

**DEMYSTIFICATION OF *DADA* (DREADLOCKS) INTERPRETATIONS IN
TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY: TOWARDS PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF
PSYCHO-MEDICAL INTERVENTIONS.**

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Abstract

It is worrisome that traditional African communities are bedeviled by skewed spiritual interpretations of *Dada* or dreadlocks leading to fear, simony, abuses and some inhuman practices. This research aims at demystification of *Dada* practice minding the findings of psycho-medical enquires. This study applies the methods of ethnography and hermeneutics in order to empirically understand the practices of *Dada* and offer philosophical interpretations /analysis on available data minding implications of psycho-medical discoveries. The findings reveal *Dada*/dreadlocks as hair shaft disorder leading to hair matting, felting or knotting rather than spiritual visitation as presumed in the traditional African society. Most unfortunate is that some spiritual leaders in the traditional African communities harvest the ignorance of the congregation by offering surplus spiritual meaning to the concept of *Dada* leading to simony, extortion and fear. Also, in the modern time, it is obvious that the practice of *Dada* or dreadlocks has gained lots of metamorphosis to become highly fashionable among the youths, artists, footballers, e.t.c. This metamorphosis is an evident sign that *dada*/dreadlocks is demystifiable. The implication of this study is to show that *Dada* practice is demystifiable and divestible of the frightening and spiritual skewed interpretations, hence unlocking Africans who are still under spiritual bondage for lack of awareness. More so this work will contribute to research resource on *Dada*.

Keywords: *Dada*, dreadlocks, demystification, Africa, hair-knots, etc.

Understanding Psycho-Medical Concept of *Dada*.

Dada or dreadlock has its professional name as “Plica Polonica” or “Plica Neuropathica”. It refers to a form of hair disorder or acute hair felting¹. This term was coined by La Page in 1884 but the French-Dutch physician, Joseph Roman Louis Kerckhoffs(or Kerckhove/ 1789-1867) gave a thorough description of the phenomenon². This term was coined to describe a case of sudden onset entangled hair in a patient with hysteria³. Plica Polonica presents as a compact mass of scalp hair with irregular twists and matting of hair⁴. This irregular twist is so hard that

they seem like entangled plaits and impermeable mass of keratin. It is said to be Plica Polonica because it was prevalent in Poland in 19th century and hence referred as Polonica or Polish Plait⁵.

Generally, Plica Polonica is seen as a medical condition which is usually associated with damaged cuticle cells which expose the cortex, hence leading to hair shaft disorder. Hair-shafts consist of a Cuticle which is a multi-layered ‘protective’ outer zone and a Cortex containing elongated cells responsible for any natural curl, resilience and elasticity. Occasionally the hair is stuck together in one mass of various sizes and in other instances, it acquires greater lengths⁶. This can be as a result of genetic disorder, disease or environmental factors which can lead to changes in the properties of hair shaft resulting in fragility or alterations in hair shaft texture and appearance, etc.

Plica neuropathica (polonica) can be said to be a rare acquired disorder of the hair shafts in which groups of hair are matted together forming a malodorous, encrusted and sticky, moist mass⁷. The first experience of Plica Polonica record goes back to 2500 BC with the dreadlocked Hindu deity Shiva and his followers reported in the Vedic scriptures of India as “JaTaa”, meaning twisted locks of hair. The term is probably derived from the Dravidian word “CaTai”, which means ‘to twist or to wrap’⁸. It is also known as ‘plica neuropathica’ or ‘dread locks’. Le Page coined the term ‘plica polonica’ in 1884 when he described a 17-year-old girl with a sudden onset of tangled scalp hair. Le Page attributed this strange phenomenon to “nerve force” while the parents of the child considered it as “visitation from God”. This phenomenon was historically linked to a common condition of scalp hair in Poland during the 19th century. It was characterized by fitting malodorous inflamed scalp usually heavily infested with lice⁹. The hair was matted into a thick, moist mass, due to deficit hair care. The Polish custom of wearing tight fur caps and the superstitious belief that a lousy scalp was healthy contributed to the frequency of plica polonica in Poland.

In his book, *King Lear*, Shakespeare described Plica Polonica as a form of hair knots¹⁰. This can be simple or acute. Mild or simple Plica Polonica entails simple twisting of hair like the hair of some artists while acute hair felting is a form of disorder of scalp hair where hairs become twisted and entangled as a hard stony mass resembling a birds’ nest¹¹. This is noticed in children and adults alike. However, it is supposed to be removed at childhood that the carrier may be free of the inconveniences before adulthood. Most times, it is seen as a visible sign of psychological

disorder in adults. However, in recent times, it has become a factor of social construct among the young artists such as musicians, footballers, etc.

According to Ohana and Ohnry, Plica Polonica can be traced to several causes. However, as medical practitioners and dermatologists, they described Plica Polonica as a rare hair-disorder and acute hair felting which is associated with lice eggs on hair, chemotherapy, azathioprine-induced pancytopenia, seborrheic dermatitis, rupoid psoriasis, trachoma, pediculosis capitis and scabies.¹² Beyond these factors, plica polonica can be attributed to longitudinal splitting or weathering of hair shaft due to vigorous friction and frequent use of harsh shampoos, cleaners or neglected parasitic infections¹³. The treatment in severe cases is by cutting/ shaving and avoid future triggering factors especially when the etiology or cause of Plica Polonica is as a result of dirt¹⁴.

Other etiological factors which show the causes and development of plica polonica conditions include;

1. Behavioural factors- results of neglect, dirt or lack of regular combing of hair especially damaged hair-shaft as explained above.
2. Chemical exposure factors- include bleaching/colouring permanent waving, use of some gels/detergents and other chemicals capable of damaging the protein rich cuticle causing exudation of the sticky cortical moisture binding the hair-shaft together. This may also include weathering of hair shaft due to vigorous friction and frequent use of harsh shampoos and harsh cleansers or keeping long hair with poor hair care¹⁵.
3. Physical factors- initiate hair shaft damage as a result of physical pressure or attack with potentials of tangling or matting. This situation may lead to cuticle and cortical damage.
4. Temperature factor - implying exposure to high temperature processing device like hair driers or thermal styling appliances which vaporize residual moisture within the cuticle and cortex.
5. Treatment/Medication side effect- obvious implication or side effect of some treatments is matting or coloration of hair which may take place in different parts of the body such as the pubic hairs, armpit, beards or skull hairs, etc. Typical of this symptom is chemotherapy¹⁶ treatment or effects of some drugs as prescribed by medical practioners.

6. Electrostatic force – this occurs when the hair shafts become di-electrically charged. Thus different charges definitely cause matting¹⁷
7. Psychiatric symptoms- matting of hair is a popular sign of long lasting heavy psychiatric symptom. Thus psychiatric disturbances may lead to neglect of hair leading to scalp infections¹⁸.

***Dada* and the Traditional African Perspectives.**

In traditional African society, Plica Polonica or Plica Neuropathica” is a form of hair disorder or acute hair felting mainly seen among children from birth which is referred as *Dada*. Also, it refers to a compact mass of scalp hair with irregular twists plaits like hair knots. In the traditional African society, *Dada* (Plica Polonica or dreadlocks) is chiefly associated with the worship of marine spirits. Thus the descendants or children of such worshippers of marine queen inherit *Dada* (hair plait/knots) as a mark of ownership or belongingness to the marine kingdom. Thus *Dada* cannot come up without such worships; hence the individual carrier of *Dada* is certainly unaware of such worship but by unsolicited consent is incarnated into the marine spirit world from birth. In this instance, plica neuropathica or *Dada* becomes a mark or symbol of ownership on the victim¹⁹.

Most times, this form of worship to marine queen is in expectation or a pledge in exchange for the gift of a child. Such women perform this exercise in streams (okpuru) as it is believed that such goddesses in the streams have powers to give children to childless couples. Thus marine children re-incarnate to such families with peculiar qualities; one of which is the *Dada* features. Before conception, the woman is expected to offer several sacrifices to the marine queen who in turn; gives a child or children to the barren woman. However, there are other instances where even when there is no case of barrenness, some women decide to worship such marine spirit such that their children will belong and receive the protection of the marine queen. Generally, conception of the child is preceded by **dreams** in which the marine queen fulfils the promise of a child before actual conception. The sacrifice is punctuated with cooked food and drinks which are kept at the stream bank. Thus after birth and the child turns to become *Dada*, it is a confirmation that the child came from the marine queen as requested and granted. Such woman

must keep a shrine of the marine queen in her home which is highly revered and worshipped as a sacramental presence of the marine queen. However, recently these details are not observed by many parents.

No woman can give birth to *Dada* without any connection with the marine queen²⁰. After birth, the child is taken to the river and laid at the exact place where the sacrifices are kept. This act is like a dedication and thanksgiving ceremony for the gift of a child.

It is noteworthy that *Dada* is not shaved at will rather; its shaving is accompanied by some rituals which will appease the marine queen. However, before the actual shaving, the family must seek the permission of the marine queen through a *dibia* or any oracle of the marine queen in the community. It is supposed that the child or the marine queen must be the ones who will request the parents to shave the *Dada* while the parents will follow the due process as would be defined by the marine queen during the consultation. The victim can communicate the desire to be shaved to the parents or relatives through dreams while the parents go for confirmation through the *dibia* or oracle of the marine queen.

The protocols of shaving begin with consultation with the oracle of the marine queen who goes to confirm the ceremony from the marine queen and within which instructions are given and her (marine queen) menu confirmed. This is followed by a feast of sumptuous meal and assorted drinks held in the child/victim's house. After the cooking, the portion belonging to the marine queen is first separated and thrown to the stream for her to eat. It is believed that she comes out in the mid night to eat her food. The remaining portion is left for co-*Dada* carriers to feast on. However, other children around may be given a little portion while the child's real brothers and sisters who are fellow *Dada* will have the lion share because it is their feast.

Bottles of mineral, chewing gum, and other eatables are equally served. It is believed that not everybody touches the sacrifice made to the marine queen. If such thing happens, the person in question either runs mad or becomes confused all through his life. A story was told of a young boy coming back from school who came across these sacrifices offered to the marine queen, he collected all the items for the sacrifice and ate; including the money that was kept at the bank of the river. From then till date this boy has not been himself because of the spiritual connection involved²¹.

Immediately after this feast, the *dada* hair will be cut/shaved either by the *dibia* or anyone that the marine queen instructs to do so. If a Christian family gives birth to *Dada*, the parents take the child to their pastor/priest who then prays and sprinkles holy water on him. The power of the priest will overshadow the child when the hair is being cut. It is believed that the marine spirit will come to take the child if the process is not well done and if a strong spiritual being is not involved. However, when the child grows up and the spiritual force of the marine queen begins to disturb him or her, then he or she will be taken to the *dibia* or a priest for deliverance.

Dada is an existential phenomenon that causes a lot of mayhem to both the family and the victim. On the side of the family, they spend a lot of money and other items during the sacrifices especially when the *Dada* is to be shaved. Also, it is believed that the child frequently falls sick in order to put the parents in financial distress. On the part of the child, he or she falls sick and sometimes becomes unconscious. His age mates avoid such children/victims because they believe that such child/children is/are from the marine goddess. The parents of other children warn their wards not to associate with *Dada* to avoid initiation into the marine world. The child with *dada* is always scorned by his or her peers. He or she looks dejected and can only play with his or her fellow *dada*. There are also names given to them by the marine queen.

Due to some superstitious believes, it is encouraged to apply sticky materials over *Dada* hair and not washing or combing the hair without the permission of the marine goddess. The common superstitious belief associated is that such sticky materials help in curing internal illness and keeping the child secure from attacks by other spirits.

Towards Philosophical Demystification of *Dada* in Traditional African Society.

The concept of Dada has been defined from its professional translation as “Plica Polonica” or “Plica Neuropathica” which refers to a form of hair disorder or acute hair felting²². Generally, Plica Polonica is seen as a medical condition which is usually associated with damaged cuticle cells which expose the cortex, hence leading to hair shaft disorder²³. This can be as a result of genetic disorder, disease or environmental factors which can lead to changes in the properties of hair shaft structures resulting in fragility or alterations in hair shaft texture, appearance²⁴, etc.

Many other factors are responsible for alterations in hair shaft structure, texture or appearance. These factors include; Behavioral factors such as neglect or lack of regular combing of hair, chemical exposure factors,²⁵ physical factors which cause shaft damage, temperature factors such as exposure to high temperature processing device like hair driers or thermal styling appliances which vaporize residual moisture within the cuticle and cortex²⁶, treatment/medication side effect such as chemotherapy²⁷ or effects of some drugs, electrostatic force leading to di-electrical charges²⁸, psychiatric symptoms²⁹, etc.

In the same vein, the research reveals that traditional African interpretations of *Dada* or Plica Polonica is a form of hair disorder or acute hair felting mainly seen among children from birth. However, in the modern African society, Dada has become fashionable among young artistic such as musicians, footballers, etc. In the traditional African society, Dada is chiefly associated with marine spirits which the children or descendants of such worshippers of marine queen inherit *dada* as a mark of belongingness or ownership. The individual carrier of *Dada* is certainly unaware of such worship but by unsolicited consent is incarnated into the marine spirit world from birth such that the plica neuropathica or *Dada* becomes a mark of ownership on the victim³⁰.

The skewed African spiritual interpretation of Dada runs at parallel with the psycho-medical interpretations discussed above. It is not very strange that Africans attach spiritual interpretations to their lived experiences which are beyond their grasp and understanding. Thus there is the attempt to mystify whatever the African man does not fully understand about his life and existence. This is very unfortunate because there is no serious effort made to clarify and clear such ignorance and gain knowledge. The traditional African interpretation of *Dada* can at best be described as skewed and quite unscientific. It can be said to be a fallacy of false cause as they apply the cause of *Dada* to spiritual implications whereas they have psycho-medical etiologies.

However, in order to satisfy the inner yearning for reconciliation with the spiritual world in strange matters which *Dada* is one of them, it is presumed that *Dada* is a marine gift which demands some sacrifices to undo the spiritual bond with the child/victim. This is why the traditional African society engages in long protocols of sacrifices before shaving a *Dada* victim. Alternatively, the parents of *dada* victim may approach a priest or pastor to pray for the victim and shave the child in order to undo whatever spiritual power or connection with the marine spirit. This prayer request is to give the parents some forms of spiritual security against the

forces of the marine queen. This can be described as spiritual placebo effect because even though the priest prays for the child before shaving the hair, it is obvious that the prayer only suits the confidence of the parents.

From the research, it is obvious that fear is a major factor making parents believe that *Dada* is a divine intervention rather than psycho-medical reality. From psycho-medical discoveries, the skewed interpretations of *Dada* have received an alternative explanation which demystifies and divests *Dada* of the strange spiritual attachments in the traditional African society. A child/victim does not allow the hair to be combed because already the knotting and long time plaits make combing of hair a herculean task and source of server pains. Similarly, the damage on the hair shaft leading to disorder resulting from the factors discussed above makes the hair more vulnerable and fragile to every form of hair care and many other health challenges. This situation makes the child react whenever there is attempt on hair care not necessarily because of the mystical interpretations linked to marine spirits but on account of hair shaft disorder. The child does not fall sick as a spiritual repercussion in order to punish the parents financially but the sickness is as a result of inherited hair disorder and acquired pathological factors minding the hair condition.

Nevertheless, courageous parents who do not believe in the mystification of *Dada* go ahead themselves to shave their child and nothing happens afterwards. However, even if the child gets sick afterwards, there isn't need for visiting *dibia* rather clinical attention is needed as the situation is in itself a medical condition. It is impotent to note that the treatment of Plica polonica in children is by shaving³¹ to avoid secondary contamination. Thus there may still be signs of curly hairs afterwards but the initial hair growth is the most affected in the process such that subsequent hair growth is very free from matting or knotting.

The application of sticky materials on matted hair without washing or combing the hair except with the permission of the marine goddess as a means of curing internal illness only brings placebo effect to suit the parents of healing that does not happen in actuality. Unfortunately, the traditional Africans already believe that the victim is incessantly sick with the intention of causing financial distress to the parents³². It should be noted that the state of *dada*/plica polonica itself is a medical condition which already constitutes other secondary effects if not well addressed.

Furthermore, the recent social construct among the youths has made *dada*/dreadlocks highly fashionable especially among artists; musicians, footballers, etc. This is prevalent among upcoming artists such as musicians especially when they are on stage, footballers, wrestlers, etc. This form of *Dada* is very artificial and is gotten by chemical factors. Thus this social construct is a testimony towards demystification of Dada. Thus these dreadlocks are being used as a means of beautification and there is no marine spirit connection to such outlooks. Thus one questions why the marine spirit avoids these young artists and controls only the little children who aren't conscious of their outlooks? The answer to this question increases the chances of further questions on the validity of the traditional African society claims on marine spirit as the source of *Dada*.

Conclusion

This paper has made dogged effort towards exposing the concept of *Dada* or Dreadlocks (Plica Polonica) as a form of hair disorder or acute hair felting³³. Generally, Plica Polonica is seen as a medical condition which is usually associated with damaged cuticle cells which expose the cortex, hence leading to hair shaft disorder. This can be as a result of genetic disorder, disease or environmental factors which can lead to changes in the properties of the hair shaft structures resulting in fragility or alterations in hair shaft texture, appearance, etc. Plica neuropathica (polonica) can be said to be a rare acquired disorder of the hair shafts in which groups of hair are matted together forming a malodorous, encrusted and sticky, moist mass³⁴.

Studies have shown that many factors are responsible for alterations in hair shaft structure, texture or appearance leading to plica polonica which is referred as Dada or dreadlocks. This research has exposed such factors to include; behavioural, chemical exposures,³⁵ physical, temperature factors such as exposure to high temperature processing device like thermal styling appliances which vaporize residual moisture within the cuticle and cortex, treatment/medication side effect³⁶ or effects of some drugs, electrostatic force leading to di-electrical charges³⁷, psychiatric symptoms³⁸, etc.

Similarly, the research exposed African mystification of *Dada*/Dreadlocks with some spiritual attachments. For the traditional Africans, dreadlocks or Plica Polonica is a form of hair disorder or acute hair felting mainly seen among children from birth. This is chiefly associated with

marine spirits which the descendants acquire by unsolicited consent. This skewed African spiritual interpretation of Dada runs at parallel with the psycho-medical interpretations. Traditional African society tends to mystify and spiritualize the concept of *Dada* for the want of understanding, hence takes recourse to traditional *dibia* or pastor for ritual cleansing before shaving the hairs. Nevertheless, psycho-medical explanations make it obvious that genetic disorder, disease or environmental factors are responsible for hair knots which cause pains sickness and difficulty in combing *Dada* hairs as against the traditional African allusions to marine spirits. In the same vain, it is obvious that such hairs can be shaved without spiritual repercussions.

Furthermore, it is unarguable that today the modern society has dreadlocks as a social construct among the youths especially musicians and footballers which is a testimony of demystification of *Dada*. Thus these dreadlocks are being used as a means of beautification rather than signs of marine ownership. In all, it is expected that this paper will go a long way towards unlocking Africans who are still under spiritual bondage in Dada practices to divest the practice of unwarranted spiritual attachment and bondage.

Endnotes

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