

## **Mental Health in Haiti: cultural beliefs and the role of traditional medicine**

My aim in this essay is to understand mental health in Haiti; I will explore the cultural beliefs surrounding mental health issues and how these influence the way people respond to these disorders, in particular at the role of Vodou in treatment. In light of the 2010 earthquake I will look at the role of international aid in the treatment of mental health and the potential for integration of conventional psychiatric treatments with the traditional healing practices.

### **Introduction**

Mental health is commonly grouped under the bracket of the NCDs – ‘non-communicable diseases.’ Previously overshadowed by infectious diseases this important group is now recognised as a significant concern for global mortality and morbidity. The WHO estimates that one in four people will suffer from a mental health condition at least once in their lifetime,<sup>(1)</sup> but that in low and middle income countries as many as four out of five people living with serious mental disorders do not receive the medical care that they need.<sup>(2)</sup> The burden of mental health disorders is only predicted to increase; in terms of disability-adjusted life years, depression alone is likely to become the most important overall contributor to global disease burden by 2030.<sup>(3)</sup> Despite the recent shift in focus towards NCDs, however, we are still lacking focus on mental disorders; this group of extremely debilitating conditions did not receive a mention in the ‘Millennium Development Goals’<sup>(4)</sup> and were absent from the agenda of the 2011 UN summit on NCDs.<sup>(5)</sup> On an individual country level, a recent global review from the WHO states that 40% of all countries lack any government policy on mental health.<sup>(1)</sup>

This is certainly the case in Haiti; a low income country with the lowest development index in the Western hemisphere,<sup>(6)</sup> it is perhaps no surprise that the health system in Haiti is somewhat underdeveloped. This is especially the case for mental health; according to the Caribbean Country Management Unit Haiti lacks any sort of government mental health policy and has no national programme aimed at tackling this important set of diseases.<sup>(7)</sup> It is perceived there is a relatively high burden of mental illness due to the state of extreme poverty that almost half of the population live in,<sup>(8)</sup> but there are no official national statistics attempting to estimate the actual burden. In terms of recognisable mental health services there are only 15 psychiatrists<sup>(9)</sup> and two psychiatric hospitals<sup>(8)</sup> in the country to serve the population of 9 million. However, this is the situation as seen from a very Western perspective; the government publications do not exist and the health infrastructure is very limited, so we assume that anyone who should be so unfortunate as to fall ill with a mental illness in a country like Haiti has no hope. With a closer look, we see systems and practices in place that may be fulfilling this seemingly unmet need in ways that are slightly less conventional, but potentially extremely effective.

The role of traditional medicine in health care largely remains rather controversial, however, in many African and Asian countries 80% of the population depend on traditional medicine alone for their primary health care needs.<sup>(10)</sup> Whilst some may be ineffective or even dangerous, some, for example acupuncture, are now widely accepted as being effective treatments.<sup>(10)</sup> In the case of Haiti, traditional medicine is completely intertwined with Vodou, the religion practised by the vast majority of the population. Haitian beliefs about the origins of ill health and the way they respond to it revolve around their cultural and religious beliefs; therefore it is of vital importance to first understand their background.

## History and Religion

Haiti's tumultuous history strongly affects Haitian mentality today. Consisting entirely of African slaves from the Atlantic slave trade, the Haitians were the first nation to overthrow their colonial leaders and become a new black republic. The belief that the gods won this victory for them is still a source of hope and encouragement to Haitians today. However, the years of exploitation and political instability have led to the difficult state that Haiti is in today; 80% of the country lives in poverty<sup>(8)</sup> and 72% only receive primary education.<sup>(6)</sup> This situation provokes a nation-wide feeling of shame<sup>(11)</sup> and there are large class divides within the country.<sup>(6)</sup>

Religion is an integral part of Haitian culture. Catholicism and Protestant faiths are both commonly practised in Haiti, but more often than not they are found in conjunction with Vodou; a West-African based religion believed by the vast majority of the population.<sup>(11)</sup> Even those in the upper class are known to turn to Vodou in times of stress. Vodou is a source of protection and hope for Haitians, but even more than that, it constitutes a health system,<sup>(8)</sup> better connected and certainly more accessible than the actual health system. Along with the healing of the sick, Vodou provides information on how to promote, prevent and treat health problems, much of which correlates well with accepted Western methods.<sup>(6)</sup>

## Vodou and health beliefs and practices

The primary focus in the Vodou religion is to worship the gods, *Loas* – the spirits of Haitians' African ancestors. They are known to guard over their devotees, however, in return they must be worshipped and certain rituals must be performed in order to keep them satisfied. Many kinds of misfortune, including poor physical or mental health are attributed to neglect of the *Loas*. In the same way, deceased spirits of family members must be honoured and failure to do this may also result in ill health. Spirits and Gods may 'possess' devotees, as it is believed that this is how they intervene in the mortal world. Another widely-accepted source of mental illness is being cursed; often a fate that is a consequence of someone being jealous of the 'cursed' individual. This may actually give the patient in question a feeling of elevated pride, as the reason for being cursed is believed to be because they are particularly attractive or successful. Mentally ill patients are therefore often seen as special and are well supported in society. However, in the case of severe mental disorders, the converse is true; decline in function has a great deal of shame attached to it, especially if the patient is no longer able to work. In cases of extreme intellectual disability, it is sometimes thought that those affected are 'zombies' – deceased family members who have been raised from the dead.<sup>(6,11)</sup>

In response to mental illness, Haitians are normally looked after by their family. If they feel they need external help, the patient will see a Vodou priest, a *Houngan*. Along with advisory and counselling roles, the *Houngan* may perform rituals to reverse the effects of a curse, or to relieve a person of the spirit possessing them. In cases that the *Houngan* feels are beyond their level of expertise, they may refer the patient on to a psychiatrist.<sup>(6,11)</sup>

In terms of burden of disease, there is no real data on the prevalence or incidence of mental disorders in Haiti. A study carried out at one of the psychiatric hospitals estimated the proportion of inpatients with different disorders that were diagnosed as:

- 50% schizophrenia
- 30% bipolar disorder with mania
- 15% other psychoses
- 5% epilepsy (These results are similar to what you would expect to find in other countries)<sup>(6)</sup>

Schizophrenia may be easily confused with spirit possession, especially for anyone not familiar with Vodou beliefs. Many of the symptoms seen in Schizophrenia are a normal part of Vodou beliefs, for example, the feeling that there is another being inside you that has its own thoughts and feelings. In the case of possession, consulting the *Houngan* may be the best option, whereas in cases of actual schizophrenia, antipsychotic drugs are available for the few that can afford them. For those who cannot access treatment, the prognosis is not good, as the patient may be labelled as crazy and be victim to severe distrust from the community.<sup>(6,11)</sup>

Depression is generally not recognised to be a condition worthy of treatment; it is attributed to excessive worry and those affected are expected to ignore these feelings and carry on with life as normal. As a result of this, depression is often somatised; patients may experience headaches, back pain or other non-specific problems. However, major depressive episodes are recognised as ill-health, usually thought to be the consequences of a curse. In such cases the patient will see the *Houngan* for the curse to be reversed.<sup>(6)</sup> A study carried out in a Haitian general hospital found that 48% of women and 63% of men had scores indicative of major depression.<sup>(12)</sup> While these scores may not be representative of the general population, it still gives us some indicator that levels of depression in Haiti may be relatively very high. (Worldwide prevalence of depression in 2001 was 9.5% in women and 5.8% in men).<sup>(13)</sup>

### **Post-earthquake Haiti**

The earthquake of January 2010 had absolutely devastating consequences on the nation of Haiti; over 230,000 lives were lost and over 1.3 million people left homeless.<sup>(8)</sup> This has had a big impact on the state of mental health in the population; many people were affected by post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression and the services that were available before the quake were largely destroyed.<sup>(14)</sup> Grief has been exacerbated by the inability to carry out proper burial rituals; many Haitians have experienced extreme guilt and worry over not being able to send their relatives properly into the spirit world.<sup>(15)</sup> High levels of crime have been experienced since the quake resulting in many people suffering additional mental problems from being victim to rape and other violence.<sup>(16)</sup>

Naturally, such a terrible disaster has attracted a huge influx of international aid. Along with providing shelter, food and treatment for the injured, many organisations have attempted to address the mental health problems created by the quake.<sup>(14)</sup> However, this may be an area where Western medicine does not necessarily have all the answers. In the case of the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, mental health relief efforts were heavily criticised; it has even been argued that they did more harm than good.<sup>(17)</sup> It was thought that labelling survivors with conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder may be over-pathologising natural processes and discouraging 'patients' from adhering to their traditional resilience and coping strategies.<sup>(17)</sup>

Surely this is even more relevant in Haiti, where mental health is so tied up in religious beliefs and practices. Psychiatrists working both within Haiti and with Haitian immigrants in the USA have found

that to ignore Haitian beliefs about the spiritual origins of their problems, is to completely lose their trust. <sup>(11)</sup> In recognition of this, various publications were made and distributed amongst mental health aid workers in Haiti, including a WHO literature review outlining the beliefs and practices of Haitians surrounding mental health. <sup>(6)</sup> Most of the literature and anecdotal reports of the mental health relief efforts in Haiti seem to be taking these guidelines into consideration, however, there have also been one or two papers published detailing relief efforts in Haiti that have no mention of Vodou beliefs or traditional practices. <sup>(18)</sup>

### **A new mental health system for Haiti?**

The disaster has drawn international attention to the shortcomings of the health system in Haiti, particularly the lack of mental services, and in response it has been suggested that a new mental health system could be set up as part of the relief work. <sup>(15)</sup> One group trained 350 Haitians in Western psychiatric practices, a start towards a new mental health system for Haiti that could go on to potentially revolutionise mental health care in Haiti, but before steps are taken in this direction, we must first ask whether Western medicine is what Haiti really needs? <sup>(18)</sup>

Although Western medicine has the clinical evidence to support the medications and therapies we use, it may well be that many of the mental health issues seen in Haiti would be far more effectively treated if left to traditional practices. If a patient believes that their illness is due to a curse it may be that they will never feel able to recover until the spell has been reversed by a Houngan. Henceforth the belief that the curse and therefore the illness has left them may contribute significantly to their recovery. This thought process may have a similar effect to 'externalisation therapy' – the idea that "the *person* is not the problem, the *problem* is the problem". <sup>(19)</sup> It follows, then, that non-acceptance of this belief by psychiatrists could potentially be damaging, as causing the patient to doubt the origin of their illness may have negative effects on their ability to overcome it. Furthermore, it is argued that one of the key factors of successful psychiatric therapy is belief in the authority of the healer/therapist <sup>(20)</sup> and it is widely acknowledged that many Haitians have far more belief in the power of the Houngan to heal them than in psychiatrists and biomedical interventions.

As far as I am aware there has been no research into the efficacy of traditional healing practices compared to Western medicine in Haiti, however, studies of this sort have been carried out elsewhere. One such study in India attempted to assess the effects in psychotic patients of attending a centre for healing where they carried out spiritual practices. Using a standard psychiatric rating scale to assess patients who had received this treatment, the authors found that the effects of attending this healing centre were comparable to results achieved by commonly used anti-psychotropic drugs. <sup>(21)</sup> Similarly, studies elsewhere have found that for certain conditions, seeing a traditional healer resulted in similar outcomes to primary care services. <sup>(22)</sup>

It has been suggested, in countries such as Indonesia, Uganda and India that there is room for integration of traditional healing practices within health systems, especially in the case of mental health. <sup>(21,22,23)</sup> It seems to me that with the current influx of international aid in Haiti, there is potential for integration of Western psychiatric care into the existing mental health system of the *Houngan* priests. It has been found that many traditional healers are very accurate at identifying the more serious mental disorders that are perhaps better suited for biomedical interventions, <sup>(20)</sup> and as mentioned previously a referral system of this nature already exists in Haiti. I would suggest that international aid workers need to incorporate themselves into this system, and in the case of

patients who believe they are cursed, perhaps aid workers need to be referring these patients back to the *Houngans*. Despite raising some concerns over the safety and efficacy of traditional medicine, the integration of traditional healing practices into health systems is an idea that the WHO support.<sup>(10)</sup> However, there is a real need for further research in this area and it will be necessary for new investigative methods to be developed for this new and relatively unknown domain of research.

## Conclusion

Mental health is an extremely complex issue with much diversity in beliefs and practices across nations. I believe that in the past the role of traditional healers has not been taken seriously enough and if treatment of mental health in resource-poor countries is to be sustainable and effective for the populations in question, we must begin to integrate the two systems to achieve the best possible holistic care of the patient.

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