

# **Colour Symbolism in Traditional Medicine and Healing Practices of the Dagomba Ethnic Group of Ghana**

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## **Abstract**

Traditional healing contributes tremendously to the healthcare desires of natives of traditional settings across the globe, especially with rural people in developing and underdevelop countries. Even though traditional healing is common and of great benefit to every society, there is little research on it among the Dagomba, in Ghana, especially colour symbolism in the healing practices. This study's purpose was to explore colour symbolism in traditional healing of the Dagomba. The study fits into cultural anthropology and thus uses observation and interview as data collection instruments, by spending time with a Dagomba traditional healer for one month. The findings were analysed qualitatively and organised thematically, showing that green, red, black and white are the prominent colours used in traditional medicine and healing of the Dagomba people. We recommend further studies of colour symbolism in other cultures of Ghana.

**Keywords:** colour symbolism, traditional healing, Dagomba ethnic group

## **1. Introduction**

Traditional healing contributes tremendously to the healthcare desires of natives of traditional settings across the globe, especially with the rural folk in developing and underdevelop countries (Adu-Gyamfi & Anderson, 2019). The origin of traditional healing dates back to the ancient times, even before man began documenting his life activities. Thus, it existed long before Western medicine evolved, which now takes the centre stage of healthcare worldwide.

The philosophy of traditional medicine and healing in the readings of various African traditions is intricate and multifaceted. A renowned Ghanaian sociologist, Nukunya, explained that African tradition is viewed as a composition of beliefs and practices that direct the value and purpose of the society, as well as aid society, to harness its basic critical resources (Nukunya, 1992).

Therefore, African traditions mirror the ideas, values and norms that are ever-changing in society and, hence, transmitted from generation to generation. As a result, the philosophy of tradition and traditional knowledge symbolises the native, indigenous and non-foreign, but also evolves to meet the changing demands of the society and its inhabitants (Nukunya, 1992; Krah, de Kruijf & Ragno, 2018). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2000, p. 1) defined traditional medicine as:

*the sum total of knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical, mental, [spiritual and social] illnesses.*

The traditional knowledge and practice of treating and healing ailments with both organic (fauna and flora) and inorganic elements has been a prevalent yet a culturally specific tradition across societies all through the ages. Traditional healing is therefore one of the primary parts of local traditions that has offered and persisted to offer treatment and care to greater populations, particularly in rural areas across several developing nations (Kwame, 2016; Edwards, 2015).

Traditional healing does not take care of only the physical wellbeing of the sick but also the spiritual, psychological, emotional and social aspects of the whole being. It is, therefore, a holistic approach to healthcare delivery. Notwithstanding, much research reveals that there are specialisations in traditional healing. These specialisations are traditional birth attendance, spiritual healers, herbalist and bone setters (Adu-Gyamfi & Anderson, 2019; Homsey et al., 2004; Gyasi et al., 2011; Barimah, 2013; Asante & Avornyo, 2013). In general, a practitioner of traditional healing is a traditional healer who is known by the people of his community as a capable and experienced person to administer healing using flora, fauna and inorganic substances. The traditional healer also incorporates the cultural anthropology and religious beliefs concerning the causes of various forms of ailments in their community, into their practice (Evans-Anfom, 1986, as cited in Barimah, 2013).

Even though traditional healing is common and of great benefit to every society, there is little research regarding traditional healing among the Dagombas, Ghana, especially with regard to colour symbolism in healing practices. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore colour psychology in the traditional healing practices of the Dagombas by interviewing a traditional healer.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1 Traditional Medicine and Healing Among Dagomba**

Before the advent of Islam into the kingdom of Dagbon, traditional healing was already being practised and was the sole means by which diseases were treated in the Dagbon society. Traditional healers in Dagbon draw on their beliefs in African indigenous faiths, as well as the impact of Islam in their understanding of treatment and curing (Izudeen, 2018). Their beliefs and concepts regarding human behaviour, the local habitat, the metaphysical realm, and sickness etiology in broad terms are used to make diagnoses and cures.

It is instructive to understand that knowledge of traditional healing among the Dagombas is through oral tradition, in the same way that the history, customs and norms are passed on from generation to generation. In most cases, healing knowledge is passed from a father to son or from one family member to the other (Kwame, 2016). As such, the learner stays with the healer as he performs the healing so that he, the learner, will acquire the healing knowledge through observation. Again, in the process of observation, the learner is taught the types of diseases, the causes of those diseases and the herbs or healing items required to combat those diseases. This implies that the learner must pay attention to every detail so that he does not mix up the diseases with their corresponding treatment plans. It is, however, important to note that with Western medicine at the fore of curing and treating diseases, some traditional healers of Dagbon incorporate some western ideologies into their healing practices (Kwame, 2016). Some of the items in the healing processes of the Dagomba are herbs, kola, and fowls, to mention but a few.

### **2.2 Evolution of Colour in Healing Process**

Colours inspired by 'nature' have a serious influence on human existence. Colour has piqued man's curiosity since the beginning of his civilisation. Various hues have traditionally been regarded as

the divine and spiritual manifestations of the Supreme Lord by the Hindus (Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022; Husaina, Azeemi, & Raza, 2018). According to these researchers, all other religions have strong feelings about colours with the common belief that God showers his kindness through the various colours that exist in the environment around us. Thus, some scholars have argued that our emotional states, conduct, and actions are all manifestations of this colour benevolence (Moffett & Hall, 2020).

Aside from the colour of the sky and other heavenly bodies (such as rivers, mountains, ocean, forest, earth, flowers, and wildlife), the rainbow, shining brightly across the sky, is also a beautiful phenomenon in which all seven hues in the spectrum are evident and are very beneficial in healing processes (Azeemi, 1999). Research on colour as a therapy has deepened over the years because colour has a great impact on human health and orthodox treatment initiatives. Nevertheless, there is scant research on colour therapy in Ghana and it is almost non-existent as far as Dagomba traditional healing is concerned.

Studies in the literature reveal that the principal colour of all colours of the universe is white because it is a composition of the seven colours of the rainbow. The mythology of the early Egyptians is that God Thoth was the first to heal using colours (Husaina et al., 2018). The ancient Egyptians believed that the human body is a composition of various coloured fluids and, therefore, colour forms the basis for healing innumerable ailments. For instance, human blood is red, the phlegm is white and the bile is yellow. These coloured fluids are connected to the various organs within the human being and, as such, colour is a facilitator to heal the body (Azeemi & Raza, 2005).

Based on this philosophy, Ibn Sina (AD 980 – AD 1037), who was an Arab physician, promulgated a colour healing theory which had a great benefit to human physiology (Azeemi & Raza, 2005). According to Ibn Sina, the human blood can be purified and its quality enhanced by white and red colours respectively, while inflammation and general pain can be drastically subsided by the colour yellow. As such, red flowers were used by Ibn Sina to cure complications related to blood, while bile disorders were effectively treated with yellow flowers. Additionally, violet and blue colours were used to treat bodily inflammations, as well as calming down the body (Azeemi, 1999). It is therefore important to find out how the colours of the items used in Dagomba traditional medicine and healing impact the healing process.

### **2.3 Symbolism of Colours in Ghana**

Colours have inherent meanings and connotations in Ghanaian culture and they are used based on their symbolisms (Azaglo & Kemevor, 2022; Adom, 2014; Pyne, 2009; Ayiku, 1998; Amenuke, Dogbe, Asare, Ayiku, & Baffoe, 1991; Breidenbach, 1976; Antubam, 1963). These academics unanimously documented that white symbolises purity, happiness, victory and vitality. White is used in joyous occasions to express happiness. Black connotes deep feeling of melancholy, sadness, past and old age. Black is used on sad occasions, like funerals, as well as making charms against wild animals and evil forces.

Red connotes blood relations, anger, calamity, danger and force. It is therefore used at funerals and warning signs against danger (Amenuke et al., 1991). Green symbolises newness, vitality, fertility and growth and it is, therefore, used for outdoor and child ceremonies and for purification and medicinal purposes. Yellow symbolises “royalty, continuous life, warmth and controlled fire, rule of God or king, prosperity of individual and state” (Amenuke et al., 1991, p. 183). How these colours are evident in the traditional medicine and healing practices of the Dagomba of Ghana is what this article sought to uncover.

### **3. Methodology**

The research is a qualitative study where an experienced Dagomba traditional healer was selected and interviewed to uncover colour symbolism in the practice of his traditional medicine and

healing. The healer, who is about 50 years old, was purposively chosen because he does not only possess deep knowledge of the healing practice but he is also educated and has adequate knowledge of Dagomba history and culture. Data were gathered over a month's period using an interview guide and observation checklist.

### **3.1 Data Collection**

The study employed unstructured interviews to explore colour symbolism in the traditional healing practice of Dagomba. The study also used participatory observation to appreciate the actual practice in the real-life settings. Both instruments of data collection helped in triangulating the findings. The interviews and participatory observations took place in the home (healing centre) of the traditional healer.

### **3.2 Data Analysis**

The data gathered through the interviews were tape-recorded and analysed qualitatively using the descriptive analysis approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Descriptive analysis is a data analysis approach used in describing conditions, populations or a phenomenon of a qualitative research study. It involves the identification of broad themes created from the transcripts of the recorded interviews, as well as the field notes from observation. Beyond the answers provided by interviewees to interview questions, generating themes from the data provides an analytical basis for data analysis and interpretation.

As such, the themes were developed and constructed in accordance with this approach, using signifiers that are related to the study's objective.

Prior to generating the themes, the data were coded and assigned categories. According to Saldana (2021), coding is an act of assigning a summative, salient, or evocative attribute of a portion of language-based data. The language-based data comprises of interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, artifacts and so on. In coding, the interviewee's responses, for example, were scrutinised to identify key sentences, expressions, statements, examples, and phrases, that clarified colour symbolism in healing. The data were then grouped into headings and subheadings for interpretation. As a result, field notes through observation and diary entries were often consulted to ensure that the data collected was accurate. The headings being developed were: the concept and practice of healing in Dagomba tradition; the classification of healing in Dagomba tradition; colour symbolism of objects required for healing; and the actual healing ritual and its semiotics.

### **3.3 Ethical Consideration**

Ethical consideration is important in conducting research that involves human subjects (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, the researchers ensured that all ethical requirements were observed in all the stages of the research. Primarily, informed consent from the participant, in this case the traditional healer, was sought and he comfortably volunteered to participate without compulsion. Again, the researchers ensured that the participant had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research. Finally, the researchers complied with confidentiality of information, the anonymity of the participant and the absolute security of data according to global research standards and best practices.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Structure of the Findings

The structure of the findings is presented in a diagram in Figure 1 to serve as an overview of the results of the study.

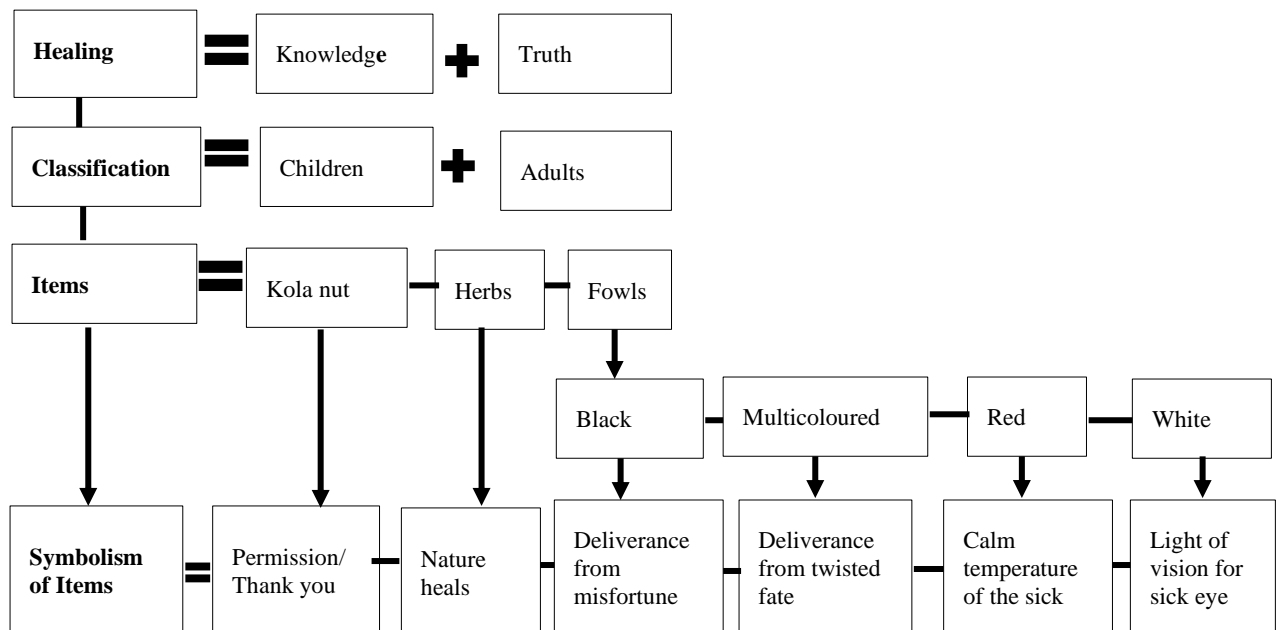


Figure 1: Summary of Results

### 4.2 The Concept and Practice of Healing in Dagomba Tradition

According to the participant, healing is anchored in the knowledge of tradition, customs and herbs as they are passed on from generation to generation of healers. Again, Dagomba traditional healing is built on truth and loyalty to their customs and beliefs; any healer who does not possess this unique quality will not be successful in his healing practice. This is because the healer is in constant communication with the ancestors and the ancestors will be listening as the healer utters dishonesty in the healing process. In healing, the ancestors, especially the one who bequeathed the healing knowledge to the healer is always called upon in the healing process.

According to the healer, they do not engage in healing practices on Wednesdays or Saturdays because it is generally believed in Dagomba tradition that everything done on these days shall be repeated. Dagomba do not organise sad events such as funerals on these days because the sad occasion shall be repeated. Instead, they organise happy events, such as a naming ceremony, marriage rites or enstoolments (raising a chief to power) on these days with the hope that the happiness shall be repeated.

It is instructive to note also, that in the Dagomba traditional healing practices, every person, regardless of the tribe or lineage, is considered one unique family of humanity. They are of the belief that everyone is a human, before being stratified into tribes or ethnic groups. Therefore, in times of sickness, it is the human the healer is delivering or treating and they do not care about the race.

Dagomba traditional healing delves into the social, cultural and spiritual world of patients, all of which are believed to impact upon their health within the traditional milieu. As such, Dagomba traditional healing is part a physician's work and part priest's work — where both physical and spiritual remedies are sought (Ngangah, 2013). There are instances where healing is successful by incantations through libation without the use of herbs.

### 4.3 Classification of Traditional Medicine and Healing among Dagomba

Traditional medicine and healing are classified into children and adult healing.

#### 4.3.1 Children Medicine and Healing

Considering children medicine and healing, the leaves and herbs are often used as to heal the child or baby. It revealing to note that children healing is considered ritual practice, whether the child is sick or not. Once a baby is born, the parents are supposed to receive the healing herbs to prevent the child from common baby diseases. Common diseases of children include convulsions (*downu*) and malaria (*kpaguzienu*). The leaves of trees are used rather than the roots because leaves are an offshoot of the roots and branches, just as children are offshoots of the adults. The green colour of the leaves symbolises the newness of the baby and to wish them growth and vitality. These leaves are boiled before they are used, unlike that of adult healing. In children healing, fowls are often not sacrificed as one of the required items for the healing process. This is because, unlike adult, a new born baby is faultless and, therefore, any evil against it comes to naught.

#### 4.3.2 Adult Medicine and Healing

The roots, bark and twigs of particular trees, for particular ailments, are often used when it is in the dry season but when it is in the raining season, the leaves are preferred. This is because, according to the participant, the potency goes to the leaves in the raining season. Adult herbs are often not boiled before they are used, except for particular ailments. Adult medicine and healing require the sacrifice of fowls, most especially a red fowl, when there is evidence that the ailment does not involve human intrusion.

### 4.4 Colour Symbolism of Items Required for Healing

#### 4.4.1 Kola Nut

Red kola is primarily used as a means of “knocking the door” of the healer. It is what you give to the healer to seek his services and blessings before you present your sickness to him. However, when the healer is successful in healing the person, white kola is presented as a “thank you” gesture to the healer.



Figure 2: Red Kola

#### 4.4.2 Herbs

Herbs constitute the root, bark, twigs and leaves of the medicinal plant; tree, grass or shrub. The herbs (leaves), if they are to be used by children, are often boiled and used for bathing for the sickness to be cured. According to the healer, the herbs are used because they are the product of Mother Earth and can be also attributed to the fact that they are cool colours and symbolise revival and, therefore, they have a cooling and calming effect for the person in pain.



**Figure 3: Herbs**

#### 4.4.3 Fowls

Fowls are the main living creatures used in the traditional healing process of the Dagomba ethnic group. The fowls are slaughtered as a sacrifice to the ancestors to appeal to them concerning the sickness of their grandchild (that is, the sick person). The fowls used are explained in the following sub-headings.

##### 4.4.3.1 Black fowl

Black fowl (*No'sabinli*) is one of the fowls sacrificed in only an adult healing process. The black fowl symbolises the human misfortune and machination that resulted in the sickness. It also symbolises that which is hidden, especially in the spiritual world. It is a means of removing the patient from the “black magic” or the “hidden agenda” that caused the sickness.

The healer explained:

*When we find out (through divination) that a patient's sickness is as a result of human doing, we will use the black fowl as a means to remove the person from the darkness that clouded their health before we will proceed to use the red fowl to reduce the temperature they are feeling as a result of the sickness.*

##### 4.4.3.2 Multicoloured fowl

A multicoloured fowl (*No'yoli*) is a fowl used together with the black fowl as means of removing the obstacles that will hinder the healing. Just as the black fowl, the multicoloured fowl is also used when a healer notices that the sickness is not a natural one given by the Supreme God but as a result of human evil. The multicoloured fowl is a symbol of twisted fate or literally “mixture of fate” on the part of the patient. This means the evil person has “mixed up” his healthy status, as well as his plans. According to the participant:

*We sacrifice the no'yoli to the ancestors to let them remove all the multiple problems or bad things human beings did to land the patient into the situation they find themselves. If we are able to expel these multiple human misfortune, we are assured that the treatment will be successful.*

It is worthy to note that, though the use of the black fowl and the multicoloured fowl may seem the same, both have distinct interpretations and come in order in the healing process. The multicoloured is sacrificed before the black fowl because it is the multiple human problems that landed the patient into the darkness of ill-health. Therefore, there is the need to do away with the multiple problems before removing the darkness caused by the problems.

#### 4.4.3.3 Red fowl

The red fowl (*No'zee*) is the main fowl used in the healing practice in Dagbon tradition. This is because anyone who is actually sick will have a higher body temperature. The person will feel the heat sensation and sometimes the body will seem to be in red flames. Based on this circumstance, the red fowl is used to appease the ancestors to calm the temperature of the patient. The red fowl is telling the ancestors that their grandson or granddaughter, as the case may be, is in danger and needs relief. It is important to state that almost all adult healing process requires a red fowl, especially when the healer finds out that the sickness is natural and not caused by any human evil. The black and multicoloured fowls are sacrificed prior to sacrificing the red fowl only when the healer confirms that the sickness is human causation.

#### 4.4.3.4 White fowl

White fowls are sacrificed in the healing practice only when the sickness affects the eye. According to the healer, “*We sacrifice the white fowl to the ancestors to enable the person’s eyes to see clearly because the light of vision is white*”. Apart from the eye sickness, all other diseases do not require a white fowl.



Figure 4: Fowls

### 4.5 Semiotics of the Actual Healing Ritual

The actual healing ritual is carried out by pouring a libation and slaughtering the fowls as mentioned by using the following criteria:

- Appear Supreme God.
- Seek permission from the gods of the land.
- Seek consent from ancestor healer.

The healer fetches water from an earthen-pot into a calabash, removes his hat, if he is wearing one, squats barefooted and with the herbs in front of him begins the incantation libation:

*“My Supreme God, you are the owner of the ground and you own the trees from which we had these herbs (pours on the ground and on the herbs). You own everything under the universe. The gods of our land (pours only on the ground to signify the lands are controlled by the gods) you controlled these lands of ours and I therefore seek permission from you to be pleased with my sacrifice to help us. My ancestor (mentions name) from whom I learned how to heal (pours only on the herbs), I am here again seeking healing right and consent from you, so this is your water. Your son is seeking relief for Wumpini who is having sleepless night. You taught me how to heal and you healed the sick based on truth and by using these herbs. You said I should use this knowledge to rescue every human being who knocks on my door. Your grandson Wumpini is suffering from malaria and since you used these herbs in healing during your days on this earth, I seek your consent to let Wumpini’s malaria vanished into thin air by using these herbs that you also did use. Let the malaria fly away into the oceans so that Wumpini will rejoice and be happy with good health. I hereby sacrifice these fowls (multicoloured, black and red fowls) to you to let the human misfortune that caused the disease and the body temperature (heat) as a result of the sickness*



*disappear and never come back* (he slaughters the fowls and sprinkle the blood on the herbs).

However, upon the request of the person involved (based on religious beliefs), the healer will not sprinkle the blood on the herbs. Multicoloured and black fowls are sacrificed to the ancestor healer for '*yeliyoya*' (twisted fate or literally "mixture of fate") and the hidden darkness engulfing the patient to be expelled. These fowls are set aside and are not added to the herbs for the sick person. They are for the healer. Only the red fowl is added to the herbs since that one is solely for the removal of the pain and heat the sickness in causing the patient.

It is important to know that, after slaughtering the *no'yoli* (the first to be slaughtered as indicated earlier), it will be thrown on the floor to struggle to settle. In settling down finally, if it turns on its back with the front part facing the skies, it means the inherited person has agreed for the healing to take place but if it faces down and its back is facing the skies, it means he has not agreed for the healing to take place and, therefore, a white fowl will be required. Again, even if it faces the skies but the head is at the west while the legs are at the east, it means there is agreement in hesitation so the one in pain is required to do a little sacrifice like giving someone a small gift before the healing will proceed. If it lies sideways on the right, it also means the ancestor-healer has agreed but if it lies left, it is not a good omen. Again, a crying fowl, before it is sacrificed means it cannot heal the disease so the healer will change the fowl.

Another semiotic of significance is numerology in the healing practice. It is a general custom in Dagomba tradition that a male is attributed to the number three in the cardinal principle of counting, while the female is attributed to four. Based on this belief, if a baby is a boy, the herbs (leaves) will be three folds (bundled into three) but, if it is a girl, the leaves will be four folds. By folds, it means that the leaves will be folded or tied in three sets or four sets. In announcing the birth of a baby delivered by a birth attendant in Dagomba traditional setting, when the cry-out is three times, it means a boy has been delivered and if they are four cry-outs, a baby girl is delivered. This numerology is applied to funerals in the sense that when a male dies, the third day will be the beginning of the funeral rites but if a female dies, the fourth day automatically begins the funeral rites. However, if the third or fourth day falls on either Wednesday or Saturday, the following day will be considered instead. The reason for this, as already explained earlier, is because these two days have the tendency to repeat the events that occur in them. To avoid more funerals, these days are skipped in funeral performance.

#### **4.6 Discussion**

Throughout history, traditional medicine and healing, coupled with colour therapy, are common and important treatment practices as revealed in the literature and various colours have their symbolisms in the practice of medicine and healing in various jurisdictions. The aim of this study was to find out if colour plays a significant role in the traditional medicine and healing practices of the Dagomba of Ghana. The study sought to find what the colours of the various items used in healing symbolise.

The results show that the demand of specific colours of items by the traditional healers, especially the fowls, in their healing practice is *sine qua non* to the treatment or curing of the sickness of patients. The symbolism of the colours is at the heart of the healing, especially when Dagomba healing practice involves largely the spiritual realm. It is worthy of mentioning that general symbolism of abstract colours across Ghanaian cultures, as documented by various art scholars in the literature, is not mutually exclusive to the colour symbolism in the Dagomba traditional healing practice. Yellow, for instance, symbolises royalty and the rule of God according to Amenuke et al. (1991). This is in contrast to the findings of this study that the calabash, which is yellow, is used in pouring libation or talking to God to intervene in Dagomba traditional healing practice. Similarly, black and red symbolises sadness and calamity (Adom, 2014; Pyne, 2009; Ayiku, 1998; Amenuke et al., 1991; Breidenbach, 1976; Antubam, 1963), which corroborates the results, because in

Dagomba traditional healing practice black and red fowls are sacrificed to deliver the patient from the sad and calamitous situations in which they find themselves. The green leaves solely used in children healing is in conformity with green symbolising newness, growth and vitality of children as expressed in the literature (Ayiku, 1998; Amenuke et al, 1991).

#### 4.7 Conclusion

Based on the findings of the current study, we can conclude that the concept of traditional medicine and healing among the Dagomba ethnic group does not depart from the definitions of traditional medicine and healing in general as reviewed in the literature (Izudeen, 2018; Kwame, 2016; WHO, 2000; Nukunya, 1992).

We can also conclude that colour symbolism is critical in the traditional medicine and healing practice of the Dagomba ethnic group in Ghana. Dagomba traditional healing ritual, we observed, is enriched with other forms of semiotics which are pertinent to the success of the art of healing. Through our search for relevant literature, we noticed that studies in colour symbolism in healing across Ghanaian cultures as a whole and in Dagomba culture are scanty. We recommend that researchers turn attention to colour therapy in other cultures of Ghana to have in-depth literature in that regard.

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