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Contributors

1. Adesanya, Ahmed O.
Dept. of African Languages, Literatures &
Communication Arts,
Lagos State University, Ojo
2. Afisi, Oseni Taiwo
Dept. of Philosophy
Lagos State University, Ojo
3. Aja, Ngozi Chukwuemeka
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Dept. of Philosophy
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6. Amosu, Kehinde Olorunwa
Dept. of Philosophy,
Lagos State University, Ojo
7. Fashola, Joseph Omokafe
Dept. of Religious Studies & Philosophy,
College of Humanities, Redeemer's
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8. Ikeke, Mark Omorovie
Dept. of Religious Studies & Philosophy
Delta State University
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9. Johnson-Bashua, Adepeju Olufemi
Dept. of Religions & Peace Studies
Lagos State University
Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria
10. Kuponu, Selome
Dept. of Religions & Peace Studies
Lagos State University
Ojo, Lagos
11. Moshood, Abdul-Wasi, Babatunde
Dept. of Political Science
Lagos State University
Ojo, Lagos
12. Offor, Francis
Dept. of Philosophy
University of Ibadan
Ibadan / Dean, Faculty of Humanities
Management & Social Sciences
Dominican University, Ibadan
13. Olatade, Damilola Peter
Dept. of Philosophy,
Lagos State University, Nigeria
14. Olubunmi, David
Dept. of Philosophy
Prince Abubakar Audu University
Anyigba
15. Osawaru, Osamede Christopher
Dept. of Philosophy, University of Benin,
Benin-City,
Edo State, Nigeria.
16. Oyekan, Adeolu O.
Nelson Mandela University
Port Elizabeth
South Africa
17. Paramole, Kabir Olawale
Dept. of Religions & Peace Studies
Lagos State University, Ojo
18. Sanni, Mubarak Oluwadamilola
PG Student, Dept. of Religions & Peace
Studies
Lagos State University, Ojo
19. Surakat, Ajibola Moruph
Dept. of Philosophy
Olabisi Onabanjo University
Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State.

Contents

1.	Monadologism, Inter-subjectivity and the Quest for Social Order —Fashola, Joseph Omokafe & Offor, Francis	1
2.	Surrogate Motherhood and the Harm Factor: A Consequentialist Critique —Oyekan, Adeolu. O., PhD & Amara, E. Ani	11
3.	Corruption and the Problem of National Sustainable Development: A Socio- Religious Approach—Johnson-Bashua, Adepeju Olufemi, PhD	26
4.	The Imperative of Individual Rights in African Communitarianism —Amosu, Kehinde Olorunwa	38
5.	Artificial Intelligence and the Limits of Epistemic Justification —Akande, Michael Aina, PhD	51
6.	An Assessment of Women's Rights in Islam: Lessons for Contemporary Marital Challenges in Lagos, Nigeria—Paramole, Kabir Olawale, PhD & Sanni, Mubarak Oluwadamilola	63
7.	The Question of African Identity and Intellect: A Heuristic Survey of African Ethno-Medical Genius—Olatade, Damilola Peter	78
8.	The Interface between Indigenous Culture and Societal Development in Nigeria—Osawaru, Osamede Christopher	87
9.	Marx's Critique of Capitalism and the 21st Century Environmental Crisis —Ikeke, Mark Omorovie	104
10.	Ethics, Accountability and the Fight against Corruption in Nigeria: The Quest for an Antidote—Moshood, Abdul-Wasi, Babatunde, PhD	115
11.	Further Reflections on Karl Popper's Critique of Plato's Totalitarian Justice —Afisi, Oseni Taiwo.	132
12.	Exploring Mathew Lipman's Philosophy for Children as a Basis for the Development of Reasoning for Moral Judgement —Surakat, Ajibola Moruph.	140
13.	Geomantic Code as Nonverbal Communication in Yorùbá Novels —Adesanya, Ahmed O	151
14.	The Mathematical Nature of Curves in Relation to Art —Olubunmi, David	166
15.	Civil Disobedience and Justice: An Appraisal of Hannah Arendt's concept of "Power Lying in the Street"—Aja, Ngozi Chukwuemeka	177
16.	Tolerance among Undergraduate Christian Religious Students: A Case Study of Penultimate-Year Students of Lagos State University, Ojo —Kuponu, Selome	190

The Question of African Identity and Intellect: A Heuristic Survey of African Ethno-Medical Genius

Olatade, Damilola Peter

Abstract

The question of African identity is necessarily tied to the issue of originality. It is on this premise that Eurocentric and Western ethnographic comments developed the pattern of denigrating the Black Intellect as a justification for colonization and civilization. The unfair comments that may be traced to these minds concerning Africans as a whole, and Nigerians, in particular has served as a basic catalyst for how Africans both see themselves and the world around them thereby fueling the need for excessive reliance or dependence on other peoples of the world. This is one of the motivations or reasons for the lack of originality and uniqueness that is pertinent for the contemporary African intellect. Granted that there have been arrays of rejoinders to the discourse on the originality and question of African identity and intellect, this research explores the discourse from the lens of ethno-medicine. This study shows instances of Black genius as we foray into the culture of medicine in the medical cultures of pre-modern Nigeria as a way of refuting the misleading assertion that traditional Africans lack the capacity for critical and rational thought. This research submits that these practices have the capacity to be regurgitated for contemporary use. The method employed is the method of philosophical analysis.

Keywords: African identity, ethnomedicine, eurocentrism, Nigeria, philosophy

Introduction

There were some derogatory comments that arrived from Europe concerning ancient Africans and their capacity for critical thinking and whether or not they have been able to make any form of intellectual progress both for themselves and the world. These comments emerged from notable Western anthropologists, philosophers and ethnographers but also extend to Western scientists and evolutionary theorists such as Charles Darwin and the negative inferences from their studies continue to dictate how the world continues to view Africans even to the present time. In this research, the primary occupation is to disclose the fallacious and misleading proposals emanating from these Eurocentric erudite. Hence, in the next section, we make an explorative exposition of the proposals emanating from these minds concerning precolonial Nigeria and the rest of Africa. We also, in this part, make the effort to-

ward the implications of these comments in contemporary times. In the third part of this study, not only do we argue that these verdicts concerning pre-colonial Africans are erroneous but offer instances, documented by some other Western scholars, displaying the science of medicine among these peoples. Since the thrust of this essay concerns pre-colonial Nigeria, trado-science inputs from these peoples will be highlighted. We also explain how this science can be regurgitated in present times for contemporary utility. In the fourth part, we conclude the thrust of this disquisition.

Traditional Africans and the Rationality Question

In this section, we concern with the propositions and verdicts of these Eurocentric scholars and the implications of their utterances concerning traditional Africans, Nigerians inclusive.

The one scholar that usually comes to mind is Lucien Levy-Bruhl. For Levy-Bruhl (1995:43), ancient Africans are:

Primitive people who had no idea of natural explanation. As people whose dreams are real experiences lacking the mental wherewithal to distinguish between subject and object, good and bad, moral and immoral. Primitive, barbaric, irrational, uncivilized and most importantly people without capacity for critical and rational thinking—qualities that are natural to doing philosophy.

On a similar note, Friedrich Hegel writes that: “The African is an example of animal in all his savagery and lawlessness” (Hegel, 1975:177). Elsewhere, he substantiates: “Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. . . . Egypt . . . does not belong to the African spirit” (Hegel, 1959:99). David Hume and Immanuel Kant too have not held back concerning the intellect of ancient Africans as low grade and inferior to Europeans. The assertion of Hume (1985:319) is necessary for the sake of clarity:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation.

Obviously, the foregoing excerpt from Hume, one of the most respected philosophers but who never set his foot on the African continent is worrisome. This is however not implausible since he relies extensively on the scientific theories of race that was promulgated by the biologists and anthropologists that worked in Africa in the 17th and 18th centuries. Hume’s and the perspective of other Eurocentric scholars seems to have been underscored

by the biased understanding that Europe produce the most handsome and beautiful men which is the genuine color of humanity (Yuddell, 2014:11). In his description of Africans, the Swedish biologist Carolus Linnaeus, writes that they are "black, phlegmatic...hair black, frizzled...nose flat; lips tumid; women are without shame, they lactate profusely; crafty, indolent, negligent...governed by caprice" (See Smedley 1999, 164). After his assessment of the skulls of the different races, Samuel Morton's experiments allowed him to infer that "the Caucasian and Mongolian races had the highest cranial capacity and thus the highest level of intelligence, while Africans had the lowest cranial capacity and thus, the lowest level of intelligence. This work became the basis for more than a century of work studying intelligence and race" (Yuddell, 2011:16).

It was however in the 19th century following the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin that Africans were considered as savages (Ofuasia, 2019). According to Darwin (1871:97), the savages have "low morality, insufficient powers of reasoning and weak power of self-command." Darwin applies his principle of natural selection to justify white supremacy, the extermination and replacement of non-white humans, whom he considers as the evolutionary link between Caucasians, the civilised race and animals. Darwin insists that the gap between civilised man, (whites) and his closest evolutionary ancestors (i.e. non-whites) will widen. The gap will eventually be between civilized man "... and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as at present between the Negro or Australian and the gorilla" (Darwin, 1871:83).

It is from these negative ascriptions and descriptions that have served as the basis for colonization, Christianization and civilization of Black Intellect. This is the thrust of the Nigerian economist, Claude Ake (1981:83) who had lamented that:

...more emphasis was placed on the justification of colonialism as a service to the colonized people. What service? Essentially the service of civilizing them. That is why colonialism was 'popularly' referred to by colonizers as a civilizing mission. According to the theory, the civilization of the native, includes among other things, bringing them Western Education, the benefits of Western technology, bringing them into the stream of human history, getting them to discard their 'barbaric culture' and generally redeeming a way of life captive to ignorance, poverty and disease.

It is therefore not far-fetched, following the convictions of Ake that traditional African cultures and conceptions of reality would have been eroded and replaced by a more seeming buoyant and sophisticated Western culture. A critic may demand the relevance of these disclosures in this research since it

does not improve the lot of these ancient peoples. It is however crucial to understand that it is important to engage in this research for the sake of originality and application of reason and logic among ancient Africans for the sake of an authentic existence and dignity. The traditional or alternative knowledge of these ancient Africans in medicine and their socio-economic and the political activities were either eroded or compromised as Ifeanyi Menkiti (2002:36) elaborates that:

...in the case of Africa, the kingdoms simply ground to a halt, and what replaced them were territories created by an act of imperial will, not something that organically evolved. This dissolution of peoples by imperial will, and the subsequent attempt to impose on the space, which was formerly occupied by the dissolved peoples, a new order of governance patterned after European national needs and political understandings, lies, it has been argued, at the base of Africa's current problems of state malfunction.

Granted there are deluges of replies to the charge that traditional Africans are lacking in cerebral competence, this study continues as one of these. When it limits itself to the domain of traditional medicine and science among the peoples, it highlights that there are aspects of these traditional pasts that may be revived for contemporary application.

Ethnomedicine and the Scientific Cultures of Precolonial Nigeria

It is important to stress from the outset that by ethnomedicine, what is meant is the traditional medical practice that is "based on bioactive compounds in plants and animals practiced by various ethnic groups, especially those with little access to Western medicines" (Deepak & Anshu, 2008:440). This is made possible by the notion of ethnoscience which also implies the effort to examine culture from the scientific perspectives peculiar to them (Atran, 1991). It is also interesting to note that most of the reports that will be encountered in the course of this exploration are derived from Western scholars. This then baffles one why these reports were not made available to those who seek to denigrate the identity of traditional Africans.

Normally, science is dedicated to the study of "regularities in natural phenomena so that prediction becomes possible" (Isichei, 1983:296). It specializes in assessing the cosmos via physical observation and harnessing same "...theoretically and practically for human kind's benefit" (Ofuasia, 2015:x). In a related vein, Isaiah Ngedu (2014:245) announces that "Science is not a field of study like mathematics, chemistry and economics, but a method which should be applied to other branches if they must gain relevance in the

modern world." This perception is also similar to Edward Wilson's (1998:58) idea that "science as an organized, systematic enterprise that gathers knowledge about the world and condenses the knowledge into testable laws and principles." Whereas one cannot speak of ethnoscience in pre-colonial Nigeria strictly from this dimension and emphasis on empirical observation and prediction, there are traces of this approach in traditional pre-colonial ethnoscience where diseases and epidemics were replete. Elizabeth Isichei (1983:296) is certain of this when she highlights that "traditional societies reacted to these scourges in a variety of ways, some scientific in the Western sense of the term, and some symbolic and magical." In an attempt to check the spread of smallpox effort to quarantine, it is said of the Yawuri people of North-west modern Nigeria that:

Fear of smallpox looms large in the thoughts of the islanders, and very sensible measures are taken to prevent its spread to the villages. In the hot season, when smallpox is rife, the householder prevents his family from out into the sun. . . . Strangers coming to the village are excluded from entry until the afternoon (Harris, 1930:315).

They were also instances of arm inoculation against smallpox among the Tivs, Fulanis and Hausas as well as in Bornu, Jukun, Katab, and among the Wurkum of Bambur (Isichei, 1983:296-7). Specifically, "they used to scratch our arm until the blood came, then they got the fluid from someone who had small pox and rubbed it in" (Smith, 1954:46).

Whereas the ethnomedical knowledge of inoculation was replete in pre-colonial northern Nigeria, only traces of it may be found within the southern regions. Specifically, the Owo people of modern Ondo state, modern Nigeria "practiced vaccination for small-pox long before the white man ever visited the country – it is said that one of their kings originated the idea" (Johnson, 1904-6:195).

Surgical operations were also carried out among the pre-colonial ethnomedical groups in Nigeria. Caesarian sections were common and the Yoruba people of South-west Nigeria operated successfully for cataracts (Isichei, 1983:297). Trepanning was rampant among the Igbo of Bende where "the patients almost invariably recovered, but not all doctors were capable of performing the operation" (Talbot, 1926:944). The setting of bone fractures was a common ethnomedical phenomenon. For the Owo, "their own method of bone-setting they considered in every way better, less troublesome, and more readily successful than that of the white man" (Johnson, 1904-6:195).

The knowledge of herbs and their healing properties cannot be shoved away easily too. It has been documented that "early European visitors owed

their lives to Nigeria herbalists" (Isichei, 1983:297). The first-hand experience of pre-colonial Yoruba herbal mixture by Clapperton (1829:29) needs to be disclosed:

The caboceer brought me some medicine to take, it was like lime juice and pepper. I was so sick that I could not stand for half an hour after I had taken it; I then got suddenly well, both as to the pain in my side and the severe diarrhoea which had troubled me.

Another European visitor also attests to pre-colonial Sokoto herbal mixture thus: "The fruits of the gherret...are a very important native medicine, especially in cases of dysentery, and it is most probably to them that I owe my recovery when attacked by that destructive disease during my second stay in Sokoto in November 1854" (Barth, 1967:248). This has therefore led to the affirmation that "the knowledge which the Hausas possess in regard to the cure of certain well-known diseases is by no means so far behind our own as might have been expected" (Robinson, 1896:145). Robinson recorded treatments for varieties of ailments among the Hausa. Some are instances of hydrophobia (the immediate consumption of the live of the dog concerned); and the antidotes usually supplied for snake bites to conclude "of the genuineness of which, no reasonable doubt can be entertained" (Robinson, 1896:145).

The ethnomedical practice and the pharmacological cultures of pre-modern Nigeria seem to be so rich and complex that one wonders why such feat are not been replicated in contemporary times. What factors are responsible for this neglect? What effective measures may be taken to curtail the surge in rampant illnesses among contemporary Nigerians that was powerless among our progenitors? These are tough questions that we do not boast to have answers to within the pages of this explorative discourse. The only point we can address is to lay emphasis on the relevance that ethnomedical practices possess and how it may be fused with foreign medical practices. This is the goal of the section that follows.

Ethnomedical Practices and the Contemporary Medical Practices in Nigeria

There is no doubt that modern Nigeria is an admixture of various cultures that have integrated and interpenetrated one another especially with Western influence as a catalyst. As a result, traditional and cultural related episteme have been perceived as instances of demonic and esoteric natures of the pre-colonial past that Jesus the Christ and Mohammed the Prophet, in addition to Euro-American and Arabic civilizations emphasize the urgency to dump. Hence, it is obvious that the relevant aspects of ethnomedical practice

es in the pre-colonial past which can serve as relevant cues for recent times may be irredeemable. There is however the need to try, to make attempt at engaging with Afro-indigenous ethnographical studies to be able to extrapolate and regurgitate these ideas forcefully.

It is important to raise consciousness and distill the urgency that African cultural values and the positive roles that they can play in contemporary African living needs to be accentuated. Instances abound in other climes where they stuck so rigidly to their views. Ancient Chinese and Indian ethnosciences, which were hitherto conceived as esoteric ideals were vindicated as anticipations of modern physics in the preceding century (Capra 1975). It is not impossible that traditional Nigerians and Africans could have also developed ideas along this line but have not arrived to us firstly, because of the level of sophistication and assimilation of foreign ideals and second secondly because Eurocentrism has done an seemingly irreparable damage to the Black Intellect that whatever is evinced as a case of Black genius in ancient times is quickly dismissed as esoteric and diabolic. To reverse this ugly consensus is one of the thrusts of this essay. It is therefore important to first commence with the goal of self-retrieval, self-reliance and self-affirmation.

The retrieval is important to invoke the ancient Nigerian ethnomedical practices that can be relevant in today's medical sector. When retrieval is in place, reliance will blossom. This because there will be two medical cultures that will be used for diagnosis and treatment. This is beings a measure of confidence and competence into play since the millions of dollars leaving Nigeria for medical tourism in foreign countries will no longer be the case. Automatically, self-affirmation enters the fray as the country will not only stamp her contribution to world medical heritage and civilization but indirectly prove wrong the initial misleading assumptions concerning Black Intellect, which had generated inferiority complex, excessive reliance on the global north as well as underdevelopment and poverty that now serve as counter cultures.

All of the foregoing cannot be made possible without the active participation of African heads of government and the introduction of the curriculum that will address this as pedagogy from infancy. This is important because a whole scale foray into local medical practice will require government backing for genuineness and authentic results that will compete with other medical practices in the world. Much as the African reality is different from those of the other peoples of the world, there is the need to work and engage this reality deeply and sternly for the right results to appear. This is precisely what the former professor of philosopher seems to have conjured almost three decades ago:

The mind of the African is not structurally different from that of the Westerner. Also, the contextual contrast between Western thought and traditional African thought, which considers only the former as a suitable material for philosophical reflection, rests on false premises. The truth is that both are similarly marked by the same basic features of the human species. The difference lies in the ways the two societies conceive of reality and explain objects and events. This is so because they live different forms of life. And it is for this reason alone that an intelligible analysis of African thought demands the application of its own universe of discourse, its own logic and its own criteria of rationality. The primary task of the African philosopher is to fashion out these unique working tools with which to unearth the complexities of the social form that confronts him. (Sogolo, 1993:74)

Conclusion

The preceding pages have been committed to attaining two principal. The first articulated, via ethnomedical practices in pre-colonial Nigeria, instances of genius to counter the initial Eurocentric and Western ethnographic denigration of Black Intellect. The second agenda is full of suggestion to ways through which the relevant pre-colonial medical practice of Nigeria may be revived for contemporary utility. It is therefore the position that is being canvassed for by this study that it is important to return to the relevant aspects of the traditional past that may serve as the viable catalyst for theory and method that will improve contemporary medical culture in the country.

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