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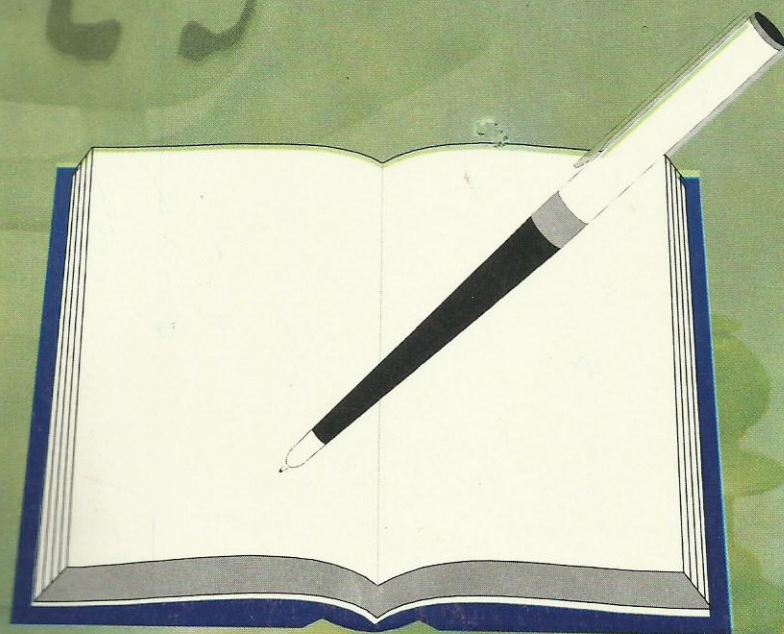
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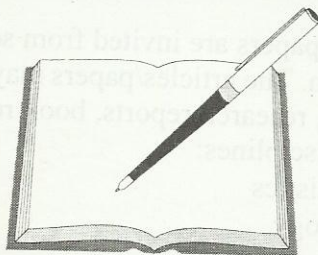


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Table of Content

Academic Strategies for Controlling Social Vices in Nigeria _____Igbo, Rosemary Ogochukwu, Ph.D	1
Interactive Radio and Customer Loyalty: The Performance of Kenya Broadcasting Corporation _____Juliet W. Macharia, PhD	17
The Role of Coaches in Drug Abuse Prevention Among Nigerian Athletes Mohammed S. Mohammed, Ph.D _____J. Boyi Omonu, Ph.D	36
Innovative Approaches for Improving Reading Skill among post Basic Literacy Learners in Anambra State through Real Literacy and Learner Generated Materials _____Adebola Helen Ebunoluwa, PhD	41
Problems Confronting Private and Public Primary School Pupils in Ilorin Metropolis: Need for Counselling _____Bukoye, R. O. PhD	48
Job Satisfaction and Job Security as Determinants of Organizational Commitment among University Lecturers in Ogun State, Nigeria _____Akinsanya Omolade Oluwatoyin, PhD	58
Syntax and Pragmatic Acts in Nigerian Print Media Reports: A Critical-Pragmatic Study _____Ebenezer Oluseun Ogungbe Ph.D	72
Theoretical Perspectives on Education in Nigeria: A Sociological Over-view _____Ololo Kennedy Okechukwu, PhD	90
Differential Effects of Selected Predictors for Improving Social Studies Learning Outcomes of National Teachers' Institute Distance Learners in Ogun State, Nigeria _____Adelakun Adebiyi, Ph.D	99
Social Studies Resource Assessment: A Survey of Instructional Resources for Teaching Social Studies in South Western Nigeria _____Jimoh, Akinola Saliu Ph.D	116

Fostering Linguistic Achievement in Primary School through Mastery Learning Strategy and Selective Teaching Attention: Towards Educational Development in Nigeria _____ Eweniyi, Iyabode T, Ph.D.	136
Correlation of Examination Malpractice in Educational Institutions of Nigeria: Justification for Improved Counselling Services _____ Mohammed, Hajara	144
Une Analyse Critique de la Version Française de la Traduction du Conte : <i>The Queen Elephant's Tail</i> _____ Simon Adewale Ebine	156
The Impact of Extension Education on Agriculture for Sustainable Development in Nigeria _____ Ojuola, Muraina Olawale	161
Hausa Influence on Yoruba-Arabic Loan-Words in Nigeria _____ Abdur-Razaq B. Adesina	169
Retaining and Improving Performance of Facilitators in Literacy Programmes in Nigeria _____ Awuzie Ngozi	175
Entrepreneurship Education and Culture of Enterprise: Twinning Concepts of Building Vocational Enterprise Institutions in Nigeria. _____ Onanuga, Peter Abayomi	188
Methods and Practices in Teaching Health Education _____ Salomi M.O, Ph.D	109
Exploring Non-formal Education Intervention in Rehabilitation of Brothel Based Female Commercial Sex Workers in Sokoto State, Nigeria _____ Yussuf, Murtala Akanbi	204
The 1897 British Conquest of Benin Kingdom and its Impact on Benin-Esan Intergroup Relations _____ Eborieme O.J. Ph.D _____ Dawood Omolumen Egbefo, Ph.D	218

Entrepreneurial skills development implementation in Universities in Kwara State, Nigeria _____ Akinnubi, O. P. Ph.D. _____ ² Alabi, A. T. Ph.D.	233
The Spiritual Environment and its Interactions with other Environments _____ Ayo Fatubarin PhD _____ Alabi, David O. PhD	242
Influence of Self-concept and Self-efficacy on Academic Achievement in English Language among Senior Secondary School Students in Oyo and Ogun States _____ 'Hammed Adeoye _____ Toyin Feyisetan	253
Socio-Cultural Factors as Predictors of Women's Participation in Literacy Programmes in Selected Local Government Areas in Osun State, Nigeria _____ Okemakinde, Sunday O. _____ Olajide, Muili F. Ph.D	266
The Role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Teachers Education for Sustainable Development. _____ Mohammed Jiya Lakan _____ Kolo Idris Alfa	275
Science Education for Social Integration: A Case for Nomads in Nigeria _____ Fatima M. Joda, PhD _____ Sa'adatu Bello	283
Influence of Listening in Learning Mathematics and English Language Among Senior Secondary Students in Akinyele Local Government, Oyo State _____ Elegbe Olugbenga, Ph.D _____ Ojo, Deborah A	291
* Harmful Socio-cultural Practices: An impediment to Healthful Living in Nigeria _____ Baba Dare A. ¹ ; Abikoye, B. ¹ ; Falaye, K. ¹ ; _____ Dagwa, M. ² ; _____ Garuba, I. ³	306

Gender in Workers' Participation and Trade Union Leadership
in South Western Nigeria

- _____ Akinsanya, Adebayo Olatunde PhD,
_____ Ajede, Salamot Atinuke
_____ Oludeyi, Olukunle Saheed 312

Mock Examination Results as a Predictor of Students' Performance in Senior
Secondary School Certificate Examination Results in Ogun State, Nigeria

- _____ Ajayi, Kassim Olusanmi (PhD)
_____ Lawani, Abisola O.
_____ Muraina, Kehinde O. 322

The Role of Adult aNon-formal Education in Empowering
Street Children in Nigeria

- _____ Olojede, Adeshina Abideen, Ph.D
_____ Adekunle, Adewale Adedamola
_____ Oyedele, Moshood Olawale 328

Assessment of Role Performance of the Director of Sports on Policy
Formulation, Implementation and Development of Sports among the
Three Types of Universities in Nigeria.

- _____ Bamidele Benson Babatunde, Ph.D
_____ Bamidele, Bose Funke Msc
_____ Obaseki, Jonhson Sunday Msc 336

Prevalence of Child Labour among Secondary School Students in
Kwara State: Counselling Intervention

- _____ I.G. Usman PhD 344

Harmful Socio-cultural Practices: An impediment to Healthful Living in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined harmful socio-cultural practices as an impediment to healthful living in Nigeria. It x-rayed in detail, the impacts of lifestyle and societal norms and values on people health and well-being. The paper also takes a critical look at impacts of some if the harmful socio-cultural practices on people's health and well being, implications of harmful socio-cultural practices on physical, physiological, mental and social well being of people. It is revealed from the appraisal exercise that harmful socio-cultural practices posed serious problems to health and well being of people in Nigeria. Based on the findings from the review, it is recommended that governments at all levels should mount serious campaigns on sensitizing people on harmful effects of some socio-cultural practices.

Keywords: Harmful, Socio-Cultural, Practices, Impediment, Healthful living

Introduction

Man has been created and endowed with abundant natural resources for meaningful existence. In an attempt to maintain common identity and remain healthy, they device and enshrined in their culture, common norms and values. These common precepts have made them conservative and culturally inclined. World Health Organization (1988) asserted that culture social or peer pressure usually determine behaviour. It added that every community has its own beliefs, values and uses of resources that constitute a pattern of life, otherwise known as culture.

It has been observed that all people, no matter the race, have their own beliefs and practices concerning health and disease. Each society or community has its peculiar way of doing things and these practices and beliefs go along way in influencing the people's perception, attitude and management of diseases and other health related problems that befall them. Naomi (2004) noted that in rural areas, the belief system and concept of illness and treatment have a major effect on health and ill-health.

All over the world, human life is seen as precious and sacred gift from God, and as such its preservation and protection is inevitable. Hence, different societies have various ways and methods of doing so. Jatau (1992) observed that culture usually

have impact on the way by which illness is being managed and healthy livings are maintained especially in developing countries. He emphasized that traditional local treatment of disease often take different forms such as invocation of God about diseases affecting people, treatment through herbs and concoctions, curing of mind and instinctive tendency in people to mention but few of them.

Some of the cultural practices such as: female genital mutilation, early marriage, food taboos and so on which feature in the daily activities of people have recorded considerable measure of success for people who practice them. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for our mind to think of something crude and bad whenever we talk about cultural practices as it concerns health and well being. It is necessary to state here that not all cultural/traditional practices are bad. For instance, some of them have stood the test of time and have positive values which make people to refer to them as helpful practices, while others are tagged harmful practices which include puerperal bath, food taboos, female circumcision and so on. It is essential to understand how and why each custom is being practiced by any community if any meaningful impacts are to be made in implementation of sustainable health development. This is because the method and practice a community adopt fulfill certain purposes for them.

Impact of lifestyle and societal norms and values on people's health and well-being

An individual lifestyle often represents pattern and unique ways by which someone does things. Societal norms and values are simply a set of beliefs and principles adopted and held in high esteem by people in a given geographical location. It is expected that people should obey them as rules and regulation governing their conducts. Naomi (2004) posited that lifestyle is the typical manner in which an individual conducts his/her life.

Mcalister (2002) asserted that lifestyle affects individuals and community health status in various ways because it is behavioural pattern typical of a person or people. Wikipedia (2012) described norms and values as behavioural pattern approved by the society to guide daily conduct of people.

The ways an individual conduct his/her daily activities usually reflects some behaviour and procedures approved by the society in which they live. World Health Organization (2007) asserted that the way an individual or community reacts and behaves will determine how soon recovery comes. On the other hand, some people exhibit and display non-challant attitude towards prevention of diseases and imbibing healthical habits that promote healthy living.

The behaviour and activities in which people indulge determine their level of health and wellness. These behaviour and practices are usually by products of their lifestyles and societal norms. Lucas and Gilles (2005), Naomi (2004) and Alakija (2000) posited that at times, people are aware of the health risks of their behaviour and are willing to take chances. They emphasized that drug abuse, smoking, driving on high speed and promiscuity, among others, are behaviours that people indulge in deliberately.

Health is the most desirable need of life. It is a known fact that a healthy living is the desire of everyone, despite its remoteness to reality of life. An essential aspect of preserving health is to identify the factors that enable or prevent people from making healthy choices in either their lifestyles or their use of medical care and treatment. The underlying assumption being that behaviour is best understood in terms of an individual's perception of their social environment, (World Health Organization, 2007). To this end, an individual lifestyle determines to a large extent his/her state of health and wellness.

Harmful Socio-Cultural Practices and People's Health and Wellbeing

In a culturally minded society, such as Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Benin Republic and so on, people state of health is often determined by an individual level of compliance with societal norms and values. People in this community put societal beliefs above any interest in their decision on factors affecting their health. Abubakar (2007) noted that one of the factors affecting peoples' health is strict adherence of people to societal norms and maintenance of status quo ante.

The dogmatic ways by which people embrace and exhibit actions on adopted societal code of ethic are succinct to describe their level of health and wellness. Inter-African Committee on Health (1999) observed that culture plays an important role in the field of health, especially in developing countries. Each community according to them has its own special beliefs about the causes of diseases, modes of transmission and ways of treating them. Some of these beliefs are detrimental to health and well being of people within the community.

The persistent harmful socio-cultural practices constitute serious hinderances to attainment of optimal health in most of our communities today. Some of these harmful practices are often resultant effects of needs to maintain status quo ante. These status quo ante revolve round norms and values of the society and other historical statements experienced by people within the community. Naomi (2004) posited that harmful cultural practices or negative practices are common in every community especially in developing countries like Nigeria. There is need to eradicate these practices in order to improve the health status of people in the community.

Harmful socio-cultural practices consist of things that are approved by the society which were detrimental to health and well being of people within the community. These include for instance, home delivery, puerperal bath, food taboos, female genital mutilation and so on. Clementa (2004) stated that harmful traditional practices simply means activities or actions taken by people in a particular society that can cause damage or have negative effects on the health of the people who are exposed to such practices. Musa (2002) emphatically stated that harmful socio-cultural practices are taboos and beliefs handed down unquestionable from one generation to another which are injurious or inimical to people's health and well being.

By and large, Nigeria is a multi ethnic and multicultural nation made up of over 250 ethnic groups with different cultural practices, (Inter-African Committee on Health,

1999). Most of these practices were based on trial and error which have endured many centuries. Harmful socio-cultural practices therefore affect physical physiological mental and social wellbeing of people. A healthy individual is a person that fulfills the four dimensional attributes mentioned above. Harmful socio-cultural practices posed serious threats to the optimal health of people going by the sanctions and complication associated with them.

Implications of harmful socio-cultural practices on healthful living

The norms and values of some communities have much implications on physical wellbeing of people. Most of the harmful cultural practices pose debilitating effects on physical appearance, physical fitness and physical ability of the people within the community. For instance, the need to maintain common identity and birth right often necessitates the adoption of tribal marks by some tribes in Nigeria. In the process of inserting these marks, there may be heavy bleeding which can result to shock and severe pain. According to World Health Organization (2007) scarification and tribal marks are practiced in almost all regions in Nigeria most especially in the south-west and northern regions.

Apart from the scarification identified as one of physical debilitating effects of some of socio-cultural practices, pain generated from female genital mutilation, punishment meted out for false immorality acquisition, pains and suffering experienced from traditional puerperal bath are all good implications of societal cultural practices. The situation usually degenerated into serious psychological problems. Naomi (2004) empathically remarked that complications of female circumcision could lead to wife neglect, broken marriages which are responsible for psychological problems.

The strict adherent by some community to certain nutritional intake and habits have been major causes of nutritional problems and deficiencies such as kwashiorkor, marasmus, vitamin deficiencies, anaemia and so on. Anazonwu (1978), Clement (2004) and Naomi (2004) corroborated that there are certain beliefs concerning some foods and these make some people stay away from eating them. The beliefs and practices have no scientific basis, they are just dogmatic in nature. The researchers added that in such communities, where their main sources of protein are from these forbidden foods, iron deficiency anaemia in pregnancy and other nutritional diseases like Kwashiorkor, Marasmus are common features in their health centres.

It has also been discovered that some harmful socio-cultural practices such as early marriage, female circumcision, use of cow-dung, to mention but few predisposed victims to severe infections. Naomi (2004) noted that the practice of traditional healers, earlier marriage, female circumcision and so, on posed serious threats to health and well being of people and caused several infections.

In addition to the factors identified as implications of some socio-cultural practices on peoples' health and well being, social stigma is associated with considerable number of them. The current trends in modern health delivery services and socialization level confirmed remarkable reduction in some of the cultural practices such as abrupt weaning practices, early marriage, female genital mutilation, practice of tribal marks

and so on. These cultural practices are in most cases responsible for persistent social stigma affecting our people in Nigeria

Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be deduced from this review that harmful socio-cultural practices posed serious problems to health and well being of people in Nigeria. It has been adequately observed that harmful socio-cultural practices affect physical, psychological, nutritional, social well being of people in many communities in Nigeria. Based on the findings from the appraisal, the following recommendations were made;

- Governments at all levels should mount serious campaigns on sensitizing people on harmful effects of some socio-cultural practices;
- Health workers within the communities, most especially the rural areas should embark on massive health education of people to discourage unethical practices;
- Ministry of health and health relevant agencies/parastatals at local governments should organize seminar, workshops and symposium to train traditional birth attendants and circumcisers on hygienic handling of instrument and healthy practices;
- Community health care providers should constitute with the support of people within their locality, powerful and formidable stakeholders forum and health facility development committees;
- There should be massive marital campaigns against early marriage and gender violence.

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