

**CULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF MENTAL HEALTH AND
PSYCHOTHERAPY AMONG AFRICANS IN *PETIT PIMENT* AND
L'APPEL DES ARÈNES.**

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Abstract

Being well-clothed or physically fit does not define the mental stability or wellbeing of a person. Lots of psychologically imbalance has derailed to madness and increased the number of mad people roaming the African streets.

One wonders if there is no proper specialized treatment for the citizens. This study examined the interpretation and response of Africans towards mental disorder and Psychotherapy in Sub-Saharan region through selected novels *Petit Piment* by Alain Mabanckou and *L'appel des Arènes* by Aminata Sow Fall. Excerpts from the selected novels, articles in academic and non-academic journals and an interview served as data for the study. The societies of the two selected francophone African novels, in addition to an anglophone country were considered in the course of the research: Democratic Republic of Congo (Kinshasa), Republic of Congo (Brazaville), Senegal and Nigeria. It was discovered that African culture has negative influence on mental health treatments as stigmatization, cultural belief, old and inadequate psychiatric facilities, hospital, equipment and medical personnel, low level of mental state awareness, long distance to access psychiatric hospital or clinic and poverty stand as obstacles to better mental disorder treatments and healing. The study recommends that sensitization and re-orientation on early detection of psychological problems, orthodox treatment, renovations of facilities, employment of more manpower in the mental health sector and prioritization of children wellbeing should be considered.

Keywords: Mental health, culture, psychotherapy, wellbeing.

Résumé

Le fait d'être bien habillé ou en bonne forme physique ne définit pas la stabilité mentale ou le bien-être d'une personne. De nombreux déséquilibres psychologiques ont conduit à la folie et augmenté le nombre de personnes atteintes de troubles mentaux errant dans les rues africaines. On peut se demander s'il n'existe pas de traitement spécialisé adapté pour les citoyens. Cette étude a examiné l'interprétation et la réaction des Africains à l'égard des troubles mentaux et de la psychothérapie dans la région subsaharienne à travers deux romans sélectionnés, *Petit Piment* d'Alain Mabanckou et *L'appel des Arènes* d'Aminata Sow Fall. Des extraits des romans sélectionnés, des articles publiés dans des revues universitaires et non universitaires ainsi qu'une interview ont servi de données pour cette étude. Les sociétés des deux romans africains francophones sélectionnés, ainsi que celles d'un pays anglophone, ont été prises en compte dans le cadre de cette recherche: la République démocratique du Congo (Kinshasa), la République du Congo (Brazzaville), le Sénégal et le Nigeria. Il a été découvert que la culture africaine a une influence négative sur les traitements de santé mentale, car la stigmatisation, les croyances culturelles, les installations psychiatriques anciennes et inadéquates, les hôpitaux, les équipements et le personnel

médical, le faible niveau de sensibilisation à la santé mentale, la distance à parcourir pour accéder à un hôpital ou une clinique psychiatrique et la pauvreté constituent des obstacles à l'amélioration des traitements et à la guérison des troubles mentaux. L'étude recommande d'envisager une sensibilisation et une ré-orientation vers le dépistage précoce des problèmes psychologiques, les traitements orthodoxes, la rénovation des installations, l'emploi de davantage de main-d'œuvre dans le secteur de la santé mentale et la priorité accordée au bien-être des enfants.

Mots clés: Santé mentale, culture, psychothérapie, bien-être.

Introduction

It is the responsibility of the government to maintain order, ensure good health and protect its citizens, particularly vulnerable populations like children. As the future of the society, children require a safe and nurturing environment to grow and thrive (Karimi *et al*, 2024). In line with this, the World Health Organization (WHO) described health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity”. This means that the wellbeing of a person is not the absence of diseases and infirmity alone, but a good complete physical, mental and social state.

In addition, the United Nations' Convention (UN) in 1989 on the Rights of the Child, emphasizes essential rights and this includes: The right to life and survival, the right to formal education and personal development, the right to good health and access to healthcare, the right to shelter and a safe living environment, the right to protection from harm, abuse, and exploitation so that children can grow up sane and become productive adult citizens in the society. As WHO and UN are trying to ensure the wellbeing of people, the immediate environment are to secure excellent interpretation of the guiding rules. The common Yoruba adage “ilera lògùn orò” meaning ‘health is wealth’ explained the ideology of Africans’ existential health to live a meaningful life which they get through their language, culture, communal living and traditions that encourage them to respect and value the norms of the society ([Heidegger, 1957](#)). Equally, [DeMarinis \(2008\)](#) confirmed in her concept of existential health to be participating in meaning-making systems, including those of spirituality and religion, and the ways of relating to rituals and symbolic expressions that are part of such systems. One cannot but question an effective treatment of mental or psychological illness.

Governments, working with parents and taking on parental responsibilities, when necessary, are responsible for ensuring that these rights are upheld. This includes implementing policies and laws that safeguard children's wellbeing,

providing support services for families, and holding accountable those who violate children's rights. By prioritizing children's welfare, governments can build a stronger and better society for all.

This study examined the responses and treatments of Africans towards mental health in Sub-Saharan Africa through selected novels *Petit Piment* by Alain Mabanckou and *L'appel des Arènes* by Aminata Sow Fall. Excerpts from the selected novels, articles in academic and non-academic journals and interview served as data for the study. The plot milieu of the selected francophone African novels in addition with an anglophone country experience as regard the subject matter were considered in the course of the research: Democratic Republic of Congo (Kinshasa), Republic of Congo (Brazaville), Senegal and Nigeria.

Discussion

It was discovered in the Sub-Saharan region that some of these established human rights for children are not properly exercised especially at the orphanage or foster homes. Mabanckou, in his novel *Petit Piment* described the stark transformation that occurred in the state orphanage in Congo after the departure of the Europeans. One can note the change in curriculum that drastically narrowed to focus solely on politics, the parenting style shifts from democratic to authoritarian, the children's access to quality medical care, including psychological support, is severely limited. Nepotism becomes rampant, with unqualified family members of the President being appointed to leadership positions and jobs. This can be addressed to the real-life event in 1971, when former President Mobutu Sese Seko changed the currency from Congo Franc to Zaïre in a quest to return the authenticity of the country. His regime registered a lot of political and economy instability and by his authoritarian way of ruling, he took over lots of companies and industries from the Europeans and fixed his unqualified family members to manage the industries which later folded up due to mismanagement and misappropriation of funds by the unqualified personnel in charge (Cordell *et al*, 2025).

As documented in *Petit Piment* these changes have a profoundly disturbing impact on the children's mental wellbeing, leaving lasting scars as seen in the Characters, Moïse, Bonaventure and the twins. In 2024, an interview with a female Congolese named Madame Ngoil who visited a particular orphanage in D. R. Congo described the state of the children as being pathetic. She had to intervene in taking a neglected sick child whose temperature was on the high side to the hospital for proper treatment. This can propel danger in the future, if state control over children's welfare and wellbeing is unchecked. It is

important to prioritize children's welfare to avert adult mental disorder like isolation, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder that are caused by Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN) and Childhood Physical Neglect (CPN) (Andrew, 2024).

Furthermore, in *Petit Piment*, a striking observation reveals that under colonial administration, orphanages seem to have fewer instances of children's psychological problems. This could be attributed to various factors such as more structured systems, better-trained staff, or more resources. However, with the change in power and the President's appointment of new unqualified directors, the situation deteriorated significantly. The children began to experience increased stress, anxiety, and behavioural issues, ultimately leading some to escape from the orphanage. This drastic change highlights significant challenges in government's approach to mental health care and child welfare. The hiring of underqualified staff to care for vulnerable children contributes to the problems, as these individuals often lack the necessary skills and training to provide adequate support. The incompetence of these caregivers, including that of the director, promotes rebellion, anxiety, and behavioural issues among the children.

Moreover, nepotism that seems to be at play, with appointments based on family ties rather than merit, further exacerbates the issue. Dieudonné, proud of their patronymic, inherited Bayaka from the director's paternal line, they look down on everyone even though they obtain their positions by the sole grace of their uncle and have no experience in the education of children whom they consider to be cattle.

Dieudonné, fier de leur patronyme hérité de la ligne paternelle du directeur, ils prenaient tout le monde de haut alors a qu'ils avaient obtenu leur poste par la seule grâce de leur oncle et n'avaient aucune expérience dans l'éducation des enfants qu'ils considéraient comme de (bétail *Petit Piment*. p.15)

This raises important questions about the prioritisation of children's welfare and the need for qualified, compassionate care. It also underscores the importance of investing in well-trained staff and evidence-based practices to support the mental health, care and wellbeing of children.

There is no plan for psychological therapy or mental health treatment to assist the mentally-disordered children. This can be noted in characters like

Bonaventure and Moïse. The novels reveals that the government only catches the petty thieves in the market or on the street and sends them to prison without proper investigation let alone rehabilitation in order to treat the cause (trauma) of their criminal act (*Petit Piment* p: 189).

Petit Piment shows that people in Africa, except the medical personnel, cannot identify chronic psychological problems that have reached a state of madness but find it difficult to detect minor mental issue. Moïse and Bonaventure were never seen as mentally disordered persons until Moïse became mad and was arrested but was saved by his neighbour who volunteered to take him to a psychologist for consultation. Moïse, Bonaventure's childhood friend, was able to recognize him in their forties because of his habit of staying at the window side to draw every airplane that passes the orphanage and expecting the aircraft to bring his biological parent to take him away from the orphanage. Bonaventure case can be seen as psychological issue that was caused by traumatic situation that is caused by abandon or separation from parental affection. Ever since his only friend whom they were abandoned together almost at the same time at the orphanage gate escaped from the orphanage, he cut the bridge of communication with others and lived a lonely life. He was never taken for any form of psychological therapy or treatment. This confirms the low level of early detection of neuropsychological awareness and treatment. Even at the acute level of mental disorder that they can be identified; it was revealed that the characters don't like the whole memory of self-assessment questionnaire during treatment. *Petit Piment*. P: 194-196

I'm going to be frank with you: I think you need treatment. Your situation is no longer serious, it's desperate, very desperate... and he was going to sing this song to me for years as the memory problems changed my pace and I walked zigzagging... (p: 182)

Petit Piment, je vais être franc avec toi: je crois que tu dois te soigner. Ta situation n'est plus grave, elle est désespérée, très désespérée... et il allait me chanter cette ritournelle durant des années alors que les trouble du mémoire modifiaient mon allure et que je marchais en zigzaguant... *Petit Piment* (p. 182).

He refuses to continue psychiatric therapy when he loses his sanity which is caused by the sudden separation from his unofficially adopted mother. He becomes greatly traumatised. His friend introduces him to a psychiatrist who

would cure him of his mental illness, but he was never in support of the orthodox medicine (*Petit Piment*. p: 194-196). It was noted that Africans believe in traditional healing as an effective treatment for psychological problems and that madness is a spiritual affliction rather than biomedical formulation of psychological disorder hence the belief of curing madness by the traditional healer (Ogunwale *et al* 2023). Mabanckou also reveals this ideology through Moïse whose friend was advising to visit the traditional healer after he refused and discontinued the psychotherapy treatment due to his uncooperative attitude towards the treatment.

“The good thing is that this guy is only strong when someone has a scolopendre in his head. Only a traditional healer could go digging into your memory and put things right.” *Petit Piment* p. 208.

Chose bien il Ce type n'est fort que lorsque quelqu'un a une scolopendre dans la tête. Or toi ce n'est pas la scolopendre qui est dedans, c'est autre chose, il n'y a qu'un guérisseur traditionnel qui pourrait aller fouiller dans ta mémoire remettre les faut *Petit Piment*. p.208.

Thirthalli *et al* (2016) confirmed Ogunwale *et al*'s submission (2023) in his work that a revealed the substantial number of people with mental illness in China and India combine traditional, complementary and alternative medicine, or alongside with biomedical for cost, cultural poor facilities, inadequate healthcare personnel, poor facilities and spiritual reasons. Ogunwale *et al* (2023) identified mental health stigmatization as obstacles to mental disorder healing in Nigeria and in other African countries, this can be related to the condition of characters in *Petit Piment* and in the characters presented in the novel *L'appel des Arènes*, Diattou, Nalla's mother, exhibits a negative attitude towards psychological treatment, largely due to the nature of the medical memory assessment, numerous questions that are being asked during therapy sessions.

Poor kids, the questions they're asked are nonsense...do you love your father?... who's nicer, your father or your mother?... are you happy to have brothers and sisters...senseless questions really. No, my son will never be a victim of this mental inquisition... (*l'Appel des arènes* p. 14.)

Pauvregosses, disait-elle, les questions qu'on leur pose : des sotties...aimes-tu ton père?... qui est plus

gentil, de ton père ou ta mère ?... Es-tu content d'avoir des frères et sœurs...questions insensées à vrais dire. Non, mon fils ne sera jamais une victime de cette inquisition mentale... (*l'Appel des arènes* p. 14).

Moïse as an adult, did not also support the medical memory evaluation that he was being subjected to by the psychologist and on that note, he refused to cooperate with the psychiatrist or respect his prescription. This later led to his eviction from the mental treatment (*Petit Piment* pp. 198-200).

Diattou, a medical personnel, who has an opportunity to work with a psychologist, does not encourage psychological treatment/therapy because of the method of treatment and cultural belief. Africans often take a psychological patient for a crazy person and this brings a lot of shame, stigmatization to both the patient and the family and can cause long term or even life time destruction on one's personality that can prevent the patient from finding a spouse in the future and also from socialising with others.

And Diattou also imagines what his acquaintances and neighbours would say...the neighbours especially...they would be happy to declare that his son was not enjoying all his faculties *L'Appel des arènes* pp.14-15

Et Diattou de s'imaginer aussi tout ce que diraient les connaissances et les voisins...les voisines surtout...elles seraient heureuses de décréter que son fils ne jouit pas de toutes ses facultés *L'Appel des Arènes* pp.14-15

Petit Piment 2005 also reveals some African belief that mental disorder is as a result of negative energy or evil spirit and that mental healing lies in the hands of the traditional healer. This was revealed when Moïse was advised to consult a traditional healer for his mental condition.

This person is only strong when someone has a centipede in their head, but you don't have a centipede in your head, you have something else. Only a traditional healer could rummage through your memory and put things back in order... But with the certainty that I had to perform the final act, chase away the spirits that had taken refuge in my body in order to corrupt my memory, those spirits that I had to

cast into the depths of Tchinouka so that they would disappear forever... (*Petit Piment* pp. 208 – 226)

Ce types n'est que fort que lorsque quelqu'un a un scolopendre dans la tête. Or toi c'est pas la scolopendre qui est dedans, c'est autre chose, il n'y a qu'un guérisseur traditionnel qui pourrait aller fouiller dans ta mémoire et remettre les choses bien comme il faut... Mais avec la certitude qu'il me fallait exécuter le dernier acte, chasser en moi ce qui s'étaient réfugiés dans mon corps au point de corrompre ma mémoire, ces esprits que je devais balancer dans les profondeurs de la Tchinouka pour qu'ils disparaissent à jamais, ... (*Petit Piment* pp. 208 – 226)

In an interview session with a psychiatrist on the 11th of December, 2025 at the Psychiatrist Clinic, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria, the psychiatrist, Dr Soetan, pointed out that, majority of his patients had visited one spiritualist or traditional healer before coming to the hospital. He observed in the patient and the patient's relatives the culture and system of interpreting psychological problem as spiritual attack. Stigmatization is also a common tradition that prevents patients from visiting the hospital early or frequently. He equally identified long distance and financial incapacity to buy prescribed medication and medical test as common obstacles to early medical consultation of mental health cases. On the part of the State, the doctor highlighted inadequate medical personnel (psychologist, psychiatrist, nurses and doctors), limited and old facilities and amenities as problems hindering better psychiatric treatments. It was revealed that they only run an outpatient clinic and refer cases that need admission to the first and the best among the fourteen (federal and state) neuropsychiatric hospitals in Nigeria. Meanwhile, the Psychiatrist School of Nursing, Aro introduced ante-natal clinic in the mental specialist hospital as a measure to reduce stigmatization on their patients (Provost SPNA, 2025).

Conclusion

The study was able to identify some African culture and tradition and other factors as some of the major problems hindering, bedeviling successful mental treatment in the Sub-Saharan Africa region. These are identified as stigmatizations, cultural or traditional belief of misinterpreting psycho issue as spiritual attack which prevents people from consulting the hospital early enough for treatment, out dated and limited psychiatric amenities and hospital,

and understaff of medical personnel, contribute to low success of psychotherapy and other mental treatments. Low level of awareness on early mental health, long distance to access psychiatric hospital or clinic, financial incapacity to meet up with the proper treatment are obstacles identified with mental health treatment. It's is also discovered that the Sub-Saharan Africa have similar problems in mental health treatment.

It was also discovered that the mental issue is not limited to adult alone and it can be provoked from the upbringing experience as seen in Nalla, Moïse and Bonaventure. Also, the welfare and wellbeing of children, especially those at the orphanage are not up to measure according to the established children human rights.

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