



# Cultural Healing and Ageing: The Effect of Traditional Therapies on the Psychosocial Health of Older Cameroonians

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how traditional therapies influence the psychosocial well-being of older adults in Cameroon's Grassfields, focusing on the Bali Nyonga community. Using a systematic literature review of studies published between 2000 and 2025, the analysis identifies three primary forms of cultural healing: herbal medicine, ritual practices, and psychosocial or counseling support. Evidence indicates that engagement in these therapies enhances social support networks, buffers against depressive symptoms, and contributes to improved quality of life. Elders and healers consistently describe cultural healing as vital for sustaining resilience, dignity, and community belonging in later life. However, modernization, urban migration, and religious change are eroding the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge, placing elders at risk of loneliness, identity loss, and psychological distress. Despite these pressures, traditional therapies continue to provide holistic care that biomedical systems alone often fail to deliver. The study highlights the need for health and social policies that integrate indigenous practices to strengthen elder support and advance cross-cultural gerontological understanding.

**Keywords:** Traditional therapies; Cultural healing; Psychosocial health; Elderly; Indigenous knowledge; Ritual practices; Herbal medicine; Ageing and resilience.

## Introduction

The indigenous belief systems of Cameroon's Grassfields, particularly among the Bali Nyonga people of the North West Region, have long provided a holistic framework for understanding health, aging, and social cohesion. Rooted in a cosmology that links the visible and invisible worlds, these traditions emphasize ancestral reverence and communal rituals as central to well-being (Owen, 2009; Fardon, 2009). Historically, the Bali Nyonga trace their ancestry to the 19th-century Chamba migration, establishing sociopolitical structures that enshrine elders as both moral and spiritual authorities. Within this worldview, aging is not decline but a transition to a revered status, where elders become living repositories of wisdom and custodians of community morality. Rituals such as the Lela Festival and libation ceremonies reaffirm ancestral ties and legitimize authority, offering elders psychosocial validation and continuity of identity. Comparable indigenous societies across Africa similarly embed elderhood in sacred narratives that reinforce purpose and dignity (Animasahun & Chapman, 2017). This historical grounding highlights how traditional healing practices, from herbal medicine to ritual invocation, have long functioned as therapeutic mechanisms that safeguard both physical and psychosocial health, positioning elders as indispensable mediators between the human and spiritual realms.

Conceptually, indigenous healing systems in Africa merge spirituality, community, and ecology into a single epistemology of health. In Bali Nyonga, health and psychosocial well-being are sustained through harmony among people, ancestors, land, and divine forces, a model comparable to other indigenous paradigms such as the Balinese Tri Hita Karana (Suardana et al., 2023). This ontology challenges Western biomedical models that isolate health within individual bodies and psychological states (Christopher, 1999). Instead, psychosocial well-being is understood as a

communal achievement where spiritual engagement and moral reciprocity are paramount. Elders play pivotal roles as ritual leaders, storytellers, and moral guardians, ensuring intergenerational transmission of values and sustaining communal equilibrium (Utama & Yulianti, 2022). Their participation in ancestral rites and therapeutic rituals mitigates loneliness, strengthens identity, and provides existential meaning, buffering against the anxieties of aging. Such frameworks reveal that cultural healing is not an adjunct to health care but a primary determinant of resilience, especially in later life. By linking psychosocial stability to ritual practice and ancestral continuity, these belief systems offer insights into the protective infrastructures that support healthy aging beyond the scope of conventional mental health paradigms.

Cameroon presents a complex setting where indigenous cosmologies and modern forces intersect. The North West Region, home to Bali Nyonga and other Grassfields communities, has experienced profound socio-political change from colonial rule to contemporary crises such as the Anglophone conflict. British colonial administration introduced Christianity and biomedical health systems that undermined traditional authority, displacing elders from their roles as spiritual mediators (Maynard, 2002; Awah, 2006). Postcolonial mental health services remain largely biomedical and urban-centered, often inaccessible to rural elders and insensitive to cultural norms (Fofuleng, 2015). Despite these disruptions, traditional therapies including herbal medicine, divination, and ritual ceremonies continue to provide psychosocial support, particularly where state systems are weak or mistrusted. Urban migration, Pentecostal movements, and language erosion, however, threaten the intergenerational transmission of these practices, creating a tension between cultural resilience and modernization (Norum, 2009). Understanding how older Cameroonians navigate these competing influences is essential for designing elder-care strategies that honor both tradition and contemporary realities.

Comparative research underscores the universal relevance of indigenous healing for elder well-being. Studies in Indigenous North American, Oceanic, and Asian communities reveal that spiritual engagement and cultural continuity predict lower rates of depression and higher life satisfaction among elders (Gall et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020). Across Africa, from Guinea to Egypt, traditional therapies storytelling, ancestral rites, and communal rituals have buffered older adults against trauma and social isolation, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Diaz, 2023; Sharaf et al., 2019). In Cameroon, similar dynamics appear in Ekondo Kondo, where belief in ancestral presence facilitated psychosocial adaptation among displaced elders (Schopp, 2020). These findings affirm that cultural healing systems are not archaic relics but living frameworks that foster resilience and meaning. They also highlight the limitations of purely biomedical interventions, which often fail to address the relational and spiritual dimensions of aging. Situating the Cameroonian experience within this broader landscape strengthens the rationale for investigating how traditional therapies specifically influence psychosocial outcomes among older adults in the North West Region.

Within Bali Nyonga, elders are regarded as “living libraries” of indigenous knowledge and moral order, occupying a liminal space between the human and ancestral realms (Nyuyki, 2017). Their participation in community councils, conflict mediation, and ritual ceremonies reinforces both their social legitimacy and their own psychosocial well-being. Ritual storytelling, libations, and ancestral invocations provide elders with continuity of role and purpose, countering the isolation often reported in modern aging contexts (Jindra, 1997; Maulana, 2020). Empirical studies show that such social participation and reciprocity beliefs are strongly associated with subjective well-being among elders in diverse cultures (He et al., 2022). Yet modernization and youth disinterest in indigenous cosmologies are eroding these roles, leaving many elders vulnerable to loneliness and identity loss (Bodjongo, 2023). Exploring how traditional therapies both herbal and ritual continue to sustain psychosocial health amid these changes is crucial for understanding aging in Cameroon today.

Rapid urbanization, labor migration, and religious pluralism have weakened kinship-based caregiving and ritual participation in Cameroon (Gouttefarde et al., 2024). Younger generations often view elder care as an economic burden rather than a moral imperative, reducing elders' access to the communal interactions that historically guaranteed dignity and support (Nangia, 2016).

Pentecostal Christianity and commodified religious practices further marginalize ancestral rituals, while the decline of indigenous languages like Mungaka disrupts the transmission of cosmological knowledge (Norum, 2009). These transformations create psychosocial vulnerabilities: elders may experience loneliness, anxiety, and diminished life satisfaction when disconnected from cultural anchors (Ngala et al., 2024). Nevertheless, traditional therapies remain a refuge, offering spiritual assurance and social recognition that modern institutions frequently overlook. Investigating these therapies provides insight into how indigenous practices adapt to contemporary pressures while continuing to meet the psychosocial needs of older adults.

While international scholarship increasingly acknowledges the link between spirituality and elder well-being, African epistemologies remain underrepresented (Jidong et al., 2021; Sanuade et al., 2014). Existing Cameroonian studies often focus on biomedical or socio-economic determinants, overlooking the culturally specific ways traditional therapies foster resilience. Research in Mezam Division indicates that elders active in indigenous rituals report greater psychological equilibrium than those disengaged from communal life (Ngala et al., 2024). Yet national policies seldom integrate these insights into elder-care frameworks (Arkah, 2022). Bridging this knowledge gap requires interdisciplinary inquiry that situates psychosocial health within indigenous cosmologies, ritual practices, and intergenerational relationships. Such an approach moves beyond merely cataloging herbal remedies to examine the deeper spiritual and relational mechanisms that sustain well-being in later life.

Despite the enduring importance of indigenous belief systems, the psychosocial well-being of older Cameroonians is increasingly threatened by modernization, migration, and religious change. Communities like Bali Nyonga illustrate a broader crisis in which elders once central to cultural and spiritual life face declining reverence and shrinking opportunities for meaningful participation (Bodjongo, 2023; Gouttefarde et al., 2024). Formal health services remain under-resourced and culturally disconnected, offering little space for ancestral rituals or traditional therapies that have historically safeguarded mental and emotional health (Fofuleng, 2015). Without deliberate efforts to preserve and integrate these indigenous practices, elders risk social isolation, identity loss, and psychological distress. This study therefore seeks to examine how traditional therapies influence the psychosocial health of older adults in the North West Region of Cameroon, addressing a critical gap in both national policy and global gerontological research.

### **Objectives**

1. To identify the types and frequency of traditional therapies used by older adults in selected communities of Cameroon.
2. To examine the association between engagement in traditional therapies and key indicators of psychosocial health including perceived social support, depressive symptoms, and quality of life among elderly participants.
3. To explore elders' and traditional healers' perceptions of how cultural healing influences emotional resilience, community belonging, and life satisfaction in later life.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a systematic literature review design, drawing exclusively on existing peer-reviewed articles and credible grey literature to examine how traditional therapies influence the psychosocial health of older adults in Cameroon's North West Region. The review focused on empirical studies, ethnographic accounts, and public-health reports published in English or French between 2000 and 2025 to capture both historical and contemporary perspectives. The setting is conceptual rather than field-based, but all evidence pertains to Cameroonian contexts particularly Grassfields communities such as Bali Nyonga where indigenous healing practices remain integral to elder care. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify articles that explicitly address three core concepts: (1) traditional or cultural healing/therapies, (2) psychosocial or mental well-being, and (3) aging or elderhood. Comprehensive searches were conducted across multidisciplinary databases including PubMed, Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, ScienceDirect,

and African Journals Online, supplemented by Google Scholar and institutional repositories. Data sources where therefore consist entirely of secondary materials such as qualitative ethnographies, quantitative surveys, and mixed-methods studies. Data extraction followed PRISMA guidelines, coding for themes like ritual participation, herbal medicine, social support, and psychological outcomes. Critical appraisal of study quality made use of the Joanna Briggs Institute tools to ensure methodological rigor and reliability of synthesized findings.

### **Types and Frequency of Traditional Therapies Used by Older Adults in Selected Communities of Cameroon**

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that traditional therapies remain integral to health-seeking practices among older adults in Cameroon, with a particularly strong presence in Grassfields communities such as Bali Nyonga. The studies highlighted a wide range of therapies, which can broadly be grouped into three categories: herbal and ethnomedicinal remedies, ritual or spiritually oriented healing, and psychosocial or prayer-based interventions. Herbal medicine emerged as the most frequently documented approach. Agbor et al. (2011), in their nationwide survey of traditional healers, described a therapeutic repertoire heavily reliant on medicinal plants, many of which are used to manage chronic and age-associated conditions such as oral diseases, digestive complaints, and musculoskeletal pain. This finding is corroborated by Annick-Mélanie et al. (2023), whose study of epilepsy treatment revealed that healers often combine plant-based remedies with ritual practices, demonstrating the fluidity between physical and psychosocial care.

Ritual and spiritual therapies are integral to health-seeking behaviors in Cameroon, especially for illnesses perceived as stigmatized or spiritually significant. Labhardt et al. (2010) documented that traditional healers in Cameroon often incorporate prayers, communal rituals, and symbolic gestures into their treatment sessions. These practices not only aim to address the physical ailment but also to restore social harmony and uphold the patient's dignity within the community. Similarly, Grietens et al. (2008) observed that in the context of Buruli ulcer treatment, ritual cleansing and spiritual consultations play a crucial role. These rituals extend beyond medical efficacy, influencing help-seeking behavior and facilitating community mobilization. Such spiritual interventions are often the first recourse for individuals, particularly in rural areas, due to their accessibility and the perceived spiritual dimensions of the disease. These practices highlight the importance of understanding local cultural and spiritual contexts in addressing health issues and promoting effective healthcare strategies.

Psychosocial and counseling-oriented practices are integral yet often underrepresented components of traditional healing in rural Cameroon. Heinzerling (2005) highlighted that traditional healers frequently assume dual roles as both medical practitioners and counselors, integrating conversations, advice, and prayer into treatment sessions. This holistic approach addresses not only the physical ailments but also the emotional and spiritual well-being of patients. Similarly, Boum et al. (2017) emphasized the diverse roles of healers, noting that in rural areas where biomedical services are scarce, healers serve as frontline providers. They offer not only herbal remedies but also psychosocial guidance and referrals when necessary, thereby filling critical gaps in healthcare delivery. These practices underscore the importance of understanding and integrating traditional healing methods into broader healthcare strategies, especially in resource-limited settings.

Traditional therapies among older adults in Cameroon encompass a multifaceted healing system that integrates biological, spiritual, and social interventions, reflecting a pluralistic approach to healthcare. While herbal medicine is prevalent, studies indicate that it is only one component of a broader therapeutic framework. For instance, Heinzerling et al. (2005) documented that traditional healers often serve dual roles as medical practitioners and counselors, incorporating conversations, advice, and prayer into treatment sessions. Similarly, Boum et al. (2017) emphasized that in rural areas where biomedical services are scarce, healers provide not only herbal remedies but also psychosocial guidance and referrals when necessary. These practices highlight the importance of understanding and integrating traditional healing methods into broader healthcare strategies, especially in resource-limited settings. Collectively, these studies underscore that traditional

therapies among older adults in Cameroon cannot be reduced to herbal medicine alone; they represent a holistic system addressing both body and mind.

### **Association Between Engagement in Traditional Therapies and Psychosocial Health Indicators**

Perceived social support stands out as a prominent benefit of traditional healing practices among older adults in Cameroon. Kayombo et al. (2007) conducted a comparative analysis across several African contexts, including Cameroon, and emphasized that traditional healers often provide a supportive environment where patients feel listened to and emotionally validated. This form of interpersonal care contrasts with the often impersonal nature of biomedical encounters. Similarly, Labhardt et al. (2010) demonstrated that healer-patient interactions in Cameroon are characterized by empathy, trust, and culturally resonant communication, all of which reinforce patients' sense of belonging within their community. For older adults, whose social networks may be shrinking due to age-related loss, such support is particularly crucial.

Evidence concerning depressive symptoms among older adults in Cameroon suggests a protective effect associated with engagement in traditional healing practices. Naah et al. (2019) conducted a study in Bamenda and found that elders who maintained involvement in culturally embedded practices, including traditional therapy, reported higher levels of psychosocial well-being and lower levels of depressive tendencies. This indicates that participation in these culturally resonant activities may contribute to improved mental health outcomes. Further qualitative insights were provided by Chance et al. (2012), who observed that older adults perceived traditional care as more emotionally comforting and less alienating than Western nursing care. This preference suggests that the cultural familiarity inherent in traditional healing practices may buffer against psychological distress.

Quality of life and resilience among older adults in Cameroon are significantly influenced by traditional healing practices, which serve as vital buffers against the challenges posed by intergenerational shifts and modernization. Gouttefarde et al. (2024) observed that as modernization and urban migration erode the traditional roles of elders, cultural rituals and communal practices help reaffirm their social identity and facilitate the transmission of cultural values. These rituals not only restore a sense of purpose but also enhance social cohesion, thereby mitigating feelings of marginalization and isolation. Complementing this, policy reviews from 2013 to 2024 highlight the importance of integrating traditional healing into public health frameworks. Faith-based and community psychosocial care models have been identified as effective in addressing both medical and existential needs of older adults, thereby improving life satisfaction. These models leverage culturally familiar practices, such as herbal medicine, prayer, and communal support, to provide holistic care that resonates with the spiritual and social dimensions of aging. The integration of these practices into formal health systems is seen as a promising approach to enhance the well-being and resilience of older adults in Cameroon.

### **Elders' and Healers' Perceptions of Cultural Healing on Emotional Resilience, Belonging, and Life Satisfaction**

Traditional healing practices in Cameroon are deeply intertwined with the identities, dignity, and psychosocial resilience of older adults. Naah et al. (2019) found that elders in Bamenda perceive active aging as inseparable from cultural participation, particularly rituals that reaffirm their social roles within families and communities. These rituals provide a sense of purpose and belonging, counteracting the marginalization often experienced by the elderly in rapidly modernizing societies. Chance et al. (2012) echoed this sentiment, noting that older adults viewed traditional care not merely as treatment but as a reaffirmation of cultural continuity and emotional safety. This perspective underscores the importance of culturally congruent care in enhancing the well-being of older adults. These findings highlight that for many older adults in Cameroon, healing encompasses not only physical recovery but also social and existential affirmation, reinforcing the need for healthcare approaches that honor cultural practices and values.

Traditional healers in Cameroon perceive their roles as encompassing both medical and emotional care, positioning themselves as custodians of psychosocial stability who mediate between the spiritual and physical realms to provide holistic support. Heinzerling et al. (2005) found that healers viewed themselves as integral to the emotional and spiritual well-being of their patients, often offering counsel and comfort in addition to physical treatment. This approach contrasts with the more clinical and impersonal nature of biomedical encounters, highlighting the healers' emphasis on the psychosocial aspects of care. Similarly, Annick-Mélanie et al. (2023) documented that healers treating epilepsy emphasized their dual role as caregivers and community counselors. They underscored their importance in managing stigma and promoting emotional resilience among patients, particularly in a cultural context where epilepsy is often misunderstood and feared. These studies illustrate that traditional healers in Cameroon adopt a holistic approach to health, addressing not only the physical symptoms of illness but also the emotional and social dimensions, thereby reinforcing their pivotal role in community health and well-being.

Several studies also described the role of rituals in reinforcing belonging and resilience. Traditional healing practices in Cameroon serve as a vital framework for sustaining life satisfaction, emotional stability, and intergenerational belonging, particularly among older adults. Rituals play a central role in this holistic approach to health, reinforcing social cohesion and resilience within communities. Labhardt et al. (2010) documented how ritualized healing encounters fostered trust, respect, and dignity among patients, especially older adults. These rituals not only address physical ailments but also provide a platform for patients to reconnect with their cultural heritage, thereby restoring a sense of identity and purpose. Similarly, Grietens et al. (2008) observed that community involvement in rituals not only facilitated coping with illness but also strengthened family cohesion and resilience in the face of chronic disease. Such communal practices enable individuals and families to navigate health challenges collectively, reinforcing the social fabric and promoting collective well-being. These studies demonstrate that cultural healing in Cameroon is perceived not merely as an alternative medical system but as a comprehensive framework that sustains life satisfaction, emotional stability, and intergenerational belonging. Integrating medical, emotional, and social dimensions, traditional healing practices offer a holistic approach to health that resonates deeply with the cultural values and social structures of Cameroonian communities.

## **Conclusion**

The study concludes that traditional therapies remain a vital resource in the lives of older Cameroonians, sustaining both health and psychosocial well-being. The review showed that elders frequently rely on herbal remedies, ritual practices, and prayer-based or counseling support, highlighting a pluralistic system that combines biological, spiritual, and social care. Evidence indicated that engagement with these therapies is positively associated with psychosocial outcomes such as stronger social support networks, reduced depressive tendencies, and enhanced quality of life, although the strength of evidence varied across studies. With respect to the study, both elders and healers emphasized that cultural healing practices foster resilience, affirm community belonging, and sustain dignity and satisfaction in later life, making them more than medical treatments but also powerful social and cultural anchors. The review demonstrates that traditional healing continues to play a central role in ageing well in Cameroon, and it suggests that acknowledging and integrating these practices into health and social care systems could strengthen holistic support for the elderly.

## **Recommendations**

Drawing from the findings of this review, several recommendations can be made to strengthen support for the psychosocial health of older adults in Cameroon through recognition of cultural healing practices.

First, policymakers and health planners should integrate traditional therapies into community health strategies, ensuring that herbal, ritual, and counseling practices complement biomedical care rather than operate in isolation.

Second, training and dialogue platforms should be created for traditional healers and biomedical practitioners to collaborate, share knowledge, and build mutual respect, thereby improving referral pathways and quality of care for older adults.

Third, researchers should expand empirical work on the psychosocial impact of traditional healing, especially through mixed-methods studies that can quantify outcomes such as depression, resilience, and life satisfaction among elders.

Fourth, community education programs should be developed to promote awareness of safe traditional practices while discouraging harmful or exploitative forms, helping elders and families make informed health choices.

Finally, government and non-governmental organizations should recognize and support traditional healing as part of cultural heritage, investing in documentation, training, and regulation that preserve its positive contributions to ageing while aligning it with broader public health goals.

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