Decolonization and Diagnosis in Nigeria: A Historical Appraisal of Transcultural Psychiatry in Nigeria

This talk examines the ways that psychiatric thinking in Nigeria about three specific diagnoses – schizophrenia, depression, and a culture bound syndrome called “brain fag” – changed significantly in the period from the 1950s-1970s. During this time, Nigerian psychiatrists like Thomas Adeoye Lambo became the first psychiatrists of indigenous background to work in the country at the same time that Nigeria was rapidly decolonizing. At the same time, the field of transcultural psychiatry was in its early development in Europe and North America, and research partnerships between Nigeria and Western research centers became crucial to the development of new psychiatric knowledge. McGill’s own Raymond Prince was among the first transcultural psychiatrists to visit and research in Nigeria, and wrote the first scholarly treatment of “brain fag syndrome”. Thus research that took place in Nigeria was influenced by and critical of earlier colonial era discourses about the nature of mental illness in Africans that had been based in the racialist ideologies of empire at the same time that it was contributing to the process of developing a new, modern nation-state with all of the psychological hazards that was believed to entail. Yet, redefining diagnostic criteria cross-culturally was a fraught process that produced debates and conflicts that have shaped psychiatric discourse ever since. Psychiatric theories and concepts originally developed to suit the needs of particular segments of Euro-American populations were reformulated to meet the perceived needs of other cultures, viewed increasingly as deserving of psychiatric care on more or less equal terms, much as independent post-colonial nation-states were seeking incorporation into the global community on more or less equal terms. This talk argues that there is much to be gained from studying the history of transcultural psychiatry in the mid-20th century in terms of the local political conditions that were influencing psychiatric thinking in decolonizing environments such as Nigeria.