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Backcloth to Music and Healing in Traditional African Society

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The African Knowledge of Sickness

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The old African world thrived on a balance of the physical and the intangible. In other words there was mutual dependency between the physical world and the active immaterial or supernatural forces, and African peoples survived because of the ability to harmonize the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the mundane, the intangible and the material realities.

The human person possesses, and is animated by, both profane and spiritual egos in symbiotic existence. The disease or malfunctioning of the one impairs the stability or efficacy of the other, and thereby the health of the whole. The cure of the sick must then be holistic for the African - healing the ego that manifests tangible ailment entailed co-jointly healing the co-acting ego that has become latently infected. The process of properly curing a physically ill person in the African medical practice then compels healing the person's psyche or spiritual well being as well as the physiological. When herbs fail, heal the spirit.

Traditional Africa recognizes that when the environment is sick, diseases become prevalent; and when such diseased material or spiritual environment is rehabilitated, human health becomes secure. When the group spirit is polluted, the minds of individuals become infected, the human sphere becomes sick. When a human body is sick, the animating spirit becomes poisoned, and the human sphere becomes unhealthy.

The traditional African concept of illness recognizes natural and supernatural causes, ordinarily co-acting together. Ill health can manifest as malfunctioning physiology, mental-spiritual disorder or unusual external misfortune. Illness may be self-generated (psychosomatic), other-engineered, congenital or caused by foreign agents. Sickness is not always diagnosed as the malfunctioning of body parts or organs in isolation, even though the seat of the sick-feeling may be located in a body part - external or internal. Sickness could be a sign for something else, positive or injurious, which is impending. When such a sign gets mistaken as ordinary sickness, or when it is ignored and unattended to, the person harboring the sign may suffer permanent injury, usually mental.

In the community-structured African socio-political system the sickness of an individual generates levels of conflicts: Conflict within the sufferer, conflict within the family and compound unit, conflict within the entire geo-political community. The conflict could have social, economic or religious dimensions. As such, the suffering of an individual affects the well-being of many others, and would compel group empathy in seeking remedy. The community is concerned to avoid the incidence of illness of any category, and to manage or contain incidents of illness as a group even though there are specialist healers. It is for the reason that an individual's sickness can impinge on the normal functioning of an entire community that African health practice places a premium on preventive health programs. Preventive health includes scheduled and mandatory environmental cleaning, avoidance rites to ward off evil forces (human and of

spirit mien), as well as constant musical arts theatre that coerces mass participation, annual group spirit purgation music-drama (new-year rites), compound hygiene etc.

The process of healing the sick, which involves the restoration of the psychic health of the sufferer as well as the community, is structured and systematic, often contextualizing the community in ritual-theatrical dimension, in order to heal the entire community psyche. The active, supportive involvement of the community boosts the life energy of the sick. A stable psychological condition is thus generated for the specialist healer to undertake the specialized process of physical or metaphysical medication.

On Becoming an African Healer

In some African cultures a person who will eventually become a healer is supernaturally selected through signs such as sickness. The signs, which often result in strange behavior or physiological ill health, manifest irrespective of age and gender. When diagnosed, preparing or capacitating the person to become a healer could entail the medical-musical theatre of "opening of the inner eyes" (to perceive beyond the commonly visible) or the "reception of extraordinary communications" (from the supernatural forces). When a sign selects a person that must be "purified" or empowered to become a healer, she thereafter becomes capable of perceiving knowledge of sicknesses and curative elements through super-ordinary sensitization. Hence there are induction ceremonies, often locally discussed as "capturing the spirit" or "welcoming the ancestral spirit-guide".

Music in Healing

The term music here suggests the musical arts theatre of the structured musical sound, dance, dramatic arts and performance plastic arts.

Music in traditional Africa is the science of being; the art of living with health. Music is the intangible resonance of which the human body and soul are composed: The human body is the quintessential sound instrument; the human soul is the ethereal melody. A matching of human souls is the foundation of African harmonic thought and sound. Musical harmony is the consonance of complementary inter-dependent melodies and timbres - vocal or instrumental. Dissonance occurs when independent melodies or souls or tone/pitch levels fail to harmonize in accord with a culture's normative idioms of interaction in life and music. Complementation of souls or the consonance of matching melodies generates healthy resonance - a healing energy. What constitutes dissonance is culturally, not universally determined. Dissonance of component parts or elements of a music event could be prescribed by a non-musical intention, which could be healing. Dissonance, whether of souls or co-sounding melodies/pitch levels/tone levels/timbres, arouses disquietude, a disruption of composure, which then compels a need to resolve irregularity. Otherwise, a state of disrupted harmony or accord would prevail, and could become injurious.

The African science of applying music to health cure relies on acute understanding of the energy properties produced by various music instruments; also the sonic constructs that would engage dissonant tissue energies in order restore the normal resonance of life energy in human organs. The African knows and applies music as energy, an effective-affective force. Hence music is conceived, structurally conformed, and staged for purposes beyond, but not excluding, the artistic-aesthetic interests.

The resonance of musical movement, whether of sound or of stylized body rhythm/motion vibes into the resonance of the body tissue or soul energy. Where the tissue resonance is out of synchrony with that of the musical energy, a state of conflict is generated. The confrontation could initially aggravate the feeling of ill health. When the energy of music is sustained with variations (intensity of vibration) as needs be, the bombardment of tonal frequencies/energies could distress the infecting organism/ distuned state of being. The bad energy that disables normal tissue or soul resonance could be eventually stressed and dispelled. At the resolution of conflict, the embattled human body or soul needs to be further re-tuned to normal through the agency of music. The music healer knows and manipulates the appropriate phonic energy for tackling the nature of an illness. This will include the instrumental tone, ensemble texture, the structural configurations of sound and form, also the individuality of the sick person. Hence Diallo and Hallstates that "the musician needs to create a dialogue between the sounds he produces and the responses of the person he is treating" (1989, p. 160). This assumes that the sick person is psychically tolerant, through enculturation or acculturation, to the phonic norms of the music used.

The African science of musical sound in healing prescribes raw (nature's) harmonics that generate more healing resonance than refined or synthetic harmonics. Drums (of animal skin and wooden/clay/calabash shell), animal/vegetable wind, and robust string/metal (cast iron/bronze) instruments are rich in healing harmonics. They are commonly preferred for playing healing music.

Some cultures still practice mass musical arts healing of group mental stresses. This may be incidental (dispersing the stresses of daily subsistence existence), cumulative (the purgation of the collective pollution of the human sphere over a period of time - commonly an annual event), and regenerating (re-energizing the communal as well as individual psyche). There is also the musical arts healing of the physiological/mental disability of an individual. In either instance of healing/purgation, music is central in Africa. Preventive medi-care, which is strong in the African health consciousness is commonly, routinely effected and enforced using the musical arts theater. This includes the musical arts for the staging of emotions - personal, gender or age - (Nzewi 1999), and which are constant psycho-therapeutic measures.

In African medi-cure practice music is particularly researched for dealing with mental/spiritual sicknesses. In other circumstances music creates and sustains a mental-physical state of being requisite for the administration of physiological cure. Music convenes the community participation that in turn musters the spiritual energy of the sick person to recover and rejoin a supportive human fold. When the will is strong the body is better in tune to fight injurious organisms.

Musical constructs are critical in healing music situations. Hence producing aleatory or improper musical sounds may marginally act as diversion or palliative, but cannot effect or induce healing. The healing energy of music derives from distinctive structural conformations - melodic/melorhythmic/textural/formal structures. The nature of sickness or disorder recommends the thematic development theory that will be appropriate. Strict repetition of a theme can, for instance, generate cumulative affect. Otherwise, repetition of a theme is not the norm in the compositional theory of African music. Elsewhere (Nzewi 1997, pp. 59-67) we have argued the philosophical-psychological rationalization of repetition in African music, if and when indeed actual repetition is rationalized. Dance, drama, visual/plastic props, including numerology and sign reading (of the patterns of thrown, and thereby, energized bones/seeds/sticks/stone) are of strong import in diagnosis and effecting healing. The theater of medicine is a science that involves musical arts component in traditional Africa.

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