

THE PENTECOSTAL DEMONOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION OF DISEASES AND ILLNESS IN YORUBA LAND

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Abstract

Life is sacrosanct and valued by adherents of all religions, including individuals with aversions for religion. African Independent Pentecostal traditions are noted for their avowed stance on disease etiology and 'cura-divina' (faith healing). In Nigerian context, perspective on demonology is similar to the global Neo-Pentecostal movements. Epidemic and other natural disasters are linked to the manifestations of demonic operations that must be countered with spiritual warfare. The poor ranking of Nigeria on global quality of life and life expectancy index is antithetical to the invocatory prayers against the forces of death. This paper highlights the perception of African Independent Pentecostals in Yoruba land on the causation of diseases and illness from the twentieth to twenty-first century and its implications on human wellbeing. Hybrid of textual analysis and interactions with residents of the ancient Oyo town and its environs were adopted to gather data for the study. The study argues that demonological construction of diseases and sickness intersects poverty, poor health index and low life expectancy. This paper posits that etiology of diseases is multidimensional and healthcare intervention should be holistic and not limited to exorcism or spiritual warfare. Biomedical, herbal therapy, disciplined social behaviours, and self-acceptance incorporated with spiritual warfare, are antidotes for sustainable healthcare delivery in Nigeria.

Keywords: Pentecostal Traditions, Demon Theology, Diseases, Healthcare

Introduction

There is an intricate connection between religious experience, diseases and healthcare. Religious beliefs and engagement are evident across cultural context though in varying degrees. Africans and particularly Nigerians are religiously conscious population. Issues about religion are taken in high esteem and every phase of life is linked to religion (Balogun, 2020). They believe in the existence of a Supreme Being who rules over the affairs of man. They also express a belief in the existence of spirits whose operations can either be benevolent or malevolent. Spiritual experience and religious beliefs are important aspects of the lives of Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria. Religion permeates every aspect of life of an average African, especially, those of Yoruba descent. An average Yoruba person turns to religion to find answers to questions bordering on the root cause of ailments or diseases and other existential problems (Olupona, 2014). This attitude reflects their theological convictions of divine sovereignty and human depravity.

There are three distinct Christian traditions in Nigeria – Protestant/Mission Churches, African Independent Churches (*Aladura*), and the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches (Alademo, 2009). The Pentecostal group is heterogeneous; within the group are Classical Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals. The focus of this paper is restricted to the Neo-Pentecostal group. They are mostly founded by independent African charismatic leaders. The study henceforth will refer to them as African Independent Pentecostal Churches (AIPCs). In the Nigerian Christianity, the AIPCs are characterised by the emphasis on healing and deliverance ministries. Their theology and practices give a unique attention to the operations of demons and how demonic agents are used by Satan to afflict humans with diseases, sicknesses and poverty. Their theology and practices differ significantly from that of the Classical Pentecostal Churches though there are points of convergence between their theologies. They both believe in the operations of the Holy Spirit. While the classical explains Holy Spirit from soteriological (salvation) point of view (Dada, 2010), the AIPCs lay much emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit to deliver, prosper believers and also to bound the demons.

The point being underscored here is that the strong belief of the AIPCs in the power of the Holy Spirit to restore health informed their aversion for orthodox medicine. To this end, this paper x-rayed the beliefs and practices of Yoruba Pentecostals on the origin of diseases and curative interventions. Specifically, it traced the development of Yoruba Pentecostals demonology with a view to analysing its impact on health behaviour and healthcare delivery in the contemporary age.

Overview of Pentecostalism in the southwest Nigeria

Pentecostalism is a global phenomenon with multifaceted origins. Global Pentecostalism is fast growing Christian movement characterised by emphasis on the Holy Spirit, gifts of healing miracle and prophecy, and participatory worship. The movement traced its origin to the event of the descent of the gift Holy Spirit on the Apostles in 30 AD. Modern Pentecostalism emerged in the twentieth century at the Azusa Street Revival (1906-1909) in Los Angeles. Pentecostalism wave spread to Latin America, Africa and Asia shortly after the Azusa Street experience (Anderson, 2006). In Nigeria, the precursor of Pentecostalism was Garrick SokaryBraide (1882/3 -1918) (Ayegboyin & Ishola, 2013), he had no connection with Azusa Street Revival. Not long after, Joseph Ayo Babalola and other charismatic prophetic figures rose to challenge the spiritual and social problems of their time. Their prophetic activities gave rise to the founding of African Initiated Churches (AICs) after pulling out of the Mission Churches. Pentecostal flame broke forth in the 1970s in the heels of the discovery of crude oil and the economic boom that ensued. Evangelical revival that broke out among the youth on university campuses laid the foundations for the Nigerian brand of African Pentecostal movement. The movement has proliferated to numerous typologies. Ayegboyin & Ukah (2008) explained the typologies of African Christianity to include the Mainline/Mission Churches, Ethiopian Churches, African Initiated Churches (AICs), Pentecostal Churches, Indigenous Pentecostal Churches, Neo-Pentecostal Groups, and Neo-Prophetic movements. These churches are distinct from each other in terms of the ecclesiastical formation, doctrines, liturgy, ritual, and worship. Churches in the Indigenous Pentecostal like Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministry (MFM), Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Christ Embassy, and other smaller churches of their brand, are the focus of this paper.

African Pentecostalism is quite different from the western influenced Pentecostals. For instance, in doctrines and practice, deliverance from demonic attacks and healing miracles is

central to MFM ministry whereas, Apostolic Faith embodies the Holiness tradition of the western Pentecostals. This is not to say that Apostolic Faith Church do not believe and practice divine healing. It is just that deliverance ministry is not the core focus of the church. African Pentecostal traditions focus on empowerment by the Holy Spirit. Anderson (2019) hinted that some of the newer Independent Pentecostal Churches have moved closer to African Independent Churches (AICs) in liturgical practices.

Adedibu & Igboin (2018) described African Pentecostalism as a liberational Pentecostalism, a holistic Pentecostalism that confronts human problems and mysteries, including the environment within which human lives. Anderson (2019) noted that the dynamism in African Pentecostalism is expressed in the accommodation of some African popular religious ideas and practices in their brand of Pentecostalism. He argued that Pentecostalism in the Nigerian context does not transform old views in discontinuity with the past. Rather, Biblical language is borrowed to translate Satan, devil, his demons, and evil spirits into comprehensible concepts for the people. The unprecedented growth of African Pentecostalism is an indication of the presence of human deprivations manifesting in poverty, insecurity, prevalence of communicable and non-communicable diseases, and terminal ailments to which the responsiveness of the African Initiated Pentecostal leaders have been a great help. They provide platforms for deliverance, exorcism, healing, and material prosperity or success in vocations. African Pentecostalism is an embodiment of a contextualised Christianity that brings the biblical promises on health, deliverance from burden of sin and poverty to bear on the existential problems of Africans. They express religiosity in attendance at worship centres, corporate and private prayers, Bible study – meditation or memorisation, fasting, beliefs in denominational doctrines and practices.

Cultural and Spiritual Dimensions of Health and Illness among the Yoruba

Religion and culture share symbiotic relationships. Culture influence religion and at the same time religious beliefs do shape culture (Saroglou & Cohen, 2011). While culture is limited to the realms of material universe, religion is connected with transcendent reality. Similar to other African cultures, Yoruba believe that good health, wealth, success and other fortunes in life are bestowed on humans by God through divinities, ancestors and benevolent spirits. In appreciation, sacrifices and attention to taboos or certain covenants are observed. They also believe in the pre-existence of all humans in soul or spirit form. The physical appearance, spirit and character of a new-born come from the soul being incarnated (Fuller, 2001). Every child must choose their destiny before leaving the spirit world. The guardian spirit – *Ori* guides the child to fulfill the destiny chosen in the pre-existence world. Fuller (2001) explained further that the soul of the child could wickedly choose a pact with other wicked spirits to have extra privileges on earth. Children that die at infancy or young age are naturally referred to as *abiku*. When pregnant ladies record still births or repeated abortions, the occurrence is attributed to the operations of wicked spirits or demons.

Diseases, like epilepsy, measles, chicken pox, insanity, and other illness are inflicted by wicked spirits. Evil spirits or demons are also responsible for deformity in newborns, accident, disability, barrenness and natural disasters. Olupona (2014) maintained that beliefs in divinities, ancestral spirits, magical spells, occultism and other supernatural forces play a significant role in health practices among Africans long before the introduction of the Abrahamic religions. Similarly, Sievert (2024) reported that illness is attributed to supernatural forces, including

deities, spirits and malevolent agents. The beliefs according to Sievert are responsible for health behaviour among middle and low income earners in third world countries. Orthodox medicines are not accepted by people who link illness to supernatural forces. Yoruba people turn to spirits and supernatural forces in their quest for explanations to outbreak of pandemic and sufferings.

Again, Yoruba people express a belief that moral failure, that is, sin of humans can provoke the anger of the ancestors and other supernatural forces. They believe that some diseases, bodily deformity or disability, epilepsy and mortality are punishments for the sins committed by an individual, parents or the progenitors. Sievert (2024) narrated that epilepsy is believed to be caused by supernatural forces to stigmatise or shame the sufferer and family members. Generally, Yoruba people consult with traditional healers, diviners, and occultists for prevention, diagnosis or treatment as situations demand. Herbs are mostly used to cure diseases, there are also preventive or curative sacrifices offered to the gods and spirits to prevent or treat ailments (Adekannbi, 2009). Exorcists are also consulted to drive out evil spirits causing insanity and related health challenges.

Scriptural basis for demonological construction

The traditional view is that God created all things (both visible and invisible) perfect or good. The Lucifer and other fallen angels were originally created as good angels in the pre-Adamic dispensation. Lucifer led other angels to rebel against God; they were consequently cursed and cast down into the world without form. Lucifer and his agents became disembodied spirits or demons, (Hagin, 1983). Lucifer in his fallen state was referred to as the Devil or Satan. The presence of Satan was responsible for the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Warrington (2004) noted that though the concept of demonology was not expressly portrayed in the Old Testament, there were constant references to the activities of individuals or ethnic nationalities that engaged in the worship of gods and spirits as opposed to the purpose of Yahweh. The Israelites absorbed the concept of demonology from their pagan neighbours. These were described as evil people or idolaters. Satan was portrayed in the Old Testament as the head of all demons and the archenemy of God and humanity. The story of the afflictions of Job is a constant reminder that God is not the source of calamities that humans often encounter. Again, the writer of the book of Jonah hinted that idolatrous practices and disobedience to Yahweh's commands are the reasons for cosmic insecurity. To the Hebrews, sicknesses and troubles in the world were attributed to the operations of lesser gods and spirits.

In the New Testament era, belief in the existence of evil spirits was popular in the worldview of Jews in Jesus' ministry era. The temptation of Jesus was by the devil as portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13). The story of the possessed mad man in the Gospel of Mark 5:1-13 is a proof to a certain extent that demons and evil spirits do possess man and can also take embodiments in animals, (Hagin, 1983). In Pauline Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul declaration that "*We wrestle not against flesh and blood...*" was also an allusion to the recognition of the presence of demonic operations in the Apostolic Age (Ephesians 6:12). Warrington (2004) argued that though there were incidences of demon possessions recorded in the New Testament, exorcism was not the central focus of Jesus' ministry but teachings on the Kingdom of God. There are limited information indicating a developed demonology and widespread practice in the Scriptures. The reason for this in Moreau's words was because the focus throughout the Bible was on God and his works in Christ rather than on demonic attempts to demean God's work, (Moreau, 1996). Demons in the New

Testament account were responsible for insanity, blindness, paralysis, epilepsy, dumbness among many others. Also, a cursory look at Apocrypha literature like Tobit informs that the writer held a belief in the interconnectedness of sickness and demons.

Pentecostal doctrine on demonology is traceable to the history of biblical figures and the lived experiences of individuals who have been delivered from demonic attacks or oppressions. According to Mosicke (2017), Satan is associated with witchcraft and sorcery among African Pentecostals. Their doctrine on deliverance is associated with the belief in the operations of Satan through ancestral spirits, witchcraft, and occultism. African Pentecostals are more demon conscious than other Christian traditions.

Pentecostal Doctrines on Diseases and Demons

The Pentecostals hold the belief that the universe that God created was perfect and that humans are the express image of God. At creation, there was no evil. The fall of man in the Garden of Eden brought the concept of dualism of good and evil. Adamic sin is thought in Christian traditions as the cause of the presence of evil in the world. Demons in Christian thought are evil angels. According to Kgatle (2022), Pentecostal faith is founded on the belief in the supernatural power of God. The same faith that lead an unbeliever to salvation and believer to sanctification, is believed to be capable of effecting healing on the sick and deliverance to the demonically oppressed. Among the AIPCs, adversity, disease, sickness, barrenness and other human depravities are believed to originate from the devil (Anderson, 2018). Kgatle (2022) recalled how the COVID-19 pandemic was demonised by some Nigerian charismatic leaders like the Late T.B. Joshua, the founder of Synagogue Church of All Nations.

Yoruba traditional beliefs about causation of diseases influence Pentecostal practice in Yoruba land. Adogame (2003) opined that the beliefs and doctrines of Pentecostals about dreams, visions, and spirit possession are evidence of the continuity with Yoruba religious worldview. He stressed that in traditional setting, most situations of failure, diseases, sicknesses, and other misfortunes are caused by the operations of the malevolent spirits. Yoruba people believe that wellness and illness are conditions that are determined by supernatural forces. According to Jegede (2002) Yoruba people commonly have four etiological perspectives on diseases. Jegede noted that illness or diseases are traced to enemies (witchcraft and sorcery), gods or ancestors, natural illness (developmental ailments in children and old age sickness), and hereditary. AIPCs' doctrines attribute the origin of diseases to supernatural powers, heredity, and evil covenants. When an individual suffers from a disease that has a history of repeated occurrence in the extended family, AIPCs view it as a demonic manipulation to keep descendants in that family under the bondage of sickness to drain their finances and ultimately cause premature death. The implication of this is that human responsibility or failure is often not seen as a contributing factor to sickness. Instead of consulting medical doctors for cure, members consult with their pastors or prophets who conduct deliverance prayers in the name of Jesus Christ and prescribe the recitation of some Bible passages. Adamo (2004) cited in Dada (2010) reasoned that the Bible is used as means of protection, healing and success by the African Indigenous Churches. There is a strong quest for spiritual power through spiritual means to engage demons in spiritual warfare and cope with existential problems in AIPCs. Charismatic Pentecostal leaders hold the belief that they have been empowered to expel demons through rituals of spiritual warfare (Adelakun, 2021). Deliverance sessions are popular means of restoring health to sick members. The deliverance prayer is accompanied by laying-on of hands,

anointing with oil, use of mantle, prophetic declarations, faith confessions, and use of consecrated water – all in the name of Jesus Christ. Healing that results from this exercise is termed miracle in Christian traditions. Deliverance sessions are also held for preventive purposes.

Implications of Demonological Constructions

Positive Contributions

Faith healing provides emotional and spiritual support. Christians going through inexplicable health challenges are not left to resign to fate. Rather, they are emboldened to fight and destroy the works of demonic agents on their health through spiritual warfare. Belief in divine healing helps the sick to seek God and develop a relationship with God. Members of the church also serve as a support system; they stick together with prayers in solidarity with the sick. The doctrine on faith healing and casting out demons provide a sense of hope and resilience in the sick individuals. Faith serves as a coping mechanism for the demonically oppressed. Divine healing is a big relief to the poor and low income earners in Nigeria where cost of drugs and other medical services is beyond the reach of the poor. Healing through deliverance prayers comes without a cost to the sick, it is free. Western medical treatment requires consultation fee, payment for laboratory tests, surgeries and drugs. Those who sought and received divine healing are saved from these financial burdens. There are testimonies of cure of psychosomatic conditions through prayer and deliverance. Similarly, women suffering from barrenness and men with challenges of impotency have been prayerfully delivered and cured through spiritual warfare. It is also imperative to add that sicknesses that defied western medications have been miraculously healed by God through deliverance prayers. God is projected as the great physician, handling terrible and hopeless medical conditions. Most importantly, the doctrine and practice of divine healing attract new members to the AIPCs. Miraculous healing is used as an instrument for membership drive and retention.

Negative implications

As mentioned earlier in this study, the demonology of the AIPCs shapes the health behaviours of church member. Many do not take western medications while some delay in seeking medical interventions. It is important to add that the expected healing miracle do not occur in all cases. Some ailments that would have been nipped in the bud are left to take root in the body. Many lives that would have been cared for through medications have died needless deaths. Over dependence on divine healing can lead to false hope and unwarranted distrust of western medical treatments. Stigmatization of individuals perceived as spiritually or demonically afflicted is also a problem. Oftentimes, light-skinned and beautiful ladies are labelled as agents or members of marine spirits. If a lady experiences barrenness or delayed marriage and there are no breakthroughs after several deliverance sessions, she will be condemned as being responsible for her own misfortune. She is tagged as having spiritual husband and has delivered children in the marine world. Sometimes, family members or friends are stigmatized, they are perceived to be demonic agents responsible for the afflictions. Mothers and mother-in-laws are often accused of witchcraft practices that brought barrenness or incurable disease on their biological children or in-laws.

Some false prophets and pastors are using claims to supernatural powers to deceive and manipulate unsuspecting miracle seekers. Many health seekers have been financially duped or sexually harassed by fake pastors. Some have been lured and murdered for ritual purposes at spiritual homes or churches where they patronised for supernatural healing. Again, attributing the etiology of all diseases and sicknesses to demonic operations creates conflict of interest between religious beliefs and healthcare practices. Sicknesses that ought to be promptly taken to the hospitals are reported to pastors for deliverance. It is when deliverance does not yield the desired results that medical help is sought. While the doctors diagnose a cause of an ailment to be stress, lifestyle, or malnutrition, the pastors are linking it to demonic attacks.

Conclusion

From the analysis of this discourse, it is evident that African religious ideas on the etymology of diseases are similar to what is obtainable in the theologies of the newer African Independent Pentecostal Churches. It is admirable the way the AIPCs bring the word of God to relevance in precarious human conditions. There are evidences in the Old and New Testaments that the concept of demon was not alien to the people. The difference in the Bible times and the contemporary time is the degree of attention given to demonic operations by the contemporary Indigenous Pentecostals. The over emphasis of prosperity theology on the powers of the forces of darkness or demons is seemingly out of line. As pointed out by Oderinde (2009), Christianity should not be seen only as a means to secure protection against unknown evil forces and unexpected catastrophes. Profession of faith ought to be marked by the presence of corresponding moral obligations.

This study did not set out to prove or deny the presence of demonic forces in the world. The study rather argues that etiology of diseases is multifaceted and should not be hinged on only demonic influences. Life style of individuals, indiscipline social and health behaviour, poor management of public resources, poverty, and environmental factor predispose Africans to diseases and illness more than spiritual forces do. The recent removal of subsidies from petroleum products affected the prices of commodities. The cost of living has skyrocketed to the point that many can no longer afford balanced diets. This has also resulted in low immunity against diseases, causing an increase in illness and premature deaths (Though the Pentecostals still relate the economic woes to demonic oppression).

Recommendations

The study proposed the following recommendations based on its findings:

- There is need for the Pentecostals to lay more emphasis on other plausible causes of diseases and encourage their members to embrace righteous living.
- Over emphasis on demons and deliverance or exorcism should be reduced to avoid giving undue attention to the devil. The people of the Bible time prioritised obedience to God's commands, worship and living in sanctification over emphasising the operations of demons.
- Faith healing should not be allowed to replace critical medical interventions in cases of life threatening ailments and other emergencies.

- African Pentecostal Church leaders need to reappraise their doctrine on divine healing and encourage members to accept and use western medications. God is the source of the knowledge used in western medical practices.
- There is need for a robust synergy between faith-healing and western Medicare. There should be respectful discussions between the two sides. Hospitals can incorporate chaplaincy services and spiritual counseling alongside medications.
- The government should declare a state of emergency on healthcare delivery and access in Nigeria. Cost of treatment for common ailments like malaria or catarrh is out of reach for the poor in Nigeria. This is one of the reasons for the patronage of churches and other spiritual homes for divine interventions.
- Corporate organisations should also see investment in the health sector as part of their social responsibility concerns. The truth is that only the government may not be able to give the desired facelift to our health sector.

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