Diagnosis And Treatment Of Mental Illness By Vhavenda Traditional Healers In Vhembe District, South Africa

Salome Thilivhali Sigida
thili.sigida@gmail.com

Nare Judy Masola
Department of Psychology, University of Limpopo, South Africa

Abstract
In rural African communities, traditional healers hold an esteemed and powerful position in the diagnosis and treatment of various illnesses. They assume a significant role in addressing the mental health care needs of individuals by offering cultural appropriate treatment and they are easily accessible. This was a qualitative study, and specifically, the case study method was utilised. Ten traditional healers were chosen through purposive and snowball sampling to participate in the study. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using the thematic analysis method. The findings revealed that several procedures (like throwing of bones and direct observation of patient’s behaviours) are used to diagnose mental illness. The findings also revealed that mental illness can be treated through the use of traditional remedies and practices (like rituals). From the findings of the study, it can be suggested that both traditional medical interventions and some culturally relevant psychological procedures are used to treat mental illness. Increased cooperation between western oriented psychotherapists and African traditional healers is therefore highly recommended.

Key words: South African traditional healers, traditional remedies, treatment, diagnosis, mental illness.

Introduction
In different societies around the world, culture plays an important role in understanding how different groups construct health and illness (Zungu, 2013). In addition to this, every society develops its cultural way of managing illness (Mokgobi, 2014). In this regard, it has been indicated by Brandt and Rozin (2013, p.148) that, how society responds to disease reveals its deepest cultural, social and morals. It is, therefore worth noting that because the attainment of good health is intrinsically desirable; people in different parts of the world, more specifically people living in sub-Saharan
Africa utilise traditional healers for their healthcare needs, including mental health (James, Wardle, Steel, & Adams, 2018; Madu, Baguma & Pritz, 1997). Moreover, literature has shown that traditional healers play an important role in health care for the majority of South Africans. Interestingly, efforts towards achieving optimum health are as diverse as the social, cultural, economic, mental, spiritual, physical, and even political circumstances of the particular individual at any point in time (Zuma, Wight, Rochat & Moshabela, 2016).

In South Africa, especially in indigenous societies, it is estimated that between 60% and 80% of South African consult traditional healers and that these healers are frequently consulted for mental illness when compared to western-trained counterparts (Puckree, Mkhize, Mgobhozi & Lin, 2002; Truter, 2007). Thus traditional healer’s beliefs and medicine play an important role in the treatment of illness, this also includes the treatment of mental illness (Tomita, Burns, King, Baumgartner, Davis, Mtshemla, & Susser, 2015). Interestingly, traditional healers are geographically accessible and offer treatment that is similar to the culture of their patients (Burns, 2011; Tomita et al, 2015). They are the entry point for care in many African communities (Richter, 2003; Zungu, 2013). Ross (2010), also pointed out that the treatment of traditional healers is also used along with western treatment.

The various ways in which individuals conceptualize social circumstances reflect their fundamental belief and perspective on the world that gives their lives direction and motivation. In an unforeseen manner, perception is the source of reason for the way things are on the planet, including speculations about mental illness, death, misery, how human suffering is (Nwoye, 2011). Taking into account the assorted varieties in the human direction across social orders and societies, musings, thinking and methods for knowing about individuals inside these social orders likewise contrast from various perspectives, particularly from the predominant Western idea and thinking (Yidana, 2014). It is important to note that decisions about mental health and wellbeing and the possible interventions during illness episodes are often managed by the people’s belief structures (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). In this regard, individual and collective response to mental illness varies and reflects pertinent information, culture, and knowledge of aetiology, including the accessibility of treatment alternatives.

In some of the indigenous societies, knowledge and thoughts on issues relating to psychological wellbeing are supported, taking into account mending professionals’ capacity to develop and reproduce culture with the progression of time (Wuthnow, James, Albert, & Edith, 1984). As indicated by Thomas (1999), since illness is socio-culturally constructed, the ways people express their mental sicknesses gives knowledge into how they see the world just as sourcing potential mediations. As the training proceeds, the perspective stays genuine in abstract credibility as it is affirmed and reconfirmed without anyone else comparable to the social others (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

Even though literature shows the popularity of traditional healers, their roles and competencies are often criticized and belittle (Zuma et al., 2016). There is abundant evidence showing that in Africa,
illness representations are commonly constructed to emphasize external and uncontrollable supernatural factors" (Bogart, Wagner, Galvan & Banks et al., 2010, p.182). The importance of recognizing cultural belief systems and practices in dealing with mental health has been highlighted (Kubeka, 2016). In most African cultures a core belief is that diseases are due to a violation of cultural taboos or witchcraft (Mufamadi & Sodi, 2010). Whilst there is evidence to suggest that most people in rural communities consult with traditional healers for illness, including mental illness, there appears to be very little research that has been done to understand how traditional healers diagnose and treat mental illness. Based on the relatively fewer studies that have been conducted on this particular subject, the current study seeks to understand how traditional healers diagnose and treat mental illness at Vhembe District in Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Traditional healers as Spiritual and healing Specialists
An African traditional healer is characterized by the World Health Organization as an "individual who is perceived by the community in which he or she lives as competent to provide health care by using vegetable, animal and mineral substances and other methods based on the social, cultural and religious background, as well as on the knowledge, attitude and beliefs that are prevalent in the community regarding physical, mental and social well-being and the causation of disease and disability" (WHO, 2002). Thus, traditional healing is an effort to increase comprehension or vision into an inquiry or circumstance in a given network of sick individuals. It is a methodical procedure of sorting out what gives off an impression of being disengaged aspects of presence with the end goal that they give understanding into an issue close by and an answer thereof (Sambe, Abanyam, & Lorkyaa, 2013). Besides, this recuperating alludes to a lot of methodologies including the specialty of utilising custom or service to procure data from the soul world to anticipate the future and mend the psychological sick person. In some indigenous networks, this training is the principle methods for spotting purportedly profound issues and endorsing cures (Azongo & Abdulai, 2014). Customary healers who are thought to have otherworldly powers can recognize the ills influencing individuals and society and recommend cures from the gods and imperceptible world. In situations where afflictions manifest individually, useful separation gets worrying because of the arrangement of causal spirits as per the external manifestation of afflictions. In this manner, depending on the society and the current community, different meanings may be added to the same condition. As a result, diagnosis and course of action in such situations are often decided through divination. Subsequently, finding and strategy in such circumstances are frequently chosen through divination. While clinical specialists use machines to decide the reason for sickness, traditional healers utilize divination to decide the reason for tribulations and decide the treatment. In the cosmology of the nearby individuals, divination assumes a focal job in lay meetings to decide the correct
Overseeing mental illnesses of this nature concerning healers and the tormented exposes two significant perceptions drawn from the recuperating rehearses. The primary issue includes dependence on soothsayers to figure out which soul is liable for a specific issue. Under this condition, an assortment of otherworldly elements might be tended to thus use the profound lab to decide the soul liable for the pain (Sambe, Abanyam, & Lorkyaa, 2013). Per the cosmological set up of the individuals, this is the main way they can give the correct antitoxin. The subsequent perception includes the demonstration of distinguishing proof of the reason for the sickness and the mediations to be attempted. Although individuals would frequently contend that the training establishes a post hoc appraisal in that it is simply after an improvement in the state of the patient that a connection between what was at first hypothesized can be certified, one needs to endure at the top of the priority list that the training is a piece of their believability structure and its proceeded with training makes it genuine.

Research Methods

Study design: A qualitative research approach was best suited for this study as the focus was on understanding the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness by Vhavenda traditional healers.

Setting: The sample was recruited from Vhembe District in Limpopo Province South Africa.

Study population and sampling strategy: In total 10 participants (8 males and 2 females), aged between 35 years and 60 years were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to participate in the study.

Data collection: Data for this study was collected through the use of in-depth semi-structured one-to-one interviews. The interviews were conducted in Tshivenda a predominant language used by the participants. An interview guide was used to guide the discussions.

Data analysis: Data was analysed through thematic data analysis.

Ethical considerations: Before conducting the study, ethical clearance was requested from The University of Limpopo's Research Ethics Committee and also from the Vhembe Traditional Healers Association. After obtaining ethical approval and permission, the researchers commenced with data collection. The participants were assured of privacy and confidentiality.

Results and Discussion

From the findings of the study two themes emerged from data analysis; those are, (a) the diagnosis of mental illness and (b) the treatment of mental illness. The two themes are presented and discussed below in line with the previous findings.

Diagnosis of mental illness

Traditional healers use several procedures to diagnose mental illness. For example, the use of mufuvha or ṱhangu (divination bones) are common procedures that the traditional healers use to diagnose mental illness.

"...when we talk about mental illness to us as ńanga (traditional healers), it is when
we observe in this manner, firstly we throw bones and determine if it is related to mental illness”. [Participant 3]

"As nganga (traditional healers), we see through our bones that a person has a mental illness and what caused that mental illness." [Participant 6]

These findings are consistent with the findings of Buhrmann (1984) and Ngubane (1977), they reported that divination bones are used in other parts of Africa to diagnose illnesses. It was further pointed out by traditional healers in this study that mufuvha and thangu (divination bones) not only help to diagnose mental illness, they also help to inform traditional healers what caused the mental illness and the type of mental illness the patient might have.

"So we take mufuvha or thangu [divination bones] and throw them down and see what kind of mental illness the person has." [Participant 9]

Participants also mentioned that they can see that the person has mental illness through their behaviour, they further pointed out that the behaviour of the person with mental illness is different from the behaviour of other people. The following extracts express this notion:

"We can also see that a person has mental illness by his/her behaviour" [Participant 6]

"Ehh...that is why I mentioned that why I mentioned that sometimes you will see by action..." [Participant 8]

"Mental illness is when a person is behaving unusually. These things that...ehh...things that a normal person cannot do". [Participant 6]

"Maybe when we know that a person must live or think or his behaviour is different from other people" [Participant 7]

It could be suggested that mental illness is understood by participants as a condition that has some behavioural manifestations that are not considered normal within their social context. In other words, mental illness is understood and described in the context of the socio-cultural context of the individual affected. The participants went further and reported some of the behaviours that are not considered to be normal. These findings are supported by Mufamadi (2001), Mzimkulu and Simbayi (2006), Robertson (2006), who indicated that in many parts of Africa, mental illness is understood to be present when an individual shows behavioural signs and symptoms that are perceived to deviate from social norms. The participants also described some of the behaviours that are not considered normal:

“mental illness is...eh...like when you see a person playing with their fingers, pointing here and there, laughing alone, and also collecting dirty things" [Participant 8]

"From there the person will start talking alone or calling someone's name, or saying "I'm coming now", or "I didn't take everything" or "I will come tomorrow" then you will know that that person has a mental illness" [Participant 7]

The description of mental illness according to traditional healers interviewed in the study can be said to be linked to how mental illness is conceptualised in the academic literature. The American Psychiatric Association (2013) in particular, conceptualises mental illness as being a manifestation of a
behavioural, psychological or biological dysfunction in the individual.

**Treatment of mental illness**
Participants considered mental illness to be a condition that can be treated through traditional remedies and practices. The following extracts further express this understanding:

"Yes, they can be cured by u aravhedziwa dzi tsemo (steaming) and those things will come out and they will live a normal life just like everyone." [Participant 1]

"That person will be given some remedy to inhale and will be given some soft porridge and he will eat and be healed" [Participant 6]

Previous studies reported that traditional healers use different herbs to treat illness (Dlamini, 2006). It is estimated that there are over 300 medicinal plants that are used by traditional healers to treat illness (Rankoana, 2016; Truter, 2007). These findings are similar to Hadebe (1986) who reported that some traditional healers' intervention strategies include the use of namesis, anema, steaming, taking medicine nasally and vaccination. Dlamini (2006) also reported that herbal medicine is the most commonly used treatment method by traditional healers. Besides giving herbs to patients for the treatment of mental illness, it was also reported by the participants that certain curative rituals are performed to treat mental illness.

"So when a person has been done such things...it means that we must make some herbs and a wristlet and some water and he will go and call his ancestors under a big tree. And tell them to stay with him and those things that were cast to him to remain there. After that, he must bath his body and that means those things are gone." [Participant 4]

The above extract indicates that traditional healing not only aims at achieving physical treatment purposes but also the psycho-spiritual treatment (United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2006).

One participant reported that traditional healers acknowledge and recognise the role that can be played by other role players in mental health promotion as reflected in the extract below:

"But if such a person seeks help from people who can counsel him, people like pastors and fellow Christians such person can improve without any need for medicine." [Participant 3]

This means when traditional healers can see that they are unable to assist the patient in seeking the treatment they then refer or advise their patients to go religious healers such as pastors. Therefore, there is a need for closer cooperation between indigenous healers and other role players such as western trained health care practitioners and spiritual/faith healers.

**Conclusion**
In conclusion, the results of the study show that traditional healers occupy multiple roles, that is the role they play goes beyond healing using herbs. They also perform other healing practice such as the performance of curative rituals. Both traditional medical interventions and some culturally relevant psychological procedures are used to treat mental illness by traditional healers. This suggests that traditional healers play an important role
in medicine and psychotherapy at the same time in their communities. The authors therefore recommend increased cooperation between western oriented psychotherapists and African traditional healers.

References


