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Spirituality, Healing and Indigenous Knowledge in Herbal Medicine: A Case of the Ndrukpa Ethnic Minority in Uganda

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This paper explores spirituality, healing and Indigenous knowledge in herbal medicine practices among the Ndrukpa ethnic minority community of the West Nile region in Uganda, and how they influence their thought processes and worldviews. The Critical theory and post-colonial theory are adopted to integrate indigeneity and hybridity. The field study was conducted from 2022 to 2025 to document the history of the Ndrukpa people whose history had remained undocumented and kept in memory. The qualitative approach and ethnohistorical design were used to explore the socio-cultural history of the people. The key emergent themes include: spirituality, healing, indigenous knowledge in herbal medicine, religious rituals and sacrifices, apprenticeship, belief system, belief in God the creator, gods, spirits and living dead and the living, magic, sorcery and divine retribution, and identity. Spirituality was a critical component of Ndrukpa society and was holistically viewed for its social, economic, political and cultural importance. The Ndrukpa believe in the relationship between spirituality and the natural environment, and the critical role artefacts play in spirituality. Ndrukpa ritual and its practitioners exhibited connections in relation to space, performance and perception. Ndrukpa believed in healing rituals and viewed healing holistically as physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects of human experience. Treatment, healing, and spirituality were to restore health and well-being. Indigenous healing systems are linked to a permanent presence of ancestral forces without a time limit. The use of indigeneity and hybridity in spirituality, healing and indigenous knowledge in medicine is not to romanticize culture and spirituality but rather view them as a promotion of the notion 'African solution to African problem' and a strategy for the development of structured and informed by local knowledge, resources and identities.

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INTRODUCTION

Whereas Indigenous knowledge has a place in academia, spirituality, healing and herbal medicine have not been extensively studied. When indigenous knowledge and science disagree, "Western science consistently trumps local knowledge" (Igoe, J, 2013, p. 64). Yet, they remain an important aspect of indigenous ethnic society. 'Spirituality and (healing) have 'some deep and unrecognized evolutionary benefit' (Coyle, J. 2002, p. 589). It calls for indigeneity and hybridity of indigenous and modern scientific knowledge in medicine and healing as a strategy to decolonize and emancipate indigenous knowledge. The use of indigeneity and hybridity in spirituality, healing and indigenous knowledge in medicine is not to romanticize culture and spirituality but rather view them as means to an 'African solution to African problem' and a strategy to promote local knowledge, resources and identities. This paper argues that through hybridity, indigenous and local knowledge is given value.

Spirituality, healing and indigenous knowledge are key aspects of the Ndrupka identity, culture, belief and knowledge system. Despite their minority status and threats of modernization and Christianity, their culture continues to thrive and spirituality, healing and indigenous knowledge remain inseparable. Similarly, the relations between religion, spirituality, and health are intricate. This leaves the

door open for understanding the ways (cultural, medicinal and other) in which indigenous peoples have long been and continue to make use of biodiversity resources (Büscher, B, 2013, p. 19).

This study focuses on African healing and attempts to provide possible synergies in Western and indigenous knowledge, and between spirituality, healing and indigenous knowledge among the Ndrupka people in Uganda. The paper further contributes towards the conversation on spirituality, healing and herbal medicine as part of Ndrupka indigenous knowledge. It is intended to use indigenous knowledge for the scholarly purposes of academic and knowledge emancipation, and decolonization.

Dei, D.J.S., (2000) noted that undertaking such scholarly work often comes with challenges, dangers and misreadings. However, it helps to draw attention to some of the nuances, contradictions and contestations, and re-assert that indigenous knowledge has a place in academia. Indigenous knowledge does not remain in its original state without the effect of other knowledge. Rather than reject 'Indigenous', this paper brings new and complex interpretations to the term by incorporating the 'hybridity' of knowledge. The fact that different bodies of knowledge continually influence each other shows the dynamism of all knowledge systems. The 'Indigenous' is never lost, as seen in the case of the Ndrupka people. The interplay of

different knowledge is one of the reasons why indigenous knowledge ought to be taught in schools and universities. Integrating indigenous knowledge in academia to create a collaborative dimension of knowledge and address the emerging call for academic knowledge to speak to the diversity of histories, events, experiences and ideas that have shaped human growth and development. It is therefore important to recognize that knowledge is not static but rather constantly being created and recreated in context, and indigenous knowledge needs to be an integral part of the ongoing co-creation and re-creation of academic knowledge/work (Dei, D.J.S., 2000, p. 113).

Schumaker, et al. (2007) noted that much early research in medical anthropology was fueled by concerns about diseases as defined by Western medicine in its biomedical or 'scientific' forms. However, through their engagement with healers and their communities, medical and social anthropologists and a growing number of historians raised important questions about biomedical disease categories and produced accounts that began to place African and European concepts of health, illness and biology in specific historical and cultural contexts. Meanwhile, the disciplines of science studies and history of medicine had also begun to situate the concepts used by European science and medicine, historically and culturally, removing taken-for-granted notions of their rationality and universal application (Schumaker, et al., 2007, p. 707).

Furthermore, African scholars ought to view 'decolonization' as breaking with the ways in which the African indigenous human condition is shaped by dominant Euro-American cultures which assert an understanding of the indigenous social reality informed by local experiences and practices. Bringing the scholarly conversation into the western dominated knowledge space, and institution of power and influence in this increasingly interconnected world is even more critical in this 'information era'. This will help contribute to

developing a critical epistemology which will account for the production and validation of critical knowledge for decolonization and emancipation purposes. It is therefore important to realize that knowledge is operationalized differently, given local histories, environments and contexts. The exclusion of indigenous knowledge from the global academic context of knowledge production leaves the space for the colonization of knowledge and cultures in local environments and contexts unchallenged (Dei, D.J.S., 2000, p. 113).

This paper therefore explores African spirituality and healing using the case of the Ndrukpa people in Uganda, focusing particularly on the role of spirituality, and indigenous knowledge in traditional medicine and healing.

Critical theory in African indigenous religion is adopted in this study in active recognition of African values and practices as relevant and ethnographically varied reflections on the politics and language of emancipation. Whereas the past is altered by the present, similarly, the present is directed by the past (Wariboko, N. 2019, p. 181).

European colonizers invented and used the category of 'religion' to humiliate, exploit and subjugate Africans and other indigenous people, but also shows how the 19th-century academic study of religion was complicit in this dehumanizing project (Strijdom, J., 2011, p.1). Strijdom, J., (2011) noted that from the 16th until the 18th century, European observers denied the existence of religion amongst indigenous communities, maintaining that their 'superstitions' contained nothing that was similar to the true religion of Christianity and thereby justified the claim that they 'had no human rights to life, land, livestock or control over their own labour'. However, the 19th-century Western scholars of Religious Studies acknowledged the existence of religion amongst indigenous peoples but considered their religion inferior, and that it retained animist elements from humankind's earliest or most 'primitive' stage of evolution. This only served

European empires in justifying their conquests as a civilizing mission (Strijdom, J., 2011, p.1). This paper using the experience of the Ndrukpa ethnic minority community, critically and creatively engages with the practice of spirituality, healing and indigenous knowledge without relegating the role and position of indigenous healing and indigenous knowledge. We argue that spirituality and indigenous knowledge in herbal medicine among the Ndrukpa is an identity issue. An Alur royal elder noted that:

We the Alur know the Lendu (Ndrukpa) for their medicine and we cannot match them. When you are bewitched or poisoned, a Lendu medicine man can heal you. But when a Lendu poisons you, you may not survive unless Lendu medicinal herbs are administered by their medicine man. Today I am a testimony of Lendu healing. I was poisoned and nearly died but when a Lendu who was living in our home brought some herbal medicines, I got completely healed (Interview, 24 Feb 2023).

This paper argues for indigeneity and hybridity of healing and indigenous knowledge in medicine. It observes that adopting the postcolonial study of religion may allow for a blend of indigeneity and hybridity. Strijdom, J., (2011) noted that in the advocacy for the use of indigeneity and hybridity,

At the one extreme are those who speak from an indigenist location. Their aim is to recover and promote pure, authentic pre-colonial roots which they claim have essentially remained the same 'since time immemorial', but were suppressed during the colonial encounter. At the other extreme are those who view culture from a postmodern position of hybridity. This analytical strategy takes historical change seriously and focuses on the diversity and mixture of religious traditions as well as on diaspora communities, which emerged because of the cultural encounters (Strijdom, J., 2011, p.1).

Similarly, this study argues for the use of indigeneity and hybridity in spirituality, healing and indigenous knowledge in medicine as a strategy for the emancipation of the indigenous communities and their form of knowledge.

Chidester (2000) argues that postcolonial scholars speaking from a position of hybridity should be cognizant that all knowledge negotiations are equal, and indigenists who cultivate a romantic nostalgia for pure, pre-colonial roots will have to contend with historical change and the diversity and mixture of traditions. He further identifies a group of indigenists who use essentialism as a strategy to recover indigenous traditions that were suppressed by colonialism. Amongst these, he includes Fanon as a post-romantic indigenist, who linked the recovery of a suppressed past with his present violent struggle against colonialism and African movements that reject 'colonial constructions of African mentality' and instead promote 'visions of African humanity and personality, communalism and socialism, in the interests of a postcolonial African renaissance'. (Chidester 2000:433 & Strijdom, J., 2011, p.1).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative approach and ethnohistorical design were used in this study. The primary fieldwork was undertaken from December 2022 to 2023 with follow-up visits in 2024 and 2025. A reconnaissance visit was first taken in 2022 to the Ndrukpa Kingdom in Zombo District to collect information on the Ndrukpa people, their culture and the land as not much information and documentation was available on the Ndrukpa. A total of 107 participants were interviewed based on the saturation level. The non-statistical sampling method was adopted given the qualitative and ethnohistorical nature of the study, focusing on the participants' experiences, feelings, values, beliefs, and practices. With no new information and data being received from the participants, the sample size was 107 participants. The study participants were purposively selected

using snowball and networking methods based on their knowledge, participation or witnessing the problem and period under study. The category of participants included the Royal Highness King of Ndrukpa Kingdom, the Royal Council, the council of elders, the Queen Mother and the palace women, the elderly persons and youth, the technocrats from Zombo District. to corroborate the study, Key Informant interviews were held in the Alur Kingdom, Kebu chiefdom and Lugbara kingdom because of their shared historical past.

Data was collected using oral tradition, oral history, and written documents. One-on-one interviews were held with the King of Ndrukpa Kingdom, the chief of Kebu and the paramount Chief of Lugbara Kari. Key Informant Interviews were held with Zombo District Technocrats. A total of four focus group discussions, each held with the Royal Council, council of elders, women and the youth. Through oral interviews, the elders who were considered the custodians of tradition narrated the history of the Ndrukpa and their political, social and economic organization. Discussions were held with the Ndrukpa Council of Elders and oral tradition narrators; the cultural memory of the kingdom who in the narratives agree on the specific content as authentic history. Literature on the Lendu from the Democratic Republic of Congo was used to bridge the gap in the absence of a documented history of the Ndrukpa. The abridged write-up on the Ndrukpa supported by the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) and Summer Linguistic Institute (SIL) provided great insight into Ndrukpa's history.

One interesting insight was the emphasis on spirituality, healing and the wealth of indigenous knowledge which was unique to the people. The elders and youth narrated how Ndrukpa culture has been kept close to its original form in the absence of documentation. In documenting the history of the Ndrukpa people, it is overwhelming to discover that the Ndrukpa society has a history that is still vivid and it has a wealth of indigenous knowledge in spirituality, herbal medicine and healing. It brings

into play a pseudo-state of nature. In the state of nature, all men are in a state of perfect freedom and equality where all power and jurisdiction are reciprocal, with no one having more than the others (Hindess, B. 2007, p. 5).

WHO ARE THE NDRUKPA PEOPLE?

The Ndrukpa, commonly known as the Lendu people is an ethnic minority group located in Zeu in Zombo District, in the West Nile region in Uganda. In this paper, we use the name 'Ndrukpa' which is the original name of the people and meets their aspirations. The Ndrukpa inhabit Lendu Parish at the edge of Lendu Forest in Akaa Division, Zombo District, bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). They are one of the 56 original ethnic groups in Uganda as of 1st February 1926 (1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda). Today, they are one of the 65 ethnic groups in Uganda (UBOS, 2016). According to the 2014 Population census, the Lendu population stood at 18,919 which is 0.056% of Uganda's total population of 34,634,650 (UBOS, 2016). They form one of the six ethnic groups that inhabit the West Nile region in Uganda: Ndrukpa (Lendu), Kebu, Lugbara, Alur, Madi, and Kakwa. The Ndrukpa people are a Sudanese ethnic group who speak the *Ndrulo* language. The majority of the Ndrukpa are found in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019). The Ndrukpa today belong to the invisible and serene Ndrukpa kingdom which is one of the oldest kingdoms in the West Nile region with little known about them despite their wealth of history and indigenous knowledge. They are referred to as the Hero-ethnic community of the West Nile region. The Ndrukpa are the first inhabitants of the West Nile region having migrated from the Sudan-Ethiopia region. This is confirmed by Hopkin's assertion that modern humans are believed to have emerged from Ethiopia (Hopkin, M., 2005). When the Alur a segment of the Luo migrants arrived in Uganda in 1125 AD, they found the Ndrukpa and

Kebu had already settled in the area (Interview, Mark Utuga, November 2022).

ORIGIN OF THE NDRUKPA PEOPLE AND KINGDOM

Ndrukpa are considered forest agriculturalist Negroes (Johnston, H.H., 1902, p. 555). Ndrukpa Kingdom is considered the first indigenous kingdom in the West Nile region of Uganda. The current kingship traces its lineage to the first-born line of their hero-ancestor-Ndru. According to Ndrukpa oral tradition, Ndru the Hero-ancestor reigned in the period 300-1000 AD while in Meroe in Egypt. Bbale who was Ndru's son reigned 1,000-1150AD in Bar-el-Ghazel. Bbale's sons ruled in 1600-1700 AD. King Rapia I reigned in Pakwach-Wadelai from 1700-1750 AD. The period 1750-2010AD among the Ndrukpa is considered an era of instability and a dark age for the people and was characterised by the Alur conquest, Arab slave trade, European colonialism, and finally the post-colonial social exclusion of the Ndrukpa people. The year 1998 witnessed the revival of the Ndrukpa kingdom during the reign of King Manase Rapia II from 1998-2022 AD. This followed the Constitutional revival of kingdoms and cultural institutions (1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, Chapter 16 Article 246. Institution of traditional or cultural leaders). Following the death of King Manase Rapia II in 2022, the affairs of the Kingdom were managed by the Royal Council until February 25th 2024, when King Jimmy Agenunga Rapia III was coronated and enthroned king of the Ndrukpa kingdom (Mark Otuga, February 25, 2024).

CONCEPTUALIZING SPIRITUALITY, HEALING AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Conceptualizing Spirituality:

Spirituality refers to the individual's personal experience, commonly seen as connected to some formal religion but increasingly viewed as

independent of any organized religion (Thoresen, C. E., & Harris, A. H., 2002, p. 4). Whereas spirituality is a highly subjective, personal, and individualistic concept, which defies the development of a standard definition, when a concept lacks a clear definition, each person defines it within the context of his or her personal life to give it meaning (Coyle, J. 2002, p. 589).

Therefore, spirituality is linked with religion and is connected to religiosity and religious commitment and practices. To Isiko, crisis often draws people closer to religion and the spiritual due to the fear, panic, and uncertainty with which they are associated. Religions are left with the responsibility of providing theological or spiritual answers beyond what human beings can comprehend (Isiko, A. P., 2020, p.77).

The focus of this study is on Ndrukpa spirituality, indigenous knowledge in medicine and healing originating from their form of indigenous religion. Religious commitment has been defined as 'the participation in, or endorsement of, practices, beliefs, attitudes, or sentiments that are associated with an organized community of faith'. In this case, it is the indigenous religious faith. In practice, the study used indigenous religious affiliation and spirituality as indicators of religiosity. Furthermore, spirituality is approached within the history and social science disciplines with the wider view of 'God' as any firmly held value or principle, which gives meaning and purpose in life (Coyle, J. 2002, p. 590). Ecklund et al. (2011), argue that spirituality is eclectic; some regard everything from near-death experiences, spirit guides, and books about angels, to meditation and prayer fellowships, as types of spirituality (Ecklund et al., 2011, p.255). Similarly, spirituality is perceived as having two interconnected dimensions – the vertical dimension of the personal relationship with the transcendent (God, higher consciousness, spiritual world) and the horizontal dimension of relationships with oneself, other people and the natural world (Coyle, J. 2002, p. 590). Furthermore, spirituality is perceived as an

activating force. Spirituality motivates, enables, empowers, and provides hope (Coyle, J. 2002, p. 592). This has been exhibited among the Ndrukpa people in their practice of healing and indigenous knowledge in medicine. Knowledge or awareness is an important attribute of spirituality (Coyle, J. 2002, p. 593). ‘Cultures throughout history have viewed health and disease as directly related to a variety of religious beliefs and practices, as evidenced by specific religious prescriptions concerning diet, physical activities, and quiet reflection and prayer’ (Thoresen, C. E., & Harris, A. H., 2002, p. 3). Whereas Ecklund et al. (2011) argue that “there is convincing evidence...that religious authority has declined at both the societal and individual levels, in what has traditionally been understood through various formulations to be part of a broad process of secularization” (2011, p.253), this study noted that spirituality and indigenous religion continues to thrive among the Ndrukpa.

Scholars have seen scientists as leaders in secularization’s advance and key players in debates and theories about secularization and carriers of extreme rationality (Smith, 2003 & Ecklund et al., 2011, p. 257). The assumption is that scientists are the most irreligious, and thrive to see science replacing religion. Studies show that scientists seemed, according to traditional indicators, to be much less religious than those in the general population (Larson and Witham 1998). Because of spirituality’s social connections to traditional religion, scholars have assumed that because scientists are not religious, then they are also not spiritual (Ecklund et al., 2011, p. 257).

Coyle, J. (2002) identifies three approaches to view spirituality: The first is the transcendent approach, in which some form of transcendence is seen as an essential feature of spirituality. The second is the value guidance approach where spirituality is held to reside in any firmly held value that gives life meaning and purpose. The third is the structural-behaviourist approach because it focuses on reproduced actions and behaviours associated with

organized religion. Although these three approaches constitute differing ways of viewing spirituality, (Coyle, J. 2002, p. 592). Spirituality is connected with invisible powers and influences and operates through mediums.

Conceptualizing Healing:

Levin, J. (2017) notes that there has been a persistent lack of critical attention to the meaning of “healing” (Levin, J. 2017, p. 244). The confusion concerning healing in medicine is evidenced by the lack of consensus about its meaning (Egnew, T. R. 2005, p. 256). Medicine is traditionally considered a healing profession, and modern medicine claims legitimacy to heal through its scientific approach to medicine (Egnew, T. R. 2005, p. 255). However, little attention is paid to spiritual and indigenous medicine which is a profession acquired through indigenous knowledge, spirituality and apprenticeship. Whereas medical literature on healing mentions the term, they do not explicitly define it. However, medicine adds qualifiers associated with the spiritual and religious aspects of illness and recovery related to psychology and alternative medicine. It could be argued that modern medicine considers holistic healing beyond its orthodoxy, leaving the promotion of healing to practitioners of alternative or aboriginal medicine such as the non-scientific, non-medical practitioners described by anthropologists (Egnew, T. R. 2005, p. 256). Whereas Egnew asserts that ‘healing remains a core function of medicine’ (Egnew, T. R. 2005, p. 256), this paper adopts a divergent perspective that healing is a result of the interplay of medicine, spirituality, culture, belief and faith. From the conversations and narratives, healing is a physical, psychological, spiritual, relational and emotional experience of well-being, connectedness and harmony (Focused Group Discussion with Ndrukpa Elders).

Healing involves achieving or acquiring wholeness as a person, which means “you’re healed. However, the concept of wholeness as a definition of healing

lacks what anybody means by the word ‘whole’ and what it means to ‘make’ whole. Therefore, to be whole again “is to be in relationship to yourself, your body, to the culture and significant others. Similarly, to be whole as a person is to be whole amongst others, and wholeness of personhood involves physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects of human experience” (Egnew, T. R. 2005, p. 257). He further noted that, “healing occurs within the life narrative of the person experiencing the phenomena” (Egnew, T. R. 2005, p. 258).

However, Hill (2009) observes that ‘Traditional medicine and healing are difficult concepts to define, as many [indigenous] people describe the medicine and practices within the localized geographical context of their community or nation. The term “traditional medicine,” as defined by WHO (World Health Organisation): Is the sum total of knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether justifiable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement of treatment of physical and mental illness (WHO, 2001 & Hill, 2009, p. 27).

Hill (2009) noted that in traditional medicine and healing, the terms elder and healer are used interchangeably since traditional teachings are considered “healing for the mind.” Therefore, “Elder” is another term attached to traditional healing. This is because elders are “Keepers of tradition, guardians of culture, the wise people, the teachers. While most of those who are wise in traditional ways are old, not all old people are elders, and not all elders are old (Hill, 2009, p. 27). Borrowing from the Lugbara notion of ‘elder’, it refers to seniority by age which makes a person closer to the ancestors (Agatha, 2016).

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Report (1996) defines traditional healing as: “Practices designed to promote mental, physical and

spiritual well-being that are based on beliefs which go back to the time before the spread of western ‘scientific’ bio-medicine. When Aboriginal people in Canada talk about traditional healing, they include a wide range of activities, from physical cures using herbal medicines and other remedies to the promotion of psychological and spiritual well-being using ceremony, counselling and the accumulated wisdom of elders” (1996, Vol.3, p. 348).

This paper introduces healing as a physical, social and relational process which involves ‘forgiveness’. Mc Cullough, Pargament, & Thoresen (2000), observe that “when people forgive, their response toward people who have offended or injured them become more positive and less negative” (2000, p. 9). What they think of, feel about, want to do to, or actually do to their offenders is positive (Finnegan, A.C., 2010, p. 247). The perpetrator(s) is perceived as unsound and imperfect, distinct from his/her acts, and capable of improvement (Govier; 2002, p. 59). According to Gobodo-Madikizela (2003), “forgiveness, while not disregarding the act, begins not with it but with the person. Forgiveness recognizes the deed, its impact having been and continuing to be lived by the victim, but transcends it” (2003, p. 95). Therefore, “forgiveness as a social process in which victim(s) release resentment toward perpetrator(s) yet acknowledge the wrong done to him/her. The outcome of the process of forgiveness is understood to be a release of negative feelings and a shift in orientation by the victim from the traumatic past toward a more forward-focused approach” and “forgiveness offers an opportunity to make meaning out of otherwise wholly negative experience” (Finnegan, A.C., 2010, p. 247). This study observed that forgiveness emphasizes relationships between people as a means to once again make a whole relationship which is a form of healing; that is; to restore a relationship to its original state of harmony.

Conceptualizing Indigenous Knowledge:

Indigenous knowledge is defined as the sum total of knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement of treatment of physical and mental illness (WHO, 2001, Hill, D. M. 2009, p. 27). It is intertwined with spirituality and religion in its principles and practices.

Agatha (2016) associates indigenous knowledge with traditional wisdom, “the creative practical knowledge used to solve life challenges, was developed through socio-environmental experience. It was based on established cultural norms, values, beliefs, customs, and practices passed through generations. Traditional wisdom is part of a people’s traditional knowledge system” (Agatha, 2016, p.1). similarly, building on Agatha’s notion of traditional wisdom, this paper views indigenous knowledge as established cultural norms, values, beliefs, customs, practices, thoughts, ideas, and skills, passed through generations.

Battiste & Henderson (2000) state that “indigenous knowledge is a complete knowledge system with its own concepts of epistemology, philosophy, and scientific and logical validity...which can only be understood by means of pedagogy traditionally employed by these people themselves” (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 44).

Elders play an important role in promoting indigenous knowledge and education, and community knowledge and values among the Ndrukpa children. They are considered in this work as the indigenous intellectuals who passed knowledge to the children and younger persons through proverbs, folk stories, songs, wise sayings, rhymes and riddles.

To Gramsci (1926), indigenous knowledge becomes an instrument to create and maintain a “certain type of civilization and of citizen”, and

“collective life and of individual relations”, and “to eliminate certain customs and attitudes and disseminate others” (1926, p. 508). He argues that an independent class of intellectuals does not exist given each social group in a specific historical period has its own intellectuals. Therefore, he defines an ‘intellectual’ by his social-political function and social activity in a specific group or organization such as a state, party, association or church (Gramsci, 1926, p. 624). According to this study, the elders and priests become the class of intellectuals in the Ndrukpa society given their authority as source and custodian of knowledge.

STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Ndrukpa Spirituality

Spirituality was critical for the Ndrukpa social, economic, political and military organization.

The Ndrukpa believed in a supreme God- called Guw, who manifested himself in different forms of gods and was adored through altars and shrines, rituals, sacrifices, songs, dances, chanting/ invocations during different circumstances. This God was responsible for everything, whether good or bad. A shrine where he was believed to stay was constructed and called *Guw-dza* (God’s house). Any consultation and spiritual ceremonies were performed in the *Guw-dza* (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 54).

The people believe that spirituality, healing and indigenous knowledge are inseparable and that herbal medicine was given by the Almighty God the creator and handed to them through their ancestors over generations. They believe in the healing and protective power of herbal medicine through higher beings and powers.

Shrines- *Guw-dza* are considered points of spiritual encounters and contacts with their living dead and spirits. This allows them to have continuous communion and encounter with the living dead. Therefore, families construct shrines as sacred places for the spirits to dwell. A son is chosen to

serve as the family priest and consult the gods on issues within the family that may need spiritual intervention. The family priest acts as the custodian of the gods (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019:14). A priest is deputized by the son who replaces him when he dies. The deputy is responsible for gathering the herbs and other materials used in the priest's house (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 54).

Traditionalists believe in an unending life or life after death: death therefore means a transition to the spiritual world where life continues, though in a different way. They also believe in the ancestors and ancestral spirits for help in any situation that needs spiritual intervention, such as in times of war, famine, drought, diseases or successes in life (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 54).

The Ndrukpa believe that they can prevent all sorts of misfortunes and bad luck including epidemics and pandemics from having access to their homes and families by putting roadside stones to act as traps for all the problems coming to the home. The stones are strategically placed by the roadside at the entrance to the home. This is done through a ritual ceremony in which a chicken is slaughtered and the blood is sprinkled over the stones. Such stones are also used when family members are going out for an engagement which may require the blessing and the protection of the gods, such as at times of war or epidemics (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 56).

The Ndrukpa believe in a direct relationship between spirituality and the natural environment. They believe in harmonious spiritual and physical relationships with the mountains, hills, rivers, forests and vegetation. Mountains are places for indigenous religious worship and rituals. Using oral tradition and oral history, a respondent observed that "The Ndrukpa people revere mountains as places for spiritual worship and rituals. Akara Mountain in the Democratic Republic of Congo is an important site for indigenous worship and ritual. During worship and rituals, the priest faces Akara Mountain and calls its name as he chants to invoke

the spirit. Similarly, names of trees believed to have supernatural powers are mentioned. Such a tree is *Umbila*. The leaves are used for dancing. It is tied around women's waist" (Interview 17 December, 2024).

Trees and plants were used to resolve a paradox. In the ritual to settle the identity crisis between the Ambusi clan in Zombo District, and those in Pakwach District, and the larger Ambusi clan in the Democratic Republic of Congo, spirituality and an identification tree were used to determine and confirm the blood relationship. The Clan Elder of Ambusi of Pakwach District; Lino Okello, in an attempt to reconcile with the brothers in Ndrukpa Kingdom, narrated how following a conflict between his grandfather Lengwa had a rivalry over the throne in the Congo, he picked his son Awaza and migrated to Zeu where a conflict developed between his grandfather and the Alur chief. His grandfather was killed and Awaza was sold as a slave to Chief Atiya of Alwii chiefdom, in the present-day Pakwach District. Awaza went to Alwii but was resold to the chief of Angal Pamwodu in present-day Pakwach. His father; Awaza, was sold as a young man and married in Pakwach when he was serving as a servant and hunter for the chief of Angal Pamwodu. His father died in 1952 when he was 15 years old. All this while, they had taken to the Jonam identity and culture. However, with time, neighbours began to ridicule and discriminate against them, reminding them of their Ndrukpa identity. In 2006, Ruma his son; who serves as the family priest consulted the gods on the issue and sought spiritual guidance. The gods told Ruma that the people among whom he was living were not his relatives. They directed Ruma to trace his true origin. Ruma informed the clan elders and started the journey to discover their true origin. The gods directed him to move westwards to present-day Zeu in Zombo District. On reaching Zeu, the spirits directed him not to approach his other brothers but rather return to Pakwach and make spiritual preparations to come to his brothers through

reconciliation because they are the descendants of Lengwa's brother with whom Lengwa fought for power while still in the Congo (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p.14).

Ruma returned home to look for sheep and goats for the reconciliation ritual. He sent a message to the Ambusi of Zeu about their plan to reconcile with them as brothers. The Ambusi of Zeu responded by requesting confirmation of the claimed relationship with the Ambusi people, who were Lengwa's descendants. A ritual ceremony to determine the blood relations with Ambusi was performed. An identification tree was planted to know the truth, and it was stated that if the tree sprouted, it would be a confirmation that the people were truly Ndrukpa, but when it failed to sprout, it would mean that the people were actually not Ndrukpa. The identification tree was planted in 2007 at Ruma's home in Pakwach. A few months later, the identification tree sprouted and the Ambusi of Zeu confirmed that those from Pakwach were truly their relatives. The reconciliation process was organized at the end of 2007 in Ndrukpa Kingdom in Gulajo in Zeu and the Ambusi of Pakwach regained their true origin and identity as Ndrukpa. The Ambusi people requested the Chief of Puvungu of Pakwach to bring them to their own king of the Ndrukpa. In 2012 the Ambusi people living among the Puvungu people officially visited the King of Ndrukpa, Manasi Njuni Rapia II. This reconciliation was after a period of over 100 years of living among the Jonam of Pakwach (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p.16). This is an indicator that spirituality applies to specific historical and cultural contexts, and therefore, it is important to understand that the indigenous social reality is informed by local experiences and practices.

Artefacts play a critical role in spirituality. For instance, clan priests use snail shells as "an important tool for the traditional healers and clan priests. They are found in the rivers from which the priests claim their supernatural power. Any gift being presented to the gods of the rivers is put in this

shell and left to float away (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 57). The Ndrukpa believe that they have powers which they exercise over creation in the land, both living and non-living. The construction of the Nyagak hydroelectric power station on River Nyagak; the first in the West Nile region which started in 2006 and completed in 2011 stalled when the turbines could not turn. When the Alur priests were invited to perform a ritual, it did not materialize. Mzee Kelokpa, the priest of the Arisi clan who represented the High Priest of the Ndrukpa in the rituals that opened Nyagak Power Station for operation used his power to make the turbine operate. In his hands are the shell given to him by the Nyagak River and a wild cat skin showing strength (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 58).

Whereas the agency of artefacts in spiritual practices is complex and multifaceted and deserves careful philosophical consideration, religious traditions often conscript material objects as the means of translation between the everyday, lived world and the intangible realm of the sacred. Such objects are not symbolic but rather active participants in the construction of spiritual experiences and beliefs (Kumar, D. [n.d]; p. 207).

The Ndrukpa ritual and its practitioners exhibited connections in relation to space, performance and perception. The landscape had connections with their belief and the seasons which determined the rituals which are linked to spatial perceptions. At this point, material culture plays a key role in articulating and expressing the ideas and confronting the spiritual implications.

A case in point again is seen in the Nyagak power station narratives when the turbines failed to run, Mzee Kelokpa, the priest of the Arisi clan made an incantation:

"This is our land, the gods of the Ndrukpa people who peacefully survived in the beautiful river, you have been disturbed through the work of men and you have not been compensated, may you receive these offerings as a sacrifice from your people and

with these words may you let this power station operate” (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 56).

He then slaughtered the sheep, left the blood flowing into the river and did the same with the other animals. The meat was prepared by the riverside and shared together with the workers at the site. After the feast, he ordered the operator to ignite the turbine and it immediately started to run and the power station became operational. He believed that creation obeyed him because of his identity as a Ndrukpa the first inhabitants of the place, the land originally belonged to the Ndrukpa and that the gods heard him on behalf of the people of West Nile (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 56). To date, the Ndrukpa believe that they communicate with the environment and understand each other through indigenous spirituality and mediums.

The Ndrukpa perform different types of rituals depending on the purpose. For instance, there are war rituals in which charms are made from a concoction of herbs and then sprinkled on the fighters to give them the protection and courage to attack the enemy. From this point of the ritual, the Ndrukpa will see the enemies as animals and will kill them. It was believed that once the war ritual was performed on the fighters, they would not be injured by the enemies’ weapons and even if a Ndrukpa was attacked using a panga knife, it would not hurt him. While the men are at war, the women would stay home bare-chested, they neither pound cassava, nor make fire as part of the war ritual. Therefore, in situations of being attacked by other tribes, they use herbal medicine for protection (Interview 17 December, 2024).

Spirituality was used as a source of protection against disease or attacks. Objects used for healing and protection are both herbal and artefacts. The Ndrukpa family or clan priest would consult the gods in case of sickness or misfortunes and the gods would direct and guide them to herbal medicine for treating the sickness or averting the misfortune (Interview 17 December, 2024).

A respondent observed that there existed charms for personal or home protection. *Sira* the horn of an animal was a source of protection and a tool for communication. It is like a whistle. It is blown to notify people around of a danger or assembly. It is believed that when *Sira* is used to draw a circle around a person, the enemies will not see him. ‘Similarly, when I use *Sira* to draw a circle around my house when an enemy comes in the night, he will find a forest,’ (Interview 17 December, 2024).

The Ndrukpa are known for having strong mystical spiritual powers called *Ambaya* which the Alur and Kebu did not have. The *Ambaya* dance ritual is performed to maintain a peaceful dance, otherwise, a violent conflict would break out. *Ambaya* ritual contests were often organised which included making fire on a grass-thatched hut without the house catching fire (Alidri et al., 2024). *The Ambaya* mystical power is not a hereditary spirit and therefore can be passed to any person who believes in it. The *Ambaya* is used as a cultural dance ritual. The Alur often invite the indigenous Ndrukpa to perform the *Ambaya* ritual during the *Agwara* dance; a side-blown trumpet with a set of tall instruments played on ordinary occasions and there are other sets of short trumpets which are part of the royal regalia (Wachsmann, K. P., 1953, p. 53). Before the dance, the Ndrukpa *Ambaya* is performed. The ritualist chants the name of women to come and meet the men and get married. Similarly, during planting season, they chant for good rains, sunshine, and for good yield. *Ambaya* is used to neutralize misfortunes and disrupt decisions to inflict strong punishment on an individual. In the case of a court case, an *Ambaya* ritual is performed to influence judgment made to favour the person on behalf of whom the ritual is performed. *Ambaya* rituals are also performed during wartime to weaken the enemy forces (Interview 17 December, 2024).

According to the Ndrukpa oral tradition, the origin of *Ambaya* was traced to a woman who had gone to weed her cassava garden. She had a baby whom she laid under a tree shade as she worked. However,

later when she had gone to check on the baby, it had disappeared and could not be found. After two months, the baby would appear when the children were playing in the homestead. He would join the children but when elders arrive home from the garden, the baby would disappear. When grown up, this child one day came out and declared his identity. This was at a time when there were hostilities between the Ndrukpa and advancing hostile groups such as the Bagungu and Bahema who had joined hands to fight the Ndrukpa people. With him, he had brought a charm to neutralize the hostile communities in the Congo. The Ndrukpa fought using an arrow called the *Muthali* which was believed to have supernatural powers. It was believed that one *Muthali* would kill up to 100 people. The arrow would be dipped in the charm concoction and used to shoot a target. The narrative reported that once the arrow was released to hit its target, it would move to kill 100 people and then return to the point where the person who shot it was. To avoid being hurt by the *Muthali* on return, the person had to change his position. The person will be given another charm to neutralize the power of the *Muthali* arrow and in case he is injured by the returning arrow, a concoction would be used to treat him. Young able-bodied men were sent to the war front to instil in them their responsibility to protect the family, clan and kingdom (Interview 17 December, 2024).

Ndrukpa spirituality is unique to their culture, identity and environment and young people have a strong belief in the Ndrukpa spirituality. The community, families, young people and children practice and follow Ndrukpa spirituality. It is organically introduced to them from childhood in the form of custom, practice and belief. When a woman is married to a Ndrukpa family, she is introduced to learn and follow the Ndrukpa form of spirituality. The gods and spirits were consulted and the gods and spirits in turn would direct the Ndrukpa on how to handle the situation.

Ndrukpa Healing

Healing among the Ndrukpa people is considered a divine process (Alidri et al., 2024). Ndrukpa people perform a variety of rituals as part of the process to enhance healing. The clan leaders and royal councils noted that the ancestral spirits still exist and speak. When a family or clan member commits an abomination such as incest or murder a cleansing ritual is performed. The cleansing is done by a high priest (Field interview: Ndrukpa youth, 10th February 2023). Such abomination affects a person's health which takes the form of a relationship with the gods, spirits, the living, and living dead. As noted by Egnew, T. R. (2005), healing involves achieving or acquiring wholeness as a person, and to be whole again "is to be in relationship with yourself, your body, with the culture and significant others. Wholeness of personhood involves physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual aspects of human experience (Egnew, T. R. 2005, p. 257). Healing, therefore, has a reconciliatory and holistic connotation with the spiritual and physical.

Ndrukpa Indigenous Knowledge in Medicinal Herb

Indigenous knowledge, the creative practical knowledge used to solve life challenges, was developed through socio-environmental experience. It was based on established cultural norms, values, beliefs, customs, and practices passed through generations. Indigenous knowledge is part of a people's traditional knowledge system (Agatha, 2016, p. 1). Knowledge is a body of systematic thinking about a subject matter (Fox, 1999, p. 2). It involves beliefs, ideas, practice and skills. Therefore, indigenous knowledge is the advanced knowledge systems highly specific to a people, culture, local environments and ecosystems.

The Ndrukpa believe in traditional healing. This knowledge is mostly hereditary and follows family lineage: if there was any traditional healer in the lineage, it was possible that another traditional

healer would emerge from the lineage. The knowledge is passed when the senior traditional healer starts working with one of his children as an assistant and by the time of his/her death, the healing power is transmitted to the younger person who takes over the full responsibility of the deceased parent and continues to serve the community (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 52).

Ndrukpa people are known for their knowledge of local medicinal herbs for the prevention and treatment of diseases. Treatment, healing, and spirituality are to restore health and well-being. The Ndrukpa are known medicine people who use various herbs for different diseases. Ndrukpa land both in the Congo and Uganda is rich in herbal plants found in the natural vegetative covers and the Lendu Forest Reserve planted in 1948. The forest provides a habitat for the various species of herbs for different diseases (Alidri et al., 2024). Forest resources have been central to religious customs, mythology and folklore. These symbolic or social-cultural values remain important today in nearly all communities worldwide. The cultural setting greatly influences the way in which local people perceive their natural environment and their relationship to that environment.

The Ndrukpa are known for their traditional knowledge of treatment, herbal medicine and healing. The Ndrukpa have medicine persons with deep herbal medicine and healing knowledge. This knowledge is hereditary and is passed along family lineages through apprenticeship. A particular person with divine knowledge and spirituality performs the treatment. The knowledge is passed by elders from generation to generation. The medicine men have to be approved by the elders who are the custodians of culture and indigenous knowledge. It is believed that the gods and spirits rely on the approval of the elders of the person chosen to be a medicine man or ritual priest. With this approval comes the indigenous authority which is not challenged unless used for selfish motives.

A traditional healer in the family will mentor a child who is fast in learning and identifying herbal plants and remembering their names and herbal values. Often such a child adheres to the cultural values, beliefs and practices, and exhibits a high level of confidentiality. The knowledge is passed when the traditional healer starts working with the child who assists in administering the herbal treatment. By the time the medicine person gets old, weak, or dies, the healing power would have been acquired or transmitted to the younger person who fully takes over the responsibility of the deceased parent and continues to serve the community. The Lendu forest was first planted between 1948 and the 1950s and the second phase was planted in the 1970s now the third phase is being planted providing a habitat for various species of herbs for curing different diseases.

The Ndrukpa administer herbal treatment for sicknesses such as cough and flu which is treated using fresh and soft Eucalyptus leaves mixed with guava leaves. The leaves are boiled and drunk, and some are used for steaming the patient. Fresh wounds are treated using the Black Jack plant (*Biden pilosa*) which is used as iodine to stop and heal bleeding wounds. Herbs are used for treating fever, headache, and abdominal pain. The Ndrukpa uses the bitter African tropical cinchona plant – djukpa in Ndrukpa and Kanja in Alur to make quinine to treat fever, headache, and abdominal pain. The Ndrukpa people use herbs to treat chickenpox by rubbing it on the body. It is believed that healing takes three days and the body gets well. (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 52 and Interview: Royal Council, 23 Feb. 2023).

Ndrukpa had bone experts whom this study describes as ‘indigenous orthopedists’; who treated fractured bones by massaging using special herbal medicine which would align the bones and enhance their healing to restore them to their original state and function. The Queen Mother acknowledged that whereas there were medicinal herbs for treating fractured bones, there also existed individuals who

naturally had skills for treating specialised cases like fractures and sprains. Such gifts were considered supernatural and were not meant for everyone. The community had knowledge of who had healing powers. Responding to the question on how indigenous orthopaedic knowledge was acquired, an elder noted that it is passed on to a family member supernaturally. He also reported that when an indigenous healer with knowledge of bone treatment massaged his client, such a client when keen could acquire the orthopaedic powers to treat.

Ndrukpa Perspective of Death

In the situation where healing does not take place and death occurs, it is given various interpretations. Death among the Ndrukpa is attributed to different beliefs. It is sometimes believed to be a form of punishment by the gods for sins committed (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 44). This occurs when the relational healing and reconciliation with the gods, spirits, living dead and the living does not materialize. Mzee Kelokpa, the traditional priest, noted that when death happens, it is a sign that something wrong has happened in the clan. Death is sometimes attributed to the actions of sorcerers, witches and wizards who sacrifice humans to keep their supernatural power. Death is perceived as a natural way of transiting to the new world. The Ndrukpa strongly believe in the living dead and life after death, and that in death, the dead transit to live in the spiritual world. When a Ndrukpa dies, death is treated differently depending on the age, sex and position of the deceased in the community. When an elderly person dies, for example, he or she will join ancestors and connect the living with the spiritual world. When a young or unmarried man dies, people mourn because they consider that he had died before having his own child as his replacement. When a married man who had children dies, it is believed that he still lives through his children. It is considered a great generational loss when a child dies because children are considered the future of the clan and community. When a person dies, the family consults spirit mediums for the cause of

death. The dead are buried next to the home, as they continue to be recognized as part of the family. The body is buried with the head turned southward signifying that the Ndrukpa are still moving south, following their brothers who went ahead of them in the Congo (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, p. 46).

After the burial of an elder, a shrine is built on the veranda of his eldest son or another son who believes in the tradition. This is to show that the dead is still a family member. On an agreed day, a ritual is performed to invoke and bring the spirit of the dead to the shrine. A goat is slaughtered, food is cooked and the priest sings a song to call the spirit of the dead until it possesses the priest or another member of the clan. The priest then places the food in the shrine, casts out the spirit and directs it to the shrine where sacrifices to the spirits will continue to be offered. Whenever there is a problem in the clan, the people bring white chicken for the priest to consult the spirits in the shrine. At the end of every month, a sacrifice is offered to the spirits at the shrine. The first harvests are taken to the shrine to seek the spirits' blessings. (Ndrukpa Kingdom, 2019, pp. 54-56).

Indigenous healing systems are linked to a permanent presence of ancestral forces without a time limit. Whereas medicinal plants and artefacts are tangible assets, the spiritual components of the forces remain intangible assets. Spirituality and healing within the ancestral system are cultural intellectual assets restricted in use to the initiated persons. Indigenous knowledge in medicine is secretive and is personal to the holder.

The spiritual, natural and social worlds are integrated, with human and non-human beings as part of the system and processes. There exists a structure of divinity, secrecy and control over knowledge. The elders have a duty to custodianship and care to keep indigenous knowledge, and protect, and preserve the ancestral health knowledge and system. Indigenous healing systems are linked to a permanent presence of ancestral forces without a

time limit. Whereas medicinal plants are the tangible assets, the spiritual components of the forces remain the intangible assets. For a social health system to be able to survive and cope with pandemics, science, Christianity and modernity, it has to have stability of structure and mechanisms to deal with social changes.

However, emergent key insights on the limitation of the study were noted. The absence of a documented history of the Ndrukpa makes it a problem to get information on their distant past, spirituality, herbal medicine and healing. Ndrukpa indigenous knowledge is stored in memory and practice by elders regarded as the custodians of knowledge in the kingdom. Relying on oral tradition, oral history, myths and taboos characterized by memory loss and biases often obscured the significance of local knowledge generated by indigenous ethnic communities. This triggers the ontological question of the explicit specification of a conceptualization with a systematic account of the existence and representation of knowledge (Gruber, T. R. 1993, p.199). This is further complicated by the fact that the actors in local and Western science knowledge may use different representation languages and systems (ibid, p. 200). The fetishization and marketization of knowledge in the neo-liberal global knowledge economy relegates indigenous knowledge to a lower rank. Whereas it was thought this study was romanticizing indigenous communities, this paper acknowledges that the peoples' experiences, knowledge and practices have fostered more life and meaning of the world often displaced by mainstream Western knowledge. Diverse voices emerging from the indigenous knowledge narrative encounters, and critical knowledge politics consistently point to the critical importance of cultivating ontological ethics in generating knowledge grounded in the Western science model. Whereas the Ontological assertion of one philosopher can be radically different from those of others, totally contradictory or completely unconnected as noted by Rawnsley (1998, p. 2), it

should not devalue other knowledge. This study suggests future research into indigenous herbal and healing knowledge and practices to explore their pharmaceutical and scientific medicinal value and practices. Studying herbal medicinal knowledge, especially the use of ethnomedicinal plants in indigenous communities could open up grey areas of research.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous knowledge has a place in academia and the 21st-century modern society. It calls for indigeneity, hybridity of healing and indigenous knowledge in medicine and healing as a strategy to decolonize and emancipate indigenous knowledge. The use of indigeneity and hybridity in spirituality, healing and indigenous knowledge in medicine is not to romanticize culture and spirituality but rather view them as a promotion of the notion 'African solution to African problem' and a strategy for the development of structured and informed by local knowledge, resources and identities. Through hybridity, indigenous and local knowledge is given value.

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