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Borderless Realms: Examining Healing Traditions, Cultivating Identity, and Cultural Resilience in Black Studies

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Abstract: *The study contends that amid the myriad challenges posed by globalization, modernity, racial discrimination, and global culture shifts, African Traditional Healing Art not only persists but thrives globally as a way of maintaining cultural identity in Africa and the Diaspora. Employing a robust textual analysis methodology, this research scrutinizes a diverse range of sources, including both local and international literature, and narratives. Through an interdisciplinary lens grounded in Black Studies, the paper aims to unveil the enduring strength and adaptability of African traditional healing art, demonstrating cultural resilience in the face of evolving global dynamics. The findings contribute valuable insights to the discourse on the intersectionality of healing traditions, identity cultivation, and cultural resilience in the expansive realm of Black Studies.*

Keywords: African Traditional Healing Art, Cultural Identity, Cultural Resilience, Black Studies

Introduction

In an ever-evolving global landscape marked by the influential forces of globalization, modernity, racial discrimination, and global culture shifts, the resilience of cultural identity stands as a testament to the enduring strength of black communities. Nowhere is this resilience more pronounced than in the realm of African Healing Art—a rich tapestry of practices, rituals, and wisdom that not only persists but thrives globally.

It is pivotal to note that these influencing forces have contributed positively to Africa, Africa, and the diaspora through diverse forms of development, ranging from advanced education, infrastructural development, and international relations. However, these forces have continually

attacked the African identity in these three areas: first, cultural heritage: where our cultural lives, values, customs, and traditions are considered primitive, barbaric, and uncivilized. Secondly, religion: that African traditional religion is concerned with the worship of idols. These assertions are basically from Western religions—Christianity and Islam, without acknowledging the fact that most adherents to these Western religions do seek help from African indigenous religions in times of desperate need. Thirdly, traditional medicine: has also been under constant attack by modern medical practitioners (Nabofa, 92-93).

With a focus on African traditional healing art, this study delves into the dynamics that have allowed African traditional healing art to weather the storm of challenges, emerging not as a relic of the past but as a vibrant force shaping cultural identities in both African and diaspora. The forces of globalization with their vast interconnectedness might suggest a homogenization of cultures, yet African Traditional Healing Art stands as a counter-narrative, asserting its significance as a global cultural touchstone. It is on this premise that the research adopts a rigorous textual analysis methodology, by scrutinizing diverse arrays of sources from local narratives and international literature to uncover the nuances that contribute to the enduring strength and adaptability of African traditional healing art, demonstrating cultural resilience in the face of evolving global dynamics

Embedded within the interdisciplinary lens of Black Studies, this exploration also seeks to contribute insights to the broader discourse on the intersectionality of healing traditions, identity cultivation, and cultural resilience within the expansive realm of Black Studies. In doing so, the paper aims to unveil a narrative of cultural continuity that persists and evolves, echoing through the ages and across continents.

Literature Review

The intersection of African traditional healing art and cultural resilience has become an increasingly critical area of study, particularly with the presence of globalization, modernity, and racial dynamics. African traditional healing art is a part of African traditional religion just like "...history, philosophy, poetry, psychology... various arms of the traditional government, ethics, economic and social activities..." (Awoniyi, 2). While this study identifies with the place of the healing art in African traditional religion, Allison and Independence observed that if African Traditional Religion does offer a basis for ethics and morals, trade-medical healing, and economic enhancement, then, the said religious tradition will have contributed something of immense value to contemporary Africa (114).

To understand the foundations of African traditional healing art, is it important to understand its historical roots. Many scholars have contributed to the discourse on African traditional healing. Scholars such as Mbiti (1970); Mashau (2016); Josephine (2019) and other contemporaries have offered rich insights into the rich tapestry of healing practices embedded in the cultural fabric of African societies. "Indigenous drugs, herbal medicine, and traditional *material medico* can only be understood through a combination of historical, ecological, economic, cognitive, and

pharmacological approaches...” (Leonti, 9). These healing traditions, dating back centuries have evolved in response to societal changes, needs, and external influences.

For globalization, it approaches African traditional healing with a subtle double-edged sword. On one hand, it has facilitated the dissemination of knowledge and practices beyond geographical boundaries (Appiah, 2016). This has made this practice a borderless one, as it has a global presence. On the other hand, globalization has presented challenges, such as the commodification of traditional healing practices and the potential erosion of cultural authenticity (Tuyen, 2023; 173). Modernization has also had a significant influence on the perception of traditional healing practices. The contending issues lie around the patronage of modern medicine and the subtle intent of no patronage of traditional healing practices. Thus, Okpewho, in his work on African literature explores the tensions between modern medical practice and indigenous healing, shedding light on how contemporary notions of health influence the dynamics between healers and their communities (2002). Indeed the central theme that emerged in the work of Toyin (2011) highlights where traditional healing practices have not merely survived but dynamically adapted to contemporary challenges, illustrating a form of cultural resilience that goes beyond mere preservation. A critical observation of his view, it is fair to say this cultural thread is thriving not just on the African soil but also in the diaspora.

In the realm of black studies, the works of Sunday and Onyeakazi (2021) among many other scholars have argued for a holistic understanding that integrates historical, sociological, and cultural perspectives, with emphasis on the need for interdisciplinary methodologies to unravel the complexities of these healing traditions.

While existing literature provides valuable insights, there are still notable gaps that warrant further exploration. Few studies delve into the lived experiences of specific ethnic groups or regions, leaving gaps in our understanding of cultural resilience through traditional healing art.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. The use of textual analysis and discourse were employed as methods. While the primary source is Stephanie Y. Mitchem’s text: *African American Folk Healing* (2007), examining the lived experiences of African Americans, the paper uses other scholarly articles as secondary sources for critical analysis. The methodology adopted for this research involves a comparative analysis of Africans in Africa and those in the diaspora. Utilizing this method will enrich our understanding of the enduring nature of traditional healing, cultural identity, and resilience across borders.

Discussion

The coexistence of globalization, modernity, racial discrimination, and civilization has persistently posed challenges to traditional healing art. Initially, Africans within their continental boundaries became cognizant of global trends, prompting a crucial shift towards active engagement in the

global arena for the sustainable development of Africa. Although these factors have a positive impact on the African space, they pose serious challenges to traditional healthcare practices. Despite the challenges attributed to these factors, traditional healing art continues to flourish. Additionally, “African American healing journey, it is essential for cultural strengths that preceded and followed the original injury of enslavement, and consequent racially based trauma, to be recognized and elevated” (Henderson, Stephens, Ortega-Williams, & Walton, 763).

Numerous scholarly works advocate for the exclusive adoption of modern medical practices, asserting that traditional medicine is perceived as less effective and lacks scientific validation. Nonetheless, these authors overlook the historical effectiveness of traditional medical practices that have proven their efficacy across generations, continuing to be a valuable heritage in our present era.

While experiencing “...racism along with migration from the South, African American culture served to construct black cultural territory and strengthened a sense of identity.” In an interview with Ms Essie, a 103 years old migrant on traditional healing, she said:

My grandmother was one of those people who could go out in the woods and get anything and cure you. We didn’t know anything about no doctors, all they had down there was horse doctors [and] they didn’t know anything but pulling a tooth. They just get those pliers and pull your teeth out and that’s it. But my grandma, honey, she knows what to do.

These healing practices show belief in the root cause of diseases. She recounts how her grandmother usually does when it comes to treatment. Aside from that, her perception of holistic healing is also born out of the fact that modern doctors are not as efficient as they should be. In her story, it was not just about the medical attention, but also, the racial discrimination as to the health attention given to people within the black communities.

Interestingly, another interviewee recounts:

Well, my father was something like an old root doctor. You would call and he used to burn shoe soles and sweet gum balls and things and make up different medications and I would watch him... My grandmother always had me following her through the woods looking for different berries and grasses and things, so I learned a lot from her too, because she lived to be 91 years old.

Derived from these shared narratives, the transmission of traditional medical knowledge spans across successive generations. The inclination to consistently return to our cultural roots is rooted in the inherent resilience embedded within the fabric of our culture. These dynamics align with and respond to the influences of modernity, racial discrimination, and globalization.

While these lived experiences resonate with Africans in the diaspora, individuals within the African continent share similar encounters. Across various literature and scholarly works on African traditional healing art, recurring themes advocating for the utilization of traditional healers include factors such as the “high cost of modern medicine,” “rapid recovery,” “holistic healing,” and “personalized care.” When viewed comparatively, elements such as “racial discrimination,” “high cost of modern medicine” and “holistic healing” among others serve as significant determinants for the persistent engagement and patronage of African traditional healing art among Africans in the diaspora. Additionally, “[t]hese themes—efficacy and the piracy of black healing practices—are reiterated throughout the accounts...” (Mitchem, 66).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has unravelled the intricate interplay between traditional healing practices, cultural resilience, and the multifaceted challenges posed by modernity, globalization, and racial dynamics. The narratives shared by Africans, both within the continent and in the diaspora, underscore the enduring efficacy of traditional medical knowledge passed down through generations. While there is a prevailing discourse advocating for the exclusive embrace of modern medical practices, this study affirms the persisting relevance and value of traditional healing art.

The act of consistently returning to cultural roots, as evidenced by the narratives explored, serves as a testament to the embedded resilience within the cultural fabric. Traditional healing practices, characterized by factors such as rapid recovery, holistic healing, and personalized care, present themselves as compelling alternatives in the face of the high costs associated with modern medicine.

Importantly, for Africans in the diaspora, factors like racial discrimination and the prohibitive cost of modern medical care stand out as critical determinants influencing the continued reliance on and patronage of African traditional healing art. The comparative analysis between these two contexts further emphasizes the nuanced ways in which traditional healing practices navigate the complex landscape of cultural preservation in the face of contemporary challenges.

As we navigate the dynamic tension between tradition and modernity, this research encourages a broader recognition and appreciation for the enduring strengths of traditional healing practices. It calls for a more inclusive dialogue that acknowledges the cultural resilience embedded within these practices and their continued significance in both local and global contexts. In doing so, we pave the way for a more holistic understanding of healthcare, one that integrates the wisdom of tradition with the advancements of modern medicine for the well-being of diverse communities.

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