

**HERBBAL POTENCY, ECOLOGICAL THREATS AND CHANGES
IN MEDICO-SPIRITUAL HEALING OF PATIENTS IN THE KOM
CHIEFDOM OF CAMEROON**

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Abstract

This paper exposed the threats to the potency and practice of traditional healing relative to human activities as well as natural and ecological considerations. The paper pointed out that, the advent of colonialism and Christianity introduced new ideologies which often tried to suppress the practice of traditional medicine, even so, the emergence of new disease like HIV/AIDS further compounded the challenges facing traditional healing and its potency was put to test. The paper equally examined the effects of human activities notably agricultural and grazing on traditional healing and environment. The paper concludes that, the place of traditional medicine in Kom remained indispensable, though the practice witnessed a number of threats which necessitated the introduction of new norms to meet up with the prevailing circumstances.

Keywords: Herbal Potency, Ecological Threats, Medico-Spiritual Healing, Kom Chiefdom

Introduction

Traditional medicine has been a basic source of healing, treating, preventing and dealing with problems associated with morbidity and mortality in the Bamenda Grasslands in general and Kom in particular. In the indigenous Kom society, traditional medicine was the only form of healthcare available to deal with the various psychological, spiritual and physical illnesses prevalent in the Kom society. In effect, the role of traditional medicine and traditional healers became indispensable, and it sustained the precolonial Kom society without any alternative. However, the advent of colonialism witnessed the introduction of bio-medicine to compete with traditional medicine.

Bio-medicine was introduced mainly by European missionary bodies whose doctrines condemned traditional medicine on the assumption that it was demonic, primitive, superstitious and ineffective. This era witnessed a stiff competition and division amongst the Kom population: those that embraced Christianity and its doctrines and had to abandon traditional medicine due to its inclination to Kom culture and traditional religion; and those who glued to traditional medicine, which to them, was a reflection of their culture, belief system, experience and the nature of illnesses affecting their communities. The major threat to traditional medicine in this era was the newly introduced Christianity and its doctrines; bio-medicine and the western culture that was imposed by the colonialists on the Kom people.

The results were the destruction and desecration of shrines, sacred springs and forests, as well as the abandoning of some healing practices. Moreover, the postcolonial times saw the emergence of new threats to add to the existing ones. This new threats included the emergence of new diseases like HIV/AIDS, and Hepatitis which exposed the limitation and challenged the potency of traditional healing; modernization, human and ecological activities which greatly affected the potency of traditional medicine and led to the introduction of new trends within the healthcare system. It was in the light of the forgoing that this study investigates the indigenous healing practices, its threats and as well as the changes in the medico-spiritual healing in the Kom fondom. The central argument sustained remains that, traditional medicine played a central role in the maintenance of indigenous health, though there were threats to its existence which became heightened during the colonial and postcolonial periods. These threats and other developments made changes with regard to the practice of traditional medicine inevitable.

Perceptions of Illness Causation

In Kom culture, illnesses were considered to be caused by several factors like the food they ate, insects, poverty, stress, substance abuse, family line, poor hygiene, innate illnesses, gods, ancestors and humans (witches and sorcerers). These causal factors could be classified into natural causes, social causes, spiritual causes, family line or hereditary,

individual lifestyle and cultural norms like curses and breaking of taboos⁴.

According to Kom perspective, illness causation was elaborate, complex and inter-related since there was always some amount of spiritual inclination to illnesses even when they seemed natural. For instance, it was believed that a snake bite could be natural as well as spiritually manipulated. Same as a fracture sustained through an accident could be considered natural and could equally be caused by human spiritual manipulation. This complexity in illness causation theories and believes made illness diagnosis and treatment a more complex task which needed to go beyond the biological explanation of illness and diagnostic procedures as was involved in Bio-Medicine⁵.

Since illnesses were regarded as having both natural and spiritual causes, both spiritual and physical means were needed in diagnosis, treatment and prevention of illnesses. Kom traditional beliefs considered the human being as being made up of the physical, spiritual, and social aspects. The functioning of all these aspects signified good health and if any of these aspects was out of balance, it signified sickness. The treatment of an ill person involved not only the physical being but the spiritual, moral, and social components of the person. In effect, there was need for a special diagnosis, which was often through *fiynyah* or divination.

Fiynyah

Fiynyah (divination) was a means of consulting the spirit world. It was a method by which information concerning an individual or circumstance of illness was obtained through the use of arranged symbols to gain healing knowledge and procedures. It was also considered as a method to access information that was normally beyond the reach of the human mind⁶.

The *wul fiynyah* (diviner) was a diagnostician, and an expert in carrying out diagnosis, he not only defined the illness, but also the ultimate

⁴ Kwame Abukari, "Traditional Medicine and Healing Among the Dagomba of Ghana", (MA Dissertation in Philosophy, Arctic University of Norway, May 2016)

⁵ Joseph Nsom, *Modern Kom Society: Culture, Customs, and Traditions of the Kom People.* (Yaounde: Nyah Publishers 2015)

⁶ Samuel Adu-Gyamfi, Anderson Eugenia, "Indigenous and Traditional Healing in Africa: *A Synthesis of the Literature, Philosophy, Social, and Human Disciplines*, Vol. 1, (2019)

cause in line with the Kom belief system. He was consulted for a wide range of issues which sometimes were not limited to health. A diviner could be consulted to know why there was prolonged sunshine, heavy rains, why the farms were not producing enough, why there was ill luck, in fact, he was consulted whenever anything went wrong in the community. Diviners differed from each other in the methods they used in the diagnostic process.

The diviners used divination to communicate with their ancestral spirits (and their patients) to diagnose the cause of their patients' misfortunes or ailment, which was done using different physiological, psychiatric and spiritual conditions. Diviners were said to be spirituality experts as they diagnosed and defined illness, its origin and the reason in terms of Kom belief systems⁷.

The diviner was a person able to communicate with the spirits when in a state of possession. His spirituality was divination within a supernatural context through culturally accepted mediumship with the ancestral spirits. In addition, he may have some knowledge of medicinal herbs.

In general, diviners differed from each other in the methods they used in the diagnostic process. While majority carried out the diagnosis while in a state of possession, others used possession and casting of bones. For this purpose, bones of animals, birds, and humans were used. The ancestral spirits then talked to the diviner through the bones he laid. Less common methods included the use of shells of tortoise, pieces of polished wood, a mirror, a needle, a calabash or dreams and smells. In some cases, shells and kulanut peelings were thrown on the ground and the diviners used their spiritual powers to interpret following the positions of what has been cast⁸. Some healers were able to inform their patients the reason for their visit and the social cause of their illness without having been told anything by their client. Once a certain spirit has been identified as the cause of the illness or misfortune, the practitioner advised the patient on the procedure necessary to propitiate the spirit, and sometimes also prescribed herbal remedy to cure the physical damage already sustained by the individual⁹.

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Ambrose Chia YAfi, aged 44, Traditional Healer, Interviewed by Clovis Nkwain, Mbingo, 10 May 2019

⁹ *Idem*

According to Kom traditional beliefs, a person does not choose to become a diviner; only a person “called” or “chosen” by the ancestors could become a diviner. In most cases, the “spirit mediums” were believed to have inherited their healing spirit from a deceased healer in the family or from an alien spirit.

Oral interviews were sometimes used by some traditional healers to find out the history behind the illness, where they had been for treatment and how long the patient has been in that condition. This approach enabled them to know how they need to handle the situation. In some cases, the healer required family members to speak on behalf of the patients in cases where the ill person was unable to express himself or herself. In recent years, after the healing process, the patients were asked to go for medical check up to confirm if they have been healed. The medical reports sometimes serve for record keeping for future reference and equally a way of assuring other clients of the healer’s ability and credibility. Due to the holistic nature of traditional medicine, the healers did not separate the natural from the supernatural or spiritual from the physical. Thus, health issues were addressed from two major perspectives¹⁰.

Spiritual Healing

Spiritual healing was a main component of traditional medicine in Kom. Perhaps, practices under this domain may be what added to the uniqueness and cultural specific nature of Kom traditional medicine. Spiritual healing involved providing treatment, management and prevention of illnesses, which were believed to have spiritual causal origins. It tried to provide a balance on the patient’s physical and social world with the spiritual one. These illnesses could be caused by human spiritual involvement, or other supper human beings such as, ancestor spirits and gods. As a departure from other illnesses, spiritual illnesses required some special diagnosis which did not base so much on presenting physical symptoms of the illness. Most spiritual healing practices involved rituals, cleansing, sacrifice and ceremonies.

Diagnoses, prevention and treatment of disease in Kom traditional medicine relied heavily on spiritual aspects. It was based on the belief that psycho-spiritual aspects should be addressed before medical

¹⁰ Idem

aspects. In Kom culture, it was believed that nobody became sick without sufficient reasons. Traditional practitioners looked at the ultimate 'who' rather than 'what' in locating the cause and cure of an illness, and the answers given came from the cosmological beliefs of the people¹¹. Rather than looking at the medical or physical reason behind an illness, traditional healers attempted to determine the root cause underlying it, which is believed to stem from a lack of balance between the patient and their social environment or the spiritual world not only by natural causes. Natural causes were in most cases not seen to be natural at all, but manipulations of the spirits or gods. Sickness was sometimes said to be attributed to guilt by the person, family, or village for a sin or moral transgression¹².

Rituals

Healing and treatment practices in Kom traditional medicine were often rich with rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices. Most of these rituals and sacrifices either had spiritual meanings or were used in fostering culture and relationship building. Most of the illnesses that required rituals and sacrifices had spiritual causal origins and each illness determined the type of ritual to be performed and the different animals to be used as sacrifices in the healing process.

Generally, rituals were an important aspect of African Traditional Religion and medicine, which was practiced across all cultures of the continent, as observed by Kelly:

The importance of rituals in indigenous African tradition cannot be overstated. Ritual serves as a gateway to the land of the ancestors and to the realm of spirits. It evokes sacredness and intentionality. From birth until death, some rituals mark every milestone in a person's life. Rituals anchor the individual to the community and give structure and meaning to life.

African spirituality embodied the belief and invocation to the gods, reverence and acknowledgement of ancestors. Ancestors were humane spirits of the departed blood-relatives of an individual, and involved a whole lineage, spanning generations. They were revered but not worshiped as one would pray to God the ancestors served to mediate between the living and *mbom* (Creator or God). They were regarded as

¹¹ Francis Chia, aged 75, Spiritual Healer, interviewed by Clovis Nkwain, Jinkfui, February 2021.

¹² *Idem*

custodians of the lives of future generations and, therefore, occupied a position of dignity and respect within their descendants¹³. Therefore, to ensure a good relationship with the ancestors, rituals and sacrifices were required. Rituals in Kom were performed at the individual level, family level, and at the community level.

At the private level, there existed traditional healers- who were recognized by the people as competent to provide health services and knew about the spirit world and how it operated, and so, individuals who witnessed signs that signified a problem between him and the ancestors or spirits had to visit these healers for the necessary rituals and sacrifices. The traditional healer addressed a range of personal, social, economic and spiritual issues. The rituals were usually performed by a traditional healer after consultations through incantations, divination, and questioning of the patient had revealed the cause of the illness and the type of ritual required. The traditional healer who acted as the link between the living and the dead, ancestors, and gods would tell the items required from the patient for the performance of the ritual based on the type of ritual to be performed.

The ritual usually involved the slaughtering of an animal, either a fowl, goat, items like palm oil, eggs, salt, palm wine, and more, depending on the purpose, the significance or simply as instructed by the ancestors. The slaughtering was important as the blood signified the connection between the individual and the ancestors. It represented the eternal bond between the ancestors and their descendants. For that reason, the slaughtering had to be done properly, according to specific guidelines and at the right place which often was the homestead and could not be at an abattoir. This spiritual healing provided a sense of security, anchoring and validated the identity of the descendants and a sense of belonging and purpose in life.

At the family level, each household and family in Kom practiced and maintained some healthcare methods. There were some family gods and ancestors who needed to always be in harmony with the family in order to ensure good health within the family. The communication between the family and these gods, and ancestors was mainly done

¹³ Idem

through sacrifices and rituals¹⁴. There were equally practices like the *Ikiing practice* which was used as a healthcare method and was available in almost all families and households in the fondom.

At the public level, rituals and sacrifices were performed by traditional authorities on a collective basis to achieve the health objectives of the community. It was aimed at keeping away all evil spirits as well as diseases which could affect the community as a whole¹⁵. This was done on specified periods and in designated shrines. These included rituals like *fuchuo*, and *azhea* which were performed at their dedicated shrines to serve the entire fondom. These ritual shrines were at the *Aku a miifieh* which was the spiritual gateway to the Fondom,

The *aku a miifieh* which was a well preserved, and reserved sacred forest located above the Kom palace, played a pertinent role to sustain both the ecological, physical and spiritual wellbeing of the kom people; firstly, it was home to the rarest medicinal herbs used by traditional healers for both spiritual and physical illnesses, secondly, at the middle of the forest, was the *ndo fuchuo* in which the *achaff and ekui* priests carried out the Fuchou ritual invoking the spirits and ancestors to intercede for peace, fertility and more food in the fondom; etc.

The Kom people had a mastery and control of their environment. Soil fertility, sunshine, and rainfall were often altered to their favor by performing rituals, pouring libations, and offering prayers to the spirits and ancestors to intercede and yield to their demands. The Azhea ritual, which was performed at sacred forests, was to ensure regular rainfall, sufficient sunshine, and good harvest. Once the ritual was performed at the sacred forest, the same was repeated at the kom royal compounds of Alim, Fuli, and Yang. From the royal compounds, the other villages were nourished¹⁶.

The performance of these rituals in the sacred forest demonstrates the kom attachment to their environment; how they mastered their environment, protected and preserved it for their medico-spiritual

¹⁴ Roland Mai Tubuo, aged 50, WoinKom Cultural Group Coordinator, WhatsApp interview by Clovis Nkwain, 8 June 2020

¹⁵ Henry Kam Kah, "Ih'neem Ritual/Ceremony, Food Crisis and Sustainability in Cameroon, Journal of Global Initiative: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2016)

¹⁶ Walter Gam, "Mythical Python and the sacred Forest"

needs; it equally shows their cultural understanding of their environment and the role of environmental understanding for the existence and sustenance of the kom fondom

Sacrifices

Sacrifices were sometimes offered at the request of the spirits, gods, and ancestors. Sometimes, animals such as goats, dogs, fowls were slaughtered or buried alive at midnight to save the soul of one at the point of death, with the belief that their spirits were strong enough to replace human life. There was also a view that because the animals were domestic animals and were very close to people, sometime when they saw that someone close to them was about to die, they offered their lives for that person to live. This was true especially when these animals died mysteriously, thus it was believed that it had sacrificed itself in the place of the owner. Sacrifices were sometimes offered in order to consecrate some herbs without which the medicine was meaningless. Divine and ancestral sanctions were considered necessary before and during the preparation and application of medicine.

Spiritual Cleansing and Appeasement of the gods/Ancestors

Spiritual cleansing was sometimes required of the sick person. The person was required to bathe at specific times for a prescribed number of days with water mixed with some herbal concoction. If an illness was perceived to be caused by an invocation of a curse or violation of taboos, the healer would appease the gods, ancestors, or spirits according to the severity of the case. The individual was often required to provide certain items for sacrifices or libation, such as cat, dog, fowl, kola nuts, eggs, and white, red, or black plain cloth. These items were demanded according to the spirits and nature of the illness¹⁷. After use, the items were either thrown into the river, allowed to rot, or placed at strategic places, usually at crossroads at the outskirts of the community, road junctions, depending on the nature and severity of the case¹⁸. The *Ateff* and *suisi mikain* was one of the appeasement and cleansing practices aimed at waving away misfortunes on individuals or families caused by broken oaths or curse emanating from an angered ancestor¹⁹.

¹⁷ Francis Chia, aged 75, Spiritual Healer, interviewed by Clovis Nkwain, Jinkfuin, February 2021.

¹⁸ Muteh Peter, "Socio-Cultural Perceptions of Infertility in Women and Treatment: the Kom Case in Boyo Division, Northwest Province" (MA Dissertation in Anthropology, University of Yaoundé 1, 2003)

¹⁹ Idem

The ateff was often carried out by the elders in a family when there was said to be a misfortune that affected members of the family. The origin of such misfortune was often as a result of a broken taboo, or an unsettled dispute against a deceased family member while he/she was alive. The angered spirit of the deceased in such cases needed to be appeased before the family could live in harmony with its ancestors. The ateff was done at the family level though it required a specialized traditional healer who could lead in the appeasement ceremony. During the ceremony, elders in the family offered prayers and apologies to the angered ancestors on behalf of the family, and at the end of the orison and forgiveness plea, the direct responds from the angered ancestor was awaited. The ancestor spoke through the items used which were; a calabash filled with corn beer, some herbal concoctions, some dry grass and a match²⁰. When the prayers were done, the traditional healer would set fire on the small grass under the calabash held in his hands, if the corn beer in the calabash bubbles and outpours within seconds, then it signified the ancestor had accepted the apologies, and if did not outpour then, there were still issues which were yet to be settled²¹.

Herbal Healing

Herbal medicine constituted the most commonly used form of Traditional medicine in the Kom society. Since this kind of medicine did not include any form of spirituality or spiritual knowledge, it was not only administered by specialists. It was said that most Kom people had a basic knowledge of some herbs that could be used in treating some illnesses even when they were not specialized in the art of healing. This proved that herbal medicine was the basic and most common form of medicine that was available to the people.

Herbal medicine was used by traditional healers mainly to treat the physical manifestation of illnesses, even when they had already been treated spiritually. There were equally specialists in herbal medicine though this was often through experience and not specialization, because the healing system in Kom did not distinguish between a herbalist and a spiritualist. The reason for this was that both diviners, soothsayers, spiritualists were actually involved in using herbs in treating patients when need be.

²⁰ Esther Ndum, aged 60, Farmer, interviewed by Clovis Nkwainn, Mbingo, 6 December 2019.

²¹ Idem

The role of herbal medicine was so remarkable since it arose from a thorough knowledge of the medicinal properties of indigenous plants and the steps necessary to make the plants ready for consumption. The use of herbal medicine was universal in different cultures. However, the plants used for the same ailments and the modes of treatment varied from place to place. In Kom, there existed fairly a good knowledge of common curative herbs except in cases of chronic illnesses.

Herbal medicine in Kom was applied through various forms and methods depending on the nature and type of illness. It could be taken orally by chewing of fresh herbs, by drinking a mixture of either boiled or raw medicine concoction, or by taking it in powdered form. At times, a patient was covered with cloth over a hot pot of medicine; this was intended for the body to absorb the heat-induced vapor of the herbal concoction.

There were equally various processes of herbal preparation before it was ready for use. It included harvesting and selecting of herbs, backs of trees and root crops that were medically rich. This step was usually followed by mixing, and boiling depending on the needs of the patient. For medicine that was required to be used in powder form, it was chopped and sunned till it got dry. When it was dried, it was pounded, ground or sieved and sometimes packaged if it was to be preserved for future use.

The art of herbal healing to run in families but was not necessarily hereditary. The point was that, to become a herbalist, it was the individuals choice, and thus by profession was freely accessible. The novice was apprenticed to a practicing herbalist of repute for a number of years. His business was to act as a messenger, herb gatherer, and general helper to his master; accompanying him on his excursions as medicine-bearer. All the time, learning was by observation and instruction, thus the apprentice learned to identify and name the relevant herbs, plants, animals, insects, and birds. He was equally taught how to select the best specimens. Later on, the apprentice could be sent to go and harvest alone but to bring the exhibits to his master for checking and approval. Next, he learned how to combine and mix the various ingredients and prepare a mixture. Further, the novice would assist the herbalist in the administration of medicine and could be allowed to treat some patients according to the master's instruction

Illness Prevention

Traditional medicine in Kom equally involved the prevention of illnesses. In order to prevent illnesses, the Kom people used different techniques and measures. Since the Kom belief system considered illness to either be natural or spiritual, they equally had different techniques in preventing natural illness and those in preventing illnesses considered to have spiritual causation.

Natural illnesses were prevented mainly with the use of herbs, good feeding habits, good hygiene and sanitation practices. It was common place for people to drink herbal concoctions even when they had no sign or symptom of an illness, this was in a bit to prevent frequent illness. It should be noted that the Kom people did not really take natural illnesses as serious as they took spiritual illnesses. So, much was not done to prevent illnesses of this genre.

Some preventive medicine was purely aimed at preventing illnesses that could be caused by the spiritual world. Many of these medicine types took place in the form of rituals and ceremonies through which the gods and ancestors were consulted and their spirits invoked for protection against evil forces. By means of these rituals and ceremonies, families could ascertain that none of its family members had offended the ancestors. When the ceremony showed that someone was guilty of an offense, this gave him/her the opportunity to rectify the situation before the ancestors could visit him/her with misfortune. There were equally some specific medicine against witches, wizards, evil spirits and other supper natural agents of misfortune. The prevention of bad luck equally occupied a substantial part of Kom traditional medicine and was the main reason for the constant contact between indigenes and traditional healers. Protection was usually sought against witchcraft, bad luck, thieves, infertility and human activities. The objects of protection were the individual, his property, the family and the community. For example, protective medicine could be sprinkled in the yard to protect the homestead against witchcraft. Further methods were taken by using amulets, bracelets, charms, and necklaces aimed at driving away spirits.

There were some specific seasons when the traditional authorities carried out what could be likened to the vaccination campaigns in Bio-

Medicine. During this period, the *afieh-iseh* which was aimed at immunizing or protecting children against skin disease and evil spirits would move from community to the other, with the intention of bathing and protecting every child in the community. In addition to bathing and protecting children, the traditional authorities had as a duty to protect the entire village against external evil forces²². The *ngvin* was responsible for this village protection. The *ngvin* was the community medicine bearer during this protection exercise, where he will move round all the entrances to the village and throw some well-prepared herbal concoctions which formed spiritual barriers into the community²³.

Some preventive medicines were carefully guarded secrets belonging to certain families. There was equally the tendency of preparing medicine especially for infants which was aimed at protecting them against evil forces. It was believed that Children were particularly vulnerable to attacks from evil forces and witches especially in case where the father was considered to be spiritually strong, and enemies would rather target their children if they proved weak and easy to get. It was normal that every child, especially male children had this medicine tied on their waist.

Also, In Kom traditional medicine, there were some practices which were aimed at influencing events in favor of the person concerned. Medicine was available for success in farming, hunting, business, artistic skills, potency and even fertility.

While causative medicine was very essential and important when it came to issues of war and the defense of the kingdom, it was more often considered to be antisocial and hence was often kept a secret by its owners. This was mainly because causative medicine often coerced other parties to take actions that they would normally not take if they were on their rightful senses and it involved bringing misfortune to competitors and enemies. People who were known to own this type of medicine were feared in the community. This was because most of this medicine was for evil purposes like inflicting pain on people, killing enemies, retarding peoples' progress, and there was often competition

²² Walter Gam Nkwi, *African Modernities and Mobilities A Historical Ethnography of Kom, Cameroon, c. 1800-2008* (Bamenda: Langa Research and Publishing CIG, 2015)

²³ Ibid

among those who owned such medicine, and the ultimate results of competing with someone who's medicine was stronger was deadly. However, there existed the village juju cults which acted as a policing force and regulated the owning and usage of such medicine in the village and those who proved stubborn were excommunicated.

Ecological Threats to Traditional Healing

The Kom environment has been threatened by many factors which either helped to degrade the environment, vegetation or made it lost its original value. The Kom vegetation began gradually witness the disappearance of forests especially sacred forests which had been preserved for medico-spiritual healing purposes; and these forests were gradually becoming grasslands and farms with a visible and substantial disappearance of herbs. These ecological threats were mainly caused by factors emanating from human activities, and to a lesser extent natural factors²⁴.

Notably, the growth and expansion of towns like Belo, Njinikom, and Fundong witnessed a tremendous destruction of shrines, sacred springs and rivers which had been preserved, reserved and protected for centuries. The destruction was often done not intentionally but for the necessity of road construction, building of residential houses, markets, western hospitals, schools and more, which hitherto was not given priority. The disappearance of such places had great impact on the ecological and medico-spiritual healing milieu in Kom. It was believed that such springs, forests and shrines were inhabited by spirits and deities which often partook and influenced the daily lives of the people around. Thus, the shrines represented the meeting point of humans, natural and spiritual entities, and its importance in human communal affairs took the aura of sovereignty. This explains why rituals which were meant for the spirits were performed in such places. The destruction of such places had consequences on the people. A major direct effect of the desecration of the shrines, sacred forests and springs was the drying up of the springs which did not only serve a spiritual and healing purpose but was a source of drinking water, and was equally very vital for the ecological preservation of the Kom society.

²⁴ Walter Gam Nkwi, "Sacred Forest and the Mythical Python: Ecology, Conservation and Sustainability in Kom, Cameroon, c. 1700-2000", *Journal of Global initiatives*, Vol.11, No. 2, (2017)

The expansion of towns and modernization equally introduced new forms of architecture which differed from the Kom indigenous building architecture²⁵. The introduction of the new architecture in the early 1990s was joyously received by the Kom people and it gained much popularity in the proceeding decades. Though the modern architecture was welcomed and it positively influenced the quality of life, it had a severe impact on the medico-spiritual healing in the fondom. Contrary to indigenous homes, the new housing system destroyed habitats of some organisms which were important components in the medico-spiritual healing in Kom. A typical example is the ant lion (*bilibili*) whose habitat was often in the dusts in verandas of local houses, this creature was used by almost all traditional healers, but the modern architecture which consisted of tiled and cemented surfaces did not provide a conducive environment for the existence of the ant lion. This gradually led to the disappearance of this creature.

Agricultural Activities

Agriculture has always been one of the major backbone of the Kom's economy. The indigenous Kom people, especially women mainly practiced subsistence agriculture where bush fallowing and shifting cultivation was the main agricultural method. This form of agriculture encouraged the growth of herbs which was invaluable for the medico-spiritual needs of the Kom people. However, the 21st century witnessed a paradigm shift in the agricultural techniques used by the Kom people. This was certainly due to the emergence and development of settlement areas such as Belo, Njinikom, and Fundong, with an increasing population and high population density, commercialization of agriculture. This necessitated the introduction of Chemical agriculture; the use of fertilizers, and notably herbicides. There was an abrupt shift from the traditional agriculture techniques of clearing and cultivation of farmlands to the use of herbicides which, however, increased the agricultural productivity but had an adverse effect on the ecology. With the constant use of these herbicides, various medicinal plants were threatened with disappearance and extinction. The effects were more severe owing to the fact that agricultural activities were often carried out along river banks and lowlands which were a safe haven for medicinal plants, this was so because the hills and highlands were subjected to wildfires and continuous grazing. In effect, hills and

²⁵ Gilbert Mbeng, "Preserving the Traditional Kom House", (MA Dissertation: School of Architecture, Planning Preservation, University of Maryland, 2010)

highlands did not provide a conducive atmosphere for the growth of medicinal plants. The use of chemicals proved more problematic as some of these chemicals were absorbed into the resistant medicinal crops, which often reduced the effectiveness of these herbs. Some of these chemicals were said to cause ozone depletion.

Changes in Medico Spiritual Healing

Traditional healers, like any other profession were rewarded for their services. In Kom society, the payment for a treatment depended much on its efficacy.

Traditional healers in kom were formally paid in kind. Usually a small retainer fee was paid initially, and the rest was paid when treatment was completed or when the patient was healed.

In general, the fee schedule was not fixed or standardized. The fee charged varied from healer to healer and according to the illness and nature of treatment. Most often, as was the case with spiritual healers, the gods did demand the items to be presented by the patient, which mainly consisted of oil, salt, goats, fowls and many other items which were used in rituals and/or sacrifices depending on the nature of illness and sacrifice required. Arrangements to bring the products later were easily made if the patient proved unable to provide at that moment. In such cases, the traditional healers would lend the products to the patient who would symbolically hand them back to the healer.

Many practitioners did not charge much and some did not charge any fee at all; they did not regard the practice of medicine as a source of wealth but as a service to the community. Such healers were rewarded by the status accrued to them and their families from their ability to heal, and have access the world of spirits. Although some practitioners did not receive any fee, they expected patients to offer gifts from time to time, and this method of payment, in certain instances became very expensive. In cases where payment was to be demanded, it was not done until the cure was gotten and the patient was fully healed²⁶.

Communal medicine which was offered by traditional public health authorities was without a fee. The role of Laikom was to ensure and

²⁶ Chia Christopher, aged 75, Traditional Healer, Interviewed by Clovis Nkwain, Mbingo December 2019.

maintain good health throughout the kingdom and this was portrayed through the various rituals like the *Azhea*, *ntul*, *fuchou*, which guaranteed the well-being of the community members. The *Ise* and the apotropaic medicine which was both preventive and treatment medicine was offered to the people free of charge.

However, the commercialization of traditional medicine in Kom opened a new page in traditional medicine²⁷. The payment methods changed over time, and most practitioners began asking for monetary payments and sometimes, exorbitant amounts were demanded even before treatment could begin. The commercialization of the practice equally gave rise to fraudulent practitioners who became only interested in making money without rendering the health services paid for.

Places of Healing

Traditional medicine in Kom was practiced at the family, individual and community levels. Most families were not specialists in healing but used their traditional knowledge of herbs, and equally connected with the family ancestors to maintain good health within the family. On the other hand, there were specialized healers who were sometimes diviners, herbalists and spiritualists at the same time.

The healing place of traditional healers depended on the type of healer and the case at hand, basically, traditional healers used their residences as health care centers. In this case, traditional healers will host the patients in his compound till the patient was fully recovered. However, in cases where the illness was severe and the patient cannot walk, the healer sometimes went to the individual homes of the patients to administer medicine to them.

One common feature in the healing system in traditional Kom society was the use of shrines. There existed family shrines where the family members performed rituals and offered sacrifices to the ancestors and to the gods of the compound, who were believed to reside not far from homes.

Specialized traditional healers used shrines when they were dealing with illnesses which were believed to have spiritual causal origins. The shrines were used for rituals, sacrifices, spiritual bathing and cleansing

²⁷ Idem

which constituted the main elements of the spiritual healing. Shrines were central and indispensable to traditional healers, hence, all traditional healers owned shrines where they carried out their art of healing. The shrines served several functions. It served as an instrument of justice as the shrines were patronized to seek redress, as in the case of communal shrines. It should be noted that some of these shrines were on the graves of deceased important clan or community notables. In some cases, human sacrifices were done before instituting these shrines, which indicates that these shrines stood as the gateway between the physical and the spiritual world.

Conclusion

It has been illustrated that traditional medicine and healing was the sole healthcare system available to deal with the prevalent physical, psychological, social, spiritual and mental illnesses in the indigenous Kom society. This form of healing sustained the Kom society as well as its environment, since its practices were nature-friendly in terms of preservation, protection and reservation of environmental elements such as springs and forests. This paper exposed the threats to the potency and practice of traditional healing relative to human activities as well as natural, and ecological considerations. The paper pointed out that, the advent of colonialism and Christianity introduced new ideologies which often tried to suppress the practice of traditional medicine, even so, the emergence of new disease like HIV/AIDS further compounded the challenges facing traditional healing and its potency was put to test. The paper equally examined the effects of human activities notably agricultural and grazing on traditional healing and environment. The paper concludes that, the place of traditional medicine in Kom remained indispensable, though the practice witnessed a number of threats which necessitated the introduction of new norms to meet up with the prevailing circumstances.

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