



# The Role of the Nandi Religion in Indigenous Healthcare Management Practices among the Nandi of Kabiyet, Kenya

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## Abstract

Religion plays an integral role in the practice of indigenous medicine across African societies, deeply influencing healing traditions and perceptions of health. This article examines the role of religion in sustaining indigenous healthcare systems among the Nandi community of Kenya using Holism as the guiding framework. It explores how religious beliefs, practices, and institutions shape understandings of illness, healing, and well-being within a culturally embedded spiritual framework. The aim is to investigate how the Nandi religion influences traditional medical knowledge and practices. Employing a qualitative research design, data were gathered through in-depth oral interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions. Findings reveal that Nandi religious beliefs are fundamental to the community's health practices. Illness is often understood as a disturbance in spiritual or social order, and healing involves restoring harmony through rituals such as ancestral offerings, community cleansing, and the use of spiritually significant herbs. Religious authority legitimizes traditional healers, positioning them as key figures in maintaining both spiritual and physical health. Despite its contributions, the study faced notable limitations. Some informants were reluctant to disclose sacred knowledge, and the findings are context-specific, limiting their generalizability to other communities. The study has practical implications for the integration of indigenous spiritual frameworks into contemporary health systems. A deeper understanding of the spiritual dimensions of health can inform culturally sensitive health policies and practices. Recognizing and respecting traditional religious worldviews may foster more inclusive and holistic healthcare approaches, especially in rural and indigenous settings.

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## Introduction

Among the Nandi of Kenya, spiritual beliefs are intricately woven into daily life, shaping how individuals understand and manage illness and wellbeing. The Nandi perceive health not as a purely biological condition but as a state influenced by spiritual, social, and ecological forces. Central to this worldview is the belief in *Asiis*, the supreme deity, and the *oiik* (ancestral spirits), who are seen as intermediaries affecting the health and prosperity of the living. When illness occurs, it is often attributed to spiritual imbalances, ancestral displeasure, or broken social relationships rather than solely to physical causes.



Globally, religious beliefs significantly influence healthcare systems. Cyracom (2024) notes that religion shapes patients' treatment decisions, perceptions of illness and overall well-being. In Africa, this integration of religion and health is particularly pronounced. Chiroma (2020) observes that the African quest for health is deeply rooted in theistic frameworks, where divine benevolence is central to healing. Similarly, Kamaara (2023) highlights the close link between traditional healing and spirituality, explaining that ancestors are viewed as mediators between the human and spiritual realms, influencing both health and illness.

The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2013) acknowledges that in African societies, traditional healing often combines physical remedies with spiritual and cultural practices. For example, among the Dinka of South Sudan, health is understood through a religious and ecological lens (Kamwaria, 2012). Among the Shona of Zimbabwe, traditional healers address illnesses believed to result from spiritual causes such as witchcraft or ancestral displeasure (Machinga, 2024). These examples demonstrate that African indigenous medicine is fundamentally holistic, integrating spiritual, social, and environmental factors into healthcare.

Mbiti (2015) elaborates that the African worldview is based on the interconnectedness of the spiritual, social, and natural worlds, guiding how traditional healers combine herbal medicine with religious rituals to restore balance and health. Ayanga (2016) supports this view, arguing that understanding African religious beliefs is essential for addressing healthcare challenges because these beliefs shape health behaviours. Janzen (2019) further emphasises that religious practices are deeply intertwined with healing processes, requiring spiritual considerations in health interventions.

Specific to the Nandi community, Maua et al. (2023) explain that religious practices such as the worship of *Asiis*, ancestral veneration, and healing rituals are vital components of healthcare delivery. Van der Watt (2021) and Mbiti (1969) also assert that African religious practices permeate all aspects of life, including health management.

Rituals play a central role across Africa. Among the Baganda of Uganda, healers undergo ritual initiation involving sacred herbs and ancestral communication (Zakumumpa et al., 2024). In Nigeria, Ifijen et al. (2022) report the use of cleansing ceremonies and spiritual consultations in mental health treatment. Likewise, in cancer care across Sub-Saharan Africa, healers perform rituals to address the spiritual causes of illness (Chiroma, 2020). Mkhize and Maphumulo (2024) also highlight the role of dreams and ancestral communication in healing among the Xhosa and Zulu.

This study adopted Holism theory (Smuts, 1926), which holds that systems are understood in their entirety rather than as separate components. In the context of the study, Holism is applied to demonstrate the interdependence of the physical, social and spiritual well-being embodied in the Nandi worldview (Maua, 2023). Belief in *Asiis*, ancestral spirits and religious rituals work together to promote health and restore balance.

## **Methodology**

### ***Study design***

This qualitative study adopted an exploratory research design to investigate indigenous medicine and healing practices in Kabiyet, Nandi County. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and guided field observations to gather in-depth insights into traditional medical practices. The approach facilitated the documentation of indigenous medicinal plant use and health-related religious practices, thereby unveiling indigenous knowledge systems for potential integration into mainstream healthcare. The study targeted traditional medicine practitioners, elders and priests who are repositories of this knowledge.



### ***Study area***

The study took place in Kabiyet Ward, Nandi County, Kenya. The area was purposively selected because it is predominantly inhabited by the Nandi community, whose cultural practices remain largely intact despite minimal exposure to modernisation. Indigenous medicine is widely practised and valued alongside modern healthcare services. Additionally, poor infrastructure in the interior parts of the ward limits access to conventional medical facilities, making indigenous healing an essential part of the community's healthcare system.

### ***Study population***

The study targeted the Nandi people of Kabiyet Ward, focusing on key holders of indigenous medical knowledge, conventional healthcare personnel, and local administration. The indigenous medicine practitioners included herbalists, priests, diviners, ritualists, traditional birth attendants (TBAs) and community elders who are custodians of cultural healing practices.

### ***Sampling and sample size***

The study used purposive sampling to select 25 respondents with relevant knowledge of the research topic. This approach suits qualitative research, focusing on participants with specific insights. The study area was chosen through cluster sampling, while purposive sampling identified key individuals possessing the desired information and characteristics for the study.

### ***Data Collection***

Considering the exploratory design, the study employed face-to-face interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to achieve its objectives. Key informants were purposively selected, including six herbalists, two TBAs, one traditional priest and four elders. The interviews followed a thematic guide based on the study objectives. Additionally, two FGDs were conducted, each comprising seven participants. The first included four elders, one ritualist, and two traditional priests, while the second involved two herbalists, two traditional birth attendants, one ritualist, one traditional priest, and two Community Health Volunteers (CHVs). These methods provided diverse, in-depth information. The major limitation that faced the study was that data collected through interviews and focus group discussions were subject to personal biases, memory limitations, or social desirability responses. This was minimised during the focus group discussions.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data was recorded through notes and audio, then reduced by editing, sorting, summarising, and tabulating according to study themes. Analysis aligned with the study objectives, and findings were discussed to draw inferences and interpretations. The study tested the assumption that indigenous healthcare practices remain significant in healthcare management among the modern-day Nandi of Kabiyet and can be integrated with the mainstream healthcare system.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Participants, including traditional healers and community members, were given clear information about the study's purpose, benefits and risks, ensuring informed consent and voluntary participation. The researcher is committed to protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Intellectual Property Rights, recognising the communal nature of traditional Nandi medical knowledge. Confidentiality, privacy and respect for cultural sensitivities were maintained with documentation of sacred practices occurring with consent. All scholarly sources were properly cited to maintain academic integrity.

### ***Results and Discussions***

The findings address the purpose of examining the role of Nandi religion in the practice of indigenous medicine by using the case of Kabiyet, Nandi County.



### ***The Nandi Indigenous Worldview on Health***

The Nandi community holds a traditional worldview that shapes its understanding of life, health, and the cosmos. Central to this belief system is the notion of interconnectedness between the physical and spiritual realms, where humans coexist with *Asiis* (the supreme deity), ancestral spirits, nature, and unseen forces. Life is perceived as a continuous flow shaped by moral conduct, communal responsibilities and spiritual alignments. Health is not viewed as solely physical but as a reflection of one's relationship with the community, ancestors, and divine beings.

Healing among the Nandi involves spiritual and ritual practices, where illness is attributed to spiritual imbalance, ancestral displeasure, or disruptions in the cosmic order. During FGDs (June 24th, 2022, and July 22nd, 2022), elders explained that the Nandi perform elaborate rituals involving prayers, offerings, and appeasement of ancestral spirits, alongside the use of medicinal remedies to restore balance.

The Nandi also believe *Asiis* is the origin of all medicine, having endowed nature with healing resources including plant, animal, insect and mineral products (FGD, June 24th, 2022). Preventive health measures involve strict adherence to cultural taboos and moral codes, ensuring continuous spiritual harmony. Thus, the Nandi holistic approach to healthcare integrates physical treatment with spiritual interventions, making healing an act of restoring balance between the individual, the community, and the spiritual world. This reflects their comprehensive and culturally embedded health system.

### ***Worship of God, Asiis and indigenous medicine among the Nandi***

In Nandi traditional religion, *Asiis*, symbolised by the **sun** and representing the source of life, health, and wellbeing, is venerated as the supreme deity (Traditional Priest, O.I., June 24th, 2022). The Nandi people engage in daily prayers under sacred trees, reinforcing their connection to *Asiis*. Rituals such as the slaughtering of a white sheep are performed to predict calamities and seek divine protection. During healing processes, traditional healers (*chepkerichot*) consult *Asiis* through prayers and rituals to diagnose and treat illnesses (FGD, July 22nd, 2022). *Asiis* is believed to grant healing potency to medicines, appoints healers and bestows the wisdom needed to restore balance between the physical and spiritual realms.

Like other African communities, the Nandi people believed in the hierarchy of existence with *Asiis* being the ultimate reality. The Nandi religion centres around the belief in a supreme being known as *Asiis*, often symbolised by the sun, as explained during FGD (2022, June 24<sup>th</sup>) that:

*Our religion is characterised by reverence for a supreme being known as Asiis, who is closely associated with the sun. At sunrise, a family elder went outside and, facing the eastward direction of the sun, spat and uttered words of thanksgiving to Asiis for protection, good health and asked for providence. The same was done in the evening at sunset, facing the westward direction.*

Even without invoking divine intervention, the Nandi believe all healing comes from God (*Asiis*). They contend that human beings have limitations and that they can only find solutions by turning to God. This is because human beings are dependent on God for all their needs, including knowledge and understanding of how to treat diseases. *Asiis* gives knowledge on what should serve as medicine from what He has created with abundance, including the poisonous materials (FGD, 2022, June 10<sup>th</sup> and 2022, July 22<sup>nd</sup> respectively). *Asiis* created life and sustains it, providing health, growth, and prosperity to the people and the land. The sun is seen as a direct manifestation of *Asiis*' power, bringing light, warmth, and vitality to all living beings. This connection to the sun also signifies



healing and regeneration, as the sun's rays are believed to have both physical and spiritual properties that can cure ailments and restore balance.

In Nandi traditional healing, health and medicine are not limited to the use of herbs or medical knowledge; they are fundamentally connected to spirituality and the worship of *Asiis*, the sun deity and supreme source of life. According to herbalists in FGD (July 22nd, 2022), illness is understood as a disruption in the balance between the individual and the divine, including *Asiis*. The physical body is viewed as a vessel of spiritual energy, and when this energy is blocked or disturbed – whether by spiritual causes, witchcraft, or breaking taboos – illness results. Therefore, healing is perceived as a restoration of harmony between the individual, the ancestors, and the cosmic order.

The chepkerichot (traditional healers) play a central role in this process. They are considered intermediaries between the human world and *Asiis*, facilitating healing through rituals, prayers, and the preparation of sacred medicines (FGD, July 22nd, 2022). The healers believe that *Asiis* grants the knowledge of healing and the potency of herbs. Some herbs are harvested during specific phases of the sun's journey, as it is believed that the sun's position determines the herbs' healing strength. At sunrise, healers may expose herbs to sunlight, allowing them to absorb *Asiis*' life-giving energy, which enhances their medicinal power.

A ritualist (O.I., June 10th, 2022) explained that during important healing ceremonies, offerings to *Asiis* are made, including prayers, sacrifices, and gifts such as milk, cattle or grain. This act symbolises a plea for divine intervention in healing, especially during times of severe illness or epidemics. The elders and healers often call upon *Asiis*' name, seeking guidance and healing for conditions that are believed to surpass human medical capabilities. In some instances, healers may enter trance-like states, connecting with ancestral spirits and *Asiis* to discern the cause of illness and identify appropriate treatments.

These healing rituals reflect the holistic nature of Nandi healthcare, where the physical, spiritual, and social dimensions are inseparably linked. Health is not merely the absence of disease but the presence of balance and harmony between the individual, the community, the ancestors, and the divine. The sun, representing *Asiis*, is not just a natural phenomenon but a sacred symbol of life, energy and healing.

In summary, the Nandi healing system emphasises that spiritual well-being and physical health are interconnected, and complete healing is only achieved when both aspects are addressed through ritual, prayer, and medicine, under the guidance and blessing of *Asiis*.

### ***Veneration of ancestors***

The veneration of ancestors is a common practice in many African communities. Maua et al. (2023) describe ancestors as deceased relatives believed to exist in spirit form and dwell in sacred places such as trees, forests, rivers, and caves (Mbiti, 2015). Among the Nandi, ancestors – known as *oiik* – hold a central role in both spiritual and social life. They serve as intermediaries between the living and the divine, particularly in matters of health, morality, and community wellbeing. Elders in a Focus Group Discussion (June 24th, 2022) affirmed that the Nandi believe in *Asiis*, the supreme being, alongside the influential role of the *oiik*. They reported:

*Ancestral spirits are either good or evil and capable of influencing the lives of the living negatively or positively. They may bless individuals with good health and prosperity or, conversely, cause misfortunes, illness or poor harvests when displeased. To appease them, libations are made in the forms of milk, grains, or beer, and even animals. These are conducted by family and clan elders. At the community level, a traditional priest or spiritual*



*leader conducts worship at a shrine (kapkoros), which may involve offering animals as sacrifices alongside prayer requests.*

These ancestral spirits are thought to have the power to shape behaviour and outcomes in the mortal realm. One of the key elements in Nandi healing rituals is invoking the *oik* of the deceased ancestors to guide and bless the healing process. The healer may speak directly to the ancestors, requesting their assistance in curing the illness or removing the spiritual imbalance that caused the ailment. The living maintains constant fellowship with their ancestors. During FGD (2022, June 24<sup>th</sup>), it was recounted that:

*It is never right to lament when milk spills or grains pour accidentally. It is in our customary belief that our ancestors used such incidents to acquire the items for themselves. In fact, because it pours or spills down, it is seen as passing down directly to the ancestral world.*

The statement qualifies the fact that ancestors have demands, and this pegs responsibility on the living to meet the needs. Failure can result in retribution by way of diseases, misfortunes and natural calamities. In FGD (2022, July 22<sup>nd</sup>), it was informed that:

*In our Nandi belief, ancestors are supposed to be offered libations; the reason why sweeping away spills at night is not right. They have to be left overnight for the ancestors to partake.*

The excerpts above demonstrate the belief that ancestors have a big influence on the lives of their living relatives. This underscores the importance of maintaining a respectful and harmonious relationship with one's ancestors and being in constant communion with them through acts of veneration.

Ancestors are considered guardians of morality, and as Bett (2018) observes, any breaches of moral codes, for example, disrespecting parents, breaking taboos and failure to carry out certain rituals, attract ancestral displeasure. In this regard, healthcare among the Nandi includes moral rectitude and communal harmony as integral components. It is a social process that addresses the physical and the spiritual dimensions in a collective framework. Ignoring ancestral fellowship also attracted ancestral anger as attested by one elder (O.I, 2021, January 8<sup>th</sup>) that:

*There was a family that suffered misfortunes, constant attacks of diseases and ill luck. The elders of the family conducted a critical assessment of the situation. It was realised that one of the ancestors had not been named. On that being addressed, there seemed to be a relief.*

The report above shows that ancestors were able to give protection to the members of their families, clans and the community.

At times, the balance between the living and the ancestors can be disturbed, leading to an illness situation referred to as *kogulgei oik* according to one of the ritualists (O.I. 2022, June 10<sup>th</sup>). The interviewee explained that this disruption may occur due to breaches of ancestral customs, neglecting spiritual practices, or failing to pay proper attention to the ancestors. In such cases, appeasing the ancestors becomes a crucial step in the healing process.

In Nandi traditional healing, maintaining harmony with the ancestral spirits is essential for sustaining both health and well-being. According to Elders in FGD (June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020), one of the most respected ways to appease the ancestors is through sacrifices and ritual offerings, which serve to honour the ancestors, seek forgiveness, and request blessings for health. These offerings include livestock – especially cattle – milk, food, and sacred objects. Among the Nandi, livestock is of special spiritual significance, often symbolising wealth, life and the link between human and spiritual worlds. During healing ceremonies, an animal may be slaughtered, with part of the meat consumed by the community



to strengthen social bonds and the remainder offered to the ancestral spirits as reverence. The elders further explained that in healing rituals, the names of ancestors are invoked, asking for their intervention in healing the sick or protecting the community from misfortune. These ceremonies typically take place in sacred groves or ritual sites, often conducted at night when the spirits are believed to be closest to the living. Additionally, healers perform divination, using sacred objects or signs from nature to identify the spiritual cause of illness and determine appropriate treatment.

Beyond sacrifices, cleansing rituals are performed to eliminate spiritual impurities or curses believed to result from ancestral displeasure. Such rituals may involve bathing the sick person in sacred water or applying purifying herbal mixtures to remove negative energies.

According to herbalists in FGD 2 (July 10th, 2022), *chepkerichot* (traditional healers) use sacred medicinal plants, passed down through generations. These plants are believed to possess ancestral power, and specific guidelines govern their collection. Harvesting is often timed with particular seasons, times of day or lunar phases, ensuring spiritual and medicinal potency. This practice combines botanical expertise with spiritual insight, ensuring that healing restores both physical health and spiritual balance. This system exemplifies the holistic nature of Nandi indigenous healing, which integrates natural remedies, ritual practice, and ancestral communication.

One of the Nandi spiritual leaders (O.I. 2022, June 24<sup>th</sup>) taught that in times of widespread disease or misfortune, the Nandi convened as a community for a communal ritual, calling upon the ancestors to remove the source of suffering and restore prosperity to the land. Such a collective highlights the interconnectedness of the community and the understanding that the well-being of an individual is linked to the well-being of the group.

### ***Performance of health-related rituals***

As expressed by Durkheim E. (1954) in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, rituals belong to the spiritual realm and are therefore used to appeal to the able spiritual world. In the context of the Nandi, the performance of rituals amounts to invoking the intervention of the ancestors and *Asiis*. This presumably brings about an assurance because it bears a degree of predictability in an otherwise uncertain situation.

According to traditional birth attendants (TBAs) interviewed, the performance of rituals is commonplace among the Nandi (O.I. 2022, February 27<sup>th</sup> and 2021, June 24<sup>th</sup>, respectively). The interviewees cited various rituals such as those carried out for purification (*ketis* ritual), naming newborns (*keguur* ritual), initiations (*yatitaet* rituals), deaths and funerals (*ng'anyet* ritual) and the *cheprewo* token ritual, which even in the present day are practised in the community. The interviewees expressed that rituals have a curative significance and were keen to note that in relation to the indigenous medical treatment, patients undergo specific rituals for the treatment being sought, which may include the rituals for exorcism, pandemics, mitigating against witchcraft, accidents and natural calamities. They cited a ritual called *keterechbei* performed when the diagnosis of a sickness cannot be determined or does not respond to medications, which:

*The ritual is performed in the evening at sunset. Water was placed on a fragment of an earthen pot, and three or four stems of castor oil plant (imaniat) were placed on the pot in an upright position. The patient is seated on a cow's hide with the legs straightened. Then the ritual performer dips a bunch of fresh kikuyu grass into a calabash of fresh milk and sprinkles it on the patient's head while chanting a prayer calling upon the spirits to relieve the patient of suffering. Then the patient kicks the earthen pot on which the castor branches were set (TBAs, O.I. 2022, February 27<sup>th</sup> and 2021 June 24<sup>th</sup> respectively).*



The above ritual underscores the necessity of rituals in mitigating ill health conditions: they serve as a crucial resort in the attempts to seek intervention of the deities to unravel the cause of an illness and its diagnosis. The respondents also gave an example of the well-known exorcism ritual known as *keonda* ritual that was performed to “chase away” the pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020 during the outbreak:

*An elder from the Orgoiyot clan was called to exorcise Corona, which was understood to be an evil spirit. The exorcism of such a spirit is carried out at a river or a stream. A sheep was slaughtered with the assistance of elders who carried fetishes from the slaughtered sheep and stood at both sides of the stream. The Orkoiyot, who was officiating the ritual, uttered words of destruction of the evil spirit, and the elders joined in a chorus as they threw the fetishes into the running water of the stream to be carried away.*

The performance of the ritual symbolically indicated that the evil spirit of the COVID-19 pandemic was carried away and its powers neutralised by the blood of the sheep shed in the sacrifice. The *Orkoiyot* is believed to have spiritual powers that counter the powers of such evil spirits. Ritual is integral to the practice of indigenous medicines, and the holistic purpose of its application gives the practice a religious character.

### **Conclusion**

It is established that religion plays a central and inseparable role in the practice of indigenous medicine among the Nandi. It profoundly influences the understanding of health, illness and wellbeing. The Nandi religion and its worldview are intertwined in the practice of indigenous medicine. They are holistic and spiritual, emphasising the connectedness of the human person with nature, community, ancestors and the divine beings. Central to this worldview is the belief in *Asiis*, the supreme reality alongside ancestral spirits (*oiik*) who are thought to influence daily life, health and wellbeing.

Guided by the theory of Holism, this study demonstrated that the interconnectedness of the spiritual, social and natural worlds in the African thought underpins how traditional healers approach medicine, integrating physical treatment with religious beliefs and practices to restore balance and health. It also affirmed that African understanding of health does not separate the spiritual from the physical and expounds that the use of medicine is not just pharmacology. Still, it is about invoking spiritual powers to heal. African traditional medicine operates within a religious framework, and health and well-being is inseparable from divine involvement.

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