

The Social Aspects of Mental Illness among Orthodox Christians of the Tigrinya Ethnic Group in Eritrea

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Abstract : This study is situated within the religio-cultural milieu of Coptic Orthodox Christians of the Tigrinya ethnic group in Eritrea. With this ethnic group being conservative and traditionally bound, extended family structures dissected along various clans and expansive community networks are the distinguishing mark of its members. Notably, Coptic Tigrinya constitutes the largest percentage of all Christian denominations in Eritrea. As religious, cultural beliefs, rituals and teachings permeate in all aspects of social life, a distinct worldview and traditionalized health and illness conceptualization are common. Accordingly, this study argues that religio-culturally bound illness ideologies immensely determine the perception, help seeking behavior and healing preference of Coptic Tigrinya in Eritrea. The study bears significance in the sense that it bridges an important knowledge gap, given that it is ethno-linguistically (within the Tigrinya ethnic group), spatially (central region of Eritrea) and religiously (Coptic Christianity) specific. The conceptual framework guiding this research centered on the social determinants of mental health, and explores through the lens of critical theory how existing systems generate social vulnerability and structural inequality, providing a platform to reveal how the psychosocial model has the capacity to emancipate and empower those with mental disorders to live productive and meaningful lives. A case study approach was employed to explore the interrelationship between religio-cultural beliefs and practices and perception of common mental disorders of depression, anxiety, bipolar affective, schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorders and the impact of these perceptions on people with those mental disorders. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 41 participants representing seven diverse cohorts; people with common mental disorders, family caregivers, general community members, ex-fighters, priests, staff at St. Mary's and Biet-Mekae Community Health Center; resulting in rich data for thematic analysis. Findings highlighted current religio-cultural perceptions, causes and treatment of mental disorders among Coptic Tigrinya result in widespread labelling, stigma and discrimination, both of those with mental disorders and their families. Traditional healing sources are almost exclusively tried, sometimes for many years, before families and sufferers seek formal medical assessment and treatment, resulting difficult to treat illness chronicity. Service gaps in the formal medical system result in the inability to meet the principles enshrined in the WHO Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020 to which the Eritrean Government is a signatory. However, the study found that across all participant cohorts, there was a desire for change that will create a culture whereby those with mental disorders will have restored hope, connectedness, healing and self-determination.

Keywords : Coptic Tigrinya, mental disorders, psychosocial model social integration and recovery, traditional healing

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