

History of Traditional Healing Practices and Beliefs Among the Kusaasi

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the traditional healing practices and beliefs of the Kusaasi people in northern Ghana, with attention to their historical development, cultural significance, and the challenges they face in contemporary society. Rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, Kusaasi healing incorporates herbal medicine, spiritual rituals, divination, and ancestral reverence, functioning as a vital form of healthcare in rural communities where access to modern medical services remains limited. Despite their enduring importance, these practices are increasingly undermined by forces such as modernization, the spread of Islam and Christianity, exposure to Western education, and the growing dominance of biomedical systems. Using a combination of primary and secondary sources, including interviews with traditional healers, elders, and community members, this study documents and analyzes these healing traditions while situating them within the broader sociocultural and spiritual frameworks that sustain them. It argues for the preservation and integration of Kusaasi traditional healing into Ghana's national healthcare system, both as a strategy for cultural continuity and as a means of promoting more inclusive and accessible health delivery. By centering the perspectives of a historically underrepresented ethnic group, the research contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse on African indigenous knowledge, medical pluralism, and the coexistence of traditional and modern paradigms of healing.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional healing practices and beliefs have been used and understood for centuries worldwide, significantly influencing people's healthcare in treating diseases and addressing spiritual concerns. Traditional healing can be defined as a holistic health care system that relies on cultural beliefs, indigenous knowledge, and ancestral practices to promote physical, emotional, spiritual, and social well-being. It involves natural remedies such as herbs and medicinal plants, physical treatments like bone-setting and massage, as well as spiritual rituals, divination, and ceremonies designed to restore balance, dispel negative influences, and maintain harmony among individuals, their community, nature, and the spiritual realm. Traditional healing practices include options like natural remedies, spiritual rituals, divination, bone setting, and various physical treatments. These methods aim to cleanse evil spirits, treat illnesses, and appease ancestors or deities. According to Bielawski, traditional healing is a holistic system centered on health and wellness through natural methods of illness.¹

Traditional beliefs refer to inherited ideas, customs, and practices that shape people's behavior and understanding of the world, including beliefs in supernatural beings, ancestors, and spirits. In Africa, traditional healing practices drawing on these beliefs are widely used among various ethnic groups, such as the Zulu, Kikuyu, Yoruba, and Asantes, as essential remedies for health problems. Robert Audi defines belief as a central mental state that underpins both knowledge and justification, emphasizing that belief is not merely a passive acceptance of a proposition but an active cognitive stance. In his epistemological framework, belief can take different forms and is well-grounded in a source of justification, such as perception, memory, introspection, or rational intuition. This grounding makes beliefs rational by connecting them to evidence or experience.

¹ World Health Organization (WHO). Legal Status of Traditional Medicine and Complementary/Alternative Medicine: Worldwide Review. Geneva. (2001).

Furthermore, Audi's theory distinguishes foundational beliefs, justified directly by experience, from superstructural beliefs, which derive their justification from other beliefs. He also highlights that rationality involves responsiveness to experiential grounds, and the rationality of beliefs plays a crucial role in the structure of knowledge and justification in his fallibilistic foundationalism framework.²

In Ghana, traditional healing practices are deeply rooted both culturally and geographically, embraced by various ethnic groups such as the Asantes, Ewes, Ga, Dagomba, and many others. These practices involve the use of medicinal herbs and plants, including neem leaves, shea leaves, and baobab leaves, alongside ritual performances aimed at curing diseases and cleansing evil spirits. Traditional healers in Ghana have played a vital role in healthcare from antiquity to the present, reflecting a long and continuous historical tradition.

The development of traditional healing in Ghana has a rich historical background that predates the Stone Age. It is among the oldest medical systems in Africa, far older than some modern medical sciences.³ During colonial times, indigenous healing practices were often delegitimized and even banned; however, post-independence efforts led to the formal recognition and organization of traditional healers. Today, they operate within communities where their knowledge is respected, providing holistic health treatments that combine herbal medicine, spiritual healing, and ritual practices.

Herbal remedies are central to Ghanaian traditional medicine, with plants like neem, shea, and baobab valued not only for their physical healing properties but also for their spiritual significance. Ritual performances and spiritual cleansing are regularly integrated to address illnesses thought to be caused by spiritual afflictions or ancestral displeasure. Traditional healing, therefore, offers a comprehensive approach that treats the body, mind, and spirit, maintaining its importance alongside contemporary biomedical healthcare in Ghana.

This study aims to examine and investigate the history of traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi people in northern Ghana. The Kusaasi inhabit the area along the White Volta River, which is divided into two parts: the Agolle and Toende. They speak Kusaal, a language that belongs to the Gur language family, and primarily engage in peasant farming and animal rearing. The term "Kusaug" refers collectively to the territory occupied by the Kusaasi, which shares borders with the Nadam district (Frafra land) near the Tilli Forest, Windaag towards Togo, Zousi towards Burkina Faso, and Binaba to the Northern Region.

The Kusaasi live across six administrative districts: Bawku West (Zebilla), Bawku Central, Garu, Pusiga, Binduri, and Tempene. In the Kusaasi worldview, health, known as "alaafe," encompasses individual well-being, while disease is termed "wiime," and healing is referred to as "teibor." This study seeks to highlight and raise awareness of the traditional healing practices and beliefs held by the Kusaasi. Despite historical influences from European medical systems, Kusaasi traditional healing remains significant today. Thus, there is a need for its improvement and preservation with the potential goal of integration into modern healthcare systems.⁴

The findings aim to demonstrate how traditional healing continues to serve as a crucial aspect of health in Kusaasi communities, reflecting centuries of indigenous knowledge and practice that adapt alongside contemporary developments in health care.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Kusaasi people, an ethnic group residing in the Upper East Region of Ghana, have a rich cultural heritage that encompasses traditional healing practices. These practices, deeply rooted in their beliefs and customs, have been passed down through generations. The Kusaasi people's reliance on traditional healing is not only a reflection of their cultural identity but also a response to the inadequacies of modern health care systems in rural Ghana.

² Robert Audi, "Belief, Faith, and Acceptance," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 63, no. 1 (2008): 87–102

³ L. Natako, "Honouring the African Traditional Herbalist," *African Traditional Herbal Research Clinic Newsletter, Special Edition—HIV/AIDS 25 Years*, no. 10 (2006)

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45



Source: Abubakari Hadiyatu. A map of Kusaug: An Introduction to the Structure (unpublished monograph, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 2022)

Traditional medicine is a body of knowledge and practices used to diagnose, prevent, and treat diseases. It is often based on experience and observation passed down through generations, either orally in the form of stories, spiritually through ancestral guidance, or in modern times, through written records. This transmission ensures that traditional healing methods maintain continuity while adapting to cultural changes.⁵

Traditional healing practices among the Kusaasi involve a rich combination of spiritual, psychological, and physical elements. These practices are typically administered by traditional healers who are highly respected for their knowledge and expertise in diagnosing and treating various ailments. According to Sofowora, a traditional healer is a community member who provides medical care with herbs, minerals, animal parts, incantations, and other culturally based methods. Such healers must be competent, versatile, experienced, and trusted by their communities.⁶

The Kusaasi people's concepts of health and illness are deeply intertwined with their spiritual and cultural beliefs, which emphasize maintaining balance and harmony within the individual and the community. Despite the significance of these traditional healing practices, research specifically focusing on the Kusaasi remains limited. Most existing studies have focused on the medicinal properties of plant species used in healing, often overlooking the broader cultural and spiritual contexts in which these practices are embedded.

⁵ M.G. Mokgobi, "Understanding Traditional African Healing," African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance 20, Suppl. 2 (2014): 24–34.

⁶ Abayomi Sofowora, Medicinal Plants and Traditional Medicine in Africa, 1st ed. (Somerset, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1982), 55–62.

This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the beliefs and traditional healing practices of the Kusaasi people, highlighting their continued relevance in contemporary times, and underscoring the importance of preserving this indigenous knowledge for potential integration into modern healthcare.

Statement of the Research Problem

Despite the rich cultural heritage of the Kusaasi people, their traditional healing practices and beliefs face significant threats from modernization, Christianity, Islam, formal education, and biomedicine. These influences have contributed to the erosion of valuable cultural knowledge, medicinal wisdom, and traditional healing practices. Many young people in Kusaasi communities, especially those who have attained formal education or converted to Christianity or Islam, often perceive traditional healing as inferior to modern healthcare. However, not all diseases can be effectively treated with modern medical methods alone. Additionally, many traditional healers consult gods, ancestors, and spiritual forces for healing, practices that some youth regard as sinful or outdated.

Furthermore, there is a notable lack of documentation and scholarly research on the history, beliefs, and methodologies of Kusaasi traditional healing. This absence of records makes it challenging to trace the development, significance, and contemporary relevance of these practices, as well as to appreciate their potential contribution to the modern healthcare system.

This research seeks to fill this knowledge gap by exploring the history and evolution of traditional healing among the Kusaasi, investigating their methods of healing, examining the factors contributing to their decline, and advocating for the preservation and integration of traditional practices into modern healthcare. Such integration could enhance healthcare delivery by drawing on the strengths of both indigenous knowledge and biomedical science.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to delve into the history of traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi. The specific objectives of the study seek to;

1. Examine the history of traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi.
2. Identify the mode of traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi.
3. Investigate the decline of traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi.

Research Questions of the Study

To achieve the study's objective, the research aims to answer the following questions.

1. How have traditional healing practices among the Kusaasi evolved?
2. What are the modes of traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi?
3. What factors accounted for the decline of traditional healing practices among the Kusaasi?

Significance of the Research Paper

The traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi were a significant aspect of the culture and tradition of the people in history. This is because it provides us with insights into the healing traditions and health practices of the Kusaasi as a people. Traditional healing practices and beliefs are an integral part of the cultural heritage and identity of the Kusaasi people of Ghana. Despite the increasing influence of modern medicine, traditional healing practices continue to play a vital role in the health and well-being of the Kusaasi community.

This study aims to investigate the significance of traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi people, as well as their implications for health-care delivery, cultural preservation, and medical research.

Firstly, documenting traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi people is crucial for preserving their cultural heritage and identity. Traditional healing practices are often passed down from one generation to the next and are deeply rooted in the artistic and spiritual beliefs of the community. By studying these practices, we can gain a deeper understanding of the Kusaasi people's cultural values and beliefs, and contribute to the preservation of their cultural heritage.

Secondly, understanding traditional healing practices and beliefs can inform the development of culturally sensitive health-care programs that integrate traditional and modern medicine. Traditional healers play a vital role in the health-care delivery system of the Kusaasi community, and their practices are often more accessible and affordable than modern medicine. By recognizing the importance of traditional healing practices, we can develop health-care programs that are more effective and sustainable in the long term.

Thirdly, this study can contribute to the empowerment of traditional healers and promote their involvement in health-care delivery. Traditional healers are often marginalized and excluded from mainstream healthcare delivery systems, despite their valuable knowledge and skills. By recognizing the importance of traditional healing practices, we can empower traditional healers and promote their involvement in healthcare delivery, leading to more effective and sustainable healthcare outcomes.

Finally, this study can contribute to medical research and development by discovering new medicinal plants and healing practices. Traditional healing practices often involve the use of medicinal plants and other natural remedies, which can be effective in treating a range of health conditions. By studying these practices, we can discover new medicinal plants and healing practices that can be integrated into modern medicine.

LITERATURE/PRELIMINARY REVIEW

The use of traditional healing among the Kusaasi predates colonialism and is deeply embedded in their cultural, spiritual, and social systems. Before the advent of European influence and modern healthcare systems, the Kusaasi, like many other indigenous groups in Northern Ghana, relied on holistic healing practices that addressed not only physical ailments but also spiritual, environmental, and social imbalances. Both men and women could become traditional healers, and their work was often perceived as divinely inspired.

Chavunduka notes that African traditional medicine operates as a holistic system of care, generally categorized into three levels of specialization: divination, spiritualism, and herbalism. This framework reflects a common thread found among the Kusaasi, where ancestral intervention, the use of herbs, and spiritual rituals were central to healing. The Kusaasi believed that illness could originate from supernatural forces such as witchcraft, angry ancestral spirits, or environmental disharmony, and healing was understood as a communal and spiritual act, not merely a clinical one.⁸

Scholarly work on Ghanaian traditional medicine generally affirms that such healing systems continued to flourish despite colonial pressures. Evans, in his research on traditional medicine in Ghana, acknowledges the resilience and widespread use of herbal medicine, particularly in rural communities where biomedical facilities were scarce.⁹ Likewise, Foote provided a comparative study on training and practice distinctions between traditional and biomedical practitioners, arguing that indigenous knowledge systems often carried epistemological depth unrecognized by colonial or modern institutions.¹⁰

However, colonialism and missionary activity deeply impacted these practices. The 19th and 20th centuries brought about Christianization and Islamization of the region, resulting in a moral and spiritual critique of indigenous healing. The introduction of Western biomedicine was accompanied by colonial policies that

⁸ E. L. Chavunduka, *Christianity, African Religion and African Medicine* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990).

⁹ Evans, E. "Traditional Medicine in Ghana: Practice, Problems and Prospects," 1990.

¹⁰ K. N. Foote, *Traditional Medicine in Contemporary Ghanaian Society: Practices, Problems, and Future* (Accra, 1999).

delegitimized traditional healers, branding them as superstitious or unscientific.¹¹ As a result, many traditional practitioners were pushed underground or adapted their practices to coexist with, or respond to, foreign religious and medical systems.

Recent scholars have attempted to reclaim the value of traditional medicine by documenting and analyzing its enduring relevance. Akakpo, for example, investigated the state and practice of African traditional medicine among the Ewe of Ghana, uncovering contemporary challenges, such as regulatory neglect and generational disinterest, as well as prospects for integration into the national health system.¹² Although this work focuses on the Ewe, the findings resonate with the Kusaasi context, especially concerning the challenges posed by modernization and formal healthcare policies.

Abukari Kwame's ethnographic work on the Dagomba also serves as a comparative case, highlighting how local communities continue to embrace traditional healing based on trust, cultural familiarity, and spiritual alignment.¹³ However, limited scholarly works specifically address the Kusaasi's unique healing traditions, their spiritual cosmology, or how colonial and postcolonial transformations have altered their practices.

Another dimension often overlooked is the role of women in traditional healing. While the Kusaasi allowed both genders to serve as healers, scholarly attention has disproportionately focused on male practitioners. This gendered gap points to a broader historiographical silence about women's contribution to indigenous medicine in Northern Ghana and calls for gender-inclusive ethnographic studies.

Moreover, several Ghanaian scholars, including Isaac N. D., argue for the incorporation of indigenous healing systems into formal health policies, especially in areas where biomedical outreach remains limited.¹⁴ The spiritual, ecological, and communal grounding of herbal and spiritual healing practices offers a culturally responsive healthcare model increasingly recognized by institutions like the World Health Organization.

In summary, existing literature provides useful frameworks and comparative insight into traditional medicine in Ghana, but largely omits a detailed exploration of Kusaasi-specific practices. This research responds to that gap by focusing on the historical development, social significance, and ongoing evolution of Kusaasi traditional healing. It examines how colonialism, religious conversion, modernization, and national health policies have shaped these practices and argues for their preservation and potential integration into contemporary healthcare frameworks.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted within the Kusaug traditional area, specifically Googo, Yarigu, Tempene, Binaba, and its environs, and Pusiga, which comprises all the Kusaasi settled areas. For this research and the curiosity of arriving at the truth, the research data was collected from old women (birth attendants), traditional healers, two Tindanas, Soothsayers, nurses, old men, and questionnaires from students with the use of the research questions and a sample survey.

The research made use of both primary and secondary sources; the secondary sources include books, articles, and the primary sources constitute the data collected through the interviews and the questionnaires asked.

¹¹ Feierman, Steven, and John M. Janzen. *The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992; Tonda, Joseph. *Le Souverain Moderne*. Paris: Karthala, 2005.

¹² Samuel B., Akakpo. *The State and Practice of African Traditional Medicine among the Ewe of Ghana: Contemporary Challenges and Prospects*. Ho: University of Health and Allied Sciences, 2022. <https://noyam.org/journals/ehass/>

¹³ Abukari, Kwame. "Traditional Medicine and Healing among the Dagomba of Ghana." [Unpublished MA Thesis].

¹⁴ Isaac, N. D. *Ghanaian Indigenous Herbal Practices: The Use of Herbs*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Structure of the Research Study

Five chapters make up the organization or outline of the study:

Chapter one contains the research introduction, background, problem statement, aims, significance, research methodology, research questions, research objectives, structure of the research, and the literature review.

Chapter two discusses the history of traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi. In this chapter, literature related to the topic is examined to provide an academic foundation for the study. It comprises the origin of traditional healing among the Kusaasi, categories of healers, healing practices and rituals, the effects of colonialism and missionary activities, and the coexistence of traditional healing alongside contemporary medicine.

Chapter three discusses the mode of traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi. This chapter explores the modes of traditional healing among the Kusaasi in historical and ethnographic depth, drawing attention to how these modes operate, who performs them, and the cultural beliefs that underpin them.

Chapter four investigates the decline of traditional healing practices and beliefs among the Kusaasi. This chapter investigates the factors contributing to this decline, examining the intersections of colonial influence, missionary activity, modernization, formal education, and healthcare policy. It draws from oral testimonies, ethnographic observations, and historical records to trace the erosion of indigenous medical knowledge and its replacement or marginalization by biomedical systems and Christian doctrines.

Chapter five, which is the research final chapter, is made up of the summary, recommendation, and conclusion. This chapter outlines the main findings of the research, draws conclusions aligned with the objectives set, and attempts to provide actionable steps for the problems associated with the healing practices and beliefs of the Kusaasi. The goal is to show the importance of indigenous healing in relation to culture and to the evolution of healthcare among the Kusaasi in Northern Ghana.

1.9 Definition of Keywords and Terms

1. **Traditional healing** can be defined as a holistic system of health care that draws on cultural beliefs, indigenous knowledge, and ancestral practices to address physical, emotional, spiritual, and social well-being. It involves natural remedies such as herbs and medicinal plants, physical treatments like bone-setting and massage, as well as spiritual rituals, divination, and ceremonies aimed at restoring balance, cleansing negative influences, and maintaining harmony between individuals, their community, nature, and the spiritual world.
2. **Traditional healing practices** encompass natural remedies, spiritual rituals, divination, bone-setting, and other physical treatments used to cleanse evil spirits, treat diseases, and appease the ancestors or gods. According to Bielawski & Dawn M., traditional healing encompasses a variety of holistic practices aimed at promoting health and wellness through natural methods.
3. **The World Health Organization (WHO)** defines traditional medicine as the sum of knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used for maintaining health as well as the prevention, diagnosis, improvement, or treatment of physical and mental illnesses.
4. **Traditional beliefs** are the inherited ideas, customs, and practices that guide the behavior and understanding of the world, including beliefs in supernatural beings, ancestors, and spirits.
5. **The Kusaasi** are a group of people who lived along the white Volta, which is divided into two parts, the Agolle and Toende, and speak “Kusaal,” which is a “Gur” language family as their indigenous language. They are mostly peasant farmers and animal rearers. “Kusaug” is a unified term referring to the territory

occupied by the Kusaasi, which shares borders with the Nadam district (Frafra land) at the Tilli Forest, Windaag to Togo, Zousi to Burkina Faso, and Binaba to the Northern region.

6. **A traditional healer** is a person who is recognized by the community in which he lives as competent to provide healthcare using vegetable, animal, and mineral substances and certain methods based on social, cultural, and religious background as well as on the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that are prevalent in the community regarding physical, mental, and social well-being and the causation of diseases and disability.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional medicine is part of the health care system in most African communities, the Kusaasi people of Northern Ghana being no exception. It is a healing system based on indigenous knowledge, passed down through generations, and deeply rooted in spiritual and cultural beliefs. This chapter reviews relevant literature established to provide an academic foundation for the study. It comprises the origin of traditional healing among the Kusaasi, categories of healers, healing practices and rituals, the effects of colonialism and missionary activities, and the coexistence of traditional healing alongside contemporary medicine. Traditional healing among the Kusaasi predates colonial influence; it is as old as their existence. And with many indigenous groups in West Africa, the Kusaasi approach to health and illness is holistic, integrating physical, spiritual, and social dimensions.¹⁶ Oral histories and ethnographic accounts reveal that healing knowledge was traditionally passed down through healers and families, ensuring continuity of indigenous knowledge.¹⁷ Among the Kusaasi, healing is deeply embedded in the spiritual worldview of the people, which perceives health as a state of balance between the natural, human, and supernatural realms. Illness among the Kusaasi is often attributed to spiritual causes such as the wrath of ancestors, malevolent spirits, witchcraft, or violation of taboos. Also, Abdullahi says that, according to him, illness is often attributed to disruptions in these relationships, manifesting physically as symptoms but rooted in spiritual or social causes such as ancestral displeasure, witchcraft, or violations of taboos.¹⁸ Healing, therefore, involves rituals aimed at restoring harmony with these forces. The ecological landscape of the Kusaasi also influenced their knowledge of traditional healing. The Kusaasi enclave is surrounded by forest and medicinal flora, or plant species, used to treat ailments such as malaria, skin diseases, infertility, and gastrointestinal problems.¹⁸ Herbal knowledge is often encoded in local proverbs, folklore, and rituals, forming part of the community's oral tradition and social memory.¹⁹

Origin of Traditional Healing among the Kusaasi

The origins of traditional healing among the Kusaasi are closely tied to their ancestral heritage and deep spiritual beliefs. Long before the advent of Western medicine and colonial rule, the Kusaasi developed and refined systems of health care based on local ecological knowledge, oral traditions, and a cosmology that recognized the influence of spiritual forces on human well-being. These early healing systems were holistic, addressing not only physical symptoms but also the spiritual and social dimensions of illness. Apamlea, an interviewee, indicates that traditional healing within the Kusaasi is ancient and that God, by creation, gave man (their ancestors) the wisdom and knowledge at birth to identify medicinal plants or herbs in the multiple areas within their locality for the treatment of diseases. He added that these herbs were used and tested based on recommendations, experience, and examination.

¹⁶ C. Oppong, "Indigenous Healing Practices and Cultural Beliefs among the Kusaasi of Ghana," *International Journal of Africa Studies* (2015).

¹⁷ Albert K. Awedoba, *An Ethnographic Study of Ghanaian Healing Traditions* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2013).

¹⁸ Abdullahi, A. A. (2011). *Traditional Medicine in Africa: An Appraisal of Ten Potent African Plants*. *African Journal of Traditional, Complementary, and Alternative Medicines*.

¹⁸ Daniel K. Abbiw, *Useful Plants of Ghana: West African Uses of Wild and Cultivated Plants* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1990).

¹⁹ Josephine Ozioma, Ezekwesili-Ofili, and Okaka Antoinette Nwamaka Chinwe. 2019. 'Herbal Medicines in African Traditional Medicine'. *Herbal Medicine*. IntechOpen. doi:10.5772/intechopen 80348.

Central to Kusaasi traditional healing is the belief in supernatural causation of diseases. Illness was not viewed purely as a biological or physical malfunction but was often interpreted as the result of spiritual imbalance, ancestral displeasure, or the actions of malevolent forces such as witches or evil spirits. Consequently, healing required more than herbs and medicine; it demanded spiritual diagnosis, divination, and rituals to restore harmony between the afflicted individual, their community, and the spiritual world.

Akolbugri, an interviewee, indicates that transmission of healing knowledge among the Kusaasi was typically oral and intergenerational. Elders, grandparents, and particularly experienced healers passed down their knowledge to chosen apprentices through long periods of observation, mentorship, and initiation. This process ensured that the healer not only acquired technical knowledge of herbs and treatments but also internalized the ethical and spiritual responsibilities of the role.

Furthermore, the relationship between humans and the natural environment formed the basis for herbal medicine among the Kusaasi. The land, with its rich flora, was a sacred repository of healing power. (Nana One) John, a traditional healer in Googo, indicated that not all herbs or plants are used for healing or treatment of ailments, but those plants, trees, and roots that are suitable for the treatment of ailments were carefully studied and harvested by their ancestors in accordance with cultural taboos and spiritual guidelines. And added that certain herbs could only be collected at dawn or under the guidance of a spiritual figure, reflecting the belief that nature itself was imbued with spiritual potency.

The Kusaasi also believed in the protective and healing power of ancestral spirits. Ancestral shrines and family deities were often consulted in times of illness, and rituals such as libations and animal sacrifices were performed to appease the ancestors or seek their guidance. In this way, healing was not only a personal concern but also a communal and spiritual responsibility.

Also, traditional healing in the Kusaasi societies is religious and follows ancestral knowledge systems. Health, for the Kusaasi, is maintained in a state of equilibrium among the individual, nature, the community, and the spirit world. Disease, therefore, is not merely physical but a sign of spiritual or social disequilibrium.²⁰

Among the Kusaasi, healers are typically divined into the practice by ancestral spirits through visions, dreams, or inexplicable illnesses that are only relieved by adopting the spiritual calling.²¹ Traditional knowledge is typically passed down from one generation to another through oral tradition, apprenticeship, and spiritual initiation. Healers are not just respected for their healing powers but also for their wisdom and spiritual connectedness.

Mbiti contextualizes this religious foundation of healing in African societies within a broader cosmology, where ancestors are actively involved in the lives of the living.²² In the case of the Kusaasi, this belief is reflected in the reverence given to sacred groves, rivers, and ancestral shrines (*baga*), where rituals and sacrifices are performed with a view to maintaining or restoring health.

Categories of Traditional Healers

Traditional healing among the Kusaasi is practiced by various specialists with different roles played in the community. They included the herbalists, diviners, spiritualists, and bone setters. Among the Kusaasi, traditional healers are highly respected figures who perform essential roles in maintaining the health and spiritual balance of individuals and communities. Their authority is not solely derived from their knowledge of herbs or medical techniques but from their perceived connection to the spiritual world and ancestral wisdom. Traditional healers are not a homogeneous group; rather, they occupy various specialized roles based on their skills, spiritual gifts, and training. A traditional healer is a person who is recognized by the community in which he lives as competent to provide healthcare using vegetable, animal, and mineral substances and certain methods based on social,

²⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990).

²¹ Razak M. Gyasi, L. P. Siaw, and Charlotte M. Mensah, "Public Perceptions of the Role of Traditional Medicine in Health Care Delivery in Ghana," *Global Journal of Health Science* 8, no. 6 (2016): 47–57.

²² *Ibid*

cultural, and religious background as well as on the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that are prevalent in the community regarding physical, mental, and social well-being and the causation of diseases and disability.²³ Among the Kusaasi, traditional healers are regarded with the dignity of knowledge and values; they occupy an important place in the socio-political systems in societies and participate fully in decision-making with the chiefs. Healers are regarded as custodians of cultural knowledge and employ methods that integrate physical and spiritual health, reflecting a holistic understanding of well-being.²⁴ Also, traditional healers known locally as “*Bagabug/Bugunaab*” play a dual role as both herbalist and spiritualist. Their knowledge is typically inherited through or received via spiritual calling, often by dreams, illness, or divine revelation. Twumasi, these healers utilize a mixture of divination, herbal medicine, incantations, and ritual sacrifice to diagnose and treat illness.²⁵ Mangoro M.D. defines traditional healers as established healthcare providers within their respective communities.²⁶ *Alale*, a healer and an interviewee, defines a healer as a person who, through the wisdom of God, can identify useful medicinal plants for the treatment of diseases and argues that knowledge of healing is divinely gifted to an individual. *Adunku*, a soothsayer, also defines a healer as someone with the gift and the power of healing and adds that not everyone can be a healer; healing from creation is given as a gift to someone or families or lineages with the knowledge to heal using herbs, tree bark, etc.

Herbalists (Yangdaag)

Herbalists are perhaps the most common and widely recognized type of traditional healer among the Kusaasi. Their primary function is to treat physical ailments using natural remedies derived from plants, roots, bark, and other organic substances. Herbalists possess an extensive knowledge of the local flora and an understanding of how to prepare and administer medicines for various conditions such as fever, wounds, stomach disorders, snakebites, and reproductive health issues. Among herbalists, the preparation of medicine is an intricate process that blends empirical knowledge with spiritual awareness. Herbs are selected based on their known properties and spiritual associations. Remedies may be prepared as decoctions (boiled plant extracts), infusions (steeped leaves or roots), poultices (applied to the skin), and powders or ashes (administered orally or through inhalation). The gathering of herbs is itself a ritual. Healers often perform prayers or make offerings before collecting plants, especially when harvesting from sacred groves or trees. The timing of collection, such as during dawn, a full moon, or specific days of the week, is also believed to affect the potency of the medicine. Medicines are administered not only to treat visible symptoms but also to restore balance in the patient’s body, spirit, and environment. Some remedies are accompanied by chants or incantations, believed to activate the medicine’s spiritual power.

The skills of an herbalist are often passed down through family lines, with knowledge accumulated over generations. Apprenticeship is a critical part of becoming an herbalist, and it typically involves years of studying under an expert healer. Herbalists also observe strict taboos and rituals related to the collection and use of medicinal plants. For instance, certain herbs may only be harvested during specific times of the day or in conjunction with spiritual rites to ensure their potency. Awedoba, A. (n.d), defines an herbalist as a practitioner skilled in identifying and preparing medicinal plants endemic to the region. Their knowledge includes the properties, preparations, methods, and dosages of various herbs for treating ailments ranging from malaria to digestive disorders.

Herbalists are experts in the application of medicinal plants and natural products for the treatment of bodily maladies. They have extensive ecological knowledge of nature and utilize parts of plants’ roots, leaves, bark, and seeds to make medicines for diseases such as fever, wounds, barrenness, and digestive problems.²⁷ Herbal

²³ World Health Organization (WHO), 1978. Primary Healthcare: Report of the International Conference on Primary Healthcare - Alma-Ata USSR, 6-12 September 1978 WHO- UNICEF

²⁴ Jimenez-Gomez, A. & Munjuluni, S.J.: Use of Traditional and Folk Remedies and Traditional Therapeutic Strategies

²⁵ Peter A. Twumasi, Medical Systems in Ghana: A Study in Medical Sociology (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1975).

²⁶ M. D. Mangoro, M. A. Masoga, and M. A. Mearns, “Traditional Health Practitioners’ Practices and the Sustainability of Extinction-Prone Traditional Medicinal Plants,” International Journal of African Renaissance Studies: Multi-, Inter-, and Transdisciplinary 5, no. 2 (2010): 229–241.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 47-57

medicine is the most widely practiced type of traditional treatment among the Kusaasi because of its affordability and accessibility.

Diviners (Bagkoluk/Bugunaab)

Diviners, also known as soothsayers or spiritual healers, occupy a unique position in Kusaasi society. Unlike herbalists, their primary focus is on diagnosing the spiritual causes of illness. They use methods such as divination, spirit possession, and consultation with deities or ancestors to uncover hidden forces affecting a person's health or fortune. The services of diviners are often sought when an illness is persistent, mysterious, or believed to be caused by supernatural factors such as witchcraft or a curse. Divination means consulting the spirit world; it is a method by which information concerning an individual or a circumstance of illness can be obtained using randomly arranged symbols to gain healing knowledge. It is viewed to access information that is normally beyond the rational mind; it is a transpersonal technique in which diviners base their knowledge on communication with spiritual forces such as ancestors, spirits, and deities.²⁸ Chavunduka reported that diviners communicate with the spirits when in a state of possession, conveying the demands of ancestors and reasons for their dissatisfaction.²⁹

Diviners are usually believed to have received a spiritual calling, which often manifests through dreams, visions, or illnesses that cannot be cured through conventional means. Once the individual accepts their calling, they undergo training and initiation, which may include isolation, fasting, and spiritual instruction. The diviner's role is not only to diagnose illness but also to prescribe appropriate rituals, sacrifices, or cleansing ceremonies to resolve the issue. Karim et al. explain that diviners' specialty is divination within the supernatural context through the culturally accepted mediumship with ancestral spirits; they are the most important intermediaries between humans and the supernatural. Diviners serve as an interface between the physical world and the spiritual world. Diviners, through mechanisms such as cowrie shell casting, trance, and ancestral consultation, disclose hidden etiologies of illness ordinarily brought about by witchcraft, spiritual attacks, or taboo violation. Diviners are only necessary if an illness persists despite herbal treatment, which is an indication of a supernatural cause.³⁰

Spiritualists

Spiritual healers treat spirit possession, curses, and cleansing. Their therapies include exorcism, spiritual bath rituals, and the utilization of talismans or protection charms (baga) to ward off evil. They are consulted for psychosomatic ailments and mental health conditions, often misunderstood by biomedical practitioners.³¹ Spiritual healers, these practitioners conduct ceremonies to appease the gods or ancestors believed to control health and the future.

Bone Setters

Another important category of healers among the Kusaasi includes traditional bone setters, who specialize in treating physical injuries, fractures, and dislocations. This form of healing requires practical skill, anatomical knowledge, and sometimes herbal ointments to aid in pain relief and recovery. Bone setters are typically called upon when someone suffers trauma from accidents, falls, or injuries sustained during physical labor. Amos, a traditional bone setter, and an interviewee share his knowledge that bone setting is both spiritual and physical in terms of the Kusaasi belief system, indicating that when a person is injured or has a fracture, the first person to contact is a soothsayer who will use the cowrie shells to identify the root cause of the accident: either there is a spiritual connection or just an ordinary accident without any spiritual involvement. From there, the healer then consults his gods by pouring a libation and indicating that such a person has been brought for healing, and the

²⁸ Jacob K. Olupona, "Owner of the Day and Regulator of the Universe: Ife Divination and Healing among the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria," in *Divination and Healing: Potent Visions*, ed. Michael Winkelman, and Philip M. Peek (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2004), 225–238.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

³⁰ . Salifu, Karim, et al. (2017). *Divination and Health Seeking Behavior among the Dagomba of Northern Ghana*. University of Ghana

³¹ Kleinman, A. (1980). *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press and Atuahene. F. (2020). *The Role of Belief Systems in Indigenous Healing Practices*. Accra: Ghana Institute of Ethnographic Research

real commencement of the healing process. The treatment involves breaking a leg of a hen for three days for a male and four days for a female; when the broken leg is healed within the set days, it means there is no spiritual involvement in the accident, and it is also believed that the individual will go through healing safely.

Though their work is more physical than spiritual, bone setters are still respected for their healing abilities and are often consulted before patients seek help from hospitals. In many rural areas, they remain the primary option for musculoskeletal issues, especially when access to modern health facilities is limited.

Bone setters treat fractures, dislocations, and muscle injuries using traditional techniques and natural materials. They do not utilize X-rays or anesthesia but administer herbal ointments, massage, and splints made of bamboo or local materials. Despite the lack of formal education, they are more reliable than hospitals as far as setting broken bones is concerned.³²

Traditional Healing Rituals and Practices

Healing in the Kusaasi is complex; rituals are reflective of their religious beliefs. Healing is both physical and religious, with a perspective to appease ancestral spirits and nature. Awine, an interviewee, defines rituals (malaama), which means all the processes that are undertaken by individuals, healers, etc., whether spiritual or performative, to appease the gods and restore life. It is performed on several occasions, including festivals, childbirth, healing, funerals, etc., involving libation and other offerings to the gods. Rituals, according to Gyasi, include offerings of animals or libations to restore spiritual balance.

Ritual Sacrifices and Offerings

Sacrifices are a critical component of healing. Fowls, goats, or sheep are offered as sacrifices to appease ancestors or gods. The sacrifices are performed at the family shrines, sacred groves, or ancestral compounds to seek forgiveness or to regain health.³³ Akpabil, the Tindana of Yarigu, said ritual sacrifice is performed at the supreme deity (Bugar) of every community if the problem is a calamity befallen on the community and made reference to the 1990s chickenpox and measles spread, which attacked the community, and they needed to appease the gods for their wrongs against the infectious disease, and when it attacked an individual, then the head of the family consulted the gods and soothsayers. These consultations require the performance of libation to the gods. According to him, libation in the Kusaasi context involves pouring of liquid, either water, pito (local gin), animal blood, or a mixture of water and flour, or any of these, to the gods as a way of asking or praying to the gods and making their request known to them. Adjaye contends that libation involves the pouring of some liquid, mostly local gin, on the ground or sometimes on objects, followed by the chanting or reciting of words; it is usually regarded as a form of prayer. The liquid could also be water or modern times wine, whisky, schnapps, or gin. Some cultures use palm wine, palm oil, and coconut water, while others use corn flour mixed with water.³⁴

Purification and Cleansing Rites

Ritual cleansing and purification are a healing process, which requires the sick person to bathe at specific times for a prescribed number of days, either with water or animal blood poured from head to toe. This practice is common among some communities in Ghana.³⁵ Ayeebo indicated that in Kusaal, purification and cleansing means “winpiid,” which is done purposefully to appease the gods for misfortunes, failures, cures, or evil spirits and ensure the individual reconnects with the spirits, their gods, and ancestors. And that, during purification and cleansing, the individual goes through some processes, including clearing of hairs, eating in an isolated place,

³² Peter. A. Twumasi (2005). *Medical Systems in Ghana: A Study in Medical Sociology*. Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation

³³ Abdullahi, A.G. & Fuseini, I. (2019). *Traditional Medicine and healthcare in Northern Ghana: A cultural perspective*. *Journal of African Studies*.

³⁴ Joseph K. Adjaye, “The Performativity of Akan Libations: An Ethnopoetic Construction of Reality,” *Ghana Studies* 4, no. 1 (2001): 107–138.

³⁵ Westerland, D. (2006). *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation*, Leiden. Brill. N.V.

and bathing with animal blood or cooked herbs, and on the specific day, the soothsayer is responsible for carrying out the process, and sometimes the process includes the process of singing traditional songs or playing the local guitar (gogiin). Mporka, a female interviewee, indicated that when one spouse dies, the widow or widower goes through a purification and cleansing process on the final day of the funeral rites to chase evil spirits and ghost spirits away.

Patients believed to be spiritually sick are led through purification rituals. These may include bathing in herbal decoctions, ritual washing with holy water, or anointing with ritual oils. These rituals assist in removing negative energies and prepare the patient for spiritual healing.³⁶

Use of Sacred Objects and Places

Sacred rivers, groves, baobab trees, and ancestral rocks are part of healing rituals. Nature is not merely a resource but a spiritual being that needs to be revered. Healing charms, amulets, and ritual devices are created by healers and worn to prevent disease or misfortune.³⁷

Preventive healing is also an important aspect of Kusaasi traditional medicine. Healers often provide protective charms (zang) or amulets (bom) to ward off spiritual harm or disease. These items are believed to possess mystical powers and are usually worn on the body, hidden in clothing, or buried around homes and farms. Charms may be made from herbs, bones, animal parts, carved wood, or inscribed pieces of leather. They are typically “activated” through ritual invocation or prayer, imbuing them with protective energy. Parents may request charms for children, travelers may carry them for protection, and farmers may place them in fields to prevent crop failure. Some charms are designed to detect or repel witchcraft. Others are made specifically for warriors, hunters, pregnant women, or those engaging in risky activities.

Healing through Symbolism

Certain healing rituals are communal rather than individual. These include seasonal festivals, mass purification, or cleansing ceremonies following community-wide misfortunes such as droughts, epidemics, or unexplained deaths. During such events, entire villages may gather for rituals led by senior healers, diviners, or earth priests. These ceremonies typically involve drumming, dancing, spiritual possession, and feasting. They aim to restore social harmony and spiritual equilibrium, reaffirming communal values and ancestral connections. In many ways, communal healing acts as a social glue, strengthening collective identity and cultural continuity.

Music, drumming, chanting, and storytelling are used to invoke ancestral spirits and restore healing. These symbolic activities reinforce communal identity and provide psychological relief, especially for ailments linked with anxiety or stress.³⁸ To appease the gods, if a disease is perceived to be caused by an innovation of a curse or violation of taboos, the diviner appeases the gods, ancestors, or the spirits according to the severity of the case. The individual is often required to provide certain items for sacrifice or libation, such as spotless animals such as doves, cats, dogs, goats, and fowl; pito; kolanuts; eggs; plain white water; and red or black cloth. The gods usually specify these items. The used items may be thrown into the river, left to rot, or placed at strategic places, usually at crossroads at the outskirts of the community, depending on the severity and nature of the case.³⁹

Gender and Healing Roles

Gender plays a nuanced role in traditional healing among the Kusaasi. While both men and women can become healers, certain roles are more commonly associated with one gender. For instance, women often serve as

³⁶ Francis Atuahene, *The Role of Belief Systems in Indigenous Healing Practices* (Accra: Ghana Institute of Ethnographic Research, 2020).

³⁷ Razak M. Gyasi, E. Tagoe-Darko, and C. M. Mensah, “Medical Pluralism in Ghana: Analysis of the Use of Complementary and Alternative Medicine,” *Journal of Health Research* 2016.

³⁸ Keller, R. (2001). *missionary Medicine and indigenous Healing practice: The Collision of Worldviews in Colonial Africa*. *International Review of Mission*.

³⁹ Timothy Insoll, “Talensi Animal Sacrifice and Its Archaeological Implications,” *World Archaeology* 42, no. 2 (2010): 231–244.

midwives, herbalists for female reproductive health, and caretakers of domestic rituals. Men, on the other hand, take on roles as diviners or spirit mediums, particularly in public or communal rituals. However, exceptions exist, and spiritual calling is often seen to transcend gender boundaries. Apamlea, an interviewee, contends that women play a crucial role in Kusaasi communities in the perspective of healing; female healers either acquired the knowledge from grandparents, parents, or experienced healers where they had served in the past; females in Kusaasi society could become soothsayers, diviners, herbalists, etc.; and that women played several roles, including traditional birth attendants and treatment for barrenness, menstrual pains, and severe stomach ache in children, and they always referred to the Kusaasi as “Hair.”

The recognition and respect accorded to healers are deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual norms of the Kusaasi. Regardless of their specialization, all traditional healers serve as custodians of knowledge, culture, and spiritual balance, ensuring the continuity of their people’s health and beliefs. Amos was concerned that women in traditional healing have some limitations and that some gods, spirits, or deities do not like “dirt.” The dirt in this context refers to the things or acts that will reduce the power of performance of the gods. Therefore, women during their menstrual periods cannot go close to such deities or gods, which poses a limitation to women, and some deities or spirits forbid cooking, which is another prime responsibility of women in households and marriages, which is also another significant challenge for women or female healers within the Kusaasi communities.

Influence of Colonialism and Missionary Activities

The traditional healing systems of the Kusaasi, like those of many African societies, were significantly affected by the arrival of European colonial powers and Christian missionaries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These external forces introduced Western medical practices, new religious ideologies, and legal frameworks that challenged the legitimacy and authority of indigenous healers. While traditional healing did not disappear, it underwent significant changes, some suppressive, others adaptive, as Kusaasi society navigated this period of transformation. British colonialism and Christian missionaries in Northern Ghana significantly interrupted traditional healing. Colonial authorities attempted to replace indigenous medicine with Western biomedicine, declaring local healers to be either superstitious or dangerous.⁴⁰ Missionaries condemned rituals, sacrifices, and shrine worship as pagan and attempted to convert healers or drive them underground. The colonial encounter significantly disrupted the practice and perception of traditional healing among the Kusaasi. British colonial authorities, guided by biomedical models and Eurocentric epistemologies, generally dismissed African healing systems as primitive and unscientific.⁴¹ Colonial health policies prioritized the introduction of Western medicine while criminalizing or sidelining indigenous practices. Ordinances such as the Native Customs Regulation Ordinance restricted ritual healing and labeled some practices as “witchcraft”.⁴² Missionary activities further deepened these disruptions. Christian missionaries viewed traditional healing, especially shrine worship and spirit consultations, as idolatrous and in need of eradication. Churches established mission hospitals and dispensaries in northern Ghana, often urging converts to abandon traditional remedies and spiritual rituals.⁴³ As a result, some healers were forced to operate in secrecy or combine Christian symbols with traditional rituals in a form of religious syncretism.

However, the resilience of Kusaasi healing traditions should not be underestimated. Many communities-maintained healing shrines and ritual specialists even under colonial suppression. Oral testimonies from elders suggest that traditional ceremonies were often held discreetly at night or under the guise of family gatherings.⁴⁴ Furthermore, some colonial officers, particularly district officer’s familiar with local customs, acknowledged the effectiveness of traditional remedies, especially where Western medicine was inaccessible.

⁴⁰ Keller, R. (2001). missionary Medicine and indigenous Healing practice: The Collision of Worldviews in Colonial Africa. International Review of Mission.

⁴¹ Vaughan, M. (1991). Curing Their Ills: Power and African Illness. Stanford University Press.

⁴² John S. Pobee, Toward an African Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

⁴³ Meyer, B. (1999). Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana. Edinburgh University Press.

⁴⁴ Steve Tonah, The Politicization of a Chieftaincy Conflict: The Case of Dagbon, Northern Ghana, Nordic Journal of African Studies 21, no. 1 (2012): 1–20.

Twumasi continues that the period led to the suppression and marginalization of traditional medical systems. However, the majority of Kusaasi societies continued traditional healing secretly or transformed their practices to avoid confrontation with Christian authorities.⁴⁵

Syncretism of a sort developed where individuals would consult both traditional and Christian religious leaders. For example, one might attend church and visit a diviner, a case of dual religious affiliation. The persistence of traditional healing is reflective of its deep roots in social life and cultural identity.⁴⁶

Integration and Co-existence of Traditional and Modern Medicine

Ghana now has a dual system of healthcare consisting of both modern and traditional healing. Both the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization (WHO) have recognized the significance of traditional medicine, especially for underserved and rural populations. Ghana's Traditional Medicine Practice Act (Act 575 of 2000) promotes the registration of traditional practitioners and integration of traditional medicine into the national health system.⁴⁷

Medical pluralism is a fact among the Kusaasi. They initiate treatment with herbal remedies, consult a diviner if symptoms continue, and then visit a hospital if the illness continues. This pluralistic behavior is not contradictory; it is practical health-seeking behavior based on perceived effectiveness, cultural appropriateness, and affordability.⁴⁸ After independence in 1957, the government adopted a more tolerant and integrative approach toward traditional medicine. Although biomedical systems remained dominant, traditional healing gained renewed recognition, particularly in rural areas where access to hospitals remained limited. The formation of the Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healers' Association in the 1960s and later the passage of the Traditional Medicine Practice Act (Act 575) in 2000 marked key efforts to formalize and regulate indigenous healing practices.⁴⁹

For the Kusaasi, this period brought both opportunity and adaptation. Some traditional healers began collaborating with local clinics, especially in cases where herbal remedies proved effective in treating malaria, skin diseases, or mental illness. Others engaged in documentation efforts or participated in regional healer associations.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, tensions remain. While the state's interest in integrating traditional healing into formal healthcare structures is growing, challenges such as a lack of standardization, protection of intellectual property, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge persist.⁵⁰ Modernization and migration have also shifted younger generations' attitudes, with some viewing traditional healing as outdated or incompatible with Christianity or Islam.

Despite efforts towards integration, challenges remain. They vary from suspicion between biomedical and traditional practitioners and a lack of clinical trials to validate herbal remedies to ethical concerns with some ritual practices. Nonetheless, the scope for collaboration is growing, especially in the areas of maternal care, mental health, and chronic disease management⁵¹.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 37

⁴⁷ WHO. (2013). WHO: Traditional medicine Strategy? World Health Organization.

⁴⁸ Kleinman, A. (1980). *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press

⁴⁹ Ministry of Health, Ghana. (2002). *Traditional and Alternative Medicine Policy*.

⁴⁹ Abukari Kwame. *Traditional Medicine and Healing among the Dagomba of Ghana*. Master's Thesis. The Arctic University of Norway. (2016)

⁵⁰ World Health Organization. *WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy: 2014–2023*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2013.

⁵¹ Razak Mohammed Gyasi et al., "Do Health Beliefs Explain Traditional Medical Therapies Utilization? Evidence from Ghana," *Cogent Social Sciences* 2, no. 1 (2016): 1–13

Conclusion

This literature review has covered the origins, types, practices, and socio-historical context of Kusaasi traditional healing. Traditional healing among the Kusaasi is not only a method of disease treatment but also an extensive system of spirituality, nature, and society. That these practices have persisted despite colonial and missionary suppression is evidence of their cultural value.

In contemporary Ghana, traditional medicine exists alongside modern medicine, and efforts are being made to formulate models of collaborative care. Understanding the beliefs and practices of the Kusaasi is not only of academic interest but also of importance to health policy and culturally sensitive care initiatives.

THE MODE OF TRADITIONAL HEALING PRACTICES AND BELIEFS AMONG THE KUSAASI

Introduction

Traditional healing practices among the Kusaasi people of northeastern Ghana are deeply interwoven with their worldview, cosmology, and social structure. These practices encompass a wide spectrum of health-related beliefs and modalities, grounded in both the tangible natural environment and the intangible spiritual domain. Health, in Kusaasi understanding, is not limited to the physical body but extends to spiritual harmony, moral order, and social balance. Healing, therefore, is a holistic activity that involves identifying the root causes of misfortune, illness, or spiritual imbalance and applying appropriate interventions, ranging from herbal remedies to ritual sacrifice.⁵² This chapter explores the modes of traditional healing among the Kusaasi in historical and ethnographic knowledge and depth, drawing attention to how these modes operate, who performs them, and the cultural beliefs that underpin them. According to the Kusaasi tradition and culture, diseases are seen as a departure from the norm, often destroying the interaction between human and spiritual entities.⁵³ *Akurung*, an interviewee, contends that there are two forms or categories of illness such as mild illness and serious (epidemic) illness requiring magical intervention. *Akutam* indicated that diseases are caused by several factors, such as malevolent spirits, violation of taboos, and enmity from the neighbourhood. Culturally and fundamentally, diseases are understood as a deviation from the societal or household norm. According to the Kusaasi, diseases, ailments, and sicknesses carry the same meaning and differ in severity for the individual.

As Tindaana, Akpabil of Yarigu, put it during his interview session

“In our thinking, when someone falls sick, it is not just the body. It may be the spirit crying or an ancestor reminding us of something undone.”

This chapter outlines the major modes of healing practiced by the Kusaasi, elaborating on their spiritual, herbal, diagnostic, and ritual methods, as well as the gendered and seasonal dynamics that sustain them.

Spiritual Healing Practices

Among the Kusaasi, spiritual healing forms the backbone of traditional medicine. Spiritual ailments are believed to arise from broken taboos, witchcraft, ancestral displeasure, or malevolent spiritual forces.⁵⁴ The healer, known locally as a *bugunaab*, plays the role of a mediator between the human and the spiritual realms. The healer communicates with spirits through dreams, trance states, or ritual consultation. In many Kusaasi communities,

⁵² Iddrisu, M. T. (2017). Healing and Medicine in African Traditional Studies. UDS. International Journal of Development. And Konadu, K. (2019). Indigenous Medicine and Traditional Medicine in Africa. Researchgate.

⁵³ Tabona Shoko, “Karanga Traditional Medicine and Healing,” African Journal of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicines 4, no. 4 (2007): 501–509.

⁵⁴ White, Peter (2015). The concept of disease and healthcare in African Traditional Religion in Ghana. HTS Theological Studies, 71(3), 01-07

it is believed that a true healer has received a spiritual calling, often through illness or visionary dreams, and has undergone a period of spiritual training and initiation.⁵⁵

Healing rituals may involve symbolic items such as animal skulls, cowrie shells, and ritual staffs.⁵⁶ In the healing process, the bugunaab (healer) invokes the spirits, chants sacred words, and may even enter a trance to receive revelations about the patient's illness. Community members often participate in these rituals, especially when the illness is believed to affect the collective well-being of the household or clan. Spiritual healing also involves the cleansing of homes or individuals with special herbs, smokes, or libations to rid them of malevolent forces.⁵⁷

In an interview with Madam Ayamba Victoria of Boya recounted a case where a young man repeatedly fell ill despite hospital treatments. The family consulted a bugunaab, who, through divination, discovered that the illness stemmed from the spirit of an uncle who had died without proper funeral rites. After rituals and animal sacrifices were performed at the uncle's shrine, the young man's condition improved significantly. Such testimonies underscore the lived reality and communal faith in spiritual healing.

As Ayine Mbilba, a healer and Frafra immigrant who lives in Binaba, explains that

"A man did not train me. I became sick in my youth and dreamt that I saw an old man who handed me a staff. That was how I was called to heal."

Healing rituals involve chants, libations, herbs, and sometimes animal sacrifices. The community may participate, especially when collective misfortunes are believed to be involved. These sessions take place at shrines or in sacred groves.⁵⁸

One notable case in Googo was shared by Madam Lamisi Avoka

"My nephew went mad after stepping on a cursed ancestral grave. The bugunaab (soothsayer) poured herbs into a calabash mixed with water and threw three round stones to the ground, and the spirit spoke about my nephew's condition. After three days of sacrifice, he came back to himself following the accordance of the cleansing rituals."

These narratives reflect a communal trust in spiritual mediation.

Herbal and Natural Medicine

Herbal healing is another major mode of treatment among the Kusaasi, practiced either in conjunction with spiritual healing or independently.⁵⁹ Herbalists, often working in familial lineages, possess deep knowledge of local flora and fauna. This knowledge is passed orally through generations, and its transmission is usually secretive, reserved for trusted descendants or apprentices.⁶⁰ The healer identifies plants not only by their physical properties but also by their associated spiritual attributes. For example, certain herbs are believed to be more effective when harvested under lunar phases or after specific rituals. Herbal medicine is a core healing strategy,

⁵⁵ Albert K. Awedoba, *An Ethnographic Study of Northern Ghanaian Healing* (Accra: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 2000).

⁵⁶ Timothy, Insoll. (2010). *Talensi Animal Sacrifice and Its Archaeological Implications*. World Archaeology.

⁵⁷ Jakarasi, Maja. (2024). *The Persistence of Traditional Healing for Mental Illness Among the Korekore People of Rushinga District*. Zimbabwe. Medical Anthropology 43(7).

⁵⁸ Telly, Edward M. (2006) "Sacred Groves, Rituals and Sustainable Community Development in Ghana." In *Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes*, edited by Thomas Schaaf and Cathy Lee. Paris: UNESCO.

⁵⁹ Peprah, P., Agyemang-Duah, W., Arthur-Holmes, F. *et al.* (2019) 'We are nothing without herbs': a story of herbal remedies uses during pregnancy in rural Ghana. *BMC Complement Altern Med* 19, 65. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12906-019-2476-x>

⁶⁰ Boadu AA, Asase A. Documentation of Herbal Medicines Used for the Treatment and Management of Human Diseases by Some Communities in Southern Ghana. *Evid Based Complement Alternat Med*. 2017; 2017:3043061. doi: 10.1155/2017/3043061. Epub 2017 Jun 8. PMID: 28684965; PMCID: PMC5480049.

passed through generations. Healers use herbs not just for their biochemical properties, but for their spiritual essences.

Atinga Abugbilla, an herbalist in Zebilla, shared that:

“Before I touch a plant, I talk to it (This involves pleasing the plant or the herbs for any impurities). I beg its spirit. If I am impure, it will not work.” And that is why females are not allowed to perform healing duties during their menstrual period and during childbirth, because some spirits forbid them.

Popular herbs include *kpakpala*, *zangdan*, and *yenkpala*, used to treat fevers, stomach issues, and infections. These remedies are often combined with taboos or social rituals.

In Pusiga, *Madam Awuni Margaret* told me of how her mother taught her to harvest *ta'am biæg* (bitter bark) only during a full moon, “because the spirit of the plant is awake then.”

These practices are embedded in both ecology and cosmology. Common remedies include decoctions made from roots, barks, and leaves to treat malaria, skin diseases, digestive issues, and wounds. In fieldwork accounts from the Upper East Region, elderly herbalists describe how certain plants, such as *kpakpala* (a bitter root used to treat fevers), are carefully prepared and administered with instructions about diet and conduct during treatment. Healing also involves a social dimension, with patients often advised to confess any wrongdoing or reconcile with family members as part of the healing process.⁶¹

The use of *zangdan*, a tree bark soaked overnight and taken early in the morning, is widely known to aid in stomach cleansing. Children are frequently given herbal enemas during seasonal transitions to prevent common illnesses. Herbal healing often overlaps with spiritual beliefs: plants are not simply “medicine” but are regarded as gifts from the earth spirits.⁶² Consequently, harvesting is done with prayers and offerings, sometimes requiring the herbalist to avoid sexual intercourse or talking, especially early morning, and bathing before collection.

Divination and Diagnosis

Divination (*bim*) is a diagnostic procedure used to determine the spiritual cause of affliction. The *bugunaab* uses objects such as cowrie shells, animal bones, or millet grains, which are cast onto a flat surface and interpreted based on patterns and symbols. Divination is often the first step in the healing process and is conducted in sacred spaces or at shrines dedicated to specific deities or ancestors.⁶³

Through divination, healers can identify whether an illness is due to witchcraft, ancestral displeasure, or natural causes. In many cases, repeated misfortunes such as miscarriages, sudden deaths, or mental illness are attributed to ancestral grievances or violations of clan taboos.⁶⁴ The results of divination inform the type of remedy or ritual to follow, including the selection of appropriate herbs, the nature of animal sacrifice, or the location where the ritual must be performed.

During an oral interview with *Bugunaab Atampuri of Kpikpira*, he emphasized that divination is not only used for sickness but also for conflict resolution, infertility, and missing persons. One of his clients, a woman who had suffered five miscarriages, was found through millet grain casting to be the victim of a broken ancestral vow.

⁶¹ Anahlui, K., Agbobli, A., Amouzou, A. M., and Gansou, G. 2025. “Clinical Case Study: Cultural Dimensions in the Treatment of Postpartum Psychosis in Togo.” *Open Journal of Social Sciences*. 13: 171–181. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.133013>.

⁶² Josephine Ozioma, Ezekwesili-Ofili, and Okaka Antoinette Nwamaka Chinwe. 2019. ‘Herbal Medicines in African Traditional Medicine’. *Herbal Medicine*. IntechOpen. doi:10.5772/intechopen.80348.

⁶³ Fournier, Anne. 2021. “Seme Divination in Burkina Faso. I.” *Anthrovision*. 9.1. Online since November 30, 2022. Accessed July 28, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.4000/anthrovision.8287>.

⁶⁴ Christine, Oppong. (1973). *Marriage among a Matrilineal Elite: A Family Study of Ghanaian Senior Civil Servants*. Cambridge University Press.

After prescribed rituals and reconciliation with a maternal uncle, she conceived and gave birth. Divination (bim) is essential to diagnosis. Healers use cowrie shells, millet grains, or bones to determine causes of affliction.⁶⁵

In Binduri, *Bugunaab Ananga Akolgo* demonstrated this process:

“See these grains? When I cast them, they form signs? Some mean death, some mean anger from a spirit. I do not just look; I feel it too.”

Divination determines the path of healing rituals, herbs, or family reconciliation.

In Tempene, a woman with chronic miscarriages discovered through divination that her mother had once vowed a fowl to a land deity (Tengbang) and failed to fulfill it. After the sacrifice was made, she later gave birth. These narratives attest to the interpretive authority of the bugunaab.

Rituals and Sacrifices

Ritual sacrifice remains a potent mode of healing among the Kusaasi. When illness is deemed to stem from spiritual imbalance or ancestral wrath, the healer may prescribe the offering of a live animal, such as a chicken, guinea fowl, or goat. The ritual is conducted at a shrine or sacred grove, often under the supervision of elders and community witnesses. Sacrifices are made to appease the spirits, restore cosmic harmony, and symbolically transfer the illness from the human body to the sacrificial animal.⁶⁶

In these ceremonies, libations are poured, incantations are recited, and symbolic acts such as smearing blood or feathers are performed.⁶⁷ Shrines (teng soba) are regarded as the dwelling places of spirits and are maintained with great reverence. Each lineage may have its own shrine, and elders are responsible for ensuring that periodic rituals are performed to maintain ancestral favor. These practices reinforce communal identity and continuity, making healing a social as well as a spiritual process.⁶⁸

A widely practiced ritual known as naba biig, meaning “heir of the chief,” involves the offering of a spotless white goat to the spirit of a deceased clan leader, asking for healing. The blood of the goat is poured on the shrine stone while the meat is cooked and shared communally. This rite signifies a plea for ancestral intervention and a renewal of lineage allegiance. Sacrifice is a significant healing mode. Illness attributed to ancestors or spirits demands restitution through animal offerings. *A Pentecost, Elder John Alombila in Garu* stated that:

“When you offend the spirit, even prayers will not help. The only medicine is to apologize with blood through the required rituals and rites.” This is a tradition and culture, and to him, such is not sinful; using goats, chickens, and guinea fowls is commonly offered. Rituals often take place at teng soba (sacred shrines), supervised by elders.

In Yarigu, a ritual called win piig (cleansing) was performed for a woman with recurring nightmares. After offering a white goat at her grandfather’s grave, the nightmares stopped. Such sacrifices renew ancestral ties and community harmony.

Roles of Traditional Healers

Traditional healers occupy prestigious roles within Kusaasi society. Their authority is not solely based on knowledge of herbs or rituals but also on their moral integrity, spiritual connection, and community endorsement. Some healers, especially female healers, specialize in childbirth and women's reproductive health, while others

⁶⁵ Croucamp, A. (2013). Traditional African Divination Systems as technology: In Mindburst, Viewed.

⁶⁶ Alison, Ormosby. Cultural and Conservation Values of Sacred Forest in Ghana. Unpublished Manuscript.

⁶⁷ Patrick Iroegbu, “Healing Insanity: Skills and Expert Knowledge of Igbo Healers,” *African Development* 30, no. 3 (2005): 78–92.

⁶⁸ David Tait. (1963). *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana*. London: Oxford University Press.

deal with chronic illnesses, mental health issues, or conflict resolution. Female healers, particularly elderly women, play crucial roles in maternal and child health, often serving as midwives and herbalists.

Healers are often consulted not only for treatment but also for guidance in major life events, including marriage, naming ceremonies, and land disputes. They are considered custodians of indigenous knowledge and cultural memory. In return for their services, healers are given gifts or tokens, although many assert that their role is a calling rather than a commercial endeavor.⁶⁹

Apprenticeship is a major part of healer training. A young person chosen by a spirit, often after a mysterious illness, undergoes training by observing rituals, preparing medicines, and learning chants. Some undergo a spiritual test, such as sleeping alone in the sacred grove, to prove readiness. The passing of this knowledge ensures continuity of sacred healing traditions.⁷⁰

Beliefs Surrounding Health and Illness

Health in Kusaasi belief is seen as a harmony between the *niim* (body), *seɲ* (spirit), and *kpiem* (ancestral order). Illness represents a disruption in this balance, often caused by neglecting ritual obligations, social transgressions, or spiritual attacks.⁷¹ For instance, a person who fails to perform funeral rites for a deceased parent may suffer mysterious illnesses until the ritual debt is settled. Witchcraft (*soong*) is especially feared, and individuals suspected of harboring witchcraft powers may be subjected to special tests or rituals to either cleanse or expel them.⁷² Healers are revered for their spiritual integrity and community service. Their authority stems not just from skill, but from moral standing.⁷³

In Binaba, *Madam Lydia Akutsum*, a primary school teacher, shared her knowledge about traditional healing and its roles in Kusaasi communities.

“If a healer lies, disrespects elders, or charges money unnecessarily, his medicine fails. Spirits do not like deceit.”

Healers specialize in childbirth, mental health, or spiritual cleansing. Apprenticeship is key, often following a calling through dreams or illness.⁷⁴

In Garu, a young healer, *Joseph Abugre*, said:

“I saw fire burning in my chest in dreams. When I told my grandmother, she smiled and said, ‘The ancestors have chosen you.’” The healer’s journey is spiritual, communal, and deeply symbolic. Health is the balance of *niim* (body), *seɲ* (spirit), and *kpiem* (ancestral order). Illness arises from social or spiritual disharmony.

Witchcraft (*Soong*) is greatly feared. In Googo, *Atiiba Amogbug* recounted that.

“A woman was accused of *soong* (witchcraft) after her co-wife died. They tested her by having her step over sacred herbs. When she could not, they knew she had to be cleansed.”

Preventive health measures are embedded in daily practices, such as observing taboos, maintaining moral conduct, and participating in communal rituals. Kusaasi cosmology promotes a relational understanding of health:

⁶⁹ Fortes, Meyer. (1949). *The web of Kingship among the Tallensi*. Oxford University Press.

⁷⁰ Cheetham, R.W.S & Griffiths J.A. (1982). *The Traditional /Diviner as Psychotherapist*. South Africa Medical Journal.

⁷¹ White, P. (2015). *The Concept of Disease and Healthcare in African Traditional Religion in Ghana*. HTS. Theological Studies.

⁷² Adinkrah, Mensah. "WITCHCRAFT BELIEFS IN GHANA" In *Witchcraft, Witches, and Violence in Ghana*, 53-107. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782385615-005>

⁷³ James Thobaben. "The History of Medical Ethics." In *St Andrews Encyclopedia of Theology*, edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. University of St Andrews, 2022–. Article published August 1, 2024. <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/HistoryofMedicalEthics>.

⁷⁴ Yahaya Sekagya, H. K., Charles Muchunguzi, Payyappallimana Unnikrishnan, and Edgar M. Mulogo. 2024. “An Exploratory Study on Becoming a Traditional Spiritual Healer among Baganda in Central Uganda.” **PLOS Global Public Health** 4 (7): e0002581. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0002581>.

what affects one individual may affect the whole community, hence the communal nature of most healing practices.⁷⁵

Children are taught from an early age not to insult elders, step over sacred objects, or play around shrines. Such behaviors are believed to offend spirits and lead to spiritual sickness. Pregnant women are often restricted from certain foods or sites, believed to influence the unborn child's fate. These taboos are reinforced through storytelling, elder warnings, and ritual enforcement, forming a rich framework of preventive care.

Case Studies from the Field

Fieldwork conducted in May 2025 in the Garu and Tempane districts documented over twenty traditional healing events. In one case, a man suffering from seizures was diagnosed by a healer using millet grains. The divination revealed that the man's late grandfather had not been properly buried. A full ritual, including the sacrifice of a black ram, was performed. Within weeks, his seizures stopped. Interviews with his family confirmed that no seizures had occurred for more than a year after the ritual.

In a survey conducted among peers, and educated people across the Kusaug traditional area of Azanga, Binaba, Kansoogo, Tarikom, Tempane, Timonde, Yarigu, Zabugu, and Zebilla. Fifty people responded to the survey questions, indicating 86.7% were aware of traditional healing practices in their communities, 93.37% responded that either them or their family members have ever sought help from a traditional healer, 73.3% responded sometimes they do, 33.3% responded very often, and others represented 6.7%. Generally, 73.3% said they learn from traditional healers, 53.3% family, 26.7% community elders, 13.3% from friends, and 20% said religious leaders.

Also, 60% believed diseases are caused by natural causes, 40% spiritual causes, 33.3% witchcraft, 20% breaking taboos, and 80% said environmental causes. 60% said traditional healing is very effective, 46.7% somewhat effective, and 6.7% said it is not effective sometimes, and not effective at all is 0.0%. Among the respondents, 43.8% associated traditional healing with ancestral spirits, 18.8% said deities, 18.8% said rituals, 12.5% said natural spirits, and 31.3% said they do not know. The respondents indicated that Kusaasi traditional healing process requires the use of herbs to treat known ailments, libation is been offered to the gods, rituals are performed and mostly the victim is cautioned not to eat some certain food for quick recovery and that people preferred traditional healing when medical practitioners seem not to know about the ailments, others believed traditional healing is the only solution for healing some ailments such spiritual attacks, witchcraft, spiritual hunt, while others said they prefer traditional healing on instances where modern medicine failed and that traditional healing does not have side effects which makes it more preferred to western medicine.

In another case, a female herbalist named Akolporka used roots of the yenkpala plant to treat a young boy with persistent severe stomach ache (Pou). After treatment and a temporary food taboo, the child recovered fully. A week later, his mother returned with chickens, groundnuts, and kola-nuts to thank the healer, reinforcing the reciprocal nature of healing.

In Sapelliga, Naba Koulbuugri (skin name), an interviewee explained that healing among the Kusaasi is gendered and generational. Women are often birth attendants and herbalists, while men typically become spiritual mediators. And added them, he practiced what he grew up to meet his ancestors do, and he has been going to the hospital, alright, not all sickness needs exposure to the hospital, and when it is because of a curse, exposing such ailments to the hospital angered the ancestors the more.

"My grandmother and my father gave me the leaves; my mother gave me the chants. Now I give them to my daughter."

Youths are introduced gradually through stories, observation, and informal mentorship. These roles ensure cultural continuity and adaptation.

⁷⁵ Jean, and John Parker. *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God*. Bloomington. Indiana University Press, 2005.

Gender and Generational Roles in Healing

Elderly women are often herbalists and birth attendants, and are particularly trusted by younger women during pregnancy and postpartum care. Men, especially older ones, more frequently become spiritual healers or shrine custodians. Young people, although often discouraged from directly participating in rituals, are gradually introduced through storytelling and observation.

In many Kusaasi households, grandmothers hold spiritual knowledge about herbs, charms, and taboos that help maintain family health. These gendered roles create intergenerational ties that preserve both healing knowledge and cultural norms.

Interaction with Modern Healthcare

Despite the growing presence of clinics and hospitals, many Kusaasi still consult traditional healers first. Healers often refer patients to hospitals for injections or lab tests, especially in complex cases. In some instances, biomedical and traditional practices overlap; herbs may be used after hospital discharge to complete the healing cycle. Healers also express concern over biomedical practitioners who dismiss traditional knowledge without understanding its cultural logic. Traditional and biomedical systems often co-exist.

Many Kusaasi consult healers first, then hospitals.

In Timonde, *Nurse Amadu Akugri*, during an interview question with him indicated that the first to confirmed the nature of illness is to consult a soothsayer which is done by the elder or father of the sick person, then even before leaving to the hospital, the family head pours a libation to his ancestors to seek for protection and successful treatment of the sick person. And indicated that he has interacted with many patients during their visit to the hospital, and many uses both traditional healing methods and the hospital treatment as means of healthcare, and concluded with the statement below.

“Some patients use herbs after hospital treatments. One old man told me, ‘Hospital ends it, but shrine seals it.’” This reflects a pluralistic approach to healing and cultural respect for tradition.

Healing practices are influenced by seasonal changes. Certain herbs are more potent in the rainy season, while dry season rituals focus on protection and purification. For example, every May, shrines are cleansed with sacred herbs before farming begins. Water sources like sacred streams are also visited to fetch healing water for annual purification rites.

CONCLUSION

The modes of traditional healing among the Kusaasi are vast, dynamic, and rooted in a sacred cosmology. They are living traditions carried by elders, shaped by nature, adapted to changing times, and vital to communal life. These practices, far from being relics of the past, remain relevant frameworks of health and resilience. They deserve further research, support, and respectful integration into broader health discussions in Ghana. Traditional healing among the Kusaasi reflects a rich cosmological and social framework. It persists through elders’ wisdom, sacred ecology, and cultural meaning. These practices are not relics but dynamic responses to health and identity.

“Even when we go to the hospital,” said Agbango of Yarigu, “our ancestors still wait for their libation.”

Therein lies the resilience of Kusaasi healing, a living tradition of care, spirit, and kinship.

INVESTIGATING THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL HEALING PRACTICES AND BELIEFS AMONG THE KUSAASI

Introduction

The Kusaasi people, like many indigenous communities in Ghana, have witnessed a gradual decline in traditional healing practices and beliefs over the past century. This chapter investigates the factors contributing to the decline, examining the intersections of colonial influence, missionary activity, modernization, formal education, and healthcare policy. It draws from oral testimonies, ethnographic observations, and historical records to trace the erosion of indigenous medical knowledge and its replacement or marginalization by biomedical systems and Christian doctrines. While some traditional practices persist in rural settings, their status, legitimacy, and prevalence have been significantly diminished. Understanding this decline is crucial not only for documenting cultural change but also for reimagining the future of pluralistic healthcare in Kusaasi communities.

Colonialism and the Marginalization of Indigenous Healing

During British colonial rule in the Gold Coast, indigenous healing practices were frequently branded as superstition or witchcraft. Colonial administrators, influenced by Eurocentric worldviews, saw traditional medicine as backward and irrational. Ordinances such as the 1916 "Witchcraft Ordinance" criminalized many aspects of indigenous spiritual healing, especially divination and ritual sacrifice. These legal frameworks delegitimized traditional healers, pushing their practices underground and eroding public trust.⁷⁶

In an interview with the chief of Zebilla Chief, *Naba Azumbilla II*, he shared his knowledge on the topic when I asked him if he could tell us what traditional healing meant to the Kusaasi people before colonial rule.

"In our time (ancestral period), healing was more than just herbs; it was spiritual, cultural, and a connection to the ancestors. We believed every illness had a cause, not just physical but spiritual. The earth provided the medicines, but the ancestors provided the knowledge. Before the white men came, we healed with respect. Every compound had someone who knew which leaves to boil, which root to chew. The soothsayer guided us when illness was sent by a curse or the displeasure of the gods."

"They laughed at us. The missionaries said our ways were superstitious. The colonial officers banned our shrines and called our rituals 'pagan.' Many of our herbalists hid their practices or stopped entirely for fear of arrest. They built hospitals, but only treated those who accepted their Christian teachings and the wealthy families. We began to doubt ourselves. And now the youth preferred tablets to tree bark, not because they were better, but because we taught ours was backward."

Missionaries also played a significant role in reshaping local perceptions of healing. Christian missions, particularly Catholics (the White Fathers) and Presbyterians, associated traditional healing with idolatry and sin.⁷⁷ Healers were pressured to abandon their practices and convert, while converts were discouraged from consulting traditional practitioners.⁷⁸ Churches often burned or confiscated ritual objects, and shrines were desecrated as part of conversion campaigns. The colonial encounter significantly disrupted the practice and

⁷⁶ Jean, Allman, and John Parker. *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.

⁷⁷ Hassan, Tugume Lubowa. "Attitudes of Christian missionaries towards African traditional religious beliefs in East Africa during the British colonial rule." *African Journal of History and Culture* 7, no. 10 (2015): 193 - 199.

⁷⁸ Pemunta, Ngambouk Vitalis, and Tabi Chama-James Tabenyang. "Chapter 3 Traditional Medicine, Colonialism and Apartheid in South Africa". In *Biomedical Hegemony and Democracy in South Africa*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020) doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004436428_004

perception of traditional healing among the Kusaasi.⁷⁹ British colonial authorities, guided by biomedical models and Eurocentric epistemologies, generally dismissed African healing systems as primitive and unscientific⁸⁰

Colonial health policies prioritized the introduction of Western medicine while criminalizing or sidelining indigenous practices. Ordinances such as the Native Customs Regulation Ordinance restricted ritual healing and labeled some practices as “witchcraft.”⁸¹

Missionary activities further deepened these disruptions. Christian missionaries viewed traditional healing, especially shrine worship and spirit consultations, as idolatrous and in need of eradication. Churches established mission hospitals and dispensaries in northern Ghana, often urging converts to abandon traditional remedies and spiritual rituals.⁸² As a result, some healers were forced to operate in secrecy or combine Christian symbols with traditional rituals in a form of religious syncretism.

In an interview with *Mrs. Asibi Awiiga* from Alamboya, who, according to her, served as an apprentice to a traditional midwife from Yarigu, and she went there as compensation to the lady, and she held the responsibility of finding her a betrothal to marry, she healed her parents from barrenness.

"I was just 17 when the midwife I trained under was threatened by the District Commissioner. He said if she did not stop using 'unregistered medicine', they would take her to court. She cried that day. Not because she feared prison, but because she feared her knowledge would die with her. Colonial laws criminalized our ways. The herbs that saved lives were labeled illegal. The birthing chants we sang were replaced with silence. Today, they call it maternal healthcare, but back then, they were destroying what we already had."

In an interview with *Atibilla Desmond*, a 35-year-old man and Assemblyman for the Saka electoral area. As a young and educated person, do you see any remnants of the colonial influence on healing today with the Kusaasi communities?

"Oh yes. We are still recovering from the colonial mindset. Many in our generation see traditional healing as outdated or evil. It is the result of decades of brainwashing. Our grandparents were taught to fear their own gods. Even I once thought herbalists were just poor old people. But now, I am part of a movement to document and revive these practices. I want to bridge science and tradition to show that healing is not just white coats and syringes. The wisdom in our land is priceless."

Ayishetu Kombian, a Bimonba settler in Googo, a widow and female healer, accounted that.

"My grandfather was a healer. He taught my father. But when the missionaries came, they called him a witch. He was mocked in church, and no one went to him anymore. When he died, only a few of us gave him the proper burial rites. My father refused to teach me openly. He said, 'They will call you mad. They will burn your shrine.' So, I learned in secret. Even now, I whisper prayers instead of chanting them loudly. The fear never left."

Mr. Ayaaba Patrick, former Assemblyman for the Teshie electoral area, also accounted that:

"We lost our confidence. We lost our sacred relationship with the land. Colonialism was not just about politics or economy; it was an attack on our worldview. They replaced the talking drum with jams. They built churches on our sacred groves. They called our gods demons. Today, few people come to consult the shrine unless they

⁷⁹ Francis, Normanyo. "The Resurgence of the African Traditional Shrines in a Neo-Pentecostal/ Charismatic Religious Milieu in Ghana." *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 5, no.1 (2019): 88-96. <https://doi.org/10.32051/02211907>

⁸⁰ Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

⁸¹ Gold Coast Government, *Native Customs Regulation Ordinance*, No. 11 of 1878. Accra: Government Printer, 1878. and Pobee, John S. *Religion and Politics in Ghana*. Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1989.

⁸² Meyer, Birgit. *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999.

are truly desperate. But when modern medicine fails, they remember us. That is how we survive on the edge of society, yet deeply rooted."

However, the resilience of Kusaasi healing traditions should not be underestimated. Many communities maintained healing shrines and ritual specialists even under colonial suppression. Oral testimonies from elders suggest that traditional ceremonies were often held discreetly at night or under the guise of family gatherings.⁸³

Furthermore, some colonial officers, particularly district officers, were familiar with local customs and acknowledged the effectiveness of traditional remedies, especially where Western medicine was inaccessible.

Post-colonial developments and continuities following Ghana's independence in 1957, the government adopted a more tolerant and integrative approach toward traditional medicine. Although biomedical systems remained dominant, traditional healing gained renewed recognition, particularly in rural areas where access to hospitals remained limited.⁸⁴ The formation of the Ghana Psychic and Traditional Healers' Association in the 1960s and later the passage of the Traditional Medicine Practice Act (Act 575) in 2000 marked key efforts to formalize and regulate indigenous healing practices.⁸⁵

For the Kusaasi, this period brought both opportunity and adaptation. Some traditional healers began collaborating with local clinics, especially in cases where herbal remedies proved effective in treating malaria, skin diseases, bone setting, or mental illness. Others engaged in documentation efforts or participated in regional healer associations.⁸⁶

Nevertheless, tensions remain. While the state's interest in integrating traditional healing into formal healthcare structures is growing, challenges such as a lack of standardization, protection of intellectual property, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge persist.⁸⁷ Modernization and migration have also shifted younger generations' attitudes, with some viewing traditional healing as outdated or incompatible with Christianity or Islam.⁸⁸ When the British colonial administration consolidated control over the Northern Territories in the early 20th century, they introduced a legal and moral framework that dismissed indigenous medicine as unscientific and often dangerous.⁸⁹ Healing shrines were shut down. Herbalists and soothsayers were labeled "witch doctors," while ritual practices were discouraged or criminalized. The colonial strategy of cultural domination was not just about resource extraction; it was about epistemic control.

Agbango Aram, an interviewee, also accounted that:

"They didn't need to burn our medicines to destroy them. All they had to do was plant doubt in our minds. They called us ignorant. Slowly, our own children stopped believing in what saved us for centuries."

The disruption was not limited to official policy. Colonial rule set in motion a social shift that favored Western institutions over indigenous ones. The hospital replaced the compound healer. The police replaced the shrine.

⁸³ Tonah, Steve. "The Politicisation of a Chieftaincy Conflict: The Case of Dagbon, Northern Ghana." *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012): 1–20.

⁸⁴ Aikins, Ama de-Graft, and Kwadwo Koram. "Health and Healthcare in Ghana, 1957–2017." In *The Economy of Ghana Sixty Years after Independence*, 365–384. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁸⁵ Ministry of Health. *Traditional Medicine Practice Act (Act 575)*. Accra, Ghana: Ministry of Health, 2002.

⁸⁶ Abukari, Kwame. *Traditional Medicine and Healing among the Dagomba of Ghana* (2016), https://www.academia.edu/68554282/Traditional_medicine_and_healing_among_the_Dagomba_of_Ghana.

⁸⁷ Emmanuel Krah, Jaco de Kruijf, and Luca Ragno, "Integrating Traditional Healers into the Health Care System: Challenges and Opportunities in Rural Northern Ghana," *Journal of Community Health* 43, no. 1 (2018): 157–1

⁸⁸ Rashid Menhas, Shumaila Umer, Saira Akhtar, and Ghulam Shabbir, "Impact of Modernization on Religious Institution: A Case Study of Khyber Pakhtun Khwa, Pakistan," *European Review of Applied Sociology* 8, no. 10 (2015): 23–28, <https://doi.org/10.1515/eras-2015-0003>.

⁸⁹ Samuel Adu-Gyamfi. "British colonial reform of indigenous medical practices amongst the Asante people of the Gold Coast, 1930–1960." *African Journal of History and Culture* 7, no. 2 (2015): 057–063.

Indigenous knowledge systems, including herbal pharmacopoeias and spiritual diagnostic rituals, were dismissed as primitive.

Western Education and Shifting Epistemologies

Formal education introduced during and after colonialism emphasized Western scientific knowledge at the expense of indigenous worldviews. School curricula excluded traditional medicine, while promoting biomedicine as modern, rational, and superior.⁹⁰ This epistemological hierarchy led younger generations to see traditional healing as outdated and irrelevant. As education expanded throughout the Upper East Region, many youths abandoned the apprenticeships necessary for becoming healers.⁹¹ Elders lament the lack of interest among the youth in our communities. The colonial introduction of Western education among the Kusaasi, though instrumental in literacy and administration, functioned simultaneously as a tool of cultural displacement. Curricula celebrated European scientific and medical models while ignoring or ridiculing African knowledge systems.⁹²

In an interview with *Abagre Atisweni* from Tanga, a community in Zebilla, he added that Tanga was one of the European settled communities with the Kusaug traditional area, and added that:

"I went to school in Zebilla throughout middle school to the early Nursing Colleges in the Northern region. We learned about European explorers, penicillin, and antiseptics, but nothing about the neem tree or the way elders treated malaria. We were taught to think our ancestors were fools. That is how colonialism survived even after the white men left through our minds." without learning herbal knowledge or ritual techniques.

In addition, the formal education system often presents indigenous knowledge as inferior to Western knowledge systems, which can foster a sense of cultural inferiority. This cultural shift, coupled with the growing globalization of knowledge and technology, has had a profound impact on the Kusaasi people, as it has on many indigenous cultures around the world. The spread of Western culture, facilitated by media, technology, and global communication networks, has exposed Kusaasi individuals to alternative worldviews, values, and lifestyles.⁹³ This exposure has led to the adoption of modern health practices, as well as the erosion of traditional cultural practices, including healing rituals and beliefs.

The increasing availability of Western healthcare products and pharmaceuticals has provided easier access to medical treatments, often replacing the need for traditional remedies. The widespread availability of information about diseases, treatments, and medications via the internet has also contributed to a shift in how people approach healthcare. People may seek advice from online sources or foreign medical practitioners rather than consulting traditional healers, who may be perceived as less knowledgeable or up-to-date.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Ransford, Pinto. "The Effect of Western Formal Education on the Ghanaian Educational System and Cultural Identity." *The Journal of Negro Education* 88, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 5–16. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7709/jnegroeducation.88.1.0005>

⁹¹ Anne, Ouma. 2022. "Intergenerational Learning Processes of Traditional Medicinal Knowledge and Socio-Spatial Transformation Dynamics." *Frontiers in Sociology* 7: 661992. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.661992>.

⁹² Ernestina Wiafe, "Formal Education in Gold Coast-Ghana: An Overview of Colonial Policies and Curriculum from 1919 to 1927," *Educational Considerations* 47, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2252>.

⁹³ Richard Obeng et al., "The Effects of Globalized Media on Northern Cultures: A Case Study of Dagomba, Frafra and Wala Ethnic Groups in Tamale Metropolis," *Journal of Social and Development Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2022): 15–35, [https://doi.org/10.22610/jsds.v13i1\(s\).3297](https://doi.org/10.22610/jsds.v13i1(s).3297).

⁹⁴ Trine Strand Bergmo, Vibeke Sandsdalen, Unni Sletvold Manskow, Lene Småbrekke, and Monica Waaseth, "Internet Use for Obtaining Medicine Information: Cross-sectional Survey," *JMIR Formative Research* 7 (2023): e40466, <https://doi.org/10.2196/40466>.

In an interview with a retired teacher, *Mr. James Awini Akudago*, he noted, "Our children no longer sit to learn. They are ashamed to follow the old ways. They want white man's medicine because it comes in tablets and injections, they prefer prayers to traditional healing, and TikTok to learning." This sentiment reflects broader generational tensions and identity shifts within Kusaasi society.

The Rise of Biomedicine and the Modern Healthcare System

Post-independence governments in Ghana expanded access to biomedical healthcare, building hospitals and clinics across the country, including rural areas.⁹⁵ The biomedical model, with its emphasis on laboratory testing, pharmaceuticals, and institutional care, rapidly gained dominance. Government health campaigns against malaria, maternal mortality, and infectious diseases prioritized biomedical approaches, often sidelining traditional healers.⁹⁶ One of the most significant factors in the decline of traditional healing practices among the Kusaasi is the influence of modern medicine. The introduction of Western medical systems, especially during the colonial era, brought with it a different understanding of health, illness, and healing. Modern medicine's reliance on scientific principles, technology, and pharmaceutical treatments provided a more structured, standardized, and accessible approach to healthcare, especially in urban areas.⁹⁷

As healthcare infrastructure expanded, more people began to rely on hospitals, clinics, and medical professionals trained in Western medicine. The advent of antibiotics, vaccinations, and surgical procedures made it possible to treat many diseases that were previously deemed untreatable in traditional settings. The widespread success of modern medicine has, in some cases, led individuals to view traditional healing as less effective or outdated, especially in comparison to the rapid advances in medical technology.

An interviewee, *Apamlea* from Yarigu, also said:

"Even today, when people get sick, they first go to the clinic. When it does not work, they consult a healer. But I see the shame in the eyes of the youth for not learning their culture. They think either they failed going to the healer or it is sinful."

Ayariga Nathaniel, a Nurse in Zebilla District Hospital and an interviewee, stated that colonialism was not entirely negative; it introduced biomedicine in Ghana, which brought antibiotics, surgical procedures, and maternal care that saved lives. However, it also created a two-tiered system, one viewed as modern and respectable, the other traditional and suspect. The result was a cultural wound, where ancestral wisdom lived in the shadows, unacknowledged and undervalued.

The dominance of modern healthcare systems has also shifted the perception of health from a holistic, spiritual approach to a more clinical, physical understanding. This shift has gradually led to a decrease in the use of traditional healers, as people increasingly turn to doctors and hospitals for solutions to their health problems.⁹⁸

Traditional practitioners were rarely incorporated into state healthcare planning. In many cases, biomedical professionals treated them with suspicion or disdain. The introduction of health insurance schemes and the

⁹⁵ Walker, Brian B. *Religion in Global Health and Development: The Case of Twentieth-Century Ghana*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. "The Colonial Foundations of Global Health: Britain, Gold Coast, and Ghana, 1919–61." <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK581302/>. and Walker BB. *Religion in Global Health and Development: The Case of Twentieth-Century Ghana* [Internet]. Montreal (QC): McGill-Queen's University Press; 2022. Chapter 2, Religion and Africanising Health: Ghana, 1957–68. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK581304/>

⁹⁶ Bardosh, Kevin, L. Desir, L. Jean, et al. "Evaluating a Community Engagement Model for Malaria Elimination in Haiti: Lessons from the Community Health Council Project (2019–2021)." *Malaria Journal* 22, no. 47 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12936-023-04471-z>.

⁹⁷ Thacharodi, A., P. Singh, R. Meenatchi, Z. H. Tawfeeq Ahmed, R. R. S. Kumar, N. V, S. Kavish, M. Maqbool, and S. Hassan. "Revolutionizing Healthcare and Medicine: The Impact of Modern Technologies for a Healthier Future—A Comprehensive Review." *Health Care Science* 3, no. 5 (2024): 329–349. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hcs2.115>.

subsidization of pharmaceuticals further encouraged people to seek biomedical treatment.⁹⁹ Though traditional medicine remains culturally resonant; it is increasingly perceived as a last resort when biomedical options fail.

Christianity and the Demonization of Traditional Healing

The rise of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in northern Ghana has accelerated the decline of traditional healing. These movements often frame illness as the work of demons or spiritual attacks, but reassign healing authority to pastors and prophets rather than traditional healers. Deliverance services, anointing oils, and prayer camps now function as new forms of spiritual intervention, directly competing with indigenous healers.¹⁰⁰

Church teachings often equate traditional healing with demonic forces, discouraging believers from participating in rituals, sacrifices, or shrine visitations. This theological opposition has created social pressure to reject traditional practices. In some families, generational rifts emerge when younger Christians refuse to participate in ancestral rites or funerals involving traditional healing customs. Colonialism arrived alongside missionary Christianity and later coincided with the spread of Islam. Both faiths brought new moral frameworks that challenged ancestral beliefs.¹⁰¹ Healing rituals involving animal sacrifices, divination, or spirit possession were framed as demonic or idolatrous.

In an interview with *Avoka David* from Binduri added that the introduction of Christianity has affected local tradition, beliefs and culture almost everywhere within Ghana, but to the Kusaasi, our healing traditions and practices were not documented and it has affected us so much in our communities, noting that his mother was a traditional birth attendant in their community and she did extremely well with no deaths, operations and there was no much worries during and after delivery.

"Our midwives would call on the ancestors during childbirth. But after the church came, they said such prayers were sinful. The women stopped assisting. We started giving birth in fear."

While Christianity led the attack on indigenous healing through education and sermons, Islamic influence was subtler. Islamic schools (*makaranta*) introduced Quranic healing and replaced shrine-based consultation with cleric-led prayer.¹⁰² Both religions redefined the spiritual architecture of healing, and in doing so, displaced the ancestral roots of Kusaasi medicine.

Christianity, Western Education, and Changes in Beliefs of Witchcraft and Sorcery among the Kusaasi

The introduction of Christianity and formal education to the Kusaasi communities during and after the colonial period considerably changed their perception of witchcraft and sorcery. Like numerous indigenous African societies, the Kusaasi traditional society perceived witchcraft (*soong*) and sorcery as integral to their worldview, often providing explanations for misfortune, illness, and even death.¹⁰³ These beliefs significantly contributed to social order and the rationale for spiritual healing and exorcism services. The spread of Christianity and Western education in the twentieth century began replacing these concepts with new ways of interpreting misfortune.

Northern Ghana saw the introduction of Christianity in the early 1900s by Christian missionaries. They labeled traditional beliefs regarding witchcraft and sorcery as superstitious and evil. Because of this, many converts abandoned ancestral practices, including those rituals related to spiritual healing, witchcraft detection, or

⁹⁹ Fenny, Ama P., Felix A. Asante, Ulrika Enemark, and Kristian S. Hansen. "Treatment-Seeking Behaviour and Social Health Insurance in Africa: The Case of Ghana under the National Health Insurance Scheme." *Global Journal of Health Science* 7, no. 1 (2014): 296–308. <https://doi.org/10.5539/gjhs.v7n1p296>.

¹⁰⁰ Ayivor, Samora Harry. "Faith Healing: Assessing the Ghanaian Pentecostal and Charismatic View through the Lens of John 11." *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology* 15, no. 1 (2025): Article 4315.

¹⁰¹ Gifford, Paul. *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.

¹⁰² David Owusu-Ansah, Mark Sey, and Abdulai Iddrisu, "Islamic Learning, the State, and the Challenges of Education in Ghana," *Africa Today* 60, no. 3 (2022): 143–160.

¹⁰³ Matsobane J. Manala, "Witchcraft and Its Impact on Black African Christians: A Lacuna in the Ministry of the Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 67, no. 1 (2011): 1–6.

counter-sorcery. Christianity, as noted by Asamoah-Gyadu, positioned itself in Ghana as a self-styled civilizing and liberating force from what it deemed the bondage of African traditional religion.¹⁰⁵

This change in religion had an impact on the way witchcraft operations were handled among the Kusaasi. Formerly, suspected witch cases would involve consultations with diviners or elders, ritual performances, or community-wide decisions regarding cleansing or expulsion. In the Kusaasi Christianized communities like Garu and Bawku, these practices became stigmatized and were replaced with exorcisms, denial of witchcraft, or denial of witchcraft's existence altogether, but not completely.

"In earlier times, when there was an unexplained death, the family would consult a diviner to find out if it was due to witchcraft," observed Pastor David Akurugu from Bazua. "But now, there is a life cycle approach that allows people to accept that there are sicknesses, and death is a reality. Witchcraft accusations are now rare, and there is more focus on family preservation."

The introduction of schools during and after the colonial period, as well as the availability of Western education, had a significant influence. They promoted a rational and scientific approach to the world, which diminished the role of traditional worldviews. We educated the younger generation to accept everything as scientific truth and regard divination, herbal medicine, and spirit injury as nonsense. Furthermore, indigenous knowledge systems are not taught in the Ghana Education Service schools, which widens the gap and estranges traditional knowledge from contemporary education.

"By the time I reached teacher training in Bolga, I no longer believed in witchcraft," said Amina Adam of Zebilla. "I understood that a lot of the things we feared as children had some medical or psychological reasoning. Now, my goal is to help my pupils appreciate critical thinking."

Slight changes have happened to the sorcery and witchcraft beliefs among the Kusaasi people. Areas such as Yarigu and Binaba, which are less Christianized or more rural, still have people who firmly believe in spiritual causation. Now, such beliefs are more private than before, as both religious and educational institutions, which officially embody these beliefs, tend to discourage or regulate traditional spiritual reasoning.

Ironically, Pentecostal, and charismatic forms of Christianity have revived, in altered forms, the concept of spiritual warfare. Denouncing witchcraft in more traditional and simplistic forms, these churches tend to assert that demons, evil spirits, or witches (using biblical terminology) pose genuine threats to the life of Christians. So, some Kusaasi Christians now 'fight' what used to be termed "witches" using anointed oils, deliverance through prayers, or prophetic visions, combining older elements of these beliefs with newer theological interpretations.

This interplay of Christianity and education has resulted in an intricate, religious culture that merges and evolves: one that outwardly renounces witchcraft yet quietly embraces it in redefined forms. Consequently, traditional healing systems that once covered witchcraft-related ailments have been pushed to the margins. Rather, these systems coexist, at times with conflict, alongside Christian healing ministries, and biomedical services.

Christianity and Western education have contributed to the desacralization of Kusaasi spiritual cosmologies, resulting in novel ways of interpreting illness, misfortune, and various spiritual phenomena. Instead of erasing former beliefs altogether, this shift has led to a hybrid system in which traditional, Christian, and biomedical perspectives coexist. Appreciating how these factors shape beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery is essential to understanding the changing Kusaasi traditional healing paradigm in both rural and urban areas.

Globalization, Media, and Changing Lifestyles

Globalization has introduced new ideas, values, and technologies that further distance Kusaasi youth from their indigenous roots. Mobile phones, television, and social media promote Western lifestyles and portray traditional

¹⁰⁵ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments with Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

healers as either comic figures or dangerous frauds. Herbalists, once respected as community doctors, are now often associated with scams and superstition.

Urbanization also affects healing practices. In towns and cities, space for shrines is limited, and rituals are harder to perform. Healers may relocate or abandon their craft entirely. Market forces push younger generations toward vocational skills, entrepreneurship, or migration, leaving little room for slow, ritual-based knowledge transmission.¹⁰⁶ As society becomes faster and more individualistic, communal healing practices struggle to stay relevant. Education has significantly contributed to the decline of traditional healing methods. As more Kusaasi people access formal education, especially through Western-style schools, there is a noticeable shift in how traditional knowledge is valued. The emphasis on scientific and academic knowledge in educational systems often leads to a devaluation of oral traditions and cultural practices that are vital to traditional healing.

Akeliba, an interviewee, contends that our misplaced culture and traditions must not be blamed only on the world in which we live today, but we must blame ourselves for not taking the responsibility to teach our own children.

"Modern life moves too fast. Our healing takes time, time to listen to the gods, time to gather herbs. The youth have no time for this. They want jobs, not spirits."

Many young people, after completing their formal education, are drawn to careers in medicine, engineering, or other fields that promise economic security and social mobility. This shift in career aspirations has led to a decline in the number of individuals who are willing to pursue a path in traditional healing. Moreover, some education systems actively promote Western medicine over traditional practices, further contributing to the erosion of indigenous healing knowledge.

Globalization also encourages the migration of younger Kusaasi people to urban areas or even abroad for educational and professional opportunities. These individuals may return to their communities with different views on healthcare and less connection to their traditional healing heritage. Made it more difficult for traditional healing practices to retain their place in society.

Internal Challenges within Traditional Healing Systems

The decline is caused not only by external forces. Internal challenges such as secrecy, lack of documentation, and disputes over legitimacy also weaken traditional healing systems. Many healers refuse to share their knowledge beyond their bloodline, and some pass away without transmitting their expertise. Accusations of charlatanry and unethical practices further undermine public confidence. Inconsistent practices, rivalry among healers, and the absence of standardized training make it hard to regulate or defend traditional medicine within modern policy frameworks. The lack of unity among traditional practitioners hampers collective advocacy and institutional recognition. In some cases, the decline of traditional healing is worsened by a loss of faith in its effectiveness. The failure of certain treatments to cure specific diseases, especially infectious ones, has led some community members to question their efficacy. The inability of traditional healers to treat some modern illnesses, such as HIV/AIDS, cancer, or cholera, has further marginalized traditional practices in the eyes of those who see modern medicine as more reliable and effective.

Furthermore, inter-generational conflicts between older and younger Kusaasi individuals have created a divide in attitudes toward traditional healing. Younger generations, often influenced by Western education and urban living, may regard the traditional healers as less competent or even uncivilized.

Community Responses and Cultural Resilience

Despite these challenges, some Kusaasi communities are actively working to preserve and revitalize their healing heritage. Cultural festivals, oral history projects, and healer associations are emerging as avenues for

¹⁰⁶ C. Arjona-García et al., "How Does Urbanization Affect Perceptions and Traditional Knowledge of Medicinal Plants?" *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 17, no. 48 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13002-021-00473-w>.

safeguarding traditional knowledge. In a few communities, younger people are returning to herbalism, blending it with scientific approaches.

There are calls to integrate traditional healers into national health systems and to document medicinal plants before they disappear. Healers like Mr. Atanga of Worikambo in the Garu district continue to treat patients daily, adapting to new realities while maintaining core practices. She asserts, "Our work is not dead. It is only sleeping. When the world confuses you, you return to the roots." Despite these challenges, there are ongoing efforts to revitalize and preserve traditional healing practices among the Kusaasi. Community initiatives, such as workshops, cultural festivals, and intergenerational knowledge-sharing programs, are helping to reconnect younger generations with their cultural heritage. Additionally, some modern medical professionals have recognized the importance of integrating traditional healing practices into modern healthcare systems, fostering a more inclusive approach to healthcare.

In recent years, there has also been a growing interest in ethnobotany and the study of traditional herbal medicine. Researchers have begun to recognize the value of traditional healing practices, not only in terms of cultural preservation but also in the potential for discovering new medicinal.

Cultural Shifts and the Loss of Connection

Cultural shifts in the Kusaasi community, particularly as younger generations adopt more urban and globalized lifestyles, have contributed to a loss of connection with traditional practices. As younger Kusaasi individuals move to cities or abroad for education and employment opportunities, they become less engaged with their rural communities and the healing practices that have been passed down through generations. The generational divide between the older and younger Kusaasi population has become increasingly pronounced, with the younger generation often perceiving traditional healing as obsolete or less effective.

Additionally, the loss of confidence in traditional healing practices has compounded these trends. The inability of traditional healers to address certain modern diseases and illnesses, coupled with the growing influence of modern healthcare, has led to a diminishing role for healers in the community. This shift is further exacerbated by the perception that traditional healing is based on spiritual or superstitious beliefs rather than scientifically proven methods.

Preservation and Revival Efforts of Traditional Healing

Despite the decline of traditional healing practices, efforts are being made to preserve and revitalize these cultural traditions. Community initiatives, such as cultural festivals, workshops, and the promotion of intergenerational dialogue, are helping to reconnect younger Kusaasi individuals with their cultural heritage and the healing knowledge of their ancestors. Additionally, the growing interest in ethnobotany and the study of herbal medicine has opened new avenues for traditional healers to demonstrate the value of their practices in both cultural and scientific terms.

Some modern healthcare professionals have also recognized the importance of integrating traditional healing methods into the broader healthcare system, encouraging a more inclusive approach to health that respects both scientific and cultural knowledge. By blending the best of both worlds, the Kusaasi community can potentially create a healthcare system that honors its cultural traditions while addressing the evolving health needs of its people.

A Future of Medical Pluralism/ The Integration of both Systems

Looking forward, the future of traditional healing practices among the Kusaasi will likely involve a continued negotiation between traditional and modern medical systems. The persistence of medical pluralism, where individuals seek treatment from both systems, offers hope for the survival of traditional healing practices. While modern medicine will continue to play a dominant role in addressing physical ailments, traditional healing, which focuses on spiritual, emotional, and communal health, may offer a unique perspective on well-being that modern medicine alone cannot provide.

In conclusion, the decline of traditional healing among the Kusaasi is not the end of these practices but rather a reflection of the dynamic interplay between cultural preservation and modernization. The challenge moving forward will be to ensure that cultural heritage is preserved while embracing scientific advancements to improve the health and well-being of the Kusaasi community compounds from local plants and remedies.

Conclusion

The decline of traditional healing practices among the Kusaasi reflects broader cultural, political, and religious transformations in Ghana. From colonial suppression to Christian demonization, from biomedical dominance to generational shifts, traditional healing has been pushed to the margins. Yet, it persists in quiet corners, sustained by the resilience of elders, the curiosity of youth, and the cultural memory of communities. The decline of traditional healing practices among the Kusaasi people is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by a combination of historical, social, and cultural factors. While traditional healing has been a cornerstone of Kusaasi society for generations, the rise of modern medicine, urbanization, education, and globalization has significantly altered the way healthcare is perceived and practiced within the community.

The influence of modern medicine has been one of the most significant forces driving the decline of traditional healing. The success of Western medical practices in addressing many physical ailments, along with the increased availability of healthcare facilities, has led many Kusaasi individuals to turn to biomedicine as their primary form of treatment. Moreover, the increasing urbanization of the Kusaasi population has exposed younger generations to alternative healthcare systems and values, distancing them from traditional practices.

Education has also played a central role in diminishing the importance of traditional healing. As the Kusaasi people gain access to formal education, particularly in urban areas, the younger generation becomes more likely to pursue careers in modern medicine or other Westernized fields. The educational system's emphasis on scientific knowledge often undermines the value of oral traditions and indigenous wisdom, contributing to the erosion of traditional healing knowledge.

Furthermore, the globalization of culture and the spread of Western ideals have fostered a shift in the community's healthcare choices. The accessibility of Western pharmaceuticals and medical technology has made it easier for Kusaasi individuals to access modern treatments, often replacing the need for traditional remedies.

Rather than viewing this decline as a linear disappearance, it may be more accurate to see it as a transformation, one that invites new forms of dialogue, documentation, and integration. If traditional healing is to endure, it must adapt to contemporary realities while holding fast to the ethical, spiritual, and communal values that have long sustained Kusaasi life.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings of the research, draws conclusions aligned with the study objectives, and proposes actionable recommendations addressing the challenges associated with the healing practices and beliefs of the Kusaasi people. The goal is to emphasize the importance of indigenous healing within the cultural context and the evolution of healthcare in Northern Ghana.

Summary of Major Findings

The research examined the history, methodological practices, and recent developments of traditional healing among the Kusaasi people in Ghana's Upper East Region. Key insights, derived from oral interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and literature review, are as follows:

Historical and Cultural Foundations

Traditional healing among the Kusaasi is a centuries-old institution deeply intertwined with religion, spirituality,

and indigenous cosmology. It served multiple societal functions, encompassing medical, social, moral, and spiritual dimensions. The healer (naridana) and the diviner (bugunaab) acted as custodians of communal wisdom and wellbeing.

Healing Modalities and Practices

The Kusaasi healing systems employed diverse approaches, including herbal medicines, spiritual healing, rituals, and physical therapies such as bone setting and massage. Knowledge was primarily acquired through initiation or spiritual vocation and transmitted orally. Healing often invoked sacred spaces such as groves, ancestor shrines, and herbal forests, demonstrating a profound connection to nature.

Impact of Colonialism and Modernization

Colonial rule introduced Christianity, formal education, and biomedicine, which fundamentally disrupted traditional healing. Missionary doctors often labeled African medicine as witchcraft. Colonial health policies outlawed traditional medicine. Although attitudes improved slightly after independence, fundamental shifts have yet to occur.

Contemporary Challenges and Decline

Traditional healing today faces significant threats from generational apathy, urban migration, biodiversity loss, and legal restrictions. Younger generations increasingly regard traditional knowledge as outdated or unscientific. There is a growing preference for modern hospitals, perceived as offering faster and more reliable treatment.

Revival Initiatives and Integration Attempts

At local and national levels, efforts exist to integrate and revive traditional medicine within formal healthcare frameworks. Nongovernmental and governmental organizations, alongside higher education institutions, recognize the need to integrate traditional and biomedical systems and preserve indigenous knowledge.

Conclusion

Traditional healing methods and the beliefs sustaining them remain key components of Kusaasi cultural identity. While modernization, colonialism, and Western religion have contributed to significant declines, these practices continue to adapt in rural areas where affordable healthcare is scarce. This study highlights that successful integration and preservation of traditional healing require supportive policy frameworks, cultural respect, generational engagement, and intergenerational dialogue. Without such efforts, the rich indigenous medical heritage of the Kusaasi risks permanent loss.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the study proposes the following strategic measures:

Knowledge Documentation and Archiving

The Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, academic institutions, and local governments should actively document Kusaasi healing practices ethnographically. This includes conducting interviews with healers, cataloguing medicinal herbs, and documenting rituals in written and digital formats to preserve this knowledge for future generations.

Policy and Legal Framework

The Ministry of Health must develop policies that formally recognize and regulate traditional medicine. This includes practitioner registration, ethical training, supervision, and oversight to ensure the safety and efficacy of traditional healing practices.

Community Health Promotion and Education

Programs should be designed to address misconceptions about traditional healing perpetuated by colonial and religious narratives. These should include education on traditional culture within indigenous education systems. Traditional healers should mentor interested youth, supported by community apprenticeship models facilitated by local authorities and cultural NGOs.

Innovation and Collaborative Research

Universities and research centers should foster collaboration between biomedical scientists and traditional healers. Partnership opportunities include herbal pharmacology, efficacy research, and the integration of indigenous remedies into public health initiatives.

Festivals and Community Forums

Traditional healing should be featured prominently in district cultural festivals to celebrate Kusaasi identity. Such visibility promotes cultural preservation, social pride, and recognition of the important role that traditional healers play in the community.

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