

Malaria, Indigenous technologies and the Politics of Public Health Interpretations in Colonial Malawi

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ABSTRACT

During the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, Malawi recorded significant cases of malaria. Both the state and indigenous people were seriously concerned about this. The colonial state for instance, put in place prophylactic measures such as use of quinine and use of mosquito nets whilst the indigenous people used acacia leaves, cow dung, hot water, African mats and covers as therapeutic and preventive measures. Amidst such mixed interpretations and approaches towards the disease, hybrid mentalities were created that in a way brought complications in public health campaigns against the disease overtime. The turn to the 20th century is considerably regarded as a hallmark through which scholars got greater interest on issues to do with disease in Africa. Such scholarship has often been fragmented along broader thematic areas of disease epidemiology, the politics of public health, socio-economic dimension of health, disease cohorts and disease mentalities. This paper examines the historical evolution of malaria in Southern Malawi particularly the Lower Shire Valley and how colonial ideas about the disease and public health interventions intersected with those of Africans between 1890s and 1960s. Using oral, archival and published secondary sources, the study shows that the local people's mentalities, material designs and measures towards malaria during the colonial period were basically a product of the dual combination of biomedical interpretations and approaches largely supported by the state and those of the local people's own traditional science and knowledge about the disease. Such a combination observes the study, resulted into hybrid ideas that often went parallel to those of biomedical sciences. These contradictions in knowledge about the etiology and epidemiology of malaria only helped to complicate public health measures that state health authorities put in place to contain the disease but this gave the local people a mental guide of dealing with the disease and its vectors.

Keywords: Indigenous mentalities, Colonial Medicines and Science, etiology, epidemiology