
Ethnographic Study of the Dying Culture of Facial Mark Incisions Among the Yorubas of South-Western Nigeria: A Case Study of Ibadan

by M. D. Enaikele and A.T. Adeleke

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a theoretical framework for the study of facial marking incisions. It also appraises the functional role of facial mark incisions, and explores the socio-medical aspects of how facial mark incision practitioners produce and treat them. The study is basically explorative. The anthropological instruments employed in the collection of ethnographic information about the dying culture of the Yoruba are key informant interview and observation techniques. The culture of facial marks among the Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria however, appears to be fading away due to centuries of cultural contact with western civilization. This study shows that the culture of facial mark incisions constitutes an important element in the construct of ethnic, lineage, household identity, history, heritage and consideration for aesthetic values and beauty. It also provides a means through which the people socio-medically provide solutions to ailments, frustration, and life troubles and for their ultimate attainment of fulfilment, well-being and happiness. The study recommends reviving the practice of facial mark incisions as a crucial way to keep the Yoruba ethnic identity, history, and heritage.

Key Words: Ethnographic Study, Dying Culture, Facial Mark Incisions, Yoruba, Ibadan.

INTRODUCTION

Sociologists and anthropologists have examined the term culture in a number of ways. The various ways in which they have implicitly and explicitly explained culture reflect the general understanding that culture is a complete way of life of a group of people, and the collection of ideas, habits and practices, which they learn, share, and transmit from generation to generation (Henslin 2007, Otite and Ogionwo 1994). Each society has its own unique culture, which enables its people to adjust to its total setting. The tradition of tribal or facial marks is one aspect of the culture of indigenous Africans, including the Yorubas of south-western Nigeria. Facial marks represent a unique expression of cultural identity of a people; especially, it has an adaptive value because it provides the people with a practical

means of adjusting to their physical and social environment.

Oke (2004) reports the adaptive value of facial mark during the 1966 civil disturbances in the northern Nigeria, which eventually led to the Nigeria Civil War (1967-1970). During the anti-Ibo campaigns in the northern parts of the country at that time, some Yorubas, who did not have facial marks, were commonly mistaken for Ibos, and many such Yorubas lost their lives in the social upheaval. He elaborates further on the adaptive value of the culture of facial marks, that it reveals instantly the tribe, household or lineage identity of anyone who bears such marks. Facial marks are a veritable means of identification passed down from family to family, members of the same village, household, or members of the same royal lineage. Also, parents (especially fathers) use this

feature to lay claim to the legitimacy of their children, that they are not bastards. In addition, facial marks serve important aesthetic purposes as they are interesting features used to adorn the face.

In recent times, however, the culture of facial marks among the Yoruba people appears to be gradually fading away because many people no longer seem interested in the art. This may be attributed in large part to centuries of African cultural contact with western civilization, which has brought a significant downturn to very many cultural and traditional practices, consequent upon colonialism in many parts of Africa. Indeed, the process of cultural contact normally does bring about a change, especially when the contact duration is rather long. This is so, according to sociologists and anthropologists, largely because cultures do not enjoy the same prestige in contact situation, as “dominant” or “inferior” status may often arise. Hence, the society with the feeling of inferiority may be inclined to relinquish her culture and adopt (in varying dimensions) the culture of the society with the dominant status.

Over and above this, too often, in much western literature, the African culture of facial mark incisions has come under severe and undeserved attack. It has often been described as “scarification”, with condemnation that the culture is somewhat “barbaric”, “inferior”, “primitive”, “agonic” and “inhuman”, especially with the recent United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). These ethnocentric or rather subjective, unscholarly and subtly racist propagandist attacks, however, fail to take cognisance of the fact that the culture of facial marks may have evolved, and been practiced and maintained to essentially enhance physical, social and cultural adjustment of a people. This systematic process and orchestration of making indigenous Africans

feel inferior to western culture did not just start. According to Oke (2004), many of the early European scholars who were concerned with the study of the peoples of the empires and kingdoms in Africa wrote with a somewhat biased and clearly ethnocentric view, often submitting that “history and science had proven indigenous Africans to be physically, intellectually and culturally inferior to the European.”

As the subject of ‘inferiority’ of indigenous African cultures featured increasingly in western literature, it became a critical issue that required scholarly discourse, debate, and analysis devoid of any direct or subtly racist approach. This has generated serious concerns, which among other things have provoked the interest of this paper, especially with the recent decline in the culture of facial marks, for reasons which can be attributed in large measure to the enactment of state laws against facial marks (as an extension of the United Nations Rights of the Child) and the long-term influence of western culture. These seem to have brought near extinction to so many indigenous African cultural practices. However, this study is meant to pedagogically offer an unbiased contribution by providing a paradigm shift and presenting a different approach to the contemporary anthropological discourse on the culture of facial mark incisions among indigenous Africans. To properly situate this objective for intellectual discussion, this paper shall attempt to provide a theoretical framework for the study; appraise the functional role of facial mark incisions; and explore the socio-medical aspects of how facial mark incision practitioners produce and treat facial mark incisions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Functionalism

Functionalism is a popular theory in cultural anthropology. It generated a good deal of academic interest particularly in the 20th century among social scientists of various disciplines. Most of the analyses and discussions on the theory however have largely been associated with culture, hence it appeals more especially to sociologists and anthropologists. There are two schools of thought of functionalism: the bio-cultural school and the structural functionalism school. The two theoretical approaches are related to overall importance of viewing and interpreting other peoples' behavioural and cultural practices in the total context in which they exist. When a culture is viewed and interpreted within the relevant context of the society where it occurs (and not in isolation), it is termed "cultural relativity". Cultural relativity emphasises the need to tolerate other people's cultures as opposed to the tendency to condemn another culture as backward, barbaric, primitive or inhuman, simply because they are different from our own or they seem undesirable.

A notable scholar with a most profound and significant contribution to the theory of functionalism was Bronislaw Malinowski (1884 – 1942). Malinowski, a Polish born British anthropologist is known for his theory of bio-cultural functionalism. He believed that a human being has a set of universal biological needs, and that culture is developed to fulfill those needs. He believed that culture and cultural practices fulfill an individual's biological needs and concluded that the human being cannot survive without culture. The functionalist examines how a particular cultural practice is interrelated with other aspects of culture to make the society function as a complete whole. According to this

school of thought, anthropologists, as a matter of importance, should describe the unique cultural identity of a people, the various cultural institutions and systems that make up the society, explain their social function, and relevance, and show their contribution to the overall stability of the society. Although the functionalist approach has been criticised for not considering cultural changes in traditional societies, the basic idea of the functionalist school of thought had become an important tool for cultural analysis, especially in cultural anthropology.

Structural Functionalism

Radcliffe-Brown (1881 – 1955) posited that all cultural traits are functionally interrelated and form an interrelated social whole. More specifically, that culture and cultural practices have adaptive value of physical and social adjustments that create a balanced and cohesive society that is always maintained by individuals within the cultural space.

On the other hand, Evans-Pritchard (1902 – 1973) widely known for his approach in analysing traditional belief systems--especially in Africa--believes that anthropologists should analyse society by considering the people's views, and should not entirely rely on presupposed ideas about any society. In other words, anthropologists need to appreciate/recognise people's behaviour and cultural practices in the context of local realities.

Materials and Methods

Nigeria is comparatively a large country with an area coverage of about 924,000 square kilometres, spanning longitude 30E to 160E and latitude 40N to 140N (George, 2009), with population of over 180 million people (Nigeria Population, 2016). Currently, Nigeria is politically organised into six geo-political zones, (northeast, northwest, north-central,

southeast, southwest, and south) comprising 36 states altogether. Nigeria has well over 250 different ethnic groups, most with distinct facial marks.

The city of Ibadan is the capital of Oyo State in the South-West geopolitical zone. It is reputed to be the largest indigenous city in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the people are indigenously Yoruba. Politically, Ibadan metropolis is divided into five local government areas, among which is Ibadan South-East Local Government area. This local government area is home to a host of indigenous communities, including those in this study. These indigenous communities are geographically situated at the centre of Ibadan and are popularly known as Core Ibadan because of their indigenous populations. The seven communities studied include: Oja-Oba, Orita-Aperin, Oja-igbo, Kobomoje, Idi-Arere, Agugu, and Ita-Baale. These communities were purposively selected for the study because they are indigenously populated; most people there observe the practice of facial marking.

The study is basically explorative, and by nature is less structured and considerably flexible. This permits the researchers to seek more insight by probing answers to questions, which invariably informed a huge collection of materials and findings on the phenomenon under study. The most common anthropological instrument used in an explorative research of this nature (the dying culture of facial mark incisions) is the collection of ethnographic information, literature and photographs from archives, as well as the use of research instruments such as key informant interview and observation techniques. Using ethnographic instruments, the researchers employed the key informant interview to source for information about the dying culture. The key informants were the facial mark incision practitioners. The key informant interviews were conduct-

ed in Yoruba mother tongue to sustain their interest in giving information due to the apathy of the indigenous people to English language. The fact that the researchers speak Yoruba language very fluently was indeed an advantage, such that the oral information gathered was not at all difficult to elicit. Similarly, the problem of possible loss of information through an interpreter did not arise. Questions asked were not arranged in a fixed questionnaire; rather they were asked in such a way to allow the key informant freedom to elaborate on aspects of specific interests within the context of the dying culture. The observation method was also employed. All the information and findings contained in this report was sourced from interviews with the key informants and observations conducted. Seven key informants were interviewed, one in each of the seven communities. This was because very few people were technically suitable for the key informant interview. Only one of the seven key informants allowed the researchers to observe the process of producing facial mark incisions, but only on the charge of a bottle of gin for an oath, and to appease the deity against any possible retribution because one of the researchers is a "stranger" (i.e., a non-Yoruba indigene)! Also, photographs were strictly forbidden, whether by camera or any other electronic device.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ethnographic Profile of the Dying Culture of Facial Mark Incisions Among the Indigenous People of Ibadan

The facial mark incision practitioners are the key informants in this study. Five of the seven key informants were relatively elderly women, possibly at menopause. These elderly women also render services as traditional birth attendants and administer treatment for minor

child ailments such as convulsion, measles, and smallpox in their communities. None of the facial mark incision practitioner practices on a full-time basis, however. From the ethnographic information gathered with the aid of key informant interviews and observations, there is abundant evidence that the culture is fast fading away because facial marks are seen on mostly elderly people. This is probably not unconnected with the fact that since Nigeria has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a number of states in the country, especially in the South-West, have domesticated and expanded the Rights of the Child with legislation to overturn the cultural practice against the presumed rights of parents to allow facial marks on their children. As a result, very few facial mark incision practitioners were available as key informants since many of them are now involved in other occupation such as male circumcision, traditional birth attendants, piercing of ear lobes of the girl child to allow the use of earrings when the child grows up, administering treatment for minor child ailment such as convulsion, measles, smallpox and other forms of traditional medical practice because of their extensive knowledge in herbal application.

The culture of facial mark incision is an age-long traditional practice that has played an important role in ethnic, lineage, and household identity, including heritage and history of the people. It has cultural significance in identifying certain households or families, especially people with royal lineage. Apart from their aesthetic and social values, facial marks and other form of incision marks (locally called Gbere) are also used to treat certain ailments such as stroke, acute headache, waist pain, arthritis, jaundice, convulsion, epilepsy, barrenness, stomach pains, snake bite, fractured bones and even neurosis, among others. Treating ailment with incision marks

and ritual sacrifice is an important aspect of indigenous medicine. Yet, not all ailments are treated with incision marks and ritual sacrifice, especially where an ailment has a name or can be given a name. In these cases, illnesses could be attended to with just medicinal herbs. In addition to this, the individual having the ailment could be advised to avoid eating certain foods. But strange ailments, or ailments perceived to be spiritually connected are commonly treated with incision marks and ritual sacrifice. Where facial marks or other forms of incision marks are used for treating particular ailments, they reflect beliefs that the evil spirit responsible for the ailment will be warded off by certain incision marks, incantations, concoctions applied to the cut or incision, and the ritual sacrifice that may follow. The belief is that the cut or incision and the substance or concoction applied to the cut will go into the blood stream to ward away the evil spirits tormenting the individual. For example, children believed to be Abiku (a child that dies repeatedly shortly after birth) or Emere (a mischievous spirit incarnate in infants) who burden their parents by dying soon after birth, are sometimes given deep cuts on the face, back or chest, or a cut on the ear lobe, thumb, or small or big toe, as a traditional way of deterring them from dying young. Many times, the cut is followed with other forms of ritual sacrifices such as burying the child's placenta, umbilical-cord and the first hair cut with white pieces of cloth and other substances in a pot near a stream or a plantain tree. When the deep cut is made on Emere or Abiku and followed with other forms of ritual sacrifices, the belief is that this will eventually make it difficult for the Emere or Abiku, to reunite with its mates in the spiritual realm because of the spiritual appeasement provided by the sacrifice, cuts, and the concoction applied to the cuts. In many cases, the Abiku or

Emere on a reborn child would distinctly have those marks exactly on the face, back, chest, thumb, toes or ear, and this will, according to traditional belief, make them escape the evil of dying young again.

Generally, where incision marks are used to ward away evil spirits believed to be associated with certain ailments, this is followed with certain ritual sacrifices to prevent reoccurrence of the ailment or retribution on the incision practitioner. For example, incision marks are often used for treating an ailment like stroke. These incision marks are tiny marks produced on the face, forehead, centre of the head and the affected arm and leg of the individual. In most cases the incision is followed with a ritual sacrifice, which includes herbal substances, native sponge and black soap prepared for the individual to take to the community refuse or garbage dump (locally called Akitan) to bath with at midnight. Following this is burning of incense and herbal and concoctions prepared for the individual for drinking and to rub on the affected part of the body. Incision marks are produced for different reasons as are the ritual sacrifices, incantations and material substances or concoctions applied to the cuts.

Following all these ethnographic findings, it is anthropologically useful to say that mark incisions have assisted the people to adjust to their social and physical environment and also provide solutions to their frustrations and life troubles. Generally, anthropologists do not attempt to condemn or pass judgement on the truth, falsity, efficacy of incision marks, substances applied, incantations, or ritual sacrifices that sometimes follow the incisions; rather, anthropologists see all these as a means through which the people socio-medically provide treatment to ailments and solutions to frustration and life troubles, and for their ultimate attainment of fulfilment, well-being,

and happiness.

Among the Yorubas of south-western Nigeria, the process of producing facial marks involves the use of a very sharp, small-handled knife locally called Abe, produced by a local blacksmith. This knife is used to pierce the skin, producing a cut that heals to form a mark. Piercing the skin lightly will produce only a faint mark but the removal of the skin together with a little portion of flesh will eventually produce pronounced and bold marks when healed, although the cut may take some weeks to heal. But the longer it takes the cut to heal, the bolder and more pronounced the mark. Generally, the depth of the cut and the substance or concoction applied after the cut and during healing period may very well determine how pronounced or bold the mark will be.

Just like in traditional medicine, herbal substances or concoctions that are mostly applied to mark incisions or cuts largely include native black soap, kola nut, black ash, and herbs derived from various plant parts such as leaves, barks, roots, flowers, fruits, or seeds. Sometimes, animals such as snail, bat, chameleon, wall-gecko, tortoise, lizard, porcupine quills, pigeon, red parrot feathers, hooves or horns of animals like antelopes, as well as insects such as bees, crickets or termites, are also added. These herbs, as well as the parts of animals and insects are heated into a black substance that is mostly prepared into a powder form, and then applied on the cuts. In most cases also, this powder could be added to red oil, palm-kernel oil, locally called adi or sheaf-butter (pomade, locally known as orii), for regular application to the cut to quicken the healing process and to bring about the boldness of the marks. The World Health Organisation (WHO) (1978) Technical Report Series corroborates this finding that in some parts of Africa, the traditional medicine prac-

tioners use not only plants but also animals, feathers, oils, beaks of birds, animal dung, and similar items as necessary ingredients for therapy.

Facial marks are mostly on the face, cheeks, forehead, and from the head to chin, under the chin and so on. They may be vertical, horizontal, vertical and horizontal, or slanted lines on both cheeks. These facial marks have different meanings, reasons, and different names. Among the Yorubas of southwest Nigeria, the pattern of facial marks with typical ethnic, household, and lineage identity include Keke, Pele, Abaja, Gombo, Baamu and other forms of incision marks. The Abaja are horizontal facial marks each of about one inch long. In some cases, they are four or more strokes on each cheek. Pele on the other hand is a vertical facial mark of about a quarter of an inch long, accompanied by three or four strokes on each cheek. Gombo are both vertical and horizontal facial marks (lines) on each side of the cheeks. The vertical lines, usually three or four, are drawn from the forehead to the cheeks to complement the horizontal lines on each side of the face. Gombo is the typical facial marks of the indigenous people of Ibadan. However, there are slight minor differences in the style of their facial marks according to their households, family and lineage as some of them wear Bamu to complement the Gombo. Baamu are slant marks drawn from the upper ridge of the nose down to the right or left side of cheek. Baamu is commonly drawn on one side of the face to complement Gombo. Keke are tiny marks, but usually many. Gbere is another form of tiny vertical incision marks. They are mostly produced on the face, forehead, centre of the head, back, chest, around the neck, wrist, ankle and waist. Gbere incision marks are commonly produced to treat ailments

and to redeem an individual from evil spirits. They are also produced to spiritually attract fame, good luck, prestige, respect, power, and protection against evil machination and bewitchment. The Yorubas believe in the existence of witchcraft. The belief that witches are responsible for a host of human miseries and misfortunes including poverty, ailment, and sudden death. A striking feature of this particular Yoruba belief is that bewitchment, evil machination, bad luck and ill health can be neutralised with Gbere incision and substances rubbed on the cut.

Privileged individuals, politicians, civil servants, businessmen/women and traditional elites commonly patronise diviners, herbalists, witch-doctors, traditional priests, and other spiritualists to wear Gbere incision mostly on the face, forehead, centre of the head, wrist and other concealed parts of their body for purposes of protection, fame, good luck, prestige, power, or to be respected, feared and to avoid being poisoned. Especially where Gbere incision marks are produced for purposes of winning an election, or for government appointment, contract award, for fame, prestige, power and protection, in most cases the cut is commonly followed with oath-taking and other forms of ritual sacrifices such as slaughtering of a cow or goat and the blood collected and given to the individual to bathe with. Other necessary ingredients to seal the oath and ritual sacrifice are prepared for the individual to take, for example, to a road junction at midnight for the appeasement and approval of supernatural forces, forces of nature, and spirits. Yorubas believe that road junctions (locally called Orita-Meta) are meeting points for witches, spirits and other terrestrial and supernatural forces; these forces and spirits are invisible, and mysterious (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979). These beliefs are as old as

the culture itself. Supernatural forces and spirits are believed to dwell in thunder, trees, rivers/streams, rocks, mountains, hills, caves, garbage dumps, road junctions, thick forests, etc., and Yorubas believe that man has tried to propitiate or influence them for his ultimate well-being, survival, and fulfilment in a number of ways. Especially, where gbere incision is followed with oath-taking to redeem certain pledges, the terms of this kind of covenant are dictated by the supernatural force (spirit) and the individual on his/her part has to accept the terms and take to himself the yoke of obedience to that spirit. Each spirit has forbidden things, which must also be observed on entering into covenant with oath-taking. These forbidden things therefore constitute norms to be kept by the individual.

Following these findings, it is useful to say that anthropologists do not attempt to pass judgement on incision marks, oath-taking, and the ritual sacrifice as fetish or bother to know how the supernatural force or forces of nature works. Anthropologists see all these essentially as component parts of the peoples' cultural heritage and a means by which they ultimately appease and influence the supernatural force and forces of nature with instrumental means for the purpose of attaining luck, material well-being, and fulfilment, and to overcome pain, fear, anxiety, uncertainty, and failure in life. By and large, if this view has any relevance, it is probably because anthropologically, the findings also shows the beliefs people symbolically attach to supernatural force and forces of nature. We could therefore infer that the society has considerable influence in the conception of the supernatural forces and forces of nature because the belief in their "mystery" power essentially reinforces and provides an organised picture of the relationship between the people and their surrounding supernatural world. Generally, instead of

attempting to pass judgement or condemn such beliefs, anthropologists see them as social expressions of faith in the truism of the mystery power of the non-empirical forces, that if well propitiated with great respect and ritual sacrifice, the forces will provide solution to their life troubles. It is this belief that makes them revere supernatural forces. This belief operates in the peoples' thought and attitude even without their awareness, through which they construct their reality and clothe the conception of supernatural forces or forces of nature with such an order of fear and respect.

Legal Instruments Prohibiting Facial Mark Incisions/Tatoos

Nigeria is signatory to a number of treaties, protocols and conventions on the rights of children. Prominent among these are the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the African Charter on the Rights of the Child (1990). At the national level, the Nigeria 2003 Child Rights Act, Section 24 (1) prohibits facial mark incisions or tatoos on a child. It declares that no person shall tattoo or make a skin mark or cause any tatoos or skin mark to be made on a child". Section 24 (2) says, a person who tatoos or make a skin mark on a child commits an offence liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding five thousand Naira (#5,000) with an option of imprisonment for a term not exceeding one month or both". The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act (2015), provides for the respect and dignity of the human person. Especially, the 1999 Nigeria Constitution provides in Section 34 (1) that, no person shall be subjected to any form of inhuman degradation". Though the 1999 Nigeria Constitution may not have specifically addressed or mentioned facial marking, it is

useful to observe that certain elements in this legal instrument reveal that facial marks on a child could be interpreted in certain quarters as a component of inhuman and degrading treatment that parents could subject the person of the child to just in the name of culture.

Since the promulgation of the Nigeria 2003 Child Rights Act, the seriousness of the law is underscored by the power vested in the police to arrest, investigate, and prosecute all crimes connected with or relating to facial mark incisions on a child, in a competent court of law. Though the legal provisions have potential to curb wearing of facial mark on a child, it has not significantly made any impact because no single individual has been prosecuted for this crime. What has brought significant downturn to the traditional practice of facial marking children seems to be the obvious influence of western civilization and western-induced attacks on its social significance and relevance rather than the domesticated Child Rights Act. However, it is possible to aver that the enactment of state laws against facial marking (as an extension of the United Nations Rights of the Child) was done without considering the implications on the culture, history, heritage, and identity of the people. Since facial marks represent a unique expression of the culture and identity of a people, and people are defined by their culture, the enactment of state laws against the culture of facial marking and incisions could therefore be equated to striping the people of their culture, identity, heritage, and history.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Culture has been defined as the general way of life of a people. While aspects of a particular culture (for example, language, religion, food, dressing, etc.) may become

modified upon contact with another culture through assimilation of certain practices, there are some fundamental practices and values within a particular culture that project the identity, lineage, history and heritage of the people, regardless of the extent and duration of contact with another culture. One such practice among various indigenous African peoples is facial marking.

This study has shown that the culture of facial marking and other forms of incision marks are important elements in the construct of family lineage identity, history, heritage, and consideration for aesthetic values and beauty among all societies in traditional Africa. Facial marks and other forms of incision marks also provide a means through which the people socio-medically provide solution to ailments, frustration, and life troubles, and for their ultimate attainment of fulfilment, well-being and happiness. Despite these, however, the practice is rapidly declining in cultural importance largely resulting from modernisation and western-induced attacks on its social significance and relevance. It is also explained by a rather poor understanding and subtle bias against the philosophy embedded in the cultural practice. For example, if the practice of facial marking had continued with the descendants of African Slaves in America and other parts of the world, many of them might probably have been able to trace their family roots, lineage, identity and history to Africa much more easily.

However, this study recommends that for the hitherto moribund practice of facial mark incisions among the Yorubas of southwestern Nigeria to be revived, the elites would have to take the lead by sensitising the government and the people about the social significance of facial marks in the construct of ethnic identity, lineage, history, and heritage.

Children's rights in traditional African

societies are embedded in the traditions, value systems, and presumed cultural interpretations of the parents and not just as strictly legal instruments. Consequently, efforts should also be made to avoid conflict between the two. ■

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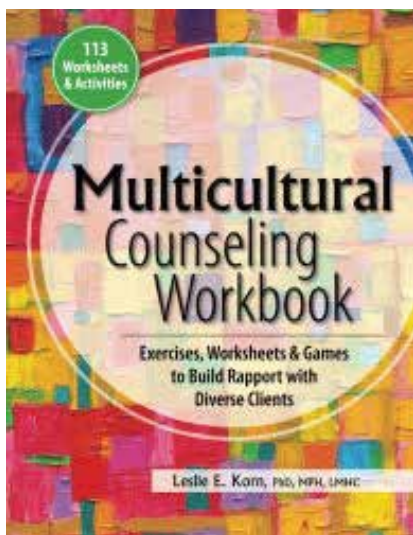
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