

**INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS, THE ENVIRONMENT AND
THE PRACTICE OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN AFRICA**

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Abstract

This paper is an examination of the practice of traditional medicine in Africa. It is generally believed that all societies have its own knowledge system, and that any society that lacks this capability is said to lack its own mind process. There is hardly any society without one, this paper therefore set out to show how and properly understand the culture, practice, traditional beliefs, spiritual climate and practices in African medicine. Central to the practices of African medicine is the knowledge system and myths surrounding it. The study analyses these myths and its potency in healing process, highlighting its epistemological and scientific efficacy. The paper concludes that although, there are scientific approaches in the practice of African traditional medicine, but more needs to be done in the discovery and demystification of certain practices to establish its epistemological validity.

Keywords: Traditional Medicine, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Africa, Metaphysics, Epistemology

Introduction

There is the need to study, determine and properly-understand and appreciate the culture, traditional beliefs, spiritual climate, and religions of a society whose behaviour researchers observe in space and time. A critical study of African religion reveals without doubt an understanding of knowledge in African society. The concept of knowledge referred to here is epistemology, a branch in philosophy. Epistemology is a branch of philosophy, which deal with the theories of knowledge, it sets the standard criteria for what is, as distinct from mere opinion, from that which is true as distinct from that which is false.

It is generally believed that all societies has it's own knowledge, any society that lack this capability is said to lack it's own mind process. There

is hardly society without this, this is because such society will be said to be an irrational society, K.C Anyanwo once asserted that "without knowledge it is impossible for most society to express their world view which constitute an aspect of their experience". The African and European researchers would merely input emotive appeals to cultural forms and behavior as suggested by some unknown minds . Knowledge therefore serves to preserve the culture and belief system of the society. The holds true also in traditional medicine in African society. Although most scholar have tagged it metaphysical, some have argued that the excessive myth surrounding it makes it more ritualistic than a healing process.

However, no one can doubt the potency of traditional medicine. The paper examines these myths and their role in the healing process. Even in countries like China, India, Malaysia, where traditional medicine has been integrated into their national health policy, they are still some element of myth. The only difference is that attempt has been made to give scientific or epistemological analysis of their trado-medicine.

The paper apart from the introduction is divided into three parts, the first examine some conceptual issues, the second looks at African knowledge system, the third and last part looks at the metaphysics of traditional medicine a conclusion.

Conceptual Issues

a. Epistemology

The concept epistemology originates from two Greek words "Episteme" meaning knowledge and "logos" meaning logical or rational. Epistemology which is the theory of knowledge is a branch of philosophy that tries to study what is knowledge, the source and the limit of human knowledge. With regard to source of knowledge most epistemologists believe that knowledge is either derived from empirical or sense perception or from apriori reasoning. This categorization has divided epistemologists into two camps as far as western philosophy is concerned. The empiricist argue or tend to believe that our knowledge is derivable from sense perception through our experience of the external world; while they do not deny the reasoning as a source of knowledge they rather hold that our experience determine what we reason about. On the other side of the divide is the rationalist philosophers who believe that our only source of knowledge is reason through intuition and deductive logic. They

generally hold that our experience can only be explained through reason and as such reason is the only source of knowledge. This school was fore grounded by no other person than the father of modern philosophy Rene Descartes.

Rene Descartes in his Meditation argue or likened the knowledge we derive from sense perception to a piece of wax and comments that "the perception i have of it is a case not of a vision or touch or imagination but of purely mental scrutiny " That is, Descartes contrasted his sense of vision or sight and touch on the one hand, which according to him do not by themselves give us knowledge of the wax and 'purely mental scrutiny' on other. From this contrast he concluded that our knowledge of the wax comes from the mind and not from sense alone. It was from this analogy that he concluded that:

I now know that even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood. 4

On the other hand John Stuart Mill a British philosopher took the other side of the divide that is from empiricist perspective. Ile believed that all our knowledge claims are empirical; hence he denied the possibility of apriori or rational knowledge. He illustrated his argument using the law of non-contradictions. The law state's that statement no statement can be both wholly true and wholly false, according to him:

I consider it to be like other axioms, one of our first and most familiar generalizations from experience. The original foundation of it I take to be that be that Belief and Disbelieve are two different mental states, excluding one another. This we know by the simplest observation of our own minds. 5

For Mills, the principle of non- contradiction can be known empirically and this is only possible through experience, he thus concluded that all our knowledge begins with the senses.

b. Metaphysics

The term metaphysics derive its origin from the Greek word "meta physika" which simply means after the physical. Historically the concept associated with Aristotle's work. Aristotle produced works dealing with

the nature of the physical world entitled the physics. After his death when his works was being edited by his editor he came to discover that included in the same volume were a number of untitled writing of his which were dealing with some abstract things like the soul, sprit, death, life after death, mind and body. These came to be known as metaphysics. In the modern times the concept is not only used to refer to his works alone but as a study of that which is abstract in nature. That is, metaphysics cover realm of ontology; by which it is meant, the being of object or the existence of being. The philosophers here are not interested in the existence of the objects for interesting sake but rather they are interested in categorizing these Objects, into material and non material objects.

Again this categorization has divided philosophers into the materialist philosophers and the idealist philosophers, while some have argued that all that exist matter or material in nature and that non-physical matter, such as the mind are traceable material substances for instance the brain or the central nervous system.

On the other side of the divide is the idealist philosophers who believe that objects like the mind has independent existence, that is, they are not locatable in space and time neither does it have size or shape, as a result this school of thought believe in the existence of a dualism. While the former's position is referred to as monist. In the case of dualist philosophers they hold that there are two basic entities, the mind and the body. The body they hold is material entity locatable in space and time, with size shape and color, reverse is the case of monist who believe that all substance are nothing but matter.

Knowledge in African

African knowledge system is not a distinct form or type of epistemology, it is epistemology in the general sense of the word - epistemology that is the search for knowledge. However, let us briefly examine Western epistemology. From our conceptual analysis of epistemology we discover that western epistemology creates compartmentalization and a duality world. Dualism in Western philosophy assumes that subject and object are two separate independent realities⁶ that is, they represent two opposing theories of knowledge which are rationalism and empiricism. This compartmentalization in turn brought about the division of reality in metaphysics in terms of objectivity and subjectivity. According to

Ndubuisi and Okoro this dualism led to other dualism in Western philosophy such dualism as mind and matter, freedom and necessity, determinism and indeterminism

The uniqueness in African epistemology is the elimination of this duality, that is, there is no distinction between the object and subject, matter or ego, and man and nature. Nature, Clement Onianga observed, is centered upon the self and that man live in a personal world of cultures. This makes African epistemology holistic, since Africans consider nature not to be complex whole. Nature for them becomes self centered. This eliminates the conflict between the self and the world, object and subject. This is because every experience of reality is personalized. This personalization of nature, Ndubisi and Okoro assert is the totality of human belief and experience. In corroborating this, Ayanwu comments that the totality of humans and their faculties do not address themselves to reason, imagination, feelings and intuition alone, but to the totality of a person's faculty. That is why the deepest expression of African cultural reality is through art, myths, music and dance. This eliminates the dualities that exist in western epistemology, that truth is lived and felt, not merely thought but as Udiguomen puts it, it involves participation II; it goes beyond talk, it is lived, felt and torched not in isolation but in participation.

To understand the knowledge of reality Africans maintain, that the individual do not detach himself from the universe but rather actively continuous participate in process life events because in space in and African time; just culture as life death and death is considered are seen as ora conceived of, as ultimately part of harmony of nature. It is not the destruction of the individual, but merely the passing away into another state of existence. Despite the painful nature of the departure it is still celebrated as dead but living, that is the living dead. This is because although dead he still remains alive in the active memory of his relatives, who celebrate his life for a long time. This is because, in Clement's words, he is remembered both mentally and also by ritual remembrance sacrifice. Arguing along the same line is Mbiti, who believes that the living dead should be respected as an ancestor

This serves as the basic foundation of African epistemological belief; that in this kind of artistic world and universe, all opposites form one living, unitary and inseparable reality from thought. That is, man and nature are

not two inseparable and opposing realities, rather reality is one inseparable continuum of a hierarchical order of forces. This order of forces that Clement referred to as a power grid¹⁴, interact with each other in such a harmonious way that there is order. The order of this forces include God at the highest point, the supernatural beings or gods in the middle, ancestors, man or human beings, animate beings, and in inanimate forces such as stones at the lowest level. The connection is such that the highest being or force which is God directly influences the lower ones, while the lower ones indirectly through the intermediaries such as ancestors influence the higher beings through rituals, sacrifices and prayers.

On the whole participation in this instance is based on human experience, for instance, the belief in magic and other traditional belief is because there are certain behaviours and practices that are called magical, and every culture has its own reasons and grounds for its beliefs. Take the case of the belief in God, divinities, spirits, ancestors or living dead as discussed above which are centered on certain foundations; these beliefs are meaningful and their justifications are based on human experiences. These experiences are in turn guided by culture. By culture we mean the principle that guide our beliefs and ideas and help us to live meaningful life.

The understanding of these beliefs give us the knowledge of causation in terms of the interaction of forces of nature, how things emerge out of many interactions. That is how one type of force produces an effect on another type of force¹⁵. This is because there exists the principle of ontological balance which plays a key rule in the African way of thinking and knowledge. Roy expresses this when he asserts that "they form an inter relationship among the various categories of forces that constitute the forms of the structure of reality". Like the grid line as described by Clement, Mbiti stressed the need to maintain the ontological balance between God and man, the departed and living ¹⁸. This directly affects the individual in the command or the entire community; this is because peace and order in the community are attained when there are no changes in this balance.

As regards harmony in this hierarchy of being, the hierarchy is such that there is intelligence at each level, this made Roy to posit that divinities,

spirits, human beings and certain forces are endowed with intelligent forces.¹⁹

From our analogy it becomes clear that force is critical and central in African perception, of realities. Tempels, explicates, this about the Bantu people when he asserts that being for the Bantus is concerned with the category of force of reality which exist in everything in the universe.²⁰ For Temple force is the reality of reason which all beings, in his own words, have in common so that the definition of this reality may be applied to all existing form of being A . According to Temple, in Bantu ontology, the all embracing element which permeates all elements and all form of being is force. Metaphysics for the Bantu, he further contends, consists of knowledge embracing all the physical or the real. This force is the foundation of reality and experience of metaphysics.

On the whole African epistemology is surrounded by the role played by humans, nature and vital forces and the interrelationship of these vital forces in nature. Vital power is what matters in life. ²² That is, the unity in nature is based on self-experience and cannot be separated as any attempt is impractical. Anyanwu explicates this when he argued that the self vivified or animated the world so that soul, spirits or mind of the self is also that of the world. The order of the world and that of the self are identical. ²³

Secondly what destines man in African society is the way he is situated in the society, the way he acts and is acted upon and reacts in every event. African cultures promote coexistence with many of the vital forces or vital relationship in the cosmos ²⁴ since everything is infused and energized with life forces.

Thirdly since everything share in it, in African epistemology, all things are similar and share the same qualities of nature. This ensures that there is constant interaction among the forces. This according to Ndubuisi and Okoro is the reason why in some instances secret forces Interfere in the course of events ²⁵

Metaphysics and African Traditional Medicine

Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy, which deals with foundation. These foundations are the principles of life which are the activities or ideas in human mind, which guides our daily activities, as well as create

harmony between people and things.²⁶ Africans have identified spirits as the ultimate working principle, which directly and indirectly guides them to carry out their activities.

This makes the practice of medicine in traditional African society to be spiritual. They trace ailments beyond the physical,²⁷ which goes to show or make African medicine holistic in nature. Holistic medicine according to Ndobuisi and Okoro, is both spiritual and psychological, this is because for healing to take place it must embrace the totality of the person's being, that is; his spirit, intellect, and emotions. The traditional healer thus needs to explore the metaphysical and the patient's psychological chemistry to enable him achieve a meaningful result.

This is not peculiar to traditional medicine alone, as the exploration of the psychological connection to diseases is a common practice in medicine all over the world, the major difference here is that, Africans approach this psychological analysis primarily from the mythical and spiritual dimensions. This is because Africans believe that life is a continuous process; even at death the spirit lingers and interacts with the living especially those of his lineage²⁸. As Makinde points out, the soul is that which gives life to the body. And because its essence is life, the soul does not admit the opposite which is death. ²⁹ That is, the ancestors die only physically not spiritually, as a result, they are believed to have powers spiritually over the living. This is based on the concept of vital force, which animates the world. As earlier stated this vital force exists in hierarchies and influence one another both in a decreasing and ascending manner. They however cannot extinguish the life force of the other. ³⁰ That is why the spiritual is sort for in traditional medicine in order to appeal to the harmony that exist in the vital force; apart from that they are controlled by the same spiritual entity. This is the simple reason that makes traditional healers call on both the ancestors and the spirits of the plants and herbs and appeal to them, for effectiveness. The land must also be appealed to. All these rituals are carried out to integrate the forces within the environment. Also invoked is the individual's spirit for the same reasons. In essence, the individual's spirit needs to be in harmony with the environment he lives before healing could be holistic. This is the foundation of traditional medicine in African society.

Conclusion

The paper examined the concept of metaphysics and epistemology as a comparative analysis of western and African concepts in both areas. It contends that the knowledge of epistemology influences understanding of the metaphysical nature of African traditional medicine.

The paper contends that African epistemology does not admit duality but rather argues for the existence of a unitary holistic point of view. These perspectives of looking at nature make the Africans believe that there is harmony in nature and that the universe of life or vital force that exist harmonizes with the environment; and that healing in African traditional medicine encompasses the appeal to these forces including that of the individual spirits to make healing possible.

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