Aspects of Mental Illness in West African Students *

J. R. M. Copeland

The Maudsley Hospital, London, S.E. 5

Introduction

Cultural factors are said to influence the form and more especially the content of mental illness in Africans. Kidd, in a study at Edinburgh University, found that the incidence of mental illness was higher in Nigerian men than in the native-born. Many Nigerians and other West Africans come to Britain to study and their mental illnesses present serious problems of diagnosis and prognosis which must be elucidated before advice can be given as to whether the student should continue at University or return home. It was in an attempt to clarify some of these problems that the present study was undertaken.

West African students are temporary immigrants, but they meet many of the difficulties experienced by the permanent immigrant. One of the first careful studies on immigration was undertaken by Ødegård (1932), who found a higher proportion of mental illness in Norwegian-born immigrants to Minnesota than in either the native-born or those left behind in Norway. Among his other findings was a preponderance of schizophrenic illnesses,

which he attributed to the predisposition of people with schizoid personalities to emigrate. Many of the illnesses occurred within the first five years of arrival. He was studying the stress of the actual situation, but in schizophrenic illnesses this was rapidly replaced by typical schizophrenic symptoms.

Mezey (1960) in a survey of mental illness among refugees in Britain, writes, "our data do not lend support to the thesis that cultural isolation subsequent to migration plays a decisive part in shaping schizophrenic personality; the assessment of the pre-migratory social adaptation in these cases showed that they tended to be 'marginal' people in Hungary".

Paranoid delusions of persecution in migrants have frequently been recorded. Mezey found paranoid schizophrenia the commonest form. Eitinger also found persecutory delusions more common among refugee patients than in matched native-born patients.

West African students come to this country to obtain some form of qualification and usually intend to return home. It can fairly be presumed therefore, that pre-migratory personality factors have played a lesser part in determining their migration, than would be true of other migrants.

The Sovereign States of West Africa considered here — Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone — are composed of many native tribes, speaking many languages but, although finding different tribal expression, their basic beliefs and customs are similar. The majority of students in this study are Nigerians from the relatively well-educated Yoruba tribe which has over the last few years developed rapidly from a peasant to an urban westernized type of culture. Lambo (1954) describes among the Yoruba, a belief of the predominant in possessions which he attributed to the predisposition of people with schizoid personalities to emigrate. Many of the illnesses occurred within the first five years of arrival. He was studying the stress of the actual situation, but in schizophrenic illnesses this was rapidly replaced by typical schizophrenic symptoms.

Eitinger (1960) supported Odgaard's finding, "that there is a connection between the schizoid character and emigration", but found that the majority of schizophrenic breakdowns occurred within the first five years of arrival. He was studying the incidence of mental illness among refugees in Norway: a group not entirely comparable with Odgaard's group of 'voluntary' immigrants. In contrast to Odgaard's findings, it appeared that the initial symptomatology was frequently coloured by the stress of the actual situation, but in schizophrenic illnesses this was rapidly replaced by typical schizophrenic symptoms.

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In his 1952 survey of Nigerian Students in Britain and Ireland, Lambo found that the majority came from urban areas and were "completely detribalised". They had an overall morbidity for mental illness of twenty five per cent. By 1956, the second survey showed that many more originated from rural areas and completely illiterate homes. His figures for morbidity in 1956 were broken down as follows: 1. Mild emotional problems, one in eight. 2. Severe emotional problems, one in twenty. 3. Psychosis, one in fifty.

Students may be Government or privately sponsored and financed. If the families of the latter group fail to continue payments, the students are forced to obtain part-time work, adding greatly to their hardship. Among the many social difficulties encountered are: finance, colour, language, climate, accommodation, inadequate preparation for coming to this country, quite unrealistic beliefs in their own untried ability and the enthusiastic status-seeking of relatives at home for whom the return of a kinsman without his degree is a matter of profound disgrace. Lambo considered this last factor to be one of the more important forms of stress.

Method

Investigation was limited to three areas 1. problems of diagnosis including the presence of persecutory delusions, thought disorder, feelings of passivity and grandiose delusions; 2. academic status at follow-up and, 3. repatriation. The problems of diagnosis chosen were those found most frequently in the medical case-records examined.

The study is retrospective because of the paucity of numbers and because a reasonable follow-up period was desired. It suffers therefore from the deficiencies of a retrospective study. Almost all the cases had their first, and from the point of view of this study, most important admission to the Bethlem Royal and Maudsley Hospitals and St. Francis' Hospital, Dulwich, which are part of a post-graduate teaching hospital complex where the record-keeping is sufficiently detailed for an appraisal to be made from the case-notes alone.

It was decided to limit the study to severe mental illness (defined as necessitating admission to hospital). This selective factor involves obvious shortcomings. In practice, however, it was found that West African Students are not easily maintained in the community once they have become ill and are readily admitted.

A wide definition of "student" was used: any person of West African birth and parentage who had come to a western country with the purpose of registering either for full or part-time study at a University, College for Further Education or Training School, in order to pursue a planned course with the intention of taking a University degree, Diploma