

African Indigenous Oral Traditional Endarkened Feminist Practice: Indigenous Knowledge and New Materialism

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Abstract

Systemic and social constructionist practitioners demand that issues of social justice are paid attention to in all aspects of practice, through the application of multi-perspectives. But multi-perspectives may not be so multiple, as they are often embedded in ideas and theories that stem from Western European frames. This paper examines the place material presence (objects) have within the discourse of African Indigenous Oral Traditional Endarkened and Feminist Practice (AIOTEFP). An example of the application of AIOTEFP is offered as a way of demonstrating inventive ways that AIOTEFP can be practiced, offering alternative accounts that privilege marginalised voices. I argue that, if social justice is to be achieved, responsible communication and attentiveness to the needs of others, have to be an important part of this process, to create discourses that go beyond a Western European frame of knowledge.

Introduction

This article examines my relationship with objects, derived from African Indigenous (Dei 2011), African oral traditional ideas (Jude 2013) and Endarkened feminisms (Dillard 2012 which I refer to as AIOTEFP. These ideas stem from the dailyness of local people's use of everyday knowledge to include experience, remembering, practice, and ways of knowing embedded in culture, history, language, place and surroundings (Dei 2011; Some 1994). Others advocate that objects and our surroundings have the capacity to influence our responses, judgement and relationship with self and others. Objects are deemed to have presence – to be alive and to have ability to generate vital force. This way of thinking encourages the inclusion of both animate and non-animate knowledge.

One of the defining characteristics of AIOTEFP is grounded in the assertion that our ways of knowing are informed by social relationships: with self, community, others, space, place, objects, and our surroundings.

AIOTEFP scholars have rightly complained that their way of giving meaning to their lived experiences are accounts that Western European scholars and academics distance themselves from, actively silencing their ways

of knowing by claiming frames used to make sense of their experience have no place in dominant academic discourse (Collins 2000; Dillard 2012; Du Bois 1990; Fanon 1993).

The debate as to what counts as knowledge continues. But academics are no strangers to being questioned and asked to account for positions taken. Feminist scholars continue to challenge academic theory and have been successful, not only in influencing dominant discourse, but re-visioning accounts that privilege feminist and marginalised voices.

I argue that there is a place for the entanglement of African Indigenous Endarkened Feminist ideas alongside the New Materialist ideas of Barad (2007 & 2003), Bennett (2010), Braidotti (2013), and many more who emphasise the vitality of matter (objects, non-human, stuff). The idea of bringing together ideas from AIOTEFP and advocates of the life of matter could be one way of creating multi-perspectives within systemic and social constructionist discourses that could offer ideas beyond Western European discourses.

Shifting position

Barad (2007) maintains that one way of shifting the traditional route to knowledge-making could involve re-evaluating discourses of inclusion and exclusion; also, the way inclusion is talked about as well as the structures that support the way disciplinary positions are defended. She argues a way forward would be to break down the spilt between the value placed on certain positions, arguing for a way of coming together that embraces responses to fit otherness in a more diverse way. This shifting of position supports the views of African Indigenous and Endarkened feminist scholars. Moreover, it made me aware that I had never questioned the theoretical menu that I had swallowed during my professional academic journey until I found myself experiencing a sense of doubt I will expand upon in the “Potatoes and Yam” narrative below.

Potatoes and Yam

Potatoes and yam are root vegetables. The potato is a staple vegetable in Europe and used alongside many dishes. Yam looks like a bark of a tree and is grown in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and Asia. Both vegetables originate from countries outside Europe.

Yam and Potato have to be cooked before they can be eaten. They can be boiled, steamed, grilled, baked, roasted, fried and mashed. And yet the potato has been deemed the chef's most versatile vegetable and has gastronomic status. The yam, on the other hand, has never been incorporated into European cuisine.

The potato and yam story is about my departure towards creating a diverse and cultural perspective to my systemic practice. As a systemic therapist and researcher working in families' homes, I had become aware of tension between my ideas (therapeutic skills) and their application. In my clinic-based sessions, I saw families at a particular place and time. During the pre-session before seeing families, I would hypothesise about what families might say and how I might respond. I would invite the team to watch out for ways in which I used a particular idea, technique or other ways of working. The videotape recording was there as backup to ensure every detail was captured, so it could be reviewed and learned from. In short, I learned to predict, measure, and develop good intentions. It was a method of working I believed could be adapted to any context. But this sweet sense of certainty and safety does not transport easily or even usefully. In families' homes there is

no certainty, time runs riot and is rebellious. I often have no idea which members of a family might be present or what mood they might be in.

It is not surprising that I found it hard to transfer theoretical ideas that grounded my training into home-based therapy. Imagine arriving at a new town, country or village and having no idea what to expect. It was hard to come to terms with the notion that I could not plan for a neat outcome or choreograph the one-hour therapeutic session. Not knowing how to use my traditional skills purposefully, I found myself coming to the realisation that, words, theory or techniques do not,

Bleed

and

Breathe

and

Fall ill

and

Laugh

or

Cry

or

Shout

or

Hug

or

Hurt

or say good- bye.

I needed a model that could breathe life into everyday family interactions. Feelings, emotions, responses, said and unsaid words are alive in families' homes. The fact that I was having this conversation in a culturally prescribed way started to make me feel uneasy. Had I lost my way around my professional nest? Yes. I found that I could not transfer my way of being a therapist in a child and adolescent National Health Service context to a family's home. Instead of my usual feelings of competence and knowing how to go on, I was experiencing thundering heartbeats, sweaty armpits, and acute emotional doubt of my ability to do anything that would be remotely considered as therapeutic. My professional self had disappeared and left me empty of know-how. This started to become a regular occurrence which forced me to pause. I'm not sure that I could have done anything else but pause. I knew that something different needed to happen. That something different was serenading to feelings in the body as one way of understanding what was going on and

seeing this, not as an infliction, but as a resource. To do this I had to reconnect with values from my cultural heritage. The intensity of difficult feelings was relieved once I had given myself permission to integrate Indigenous knowledge and know-how into my practice, alongside traditional systemic ways of working.

Dei defines Indigenous knowledge “as science, philosophy, and practice of knowing about one’s existence as not conscripted and scripted by colonial and colonizing experiences” (2011, p.4), and noted that, “Indigenous knowledge speaks of the inseparability and interdependence of selves and the collective which includes mind, body and spirit connections and connectedness of society, culture and nature in the ways we come to know about ourselves and our work; based on a cosmological understanding that the elements of the universe are interrelated and intertwined” (Dei 2011, p.4). Dillard approaches the issue of African Indigenous ideas in ways that seek to illuminate the linguistic concepts that erase and make invisible black presence, and “attempts to unmask traditionally-held political and cultural constructions or constrictions, language which more accurately organizes, resists, and transforms oppressive descriptions of sociocultural phenomena and relationships” (Dillard 2012, p.662). Similarly, Womack (2013) argues that there is a need to punctuate negative stories of the other, and maintains that the dominant discourses invented by Western academics have tended to erase contributions of the lived experiences of black lives from the past and future, which has had the effect of hijacking the imagination and creativity of communities that do not fit the frame of dominant Western European discourse. Dillard (2012) suggests that this way of offering knowledge is oppressive and marginalising, as it implies that no black thinker is good enough to have their contribution acknowledged by the white male elite.

African scholars, however, continue to be divided on what counts as African Indigenous knowledge, and what this knowledge should look like. The debate has centred on whether African philosophy should conform to Western thinking and what counts as philosophy. As a result, African scholars have found themselves occupying different camps: on one side, there are the traditionalists (Carruthers 1995; Diop 1991; Some 1994), who argue that day-to-day values based on oral tradition should be privileged, while others argue that traditional ideas in the form that emerged from Western scholars no longer have a place in African discourse – that even what are known as African Indigenous ideas are illusions created by Westerners (Hountondji 1983; Karp & Masolo 2000; Nobles 2007).

Over the last two decades we have seen a rise in writing from a wide range of black scholars - philosophers, theorists, students and practitioners - all making a contribution by placing traditional and contemporary ideas into a conversational frame to be discussed, critiqued and expanded upon. However, I am interested in the works of scholars who encourage an appreciation of the traditional ideas rooted in aspects of everyday practice. When I refer to *Endarkened* ideas, I use the word as Dillard does, to challenge the notion of enlightenment and emphasise instead multiple, complex, varied African identities, values, histories, traditions and practices. I also want to acknowledge and honour the ancestry and tradition of African Indigenous ideas that relate to everyday practice and are not forgotten but live on in the mouths of aunts, uncle, elders and parents in a local community; that are lived/living, honoured/honouring and remembered/remembling through performance, everyday activity, speech, music, song, craft, skills, touching, rituals, poetry, storytelling and family tradition. Practices and ways of being that have been handed down over time, which everybody in the community is acquainted with and can take part in. The celebration of matter by the community (bodies, environment and objects), and the vitality that emerges from the entanglement of these different elements. In sum, practice based upon the idea of connectedness, material presence and our surroundings (Appiah 1993; Dei 2011; Doumbia & Doumbia 2004). Kente clothes offer a good

example of the impact of material objects in our lives. Ross (2001) points out that Kente clothing is not superficially decorative, as it communicates something about the wearer – displaying themes of the individual’s identity, regional patterns and relational context within the local community. For example, this Kente cloth (below) conveys the message that there are things about the wearer’s life that cannot be talked about in public.



“Eyes can see but your mouth cannot say.”

Miller (2000) considers the ways in which some communities can be geographically or tribally identified through cloth. He noted that in some communities there was a belief that truth resided on the surface, where other people can easily see it and attest to it, rather than in the hidden depth of self under the skin. What seems to be emerging is the idea that we cannot have both/and. That is, we are constituted by things and appearances which may appear soft/superficial and constituted by ideas of self, local knowledge or theory. Morrison (1993) and Smith (2012) noted the latter appears to be the more acceptable construction; as Western academic scholars hold on to a textual account of knowledge, this tends to leave knowledge based on practice in the shadows.

From Morrison’s (1993) and Smith’s (2012) observations, it could be argued that knowledge based on African Indigenous Oral Traditional and Endarkened Feminist Practice rather than Western European knowledge could appear to be too much of a difference in terms of what counts as legitimate knowledge. Despite the negative slant placed on Indigenous practice and knowledge, there is a movement by culturally diverse scholars, who in essence are challenging who has the right to speak for whom. In addition, the resurgence of a focus on objects as being and having knowledge, championed by contemporary thinkers, Haraway (2008) and Barad (2003), suggests that it is a worthy pathway to divert our attention. The examples below give a sense of the vital energy that comes from place, space and our surroundings – to consider *matter* and its impact on our emotions and judgement.

Through the example, I want to retain and build on the idea that material presence and objects have vitality and if we allow ourselves to be open to this silent knowledge, it has the potential to redefine the way that we give meaning to our experiences and relationships with objects and surroundings.

From clinic to families' homes

The journey to my clinic is a very scenic affair, near woodlands and a farm. The clinic is set in hospital grounds, the receptionist welcomes visitors and the clinic walls are covered with lovely artworks. My home visits, on the other hand, often leave me feeling that I have to be on guard as I navigate my way up and down the stairwells that refuse to let go of years of urine odour. I walk over wet floors and pass through walls covered in graffiti. This housing estate appears permanently in a bad mood. It stands big and bold, but old. It looks worn and tired. When she was built in the early 1970s, she was majestic! Everyone wanted to be housed in her. From 2010, she accommodates only new arrivals to this country; they are the tenants who are grateful to be there. The visual image of this estate is unforgiving. The boarded windows are like sticking plaster on broken skin. As I walk towards the estate, I have this familiar conversation with myself about whether or not to take the stairwell or head for the lift. Neither of the options turns out to be a clear winner as they both cause anxiety and seem equally uninviting. "I am a family therapist!" I say to myself. "What am I doing here?"

It was starting to get dark and it was a chilly November day. Children of all ages seemed to appear out of nowhere, full of laughter, screaming and teasing. They shone like rays from the sun, giving the estate life. The children did not pause, ponder or hesitate about taking the lift or stairs. They just made their way home. So what the heck was I worried about? The estate was home to many children. When I repeat this statement – the estate was home to many children – I felt ashamed that I had feared it but at the same time I was humbled by my experience.

Shotter (2013), inspired by Wittgenstein and Bakhtin, invites us to make use of our vision and develop a language that invites description as opposed to one that is cold and abstract. Talk that opens the door to description allows the listener to get a sense of what is happening in the telling. Descriptive talk is alive; it's living. It has body and character. Adding descriptions, alongside storytelling, is like having a stethoscope that allows closeness from within. The stethoscope gives depth to the sense-making; it provides another layer of inner voice and energy.

But these moments that get created contain many things I can't completely capture, such as time of day, season, the presence of others, location, buildings, stories associated with the community, my experience, the purpose of my visit, my mood, events that happened prior to my arrival, my journey to the location. All these different elements can be considered polymattering: evolving not one single line of my thought and feeling, but an entanglement of a collection of experiences, for how I come to make sense of this moment requires a diffuse, scattered kind of attention and sense-making that appears absent in the way we usually dialogue and arrive at meaning-making (Shotter 2014). What I am attempting to show is the idea of enchantment (Bennett 2010; Gell 1996), and a sense that the vitality of energy in any given moment is complex. Moreover, this energy is not always immediately apparent or accessible, and can remain hidden from our awareness (Morton 2013).

The French philosopher Bachelard's (1994) work on the domestic home offers the elements mentioned above. He refers to the poetics of space as magical 'cosmos'. Home is framed within the background of childhood playful living comprised of much delight, rich in imaginary spaces, events, moments and curiosity. Bachelard (1994) is irreverent in the way that home is seen, with different tunes of praise, beauty and power all contained within home. What he demonstrates is the dimension of the aesthetics of objects (Morton 2013), which can be conveyed in the description of

our surroundings and the power of the enchantment, spellbound affect and bewitchment that comes with the intimate interplay of human and non-human relationship. Bachelard's (1994) work typifies Barad's (2003), Bennett's (2010) & Tuan's (2008) ideas of energy in matter and connects with AIOTEFP's notion of spirit and soul that exist in objects (Castaneda 2000; Keeney 2005).

An example of practice

Having considered Bachelard's poetic description of home, I want to take this opportunity to share an example of how I use the idea of objects taken from AIOTEFP in my practice. In this image, the participant was invited to select objects that they come into contact with that are important in their day-to-day context. The assemblage of objects depicts moments of the participant's life through the dailyness of stuff that they interact with.



- The participant was invited to pay attention to the objects chosen as well as to consider how together they contribute to a narrative of their everyday life.
- The relational image with object allowed the individual to create their narrative of their experience from elements of their environment/surroundings that best describe the dailyness of their experience.
- The presentation of life captured in moments offers an alternative way of seeing aspects of everyday living through our interaction with the stuff around us, and offers a way of connecting with self through the dailyness of material stuff.
- The image attempts to show the relevance of objects in our life which I argue can enrich our understanding of our situated context when words fail. As noted by Bennett (2010) in her work on hoarding, the narratives of the hoarder can be performed and understood through the message of the hoard – matter.

This connects with the work of Miller (2000, 2008) who provides a moving account of how people express themselves through their relationship with objects and Turkle's (2007) work, which provides a collection of examples of the different ways we use objects to think. Miller (2000) noted that our sense of truth and reality can exist on the surface where other people can easily see it, touch it and attest to it, or it can be located from within the inner frames of self. The point I want to make here is that expression of our experiences, sense of self and the dailyness of our existence can co-exist with language and objects. Neither is right or wrong - we can have both. It is an invitation to the viewer to look, look, and look again – to view the ever more complex realities of the here and now.

In the moment of looking I would encourage the individual:

- *To consider where their gaze arrests on the image*
- *To consider how the touch of their eyes on the frame makes them available to what gets seen and evoked*
- *Which part of self does this most connect with?*
- *What experience does it evoke?*
- *What that means for them?*
- *What other ways might they want to engage with the image?*
- *What do they find themselves getting caught in?*

The above questions would be one way in which I might encourage the process of curiosity of *becoming with the silent other* - otherwise known as objects, stuff or materialism. One way of departing on this pathway might be to consider the encounter as nomadic meeting points within a process (Braidotti 2013) inviting Lather's (2007) ideas of getting lost in the other's local habitat and being attentive to the implication of putting ourselves in conversational spaces which might be unfamiliar. Where we experience disquiet, where we are unsettled, these places open up the possibilities for the 'yet to be known' to emerge from the process. The notion of getting lost connects with the work of the feminist philosopher, Lugoes, who advocates an appreciation towards travelling the world of others and being open to what emerges from the travel: difference, unfamiliarity and alienation, to comfort and familiarity (Lugoes 1994 in Madison 2012). Braidotti (2013) also speaks of the value in taking a position that requires shifting from linear to multi ways of being and essentially being prepared, and having the courage, to go outside the box. Madison gives a word of caution in that she notes, "Travelling to another world threatens arrogant perception" (Madison 2012, p.125). This rings true for me. When I first started publicly speaking of African Indigenous ways of knowing, I was met with fury in some professional circles which silenced me for a while as I had not anticipated the level of rage I encountered.

Conclusion

The emergence of transdisciplinary interest in the matter of matter encourages new ways of being and knowing, and could soften the arrogant perception that Madison refers to, and could see the collapse of the binary that exists between animate and inanimate (Barad 2007). This could drive and support the idea of social justice for the unveiling and acceptance of AIOTEFP as deserving the same status given to Western European knowledge-based frames. What I am advocating is an awareness and openness toward creating space for using different ideas of understanding human experiences

from other communities, which could create space for multi perspectives from many corners of our globe to have equal footing in the lineage of traditional perspectives that influence what knowledge and what meaning-making practices should look like.

As researchers, scholars and practitioners we must be ready to work not only with the dialogue, tools and structures that we know and are faithful to, but must also be brave enough to include alternative ways of knowing to put our world and the world of others in an englobing dialogical frame.

It is important that we act to enable a co-joining of worlds rather than distance or force others to see the world through traditional dominant discourses. Implicit is the notion that the knowledge we impart needs to create space for many different forms of knowledge, which requires perturbing the traditional way we offer ideas that makes some knowledge more legitimate than others.

I have included my personal account of how I relate to the idea of bringing a sense of multi perspective into my practice. We now face how the question of how we might work to make multi perspective meaningful in practice and in our inquiry. But also to wrestle, perhaps, with what this response could look like in this new wave of thinking that advocates a more joined-up approach to practice.

One of the defining characteristics of AIOTEFP is grounded in the assertion that relationship with material stuff is informed by social relationships with self, community, others, space, place, objects and our surroundings. What is being constructed in this paper is the idea that our knowledge base needs to be more expansive to include practices that celebrate different knowledge, and challenges us to reinvent ways of inquiring into our practice. As a way of embracing and creating other ways of knowing, I offer AIOTEFP as one way of making visible practices and discourses from a particular cultural perspective.

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