

Cultural Beliefs and Myths Influencing Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Diagnosis in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of cultural beliefs and mythologies with the diagnostic process of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in two East African urban settings—Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. While clinical awareness of ASD has grown in both cities, community perceptions continue to be shaped by entrenched cultural narratives that attribute autism symptoms to causes such as spiritual possession, maternal curses, witchcraft, or divine punishment. These myths contribute to delayed diagnoses, family denial, and stigma, which hinder access to appropriate services. Using qualitative interviews with caregivers, clinicians, and cultural leaders, the study uncovers the profound role of tradition and belief systems in shaping attitudes toward ASD. The paper argues for culturally sensitive intervention models and targeted community-based psychoeducation to bridge the gap between biomedical understanding and traditional interpretations of developmental disorders.

Keywords

Autism spectrum disorder; cultural beliefs; stigma; East Africa.

