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A NOTE ON THE BIRTH OF ESAN PSYCHOLOGY: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ESAN PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In this work, a new theoretical framework rooted in human psychology is proposed for what is termed the Esan Psychology. Esan Psychology is an emerging subfield of psychology within the multiethnic psychology and cross-cultural psychological fields. It is assumed that its application will be able to retrieve the psychological ideas embedded within the indigenous Esan spiritual and religious traditions and philosophies. The ultimate aim is to promote further research into these psychological ideas and terms, as their greater understanding and use will contribute to their enhancement.

KEYWORDS: Esan Psychology, Benin Empire, Osanobua, Psychoafricalysis

INTRODUCTION

In this work, a uniquely theoretical framework of Esan Psychology is established by exploring how human beings are conceptualized within the cosmology that characterizes the African traditions. This requires a brief overview of basic psychological concepts and principles that have contributed to the emergence of what could be described as the Esan Psychology within the branch of multiethnic psychology.

The word “Esan” refers to an ethnic group residing in southern Nigeria who speak the Esan language, indicating that Esan Psychology examines the conventional psychology premises within a cultural context. Undergirding the history of the Esan people is a story of its cultural ideas about life and living, shaped by Africanism.

The biggest influence on Esanland came from the Edo people, founders of Benin Empire. In 1400s, Oba (king) Ewuare of the Benin kingdom passed laws in the areas of human practices like drumming, dancing, cooking, and sexual relationships. As these rules proved too restrictive for some people, in the 15th century, some of these people, including nobles and princes, fled towards the northeast where they formed communities and monarchies among the indigenous peoples they met there.

In this new Esan settlement, over thirty kingdoms were established, often warring with each other. These conflicts were partly due to the immigration process which could cause a variety of psychological problems related to negotiating loss and separation from the empire of origin, family members and familiar customs and traditions, as well as exposure to a new physical environment, and the need to navigate unfamiliar cultural experiences. Despite these wars, the new settlers tried to maintain a culture of homogeneity they had brought from the Benin Empire.

The Esan people share many values and traditions, including the Esan or Ishan language usage; strong sense of familism; traditional separation between male and female roles; celebrations of Esan festivals; visual, performing, and musical forms; religion; and ancestral devotions, spirituality, and Osanobua (God).

Esan is apparently a Niger-Congo language related to Edo, Igala, and Igbo, among others. It is a tonal language, whereby the meaning of words depends on the tone, pitch, and dialect in which they are expressed. Owing to its origins, while the Esan Psychology is rooted in cross-cultural psychology, it concentrates less on intercultural group differences, and more on intracultural group variations. In other words, it recognizes that the ways and styles of the Esan people are driven by intracultural communication, which is a meaningful exchange between members of the same social group or of groupings with similar cultural characteristics. As a result, unlike intercultural groupings, there is less discomfort and unease in interpersonal or group relationships.

The Esan Psychology stems from the Benin culture whose empire was colonized, along with the Esan land, by the British Empire in 1897. Even when Nigeria gained its independence in 1960, the Esan people were able to maintain many aspects of their culture of origin while also acquiring the White, English or “oyibo” culture.

Nonetheless, within the larger context of Nigeria, some degree of suppression and bias has affected the existence of Esan Psychology due to the Esan people’s geographical minority status. As a result, their ability to participate in power sharing was compromised, leading to a natural tendency to form close social networks and to look toward their own group for support. This unfair treatment also affects the perceptions that many members of the Esan ethnic group have toward members of the majority groups and their willingness to integrate socially, especially if it means giving up some of their cultures and identities.

The attitudes of Esan people can be easily understood from the perspective of human psychology. An important feature of Esan Psychology is the thinking that the human personality has two main elements—the physical and the spiritual—aligning with the body–mind (soul) separation recognized in the Euro-American philosophical tradition. The physical element of a person is collectively known as egbe (body), and ehi (human psyche, soul, or mind) is the spiritual element of human personality

(Oshodi, 2012). The soul is seen as a manifestation or realization of the human thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Within the Esan Psychology, obhen (goodness) and ebhiebe (evilness) are in opposition, while emphasis is placed on the afterlife beliefs which are positively or negatively associated with both death acceptance and death apprehension.

The worldview of Esan Psychology also contains a set of assumptions about physical and social reality, which could have strong effects on cognition, emotionality, and behavior.

In discussing this new formation of Esan Psychology, it is evident that moral reform in the Esan conception of human psychology is needed, so that vice and virtue within the Esan context become specifically about good wishes, health, progress, and unity.

On a global level, the Esan Psychology is best known for its various fully-fledged art forms that include the Igbabonelimhin and Asonogun. Igbabonelimhin is an acrobatic dance of the Esan people that is performed by masquerades and requires a high energetic physical flexibility. This cultural male-oriented dance involves sophisticated acrobatic stunts and tumbling.

Asonogun is an entertaining performance combining music and dance involving both male and female artists. These unique dances are accompanied by drumming, feet stamping, sticks, bells, shakers, hand claps, and singing, which are used to express a wide range of emotions such as joy, sorrow, hope, victory, and strength.

The Esan Psychology is important in the understanding of rational emotions as applied to concepts, such as patience, taking responsibility, honor, rectitude, industry, dignity, obedience, politeness, forthrightness, tolerance, and remorse. It also aids in the understanding of irrational emotions as applied to concepts such as humiliation, degradation, vengeance, conspiracy, cheating, perversion, negativity, falsehoods, and injustice. Still, its main aim is elucidating how people of Esan descent know and experience the world. In that sense, it is an integral part of cultural psychology that could contribute to African-centered studies focused on behaviors, cognition, perception, and emotion.

The development of Esan Psychology as first initiated here and globally could lead to the promotion of indigenous Esan knowledge, which would also contribute to the greater recognition of African heritage and worldviews in psychology.

Esan Psychology will find a foundational and theoretical home in the school of Psychoafricalysis or Psychoafricalytic Psychology, also known as the Oshodian Psychology—a theory of inner mental processes, conscious intentions, observable actions, formation of human personality, perceptual



orientations, cultural undertakings, spiritual presentations, and biochemical variants in the African perspectives (Oshodi, 2012).

Other academic and systematic fields that are relevant to and overlap with Esan Psychology are African American Psychology, Botanic Psychology, Agricultural Psychology, Orthopedic Psychology, Neurophysiology, Dance Psychology, Music Psychology, Transpersonal Psychology, Yoruba psychotherapy, Herbal medicine, and Traditional indigenous healing systems.

In sum, Esan Psychology is an emerging subfield of psychology which can be applied by researchers and educators engaged in cross-cultural psychological fields to retrieve the psychological ideas embedded within the indigenous Esan spiritual and religious traditions and philosophies. Going forward, it is hoped that these psychological ideas and terms will be further enhanced through further psychological research and application.

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