliefs exacerbate bad conditions.

A few years ago, Nigerian humanist activist Leo Igwe put out the call to Africans for a New Enlightenment. Any truly enlightened world could never support the chaining of mentally ill people or the idea that mental illness could be cured through prayer. (See Igwe's "Towards a new enlightenment" at https://mukto-mona.com/Articles/Leo_Igwe/new_enlightenment.htm.)

Finally, Africans need a good human-centered commitment to good mental health. More Africans need to be encouraged to go into psychiatry and mental health services. More importantly, more money must be committed to good mental health for Africans. Just as Western nations do not entrust the mental health of their citizens to prayer warriors, neither should African nations.

