

## Wellness Syndrome in the Era of Coronavirus in Nigeria

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### Abstract

There is abroad in Western society a phenomenon known as wellness syndrome. Wellness syndrome is like a moral imperative. The moral aspect is based on biomorality which is anchored on the axiom that a person who feels good (and is happy) is a good person; a person who feels bad is a bad person. It is a moral obligation rather than a choice because people should actively pursue healthy living which means that wellness of the body becomes an imperative command for everybody in the society. In Nigeria with the COVID- 19 pandemic people have embraced wellness syndrome by taking care of their bodies through certain herbal/alternative medicine called concoction. Churches also have joined the train in which some pastors claim they can heal or drive COVID- 19 away through prayers. Native “*Babalawo*” (Herbalist) have also claimed through incantations they can extirpate coronavirus. The people have bought into all these.

Before COVID- 19, the middle class embraced wellness syndrome by buying all kinds of wellness tablets manufactured in Europe, the United States of America, and Asia - Mason, Nature, Alliance Global, and a myriad of them for the well-being of their bodies. These wellness tablets advertise in their products that they could fortify people in terms of antidote against all kinds of diseases. Most of the people that buy these tablets are middle-class people. Some of them form a sort of group where they are taught about all kinds of healthy living so that they can be physically and mentally healthy. They also engage in physical exercises and the groups meet to be educated about what promotes good healthy living whereby they are told about some particular tablets that could help them

to be healthy and be fit so that they are not a burden to themselves and the society in general.

**Key words:** Herbal medicines; COVID-19; Science; Philosophy of Science; Western hegemonic order; Rationality; Research on herbal medicine

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### INTRODUCTION

In Western societies, wellbeing syndrome has become an ideology of the capitalist society. It is like a contract and each person in this wellness syndrome is sucked into its moral principle that a person who feels good and is happy is a good person; a person who feels bad is a bad person. In this regard, wellness has become a moral obligation rather than a choice. We have to choose a good lifestyle in order to stay healthy and not be a burden to the society. One has to be smart and this means that one has to be slim and shun some so-called unhealthy foods which could have negative effects on one’s body. According to wellbeing promoters the society profits from this healthy living in terms of raising the productivity of companies and hence the profit of the companies in the society. This new ideology of wellness fits into the ideology of capitalism.

As regards the wellness syndrome in Nigeria, it is not the same as that of Western societies. The wellness syndrome in Nigeria is propagated or adheres to by a small group of middle-class people before the COVID-19 pandemic. They buy all kinds of wellness tablets and capsules manufactured by Western and Asian pharmaceutical companies. They also engage in physical fitness and coaching on how to stay healthy. They are also coached about nutritional values of certain foods and

fruits which have to be taken in order to have wellness of the body. This group believes that living a healthy life involves making one's body endure certain deprivation which is a moral imperative. The discourse of this middle-class group is about making the individual responsible for the health of the body. Food centric health initiatives as fasting and dieting are touted as part of wellness programs. This group believes that through this program it makes one return to an authentic lifestyle devoid of carefree attitude to one's body. They believe that the lower class indulges in excessive eating and as such this class cannot live up to the dieting regiment. In this regard, it is shown that the lower class is not disciplined enough to regulate what they eat and drink hence they have fat bodies that portray them as having an unhealthy lifestyle. What all these portray is that wellness of the body has to do with a sort of will power on the part of those who engage in them and it becomes a personal responsibility as a free moral agent of the individual.

Although this attitude before the COVID-19 pandemic was prevalent among the middle class, it has become the norm among different strata of the population now with the pandemic ravaging the world including Nigeria. The pandemic has ushered in a new concept of wellness of the body which we can term wellness syndrome though it is different from the wellness syndrome of the West. The wellness syndrome in Nigeria now is specifically focused on the pandemic whereby everybody takes one drug or the other in order to keep fit and safe from the coronavirus. There are many drugs on offer in the market which are touted as a cure for coronaviruses like Yemkem, Pax Herbal, Kedi, and many others. The reason why this wellness syndrome about the COVID-19 virus is rampant is that there is a stigma attached to people who contract the virus in Nigeria. They are ostracized from the community or society in which they live hence they make every attempt to stay safe from the disease by taking all kinds of herbal drugs which makes them not contract the disease. Wellness syndrome has also moved into the realm of the spiritual. Some pastors have also proclaimed that through the spiritual means they can stop the contraction of the coronavirus and some people have flocked into their churches for spiritual protection against the pandemic. Some "*Babalawos*" (Herbalists) have also claimed that they can stop the contraction of the coronavirus through their herbal drugs and incantations. They canvassed that their products are efficacious. They have advertised their products through print and broadcast media and also the internet. This particular attitude to wellness chimes with the magical Hindu oriental thinking about wellness.

In all these claims about herbal medicines and incantations in preventing and curing the coronavirus another discourse has emerged about their scientific credibility. The lack of scientific evidence of these herbal medicines and incantations have been advanced against them (Mani, et al. 2020; Herbrechter, et al. 2020;

Ang, et al. 2020; Jegede, 1999, 2010; Olaoluwa, 2008; Adeeko, 2014). Some scientifically-minded scholars and philosophers of African descent have argued that herbal medicines are not scientifically valid since they do not follow scientific protocols (Gyekye, 1997). Gyekye claims that African traditional cultures have refused to cultivate scientific minds in order to probe into nature for reasons that are "not fully known or intelligible" (Gyekye, 1995; 1997). The other eminent Ghanaian philosopher Wiredu has also claimed that Africans' reliance on traditional herbal medicines to prevent and cure themselves of diseases has no solid scientific explanation for the herbal medicines in terms of preventing and curing these diseases. Wiredu, (1995) claims that in the medicinal area many herbalists treated diseases without providing any scientific explanations.

There have been some scholars who have vouched for the integrity of herbal medicines generally (Osunwole, 1988, 1992; Jegede, 1999, 2010). They claim that Western science should not be used to gauge the integrity of herbal medicines. Further, they claimed that this herbal medicine has its rationality embedded in it which could not be judged by the Western scientific method of rationality. It is argued that the hegemony of Western society has constructed rationality in such a way that it is their concept of rationality that is relevant. Some philosophers of science have argued against this hegemonic conception of science. Harding, (1986; 1991) has argued against the denial of this situatedness of reason which she believes leads to weak objectivity. She believes that knowledge is not disembodied and situatedness but rather this "God trick" notion of reason has to be transcended. She claims that the idea of the dominant hegemonic group in science about rationality has to be examined critically; and in contrast, acknowledging and taking into account different perspectives and standpoints of knowledge makes possible the achievements of strong objectivity. It is argued that in this regard even there is still an allowance for detachment from one's standpoint without commitment to the possibility of commitment knowing all rationalities that transcend all standpoints. It is argued that although our view of rationality is selective we are not sucked into closed walls of meaning. According to Haraway, (1991) responsible knowledge entails learning to take responsibility for the social position from which we stand "struggles over what we count as rational accounts of the world are struggling over how to see."

What this points out is that there should be pluralism in the scientific enterprise. In his highly influential book *Against Method*, Feyerabend, (1975) has argued that Western scientific rationality should not be taken as the only yardstick of rationality. He claims that Western scientific rationality is only one form of rationality in the schemes of rationality. The hegemonic status given to Western rationality is a misplaced one. He argues for pluralism in this wise. He believes that myths, symbols,

and other forms of cultural artifacts are at par with the Western concept of rationality; none is inferior to the Western concept of rationality. Rorty, (1979; 1987; 1989) also has argued along that line that the privileged position given to rationality in Western culture in terms of science should be abandoned. He claimed that rationality is one among other concepts in Western culture in the conversation of humankind and that no hegemonic position should be ascribed to it. Kuhn, (2012) in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* has argued against Popper, (1959) historical trajectory of science-based rationality. He argues that in the scientific community there is no rationality in one paradigm taking over from another paradigm in the historical journey of any scientific paradigm. The point that has to be highlighted is that theory change in science is not a linear one anchored on rationality in Kuhn's account of it. Some philosophers of science like Scerri, (2016) and Bhaskar, (1989) have also corroborated this by arguing that scientific progress is a sort of evolutionary development as a living evolving body of knowledge. Bhaskar believes that there is no apparent theory change that follows a rationally linear path but the success of any theory depends on how it effectively responds to contingency and circumstances. In this account of scientific progress, there is no ultimate truth that any scientific theory is advancing towards. Bhaskar's account of the evolutionary model of science is in accord with the dominant temper of the contemporary philosophy of science.

This account of science encourages pluralism in that it allows for other knowledge claims in the production of scientific knowledge to thrive rather than having a sort of hegemonic rationality underlining any scientific progress (Kellert, et al 2006; Irele, 1996). At this point, it will be necessary to point out that African herbalist or *Babalawo* has been accused of secrecy in their method of arriving at an adequate account of their herbal production. In other words, it is argued that their knowledge claim is not an open one rather it is a closed one and as a result it does not follow any proper scientific protocol, at best it can be described as a pseudo-science. This position echoes the hegemonic concept of rationality which emphasizes certain protocols of Western scientific methodologies. This derogatory rhetoric is a name given to some practices and a body of knowledge delineated by a community not defined by the exigencies of logical proof and experimental verification. This particular position is to echo what could be called official knowledge adopted by the hegemonic order characterizing the subjugated knowledge of the order like the indigenous knowledge of the African people. This position is a sort of scientific colonization that has disparages the indigenous knowledge of the Africans in a generalized way including the culture, the traditions of the African – beliefs, ideas, etc. The whole idea of this position is structured along with the economy

of knowledge production of the Western idea which revolves around two of the oldest dualisms in Western thought: reason and non-reason and transcendence and immanence. The reason has been culturally constructed to be that of Western society. Transcendence is construed as making breakthroughs or innovations in opposition to static realms of immanence which is seen as living-in the present and eking out subsistence living day by day without making any effort to make any history. It is argued that the Western mind is naturally attuned to make history against indigenous African people.

What could be argued against this position is that culturally and symbolically the limits of reason have been fixed to exclude indigenous knowledge. The claim is that indigenous knowledge has been ruled out by not being rational. Rational knowledge is perceived as transcending, transformation and the control of natural forces and indigenous knowledge cannot be associated with what rational knowledge transcends and dominates. In other words, the indigenous knowledge of Africans lacks the canons of rationality that can cope with the transformation and control of the natural forces through their knowledge production. But this notion of rationality is culturally constructed by the Western hegemonic scientific discursive practice which represents the official knowledge position. It should be pointed out that this position signifies a partiality of the Western hegemonic order which can be termed as an ideology to denigrate the “subjugated knowledge” of the order – in this case, African indigenous knowledge. Ideology for some theorists like Foucault, (1972) and discourse are not demarcated in that both are projections of the interest of people in a particular social location of power. Foucault has focused on knowledge/power relationship whereby power is deployed in such a way that it serves prevailing relations of dominance and subordination. Those who have dominant knowledge have the power to control the subordinated subjects through certain practices which have made the subordinated group believe in what the dominant group offers them. This power is produced in concrete sets of relations; for example, it is produced in “certain coordinates of knowledge.” These practices are simply that of disciplinary power which the dominant group exercises. There are according to Foucault “no power relations without the constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose at the same time power relations.” From what has been said the discourse of dominant Western scientific practice is an ideology (Eagleton, 1991).

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## THE SECRECY TALE

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The secrecy that has been leveled against the herbalists is simply misplaced. In every discipline, there are rule-governed protocols and if one knows the rule-governed

protocols one would understand what goes on in that area of knowledge. All the herbalists or *Babalawos* have been socialized to the rules governed protocols when they were learning the herbal medicine hence they know what is involved in terms of the protocols. In a Winchian Wittgensteinian sense in order to understand the system of indigenous knowledge you must have been socialized into their language game in terms of their discursive practice. There is therefore no secrecy in the African indigenous language as been alleged by the certain scientific community. Moreover, the claim of secrecy is rampant in almost all disciplines especially when a new theory in science is being formulated by a new ascendant scientific community. This is even the case now with the virus vaccine which some Western scientific communities are claiming that Russia is out to steal the chemical compositions which they have invented to combat the pandemic.

Furthermore, the secrecy leveled against the traditional herbalist who refuses to disclose the methodology of his herbal preparation maybe because he considers the knowledge as the legacy of his community rather than his knowledge in terms of the herbal medicine. In other words, the knowledge claim about herbal medicine is not an individual one but belongs to the whole community as against Western individualistic intellectual property. In this regard, the legacy must be preserved within the community and this legacy has to be transferred to upcoming apprentices who will take over from him and who will be socialized to the language game of the herbal community.

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## MAGIC, INCANTATION AND SPIRIT

The Western dominant ideology has also alleged that spiritual, magical, and incantation practices are antithetical to science. Scientific practice does not allow all these tendencies to be an important factor in its practice. It is therefore unscientific to allow such things in science. However, one could argue that in most African ontologies there are no such dichotomies between spiritual and material entities. The ontologies of most African societies do not have any dualism like spirit and material, reason and non-reason, and transcendence and immanence as we have them in Western thought. Wiredu, (2009) has noted that the dichotomy or dualism like transcendence and immanence which has been “historically important in Western philosophy does not arise in African traditional thinking.” In other words, the ontology of African traditional societies does not countenance this dichotomy. Any ontology would specify what is believed as the reality in any society. In this regard, Quine, (1969) has elaborated on this when he says “to be is to be within the bounds of a variable” of our ontological belief. What this means is that this should make us have what should

be called metaphysical caution in the face of this African ontological boldness which differs from that of the ontological binary relationship of Western philosophy. What can be ferreted out is that there should be tolerance towards African traditional herbal medicine because in its practical dealings it has been able to address certain medical problems in the various African communities and what this directs us to is that we should have a practical turn in appreciating traditional African herbal medicine (Wiredu, 1980). The African traditional herbalists have what could be called the total healing process in dealing with any disease and what this means is that incantations, etc are part and parcel of their medical practice. This leads us to causal connections. Most African traditional societies have been alleged not to have the causal explanatory model in their methodology of herbal medicine. This particular argument is not tenable because in the ontologies of these African societies as earlier pointed out; there is no dichotomy like matter and mind. Traditional African societies do not have any dichotomy which could be classified as cause and effect. For instance, in the Yoruba ontology, it is believed that there is a sort of a natural necessity in nature and this natural necessity exists as an essential nature of the world or reality. This notion of natural necessity is compatible with common-sense intuitions that when water is heated it boils in normal air pressure when it is heated to 100-degree c, by its chemical structure i.e. H<sub>2</sub>O molecules interacting in certain ways. This kind of explanatory model does not project mind as perceiving regularity in nature because in this case there is a denial of the existence of natural necessities. The observable regularities are coached in a mentalistic way since the mind is the entity that observes these events in nature not that it is a natural necessity. In other words, any event in nature in the Yoruba ontology should be ascribed to nature itself not to the human mind since Yoruba ontology does not have the concept of cause and effect or causal power as an explanatory model of what happens in nature when we have any chemical, biological and physical reaction occurring in nature.

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## CONCLUSION

Let us return to wellness syndrome that has pervaded the Nigerian society at present because of COVID-19 or coronavirus ravaging the world. The wellness syndrome has become rampant in Nigeria today and herbal medicines in one form or the other have become popular among the population in Nigeria. They are taking these herbal medicines in order to guide themselves against the coronavirus. In most cases, herbal medicines have worked. It has become the norm that herbal medicines are important for the prevention and cure of the coronavirus. In some cases, they have mixed this with orthodox medicine like Hydroxylchloroquine and some other

drugs which are not though approved by World Health Organization (WHO). WHO has condemned herbal medicines as a prevention and cure of coronavirus even though in most third world developing countries it has largely worked for people in terms of being fit and safe. The non-acceptance of herbal medicines by WHO could be ascribed to the fact that the big pharmaceutical companies in the West are being awaited to produce vaccines that will cure the pandemic. In other words, in this regard, the logic of capitalism is at work here in terms of profit that they will have when they will invent vaccines that will prevent and cure the pandemic. In most countries now herbal medicines are being researched into to know the efficacy in preventing and curing the pandemic in most developing countries and Asian countries like Japan, China, etc (Mani, et al. 2020; Herbrechter, et al. 2020; Ang, et al. 2020). Life goes on and most African countries with the exemption of one or two have coped with the pandemic and the prediction that the pandemic will become a tragic one in Africa because of the poor medical facilities has not come to pass. In the case of Nigerian society, the coping mechanism with the pandemic has been largely due to the herbal medicines.

As earlier pointed out the wellness syndrome in Nigeria is not the same as that of Western society but in Nigeria, it has been taken as a moral obligation to be well like in Western society. Moreover, the stigma attached to coronavirus has made it imperative for people to take these herbal drugs especially the poor segment of the society to wade off the pandemic from attacking them. In essence, there have been a low percentage of people that have been affected by the pandemic in Nigeria as well as in most parts of Africa. As pointed out above there must be pluralism in the world now. There should not be any condemnation of any society's invention.

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