

Exploring and Understanding Human Ageing in Nigeria from the Eyes of African Belief System

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Abstract: - This study discusses the phenomena of aging, aging-associated needs, and challenges of healthcare provision in Africa from the perspective of African belief systems. African cultural heritage presents older adults as custodians of custom, and as people who are full of wisdom, representing the mirror through which the society sees. It is believed that older adults deserve some respect and should age in their homes. However, caring for older adults were reserved for women, but we argue that such an approach is not sustainable, and alternatives are needed. Older adults have peculiar healthcare needs, and as such, moral support alone will not be sufficient, as it appears to be the only thing that the family may be able to continue to offer. Thus, the study recommends institutional poverty alleviation in Africa as it remains a stumbling block to any meaningful innovation and change to lifestyle. Policy enactment and strict implementation guidelines, in addition to private sector participation, are crucial to tackling the issues of aging in Nigeria. Sensitization on aging-related matters can be accomplished by introducing gerontology and human services courses in primary and secondary schools, and institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: African Belief System, Nigeria, Human Ageing and Healthcare

I. INTRODUCTION

Generally, it is believed that a person who has lived to be 60 years and above can be classified as an older person. However, strict adherence to chronological age as a measure of classification into old age may be inappropriate, given the fact that most societies have no accurate birth records, but attributes age to individuals based on roles or social status, Wells (as cited in Bramucci & Erb, 2007). Aging has increasingly become a social, economic, and political reality in Africa. Many agencies have alluded to the exponential growth of the aging population in Africa, and especially sub-Saharan Africa. Still, government and policy experts have not taken the issue of aging, and its healthcare needs seriously. Primarily, we attribute the lag to the traditional African belief system and its effects in understanding aging.

According to UNFPA (2012), currently, there are 15 countries with more than 10 million older persons, seven of these being developing countries. This trend, therefore, suggests that culture and belief systems are significant to understanding people, and conditions of living will continue to play determining roles in matters of life and death, including aging. For example, belief systems are essential to all forms of actions and activities associated with aging and

healthcare provision for the aged. In developing countries, while poverty is subsidized to enhance the tackling of the multi-consequential issues of aging, older adults in Africa can only count on their immediate family for any source of help. The significance of poverty to aging predicaments have been identified by UNFPA (2012) that, having poor conditions earlier in life place older people at risk of severe health problems and adversely affect their health and vitality.

The health conditions of older adults reflect the environment, working conditions, nutrition, and lifestyle choices in younger years, and constitutes key ingredient for policies and programs with an intergenerational focus. In Africa, differentiations are established on the basis of culture, and such habits constitute the identity of the people as well as a cultural reality. Waghid (2013) understood culture as a product of people, and argue that the environment plays a significant role in understanding social realities and more importantly, aging. African culture is a mesh of several backgrounds, political and socio-economic realities defining the indigenous cultures. Relatedly, culture comes to be reinforced or affected by the facts of colonialism and globalization as a reality of the continent. This development continues to challenge indigenous culture, general well-being, perception of aging, and the methods of caring for older adults. Nevertheless, comprehensive care for the aged is affected by factors such as traditional lifestyles, educational status, having personal money in old age, and gender status (Fajemilehin and Odebiyi, 2011).

II. THE AFRICAN BELIEF SYSTEM AND HUMAN AGEING

African is a continent of rich cultures and cultural heritage that attract people's inquisitiveness. In the area of health and aging, people tend to be fascinated by cultural practices bordering on respect, tenderness, courtesies, political inclusion and religious reverence accorded to the elders in Africa against what is obtainable in the west (Waghid, 2016). The peculiar manner at which older adults are respected in Africa is relative to people's experiences and the impacts of their environment. Cultural heritage is a regular social occurrence that enhances borrowing and sharing of valuable traits to better people's life. Africans boast of lofty cultural philosophy such as collectivism, community solidarity, courteousness, and tenderness. On the other divide, Europeans and Americans embrace individualism, institutionalization, frankness, and laissez-faire attitudes towards their older

adults. If cultural values could be emulated, it may be possible to arrive at something that will serve the needs of all members of society.

Africans place a high premium on religion and cultural belief systems, which to a large extent, shape social relations which influence, among others, caregiving provisions to the older adults. Populations around the world are aging rapidly, and this demographic transition is placing new demands on societies to provide comprehensive systems for long-term care at home, in communities or institutions. In sub-Saharan Africa, 46 million older people live in the region, and this number is expected to more than triple by 2050 (WHO, 2017). If nothing else, we must start planning because a significant proportion of these people will require long-term care at some point in their lives. The new demographic composition will call for a closer look at and a review of African traditional belief systems on aging and caring for the aging population.

The argument for human interdependence in all aspects of life and the respect to do unto others as one will love done unto him has been the basis upon which family was sustained in Africa. The community has always been part of man and vice versa, but time has changed, and globalization has not helped. Therefore, the understanding and philosophy that taking care of older adults and providing mandatory support services is a community responsibility have been the norm in Africa. Africans still believe that all hands are expected to be on deck to ensure that those who toiled for us will not be forgotten. Those who worked hard and contributed to the well-being of their communities will rely on the younger ones who are expected to continue with an active life. Thus, Waghed (2013) argued that within the African cultural belief system, people are expected to live an active life and make contributions to their community.

As an individual or through collective effort, there is need to engage in the community in a manner to be positively recognized and respected based on past contributions to the welfare and well-being of others in the society. It is the contributions of individuals during active years that determine one's social network and guarantees some level of tranquility and serenity at old age. There is a need to establish that such lines of thought are problematic on many fronts. For example, it is a good idea and principle for people to dedicate their lives to the community at very tender ages, but the impact of urbanization and modernization challenged the notion of residing within a limited geographical location, and hence the difficulty inherent with living and making enough contribution in a particular locality. People are no longer expected to limit their residence to one country, talk less of the same continent, and communities, where we age, will depend on how we feel about the particular location. The chances are that many people will age in communities outside where they lived as adults and maybe, different from where their significant others reside. Even, when the relatives live within the proximity of the older adult, the complexity of

aging and the needs may surpass the emotional or skills set of the relatives. To meet the needs of such persons, it may require engaging the services of an expert who has acquired competencies needed for the older adult to age in place.

In Africa, culture and traditions, among other things determine to a considerable extent, the nature and quality of care that an older adult will be entitled to at old age. Protecting family images, reputation, and prestige have all accounted for reasons to care for an older person in the family and community. The close family ties enjoyed through the extended family systems in Africa calls for safeguarding the honor and the dignity of an older person and continue to ensure that the respect, contentment, prosperity, and joy of the elder will be protected. All these traditional belief systems will provide an enhanced old age serenity. But aging is not often cozy as all forms of complication may accompany the process. As Tosato, Zamboni, Ferrini, & Cesari (2007) posited, disease at old age is attributable to the accumulation of diverse deleterious changes occurring in cells and tissues with advancing age. Death is inevitable in humans, but culture and tradition will do well if they are strategized to extend living or make dying easier.

III. AGING IN NIGERIA: SOME CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

The demographic realities in Nigeria have been reviewed, and its implications on aging queried. For example, (National Population Commission, 2009; United Nations, 2012; Togonu-Bickersteth and Akinyemi 2014) calls attention to the facts of the blurring of those 60 years and above in the demographic composition of Nigeria. Togonu and Akinyemi were more specific in their identification of the weak relationship between the growing aging population and the shortage of social and health services, and importantly, the legal framework for the aged. All markers point to the fact that the costly cultural components of traditional Nigerian life often blurred the realities and identified mismatches. Clear and valid use of rich cultural tradition, belief systems, and befitting healthcare services for older adults must be instituted.

Preventable death among older adults can be reduced by ensuring the establishment of effective and efficient HealthCare delivery systems in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the existing units are not adequately furnished, and only the rich can afford to receive the needed health attention overseas. At the level of governance, a *laissez-faire* attitude still creates the impression that issues of aging are yet discussed and handled at the family or community level. It is evident that from independence to date, most African countries have enjoyed the rise in healthcare facilities and provisions but has not captured the needs and requirements for the aged (ADF, 2013).

Aging brings a peculiar social and healthcare challenge that relates to chronic conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and cancer. These challenges are associated with a growing middle-class

lifestyle that is proving to be significant killers on the continent, perhaps due to the large population and significantly due to the shortage of healthcare provision and expertise to address such needs. Most lifestyles, in addition to the new foreign supermarkets that are bringing food genetically to the general Nigerian population, are increasing the disease burden in Africa, but the available health systems are ill-equipped to tackle the problems. This new phenomenon, however, remains problematic in the context of lag in the conscious consideration and provisions for the increasing care of the aging population. Globally aging and the entrepreneurship prospects in aging are being celebrated (Ki-moon, 2012), but many African states are still backward and refuse to realize that aging is an opportunity to review and rethink culture and tradition, and how best to make use of them in getting the best out of the aging population. Nigeria could do well in tapping into the opportunities aging presents by establishing legal and institutional frameworks that will be acceptable to all culture with respect to the care of older adults.

UNFPA (2012) observed that there is need to review the political, healthcare, economic, and social context in Africa if we must provide a more robust and deserving aging experience. In Nigeria, this composite need of older adults remains tasking on several fronts, policy-wise and financially at both the state and private level. At the state level, meeting with the needs of older adults continue to be seen as a Hercules task due to the lack of resources, coupled with the understanding that aging needs and care are capital intensive. At the individual level, cost and coverage have continued to discourage many older adults from accessing needs. African belief system and tradition remain an essential and meaningful aspect affecting the demand and provision of care for older adults. But, as Fajemilehin & Odebisi (2011) found out, social relationships are crucial aspects in the drive to aging care, but they are not enough in themselves a guarantee to affective well-being of the aged.

There should be a synergy between social, health, economic, and political arrangement to meet the needs of older adults. For example, those who provide social supports should be able to give advice about health practices, disease prevention, and should also encourage the practice of positive health behaviors. An in-depth examination and scrutiny of the existing sociocultural network of older adults will easily facilitate the application of such arrangements. This form of synergy will see to and guarantee harmony between generations in the quest for effective transformation of aging challenges facing the continent of Africa, of which Nigeria is a major actor.

The role of the family in this regard remains critical, as "long-term care can be provided in a range of settings – including people's homes stating that currently, families provide most long-term care in sub-Saharan Africa and doing so without any organized training or support." (WHO, 2017) Unfortunately, in Nigeria, as it is the case in most African

countries, the burden of the provision of Long-Term Care repose on families already battered with the difficult economic situation and lacks the adequate technical know-how to meet the need of older adults. Placing the burden of providing Long Term Care to older adults on family members alone is not sustainable, given the rapidly increasing number of older people.

IV. AFRICAN BELIEF SYSTEM, AGEING NEEDS AND REALITIES

Beliefs systems remain the identity of a people and attempt to change a people's belief system are excruciatingly hard and time-consuming. However, modernization and general development have proven to force belief systems in Africa to bend, and in most cases, it is only possible after a series of long battles. Often, eradicating a belief system mounts much pressure on social order, which turns problematic and sometimes injurious (Rwezaura, 1989; Chepngeno & Ezech, 2007). This perception, therefore, suggests the need for societies to take the existing systems into considerations in understanding and in planning for alternatives to the indigenous models of meeting the care and the needs of the aging population. Africa should be at the forefront of designing options to the present system of care, putting into considerations the central belief system that aging is a serene and glorious status that demand proper care, support and rest. One can claim that aging is a continental challenge in Africa and as such, there is need to put all hands-on deck if we must make progress towards the legal, political and economic frameworks upon which a sustainable provision of care to older adults can be built.

WHO (2015) argued that investment in aging-related issues and healthcare infrastructure are needed, but interested parties must pay closer attention to the existing belief systems, and must be willing to support policies and programs that will adequately protect and care for older adults. It has been established that Africa is in dire need of aging-related infrastructure, but country-specific policies are not designed in a manner that will attract the needed investment to meet the demands. There have been development agendas to build capacity on long term care service providers as it relates to health, social protection, gender equality, the advancement of human rights, and economic development. We must remember the contributions of those who we see today as older adults– either to their family, local community, or to the broader society. However, health is key to longevity because it only when we are healthy that we can make use of other available social resources.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Replacing or eliminating long, culturally held beliefs and traditions is not an easy task, especially in Africa. Many generations have depended on the same belief and culture to support their older adults. However, education and time leave nothing untouched or unchanged. Education and public awareness campaigns are recommended for the general

populace and policymakers in Africa to consider aging and healthcare needs foraging as a priority. Aging must be incorporated into national development plans and poverty reduction strategies. Studies have shown that abuse, neglect, and violence against older persons are much more prevalent than currently acknowledged, often such is couched in cultural belief and practices. For more effective prevention strategies to take adequate care of older adults, there is a need for stronger legislation that can protect the rights of older adults.

Poverty in the continent of Africa remains a stumbling block to any meaningful innovation and change to lifestyle and must be addressed through appropriate policies and programming. Aging awareness is required and necessitates the introduction of courses such as gerontology and other human subject courses, both at primary and secondary schools, and in institutions of higher learning. Teaching age and human-related classes will go a long way in creating widespread re-conscientious and psychological awakening in the population about the aging population. African belief system contains rich cultural heritages that remains relevant to fashioning a way out for the emerging problem of providing care for older adults in Africa. Despite the rich cultural values which we hold very dear as Africans, we must be willing to bend to some reasonable extent as time changes.

There is a need to integrate African culture with the current realities on the ground, and plan a sustainable system to take care of our older adults. Our culture should be considered as an asset and must form the bedrock upon which we must add a sound legal, economic, and political ideologies that will strengthen our institutions. The system must agree to transform and respond to the rhymes of modernization, which controls the healthcare realities of modern times. Cultural and traditional belief system will be here with us for a long time, but in the foreseeable future, the conventional belief system

needed to change to meet the growing reality of aging in Africa.

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