

BOOK REVIEW

Kalle Kananoja, *Healing Knowledge In Atlantic Africa: Medical Encounters, 1500–1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xii+ 258 pp. Maps. Bibliography. Index. GBP£75. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1108491259.

In the last decade there has been a growing interest among historians of the Black Atlantic in the healing dimensions of African knowledge in the Atlantic world. James H. Sweet's book on the healer from Dahomey Domingos Álvares (*Domingos Álvares, African Healing and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* [University of North Carolina Press, 2011]) and Pablo F. Gómez's more recent work on African healing and the Caribbean (*The Experiential Caribbean: Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic* [University of North Carolina Press, 2017]) both expanded in important ways the historical understanding of the vital African contribution to the construction of modern understandings of healing and treatment. Nevertheless, and as with many fields in Atlantic history, the dimensions of knowledge creation and production relative to medicine in the African continent itself have been understudied.

This all changes with the publication of this groundbreaking book by Kalle Kananoja, *Healing Knowledge In Atlantic Africa: Medical Encounters, 1500–1850*. This is the first book-length study of medical knowledge in Africa in the early modern period. Kananoja explores the way in which cross-cultural relationships between Africans and Europeans in Atlantic settings—and especially, in this study, in Angola—shaped a mutual understanding of health and healing in the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is an insightful, innovative, and beautifully written text which will stand as a landmark in the field.

Kananoja's concern in this book is to craft a new approach to the development of early modern medical knowledge, in which Africans are key partners with Europeans in the empirical process of trial and error. His approach is grounded in exhaustive archival research in the Inquisition and Colonial archives for Angola, complemented by detailed knowledge of an enormous range of published primary sources. He also is careful to show that the experience of Angola was not unique, and does this with comparative chapters which assess events in Sierra Leone and on the Gold Coast.

There are many innovations in this book, which a review such as this has not the space to attend to in detail, but there are three aspects in particular which I wish to emphasize. The first is that Kananoja shows the important similarities between the pre-scientific medical worldviews of Europeans and those of many of their interlocutors and medical partners in Atlantic Africa. This emerges especially in the Angolan context, where shared practices of bloodletting and bleeding by cupping, as well as shared views of the spiritual dimension of some illnesses, offered important meeting points from which additional cross-cultural interactions and understandings were able to develop. This similarity in metaphysics and medicine is vital in emphasizing the mutual process through which new knowledge could be created from this shared starting position.

A second key aspect of *Healing Encounters in Atlantic Africa* is the way in which the text reveals the transformations in medical practice and perspectives which emerged with the rise of an institutionalized scientific method in the nineteenth century. Whereas until this time, and even in the late eighteenth century, medical visitors to Africa were keen to learn from local healers and the plants which they used, by the nineteenth century this dynamic had changed. There was instead a desire to dismiss local knowledge as superstitious and to shun local healers. As Kananoja puts it, “The nineteenth century brought with it the rise of the witch doctor discourse to Atlantic Africa, and this drastically changed the nature of medical interaction” (116–17).

In other words, the rise of modern scientific and racial hierarchies saw at the same time a dismissal of the methodology which, Kananoja shows, had hitherto been at the heart of the development of medical knowledge: cross-cultural interaction, exchange, and learning. While earlier generations of botanists and healers mentioned their African teachers and the knowledge which they had, nineteenth-century scientists in the imperial mould complained that they had to collect all their *materia medica* themselves. This transformation was said to accompany scientific progress, but the nature of the knowledge collected and of the progress that emerged are placed in a new and critical context through Kananoja’s work.

That this represented a new departure is revealed by the third key aspect emphasized in this review, which is of the way in which African medical knowledge was received and used in some parts of Europe prior to 1800. Kananoja locates sources which describe how some remedies from Angola, and especially the bark of the *enkasa* tree, were available in Lisbon by the 1730s and were also used in the interior of Portugal as well. Some of those knowledgeable about Angolan medicinals produced books which discussed their many uses, and one—Francisco de Buitrago—documented the names and applications of 54 remedies, in a manuscript that remained unpublished.

Even beyond these important interventions, there is much to admire in this important book. The depth offered by the archival sources which Kananoja has located for Angola provide unparalleled detail of the types of healing that were practised, and the ways in which this grew out of cross-cultural

interaction. Kananjoja is eager to show not only that European medical staff and settlers learned from their Angolan hosts, but also that Angolan healers were eager to learn whatever useful could be gleaned from the European medical knowledge of the day.

Healing in Atlantic Africa is thus a book which will be of interest to scholars in many fields. For historians of the pre-colonial Atlantic it offers a pathfinding work which enables a new perspective on Atlantic medical knowledge and practice prior to the Enlightenment. For historians of Angola in particular, it offers a counterweight in terms of scientific and cultural knowledge to the preponderance of literature focusing on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. And for historians of medicine, it offers new directions for an understanding of the emergence of modern scientific knowledge.

In sum, this is a very important book, which I would expect to see used in a wide variety of graduate and undergraduate courses for many years to come.

Toby Green
King's College
London, England, UK
toby.green@kcl.ac.uk

doi:10.1017/asr.2022.6

If you liked this, you may also enjoy:

- Dawson, Marc H. 1987. "The Social History of Africa in the Future: Medical-Related Issues." *African Studies Review* 30 (2): 83–92. doi:10.2307/524042.
- Feierman, Steven. 1985. "Struggles for Control: the Social Roots of Health and Healing in Modern Africa." *African Studies Review* 28 (2-3): 73–147. doi:10.2307/524604.
- Handloff, Robert. 1982. "Prayers, Amulets, and Charms: Health and Social Control." *African Studies Review* 25 (2-3): 185–94. doi:10.2307/524216.