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## **FAITH HEALING AND WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is based on several years of field research on African religious movements, particularly those led by women. It employs in-depth interviews, participant observation, collection of testimonies and case studies. It looks at how faith healing is patronised especially by women as a health delivery option. It suggests that, given the poor economic status of women, cultural beliefs, and the uncertainties of continuous medical services resulting from frequent strikes, or 'alutas' by hospital personnel, among other things, as well as the complementary role the churches play in health delivery, faith healing should be taken seriously by the national health delivery agencies. Faith healers include categories of religious personnel called prophets/ prophetesses, male and female pastors, divine healers, traditional priests/priestesses etc. In this presentation, I focus on the first two categories

### **Introduction**

Increasingly more people, especially women (80-90%), are flocking to one African religious movement (Spiritual, Pentecostal/Charismatic church) or another primarily in search of solutions for health problems and socio-economic welfare for themselves as well as for their family members. They prefer the churches to hospitals/clinics because they sincerely believe in the religio-cultural dimension of illness that generally classifies the causes of illness into two, namely physical and spiritual diseases. Even though the churches believe in both causes, they are preoccupied with the spiritual, while the hospitals focus exclusively on the physical. The roles of the churches and biomedicine therefore are complementary.

The quest for healing, an integral part of African traditional religion, is also the most common activity of the churches. Here, the healing is defined broadly as a change or an improvement in a person's former condition in life be it health, economic, political etc. The main problems of women are those concerning their 'stomach' (meaning womb/childbirth), their marriage, and witchcraft. These seem to be closely interwoven, because the inability to give birth has implications for the stability in marriage, while the main causative agent for this state of childlessness is supposed to be witchcraft. It is believed that these churches, rather than the mission churches and hospitals, provide remedy for witchcraft-based afflictions, especially those that affect the reproductive health, and indeed the churches also attest to this. However, those accused of witchcraft are invariably women in one's own family, thus bringing disastrous consequences to the welfare and unity among family members that are needed for optimal human development.

### **Defining Faith Healing**

Faith is defined by Rev Christie Doh Tetteh (Mama Christie) as "an intense trust in God that He will make the desires of a person come true". It is something that is not seen with the physical eyes (Sackey 2002: 11). Faith healing, as practised in African religious movements, is usually the hope in the alleviation of sickness and socio-economic problems through either the intercession of Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit of God, the Divine Word, prayer or even a trusted and

charismatic human being. Sometimes the mere sight of a religious personality may fulfil a person's faith. For example at the Spiritual Revival and Healing Centre at Edumfa, a unit of the Church of Pentecost, the very sight of the leader Auntie Grace is believed to have effected healing (Sackey 1996; 2002). Affirming this phenomenon, Adu-Boahen (1999: 25 quoting Luke 4: 41), writes that there were occasions where demons themselves have come out of people they had possessed when those, "people were brought to Christ and He did not command them but they came out all the same". Therefore, it can be argued that even though faith may be a person's innermost desire, invisible to the outside world, a powerful force or a clairvoyant personality can penetrate into this secret wish.

To me, even though faith cannot be seen, it can be described as a reciprocal phenomenon, that is, one needs to perform an outward action in order to achieve the desired result. This can be in the form of prayers, fasting, rituals, consuming food and other items blessed or touched by pastors, or prophets. This latter aspect of faith may be likened to what Frazer calls "contagious magic," by which he means that "things which have been once conjoined must remain ever afterwards, even when quite dissevered from each other" (Frazer 1979: 347). In other words the power inherent in the religious person is transferred into any item that had been in his/her possession before. At Edumfa, Auntie Grace blesses toffees (candies) and when she throws them out into the congregation, as she usually does, they scramble for them with great zeal and aggression because those toffees are believed to contain healing powers. There are testimonies whereby barren women have consumed such toffees and given birth.<sup>1</sup> In the same vein food handled by Rev. Christie such as *kokonte* (processed cassava flour dough) and groundnut soup offered to a supplicant, and the bread she sells to her congregation are believed to have performed wonders. According to a woman while she was eating the *kokonte*, she prayed that God should have mercy on her and give her a child. Shortly after that she conceived and gave birth to a baby girl whom she named Christie. A Biblical example that supports this contention is the woman suffering from a twelve-years long blood condition (Luke 8: 44). She touched the cloak of Jesus Christ, believing she would be healed, and she achieved the intended result. Again Mama Christie cited the case of the woman with fibroids who was healed by drinking just tea she prepared for her and thus avoided surgery (Sackey 2002). Mama Christie thus argues that it is not every sickness that needs surgery. Through one's faith, God can deliver a person from sickness. Again she justified spiritual healing activities with a citation from Mark 16: 15-20, emphasising verse 17 which stresses the performance of miracles or signs, casting out the devil, and speaking in tongues which are also the very important characteristics of Charismatic/faith healing.

All of the above examples deal with female reproductive ailments and how the faith of the women was able to heal them. Also, from the foregoing, the definition of faith seems to go beyond the simple hope that something positive happens, a miracle, so to say. It appears that sometimes one has to make use of materialism in order to make faith effective. It is in this context that Rigby (1981:106) is right when, which he describes a function of the African world-view as a venture in which, "the efforts of men (the material) and God (the spiritual) are conjoined...in a common enterprise." Thus the African world-view is an integral part of the New African religious movements or African Christianity as Sanneh (1983) calls them, though some of them especially the Pentecostals and Charismatics vehemently deny this assertion.

### Reasons for Seeking Faith Healing

There are different reasons for seeking faith healing that have been well documented by Sackey (2002, 1996, 1991, 1987, 1979), Appiah-Kubi (1981), Baeta (1962), among others. Apart from the observation that most women are poor and cannot afford the high cost of health delivery services, the unfavourable pre-payment arrangement before treatment known as "cash and carry" is also very prohibitive. Dr. A.H.K. Collison<sup>2</sup> also asserts that poor quality service and poor treatment by health

providers prevent women from seeking health services at the medical facilities. The women rather resort to faith healing at the churches or spiritual gardens. However, the main reason women give for resorting to this alternative healing is witchcraft.

Witchcraft is the spiritual ability of a person to prey on the spirit of another person by means of a remote control mechanism. Invariably this activity is meant to cause harm and sometimes even death to its victim.<sup>3</sup> Primarily, witchcraft is inherited. However, people who exhibit certain characteristics such as greed, jealousy, stinginess, quarrelsomeness, and other negative conduct are said to be witches. Witchcraft affliction can neither be cured by Western medicine nor orthodox/mission churches (Sackey 1999; 2000; Adu-Boahen 1999). The orthodox Christian churches have been criticised for their "inability to deal with.... specifically African illnesses which are the result of the specifically African problem of witchcraft" (Walker 1979: 136). However, the new African churches have given another dimension to this definition. According to Adu-Boahen (1999: 59) witchcraft is the art of being consciously possessed by evil, demonic spirits and collaborating with them to commit evil acts in line with Satan's evil aim of killing, stealing and destroying. This definition is not very different from the one given above but here the age-old spiritual phenomenon of witchcraft is being associated with Satan to show the synthesis of African and Christian cultures that characterise the new African religious movements or churches.

Witchcraft affliction takes several forms but in women it affects mainly their reproductive capabilities especially their womb or stomach, as they say. These afflictions which are described as *sunsum mu yare* (spiritual), as opposed to *honam mu yare* (physical) and are translated as infertility or barrenness, fibroids, abdominal pains, waist pains, nymphomania etc. In witchcraft parlance, the misfortune caused to the womb is described as: 'the womb has been "sold", "buried", "cemented" or "swept"'. Since the value of an African woman is expressed in motherhood the childless woman is not only without esteem within the society; but also the stability of her marriage is affected, since the union mainly thrives on the ability to reproduce. Even though medical statistics have proven that male sterility and low sperm count also contribute to childlessness (Symre 1991),<sup>4</sup> women are still the ones blamed for this condition. Again, witchcraft affects both men and women, but it is believed that women witches outnumber wizards and more women also become victims of this misfortune. It is within this framework that Prophetess Grace Tani, the mother of New African Religious Movements, found it expedient to focus on female reproductive health and combat witchcraft when she founded the Church of the Twelve Apostles in 1914 (Sackey 1989). Understandably, Colonial Government officials initially referred to these churches as witch-hunting movements (Debrunner 1961).

On the other hand witchcraft is said to have positive functional value despite its grisly aberration of human spirits and macabre elements (Lessa and Vogt 1979: 332). It is a way to explain the inexplicable events in society and according to Lessa and Vogt (1979: 332):

All societies have the problem of providing an outlet for aggressions engendered by the conflicts, antagonisms, and frustrations of social living. Witches exist as convenient scapegoats for such aggressions. All societies also spawn individuals who in some degree do not find satisfaction within their culture, and a person of this sort may find an acceptable self-identity by considering himself to be a witch.

Women prefer these churches where they are treated humanely, and their problems, be they witchcraft and other spiritual sicknesses, are taken seriously. Here the patient has access to the prophet/pastor/healer on one-one basis. In the churches supplicants can have time to share their experiences with others through the giving of testimonies, which are integral part of worship. People's testimonies may move and give encouragement to other supplicants with similar or greater problems. The goal of testimony-giving is also to show gratitude as well as serve as life motivation for others. During the narration of testimony, the congregation may find empathy with the speaker by murmuring "aahhs," "mmms", "eeeiis," and "oohs", Amen, Halleluiah, etc. to support the testifier

that she/ he is not alone. Testimonies are a means to the communal good. There have been occasions where people's testimonies have effected instant healing in others.<sup>5</sup>

### Faith Healing Methods

Healing methods are varied as have been described in detail by Sackey (2002). Briefly, faith healing during church service can be both direct and indirect. The most common form of direct faith healing is through prayers and laying-on of hands. This takes place in one of two ways: either the patients are called up in front of the congregation, kneel and are prayed for, or they are placed in the centre of a circle and prayed for while the congregation dance round the perimeter or in their places. (West 1975). The dancing takes place amidst the loud prayers of the prophets/pastors and shouts of 'Amen', or 'halleluiahs' or 'Yes' by the whole congregation. In some cases the prophet-healer touches the afflicted or the ailing spot of each individual with his hands, or the Bible, or crucifix or any objects deemed sacred by the church. These healing services emphasise group participation because it is believed that the Holy Spirit heals through the agency of the healer and also through the efforts of the congregation alike (West 1975: 93). Group participation is also an aspect of African life where the sense of corporate living is so deep (Mbiti 1969: 207).

Music, another form of direct healing, is believed to be efficacious especially for those with mental, emotional and other spiritual problems. Appiah-Kubi (1981:110) reports of instances where music had healed such problems at Rev. Prah's Divine Healing and Miracle Ministry. During worship in these churches the intensity of drumming and dancing may result in instant healing. Music and dancing or noise for that matter is generally believed to expel witches, and other evil spirits that are the causative agents of illness and other misfortune.<sup>6</sup> This contention is strongly manifested at the Church of Nyamsom Pa (Ekwam) where patients are made to participate in the 'heavenly' inspired dance called *Hine* (Sackey 1987:14). They are expected to dance vigorously and unceasingly till exhausted. The root of this belief may be found in traditional healing at the shrines where, "the sick may be denied rest and quiet for the simple reason that the causative agent (disease demons) must be allowed no peace" (Twumasi 1975:35). Again, even though one may have faith, one must equally participate in making the faith work.

An indirect faith healing may come in the form of dreams or what is called visionary operations at the Church of *Nyamesom Pa*. Here the patient dreams she/he is being surgically operated upon by the founder Ekwam or one of the prophetesses or angels, and awakes actually healed (Sackey 1987:14). At the Spiritual Revival and Healing Centre at Edumfa a young man believed he had been 'spiritually shot' in the leg. As a result he developed a boil on the right thigh, and one night he dreamt thus:

As I was sleeping in the church the boil suddenly burst and a flood of brownish pus began to gush out. I never realized I could contain so much pus, about a gallon full that drenched the mattress on which I was sleeping. Then out of the thigh came the remnants of what looked like a shotgun cartridge.

Like any sickness spiritual affliction can recur. A witchcraft spirit can repossess a person if he refuses to live and be fully committed to the Lord, to come under his protective power. This can be very dangerous because it will put you in greater bondage than before (Adu-Boahen 1999: 68). Faith healing is therefore contingent upon good moral behaviour, observing and living within the framework of what a particular society has set up the moral code. Faith healing is also contingent on good moral living, observing the moral code of the community.

## Conclusions

Faith healing has both advantages and disadvantages. Too much emphasis on faith healing may, and indeed, has resulted in casualties during child-birth, though the churches decline to confirm.<sup>7</sup> These incidents could have been avoided had medical care been sought. Yet the patients and churches are not the only ones to blame. The frequent strikes or 'alutas' by hospital personnel are equally to blame. Many a strike by hospital personnel has sent many patients to the healing churches.<sup>8</sup> This situation must also be addressed if there should be improvement in women's health generally. Even though the churches may have remedy for relieving women from witchcraft, the tendency of accusing other people as the source of the affliction especially family members has led to dissension and disintegration of families. For example, it has resulted in broken relationships between mother and child, grandmother, aunt, sister etc. Some sons have even killed their mothers because some pastors had told them their mothers were the cause of their misfortune, while some daughters are not on speaking terms with their mothers for the same reasons.

There are other examples of witchcraft accusation, which though not directly linked with the churches are relevant here. For example, witch camps exist in some areas in the northern part of Ghana (e.g. Gambaga), where over 200 women have been accused, stigmatised, and confined as witches. They have been declared as outcasts of both family and society. This shows the invidious and destructive nature of witchcraft accusations.

Some faith healers, particularly the men have been accused of fraud, trickery and seduction (Sackey 1991). Some female leaders also fraudulently exploit their fellow women in the guise of praying for them to redouble whatever money they sow in the church. Indeed such negativism coming from women seems to negate the very help women seek to give their fellow women. But, then, in all human institutions there are good and evil, genuine and fake personalities.

However, in a witchcraft-prone society where medical facilities are inadequate and also expensive the churches play very useful roles. Some have built new townships where they provide shelter for the sick, instituted self-help projects for the destitute and the undesired, especially those healed of witchcraft, and this can be seen as a positive contribution to development of the country as a whole. These settlements include the former Ekwamkrom of the Church of *Nyamesom Pa* (now used as the Buduburam Refugee Camp), Mozano (Musama Disco Cristo Church) and the Edumfa Spiritual Revival and Healing Centre all in the Central Region; the Tadzewu township of the Apostles Revelation Society in the Volta Region and others. Faith healers have been able to restore self-confidence to the sick, especially women, some of whom have rediscovered their values as human beings.

In conclusion therefore, these churches, whatever their short coming, have made some positive contribution, especially in complementing the health delivery in the country. Yet, the National Health delivery institution, specifically the Ministry of Health, has not officially acknowledged the churches, although I know some medical doctors at the hospitals who are "born-again" Christians and practise both Western healing and faith healing. (see also Sackey 1996).<sup>9</sup> Since witchcraft beliefs are the concerns of different classes of people and churches, there is the urgent need for those concerned in the field of health including the churches and women NGOs to take a closer look at the belief in the spiritual causation of illness in Ghana, and perhaps consider a redefinition of it. This may prevent women from being accused by others, as well as discourage women themselves from accusing each other of witchcraft to disprove the adage that "women are their own enemies". But the big question still remains: can legislation be enacted against a phenomenon that is invisible? On a funny but serious note, this dilemma could be comparable to a human being engaged in a fight with a

ghost: when the ghost hits you, you feel it but when you strike back, your punch hits the wall causing you more injury which will again be attributed to the unseen forces of witchcraft?

As stated earlier, witchcraft is based on certain unacceptable human behaviour such as jealousy, greed, etc. and so long as human beings exist these attitudes will also be present in society. Thus, one way to control the incidence of witchcraft will be an attitudinal change, because "the witch kills 'He-gave-me-not-at-all' not 'He-gave-me-but-little' " (Danquah 1968: 188). Until then the churches should be assessed, a difficult task though, so that the genuine ones can continue to play complementary roles in the field of medical care.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Sackey, Field Notes on the Spiritual Revival and Healing Center, Edumfa, May 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Lecture delivered by Collison at the Women's health in the City of Accra Workshop, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, July 3, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See also Debrunner 1961; Appiah-Kubi 1983; Omoyajowo 1983.

<sup>4</sup> See also Sackey 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Sackey, Field Notes 1978, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> This perhaps one reason why the ban on drumming and noise making invokes protestation from the churches because the noise is necessary to drive away evil spirits. By observing the ban the ability of the churches to hold deliverance and exorcism is hampered and in the interim people being oppressed by witchcraft and other evil forces suffer unjustly.

<sup>7</sup> My own relative lost a baby through delivery at a church. Another relative lost her sick child at the hands of pastors and there must be many more since there are no statistics by the churches on this. Indeed record keeping is rarely practised (see Sackey 1996).

<sup>8</sup> I myself have been a victim of hospital personnel strikes and could have landed in a faith healing church.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the leader of the Lighthouse Chapel International is a trained medical doctor, who primarily does faith healing but also offer free medical services to the community in which he operates.