Journal of Retracing Africa

Volume 2 | Issue 1 Article 14

January 2016

Heaton, Matthew M. Black Skin, White Coats: Nigerian Psychiatrists, Decolonization, and the Globalization of Psychiatry. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013. 249pp

David C. Jones
crawjo@gmail.com

Heaton, Matthew M. *Black Skin, White Coats: Nigerian Psychiatrists, Decolonization and the Globalization of Psychiatry*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013, x + 249 pp.

In recent years, the study of Africa's transition from colonialism to independence has proven to be a particularly fruitful avenue of historical inquiry, as scholars have documented both the opportunities and challenges Africans faced as they struggled to define the boundaries of nationhood and identity while articulating new understandings of modernity. With his recent work on the history of Nigerian psychiatry in the decades surrounding national independence, Matthew Heaton has contributed an important chapter to this unfolding narrative, inserting the perspective of Nigerian psychiatrists into larger debates over the process of decolonization and the appropriation of Western knowledge within African landscapes.

The book's title, a play on the classic 1952 text by Frantz Fanon, signifies a point of departure rather than arrival, as Heaton argues that Nigerian psychiatrists of the 1950s and 1960s were able to reject the Manichaean logic of Fanon in favor of a pluralistic approach to medicine that adapted Western psychiatry to the Nigerian landscape while simultaneously redefining their field in light of local perspectives. In this way, Heaton argues that Nigerian psychiatrists challenged the binary distinctions between colonizer and colonized that have often defined the study of modern medicine in the non- Western world. Heaton's book thus offers an important corrective to other studies of African psychiatry that have emphasized the dislocations and miscommunications of the colonial encounter, in which Western doctors all too often pathologized and dehumanized colonial subjects exposed to the Western medical gaze.

By contrast, the heroes of Heaton's narrative are the first generation of Nigerian psychiatrists trained in the West, men like Thomas Adeoye Lambo and Tolani Asuni, who challenged the assumptions of the racist ethnopsychiatry that had dominated the field of colonial mental health for much of the twentieth century. That movement had argued for the existence of an "African mind" that was impulsive, emotional and allegedly less prone to mental illness than the supposedly more logical Western subject. In the book's most important chapter, Heaton shows how Lambo's work in the

1950s and 1960s shifted the field towards the new paradigm of transcultural psychiatry, defined by the premise that mental illness was a product of what Heaton calls "universal similarities of human psychological processes that transcended perceived boundaries between races and cultures" (4-5). Thus, a subsequent chapter on the mental illnesses of Nigerians living in the United Kingdom shows how Lambo and other Nigerian psychiatrists resisted racial and essentialist

explanations for the prevalence of mental illness among migrant populations. Likewise, Heaton shows how Nigerian doctors worked to reformulate so-called "brain fag" syndrome, an illness once thought to be unique to Nigerian culture, by placing it within the spectrum of universally acknowledged mental illnesses.

Though the above examples suggest a process whereby Nigerian psychiatrists redefined African illnesses according to the accepted terminology of Western medicine, Heaton does a fine job of showing how Nigerian medical personnel also worked to redefine the field of international psychiatry through an engagement with local practices. In this regard the most important effort at integrating international and local medicine was made through the establishment of the Aro Mental Hospital, founded by Lambo near his home of Abeokuta in the 1950s. Here Lambo and other Nigerian doctors offered an approach to healing that combined Western techniques, such as psychopharmaceutical treatment and electroconvulsive therapy, with traditional African healing practices that were more holistic than those found in Western medical institutions. In fact, as Heaton shows, Lambo not only worked with traditional medical practitioners at Aro, he also spent much of his career insisting on the value of indigenous healers to achieving successful therapeutic outcomes. Yet the incorporation of non-Western medicine into the practice of Nigerian psychiatrists was also clearly elitist in orientation, as Nigerian doctors situated themselves as intermediaries, or as Heaton refers to them, "gatekeepers of the mind" who were "the only ones with the appropriate balance of culturally specific knowledge and scientifically universal knowledge" (152).

Heaton's narrative is written in a clear and effective—if at times repetitive—prose, and his argument about the importance of transcultural psychiatry to the decolonization process is well-made. However, Heaton's analysis would also have benefited from a deeper engagement with the theoretical implications of his main contentions. Heaton is surely right to position figures like Lambo as "gatekeepers," yet this term also raises important questions about the cultural and national agendas of this newly educated elite, as well as their desire for social control. Nowhere is this more clearly apparent than in the doctors' concerns about the emergence of recreational drug use by young urban men in post-independence Nigeria. As Heaton shows, Asuni believed that widespread cannabis use hurt family stability and constituted "disruptive and irresponsible behavior" (170) that threatened the health and productivity of the nation. Yet the author never weighs in on whether these fears were rational or simply a manifestation of an undefined social and cultural agenda. Given the importance Heaton ascribes to these seminal psychiatric figures, a deeper exploration of their own perspective on the meaning of nationhood and independence would have helped to contextualize their interventions in local and international medical debates, while also raising

the question of whether, as intermediaries, these doctors' efforts at social control constituted a neo- colonial continuation of colonial-era priorities. Relatedly, the book's focus on elite perspectives seems to preclude a deeper discussion or analysis of how other participants in the field of Nigerian mental health, such as traditional healers and patients, navigated the post-colonial landscape being constructed by men like Lambo and Asuni.

That Heaton's book raises these questions is surely a credit to the author's exhaustive research into the medical debates of the independence period and his clear presentation of his argument. For these reasons alone, Black Skin, White Coats will become essential reading for scholars of the history of African psychiatry and African medicine, as well as for specialists of modern Nigeria. It will also surely open new fields of inquiry into the study of contemporary African encounters with Western science and philosophy.

David Crawford Jones
Senior Lecturer of African American and African Studies
The Ohio State University
Columbus, OH