

METAPHYSICAL DIMENSION TO THE PRACTICE OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AMONG THE AFRICAN - ESAN PEOPLE

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Abstract - Before orthodox medical practice was made popular, every society, tribe and race had its approach to health care delivery, which in Esan land is still very much patronized till date. These various cultural health care approaches are rooted in the traditions of the people. In Esan land there is a high level of recognition of the use of traditional medicine. Traditional medicine is claimed to involve the direct use of herbs in curing ailments. There is virtually no disease that a traditional Esan person does not believe to have a local solution. But in spite of the use of herbs which undoubtedly is the claim of the traditional practitioners in the land, the practice of traditional medicine among the Esan people has a deep metaphysical undertone, the volume of which is now made very low in the face of Christianity. The recourse to the preternatural, follows the belief among the people that some ailments are supernaturally caused and so, also need same force to reverse. Hence, influence of the non-perceptible forces over the empirical handy herbs (especially in notable cases), they do not undermine. It is this metaphysical dimension that the paper is set out to explore. Revealed in the paper is that there is 'more' to the use of herbs. The methodology of a philosophical work of this nature would necessarily be analytical. And the paper posits that a holistic practice of traditional medicine cannot but involve this metaphysical dimension. And that partnering with grass-root practitioners is a condition sine qua non for its total success. Again, that the revival to promoting the use of herbs in medicare is welcomed, however, among the Esan people the belief and employing of the 'anointing' of the supernatural forces for its efficacy in some special cases cannot be undermined and as such, should not be discouraged.

Keywords: Esan, Traditional, Metaphysical, Medicine.

INTRODUCTION

While being bordered with what to eat and drink - either for daily survival or for merriment, and also engaged his effort and thinking around making notable achievements, what seems to be highest in degree in the list of concern to man, is the issue of health. Yes! It takes the apex position simply because its state determines how hopeful it is that other things would ever come through. Off-course. there is the saying that 'health is wealth'. Hence, every race and people has a system working to cater for this aspect of human life. This is at the grassroots refer to as traditional medicine.

The practice of traditional medicine is an age-long activity with man which involves the direct use of herbs. It is also very rampant with the Esan people. Also refers to as '*herbalism*' thus, there are so many herbalists in the land. Whereas some families or lineages are believed to be naturally gifted, others

learnt the art. But whether gifted or learnt, the efficacy of the practice over the years has made it popular. However, the practice of traditional medicine in Africa and in Esan in particular which is the focus of this work, go beyond the use of roots and plant (herbs). Instances abound which are pointers to the fact that there is the complimentary other side (metaphysical dimension) of trado-medical practice among the people. It is the nucleus of this work to expose this dimension and to reveal why till date, even with the drum-beat of Christianity, the practice of traditional medicine among the Esan people cannot be disassociated from it. The paper therefore is a pointer. It tends to beam a search light to a seemingly silent area in the practice of traditional medicine.

Following the abstract and introduction, the paper spans through four sections. Section one briefly looks at definition of terms. Section two the paper made known the Esan people and their world-views. In section three the paper treats the healing art among the Esan people. And finally, section four takes care of the metaphysics of diagnosis and healing among the Esan people.

Defining Metaphysics

Metaphysics - Simply put, means over and beyond the physical. It is a systematic study of the fundamental problems related to the ultimate nature of reality and human knowledge (Fadahunsi 2004, p. 10). Metaphysics concern itself more with abstract qualities than with a scientific observation and analysis of factual matters. It attempt to find some first causes from which sprang the diversities of reality. The definition of metaphysics is not a one way thing. This becomes the case because the concept has varied meaning following the perspectives or spectacles one may look at it. In the context of this work, the term would be implore in the light of Jim Unah: "...Metaphysics strictly called ontology" (the study of beings), (Unah 2004, p. 3). Etymologically, the concept comes from the Greek expression *meta ta physica* - after the physical. Plato sees metaphysics as the study of 'Being' in its ultimate form to grasp its very ground of existence (Armstrong 1981, p. 36). Thomas Aquinas defines it as the science of 'being qua being', ' science of God and spirits as immaterial beings' and 'a science of being which is assumed to be essences (Aquinas, qu 5; qu 14). Thus for Aquinas metaphysics explains the mystery of being – visible and invisible in their ultimate essences. And more recently, Bertand Russell defines

metaphysics as “what constitutes the ultimate future of the universe.”(Russell 1966, p. 346). From the foregoing therefore, the scope of metaphysics includes: the present world, the transcendental world and all that lies beyond; in so far as they affect the human person and his perceived universe.

The Esan People And Their Worldviews

The Esan people are located in Edo state. Politically, they occupy the region known as the Edo central and spread across five local government areas which are: Esan Central, Esan West, Esan North-East, Esan South-East and Igueben. It shares boundaries with Owan on the North-West, Etsako on the North-East, Orhionwon and Ika on the South-West, and Aniocha and Oshimili on the South and South-East. The popular view that Esan people entirely derived their ancestry from Benin is not correct. This argument logically follows in the light of the historical facts that, prior to institution of chiefdom or dynasty in Esan (c. 900- 1400AD) brought about by immigrants, there were settlers in the area that later developed into chiefdom and villages. Okoduwa (2002, p. 23) referred to these earlier settlers as the autochthonous groups in the Esan forest savannah ecotone. According to Okojie (1960, p. 201) these inhabitants scattered in the jungle of the area now known as Esan land and the 15th century migrants met them in the area. These people could be regarded as the aborigenes of Esanland.

The 15th century is remarkable in the history and development of Esan people. It is the period that the people in the region became collectively known as Esan. The word Esan is derived from '*E- san fua*' (Benin language), meaning 'they have fled' or 'jumped away' (Okojie 1960, p. 1). This tag was used for the migrants. The settlers being dominated by the migrants, hence the nomenclature of the migrants eclipsed the entire settlers. The popular history which is now part of the history of origin of the Esan people, is traceable to Oba Ewuare the Great whose decree inflicted untold hardship on his subjects, which led many to abandon the Kingdom for a safer and more comfortable place to settle.

During the reign of this Great King, there was an incident that took place in the ancient Benin Kingdom. It was related that the Oba had two sons; Kuoboyuwa, the first son, and Ezuwarha, the second son. Both of them love each other dearly and while the older son, Kuoboyuwa was the "Edaiken" of Uselu, the younger son was made the "Onojie of Iyowa". They maintained and sustained their mutual relationship by exchanging gifts amicably until one day when Ezuwarha misinterpreted Kuoboyuwa's good gesture

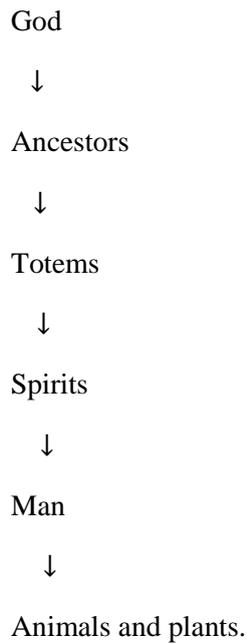
of sending him gift of farm implements; hoe, machet, etc, in return for his own gifts of yam to mean that Kuoboyuwa called him a "bush man". This introduced hatred into their relationship, which eventually culminated in their poisoning one another which resulted to their death on the same day. As a result of the lost of his two sons, Oba Ewuare summoned all Binis and passed his inhuman and wicked laws of mourning. Following which includes: prohibition of sexual intercourse in the kingdom, prohibition from: washing, sweeping, drumming, and dancing in the kingdom and making of fire in the land (Alli, 2006, p.) The Oba insisted that these laws be strictly adhered to - binding upon all subjects in the Kingdom for a period of three years as a mark of respect for his dead sons and any defaulter would pay with his or her life.

His intention was clear, since he had lost his only two sons, no one henceforth, had any right to give birth to any child, hence the promulgation of the most draconian laws ever heard in Benin history.

A people's worldview tell greatly about their life and practices. In other words, the way a people perceive the world and think about it, speaks volume about their believe and approach to life which turns out to be their culture. Worldview refers to a comprehensive conception or image of the universe and of humanity's relation to it. It is a collection of beliefs about life and the universe held by an individual or a group. In a nutshell, worldview is the overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world. The Esan image of the world portrays the world as comprising visible and invisible beings. These invisible beings are believed by the people to be preceding the human person. Following the believe of the people as mentioned above, it would not be out of place to say that the Esan people see the world as largely controlled or influenced by these non perceptible beings or forces. Existent beings, be it visible or not, the people believe operate in hierarchy. The hierarchy of beings as believed by the Esan people is not different from what holds among Africans.

The Africans have a hierarchy of being, with *God* at the apex, followed by the *ancestors*, then, we have *totems* or emblems or hereditary relationship following by other *spirits* that are manipulated in the sorcery, witchcraft or magic for certain ends. These are represented at times as charms and amulets, then we have *man* and finally, *animals and plants* as occupying the lowest level. (Ozumba, 2004)

Giving the diagrammatical representation , hence we have:



The people interpret reality as wholeness - encompassing both 'worlds' as mentioned above. The society is interpreted as an holistic organization of human relationships "with the earth as a whole and with the world of constructive forces" (Parsons 1964, p. 176).

Healing As An Art Among The Esan People

The issue of health is approached by the westerners scientifically. The scientific method in this respect have gained a very high popularity, that even while there is now the call for the consideration of alternative medicine the tendency is still to scrutinize it through the scientific process because it is believed to be more reliable for some acclaimed reasons.

But among the Esan people healing is simply an art. To perform healing special skills and abilities are required. Every village has men and women who are versed in the knowledge and use of herbs and this knowledge is passed down from parents to their children and there are secrets behind this which are guarded jealously (Okojie 1960, p. 228). To possess these skills and abilities to use roots and plants or herbs is believed among the people, to be a given. Thus for anyone who is seeking medical assistant in any of the respected areas he or she is simply referred to the family known to possess the solution or remedy. The secret behind the efficacy of those herbal medication, the respective families always try to

conceal. This could be likened to a trade mark and it is regarded as sacrosanct. Any family who possesses these abilities to proffer solution to any ailment, its members are as a matter of secrecy, to keep silent in respect of how it is prepared and the source of its efficacy. In most cases a family may have this ability but not every of its members know about its protocol and the modalities for its administration. In other words, even among members, there are restrictions. Under this condition members of the family take turn by way of inheritance to have the right to the usage of this gift.

However, it is the prerogative of any family to allow anybody who is not a member of the family to know about it. In this case such a person is taught and also told the ground rules. It must be noted at this juncture that as much as the practice of traditional medicine and healing among the Esan people is an art, yet, no one can acquire the skill by hanging around the practitioners the way it is possible with other arts by simply knowing their procedures. Why this so shall be discussed later in the work when talking about the metaphysics of healing. But, just before we get there, the next thing to look into is how the Esan people get to discover the causes of ailments. This shall be discuss under the next subtitle.

THE METAPHYSICS OF DIAGNOSIS AND HEALING

Diagnosis is referred to as the act of identifying a disease illness or a problem through the process of examination. In the orthodox medical practice, there are conventional ways via which this is done. These laid down procedures are made public and are subjected to defined rules. Being public here means that everyone who is in the field of the practice knows what procedure or approach to adopt when faced with any given situation. Hence, given any situation, if 'A' adopts say, BBO and a particular result is obtained, the same would be if B, C, D, E etc adopt the same procedure to the same given situation. Diagnosis in the orthodox medical practice is limited to the empirical possibilities. Whatever cannot be empirically proven is considered as not existing.

However, in the practice of traditional medicine among the African nay Esan people diagnosis is pushed farther than what is obtainable in the western science following the world view of the people which sees the world as dual; comprising the empirical and the supra-sensible. Hence, there is the belief among the people that some ailments are in connection to the supernatural. This being the case, for any ailment

that has defiled the application of ordinary root and herbs the people recourse to the metaphysical approach in order to get to the root of it because it is at this stage suspected to have a cause which may be spiritual.

In the bid to finding out the cause of such ailments, the people implore the process of divination. Divination has simply been defined as "the practice of seeking knowledge of ... the unknown by supernatural means". The practice of traditional medicine among the Esan people is not a one-way thing, there is the metaphysical dimension which features divination prominently. However, this has present puzzling problems for scholars because a certain amount of communication that goes on between practitioners of these arts and cosmic powers other than human appears difficult to fathom. But must be mentioned is the fact that the practice is pragmatic and has being results yielding. In the context of divination, Parrinder acknowledges that "some degree of telepathy and extra-sensory perception is at work", (1962, p. 122) while Mbiti holds that "divination adds to the complexity of African concepts and links together in its own way the physical and metaphysical" (1969, p. 177). The function of the diviner within the context of Esan diagnosis of diseases therefore, is "... to diagnose the intervention of metaphysical agencies, provide rational accounts of what moved those agencies to intervene and to link the present conditions of patients with human actions that brought the agencies into play" (Horton 1967, p. 53).

The practice of traditional medicine in Africa and in Esan land in particular, involves the combination of the ability to 'see' with the ability to treat. The totality of what is known as traditional medicine in Esan land involves divination and the use of herbs. The ancestors as a matter of fact are, the great pillars behind Esan traditional medicine (Onimhawo & Ebhomielen 2014). There is the belief among the people that a combination of both the spiritual forces and the application of herbs does make for complete and permanent cure of some illness, even of the most serious kinds, be it organic or functional. What is meant, therefore, by the understanding of medicine and good medical practice in the Esan traditional setting is to know the 'root' of diseases or illnesses as well as the effective remedies. According to Mircea Eliade (1963) medical remedy does not take effect unless its origin is known and recited. Standing out in Esan traditional healing is the herbalist's peculiar understanding of the nature

of things. Thus while the traditional healer, say a herbalist, knows the exact herb or root needed to treat a severe headache and makes his concoction accordingly he could go further to make treatment more effective by the employment of oracle. He calls the headache by its original name, tell its nature, give the name of its parents and where it got its power to trouble human beings. Through the oracle and by making incantations he then tells the fever the reason why he will not succeed in troubling the person affected with headache because as it is, given the understanding of the secrets of the headache, the oracle is able to reveal the things which, once given to the patient, provides the necessary cure. It reveals the original but secret name of headache, and says that this and that are things it must not 'eat', 'drink' or 'take'. The calling of its original name, and the application of those things that are forbidden to the headache, cause it to vanish from the affected person. The system of divination affords the traditional African the opportunity to control the cosmic order. This attempt to master the cosmic order is at the same time an effort to ascertain its nature or foundational principle. Divination turns out to be a quest for foundation as “the whole point of divination lies in the realm of meaning” (Zuesse, 1974). The same method is used for other kinds of illness or disease. But a thorough knowledge of traditional medicine through a long period of training, much longer than the period of training of western trained doctors, is necessary to be able to do these things. It is therefore pertinent to say that, in all aspect of traditional medicine and practice, the principles are the same and the diagnostic methods and discovery of causes are founded on the same principles, whether the illness is organic or functional.

Below are areas in which it cannot be disproved that there is intervention of the metaphysical in the practice of traditional medicine among the Esan people.

Treatment of snake bit: While the English doctor must get a near correct description of the snake that bit a person for him to be able to select the correct antivenin, when a victim of snake bit is rushed to a snake herbalist, he examines the patient, asks no questions and proceeds to treat the patient with herb portions, but makes a great fuss in “removing the teeth” of the snake. What transpired in the process of his examination, an *owoli* (a canal person) cannot tell because it is beyond his realm. Activities in this realm are not and cannot be subjected to laboratory test. Only those who operate in that realm know. In

Esan land to operate in the supersensible, one is referred to as *ōmakhalēn*. *Ōmakhalēn* is the opposite of *owoli*; whereas *owoli* means a canal person, *ōmakhalēn* means person in spirit.

Treatment of fractures: In the area of fractures treatment, these medicine men, in more than one way, are in advance of western medicine. Whereas a patient with fractured femur (thigh bone) would keep on his back for twelve weeks, receiving orthodox medical attention, the traditional bone setters would make scarification all round the broken bone area, rub in some burning herbs, weave a basket material round the fracture securely, if the person is a male, he takes a fully grown cock or a hen in the case of a woman, break its thigh bone and set it free. By the fourteenth day when the cock or hen is able to walk about, the human patient is allowed to get up and bear weight on the broken leg; this means the traditional bone setters allow their patient to get on his legs in fourteen days. What cannot be explained here, is the correlation between the human patient and the cock or hen depending on the gender concern. It must be mentioned here that in bone setting, traditional approach has proved to be healing faster. This point, even the orthodox practitioners cannot deny. But the force or forces behind its efficacy is still to this extent, beyond their comprehension. These men are all over Esan: Ewu, Ivue-Uromi, Awo-Uromi, Ogwa etc.

Mental illness: In Esan culture the case of mental illness is regarded as a very serious issue. It has a social meaning which must not be confused with its meaning for the individual afflicted. The social meaning of mental illness among the Esan people is akin to a taboo. Unlike in the western world, mental illness in Esan society may put a sort of stigma on the relatives of the affected person. This seems to explain why mental illness is so dreaded among the people that its treatment is of great concern. Because of the social impact of mental illness on the individuals and his relatives, the Esan people usually have a way of treating effectively an illness of this nature which is quite different from the orthodox approach.

In the field of mental illness, a patient is brought in, raving mad, tearing at anything in sight. Quietly the herbalist would go into the forest, collect his herbs with which he makes his potent decoction, administers them to the patient and within a few days, the patient is seated, cooperative and responding willingly to further treatments. Many western researchers have tried to pry into these leaves, roots and

barks with no success from these illiterate men of medicine. Whereas it cannot be disputed that their practice largely depends upon their cherished knowledge they had acquired from their forefathers, there is the metaphysical aspect which they guide with almost sacredness.

CONCLUSION

The practice of traditional medicine among the African - Esan people has both the empirical (like most sciences) and its metaphysical aspects. In the case of organic illness, there is little controversy over its diagnostic methods. Since the illness is physical in nature and therefore open to empirical investigation, its identification is found to be less troublesome than the diseases which are not open to empirical investigation. It is the position of the paper that, the word "science" must not be construed in its sense as empirical science only. Since science is a body of knowledge, whether empirical or otherwise, Africans believe, like their western counterparts, in non-empirical knowledge of entities that are not subject to empirical investigation. Africans say Esan people do believe in causes which are not publicly observable events or whose existence cannot be ascertained empirically. In either case, we believe that knowledge is attainable, and is so attained, by empirical and non-empirical means. Thus, in the practice of traditional medicine the Esan people also implore the metaphysical means where it is deemed necessary.

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