

The Ghanaian (Akan) View of Health

Dear Friends,

This article is an introduction into a new series touching on health. I thought this might be interesting to you since globally we all (humankind) are confronted daily with issues of health and longevity. Health is the foundation on which life in every way balances. The thinking and approaches adopted by the Akan (the ethnic group of Akrampa), and the Ghanaian, for that matter, are universally not different, in matters of health. There are significant differences in how modern Ghanaian Christians and non-Christians view health. In this article I will talk about the traditional customs and beliefs on health.

The typical Akan - even the contemporary, educated - view health with a unitary philosophy, that everything is part of the whole. Health is very integrated. The Akan understands health as not just about the proper functioning of bodily organs. It goes beyond that in the sense that good health for the African consists of mental, physical, spiritual and emotional stability [of] oneself, family members and the community. This view comes from the understanding of what Traditional African Religion, its beliefs and practices, are all about. African Traditional Religion (ATR) holds the view that the body is merely a container of the essence: soul and spirit, hence what touches the body also touches the soul and spirit of man.

In view of the above, traditional medicine has at its base a deep belief in the interaction between the spiritual and physical well-being of people. It is also imperative to emphasize that good health also includes the viewing of an individual as a collective member of the community. According to one very influential African Philosopher (John Mbiti), 'Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to [the] whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.'

A very important aspect of the Akan view of good health is the connection or part that relation with the ancestors plays in any Akan (African). It is generally believed that good health is understood in terms of the relationship with one's ancestors. Health amongst Africans is not based merely on how it affects the living, because it is of paramount importance that the ancestors stay healthy so that they can protect the living.

Because life in African Traditional Religion is based on maintaining the balance between the visible and invisible world, it is generally believed that there are several

ways to explain or understand the causes of disease.

This is the basic concept that guides the diagnoses of any ailment and the particular treatment that may be applied to remedy it. In this regard, Akans are of the view that Western Medicine, for all its worth, cannot without other local applications supporting the process, completely solve or remedy the ailment. This led to the processes employed in the treatment of diseases involving traditional sources, the local fetishes, local herbalists, and also the churches (then referred to as 'spiritual churches') becoming a part of the process. The process of healing most of the time begins with consulting the ancestors as to the cause of the disease and to seek their help in diagnosing it. Then the appropriate medication will be applied or employed.

In the next article I will tell you more about the treatment of disease in Ghana, and how people of different faiths approach medicine.

Blessings, Pastor Ben