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Review Article

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Plant Healing as Governance of Life: A Gonja Philosophical Framework for Understanding Human Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of healing through the Indigenous Ngbarnyi-Gonja worldview of northern Ghana. It argues that healing is not merely a response to illness but a fundamental process of governing life, shaping destiny, and sustaining the integrity of the human being across physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

By examining the cyclical concepts of Aklabi (pre-existence), Nkpa (life), K'bawuta (life-living), and Klamba (destiny), the article positions healing as a dynamic interaction between the self, the environment, and nature. This Indigenous framework offers a transformative understanding of well-being that challenges biomedical reductionism and expands global discussions on holistic health.

Introduction

The question, "What is healing?" appears deceptively simple. Yet, across cultures, healing remains one of the most profound and enduring human concerns.

In many contemporary discourses, healing has been narrowly confined to the physical body. Medical systems prioritize symptoms, diagnoses, and interventions, often overlooking the deeper existential, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that shape human well-being.

In the Gonja worldview, however, healing is not an isolated event; it is a governing principle of life itself. To heal is to sustain existence, to influence destiny, and to harmonize the complex energies that constitute a human being. This article introduces a Gonja philosophical model of healing that broadens global conversations on health and provides insight into how societies conceptualize life, illness, and the forces that sustain them.

The Gonja (Ngbarnyi) concept of life is rooted in a distinction between Be—a state of pre-existence—and life as a temporary physical experience. Life is understood as the transformation of Be into a living form that inhabits the world for a limited period. Because life is temporary, it must be governed, cared for, and protected so that it may endure beyond its natural expectations. This understanding positions life as a journey rather than a possession, requiring constant regulation, attention, and alignment with sustaining forces.

To understand healing, one must first understand the cyclical flow of existence in Gonja philosophy:

Aklabi — Nkpa — K'bawuta — Klamba
Pre-existence — Life — Life-Living — Destiny

A key linguistic insight illustrates this cycle. In the Gonja language, Nkpa means both "to live" and "to throw." Life is

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therefore perceived as something propelled forward—like an object set in motion—moving through space and time until it reaches its endpoint.

Thus, Nkpa represents birth, the beginning of the thrown life; K'bawuta represents life-living, the active process of existence; and Klamba represents destiny, the totality of the journey.

In the Gonja intellectual tradition, healing is understood as "Governing One's Destiny," expressed through the acronym GOD. This concept does not refer to a deity in the Western theological sense, but to the governing natural order that sustains life. GOD (Nature) encompasses the actions, conduct, discipline, precautions, and measures that individuals adopt to protect life and maintain harmony with the environment. Healing thus becomes an ethical and ecological practice—a disciplined way of living responsibly within a shared world. It is not only curative but also preventive, relational, and deeply intertwined with destiny.

However, the Gonja (Ngbarnyi) conceptual framework, there are two complementary understandings of God. The first is the Creator—the originating source and the very nature of existence itself, from which all forms of life and the natural world emerge. This dimension of divinity brings nature into being.

The second is the God of the governance of destiny. This understanding emphasizes that destiny culminates in mortality and therefore requires guidance, care, conscious responsibility, and accountability throughout life. The God of the governance of destiny instructs human beings to protect life, steward existence wisely, and take responsibility for how destiny is shaped through human action.

In this sense, while the Creator provides nature, the God of governance calls upon humanity to engage with nature with care, discipline, and ethical restraint. This divine principle is concerned not with creation itself, but with responsibility, accountability, and the proper management of life, the environment, and human conduct within the world.

Global environmental disruptions—including climate change and complex socio-ecological challenges—were anticipated and critically examined within Indigenous knowledge systems long before their emergence in contemporary scientific discourse.

These insights were symbolically conveyed through songs, understood within Indigenous Gonja cosmologies as observational and regulatory forces within the Earth system. Through this medium, early warnings were articulated regarding processes that would precede present-day conditions, including environmental degradation, mineral depletion, and unsustainable extraction of natural resources.

Earlier generations lived in reverence for the divine order governing human–environment relationships and upheld healing as a foundational principle of ecological governance. This framework emphasized balance, restraint, and responsibility, enabling societies to maintain ecological stability and resilience. Consequently, these generations did not experience the scale and intensity of environmental crises confronting contemporary societies. The erosion of this Indigenous governance ethic—marked by a failure to assume responsibility for environmental stewardship and to operate within sacred ecological limits—has directly contributed to present conditions, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and escalating global disasters.

Within this context, songs composed in old-age traditions function as both knowledge systems and mechanisms of environmental regulation and healing. They operate as forms of holistic healing and early-warning frameworks that alert communities and nations to the consequences of unsustainable environmental governance.

These songs caution that neglecting responsible stewardship of land, climate, and resources will lead to systemic disruptions, including climatic instability, human suffering, and ecological collapse—outcomes now empirically observable. Had the warnings encoded in this Indigenous sonic knowledge been recognized and integrated into environmental decision-making, restorative processes could have been initiated earlier, and many contemporary environmental challenges might have been mitigated or avoided altogether.

To understand healing, one must also understand illness. In the Gonja (Ngbarnyi—the true Indigenous name of the language, with "Gonja" being a later borrowed commercial designation) worldview, illness is associated with patterns of harmful behavior, including lack of love, absence of peace, irresponsibility, and careless freedom. These behaviors produce emotional and environmental contamination.

Loss of connection to a clean and dignified environment generates illness. Loss of confidence and loss of the right to meaningful choice within one's surroundings result in unwholesome illness and disease.

Healing is therefore the act of responding to disruptions—whether within oneself or within the environment. It involves seeking answers to challenges that impede life. Healing repairs unfamiliar conditions affecting the entire being: body, emotions, mind, spirit, psychology, and environment. It restores life and realigns personal experience with the broader community of existence.

Healing unfolds across multiple dimensions. Physical conditions manifest in the body and may require tangible interventions such as medicine or surgery. In the Gonja worldview, a purely physical condition requiring surgical intervention is classified as a "world (physical) disease." Yet physical symptoms often reflect deeper disruptions in the spirit or soul. The inability to locate the source of illness is itself considered a form of illness.

The emotional and spiritual dimensions of plant healing are equally essential. The body is merely the receiver—the visible vessel through which deeper realities communicate. The Ka (the soul of doing) accompanies the body like a shadow, and many illnesses originate from disturbances or distancing of the soul. Asking "How do you feel?" is therefore an inquiry into emotional and spiritual states, not merely physical sensations.

Ancient traditional plant healers (Native Doctors), specialists now commonly referred to as physicians—such as those in Mankurma(Kaloɔ so po) —enter spiritual states that allow their spirits to travel toward the patient's spirit. They observe, return, and provide insightful diagnoses identifying the root of illness and the appropriate plants or herbs required for healing.

"Adur" (spiritual dimension or plant medicine) protects individuals from enemies—not necessarily human adversaries, but forces, conditions, or misalignments that threaten well-being. This medicine strengthens the bond between the living, their ancestors, and the nature of existence itself.

Healing begins at birth. A newborn has seven days to decide whether to remain in the world of the living. Naming occurs on the seventh day, after this decision is spiritually confirmed. Plant medicines are applied to the child's head to protect against the sun's intensity, while other plants may be placed on the lips as early forms of natural antibodies, introducing the child to the living environment.

Persistent crying or sickness in a newborn within its natural environment prompts the question: What is the baby missing? This question assumes that illness signals a disruption requiring attention and may involve physical or spiritual disconnection from the nature of existence—not punishment or pathology.

In the Gonja worldview, death is also understood as a form of illness—an indication that the body can no longer continue the journey with soul. While the body changes form, the soul does not die. The soul existed before life and continues after death. Reincarnation is therefore possible and understood as part of the soul's ongoing journey across multiple lifetimes.

The Gonja concept of healing invites a rethinking of global notions of well-being. Healing is not merely the correction of physical dysfunction; it is the governance of life itself—a dynamic process aligning birth, living, and destiny. This worldview challenges the over-medicalization of health and offers an Indigenous framework in which life is purposeful, illness is relational, destiny is participatory, and healing is both an ethical and spiritual responsibility. By bringing Indigenous African knowledge into contemporary discourse, we expand our understanding of what it means to be human—and what it truly means to heal.

Thank you very much for your attention to this work. I remain available for any further clarification, revision, or discussion you may require.

One Example of Gonja Plant Healings
The Original Concept of Plant Healing
The true concept of the plant, which ignited the composition of the traditional song and through which plant healing as life-living was articulated, was entirely generated from an age-old traditional and cultural song composed by the first- ever Native Doctors (physicians) of our grandmothers' generation, in a village known today as Sawla.

However, the hilarious nature of this song triggered laughter, entertainment, and distortion, diverting attention from the profound linguistic, metaphysical, and ethical insights embedded within its verses, as well as from the responsibilities encoded in the song.

The song has long been performed and transmitted orally; however, its original intention and deeper meaning were not clearly understood by the people. Through rigorous linguistic research in the Ngbarnyi language, Native Doctor—Dr. Rashid A. Iddrisu Wwari, the native doctor of Ngbarnyi—systematically excavated the song's encoded meanings. By decoding and interpreting its symbolic and philosophical layers, he brought these insights to light, preserving them for the benefit of present and future generations.

The message is expressed as follows:

Gonja Expression and English Translation

Gonja Language	English Translation
K'sa Awule Anye awo kumo!	Planet Earth, suspended in space belong to us.
Anye pui achi kumo so!	It is essential to us; it is the only hope we have.
Benye awuro ania ne anye ba keni kumoso na ani!	We must consistently take good care of it.
K'fo anye be jimene!	The time has come for us
ne ankeni kumo so aloɔŋɛ!	To observe and repair it.
Asoɔ foɔ K'ma ne ayaba!	When any unfamiliar thing arrives.
Aman dega ne amankur amo!	We should not deeply embrace it.
Abenki kuloɔ pa nlar!	It will turn into a sickness
Nŋin ndii a k'ma so'!	That will overtake every one of us.
Benye awuro ania	You must strive to do your best.
Anye wuro ania!	We all must strive to do our best.
Ak'ma awuro ania awuro ania!	Everyone must strive to do their best
Ne anye ba tinŋ a keni kumo so!	To be able to take good care of it.

Conceptual Clarification
Planet Earth, Suspended in Space, is Ours
In Gonja, K'sa awule refers to the ground upon which one settles, sits, walks, and performs daily activities. However, when translated into English, it conveys the idea of being suspended in space. The song itself serves as evidence that the Earth is understood as round rather than flat. This reflects the Gonja worldview that the ground is not static, but part of a suspended bodily form—planet Earth—which belongs collectively to all.

Our cultural and traditional understanding of belonging is inherently communal and inclusive. It emphasizes shared and collective responsibility in caring for what is essential to everyone, rather than individual, parochial interests or ownership of land and resources as personal property.

Additional Interpretations Introduction

The Savannah Region of Northern Ghana, West Africa, is home to a wide array of natural elements, native plants, and wild animals living alongside their human neighbors. Since time immemorial, the native Gonja [Ngbarnyi (Ngbanye)] people have maintained extensive knowledge of how to collaborate with one another, communicate with their immediate environment, and uphold a reciprocal relationship that values abundance in all aspects of their surroundings.

People harvested native fruits such as kakuwul yi (shea tree), kaklia yi (cotton tree), and kachuni yi (dawadawa tree), among others. They domesticated wild plants such as aduwurbi (millet), akularnku (groundnut), and ajɔ (yam), integrating farming harmoniously with the land. Soil fertility was sustained through animal manure and the natural cycling of nutrients, rather than through petrochemical fertilizers.

Medicine grew naturally in the bush and was administered under the guidance of revered traditional healers, rather than through pharmacies or laboratories. Before the introduction of plastic, food and supplies were wrapped in leaves, cooked in clay pots, and stored in gourds. People practiced seasonal hunting, refined Indigenous technologies for constructing distinct and efficient "touch houses," and, above all, celebrated their inheritance from their ancestors.

While this cultural connection to nature remains visible today, many Gonja people, along with other tribes in present- day Ghana, have fallen out of balance with their environment. This pattern is not unique to Ghana; it is observable across cultures on every continent.

Among the root causes of this imbalance are the long-term impacts of colonization—a slow disaster that forcibly disconnected Indigenous communities from their ways of life. The dominance of Western cultural systems altered societal expectations and continues to devalue Indigenous languages, knowledge systems, and practices. Although elders still carry this precious knowledge, what was once an innate understanding for West Africans is gradually being lost.

Yet, there is hope—hope found in seeds, both literal and symbolic. The seeds of the next generation, our children, embody the possibility of renewal, this will a long way if younger learners will adapt and make use of the {Gonja term A/Ebɔrɛ for God}, helping to bring about change by restoring a mindset that moves away from short-term gratification and extractive practices, and toward wellness, sustainability, and shared abundance.

Although ancient, the Gonja poem contains profound insight and timeless wisdom that is immediately applicable today. It urgently calls for observation and repair of the damage that has been done, and for renewed care of the Earth, which remains our only hope. The essential question remains: can we meet the daily needs of our communities while returning to our rightful place within, and respect for, the environment? This demands a change in mindset and immediate action.

We begin today.

Impact of Rampant Tree Felling and Permanent Damage

{Gonja Reflection}

A tree can take decades to grow, yet it can be destroyed in a moment.

Charcoal production is killing us. It is destroying biodiversity and accelerating soil erosion. The sickness—or disease—that will rise like water and consume everyone:

A ben ki kuloɔ pa nlar nɳin ndii a k'ma so Unfamiliar Things

Diamonds, metal extraction, chemicals, and similar elements represent unfamiliar intrusions. These unfamiliar things.

often become the seeds of conflict, leading to bloodshed and suffering. The poem warns us to be cautious about embracing them too deeply.

These materials are not essential to our survival, yet we covet them. Food and basic necessities are familiar to us; they are good and rightful. We do not eat gold or diamonds.

Chemical farming is killing us by destroying the soil and weakening crops. By taking good care of the planet, we can avoid our collective demise under the growing pressures of climate change.