

African Traditional Healers in the Media in Zambia's Contemporary Times

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Abstract

The article investigates the representation of African Traditional Religion (ATR), in the media in Zambia using a descriptive case study design. The article focuses on traditional healers as depicted in the media in a bid to establish patterns and ascertain the existence and forms of traditional religion in the cities. The article established that the traditional healers were portrayed to be on demand especially in urban areas. Despite this, the representation was largely negative as it carried demeaning terminologies and offences and crimes reported to have been committed by the healers. In addition, while the media negatively portrayed the traditional healers, they used the very media to advertise their skills and profession. The article therefore argues that traditional healers are still relevant in contemporary times as demonstrated in the functions they play, despite public condemnation. The article advances that modernity and technological advancements coupled with socio-economic conditions have led to the commodification of traditional healing. Most importantly, the presence of traditional healers in the media points to the fact that ATR is still alive in a self-declared 'Christian nation.' The article therefore recommends that the largely negative portrayal of some aspects of traditional healing in a way, which tend to stigmatise African traditional religion, needed to be problematised in academia.

Key words: African Traditional Healers, Media, 'Religion', Contemporary Times

1.0 Introduction

In African traditional religious view, traditional healers have been perceived as the greatest gift and most useful source of healing which is usually holistic since time immemorial (Mbiti, 1991). However, the growth

and spread of Christianity and Islam affected ATR in diverse ways including traditional healing. Despite this, Christianity and other religions co-exist side by side with ATR in Zambia. Other influences such as modernity, urbanisation, social change and globalisation have also in one way or another modified the traditional African life in many aspects. It is for this reason that Bourdillon (1990) opined that some aspects of traditional religion will fade due to the influences of foreign religions and social changes such as education and urbanisation as people move to live in the cities (Bourdillon, 1990). This article therefore explored the representation of African traditional healers in the media in order to establish the existence of ATR in present day Zambian society. Here a distinction is made between ‘religion in the media’ which refers to situations in which ‘outsiders’ discuss, report, or put information about religion in the media and ‘media religion’ which refers to situations in which religious authorities, communities or their representatives either practice their religion through media or purposely place information about their activities in the media (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2011). The article examines how the representation of traditional healers in the media reflects religion in the media. The article recognises the growing presence of traditional healers especially in Zambia’s capital, Lusaka where posters, flyers and different adverts are displayed in the public media and public places. Despite this, little is known about the implications of such adverts on the public and ATR. The article therefore makes a theoretical contribution on ATR in Zambian cities where studies on ATR in Zambia are limited. This is because Christianity has dominated studies on religion in Zambia.

Some attempts have been made to study ATR in the media though mostly in West Africa. Perhaps this also

reflects the growing popularity of West African movies which continue to flood different parts of Africa. With reference to how ATR has been addressed in the media, Asamoah-Gyadu (2011) opined that the media ‘demonised’ African religions. Tasié’s (2013) study, which examined the place of ATR in Nigerian video films, also established that Nigerian video films stigmatised ATR and African ethical values were generally seen as inferior to those of Christianity. He argued that unlike Christianity and Islam, African Religions tended to be at a serious disadvantage in media reportage because traditional religions do not have any central organising authority. This had led to outsiders being informers on the religion who include scholars of religion and journalists who may not necessarily believe or consciously subscribe to the teaching and practices of any deity. The negative representation of African Religions in the media had also been influenced by the growth of Christianity and the current Pentecostal trends, which viewed anything traditional to be a source of evil. Despite the negative portrayal, Nwoye (2010) confirmed in the dominance of the trappings of ATR in ‘Africa magic’ movies that the strengths and resources of ATR are still attractive to most African Christians. The continued presence of its various trappings in ‘Africa Magic’ movies is a practical testimony to this conclusion.

As can be observed, the above cited studies were all interrogating ATR from a broader perspective which sidelines the specific details relating to different aspects of the religion for not all aspects of ATR can be represented in the same manner. Therefore, this article sought to make a specific contribution on how traditional healers have positioned and been positioned in and by the media in contemporary times in Zambia.

2.0 Contextual Issues and Clarification of Terms

Before the advent of Christianity, which is often attributed to the influence of David Livingstone in the late nineteenth century (Henkel, 1989), Zambia's religious landscape was characterised by ATR, which the indigenous developed over time. Even after the arrival of Christian missionaries, the majority of Zambian communities continued to adhere to traditional practices and to maintain, at least initially, a number of traditional beliefs alongside their new Christian faiths, and many of these traditional beliefs and practices continue to influence behaviour and cultural norms (Taylor, 2006). One such traditional belief, which the article grapples with, is traditional healing represented by traditional healers in modern times.

Traditional healers are not only valued in Zambia, but in other countries too. For instance, Richter (2004) notes that in sub Saharan Africa, the ratio of traditional healers to the general population is approximately 1:500. It is also estimated that 70 percent to 80 per cent of the population in Africa makes use of traditional medicine (WHO, 2002). With reference to Zambia, it was estimated that there were over 50,000 traditional healers in Zambia, with about 40,000 registered with the Traditional Health Practitioners Association of Zambia (THPAZ), the major association for healers in the country (Nyambo, 2001). Many more operated outside the association while others belonged to the National Council of *N'ganga* (NCN) and other smaller organisations. The article adopts WHO's understanding of healers as a:

group of persons recognised by their community in which they live as being competent to provide health by using vegetable, animal and mineral substances and other methods based on social, cultural and religious backgrounds as well as on the knowledge of attitudes, and beliefs that are

prevalent in the community regarding the physical, mental and social wellbeing and the causation of disease and disability (WHO, 1978: 14).

With regard to the term ATR, it is here taken to mean the indigenous religion of the Africans, which was handed over from one generation to another by word of mouth until recent attempts at documentation. The title 'ATR' presents an assumed unitary portrait of the religions of the African and thus the paper also admits that while it is true that many features of religion and its practice are similar across Africa, it would be erroneous to assume that all African religion (s) is the same. ATR is seen through the media, here limited to technological uses in which the media is a conduit for the transmission of religious ideology and opinions. Among the different forms of media, the article focused on television, newspapers and Internet through social media especially facebook because these are the widely used forms of media. The relationship between the media and religion is not new, perhaps the important question is how media is understood and interpreted in different historical times be it in technological terms where the media becomes a conduit for the transmission of religious ideology or as an institution where the media becomes a structured complex of social relations (Fox, 2009).

3.0 Methodology

The study was situated in the interpretivist paradigm. It was therefore purely qualitative and employed a descriptive case study design (a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a case or multiple cases through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews,

audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes (Creswell, 2007). This was because the phenomena were qualitative in nature in that the study sought to explore the representation of traditional healers in the media and uncover how they had embraced the technological advancements in an urban context.

The article used the conceptualisation of religion in the media (situations in which ‘outsiders’ discuss, report, or put information about religion in the media) and media religion (in which religious authorities, communities or their representatives either practice their religion through media or purposely place information about their activities in the media) to collect data and make meaning of the findings and observations. To address religion in the media and media religion, the guiding research questions were centred on establishing what the media portrayed about traditional healers, what the traditional healers depicted about themselves in the media, and explaining why traditional healers were portrayed in that manner in the media?

Newspapers, social media and television stations were purposively sampled for analysis. For purposes of triangulation, the data was also collected through document analysis (including video recordings) and interviews. Being an exploratory study, non-probability sampling was more appropriate (Kothari, 2004: 56) and thus ten purposively sampled traditional medicine specialists were interviewed in Lusaka. They were all subjected to a structured interview, which lasted between 30-45 minutes. The interviews were all conducted at the traditional healers’ work stations. The data was coded and thematically analysed. The findings were reported in a narrative style as is the case of case studies (Yin, 2003).

Being a case study and realising that traditional healers were never the same even in the same context and culture, the findings of this article may not be generalised but may help in understanding how the media has influenced African Traditional Religion through the office of the traditional healer in contemporary times.

Under the interpretivist paradigm, the reasons for research are to understand and describe meaning and interrogate how the phenomenon on focus is socially constructed among others (Creswell, 2007). Unlike starting with a theory (as is often the case with post positivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). In this case, the paper developed patterns of meaning and accounts for those patterns.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Representation of Traditional Healers in the Media

Different themes emerge from the representation of traditional healers in the media. These are highlighted and discussed in this segment. Representations of religion in the media will be presented and discussed followed by media religion.

4.2 Religion in the Media: Traditional healers' portrayal in the media

With regard to what the media portrayed about traditional healing, the study established the portrayals of terminology, demand for traditional healers, challenges of traditional healers, and their offences and crimes.

4.2.1 Terminology

The media uses the terms ‘witchdoctor’ and ‘traditional healers’. While scholarship has long gone beyond the use of derogatory usage of the term ‘witchdoctor’, the media in Zambia still reflected the use of the term. For example the *Guardian* carried a story titled: ‘Zambian struggles with power of witchdoctors’ (Guardian, 2005). Other stories included ‘startling confession of a female witchdoctor in the *Zambian Eye* (Guardian, 2014); ‘Are Witchdoctors Purveyors of Ritual Murders, Defilements?’ in the *Times of Zambia* of 20 April 2015; ‘Childless women versus witch doctors’ demands’ in *Zambia Daily Mail*, 26 March 2015) among others. While this term has its roots in early Eurocentric scholarship and Christian attitudes, the lack of recognition and appreciation of the office of traditional healers as understood in African traditional religious thought has perpetuated the derogatory term. Perhaps this may also be associated with the wrongs, which some healers are reported to be involved in such as taking advantage of clients. In any case, the fact is that like anyone else, these traditional healers can and occasionally do use their position of power to exploit members of society. And this does not justify the use of derogatory labels. Most importantly, the use of the term witch-doctor also raises the question of who is writing about traditional healers. The article observes that the reports covered in the media on traditional healers were largely from some sections of Christian churches, journalists and gender activists who all have their own interests. A scholarly, balanced and critical voice was missing and this explains the use of terms that have long been buried in scholarship.

4.2.2 Demand for Traditional Healers

The media also reflected demand for traditional healers and their medicines for different ailments. The most popular demand was related to marital affairs, sicknesses and sexual life. This suggested the people's understanding of misfortune. For example, Mildnerová (2010) studied the *Local Conceptualisation of Health, Illness and Body in Lusaka* from a medical anthropology perspective and noted that in Zambia, conception of illness is connected to a wider framework of religion and social reality and as such, illness is not seen as a mere disruption of physical and psychological integrity of an individual. It is instead envisioned in broader terms as a sort of misfortune or bad luck caused by the intervention of different invisible powers such as spirits, demons, ghosts and witches. The local conception of health and illness and body in Lusaka also draws on the idea that its physical, mental, spiritual, social and environmental aspects are closely interrelated. According to her study, it is believed that one cannot be healed or become wealthy unless at the expense of someone else, hence the processes of healing and affliction are interconnected and influence each other. Mildnerova's study further explains why the people of Lusaka may find the traditional healers attractive because of their understanding of what illness and health is, including the causes of illnesses and misfortune despite their claimed Christian orientation.

While the media depicted that sex herbs were much more on demand from traditional healers, (Sexual stimulants "*kafupa*" and "*mutototo*")

openly sold in Zambia in the *Lusaka Voice* of 24 September 2013; ‘meet Christopher Zulu the Seven hours Man in *Times of Zambia* of 8 June 2015 among others, the traditional healers (Dr M. interview, 7 November 2014) attested to the fact they were addressing multiple misfortunes such as marital problems (infertility, bringing back lost lovers, preventing partners from being unfaithful, enlargement of the male penis, quick and prolonged ejaculations, tightening of the vulva, and helping people find marriage). Other problems were economic in nature and these ranged from providing medicine for employment, promotion at work, boosting businesses and passing examinations in order to have a better future. Other issues were spiritual in nature such as protecting people against enemies, illnesses and revenging on the people’s behalf, witchcraft and sorcery (*Mama B. Interview* on 6 November 2014). They also claimed to be removing bad luck and treating madness. Fortune telling was also a prominent aspect of these specialists’ work. In addition, some Pentecostal preachers were reported to be seeking the services of the traditional medicine specialists in their quest to attract members. This was also confirmed in the public media. For example, the *Sunday Times* of 11 April 2015 carried a story in which ‘Doctor’ Yesaya from Chadiza District, Eastern province, who operated on Church Road in Lusaka, said many pastors had visited him to seek help with herbs to attract more members to their churches, noting that some pastors were using some charm called *Chikoka* to attract people to their churches

and also make their sermons interesting.

The media representation or projection of the roles of the traditional healers and those highlighted by the study participants were consistent with Mbiti (1969) description of the duties of healers. It is also clear that urban life and modernity has not taken away their roles, but has instead given them new roles in a different context. It can therefore be said that the traditional healer's profession is likely to continue for several generations especially as people's needs continue to increase through modern changes.

4.2.3 **Challenges faced by Traditional Healers (Healers & State)**

The media reflected the challenges, which the traditional healers faced in accessing herbs and roots for their medicines from the environment. The challenge related to the changing environmental crisis and climate change which led to the disappearance of certain vegetation and animal species (Dr T., 6 November 2014). More so, the challenge; were linked to State regulations on protected areas. In this regard, Zambia Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) warned traditional healers against venturing into protected areas without the prescribed documents for their medicines (*Zambia Daily Nation*, 16 September 2015). This scenario depicts a long-standing dilemma African Traditional Religion was faced with since the inception of colonial rule, which took away the land from the people. Since the colonial period, indigenous peoples have been dispossessed of their lands or faced the threat of dispossession

and forced removal leading to increased poverty, erosion of cultures and even outright extinction or complete assimilation (Kipuri, 2009).

Over time, indigenous populations have continued to experience the loss of access to lands, territories and natural resources. Young (2007) also observed that indigenous people have a deep spiritual relationship with the land; and feel one with their ancestral territory and responsible for the healthy maintenance of the land (its waters and soils, its plants and animals) for both themselves and future generations. Therefore while environmental regulations such as safeguarding protected areas secures these areas, the spirituality of the people who are connected to the land and nature is threatened to the point that performing their religious duties becomes a challenge. The decline of spirituality connected to land and nature is also seen in the growing dispossession of the 21st century where chiefs and headmen sell land to foreigners and local land brokers.

4.2.4 Offences and Crimes

The media further reflected offences and crimes committed by the traditional healers and it was a major theme when judged against all other aspects of traditional healers' portrayal in the media. These offences included immigration offences, theft, causing death and the use of false remedies. For example, '30 illegal immigrants, including traditional healers making unsubstantiated claims of magical healing powers in the media were arrested by Immigration department (*Daily Mail*, 2015); 'Traditional healer gets 2 years for causing

death in Daily Mail of 9 June 2015; Traditional healers arrested for offering false remedies in the *Lusaka Voice* of 25 June 2015; ‘Grandmother [traditional healer] gets 16 years for marrying off 13 year old’ in *Post Newspaper* of 15 July 2015. While the media reflected these crimes, these were to some degree a manifestation of how the sacred office of the traditional healers was invaded by people who had no calling for economic reasons (*Dr D. Interview*, 9 November 2015). At the same time, by dwelling on the wrongs, the media was demonising traditional healing. Breeze FM (Chipata) also reported an outcry on the number of illegal foreign traditional healers and witchdoctors on the increase in Chipata district. These concerns were also expressed by THPAZ (Fake traditional healers worry THPAZ on *Zibani Zambia*, 11 May 2013; *Lusaka Times*, 21 March 2013; QFM Radio, 11 May 2013). This has also led to calls on the state to regulate traditional healers (State to Regulate Traditional Healers) in the *Times of Zambia* of 21 June 2015.

The representation of traditional healers ‘offences and alleged crimes also points to the society’s expectations. Traditional healers are expected to be trustworthy, morally upright, friendly, willing and ready to serve, able to discern people’s needs and not to be exorbitant in their charges (Mbiti, 1969: 167).

4.3 Media Religion: Traditional Healer's own representation

The traditional healers' own representation was centred on adverts and explanations on what they were able to cure. In this way, the media was being used to sell their products and services. It can therefore be said that unlike in the traditional set up where traditional healers did not have to sell themselves, modern life and technological advancements have transformed traditional healing. Media religion with reference to traditional healers is thus largely dominated by adverts from different healers, both local and abroad.

This demonstrates that the use of the media has introduced or enhanced the commodification of healing, a departure from a typical traditional worldview. As Mbiti (1969), observes impersonal life of the urban society and the money economy, which encourages quick gains, has resulted in traditional healing being deemed as a source of income. For example, some traditional healers admitted that they are doing very fine economically and have acquired plots on which to build houses, motor vehicles and are able to provide for their families through being a healer (Dr K. *Interview*, 9 November 2014).

4.4 Explaining the Representation of Traditional Healer

The media largely presents negative imagery of traditional healers from the stories which are covered (offences and crimes, fake healers and their problems with the state). Where the image is positive, it is in instances where the traditional healers themselves are using the media to showcase their services. This negative portrayal raises the question of who is writing about traditional healers? While the stories covered in the media are reports from the public, the stories do not reflect nor highlight the core

of traditional healing. The representation also reflects the perception of the public on the traditional healers as judged from the terminologies used ‘witchdoctor’, ‘fake doctors’, ‘traditional doctors’, etc. Despite this negative perception, reports on the demand for traditional healers are on the rise as attested to by the traditional healers (Dr P. interview, 8 November 2014). Perhaps this is the irony with syncretism where people have two religious worldviews which can be used when it is appropriate. In any case, the representation of traditional healers in the media still reflects the injustice ATR has suffered from colonialism and Christianity, which condemned the religion as being backward, primitive, fetish etc (Mbiti, 1991).

The positive imagery of traditional healers in the media demonstrates how the traditional healers have embraced technological advancements in their work. This is manifested in the adverts in the form of flyers and advertising space in the media (social media, print, radio and TV and public space).

At the same time, the use of the media manifests the economic value, which has been attached to traditional medicine, perhaps a shift from the way traditional healers carried out their sacred roles in the society. This also demonstrates that the institution of traditional medicine is not a closed system but that it is dynamic and responsive to social, political, environmental and epidemiological transformations. As such, traditional healers have embraced the use of the media to show case their medicines and work. However, it is indisputable that the use of the media and technological advancements has contributed to the commercialisation of traditional healing. Neo-liberalism when understood as a modified form of liberalism tending to favour free-market capitalism and the

consequent plummet of indicators of human development such as health, education, sanitation and infant mortality rate (Englund, 2006), the immediate the link between the commercialisation of traditional healing and neo-liberal economy becomes even more clear.

4.5 Reflections on the media representation of Traditional Healers

The positive and negative representation of traditional healers in the media leads to different patterns and points of reflection inductively. In this paper, the representation of traditional healers in the media firstly proves that ATR as expressed in the office of the healer is alive in Zambia. The healers are not only inclined to the rural areas, but have moved to urban areas. This demonstrates that African Traditional Religion has also moved to urban areas for where the African is, so too is his or her religion.

The representation also attests to the fact that aspects of ATR co-exist with other faiths and has continued to provide meaning and assistance to other worldviews, especially Christianity from the reported use of traditional healers by some Pentecostal pastors. More so, adherents of other worldviews are reported to consult healers when they are faced with misfortunes, which they cannot understand, and illnesses, which have not been cured from western medicines (Dr Z. *Interview* 7 November 2014; Mbiti, 1991).

In addition, the representation of traditional healers in the media also calls for a re-evaluation of the role of healers in the society. This re-evaluation ought to be deconstructed and reconstructed in a bid to move towards an enlightened understanding and appreciation of traditional healers as understood in the ATR. Most importantly, more scholarly engagement with traditional

healers and healing in Zambia is needed as the place of traditional healers in the society increases. This article therefore lays a foundation for further research.

5.0 Conclusion

The article explored how traditional healers were portrayed in the media and observed that the portrayal was largely negative. With reference to ‘religion in the media’ in which outsiders discuss, report or place information in the media, the article observed that the imagery of traditional healers was largely negative and the academic voice was missing in the coverage as the current media reports were dominated by the some sections of Christian churches, gender activists and journalists. Regarding ‘media religion’ in which religious authorities, communities or their representatives either practice their religion through media or purposely place information about their activities, the article observed that the traditional healers largely used the media to advertise or ‘sell their skills.’ Thus the media becomes a medium for informing the public on the services they offered and show case their work. This scenario demonstrates an irony that while on one hand the very media negatively portrays the traditional healers, the traditional healers use the very media to advertise and show case their work. Most importantly, the presence of traditional healers in the media attests to the relevance of traditional healers in the society and demonstrates the presence of ATR in modern Zambia.

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