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# Theoretical Perspective of Traditional Counseling

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## Abstract

This chapter discusses the theoretical perspective of traditional counseling from an African context. Traditional counseling involves a broad perspective that enhances learning for transformation and integration of sociocultural values that are peculiar to each human society. A cursory review of the literature suggests that the concept of traditional counseling is rooted in traditional systems of knowledge and sociocultural customs and practices, and it promotes a collective approach to problem identification, resolution, and management. The traditional counseling process centers on four aspects: traditional counselor, client, family, and community. The key elements that inform the theoretical framework of traditional counseling from an African perspective are: cultural context, collective belief system, and initiation rituals. Traditional systems of knowledge deemed essential for each generation are passed on successively to the next generation by elderly people who do not only have the necessary wisdom and experience, but are also adorned with social competences and skills.

**Keywords:** traditional counseling, sociocultural values, culture, collective beliefs, ritualism

## 1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the theoretical perspective of traditional counseling from an African context. Traditional counseling involves a broad perspective that enhances learning for transformation and social integration of cultural values, customs and practices that are peculiar to each human society. Counseling, as casual but purposeful contact and interaction between people, has an origin as ancient as the genesis of humankind. It can be viewed from a dimensional context: on one hand are traditional forms of counseling practiced from an Afrocentric perspective, and on the other, modern forms of counseling practiced from a Eurocentric perspective. Between these two broad schools of counseling stem derivative approaches, such as adolescent counseling, careers counseling, child counseling, couples counseling, and psychosocial counseling.

Modern counseling evolved and changed rapidly during the 20th Century, and contains within it a variety of different themes, emphases, practices, and orientations [1]. The theoretical orientations espoused by different proponents arise from the plurality of modern counseling practice, problem contextualization, and anticipated counseling process outcomes. There are several classifications of modern counseling based on different theoretical orientations, resulting in specialization, and focused approach, by the practitioner-counselors. An elaboration of the various

modern counseling models and orientations is outside the scope of this chapter. Much has been written about the different modern counseling models, clearly defining both the theory and practice of the various orientations, as well as the taxonomy of generic problems and their diagnosis, treatment, and management.

Counseling is, in many respects, an unusual area of study, in that it encompasses a set of strongly competing theoretical perspectives, a wide range of practical applications, and meaningful inputs from various social disciplines. The term 'counseling' is used to describe a variety of different activities. Most people have different views on what counseling is, and the context of its application, hence the multiplicity of theoretical models. Some people believe that it is a means of giving good advice, teaching on morality, mentoring for initiation, and guidance on marriage and sociocultural issues. Sometimes it relates to information-giving only. All these views are correct. From a conventional perspective, counseling is a process that involves a special type of helping relationship between a counselor and a client that is purposively interactive and ameliorative. The primary aim of counseling is to help people with concerns to reflect on their changed situation, identify possible solutions, and develop action plans to resolve those presenting problems, so that they can continue living resourcefully for personal development and satisfaction.

People in all societies, at all times, have experienced emotional or psychological distress and behavioral problems; and in each culture, there have been well-established indigenous ways of helping people to deal with these difficulties. Indigenous ways have existed for the whole of human creation, and they aptly connote traditional ways of doing things, based on traditional systems of knowledge and cultural practices. People in different cultures and societies globally have distinct ways of assisting those experiencing social, psychological, behavioral, emotional, familial, spiritual, and physical, problems. Traditional counseling is closely linked to indigenous ways of doing things which were based extensively on oral history, that is, traditional knowledge and social skills pertaining to some critical issues, customs, or practices, were handed down from one successive generation to another, orally. Oral history as a source and method has been central to the development of African historiography, and no element has served as a clearer signature of, and for, the traditional oral source, within the programs of recovering the African past [2].

## **2. Concept of traditional counseling**

A cursory review of the literature [1, 3–6] suggests that the concept of traditional counseling is rooted in traditional systems of knowledge and sociocultural values, customs and practices, and it promotes a collective approach to problem identification, resolution, and management. Traditional systems of knowledge deemed essential for each generation are passed on successively to the next generation by elderly people who do not only have the necessary wisdom and experience, but are also adorned with social competences and skills. The collective wisdom of Africans is that elderly people are generally regarded as a valuable resource in the community. They are the repositories of traditional knowledge, the embodiment of cultural competences, the experts in social skills, and the cherished models for emulation at the community level. This view is supported by Ampim [7], who states that, “an elder is someone who is given the highest status in African culture, because she has lived a life of purpose, and there is nothing more respected than living a purposeful life [...] she is a living model for the other groups in the society to emulate” (p. 2).

The sociocultural life of Africans is generally anchored on recognition of traditional norms and practices, ancestral worship, religious cults, and sexual-related

taboos [8]. These values are instrumental in shaping people's beliefs and attitudes. The conception of sexual-related taboos and ancestral worship translate into the collective belief systems inherent in traditional systems of knowledge, and cultural customs and practices. Traditional knowledge is applied through avenues such as tradition, initiation, rituals, marriage, social and religious ceremonies. These avenues are important, not only for sustainable social integration and the perpetuation of cultural identity, for the common good of the society and individual well-being, but also for the practice of traditional forms of counseling, at the various levels of contact.

The words 'traditional' and 'indigenous' are used in the context of the original experience of the sacred, cultivated by the African people, and the concrete expression of that experience within the different ecological and socio-historical settings [9]. Being traditional does not mean static or unchangeable, but rather, in keeping with the original sense of the term, it means that the living experience of cultural customs and practices is handed down from one successive generation to another in perpetuity. These reflect the period, circumstance and cultural factors surrounding a particular generation or human society, which acts as a reference point. Tradition and culture are indigenous entities, they are dynamic, and in constant flux. Traditional counseling has always been part of the fabric of all human cultures and societies, present in the very midst of peoples and communities worldwide, from time immemorial. Like in the past, it takes place within the kinship system, family and community.

Traditional counseling is beset by cultural nuances: it takes place in the local environment, it is offered by the local people, it reflects a mirror of the society in which it is offered, and it has always been part of the human experience since ancient times. This analysis of traditional counseling has a global interpretation and application as well. Most people globally practice some forms of traditional counseling, based on their sociocultural context, and the nature of presenting problems. It is in the context of this understanding that it becomes imperative to promote and strengthen indigenous approaches of traditional counseling that are responsive to the social life and expectations of the local people.

Traditional counseling applies indigenous forms of helping people experiencing various problem situations, and those that wish to make a transitional commitment, such as initiation at puberty, or marriage, or are aggrieved through loss of a beloved one, due to physical illness, psychosomatic dysfunction, or cardiac failure, injury, or accident. Forms of traditional counseling refer to the various methods or approaches used by traditional counselors during the process of their interaction with clients in a culturally acceptable environment, using appropriate interventions that are tailored to meet their needs, expectations, and aspirations. The commonly practiced traditional counseling approaches or methods are: marriage counseling, pastoral counseling, adherence counseling, initiation counseling, family counseling, community counseling, and bereavement counseling.

### **3. Traditional counseling process**

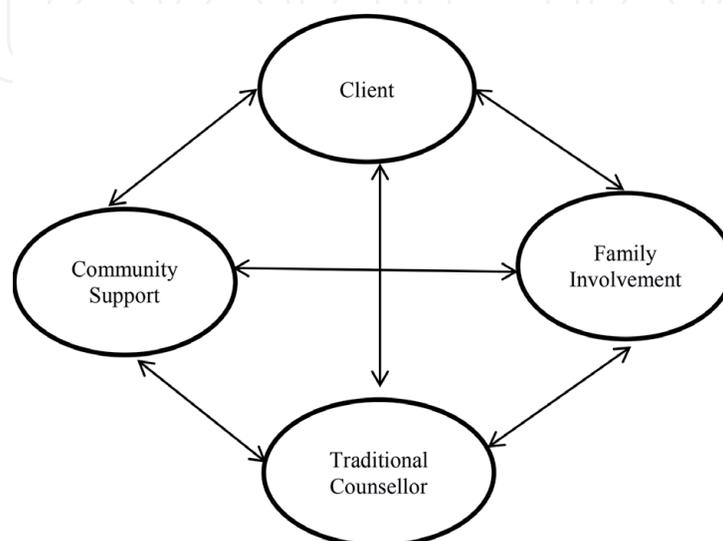
As with modern counseling models, traditional counseling can take place in varying settings, and for different purposes and needs. The interaction can be for one counseling session only, or can be for several sessions, spread over a period of time, depending on the scope of the problem and the nature of its representation. There is no specific timeframe for individual sessions in traditional counseling, but the traditional counselor applies intuition to determine the most

appropriate timing for each session, depending on prevailing circumstances and conditions in each case. The traditional counseling process usually involves four elements: traditional counselor, client, family, and community (**Figure 1**). The counseling process is like a road map that helps the counselor to know when to get started, where to go, and when to determine the end point of the counseling journey.

Communication, as a medium of dialog, is at the center of the process of traditional counseling, all other elements stem from, and revolve around it, and it is multidimensional. Communication is a pivot of interaction between the traditional counselor and the client, a means of exchanging information between them; an avenue for social interaction between the family, the community, and the client-counselor context; and a catalyst for interconnectedness, linkages, and interrelationships among the various elements in the traditional counseling process. Traditional counseling is not only dependent on clear communication, but also on effective communication from the counselor to the client. The traditional counselor must be proactive and interactive during the counseling process, and should be conscious of the sociocultural context of the client, his family and environment, which is in sharp contrast to the professional counselor's role of reactivity and passivity, which is required in classical psychodynamic counseling practice.

Depending on the scope of the problem, and its nature of representation, traditional counseling approaches promote the active involvement of the family and community in problem identification, resolution, and management. The emphasis is on collectivism over individualism, and collaborative relationships between the individual client, his family, and the community. This collectivist orientation ensures that the desired behavioral and attitudinal change not only benefits the affected individual, couple, or family, but also the community as a whole. From an African perspective, this collectivist orientation builds stronger sociocultural bonds, promotes more cohesive avenues of problem resolution, and enhances desirable behavior change for the common good of the society.

The traditional counseling process is largely influenced by traditional counselor competences which are fourfold. First, the attitude that includes the traditional counselor's affective, behavioral and cognitive functions; second, the awareness, which includes the traditional counselor's self-awareness of her own



**Figure 1.**  
*Elements of the traditional counseling process.*

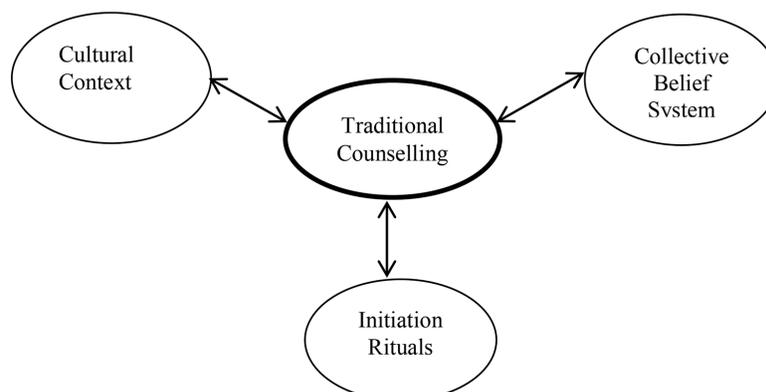
cultural values, beliefs and biases and how that cultural background affects the interpersonal dynamics between herself and the client; third, the knowledge, which includes familiarity with the major assumptions in traditional systems of knowledge, cultural backgrounds of the clients, and available social networks and referral systems; and fourth, the skills that include the application of traditional interventions and strategies which foster instantaneous resolution or amelioration of the presenting concerns. Traditional counseling is often regarded as part of the formal interpersonal interaction and communication that is integral to community life.

#### 4. Theoretical framework

The key elements that inform the theoretical framework of traditional counseling from an African perspective are (Figure 2): cultural context, collective belief system, and initiation rituals [4–8, 10, 11]. The multicultural theory can adequately inform the theoretical framework of traditional counseling when an African perspective is integrated. These key elements are elaborated hereunder.

##### 4.1 Cultural context

The term culture is novel and broad. It can mean different things to people at different times and in different circumstances. Culture refers to a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and esthetic development; a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, or a group; or the works and practices of intellectual and artistic activity [12]. It includes much more than belonging to a categorical group, and encompasses a society's shared values and beliefs such as individualism, collectivism, herbalism, ritualism, equality, freedom, peace, historical background, and evolution [13], as well as the arts and other intellectual achievements, customs, and civilization of a particular time or people [4]. These broad and inclusive descriptions of culture suggest that there are variable factors which define a people's culture, which are learned, assimilated, and integrated, over time. Culture is complex, dynamic, and bears both overt and covert differences which are unique to each human society. The concept of culture has serious implications for traditional counseling theory and practice. Understanding the sociocultural context of a client's behavior and belief system is an essential psychological ingredient for the accurate assessment, amelioration, and management of problem situations presented by clients.



**Figure 2.**  
*Theoretical framework of traditional counseling.*

The African cultural life has been unique since time immemorial. The most notable features are the chieftaincy, village headship, tribal clanship, extended family systems, initiation rites, totems and rituals, ancestral worship, religious cults, witchcraft, and social and traditional ceremonies [8]. In rural communities, large land areas are divided into chiefdoms under the command of Chiefs. In Zambia, with particular reference to the Nkomeshya chiefdom in Chongwe district for instance, the chiefdom comprises almost 150 villages that are supervised by village headmen/women [3]. For administrative purposes, between 15 and 20 villages are demarcated to constitute a zone whose committee is chaired by an elected headman. The zone is a second tier in the administration hierarchy, just below the Chief's council. At village level, the village committee constitutes the third tier in the hierarchy. This administrative structure underscores the importance of not only the management functions of villages and zones in a chiefdom, but also the levels at which traditional counseling is offered.

In rural communities of most African countries, people live in relatively small villages. They know each other very well, they share many things in common, and the behavior of individuals is monitored and controlled by elderly and eminent people in each community. There is direct observation of what people do, and how they behave, and quite often, direct action is taken to deal with social deviance through scorn, censure or exclusion, or in extreme cases, court action. In dealing with an individual client, or group of clients, the traditional counselor involves the family or community during the traditional counseling process. Advice and guidance is given to the family or members of the local community when young people are being initiated at puberty, or prepared for marriage, when people are in bereavement, and when people attend traditional, religious, ritual, and social ceremonies. Children are advised on many aspects of social norms and moral conduct, including education on acceptable behavior, and collective responsibility in conformity with community life.

Most concerns or problem situations affecting an individual are initially dealt with at the family level. Depending on severity and complexity of the problem situation or social issue at hand, it may be referred to the village headman/woman, prior to referral to either the village committee or the zone committee. When there is failure, or dissatisfaction with a problem resolution at the zone committee level, the matter can be referred to the Chief, who is the final authority. Her counsel is binding, and it cannot be disputed or challenged. These indigenous approaches to traditional counseling can be referred to as family counseling, and community counseling, respectively.

Activities such as initiation, ritual, marriage, social, and religious ceremonies are practiced to symbolize the cultural heritage and traditional value systems. They are an avenue for sharing information on traditional knowledge, customs, and practices that are acknowledged as essential and worthy perpetuation for the common good of the society. Besides, they are intended to promote indigenous ways of knowing and doing things, as part of the African cultural heritage, expressed through ceremonies and other interpretive messages. The historical continuity of a culture endemic to a particular human society is fundamental to the interconnectivity of all things that define its traditional values, beliefs, customs and practices [14]. Society exists, and exerts credence, where people behave and interact with one another based on mutual recognition, acceptance, and respect, and culture plays a significant role in the sphere of social life, as it is central to the development of any human society [4]. Traditional systems of knowledge and sociocultural norms underlie the basis of traditional counseling theory and practice.

The institution of marriage is an important cultural heritage in most African countries. Marriage is a legally recognized union between a man and woman, in

which they are united sexually, cooperate economically, interact socially, and live together productively, as a unified entity. Marriage is a very important institution in almost all human societies worldwide; it has survived human existence as an instrument for social interaction, procreation and protection from extinction, and it can be a critical factor in achieving happiness throughout family life. The African traditional context of marriage is buttressed by the payment of a bride-price or dowry which forms a basis for the union and family obligations. The institution of marriage represents the behaviors, norms, expectations, and values, that are associated with legally, socially, and culturally-recognized marriages between a woman and a man. It bears a symbolic value and importance.

A successful marriage is not only measured on the basis of fundamental aspects of stability, longevity, and prosperity, but also on the number of children born. Children are the adornment of a home, an investment for the couple, and the lineage of the family. They constitute links in the ancestral chain for generations in perpetuity, as a lifeline for the family and clan, genealogically. For most people, getting married and bearing children are important transitional life events on their ladder to adulthood. Marriage counseling is offered to a couple intending to marry, or experiencing marital and other psychosocial problems; and it is commonly practiced at community level in most African countries. Although most people wish to maintain nuclear family structures, the exigencies of retroviral disease, poverty, and unlimited numbers of children per family, have all contributed toward the extended family obligations. In many instances, orphaned children have to be supported and cared for by extended family members or grandparents. Orphan child-headed families are an emerging phenomenon, and are progressively moving toward institutionalization, not only in Zambia, but in most African countries. This poses sociocultural challenges that will be difficult to contain in the coming generations.

Religion is another important institution in the cultural life of not only the African people, but also others in almost all the continents worldwide. Religious gatherings are at the center of human creation, and are strongly connected with personal identity formation and group belonging. Religious history reveals that human beings have defined their existence in consort with, or relation to, some supernatural, omniscient and omnipotent beings in the celestial realms. In expressing this interdependence, most people resort to religious gatherings as a form of maintaining communication and communion with the heavens above. It is also a cultural expression. Religious leaders are representative 'shepherds of God', responsible for the caring for people on earth. In discharging this shepherding function, they play a dual role, namely, the ecumenical or spiritual function, which involves caring for people from a biblical context, and the pastoral counseling function which involves caring for people from a human relations context. The epicenter of these functions is mostly the church and community, and religious gatherings constitute a formidable social network that is perceived as desirable and relevant to peoples' social life.

Traditional herbal remedies constitute yet another symbol of cultural heritage in African culture and society. Traditional medicine plays an important role in the provision of primary health care. Traditional healers provide affordable and accessible primary health care that is culturally appropriate and traditionally convenient. For instance, most Africans, in both rural and urban communities, especially relatively poor people who cannot afford the cost of modern medicine and transport costs to sparsely located health facilities, generally use traditional healers for their primary health care needs. From an African perspective, the traditional healer is a psychiatrist, medical doctor, fortune-teller, diviner, social worker, and traditional counselor, all rolled into one. Traditional healers are a valued category of people in

the community, as they possess the cultural knowledge and social skills to make an impact on health promotion.

The implication of these observations is that traditional healers combine their practice of healing with adherence counseling through the provision of primary health care in both rural and urban communities. What seems to be central to their traditional healing practice is the determination of physical illness, and a ritualistic approach to resolving some of the problems presented to them, especially in the context of extrasensory phenomenal concerns and richness enhancement. Inadvertently, most people rely on traditional healers because their herbal treatments are easily accessible, readily available, and practically affordable. They are given in the context of a patient's culture, beliefs, and values, as well as within the confines of his expectations and aspirations. Traditional medicine is shrouded in ritualistic observance and practice. Traditional healers offer adherence counseling that focuses on advice and guidance related to taking the herbs, or actions contained within the rituals. They have an obligation to inform, guide, and advise their patients on the many aspects that surround the herbal treatment, observance of rituals related to the herbal remedies, and sexual prohibitions related to traditional taboos and customs.

#### **4.2 Collective belief system**

The culture of people in any human society is partly determined by their belief and value systems which influence the pattern of their social behaviors and actions. Values and beliefs are an important component of people's lives as they are used to interpret, judge, and evaluate, external situations or events [15]. Beliefs in bad luck, fate, or chance, are generally associated with failure to engage in constructive behaviors and depression in the face of chronic illness. The behavior of people varies from one culture to another. Expressive social behavior drives the actions of people through their lifespan, and behavior is one of the primary currencies used by natural selection. The evolutionary history of natural selection is anchored on developmental issues through life, such as transition changes and adaptation. When behavior changes are disconcerting, especially during pubescence and senescence, for instance, they affect attitudes toward the changes unfavorably. The reverse is true when the changes are deemed beneficial to the individual. This is the locus of the collective belief system: people believe in both the seemingly good and bad things that affect their social behavior, communication patterns, interactions, and interpersonal relationships with others, and their environment. This is central to the expression of societal norms, values and practices.

Values represent the base upon which a person builds a satisfactory personal existence (age, geographical area, generation); they are crystallized through social models and personal experiences (cultural, professional, societal), and they represent the fundamental or universal paradigms, such as autonomy, equality, liberty, solidarity, freedom, justice, and fairness [6]. Values are an enduring belief that a specific end-state or mode of conduct is preferable. There are two categories of values: terminal values refer to desirable end-states, or goals, such as wisdom, comfort, peace, and freedom; whereas instrumental values refer to the means by which the end-states are to be achieved, for instance through ambition, honesty, and competence [1]. The values of people are a representation and reflection of their prior experiences during their developmental journeys through life. They are derived from socialization and culture, environmental influences, and education, among many other factors. All these aspects contribute to the determination of how a person ought to act or react when confronted with problem situations. In the context of this understanding, it is plausible to infer that people's attitudes and

feelings about their culture, what is good or bad, what is acceptable or not, what is preferable or not, and why people act the way they do, all lay a sound foundation for the collective belief and value system.

The belief and value system may be influenced by four factors: syncretism, totemism, universalism, and culturalism. Syncretism relates to a reconciliation, or fusion, of differing systems of belief, especially with partial success or heterogeneous result; totemism represents an emblem of a clan or family which is revered, such as its founder, ancestor or guardian; universalism refers to a common conception of the origin of the universe and people; and culturalism refers to traditional customs, norms and values enshrined in a particular society that defines its beliefs and practices [16, 17]. From an African perspective, the origin of the universe, and of their ancestors as a people, is a mystery the reality of which was revealed at its genesis, through spirit mediums. The revelation may have occurred near a river, rock, cave, mountain, tree, or any such other notable emblem. This yields the notion of totems and rituals, ancestral religion and customs, and special shrines which serve as places of intimate personal memory and repositories of traditional knowledge, although ritual practices are much more diverse and fluid. The mythical interpretation of the universe is an active part of everyday life and a vital social force. It not only supplies accounts of the people's origin, but also relates past precedents to current traditional beliefs, actions, and behaviors, which are conveyed to successive generations in perpetuity.

The totemic character is inherent, and a symbolic figure to all the individuals of a given clan. Totemic ritualism is influenced by the collective belief system that has evolved through a blending of various beliefs, values, and customs as a result of enlightenment, evangelism, socialization and globalization. For the vast majority of traditional African protagonists, it is the collective belief in, and reverence of, the ancestors, fear of spirits, totems and symbols, ritual sacrifice, initiation rituals, divination, and charms, as well as their interrelationships and interconnectedness to the enhancement of life, and the genealogical continuity which are fundamental issues of the traditional consciousness [9]. This observation permeates through modernity, and it is an expressed social behavior of many traditionalists in most African countries. Besides, it is a cultural expression.

There are several thematic beliefs that underlie the value systems of most African cultures and societies. The most notable ones are: an acceptance that human action can influence natural forces; a reliance upon the mediation of the revered spirits of the dead, who possess new powers over the living and influence human lives and actions; the importance given to shrines and cult ceremonies; reliance on charms or herbal medicines to enhance power, and wealth, and provide safeguards; recognized categories of spiritual entities, and the nature of religious cults; and the belief that much misfortune is caused by human greed and malevolence [10]. The history of witchcraft, spirit possession, and experiences of extrasensory perception, is old and deep-rooted, and part of the African culture [18]. Witchcraft is closely linked to magic and sorcery, and sorcery is a form of destructive magic.

The social interpretation of witchcraft is that evil and misfortune is embodied in the person of a witch. It involves covert actions by people to cause misfortune. The interplay is between one person and the other, usually arising from envy, jealousy, and resentment, and is motivated by the desire for inheritance, revenge, malice, or appropriation of magical power, or for economic gain, enrichment, and prosperity. Magic is the umbrella term and is categorized, according to whether its application is for offensive, defensive, divination, or communication purposes, given that witchcraft is derived from the same empowering herbal medicines which can be used for personal protection, such as from bewitchment, for public common good, such as divination and traditional herbal treatments, and for evil, such as placating bad luck, inducing physical illness or causing mysterious death.

When magic is applied for offensive purposes it assumes the label of witchcraft. Traditional healers use magic in a broad context. For instance, diviners apply divination to discover the cause of sudden illness or death, or perceived bad luck; herbalists apply herbal medicines to treat illness or placate the spirit of the deceased, or induce good luck; spiritualists claim a special link to the underworld or dead ancestors as a source of their magical power to help people experiencing extrasensory phenomenal problems; and faith healers apply biblical inscription and prayer to ward off demon possession or enduring physical illness. Some traditional healers apply exorcism to cleanse evil spirits or demons at the individual or family level. Most people are motivated to contact traditional healers because of their perceived magical power and social influence.

The contextualization of this collective belief in witchcraft is centered on the assumptions that magic is good, for instance the traditional healer who cures physical illness or induces good luck, but also bad, for instance where a wizard or witch causes physical illness or bad luck. It is from this understanding that the belief in magic and fear of witchcraft has actually evolved, and it is a potent force pervading and influencing all spheres of human endeavor in African culture and society. Witchcraft is an enduring belief and occurs throughout central and southern Africa, among rural and urban populations alike. Most people, both educated and uneducated, believe in magic and witchcraft at the community level. Witch-hunts have proliferated, despite the increasing importance of Christian churches and the people's communion and association through various religious denominations at the national level.

In Africa generally, religion and witchcraft constitute a recognizable component of most people's everyday life and world view. Many forms of authority, power, and wealth, easily attain an interpretive association with witchcraft. For individual problems, many people find an acceptable answer in either witchcraft, or supernatural influence, or both. In many traditional belief systems in Africa, mental health problems, bad luck, and sudden or mysterious deaths, are attributed to either the influence of ancestral spirits or bewitchment [19]. These issues are typical, and embedded in the culture and collective belief system: they are a part of cultural life of the people in both rural and urban communities alike, and they represent a paradigm of causation of human problems, some of which are amenable to traditional counseling and healing. They are an integral dimension to the discourses surrounding the role and practice of traditional healers from the ancient past, for several centuries.

Closely linked to the issue of witchcraft is the aspect of places of power, and land shrines which are permanent features of the landscape and regarded as inherently sacred, or as the source of spiritual power. Spiritual forces associated with places of power are defined differently from the spirits appealed to at land shrines which are reputed to have a link to the community stemming from their past experience as a people. Spirits associated with places of power are known as natural spirits, and those associated with dead ancestors are known as ancestral spirits. The interpretation and experience of these extrasensory phenomena is common among many cultural and tribal groupings in Africa. They constitute a prevalent belief that finds solace in traditional healers who divine not only their occurrence, but also their effect on the causation of physical illness among members of the community and their ritualistic treatment. The occurrence or experience of ancestral spirits results in spiritual trance and demon possession. In some instances, the demon-possessed person becomes a spiritualist after undergoing successful ritualistic treatment at the hands of another experienced traditional healer.

Land shrines become associated with invisible entities or spirits, and are thus objects of veneration by the people in a particular community. The implication of

this indigenous knowledge is that, although the linkage and interconnectedness between cause and effect may not be apparent from a modernistic perspective, many people believe in spirits, that is, natural spirits and ancestral spirits. This belief seems much the same in most countries throughout Africa, and beyond. It is plausible to postulate that both natural spirits and ancestral spirits are important factors in the etiology of human disease causation and the practice of traditional herbal medicine.

Another aspect of the collective belief system is spirituality. The word spirituality is sometimes used interchangeably with faith or religion. Spirituality is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things that unite people into one single moral community, called a church. Whereas spirituality appears to be a simple phenomenon on the surface, in reality it entails a very complex system of symbolisms, ideas, beliefs and practices, which comprise the fundamental principles on which many people base their lives [20]. For most people, aspects or factors regulating daily life are the same for religion, as they provide the occasion and setting for awareness of spirit or divinity, and the symbolic forms through which religion is conceptualized [10]. This is an essential element of African religions, and it is on this basis, that religious and shrine cults have flourished. Spirituality differs from private belief, because it bears a public aspect that ultimately unifies people into a religious brotherhood or sisterhood, a religious family, and a religious community.

### **4.3 Initiation rituals**

A rite is a principal act, or a set of rituals which are performed according to prescribed social rules and customs. The performance of rituals revolves around a deeper understanding, or involves an appreciable level of indigenous knowledge, social skills, and competences. The process of initiation is based on a prescribed set of rituals to start a new phase in life, and it involves transformation, progression, and maturation [21]. Initiation rituals have been a central part of traditional cultures of African society, from ancient times. They are an important component of the cultural life of most human societies, not only in Africa, but also in other continents worldwide. Important milestones such as birth, puberty, marriage, adulthood, and death, are typically marked by special celebratory and ritualistic ceremonies at the individual, family, and community levels, and state funerals are a common feature at national level, including memorial services in remembrance of deceased relatives at family level. Ritual ceremonies are an embodiment of the African cultural life, and a symbol of traditional values, beliefs, customs, and practices.

Ritualism is a common feature in contemporary society, and many people practice rituals as part of the cultural norm, religious service, or sheer traditional requirement. A ritual is a prescribed order for performing a religious service, or performance of actions in rite, or a procedure regularly followed. The prescribed order of performance is not only limited to religious service, but also encompasses other sociocultural actions and rites, including those performed by traditional leaders and traditional healers. Ritualism is the regular or excessive practice of rituals, although this view bears a rather negative connotation. Equally, it is limiting to conceptualize rituals in the context of genealogical continuity only. The performance of rituals ought to be viewed as an important cultural norm and traditional practice. The basic assumption about ritualism is that it can be interpreted in many different ways and has variable functions. For instance, ritualistic actions may include church attendance, initiation, marriage, birth, death, and spiritual healing, including the act of sex. There are many other aspects of life in which rituals are performed, or

whose attendance and practice is based on some procedure that is ritualistic. Based on this understanding, it is manifest that rituals are part of the cultural life of people, and ritual performance is a normal traditional custom and practice in most human societies worldwide.

Nearly every human society has rituals to mark the passing of a stage in the life of an individual, and all rituals are events with social meaning and symbolic actions. Rituals have important cultural, social, psychological and symbolic dimensions to people who take part in ritual practices [22]. From an African context, the initiation rituals preface the beginning of, or conclude, the days, weeks, or even months and years of sustained instruction, coaching, mentoring, and counseling. The primary function of rituals of socialization and transformation is consistent with the structural functionalist paradigm [21]. According to this paradigm, the community represented by the authority of elders becomes responsible for discharging the primary functions of rituals for the benefit of the community at large. Girls and boys are transformed at puberty from autonomous maturing people into a pool of social entities, whose role is to contribute to the reproduction and sustainability of the whole community, and to perpetuate genealogical continuity [5]. Through this process, the structure of society is confirmed, sustained, and perpetuated from one successive generation to another. The process of pubertal rituals involves initiation counseling and mentoring.

The African interpretation of childhood refers to a period spanning about 15 years of a child's life from conception, and integrates early teenage and pubescence. The initiation rituals are more pronounced at the birth of a child, whereupon the infant is initiated into the world through a ritual naming ceremony. The birth of an infant is regarded as a special gift from the celestial realms, and is cherished with religious intensity. The ritual of naming a child may take place at the household level, family level, or church level, and through consultation with a traditional healer. The latter is a pre-requisite in situations where the traditional healer previously prescribed herbal remedies for infertility, or any sexual dysfunction, to a couple prior to conception. At the church level, a child may be subjected to a ritual and naming ceremony, whereupon he is given a Christian name in place of, or in addition to, the African names that were given at birth.

The child can also be taken to a traditional healer or religious leader when he falls sick, where he is subjected to further rituals as part of the healing intervention. In more rural communities of Africa, the rituals may include tying of strings and wearing a talisman, especially prepared with herbal concoctions, around the child's arm, neck, waist or leg. This is intended to protect the child from bewitchment, evil spirits, bad luck, or physical illness. Traditional healers are instrumental in these arrangements, and they act as a cherished fountain of traditional knowledge and cultural practices in both rural and urban communities. In contrast, every child has a mission to accomplish; a life goal that permeates through all the main stages of development, from childhood to adulthood.

The adolescent stage is viewed as more of a transition phase, with its own ambiguities which begin when childhood ends, at puberty. The initiation rituals of adolescence are essentially twofold: at puberty, and at marriage. The initiation rituals at puberty are more pronounced for girls than boys, primarily because of the physiological implications and gender role responsibilities that separate girls from boys. For the girls, initiation is puberty-occasioned, ceremonial, celebratory, and the announcement of a girl's having become nature's vehicle of life, whereas for the boys, initiation is an intervention enacted, if not against, then in juxtaposition to, originating associations with the natural sphere [5]. For most young girls as they advance toward pubescence, the pubertal initiation ceremony is something

they eagerly look forward to, prepare for, and freely participate in. It is perceived a symbol of their maturation to womanhood, motherhood and adulthood.

Pubertal initiation rituals are very important and significant to African cultures and societies. Isolation of the initiands (both girls and boys being initiated) at puberty, whether for a few hours, days, weeks, or months, is unique, and it is practiced in both rural and urban communities alike. The current practice focuses on seclusion for shorter periods, as opposed to the olden practice which favors longer periods. This development is necessitated by the demands of schooling, innovations to traditional practices, and commercialization, among many factors at play. During the period of seclusion, the initiands are taught the ways of adulthood and their role in the family, including the rules, taboos, and sanctions of the society, moral instruction and social responsibility, gender role challenges, and their life goals and expectations. This is the penultimate initiation ceremony, at puberty; the onset of adolescence.

Equally important is the marriage initiation ritual. In the African context, initiation rituals are performed at the premarital stage and during the wedding ceremony. At the premarital stage, the focus is on the 'dos and don'ts' of married life, family responsibility, and parenting—more of an induction process to enhance social competences and skills in readiness for marriage. During the wedding ceremony, the ritual performances integrate traditional, religious, and cultural aspects whose focus is on emphasizing the oneness of the couple as a unitary entity, and as a vehicle for bearing children. Just as at puberty, the marriage initiation rituals are performed by elderly people, deemed to be knowledgeable, competent and skillful. Young people in adolescence are regarded as adults, capable of marrying or being married and bearing children. They can work to earn income and live independently, although it is not uncommon for a new couple to stay with the parents in arranged marriages, especially in the rural communities.

The symbolic logic regarding the primary function of rituals is that it applies to both girls and boys, and the socialization process starts during childhood and reaches its climax in the initiation rituals at puberty and marriage. The informal education, and the initiation counseling related to performance of rituals at the pubertal stage, place emphasis on learning for transformation, and at the marital stage, on social integration. This process not only empowers young people with relevant attitudes and knowledge, but also enhances their social competences and skills to handle similar issues when they grow into adulthood as valuable members of the community. It also enhances their ability to perpetuate traditional systems of knowledge and sociocultural values, customs and practices over successive generations for the common good of society.

From a contemporary perspective, the informal education and traditional counseling processes related to initiation rituals at puberty place more emphasis on the development of moral values and social responsibilities, and the exposition of gender role dilemmas from a sociocultural context. This view is in sharp contrast to the traditional view, which holds that young women at initiation are predominantly taught how to lie in bed with their future husbands in order to give them the greatest sexual satisfaction, how to behave as 'proper' women, as married women, and mothers of families, and how to perform women's roles and responsibilities [21, 23]. The traditional view is not only narrow in focus, but also contrary to modern perception and understanding. It greatly contributes to the stereotypical orientation that promotes the hegemony of men against the submissiveness of women. Stereotypical orientations are instrumental for the perpetuation of gender-based violence and other forms of abuse between men and women, including abuse or violence against children and other disadvantaged or underprivileged social groups.

#### **4.4 Multicultural theory**

Multiculturalism can be viewed as an umbrella term which incorporates within it a variety of shades of meanings, attitudes, beliefs, norms and values, and it is subject to different interpretations and applications [24]. It is anchored on some fundamental assumptions which are core to its theory, research and practice. The central theme of multiculturalism is the assumption that the other mainstream modern counseling theories inadequately describe, explain, predict, and deal with, cultural diversity and dynamism of the clientele [25]. Most counseling theories have tended to focus on the individual, giving minimal attention to contextual issues and sociocultural values, customs and practices. Multiculturalism is a concept that broadly acknowledges the importance of demographic variables, ethnographical status, social status, and sociocultural affiliations of the people in any human society worldwide.

The proponents of multicultural theory have advanced varying assumptions to complement the identified gaps, three of which are illustrated herein as advanced by Laungani, Repetto, and Sue and colleagues. According to Laungani [24], the fundamental assumptions of multiculturalism are: that all human beings are products of their own culture; that each culture has a uniquely acquired way of construing its own worldview that gives meaning to life and living; that within each culture there exists a plurality of beliefs, values, norms and traditional practices; that each culture has something to offer and learn from another culture which assumes comparative meaning only in relation to other cultures; and that a mixture of cultures is more likely to lead to the enrichment of an individual's intellectual, emotional, spiritual, humanitarian, moral, and altruistic visions.

According to Repetto [11], the fundamental assumptions of multiculturalism are that it recognizes the existence of many points of view, none of which are considered good or bad, correct or incorrect, and involves social constructivism, in that people construct their worldviews through social processes (historical, cultural and experiential) which contain cultural symbols and metaphors. It is contextualistic in orientation, because personal conduct can only be understood in the context within which it takes place. It offers different approaches to the world, because each perspective captures a differently valid approach, and defends a rational sense for language rather than just a representational one, because language has a high correlation with culture and the perception of reality.

According to Sue, Ivey and Pedersen [25], the fundamental assumptions of multiculturalism are that it is a meta-theory of counseling, as it offers an organizational framework for understanding the numerous counseling approaches that people have developed. It recognizes that both counselor and client identities are formed and embedded in multiple levels of experience (individual, group and universal) and context (individual, family and culture). Cultural identity development is a major determinant of individual attitudes toward the self, the same group, and different groups, and its effectiveness is most likely to be enhanced when the counselor uses modalities and defines goals which are consistent with the life experiences and cultural values of the client. It stresses the importance of multiple counseling roles developed by many culturally different human groups and societies. The multicultural counselor competencies involve the continual development of attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, and skills, related to the awareness of one's own assumptions, values, and biases, understanding the worldview of the culturally different client, and the application of culturally appropriate interventions, strategies and techniques [26].

A general understanding to be drawn from the foregoing fundamental assumptions of multiculturalism can be explained twofold. First, multiculturalism

integrates a conception of the uniqueness of each culture, and its own constructed worldview based on a plurality of traditional values, customs and practices. The universal experience suggests that all human beings are products of their own culture, hence the unique cultural identities in each human society worldwide. Each culture has something of value to offer or learn from another culture in contemporary society. The effects of globalization, acculturation and social integration all bear testimony to this observation. People have the ability to adapt and incorporate changes within their cultural identities. Multiculturalism recognizes the interplay of the cultural influence between the counselor and client and how those influences determine or affect the counseling process outcomes.

Second, multiculturalism is a broad theory that is conceptualized based on multiple levels of human experience and sociocultural affiliations. It involves the social interpretation of reality and the meaning of human experience, culture and life from a constructivist perspective, and recognizes the importance of cultural identity and its centrality in defining associations and relationships within the individual, and between the individual, his family and environment. This theoretical paradigm proposes that, in working with the individual client in any setting, it is necessary to understand how that client is embedded in his family and how the family is affected by being embedded in a pluralistic culture. In contemporary society, increasing importance is being placed on how culture, ethnicity, and gender affect communication styles. The multicultural theory is integrative in orientation, it recognizes the existence of various worldviews, and each worldview is influenced by uniquely constructed sociocultural beliefs and norms. Apparently, no particular worldview is right or wrong, good or bad, or superior to the other. The multicultural theory is essential in counseling and working with people from different cultural backgrounds, irrespective of their continental affiliation or ethnicity. It recognizes that all counseling relationships ultimately exist within a cultural context, and they are multicultural in nature.

Multiculturalism recognizes the multiplicity of subcultures which differentiate, for instance, one tribal grouping or clan from another, and one society from another. Anecdotal inference suggests that migration contributes to the introduction of new cultures broadly (such as when people move from one country to another), and new subcultures specifically (such as when people move from one village or town or province to another). It is widely accepted that when people migrate, they do not leave behind their cultural norms and values but carry these as inherent elements that constitute part of their cultural identity and social entity. The plasticity of human behavior, that is, a person's ability and capability to learn from experience, adapt to new environments, and to be influenced by situational factors and duration of exposure, can all lead people to transcend their own culturally embedded boundaries. Some of the issues that multiculturalism set out to address, although primarily referenced in the Euro-American context, have some relevance to the African context as well. In most African countries, the sociocultural divide is prominent in rural villages, rural and urban townships, and various community settings. Each community comprises people of different ethnic backgrounds, languages, religions, customs, and traditions. The needs of these people are different, and so is their demand for traditional counseling.

The theoretical framework of traditional counseling is supported by multicultural theory, which promotes a systematic integration of numerous theoretical concepts based on the complexity of human experience and sociocultural, situational, and environmental factors. The theory is premised on the understanding that awareness of the sociocultural differences among clients, and the way people view the world are paramount in counseling psychology [26]. Traditional counseling theory is collectivist in orientation, and it emphasizes stronger social bonds,

promotes group cohesiveness and belongingness, and enhances desirable social behavior for the common good of the society. This blends well with the meta-theoretical approach of multiculturalism. A meta-theory is prescriptive and defines what is meaningful and meaningless, what is acceptable and unacceptable, what is good and bad, and what is central and peripheral to inquiry [27]. Meta-theories clarify the context in which theoretical concepts are constructed, grounded, constrained, and sustained. All people are products of their distinct sociocultural and historical experience, as exemplified in both developed and developing countries – because they are essentially multi-ethnic, multiracial, multicultural, multilingual, and multi-religious by inclination. Ethnic affiliations are perceived as an important aspect of individual and group identity formulations, whereby disadvantaged or underprivileged groups are deemed disempowered politically, rendered poor economically, and disenfranchised socially. Therefore, multicultural theory can adequately inform the theory and practice of traditional counseling, when the Afrocentric perspective is integrated. Inadvertently, any form of counseling is multicultural in nature, essentially because of the sociocultural plurality and diversity of the people involved in the counseling interactions.

## **5. Conclusion**

The conceptualization of traditional counseling is unique, dynamic, complex and multifaceted. When viewed from the perspective that indigenous knowledge has cultural implications and that all counseling is influenced by the cultural context, it is safe to conclude that traditional counseling approaches are rooted in traditional systems of knowledge and sociocultural values, customs and practices; they are essentially community-based and multicultural in nature; and they are routinely offered within a culturally acceptable environment by the local people [28].

The broad and inclusive understanding of culture is that there are various factors that define a people's culture. The culture of people in any society is partly determined by their belief and value systems, which, in turn, influence the pattern of their social behaviors and actions. The collective belief system is part of human culture, and beliefs are ideas that constitute an essential element in predicting the social behaviors of people. Ritualism is a common feature in contemporary society; and many people practice rituals as part of their sociocultural norm or religious service, and a symbol of traditional heritage. All these contextual factors are cardinal in understanding the theory and practice of traditional counseling from an African perspective. The theoretical framework of traditional counseling represents a newer worldview that may influence counseling styles applied by counselors, psychotherapists and psychologists of divergent training and educational backgrounds.

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