

Editorial

Mental Illness in the Context of Witchcraft and Bewitching. A South African Perspective: Voices from Communities

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ABSTRACT

The paper substantiates its argument with available statistics. It looks into the poignant narrative of mental illness versus being bewitched or witchcraft in Black African culture in South Africa. The writer meticulously explores her childhood nostalgic perceptions and views as well as societal views about mental illness. The writer continues to delineate on how her own perceptions and views evolved over the years, through a professional milestone as a social worker practicing in the helping profession. She concludes by categorically stating that "a vibrant, self-sustaining and widely accepted and universal views and perceptions about mental illness and

the belief that prayer can heal mental illness amongst Africans in South Africa" is an essential precondition of deliberating with the view to finding universal held belief about these issues by South Africans and the World at large. She goes a step further to providing cutting edge recommendations in terms of creating synergy between believing in professional therapy, witchcraft and prayer. Lastly, she urges government to invest sufficient funds to create an enabling environment to raise more awareness around the narrative of mental illness, witchcraft and being bewitched.

Editorial

South Africa is currently grappling with the news of 36 psychiatric patients who died in the hands of government within a short space of time after they were removed from a credible mental institution. The move did not only bring embarrassment to government, but it brought immense pain to families and non-governmental organizations dealing with psychiatric patients. More than 17 million people in South Africa are believed to be dealing with mental health issues. One third of all South Africans have mental illnesses - and 75% of them will not get any kind of help <http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2014/07/07/one-in-three-south-africans-suffer-from-mental-illness> (Accessed on 2015/06.23).

From 2010, I have worked as a telephone counsellor and an on-site affiliate at the same time in the field of behavioural health. I had the privilege of addressing the public on mental illness and its causes. I was not only confronted with the public who stared at me as I was presenting, but I observed helplessly at people's total lack of insight, let alone lack of knowledge about mental illness. For as long as I remember, during my childhood, I grew up with the perception that when there are issues relating to one's mental status, there was an element of witchcraft. I was not lectured about this perception, but the held view in Society of mental illness being associated with witchcraft found strong resonance to me and was deeply embedded in my mind as I continue to witness young men and women capable of life prospects, being under the witchcraft possessiveness, in my mind off course. (When I saw persons who were mentally ill, I laughed at them because there was a strong perception and the view that they were either bewitched or cursed for sins the Society does not know. My parents were staunch Christians, I and my siblings attended church at traditional Christian Church, one that preached Salvation and repentance, a church which viewed mental health differently then, a church which views appeasing ancestors as the greatest sin than adultery. All these

views and perceptions created a certain stigma to me about people who had mental disability. Observations and experiences from the ground overwhelmingly supported the narrative of belief that mental illness exist because of a variety of conditions which are all related to stigma from people who are functionally illiterate to professionals. The perception of evidence of mental illness, personality disorder never crossed my mind because my elders never held that perception and view. In retrospect I realized that I was misinformed and the environment in which I grew up did not inculcate education on mental illness but was more obsessed with witchcraft.

Voices from Communities on the Ground

In my journey as a social worker, I have heard stories ranging from linking mental illness with witchcraft in the case of a learner who is bright and clever at school, where it all began with another learner who stole learner's ball pen or a book, then that was the beginning of mental illness, to the woman whose mother in law bewitched her because of jealousy. The stories are many and endless. These stories call for action to be intensified in educating people that mental illness exist and has nothing to do with witchcraft or being bewitched.

How my perception about Mental Illness in Black South Africans has evolved over the years?

Over the last 40 years I have heard that a black person who has mental illness has been bewitched. That perception still holds amongst Black South Africans, to some at least. I held a strong view that a person is bewitched notwithstanding the fact that there could be neurotransmitters which may have an effect on someone's mental state. It was until I took interest in studying advance Psychology that intellectually my thinking, perception and reasoning took a complete different turn. Where one does draw a red line, between mental illness and being bewitched? It is incumbent on all of us especially Black South Africans to dispel the myths about being bewitched and take interest on

Mental Health Issues [1,2]. The far reaching recommendations are as follows:

Professional intervention should be sought at least even when a person harbours thoughts that someone has been bewitched. Who knows the two could gel together at least to those who still hold that strong view. Should this subject be open for intensive debate?.

Non- governmental organisations and government need to make the narrative of the subject of mental illness a priority. Though strides have been made as the WHO reports asserts “In addition to legislative and financial support, there are formal collaborations between the government department responsible for mental health and other departments/agencies from a range of sectors in most provinces” It may not be sufficient to dispel the stigma attached to mental illness, WHO Aims Report on Mental Health System In South Africa (Cape Town, South Africa September 2007).

Government will need to have sufficient financing of mental health services available “The percentage of government health department expenditure devoted to mental health is not known at a national level” (WHO Aims Report on Mental Health System In South Africa (Cape Town, South Africa September 2007).

REFERENCES

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