

Indigenous Healing: Search for the Universals



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Mini Review

All indigenous societies have evolved their own healing systems and practices to deal with physical and mental health problems of its people. Rooted in their shared worldviews and social lives, these healing systems are still practices in different societies. The range and diversity of these indigenous healing systems is, in fact mind boggling. In India, for example, there are ayurvedic practitioners, shamans, swamis, mystics, gurus, diviners, and others, the list may be ever-increasing. Furthermore, there are temples, mosques, local deities, and shrines in almost all villages, which double as healing centers Kakar [1]. Similar scenario prevails elsewhere as diversity is the hallmark of these healing systems, as these systems are in practices in traditional and indigenous societies.

However, in spite of all diversities, there is a remarkable uniformity in the working of these healing systems across the continents. Medical anthropologists and health psychologists have only recently paid attention to this aspect. We need to identify the core assumptions and principles which underlie the universality of these indigenous healing systems. Search of such universals is important to decipher what healing is and how does it work. At the core of these healing practices are the basic assumptions of unity, interconnectivity and harmony of the mind, the body and the soul Ross [2]. This paper, as part of a major research project, aims to unravel the universality across diverse indigenous healing practices in different regions of the world. Some preliminary findings are reported herewith.

What Healing Entails?

The term indigenous healing covers a vast range of therapeutic practices in which both natural and supernatural are involved in the healing process. These practices engage not only the patient but also his/her family and social network in the therapeutic process. Furthermore, these systems are mostly eclectic in the sense that herbs/medicine, sacred rituals, gods, possession, all are part of the therapeutic process Bhugra & Bhui [3]. At the ideational level it is a holistic approach to balance life forces within the person and harmonize his or her

relation with family, society, vocation, ecology, and supernatural. These are the psycho-spiritual aspects of the disease which are of prime interest and the healing practices aim to invoke the cultural symbolism to heal the person. There is often an aura of mysticism around many of these healing practices, reinforced by legends, fables and folklores Dalal [4], Kakar [5].

What is healing is a widely open issue is all indigenous societies and it is viewed as diversely as the healing systems are. It is not thought of in biological terms only, but is considered to be an active and ongoing process. In most of the indigenous healing practices there are no fixed goals or standards to evaluate the efficacy of healing, only a sense of direction Waldrem [6]. Much depends on the goals set by the therapists and the expectations with which the patients and their families participate in the therapeutic sessions. The outcomes of such therapeutic sessions are often negotiable and open to diverse, even contradictory interpretations by the stakeholders. Indigenous healing, in this sense, is flexible and pragmatic, open to experimentation and outside influences. In fact, no healing system can be found in its pristine form, the healers themselves are not much concerned about contamination of their practices, as long as they serve the purpose. A vast majority of native population which believes in the efficacy of these indigenous systems is also unconcerned about this vagueness. Medical professionals and academic scholars are, however, not very comfortable with this fluidity of indigenous healing systems.

Rather than unraveling the underlying universality of indigenous healing, most of the medical anthropological work of the colonial period denounced indigenous systems as primitive, pre-scientific and magico-religious. Labeling indigenous practices as sorcery, witchcraft and ignorance these anthropologists became instruments in asserting supremacy of western medicine Bhasin [7]. Later generation of anthropologists and social scientists trained in this tradition, both in western and developing countries, continued to look down upon indigenous systems in their zest to promote western medicine as a superior system to treat physical and mental health problems. However,

some medical researchers like Arther Kleinman [8], Sudhir Kakar [1], and Rupert Ross [2] have argued for the scientific and universal nature of indigenous healing practices. In the present times there is a growing body of research in different continents to establish that these age-old practices are effective because they are germane to basic human nature.

Indigenous Healing and Modern Medicine

Modern medicine with significant discoveries and therapeutic advancements in the last centuries has become the primary system of health care in almost all countries of the world. Health services and institutions, including WHO, are mostly manned by medical professionals. Most of the health budget of all countries is allocated to modern medicine. In the western countries there is only token presence of alternative systems of medicine.

In terms of health research, in comparison to the huge budget of medical research, the money available for research on indigenous healing is just peanuts. Ten major pharmaceutical companies in the U.S. spent about \$800 billion on drug research between years 2002 to 2008. In its comparison the world budget for social research on indigenous systems is less than half a billion dollars, most of which is garnered by those researchers who work in the west or are trained in the west. Medical research has reduced herbs as 'things', subjecting them to bio-chemical analysis, randomized clinical trials, patenting them as bio-chemical substances, and then marketing them as drugs and nutritional supplements Tilburt & Kaptchuk [9]. It is conveniently ignored that these herbs are embodied in a social and religious milieu within which the healing takes place.

Furthermore, the dialogue between western medicine and indigenous systems is marred by unequal power relationship. Traditional healers are a poorly organized group of people with low formal education and income, and can be no match for educated medical doctors who hold important positions in the power structure and control research funds, including in internal agencies. It is conveniently ignored that indigenous practices are possibly based on sound theories of health and illness, subscribed by the local communities Dalal [10]. The positivistic science which is based on the Descartean dichotomy of natural and supernatural has its limitations in understanding subtleties of these healing practices. We need new methodologies to implicate the salience of these indigenous systems. Research in the area of indigenous healing is still at the preliminary stage.

Search for the Universals

My initial work in this area focused on how indigenous healers treat the patients of afflictions, like snake-biting, hysteria and convulsion, paralysis and such other diseases cf. Dalal [4]. The findings evidenced that

- i. Local healers instill faith and hope in the patients, important ingredients for activating self-healing mechanism of the patients.

- ii. Through invocation of some local deity and spirit, the healers create an imagery of good health and well-being.

- iii. Involve family and community in the healing rituals treatment process, so as to reintegrate the patients within the social fold.

Encouraged by these initial findings, I am presently engaged in a comparative study of systems and practices of indigenous healers in different parts of the world. This is primarily a library-internet-based work in which research journals in this area are scanned for the studies which present in detail healing practices of different indigenous societies. A number of studies on indigenous healing were meta-analyzed to decipher the commonalities. Some common features identified in the preliminary analysis are:

- a. These practices are holistic in nature. The focus is on the patient than on the problem. The patient was treated by combining shamanic healing with herbs, rituals and modern medicine.

- b. These are culturally imbedded. Healers and patients belonged to the same culture and socio-economic background. They shared similar causal beliefs about the illness.

- c. There is an aura of sacredness and mystery which is supported by myths and legends about the healing prowess of the healer. Invocation of the supernatural is through the sacred rituals.

- d. No concern for confidentiality. Healing sessions are public activities and are often participatory, where family friends, neighbors, all join.

- e. These healing services are free, voluntary and part time, they are not a source of livelihood. If charge for their services there is a fear of losing healing powers conferred on them. Healers are supported otherwise by patients' families and local communities.

- f. They rarely have any official patronage but thrived on mass appeal.

- g. These healing systems have organically evolved over ages and have gone through changes over time. There is no written documentation as such, and is mostly part of the oral culture.

These are some features common to most indigenous healing systems of the world. These conclusions are very tentative and needs further confirmation taking larger sample of studies from different cultures and continents. Nevertheless, these findings pave way for an exciting proposition that, in spite of all diversities, these are some features of these healing practices which are uniform in all societies since ancient times. Given the fact that many regions have remained inaccessible

and remote, findings these commonality there too remains a mystery. May be this commonality evolved through trial and error and common experiences in different cultures. Knowing that the modern medicine is only two hundred years old, there is much to learn from these indigenous healing practices, which are thousands of years old and have gone through cycles of decay and rejuvenation. Holistic in nature (based on the unity of mind-body-spirit) Indigenous system can significantly contribute to mental health movement Incayawar et al. [11]. They provide important lessons for carving out public health care services in different countries and there are many possibilities of their integration Payyappallimana [12].

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