

Autism, Spirit, and Destiny: An Akan Priestess's Teachings on Non-Speaking Children

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Abstract

Autism research rarely examines how African spiritual traditions interpret autistic traits or support family well-being. This phenomenological study explores the interpretive perspectives of an Akan high priestess regarding autism, with particular attention to non-speaking autistic children. Drawing on an in-depth interview and *in vivo* coding, the analysis highlights how the priestess understands autism through Akan cosmology, ancestral purpose, and spiritual attunement. Her teachings emphasize the sacredness of autistic children, the intuitive wisdom of non-speaking communication, and the importance of rituals, communal care, and spiritual alignment. These insights offer culturally grounded considerations for counselors working with families who welcome spiritual meaning-making. The findings suggest that integrating culturally relevant spiritual frameworks may enhance relational attunement, reduce stigma, and expand therapeutic possibilities for autistic children and their caregivers.

Keywords

Neurodiversity, African Spirituality, Akan Cosmology, Autism, Spirituality, Narrative Repair

1. Introduction

In 2023, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that approximately 1 in 36 children in the United States are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, a neurodevelopmental condition that can affect social interaction, communication, and sensory processing (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Symptoms may be both visible and nondetectable, varying widely across children and developmental contexts (Acheampong, 2024). Autistic children often experience psychological and social challenges that impact both the child and the broader family system (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) characterizes autism as a spectrum of neurodevelopmental differences involving social communication, behavioral patterns, and sensory processing. Within Black communities, however, autism is often compounded by stigma, misinterpretation, and delayed diagnosis, which can intensify family stress and limit access to supportive care. African-centered healing traditions offer alternative frameworks for understanding autism—frameworks that emphasize spirituality, communal belonging, and ancestral purpose. In Akan spirituality, each child possesses a *kra*, or divine soul, with a designated purpose and destiny (Morgan & Okyere, 2020; Rosen, 2024).

Although research on autism is extensive, only limited scholarship has examined how spiritual or religious belief systems support autistic children and their families (Hayat et al., 2024). African-centered scholars such as Nobles, Baldwin, and Kambon argue that human beings are fundamentally spiritual entities and that clinical approaches that ignore spirituality risk omitting essential dimensions of healing and identity (Nobles, 1986, 2023; Baldwin, 1986; Kambon, 1992). Spirituality has been shown to reduce caregiver distress, foster hope, and strengthen meaning-making for families navigating autism (Pitten, 2008).

In Ghana, spirituality has been shown to strengthen resilience and coping among families raising autistic children (Acheampong, 2024; Opoku, 2018). Yet in the United States, spirituality is rarely integrated into therapeutic interventions for autistic children or their families (Nurhastuti & Fatmawati, 2018). Instead, research has largely emphasized genetic, neurological, and biomedical explanations for autism (Sharlach, 2025; Latipun, 2008), offering limited guidance on how spirituality might assist clinical or familial understanding of autism (Kéri, 2023). This gap underscores the need for culturally grounded, spiritually attuned perspectives that honor the lived experiences of families who welcome such frameworks.

Cultural Preparation

Qualitative interviewers should exercise cultural care and competence when preparing for interviews (Hays & Singh, 2012). For this study, preparation required understanding traditional practices and offerings for Akan faith healers. Across West Africa, items such as kola nuts and palm wine are signs of respect and honor for spiritual rituals (Nwadi-alor & Eze, 2021). Among the Igbo, these items are considered sacred components of spiritual and informational exchange (Nwadi-alor & Eze, 2021). Recognizing such traditions reflects multicultural competence and humility consistent with African spiritual traditions (Rosen, 2024; Morgan & Okyere, 2020).

The interview environment also matters. The high priestess advised that the waiting area provides an opportunity for seekers to ground themselves before receiving spiritual messaging. Sattler & Hodge (2006) note that effective interviews rely upon an interviewer's ability to communicate and understand participants' feedback. Researchers are advised to conduct interviews in an environment free

of noise and distractions (Sattler & Hodge, 2006).

2. Methods

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how Akan spiritual principles can inform therapeutic considerations for autistic children (van Manen, 2021). This study included one participant, a traditional Akan high priestess whose teachings served as the primary data source. The aim of this study was to understand how the teachings of a traditional Akan priestess might guide autism-affirming counseling practices to support families impacted by autism. Two research questions guided the inquiry:

- 1) What Akan spiritual principles inform understandings of autism?
- 2) What roles do ritual and spirituality play in supporting autistic youth and their families?

2.1. About the High Priestess

The high priestess guiding this study was trained under Akom rites, which established her authority in Ghana and throughout the diaspora of Akan communities. Her titles, Ankobra Hema (chief priestess) and Okomfokese (senior priestess), denote her authority and scope of responsibility (Rosen, 2024; Quarcoopome, 1987). Her role aligns with traditional Akan expectations that priestesses inherit and cultivate sacred gifts across generations.

A core competency of her work within Akan cosmology is ancestral communication, which positions her as an intermediary between the living and the ancestral realm. In addition to her spiritual training, she holds a doctorate in neuropsychology, allowing her to uniquely integrate African-centered spiritual knowledge with clinical understanding of cognition, behavior, and neurodevelopment.

2.2. Analysis

Following Institutional Review Board approval, informed consent was obtained, and permission granted to proceed with this research. Semi-structured questions explored the priestess's perspectives on healing, autism, spirituality, and biomedical models, with particular attention to the non-speaking trait of autism.

The interview guide aligned with Hays & Singh's (2012) qualitative inquiry framework and drew on Seidman (2006)'s phenomenological approach to capturing lived experience. *In vivo* coding was used to honor the priestess's voice and preserve the cultural and spiritual specificity of her language (Miles et al., 2014). Codes were derived from terms, phrases, and concepts emphasized and repeated during the interview, allowing first- and second-level analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012). Coded data were synthesized into thematic clusters. Member checking was conducted using the participant transcript to ensure interpretive accuracy.

3. Findings

The following section presents findings derived from the high priestess's interpre-

tive perspective on autism and her guidance on how Akan cosmology can support autistic children. Because autism encompasses diverse traits and presentations, the priestess and researcher chose to focus specifically on the non-speaking trait of autistic children; however, sensory perceptions and other traits were also discussed. Her responses framed autism as a sacred and divine variation of humanity. Akan cosmology and ancestor veneration were repeatedly referenced but warrant separate, extended analysis. She also emphasized rituals, communal care, and spiritual attunement as core competencies counselors should integrate into their practice. Quotes are provided to preserve her voice.

3.1. Themes from the Akan High Priestess

1) Spiritual and Physical Cosmology

Autism cannot be understood solely through biomedical frameworks; it must be interpreted within a broader cosmological system. The high priestess stated that healing depends upon alignment between the spiritual and physical realms: *“The physical is aligned with the spiritual...healing must address ancestral imbalances and spiritual misalignments.”*

2) Holistic Assessment and Divine Consultation

She described a dual approach that honors both medical and spiritual evaluation. She referred to this process as “spiritual data analysis”, emphasizing that she does not act without consultation:

“I want to see the [medical] evaluations... then I go to the higher power.”

“You have to see the spiritual side to understand autism.”

“I don’t do anything until I consult.”

3) Intuitive Wisdom of Children

The high priestess challenged assumptions about non-verbal communication, asserting that non-speaking children still convey messages:

“...even though he doesn’t talk, he’s talking... The child who does not speak is not silent, the ancestors are speaking through him.”

4) Destiny Aligns with Ancestral Identity

She described autism as a sacred assignment for both the child and the caregiving unit, including the community:

“...nkrabea is destiny...The child may come with a purpose for you to fulfill, something you didn’t learn the last five times. You’re also learning, evolving as a person...for the next person who’s coming.”

5) Rituals, Attunement, and Communal Care

She advised caregivers and counselors to cultivate attunement by listening with spirit as well as ears. Rituals included drumming to calibrate rhythm, water rituals to cool the spirit, and naming ceremonies to anchor identity. She emphasized that children exist within a spiritual ecology that includes ancestors, deities, and living communities:

“He is not meant to walk your path. He walks between the worlds. You must walk beside him, not behind.”

3.2. Assessing the Spiritual

The high priestess cautioned that Akan cosmology cannot be extracted or quantified but must be witnessed and honored. Yet she acknowledged that biomedical practices often require measurement. She offered foundational concepts for integrating spirituality into assessment:

- **Kra** (divine soul): affirms the sacredness of the child's identity;
- **Nkabom** (spiritual interconnectedness): sustains relationality;
- **Ntoro** (paternal inheritance): conveys ancestral wisdom;
- **Abusua** (maternal inheritance): anchors belonging and attunement.

She recommended co-creating adaptive measures of caregiver and child well-being through dance, breathing techniques, and storytelling. Akan rituals vary by client need but often include storytelling, affirming dignity, and connecting the living with ancestors and deities (Rosen, 2024). From an Akan perspective, healing is inseparable from spirituality; there is no division between mind, body, spirit, and community (Opoku, 2018).

4. Implications

This study provides rarely documented insights into Akan healing practices and spiritual interventions for autism care. Several key contributions emerge:

- The high priestess's direct testimony offers epistemic authority and spiritual nuance that cannot be yielded through secondary analysis.
- Her interpretations of autistic traits through sunsum (spirit), kra (soul), and abosom (deities) provide sacred decoding of behaviors often pathologized in Western psychology.
- Documenting her guidance on drumming, libation, naming ceremonies, and herbal baths offers a culturally specific care model that can inform clinical and community-based interventions.
- Her framing of parents as chosen spiritual stewards reframes caregiving as a sacred assignment rather than a burden.

These insights are most applicable for families who actively welcome or incorporate spirituality into their understanding of autism. The high priestess's teachings offer a path for culturally responsive care through:

- integrating spiritual discernment into assessment and treatment;
- recognizing non-speaking presentations as meaningful;
- engaging extended family and community as therapeutic partners.

5. Conclusion

This research reframes narratives about children on the autism spectrum by highlighting the interpretive perspectives of an Akan high priestess and inviting more communal, relationally attuned forms of care. Through her teachings, Akan spirituality emerges as a culturally grounded framework that can complement and expand conventional approaches to autism, particularly for families who welcome

spiritual meaning-making. Her insights offer a pathway for transforming narrow or arcane autism practices and advancing counseling approaches that recognize the value of cultural, ancestral, and spiritual interventions. These findings resonate with African-centered scholars such as Wade Nobles and Na'im Akbar, who argue that Western psychology often overlooks the spiritual and communal dimensions essential to human well-being.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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