

Epigenetics and Post-Traumatic Slavery Disorder

The European 'Discovery' of what Afrikans already knew

Introduction

Why is it that Afrikans will never believe any 'new' idea or concept that is introduced to them unless it comes from Caucasians, or until it receives confirmation by Caucasians?

Many of our people are dogged by a deepseated inferiority complex which does not permit the possibility that Afrikans past or present are capable of developing ideas and concepts – particularly in the realm of science and technology – that are unique and groundbreaking and unknown to Caucasians.

This point was brought home to me recently when watching a television programme 'Horizon' on BBC2 on Wednesday 2nd November 2005. The programme was looking at the topic of *epigenetics* and the exciting and groundbreaking 'discoveries' being made by Caucasian scientists.

Traditionally, European scientists have believed that the genetic inheritance that one receives from one's parents is 'sealed' once the egg is fertilised in the womb. Therefore if there is a genetic abnormality e.g. a chromosome deletion, this will lead to the same condition irrespective of which parent this abnormality is inherited from.

The story of epigenetics unfolded in the UK and Sweden. In the UK a geneticist was seeking an explanation as to why children with the same genetic abnormality (a deletion to the same chromosome) ended up with two very different diseases, Angelman Syndrome and Prada Willi syndrome. It transpired that children who inherited the chromosome deletion from their mothers ended up with Angelman Syndrome, a severe condition in which the child is severely impaired, never develops speech, but appears to be permanently smiling and happy. On the other hand children who inherited the chromosome deletion from their father developed Prada Willi syndrome in which there is no intellectual impairment, but where the child does not have the internal triggers that tell us when we are full and therefore will eat continuously unless prevented, usually leading to morbid obesity. The question was, how could the same genetic abnormality lead to two very different diseases?

At the same time scientists in Sweden were studying a remote community near to the Artic circle which presented an excellent study group due to their genetic isolation and excellent records of births, deaths etc. dating back hundreds of years. Upon investigation these scientists were astonished to find that events that affected the present population's grandparents e.g. famine, seemed to have a direct impact upon the current population's health prospects. These findings flew directly in the face of the contemporary genetics paradigm since one was not talking about the inheritance of traditional genetic abnormalities through the generations, but rather the

realisation that experiencing adverse social and environmental conditions could have a direct impact upon the health of generations to come.

Due to its location close to the Arctic Circle the people living in that area had experienced fairly frequent famines. By using the historical records to track the occurrence of these famines, the scientists were able to demonstrate that these events had a direct effect upon the life expectancy of the grandchildren of the people who actually experienced the famine. More specifically, this effect occurred when the female grandparent had been a foetus in the womb and when the male grandparent had been going through puberty at the time of the famine. It appeared clear that these were crucial periods due to the times when females develop their egg producing capacity and males their sperm producing capacity.

This work led to the idea of *epigenetics* which suggests that certain traits or genetic dispositions can be passed down through more than one generation and act in the manner of a light switch i.e. they can be switched on or remain off depending upon the environmental conditions. For example, they were able to demonstrate that children who were conceived via invitro fertilisation were up to four times more likely to develop certain genetic abnormalities and that this was due entirely to the fact that the egg was exposed to environmental change i.e. being removed from the womb and placed in a Petri dish or test tube for fertilisation by sperm from the prospective father.

Such findings bring a renewed focus upon the importance of environment in shaping the physical health of current and future generations. It shows us that we are literally shaping the health prospects of our grandchildren and no doubt great-grandchildren by the things we do and the environment to which we are exposed.

The transmission of psychological states or dispositions through the generations was also explored during this television programme. Psychologists had noted that the children of Jewish holocaust survivors had reported high levels of stress and anxiety and that many attributed it to the experiences of their parents in the European concentration camps. It had been generally believed by psychologists that these people were manifesting these high levels of stress due to having been repeatedly exposed to the stories of their parents' torture and abuse.

In order to test this thesis these scientists examined women who had been pregnant and exposed to the events that took place in New York on 9/11. The psychologists found that the children whose mothers had been directly exposed to the 9/11 attack and aftermath whilst they were in the womb exhibited much lower levels of cortisol production than other children. The psychologists were aware that people with low levels of cortisol had been demonstrated to have a greater susceptibility to developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder than people with average levels of cortisol production.

Thus it was clear that the stress exposure of the mother had had a direct effect upon the bio-chemistry of their children and made them more prone to experiencing damaging stress than children who were not similarly exposed.

The title of this essay is 'Epigenetics and Post-Traumatic Slavery Disorder The European 'Discovery' of what Afrikans already knew'. It informs the reader that epigenetics is just one example of how ancient Afrikan wisdom, which has been passed down through countless generations, is now being 'discovered' by European scientists. Personally speaking, it was back in the 1990's that I first heard Dr Patricia Newton speaking on the subject of 'Post-Traumatic Slavery Disorder'. Dr Newton, who is a psychiatrist as well as being trained in Afrikan knowledge systems, was explaining how the repeated trauma experienced by our ancestors during slavery and in the years of terrorisation and oppression that followed had been passed down through the generations and resulted in many of the self-negating and dysfunctional individual and group behaviour patterns that we see amongst Afrikan people across the world today.

Of course at the time many acculturised Afrikans rejected such ideas as excuse making and Afrikans immersing themselves in their victimhood. Now, with European scientists validating the ideas that Dr Newton has sought to reacquaint us with these Europeansied Afrikans will take them on board, at least up to the point where it brings them into conflict with their European reference group.

The first fundamental point I am making in this essay relates to how knowledge is produced and constructed within a world dominated by Caucasians. It is one of those sad truisms that if you are seeking to convince most Afrikans of a point of significance the most effective route is to bring forth 'mainstream'/European validation for that point.

The second fundamental point I am making relates to the damage to our contemporary psyches resulting from the Mangalize (sometimes misnomered Black Holocaust). We are encouraged to underplay and underestimate the effects of hundreds of years of physical and psychological terrorisation on our people and yet everything we see around us tells that our people are spiritually, emotionally and psychologically dislocated in a way that could only arise from massive trauma.

Dr Newton will not receive media acclaim for her work in publicising the generational transmission of stress and trauma and she would no doubt highlight that she is simply bringing forth Afrikan ancestral knowledge for the benefit of our people. Knowledge is not produced in a cultural vacuum and indeed is a product of culture. Afrikans need to learn this and act to produce institutions to (re)create and disseminate Afrikan centred-knowledge.

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