Zimbabwean spirit mediums’ guidance and counselling role

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Abstract

Although not a subject widely discussed by mainstream guidance and counselling theorists, the guidance and counselling role of women spirit mediums has recently received increased attention in Zimbabwe. The increased interest in the guidance and counselling role played by the spirit mediums in contemporary Zimbabwe is twofold. Firstly, the interest has been instigated by the need to understand the nature of guidance and counselling offered by women spirit mediums from the perspective of African religion. Secondly, there is also need to contextualise the guidance and counselling role played by the women spirit mediums within mainstream guidance and counselling theory and practice. This qualitative study investigated the guidance and counselling role played by the women spirit mediums. Research results revealed that women spirit mediums guidance and counselling role has not been adequately contextualised within the mainstream western-oriented guidance and counselling theory and practice. The study established that African societies have their own systems of guidance and counselling they rely on to navigate the challenges of life different from those of westerners who have developed the conventional models of guidance and counselling. It is recommended that the guidance and counselling services provided by the women spirit mediums be recognised within conventional guidance and counselling practice.

Key words: Guidance and counselling, counsellors, women spirit mediums, African cosmology, spirituality, psychotherapy

Introduction

Although not a subject broached by mainstream guidance and counselling theory and practice, the guidance and counselling role of African women spirit mediums (hereinafter referred to as women spirit mediums) has recently received increased attention in Zimbabwe (Moodley, Sutherland and Oulanova, 2008; Nickles, 2011; Mabvurira and Nyanguru, 2013). The increased interest in the guidance and counselling role played by the spirit mediums in contemporary Zimbabwe is twofold. Firstly, the interest has been ignited by the need to understand the nature of guidance and counselling offered by women spirit mediums from the perspective of African religion and spirituality. Secondly, there is need to contextualise the guidance and counselling role played by the women spirit mediums within conventional western oriented guidance and counselling theory and practice. There is also compelling need to acknowledge the role played by women spirit mediums in promoting the psychological wellness and wellbeing of individuals within African societies.

This paper deliberately focused on women spirit mediums at the exclusion of their male counterparts. Bringing to fore the contribution of female spirit mediums in guidance and counselling in Zimbabwe entails challenging...
institutionalised patriarchalism which tends to deny women their religious, spiritual, cultural rights and recognition. Cheater (1986) posits that arguably the most interesting and ambiguous role of authority occupied by women in the pre-colonial and post-colonial period is that of spirit mediumship. The role of women spirit mediums as counsellors was epitomised by Mbuya Nehanda Nyakasikana during the First Chimurenga of 1896. Nehanda Nyakasikana, through the spirit that possessed her, is said to have divinated military guidance and counselling to the Shona people (Chogugudza, 2012). Though Nehanda is the most well-known female spirit medium, there are many others like Mbuya Tangwena in modern day Zimbabwe effectively playing the guidance and counselling role in their respective communities.

Background to the problem

Women spirit mediums have played the guidance and counselling role in Zimbabwe for thousands of years yet that role has not been fully acknowledged and is neglected in conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice. According to Moodley and Palmer (2006) the role of women spirit mediums as counsellors is regarded as new phenomenon in conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice. This is because guidance and counselling offered by women spirit mediums when equated to conventional westernised guidance and counselling theory and practice are perceived to be worlds apart with different models of wellness and wellbeing operating within a different world view (Solomon and Wane, 2005). In this paper conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice refers to western oriented theories that guide the practice of guidance and counselling. Thus, neglect of the guidance and counselling offered by women spirit mediums in conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice has more to do with ignorance and western prejudice which regard western guidance and counselling practices as more superior and systemised than those of Africans (Moodley et al., 2008). However, recent trends show that conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice is grudgingly accepting African guidance and counselling practices and the central role that women spirit mediums play in those systems.

This paper seeks to explore the guidance and counselling role of women spirit mediums from the perspective of African religion and spirituality. Further, the paper endeavours to contextualise the guidance and counselling role of women spirit mediums in Zimbabwe within conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice.

Methodology

This study adopted the phenomenology research methodology rooted in the qualitative research paradigm. Creswell (2009) posits that the qualitative research paradigm advocates inquiry that addresses a social human problem, based on complex, everyday life experiences, and human interactions, conducted in a natural setting. According to Stewart and Mickunas (1974) phenomenology is reasoned inquiry that seeks to discover the inherent essences of appearance. Phenomenology is a descriptive study of how individuals experience a phenomenon from their own subjective viewpoint or perspective as opposed to the objectivity inherent in quantitative research (Lester, 1999). Thus the phenomenological case study research design tends to yield rich narrative descriptions which give an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. The use of the phenomenological case study research design in this study enabled the researcher to dig deep into the nature of guidance and counselling offered by women spirit mediums and this gave elevated insights of that...
guidance and counselling from the perspective of the women spirit mediums themselves and those who receive such guidance and counselling (Stewart and Mickunas, 1974). Given the uniqueness of the sample, the study selected the participants through the non-probability, purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling was preferred in this study as it enabled the researcher to select information rich cases (the women spirit mediums and their clients) for in-depth interviews. Five (5) women spirit mediums and 10 clients who had received guidance and counselling from spirit mediums were interviewed.

Theoretical Framework

Womanism

There is heavy reliance on womanism in this paper as a theoretical framework to interrogate the position of women spirit mediums as they play the guidance and counselling role in African societies. The term womanism derives from Alice Walker’s writing, *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*, which sought to describe the experiences and perspectives of African American women, based on their despised colour in the western world. According to Mobolanle-Ebuntuta (2009) womanism is the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural ways. Womanism has two main variants, Africana womanism purports to capture the experiences of the African women in the diaspora- and African womanism essentially highlights the experiences of the African women on the African continent.

This paper is rooted in African womanism because it is an ideology that seeks to address the struggles and aspirations of African women, through delineating the indigenous African women’s experiences, worldviews and perceptions (Mobolanle-Ebuntuta, 2009). For far too long the narration of spirit mediums have been masculine, glorifying the role of males such as Kaguvi, Mashayamombe, Mapondera, Mkwati and Chaminuka. African womanism debunks the myth that male spirit mediums play a more active role than their female counterparts with respect to social services such as guidance and counselling. Mwale (2002) contends that the ideology of African womanism basically unpacks and challenges the hegemony of patriarchy, which poses as the major impediment to the advancement of women. Thus African womanism theory seeks to understand the nature of gender inequalities by examining women’s social roles and experiences by seeking to promote women’s interests and at the same time recognising the centrality of the African family, motherhood and community in its discourse (Biri and Mapuranga, 2013). This paper has been inspired by the need to recognise the role of women spirit mediums as guidance and counsellors.

Review of Related Literature

Conceptualising guidance and counselling and the role of the counsellor

Understanding the guidance and counselling role of women spirit mediums requires an exploration of some of the definitions of guidance and counselling as given in existing literature. The terms guidance and counselling are widely used yet there are no universally accepted definitions of the words. In fact many different definitions exist pointing to different understanding of guidance and counselling. Though there has been a proliferation of the definitions of guidance and counselling over the years, it is noteworthy that these definitions share similar meanings. Literally, the meaning of the word guidance
derives from the root word to guide which means to direct, lead, inform or show the way (Makinde, 1993). According to Twambul (2011) guidance means to direct, pilot, manage, steer, aid, lead and assist. UNESCO (2000) defines guidance as a process, developmental in nature, by which an individual is assisted to understand, accept and use his or her abilities, aptitudes and interests and attitudinal patterns, in relation to his or her aspiration. According to Bakare (1996) guidance is a prescriptive or directive form of assistance given by a counsellor to a counselee to help the latter deal with their life challenges. From the foregoing definitions guidance can be understood to be a specialised service provided by counsellors that helps people to understand themselves in relation to their socio-cultural, economic and political environment. Thus guidance aims at building and strengthening the human character.

Modo (2008) defines counselling as that helping relationship between counsellor and counselee. According to Makinde (1993) the common meaning attached to counselling is that of consultation, discussion or exchange of ideas and advice. McGuiness (1998) refers to counselling as a helping process that uses trust engendered by a special kind of relationship to help individuals get access to a greater part of their personal resources as a means of responding to the challenges confronting their lives. According to Oleremi (2013) counselling can be understood to be a process by which an individual with problems is assisted by a counsellor to voluntarily change their behaviour, clarify their attitudes, ideals and goals so that their problem can be resolved. Unlike guidance, counselling is often used to describe a non-directive therapeutic approach in which counsellees are helped to define their problems and enabled to reach their own solutions. The foregoing definitions raise three important issues about counselling. Firstly, counselling is a process whose aim is to help a person deal with life challenges they are facing. Secondly, it involves a special relationship between the person being counseled (client or counselee) and the person counselling (counsellor). Thirdly, the counsellor must apply specialised skills and techniques in order to offer therapeutic relief to the counselee.

Braddock (2001) contends that guidance and counselling, is meant to improve how individuals deal with life challenging situations. Oluremi (2013) corroborates further by stating that guidance and counselling is a process of helping individuals to discover their needs, interests and capabilities, in order to formulate their own goals and make plans to realise them. Combined, guidance and counselling are the assistances made available by a counsellor to a counselee to help him or her to manage their life activities, develop their own view points, make their own decisions and carry their own burden. The main goal or purpose of guidance and counselling is to help counsellees make informed choices and decisions on challenging matters they face in their lives.

A survey of the foregoing definitions of guidance and counselling shows that at the heart of guidance and counselling is the counsellor. Kelechi and Ihuoma (2011) refer to a counsellor as a professional trained in psychological perspectives that typically render tangible services to the counsellees. The counsellor occupies a place of centrality in guidance and counselling theory and practice as he or she carries the responsibility of promoting wellness and wellbeing of the counsellees. In fact the role of the counsellor is to help counsellees to discover their interests and capabilities as well as to empower them to deal with psychosocial challenges they face. The Institute of Guidance Counsellors (2014) further states that the role of the counsellor is to engage in personal counselling with counsellees throughout their lifespan and in all the particular circumstances of their lives. Conventional guidance and counselling
require the counsellor to be someone who has acquired formalised training in the theories of guidance and counselling under the tutelage of a qualified and experienced mentor. This is different from guidance and counselling offered by spirit mediums that are given counselling skills via ancestral connection.

**African cosmology, spirituality and the guidance and counselling nexus**

The guidance and counselling role of women spirit mediums can only be fully appreciated through an understanding of African cosmology and the supra influence it has on African traditional religion from which spirit mediums draw their relevance and authority. The term cosmology refers to a people’s worldview (Schmidt, 2009). Drawing from Schmidt, African cosmology refers to the African worldview. There is structuralism within African cosmology which means that the elements of human culture must be understood in terms of their relationship with a larger overarching belief system (Blackburn, 2008). It must be stated from the outset that Africa is culturally diverse which might create a problem in trying to homogenise the African worldview. However, there is a common generative and occurring theme among almost all African cultures when it comes to religion.

Schmidt (2009) notes that African religion, as understood from a cosmological perspective, believes that there is a close relationship between the visible (presented by the living) and the invisible (presented by the ancestors). The ancestors are the guardians of tradition as well as the link between God and the living community. African religion holds that God does not communicate directly with the living, but does so via the ancestors (Kazembe, 2011). In that formulation, in African religion, the people who link the ancestors with the living people, so that they could hear what God says, are the spirit mediums (Gelfand, 1970; Kazembe, 2011). More specifically in Shona and Ndebele religion, God, the Supreme Being, is perceived as the creator and sustainer of the universe in much the same manner as within Christianity (Kazembe, 2011). In Shona belief God (Mwari) and Ndebele (Ulimimu) is believed to be active in the daily lives of people. People encountering psychological problems communicate with God through the spirit mediums (Kazembe, 2011). The spirit mediums are the conduits that link God, the ancestors and the living. Women spirit mediums thus derive their authority in guidance and counselling from the intermediary role they play between the ancestors and God.

There is growing belief in contemporary guidance and counselling theory and practice that the spiritual values of a person can promote their physical and psychological wellbeing. This has prompted Corey (2005) to argue that the field of guidance and counselling now recognise the need to address religious and spiritual concerns. Within the African context, guidance and counselling and spirituality are closely related (Sawai, Baharudin and Mayhuddin, 2004). According to Canda (1997) spirituality refers to the patterning of spiritual beliefs and practices into social institutions with community support and traditions maintained over time. Favier, Ingersoll, O’Brien and McNally (2001) refer to spirituality as that which connects us to other people, nature and the source of life. Tillich (1987) elaborates further by arguing that spirituality is the ultimate concern or the holy unconditional and absolute force which emanates from the depth of being, giving meaning to human existence and containing answers to existential problems. Thus the experience of spirituality is greater than humans and helps them to transcend, and embrace life situations. Corey (2005) posits that spirituality and religion are critical sources of strength for many
counselling. The key to understanding counsellors is to understand and appreciate the central role of their spiritual beliefs and practices. Women spirit mediums, because of their connectedness to religion and spirituality, are able to offer guidance and counselling that reflect the social background of the counsellors.

Findings

Unpacking the guidance and counselling role of women spirit mediums

Are women spirit mediums guidance counsellors?

The major vexation in conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice is whether women spirit mediums are guidance counsellors. Participants were asked to address this question. There was overwhelming consensus among the participants that indeed women spirit mediums were counsellors.

Woman spirit medium, Mbuya A stressed that:

‘We help our clients to deal with emotional challenges that they encounter in their lives which in my view essentially constitute the role of a guidance and counsellor’.

Woman spirit medium, Mbuya C noted that:

‘Our responsibility as spirit mediums is to promote the spiritual well-being of our people; hence one of the key functions we play in our respective communities is that of guidance counsellors’.

Client A explained that:

‘There is no doubt in my mind that women spirit mediums play the guidance counsellor role, given that they give direction and focus when we become hopeless as individuals or community to deal with challenging situations. They deal with that spiritual aspect which western oriented guidance and counselling often lacks’.

Client B noted that:

‘The fact that the majority of African people in Zimbabwe consult them frequently on issues that affect their lives leaves it beyond reason that women spirit mediums are guidance counsellors’.

From the findings, it is clear that spirit mediums in general, and women spirit mediums in particular, are regarded guidance counsellors. The majority of the African people in Zimbabwe regard them as such. Thus it is beyond doubt that women spirit mediums play a guidance and counselling role widely acknowledged within African culture. This, therefore, means that women spirit mediums are guidance counsellors who must be accorded a position of centrality in mainstream guidance and counselling practice and theory.

Where do women spirit mediums derive their guidance counsellor role?

Participants were asked to elaborate on where women spirit mediums derived their guidance and counselling role.

Woman spirit medium, Mbuya A stated that:

‘We are chosen by the ancestors as the link between them, God and the living. As such, we are, as a matter of necessity, expected to play the guidance and counselling role to our people as individuals or as a community. Thus the basis of our guidance counsellor role stems from the fact that we are the chosen ones who are able to enter the spiritual realm and world of the living realms in a way that enables us to see through the lives of people’.

Woman spirit medium, Mbuya B noted that:

‘It may be hard to comprehend from a western point of view on where we derive
the guidance counselling role. The truth of the matter is that the moment that the ancestors designate one as a spirit medium they automatically become a guidance counsellor’.

Woman spirit medium, Mbuya C stated that:

‘In the African set up, our ancestors select people within lineages and bestow upon them wisdom to offer advice to members of their group. Thus spirit mediums are the people who are chosen by the ancestors to play that role’.

Woman spirit medium D said that:

‘We derive the guidance and counselling role from the ancestors and God. That is why the ancestors and God choose us’.

Woman spirit medium, Mbuya E stated that:

‘Our status in society as the advisers makes us spirit mediums ideal guidance counsellors’.

Often, the source where women spirit mediums derive their guidance counselling role has been looked down upon in the western world and regarded as pagan. However, perceived from an African perspective, the ancestral world is real and those who can intercede between the living, dead and God are held in high regard. Women spirit mediums occupy that privileged position in African societies and are looked upon to offer guidance and counselling on personal, community and even national issues.

How do women spirit mediums play the guidance counsellor role?

This study had a particular interest in how women spirit mediums played the guidance counsellor role. Women spirit mediums who participated in this study were asked to give insight into how they performed the guidance counsellor role. Some of the accounts given by the women spirit mediums are as follows.

Woman spirit medium, Mbuya A explained that:

‘You see, when people come to us for guidance and counselling, we go back to the ancestors and God to give us wisdom to dispense appropriate advice. This normally involves a communicative process where the spirit medium is possessed by the spirit of the ancestors who inform the guidance and counselling to be given to counsellees. It is a complex process, but its ultimate goal results in guidance and counselling that usually satisfies the needs of the counsellee’.

Woman spirit medium, Mbuya B’s explanation was that:

‘The ancestors imbue us with exceptional powers to listen to people’s problems. Upon listening to these problems we use the wisdom we possess to give guidance and counselling advice’.

Woman spirit medium, Mbuya C stated that:

‘Spirit mediums do not exist in a vacuum, they are also people aware of the everyday challenges encountered by society. However, we, as the spirit mediums, provide an extra dimension by invoking the spiritual side of human beings which helps to allay certain fears’.

By invoking the spirit, we are able to provide guidance and counselling which is wholesome and that soothes the spirituality and physical being of our clients.

The research findings reveal that the guidance and counselling role played by women spirit mediums is very peculiar when perceived from the western oriented guidance and counselling practice. Instead of relying on theories that have been propounded by psychoanalysis scientists, women spirit mediums make their point of reference the ancestors. This might appear strange, but the underlying factor is that the end result is guidance and counselling that help counsellees to deal with their situations.
Discussion

In the western world, guidance and counselling is a specialised vocation which requires the acquisition of certain skills and techniques by the counsellor through a structured training programme (Wango, 2006). Conventional guidance and counselling is rooted in theoretical frameworks such as psychoanalysis, behaviourism and the Personal Centred Theory (PCT) *inter alia*. The guidance and counselling offered by the ancestors and the living have an understanding of what goes on in the spiritual and psychological lives of people who seek guidance and counselling services from them. The women spirit mediums are imbued with the spiritual power to read current events and to foretell future developments of these events (Kazembe, 2011). As such, the women spirit mediums do not necessarily have to undergo specialised training on the aspects of guidance and counselling as required by conventional guidance practice. The ancestors naturally transfer and bestow the guidance and counselling skills upon them. The women spirit mediums on that basis are bestowed with the wisdom and powers to offer guidance and counselling services to the living. However, it is important to note that some women spirit mediums have to go through some form of training under a mentor and not all spirit mediums are genuine.

The guidance and counselling role of women spirit mediums is done when the mediums are in what Andrea (2008) called state of spirit possession. Capranzano (2005) define spirit possession as any altered or unusual state of consciousness and allied behaviour that is indigenously understood in terms of the influence of an alien spirit or deity. Huskinson (2010) states that spirit possession sessions have therapeutic power which help to facilitate mental wellness and wellbeing. In the state of spirit possession, women spirit mediums are able to link with the minds of the counsellees. With that power to enter the minds of the counsellee, the women spirit mediums are able to offer counsel on the problems facing the counsellee (Schmidt and Huskison, 2010). Since what happens in the possession trance is beyond ordinary human comprehension, conventional guidance and counselling theory may frown upon such practices.

The fact that what happens in the state of spirit possession cannot be explained in simple scientific terms does not mean that there is no counselling taking place. Spirit possession directed by spiritualism is able to penetrate into the inner private minds of the counsellee in such a way that what is troubling them can be revealed to the women spirit mediums. The women spirit mediums then communicate whatever has been revealed to them in the state of spirit possession to the counsellee as guidance and counselling. After the spirit possession session the counsellee leaves (the women spirit mediums) in a state of mental restoration and feeling of self-invigoration. The ultimate goal of guidance and counselling is to create a sense of wellness and wellbeing in the counsellees and the women spirit mediums are able to achieve that goal.

Recommendations

Integrating women spirit mediums in conventional guidance and counselling practice

- There is need for conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice to understand and accept the role of women spirit mediums as guidance and counselling psychotherapists. This is because there is growing consciousness that conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice do not offer wholesome solutions to meet the needs of a person resorting to alternative psychotherapies. People are increasingly seeking guidance
counselling from the women spirit mediums. The appeal for women spirit mediums as guidance and counsellors lies in their ability to offer counselling that is holistic which seeks to restore harmony and balance within the counsellee and between the counsellee and his or her environment (Moodley et al., 2008). Guidance and counselling offered by women spirit mediums engages the mind, body and soul of the counsellees, as well as their families and communities.

- The first step in positioning the role of women spirit mediums as counsellors in conventional guidance and counselling is to theorise spirituality as understood by the Africans. This is because the starting point in guidance and counselling is to understand the spiritual orientation of the counsellors and counsellees. Once the spiritual orientation of the counsellee has been established, the next step is to understand spirit possession in relationship to guidance and counselling. Through spirit possession, the women spirit mediums are able to enter into the spiritual realm of the counsellee, which result in guidance and counselling that promotes psychosocial wellness and wellbeing of the counsellees.

- Spirit mediums in general and women spirit mediums in particular should be at the forefront of affirming that they too are guidance counsellors in their own right. They should prove to the mainstream guidance and counselling practice that they too are bound by certain rules, laws and ethics. This can be done through strong advocacy activism via bodies such as the Zimbabwe National Association of Traditional Healers (ZINATHA).

- Counselling bodies and institutions such as hospitals should acknowledge the guidance and counselling role played by spirit mediums. This can be done by referring special cases to the women spirit mediums who can offer spiritual guidance and counselling to patients who show signs of being affected spiritually.

Conclusions

Contrary to conventional guidance and counselling practice, women spirit mediums play an important guidance and counselling role in Zimbabwean societies. For thousands of years, Africans particularly in Zimbabwe, have relied on women spirit mediums for guidance and counselling services. Women spirit mediums as counsellors have helped counsellees to affirm their cultural and ethnic identities which are not only denied in conventional psychotherapy, but in Zimbabwean society generally, because of colonial influence and Christianity. African cosmology and spirituality as well as belief systems place women spirit mediums at the centre of life. As such the women spirit mediums play an important role in promoting the wellness and wellbeing of people in their communities. In that respect, women spirit mediums are counsellors in their own right who should be recognised in conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice. Since many people in Zimbabwe frequent women spirit mediums for psychological assistance they should be recognised in, conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice. Though there has been a drive towards integrating cultural beliefs in guidance and counselling theory, there is need to project the role that women spirit mediums play as counsellors. Their role as guidance and counsellors needs to be properly theorised in the same way psychoanalysis and other psychological theories have been done in conventional guidance and counselling theory and practice.
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