Journal for the History of Knowledge

HELEN TILLEY

Ignoring the Obvious About the World

Four Kinds of Not Knowing in African Studies

▼ **FORUM ARTICLE** in *Decentering the History of Knowledge*

▼ **ABSTRACT** This essay takes up four kinds of "not knowing" that have been central to knowledge-making in African Studies. I chose ignorance and African history to open a dialogue with the other authors in this issue. The essay deals with therapeutic non-systems, cultural ignorance, disappearing knowledge, and sovereign forms of community care. It uses a now-classic article by Murray Last, on the health-seeking practices of Hausa speakers in northern Nigeria in the 1960s and 1970s, as its anchor. Embedded in the essay is a tacit question about the history of anarchic modes of collective organization in places under-served by states.

▼ **KEYWORDS** colonialism; Africa; ignorance; anthropology; knowledge; medicine

▼ **ISSUE** Volume 5 (2024)

Helen Tilley • Northwestern University, USA, helen.tilley@northwestern.edu

Cite this article: Helen Tilley, 'Ignoring the Obvious About the World', *Journal for the History of Knowledge*, 5 (2024), 237–251 <https://dx.doi.org/10.55283/jhk.19473>

DOI: 10.55283/jhk.19473

BREPOLS

"… even a coherent set of ideas, embedded in the language or implicit in people's actions has now disappeared."

Murray Last (1981: 390)

There is a special irony that analysts interested in the roots of things *global*—whether it be governance, commodities, disasters, expertise, infrastructures, or even pandemics—will often invoke ideas about "ways of knowing" and "unknowing" that pay disproportionate attention to Western intellectual influences.[1] Historians may have taken a cultural turn, but so many organizing theories about knowledge and ignorance still leave the *epistemological* histories of most cultures to one side.[2] This is not just a problem of Eurocentric bias, though that is partly to blame, but also one of scholarly incentives to ignore the obvious. Powerful nation states are happy to let lies and half-truths about the world live on, especially after empires fall, because it helps them maintain their dominance. Wealthy institutions have a vested interest in shoring up certain worldviews, true or not, because these sustain their roles. Even precious repositories of knowledge across the planet—libraries, archives, museums, universities, and sacred sites—have existed as venues that conceal as much as they reveal, silencing some voices while amplifying others, creating mountains of detail about some places while overlooking so much else. Skilled leaders play similar roles, parsing information and deciding what matters in ways that create cultural blind spots.[3] The most gifted linguists are in truth limited to a finite number of languages.

In his global history of ignorance, Peter Burke includes a useful glossary that lists dozens of different ways scholars and laypeople have invoked the idea.[4] In the body of the book, he expresses mild surprise that those working on "medical ignorance" happened to be early adopters, beginning with "an anthropologist" in the 1980s.[5] The person in question was Murray Last, whose 1981 essay, "The Importance of Knowing about Not Knowing," has had a long afterlife in African Studies and anthropology.[6] Drawing upon a decade of research among Hausa speakers in northern Nigeria, including three in the area of Malumfashi (1969–1972), Last wanted scholars to be more skeptical of

1 Pickstone, *Ways of Knowing*; Livingstone, *Putting Science*; Burke, *A Social History*; Proctor and Schiebinger, *Agnotology*; McGoey, *The Unknowers*; Gross and McGoey, *Handbook of Ignorance Studies*; Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein, "Introduction"; Burke and Verburgt, "Histories of Ignorance."

2 Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*. Scholars bridging anthropology and history often grapple with this exact question; see Steve Feierman's contribution to *Beyond the Cultural Turn*; Palmié, *Thinking with Ngangas*.

3 On this point for global histories of science and knowledge, see Tilley, "Two Stories and Ten Theses."

4 Burke, *Ignorance*, 259–61.

5 Ibid., 39.

6 Last published three versions (in 1981, 1992, and 2007), with new postscripts each time because he kept returning to the region. The second appeared in Feierman and Janzen, *The Social Basis*; the third in Littlewood, *On Knowing*.

ethnographic studies that depicted societies and their systems as coherent and complete.[7] "Negative evidence," Last explained, "is not commonly recorded in ethnographies: their purpose was, naturally enough, to explain a *system* of medicine and to unravel the complexities of *knowledge*—and in the past, no doubt, systems were really systems."[8] The past he had in mind covered centuries, not decades.

When Last published his article, there was no such thing as ignorance studies. His insights grew out of his fieldwork, including documentary and oral research, and stemmed from the hard-earned trust people placed in him and his own desire to tell accurate stories. His arguments went against the grain of dominant trends in academic anthropology and postcolonial health governance. Yet they also had a dialectic relationship to disciplines and institutions without which his research in Nigeria would have been unimaginable. While it is tempting to discuss Last's article primarily in terms of "medical ignorance," it was really a manifesto on method and history. Unearthing this story centers the African continent and puts aspects of its imperial and postcolonial past in dialogue with global histories of knowing and not knowing.[9]

Skepticism: Insiders' Ignorance as Rationale

During his many years of study, Last found himself puzzling over what happened when people's ways of life were upended, when theories fragmented, and groups stopped knowing or caring to know how things worked or why. He focused most on the lives of "ordinary people" and sought to understand how they thought about and dealt with being unwell.[10] His concerns were not strictly about collective forgetting or deskilling, because even when people seemed not to know, their practices continued, however unsystematized. Nor was Last trying to explain willful or feigned ignorance. True, he admitted, people in many parts of the world happily left things in a black box if they did not need to know how they worked, while informants often withheld details from outsiders, saying they "didn't know" if they wanted to shut down a line

7 Last received his BA degree in Classics from the University of Cambridge (1959), his MA in History from Yale University (1961) and his PhD in History from University College Ibadan (1964).

8 Last, "Not Knowing," 387–88; italics in original.

9 See also Mavhunga, *What do Science*, and Langwick, "Properties."

10 For the purposes of this article, I am truncating his intellectual biography and using his 1981 article as my focal point. Last stresses five things about the genesis of his medical work: in 1967 the Vice-Chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria asked if he could develop a Hausa medical dictionary; at the new medical school and hospital, none of the staff "seemed to know what their patients might be thinking or feeling in any detail"; as a trained historian, his "specific project was not to behave as or become an 'anthropologist'," but to witness real life; he chose a non-Muslim, non-Christian farmstead in Gidan Jatau, about fifteen miles from Malumfashi city, as his home base; and the people who took him in were taking real risks because white people were a known danger and even some among his hosts "thought [he] was up to no good." Personal correspondence, August 12, 2024. For a fifty-year retrospective, see Last, "Medical Ethnography."

of questioning, but these patterns were not his primary concern either. Rather, Last wanted to explain how not knowing could arise organically *within* groups as they tried to survive upheavals over which they had little control.

To set the scene, Last reminded readers of several big changes that had affected people living in northern Nigeria over the century between 1870 and 1970. Why could he trace continuities in health practices even when "pagan" Hausa residents (*Maguzawa*) had evacuated and resettled the Malumfashi area *c.* 1870–1930, lost their sovereignty to the British *c.* 1900, witnessed more Muslims in their midst *c.* 1903–1940, changed their ways of earning a living, grappled with new kinds of misfortune and illness, and increasingly encountered ideas and institutions transplanted from Western Europe *c.* 1945–1970? Colonial rule and its new medical cultures were just one facet of these changes, and not the most important one in Last's view. Islamic influences seemed far more significant to him, including legal, social, and medical aspects. If Hausa-speakers' "traditional medicine [was] … no longer a system," he asked, why was the "resultant medical sub-culture … thriving *as* a non-system"?[11] His answer had many layers.

Given that he could speak Hausa and lived in a local farmstead, Last had come to understand the therapeutic landscape of the Malumfashi region fairly well. He also had a good sense of what government officials were doing. Like another of his peers, John Janzen who worked in Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo), Last wanted to be guided by people's choices.[12] When it came to their own health, he explained, *Maguzawa* had learned not to disclose too much because transparency itself was dangerous, making them more vulnerable to malevolent spiritual forces (wielded by people in their midst) and negative judgments, especially from adherents to Islam. He referred to these patterns as a kind of "extreme, institutionalized secrecy in medical matters." Practitioners, whether they focused more on general health (*bokaye*) or spirit possession (*mai Danko*), protected their expertise as "trade secrets" partly because they had to compete with each other and partly because the government posed its own threats when officials took new steps to regulate their work.[13]

Over time, these types of non-disclosure led *Maguzawa* to alter their sense of self. They appeared to have once understood themselves as being comprised of an inner, physical layer that they nourished and "cured by herbs," and an "outer layer," a social and psychological dimension, "sustained through kinship" and healed through ritual and performance. (There were also technicians who addressed the health of the inner layer and knew surgery [*wanzamai*], midwifery [*ungozoma*], and bone-setting [*madori*], and who by the 1960s had mostly converted to Islam.) "With the gradual breakdown of lineages and wider kin groupings, individuals [had] to rely increasingly on their

11 Last, "Not Knowing," 390.
12 Janzen, *Quest for Therapy*.
13 Last, "Not Knowing," 389, 390.

own medical defenses." Social changes and extreme secrecy, in other words, brought a third layer of the self into being. This was a kind of immune self: the "undefined, unknowable" individual who used deflection as protection. *Maguzawa* combined these defense mechanisms with healthy "skepticism … of external authority," creating a subculture of levity, wordplay, jokes, rumors, and subversive mockery that went together with radical doubt about *all* diagnoses and treatments. "Such skepticism [was] not confined to traditional medicine—hospital medicines [were] often treated as cavalierly." *Maguzawa* lived in a world with steep power gradients. Because they had developed fluid strategies to survive "inherently unstable" conditions, their medical pursuits flourished as *practice*.[14]

Conquest: Global Ignorance as Rationale

To flesh out the wider context of Last's research and why he chose to focus on "non-systems," I want to review another kind of not knowing that has been pervasive among the powerful: the genre that drove empire-building in the first place. Last was right to argue that European influences were less *epistemologically* significant to daily life in northern Nigeria, but he also understood that colonial institutions had lasting *structural* effects. He began his doctoral research, after all, in 1961 at the University of Ibadan, which the British government founded in 1948 as an extension of the University of London.[15] His first book drew on Arabic manuscripts and oral traditions gathered from across Nigeria that helped him write the fascinating history of the Sokoto Caliphate (1804–1903), the largest polity on the continent prior to European conquest.[16] Malumfashi had been incorporated into that polity by the 1870s, and by the 1960s it also happened to be where the University of Northern Nigeria (later renamed Ahmadu Bello University) in Zaria built an outpost of its teaching hospital. This too had been set in motion by the British, which helps explain why the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine initiated more than a dozen studies in Malumfashi in the mid-1970s to make sense of its endemic diseases, human ecology, and prospects for economic development.[17] Their intellectual priorities grew out of colonial precedents. Indeed, over the course of the same century that Last surveyed, theorists from Europe had been

14 Ibid., 389, 390, 391, 392. Last introduces his ideas about "self" with a cautionary note, "at the risk of systematizing the unsystematic."

15 Kane, "Arabic Sources," 344–46.

16 Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, xxv–lvii; Last, "The Sokoto Caliphate," 1082. For a sense of scale, it covered an area "from today's Burkino Faso in the west over to Cameroun in the east, and stretching northwards into the Sahel and southwards down to the forest edge." Last, "Frontiers," 25.

17 Bradley, Gilles, and Shehu, "Malumfashi Endemic Diseases." In 1952, the government opened a branch of the Nigeria College of Arts and Sciences in Zaria. Ahmadu Bello University was built around that original campus. For background, including the government's 1959 Ashby Commission, see Fafunwa, *Nigerian Universities*.

deeply affected by debate over Africa's place in the world. Their interest in studying "systems of medicine" in Africa germinated then too.

When European statesmen and scientists got together in the late Victorian era to share their worldly knowledge, they often had to admit to themselves and their audiences that they had little standardized or readily available data about Africa. Epidemiologist and state bureaucrat William Farr said as much in an 1872 presidential address to the Statistical Society of London. Statistics, or the "science of states," he told the gathering, was flourishing in most regions of the world, but "[o]f Africa, statistics knows little or nothing *certain* … as yet all Africa is for science a great desert." Twenty years later, during a Royal Geographical Society discussion of the "lands of the globe available to European settlement," German-British cartographer Ernst Ravenstein made a similar point in terms of geological and meteorological knowledge: "Of Africa we know next to nothing."[18] At the founding meeting of Britain's African Society in 1901, field scientist and imperialist Harry Johnston also confessed, "I have come to the conclusion that we, myself included, possess very little in the way of accurate scientific knowledge of this mysterious continent."[19] What Johnston and men of his ilk had in mind was instrumental and state-based knowledge. When they professed ignorance, it came with an imperative: We have a right to know and give ourselves permission to act. Imperial frontiers and intellectual frontiers were tied together in their minds.

Johnston's confession was deeply ironic given his own past actions. When he was selected to lead the British Association for the Advancement of Science's expedition to Mount Kilimanjaro in 1883—to study the "migrations and modifications of species" in the area—the Secretary of the Royal Society found Johnston so enthusiastic to secure a piece of eastern Africa for Britain that he wrote a tongue-in-cheek note to the director of Kew Gardens that Johnston seemed about "to set up the Kingdom of Johnstonia—though I doubt if Sir John Kirk [then Consul-General in Zanzibar] thinks him the best man for the first King."[20] German expedition leaders ultimately claimed the spoils of Kilimanjaro for their country, while Katanga, another area Johnston had tried to secure, was claimed by King Léopold of Belgium, much to Johnston's regret. He was rewarded a few years later, however, with a position as First High Commissioner of British Central Africa (covering present-day Malawi), where he lobbied successfully to create tropical Africa's first "scientific department" devoted to field research.[21] Johnston went on to serve as special commissioner to Uganda, concluding a major legal agreement with Buganda's leaders in 1900

18 Farr and Ravenstein quoted in Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory*, 33 (emphasis in original) and 60.

19 Johnston, "Notes on African Subjects," 17.

20 John Kirk to Earl Granville [Foreign Secretary], May 5, 1884, and Foster to Joseph Hooker, September 12, 1884, "East Africa-Kilimanjaro Expedition," Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew Archives, London.

21 "Mr. H.H. Johnston's Staff," excerpt from *Pall Mall Gazette*, March 23, 1891, in "Nyasaland Botanic Station, etc. – Miscellaneous Reports, 1878–1905," Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew Archives, London. Also see Drayton, *Nature's Government*, 233.

and advocating that Europeans should add South Asian settlers to their ranks: "East Africa is, and should be, from every point of view, the America of the Hindu."[22] By the launch of Britain's African Society, Johnston had written five books on the continent, with his latest being a *History of the Colonization of Africa by Alien Races* (1899). If any European knew by then about African matters, he did. Claiming ignorance was part self-critique and part boosterism, allowing him to recommend systematic state-building and study at the same time.

Without geographical and learned societies, not just in Europe but also North Africa and the United States, the veritable scramble to claim African lands beyond the coastlines would not have happened as quickly or as thoroughly as it did.[23] Between the early 1870s and the late 1890s, leaders from more than a dozen countries wrote new rules about "effective occupation" and "free trade," while six governments—Britain, France, Portugal, Germany, Spain, and Belgium's King Léopold—negotiated formal claims dividing the bulk of the continent among them. Frederick Lugard, infamous military officer and proponent of indirect rule, mapped these techniques directly on top of the Sokoto Caliphate's ruling structure, having imported the methods from India.[24] The task of establishing actual territorial borders took longer and was more fraught.[25] In 1909, Northern Nigeria's new governor, Hesketh Bell, who had also worked in the Caribbean, the Gold Coast (Ghana), and Uganda, stressed just this point in a talk to the Geographical Society on boundary commissions. "In most countries, and certainly in equatorial Africa," Bell explained, "an arbitrary line, based on astronomical observations and having no regard to tribal divisions or other local interests, usually makes a most unsatisfactory boundary, and causes much injustice and hardship."[26] Bell was not being disingenuous. Officials were thin on the ground. Trying to police movements when people were just as likely to ignore colonial borders made for uneasy working conditions and could lead to revolt. During his two separate stints as governor in Nigeria, Lugard himself instructed district and provincial officers to become political ethnographers. They were to find out what had

22 H.H. Johnston, *Report by His Majesty's Special Commissioner on the Protectorate of Uganda.* London: HMSO, 1901 (Cd. 671), 7. He first made this point in his 1894 report on British Central Africa, echoing a point Frederick Lugard had made a year earlier in *Rise of Our East African Empire* (1893). Low, "The Making and Implementation," 3–159.

23 While research on the Scramble for Africa has continued, not enough authors take scientific and ethnographic knowledge seriously, stressing instead political, legal, military, religious, and economic factors. See Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory*, chapter 1. Also see, Minawi, *Ottoman Scramble*.

24 Lugard, *Instructions to Political Officers*, chapter on "Fulani Rule."

25 Nugent and Asiwaju, *African Boundaries*.

26 Bell, "Survey and Exploration," 154. Bell had already written books on Obeah in the Caribbean, the "geography of the Gold Coast" (Ghana), and sleeping sickness in Uganda.

"the sanction of traditional usage and [what was] acquiesced in by the people," while also keeping careful records of different boundaries as they proliferated, especially for judicial and tax purposes.[27]

Salvage: Disappearing Systems and Cultural Survivals as Rationale

If Victorian-era leaders used not knowing as a rationale to seize and survey *lands*, their counterparts in universities and museums invoked it to objectify and study *races* and *cultures*. Experts in the human sciences and those in the geo-sciences often understood their mutual dependence. Just months before King Léopold hosted a conference of geographical experts on Africa in 1876 in Brussels, the Anthropological Institute in London hosted a talk by Verney Lovett Cameron on "the anthropology of Africa" based on his multiyear expedition across the equatorial belt from the Indian to the Atlantic Ocean (1873–1875). Cameron's field reports piqued Léopold's interest and hastened his efforts to set up an African exploration society in Belgium. Cameron was in fact "the first African traveler who had gone out with a list of queries" drawn up just for him by a special committee of the British Association in 1872, published two years later as *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* with the revealing subtitle, *For the Use of Travellers and Residents in Uncivilized Lands* (1874).

Colonel A. Lane Fox, who took part in drawing up the instructions and chaired Cameron's talk, could not help but offer a candid critique afterwards: "It is quite right that geography should take the lead [in Africa], and anthropology should follow afterwards, but anthropology cannot afford to be far behind … The English race has done more than any other to destroy races and obliterate their culture. As a nation we are bound to keep some scientific record of that which we destroy."[28] Scholars now refer to this impulse as "salvage anthropology." The editors of *Notes and Queries* framed their research in terms of "rapid extermination," organizing questions under various subheadings—i.e., government, law, morals, medicine, mathematics, navigation, invention, mythology, magic and witchcraft, art, music, and communication. Field ethnographers were instructed to assemble as coherent and complete a picture of each *system* as they could, as quickly as they could, because these cultures were likely to disappear.

Cambridge anthropologist Edward B. Tylor had also worked on *Notes and Queries*, and he agreed that scholars had a duty to describe "primitive

27 Lugard developed these rules of operation first in northern Nigeria and then revised them when he oversaw the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria. Lugard, *Instructions to Political Officers*, 265; and Lugard, *Political Memoranda*.

28 Lane Fox, "Anthropology of Africa," 178. In 1880, Lane Fox inherited the Pitt Rivers name from his great uncle along with its fortune, which he used to endow the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford in 1884.

cultures" before European influences altered them for good, but he added an important caveat: Anthropologists should also pay attention to "cultural survivals," or anything that despite "disturbing influences … may keep its course from generation to generation."[29] Survivals, he argued, existed in every culture and tended to mix "human reason" and "unreason" in explanations of reality. This is why he glossed over them as superstition. Yet Tylor also had a sense of humor and poked fun at his compatriots' exalted sense of their own culture. If ethnographers studied the history of survivals around the world, he believed it could reveal "how direct and close the connection may be between modern culture and the condition of the rudest savage."[30] Not even science was exempt from his scrutiny. "Were scientific systems the oracular revelations they sometimes all but pretend to be," he explained, "it might be justifiable to take no note of the condition of mere opinion or fancy that preceded them … But there are departments of knowledge, of not less consequence than mechanics and medicine, arithmetic and astronomy, in which the study of the lowest stages, as influencing the practical acceptance of the higher, cannot be thus carelessly set aside."[31] His models of cultural and scientific progress rested on linear theories of evolution, but he left room to question whether "the soundest modern knowledge" was so modern after all.

Tylor thus advocated not just for more fine-grained ethnographic fieldwork, but also more comparative and accurate historical study. His position helps explain why the editors of the first edition of *Notes and Queries* made their own barbed critique of the history profession, accusing scholars of excluding the bulk of humanity from their remit. The anthropologist, they stressed, "regards all races as equally worthy of a place in the records of human development." Because their field was a young "science" and many parts of the world had yet to be studied, they also admitted that "false theories" about cultures were widespread. In checking their arguments, anthropologists had to contend then with many unknowns in terms of both "positive and negative evidence, i.e. between non-existence and non-recorded existence [of evidence] … not knowing what evidence there may be against [a theory] buried in the ground" for archeologists to discover, or in different "tribes" awaiting more research by ethnographers.[32] Their theories existed in tension with their questions *because* they were ignorant.

During the conquest and colonization of the African continent, *Notes and Queries* went through six editions, dropping its charged subtitle by the

29 Tylor, *Primitive Culture* 1, 63 and chapters 3 and 4, "Survival in Culture."

30 Ibid., 104, 144. Tylor divided people into a tripartite system of savage, barbarian, and civilized, but occasionally described civilization as singular (p. 17): "Progress, degradation, survival, revival, modification, are all modes of the connexion that binds together the complex network of civilization."

31 Tylor, *Primitive Culture* 2, 402.

32 British Association, *Notes and Queries*, iv–v. The quotation about negative evidence and not knowing is from E. B. Tylor himself. I cover some of this history from a different vantage point in Tilley, "Global Histories."

second in 1892.[33] Robert Felkin, a doctor with many years of field experience in East Africa, wrote the questions on medicine for that edition, a stark reminder of how entangled medical ethnography has been with African subjects. (While still a medical student, Felkin served briefly as the personal physician to Mutesa, Kubaka or king of Buganda, and in 1879 witnessed a Bagandan specialist perform a successful caesarian section, which he wrote up as a lecture once he returned to Scotland.)[34] Over time, evolutionary theories about civilizations and rational progress fell out of favor in anthropological training, to be replaced by ideas about "culture contact" and social functions. Yet ethnographers continued to focus on studying *systems*. By the sixth edition in 1951, *Notes and Queries* included an entire chapter on "knowledge and tradition," including questions that ran the gamut from history to measurements, cosmology to medicine, and so many other kinds of expertise "handed down orally from generation to generation."[35] In 1874, when the British Association issued its first edition, "traditional medicine" was a non-entity in conceptual terms. By 1951, it was becoming a go-to category for anthropologists and officials alike.[36]

Sovereignty: Unknown Things and Thriving Non-Systems as Rationale

When Northern Nigeria became a British protectorate in 1900, there were more emerging *colonial* states in Africa than anywhere else in the world.[37] When Murray Last took up his doctoral research in 1961, there were more emerging *sovereign* states than on any other continent.[38] Both sets of changes, plus what happened in between, had lasting ripple effects globally. Last was openly anti-colonial and favored people-centered studies. His PhD supervisor, the historian and Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, Kenneth Onwuka Dike, explained in the preface to Last's book on the Sokoto Caliphate the damage done by conquest: "when Europe occupied Africa, her scholars did not attempt to understand or build on the historical traditions there; they sought instead to challenge and supplant them." That started to change, he said, in the "late 1940s … [when] African research students began to insist that African history must be the history of Africans … that local records and historical traditions must be used to supplement European metropolitan

33 Editions appeared in 1874, 1892, 1899, 1912, 1929, and 1951.

34 His verbatim narrative plus an illustration are in Dunn, "Robert Felkin." Details on his consultations with Mutesa in Brierley and Spear, "Mutesa," 610–11.

35 *Notes and Queries*, chapter VIII, "Knowledge and Tradition," 195–207, on 195.

36 For a fuller analysis, see Tilley, "Traditional Medicine Goes Global."

37 I am borrowing this point from D. A. Low, writing about the Buganda Agreement of 1900.

38 I am leaving to one side multi-territorial institutions of which the continent also had more than anywhere else; see Cooper, "Decolonizations."

archives; in short that oral tradition must be accepted as valid material for historical reconstruction."[39] Last was part of this new generation trying to undo and correct the cultural ignorance that empires had produced.

Though Last and E. B. Tylor shared few political and social commitments, Tylor would have recognized the patterns that interested Last. After all, both took "not knowing" seriously. Tylor used the absence of evidence and disciplinary unknowns as instruments to fact-check *armchair* anthropological theories about the world and its cultures. Last used negative evidence and people's "secrecy, uncertainty, and skepticism" to fact-check *field-based* anthropological theories (as well as government policies) about medicine and its subcultures. Hausa communities in Northern Nigeria may not have cared to know how their "traditional" practices worked, but they were sufficiently *in the know* for an Oxford anthropologist, who went on to become a medical doctor, Lewis Wall, to write an entire book on the subject as *Hausa Medicine* (1988). Wall, who also worked in the Malumfashi area in the mid-1970s, resurrected the systems approach that Last was trying to dismantle and used the Hausa concept of *lafiya*—a capacious term meaning "health … order, peace, well-being, … environmental harmony and moral propriety"—to structure his study.[40] Last understood, even if Wall did not, that writing down the details produced systems anew: "The 'don't knows' will have their ready answers again."[41]

Perhaps Last's most important conclusion was that Hausa cultures of not knowing left them no worse off than those allegedly more knowledgeable. "If anything, compared with the rest of the community, they are better off and able to provide shelter and cures to those 'dropping out' of the town-centered culture." Not only could their practices "flourish in seeming anarchy," but people could live—and die—according to their own preferences, calibrating their choices to their "emotions, expectations, and experience."[42] Last did not mean this as a rejection of public health measures: "mothers actively want the vaccination" and everyone relished clean water and being rid of guinea worms. He was pointing instead to what he referred to, in a fifty-year retrospective of his work, as "self-generated" modes of community care.[43] On this point, he and Lewis Wall agreed. As Wall explained in his conclusion, the people he got to know "crave a fullness of life, a personal peace, and a domestic tranquility which exceeds the ability of mere scientific medicine to provide." "Hausa medicine" offered people an "intimacy of care" and a "supportive environment in which to face the challenge of illness."[44] Given the vertical gradients that existed in Nigeria between state-sanctioned medicine and community therapeutics, describing Hausa cultures of not knowing as anarchy

39 Dike in Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, vii–viii.
40 Watts, "Hausa Medicine," 519–21; and Lewis, *Hausa Medicine*, xx.
41 Last, "Not Knowing," 392.
42 Ibid., 391.
43 Last, "Medical Ethnography Over Time," 52, 54.
44 Wall, *Hausa Medicine*, 336.

seems apt. Anarchy's early theorists, after all, were interested in horizontal forms of social solidarity and "mutual aid."[45]

*****

Scholars whose methods focus on bottom-up histories tend to confront epistemic continuities of one kind or another all the time, even when groups have experienced radical upheavals. Last's work on *not knowing* pokes holes in many mainstream assumptions about the ways expertise gets transmitted over short and long sweeps of time. It also raises questions about relationships among those who know, what is known, media in which things are known—whether print, ritual, performance, speech, or embodied acts—and why people who do not care to know can still be in the know. By taking these rich ethnographic and historical insights seriously, analysts can tease out critiques of the real world contained in epistemologies of practice that endure.

Last's detailed work in one "deep-rural" area of Nigeria serves as a poignant reminder that most people have lived their daily lives with *unsystematized knowledge*; that governing structures have always had an *uneven reach*; and that ordinary folk have often coped with threats to their survival by developing cultures of *radical skepticism*. Being wary of authorities and alive to the world's dangers, using humor to deflect and mock, but also to express joy and grief, can indeed give groups a sense of self-control, especially when things around them were designed to be beyond their control. Last's manifesto on method was clear: if analysts want to understand the lives of ordinary people, they need to stop investing so much power in unreal *systems* and pay more attention to the world's kaleidoscopic and messy *realities*.

About the Author

Helen Tilley is an associate professor in the History Department at Northwestern University with courtesy appointments in Anthropology and the Pritzker School of Law. Her research examines medical, environmental, and human sciences in colonial and post-colonial Africa, including their synergies with legal, economic, and global history.

Acknowledgements

I'm grateful to the editors for the invitation. I also owe a special debt to Murray Last who first shared his essay with me in 2007 and generously read the penultimate draft of this one. I am condensing a lot in this short piece, so it may be best to read it alongside Last's "Not Knowing," "Medical Ethnography," and "Frontiers." My thanks to Umar Yandaki for checking Hausa terms. All choices and errors are mine.

---

45 Kinna, "Kropotkin's Theory of Mutual Aid."

Bibliography

Bell, Hesketh. "Survey and Exploration in the Ruwenzori and Lake Region, Central Africa: Discussion." *Geographical Journal* 34, no. 2 (1909): 153–56.

Bonnell, Victoria, and Lynn Hunt, eds. *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.

Bradley, A. K., H. M. Gilles, and U. Shehu. "Malumfashi Endemic Diseases Research Project, I: Some Ecological and Demographic Considerations." *Annals of Tropical Medicine and Parasitology* 71 (1977): 443–49.

Brierley, Jean and Thomas Spear. "Mutesa, The Missionaries, and Christian Conversion in Buganda," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21 (1988): 601–18.

British Association for the Advancement of Science. *Notes and Queries on Anthropology for the Use of Travellers in Uncivilized Lands*. London: Edward Stanford, 1874.

Burke, Peter. *A Social History of Knowledge, Volume I: From Guttenberg to Diderot*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

———. *A Social History of Knowledge, Volume II: From the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

Burke, Peter and Lukas Verburgt, eds. "Histories of Ignorance – Special Issue," *Journal of the History of Knowledge* 2 (2021).

Burke, Peter. *Ignorance: A Global History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023.

Cameron, Lieutenant [Verney Lovett]. "On the Anthropology of Africa," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 6 (1877): 167–81.

Cooper, Frederick. "Decolonizations, Colonizations, and More Decolonizations: The End of Empire in Time and Space," *Journal of World History* 33 (2022): 491–526.

Dunn, Peter. "Robert Felkin MD (1853–1926) and Caesarean Delivery in Central Africa (1879)," *Archives of Diseases of Childhood-Fetal and Neonatal Edition* 80 (1999): F250–F251.

Fafunwa, A. Babatunde. *The Growth and Development of Nigerian Universities*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1974.

Feierman, Steven. "Colonizers, Scholars, and the Creation of Invisible Histories." In *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, edited by Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, 182–216. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.

Feierman, Steven, and John Janzen, eds. *The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992.

Gross, Mathias, and Linsey McGoey, eds. *The Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*. London: Routledge, 2015.

Janzen, John. *The Quest for Therapy: Medical Pluralism in Lower Zaire*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978.

Johnston, H. H. "Notes on African Subjects of Special Interest for Future Investigation." *Journal of the Royal African Society* 1 (1901): 17–22.

Kane, Ousmane. "Arabic Sources and the Search for a New Historiography in Ibadan in the 1960s," *Africa* 86 (2016), 344–46.

Kinna, Ruth. "Kropotkin's Theory of Mutual Aid in Historical Context," *International Review of Social History* 40 (1995): 259–83.

Langwick, Stacey. "Properties of (Dis)Posession: Therapeutic Plants, Intellectual Property, and Questions of Justice in Tanzania," *Osiris* 36 (2021): 284–305.

Last, Murray. *The Sokoto Caliphate*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan, 1967.

———. "The Importance of Knowing About Not Knowing," *Social Science and Medicine* 15B (1981): 387–92.

———. "Frontiers in 19th Century Northern Nigeria," *Critical African Studies* 8 (2016): 23–31.

———. "Medical Ethnography Over Time: Penetrating the 'Fog of Health' in a Nigerian Community, 1970-2017," *Anthropology in Action* 26 (2019): 52–60.

———. "The Sokoto Caliphate." In *Oxford World History of Empire*, volume 2, edited by Peter Bang, 1082–1110. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Littlewood, Roland, ed. *On Knowing and Not Knowing in the Anthropology of Medicine*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007.

Livingstone, David. *Putting Science in Its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Low, D. Anthony. "The Making and Implementation of the Uganda Agreement of 1900." In D. Anthony Low and R. Cranford Pratt, *Buganda and British Overrule 1900–1955 – Two Studies*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960.

Lugard, Frederick. *Instructions to Political and Other Officers on Subjects Chiefly Political and Administrative*. London: Waterlow and Sons, 1906.

———. *Political Memoranda: Revision of Instructions to Political Officers, 1913–1918*. London: Frank Cass and Co, 1970 [1919].

Mavungha, Clapperton Chakanetsa, ed. *What do Science, Technology, and Medicine Mean from Africa?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.

McGoey, Linsey. *The Unknowers: How Strategic Ignorance Rules the World*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

Minawi, Mostafa. *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016.

Nugent, Paul, and A. I. Asiwaju, eds. *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits, and Opportunities*. London: Pinter, 1996.

Palmié, Stephan. *Thinking with Ngangas: What Afro-Cuban Ritual Can Tell Us About Scientific Practice and Vice Versa*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2023.

Pickstone, John. *Ways of Knowing: A New History of Science, Technology, and Medicine*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Proctor, Robert, and Londa Schiebinger, eds. *Agnotology: the Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008.

Tilley, Helen. "Global Histories, Veracular Science, and African Genealogies, Or, Is the History of Science Ready for the World?" *Isis* 101, no. 1 (2010): 110–19.

———. *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1950*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

———. "Traditional Medicine Goes Global: Pan-African Precedents, Cultural Decolonization, and Cold War Rights/Properties," *Osiris* 36 (2021): 132–59.

———. "Two Stories and Ten Theses on Teaching the Science/Knowledge Divide in Global History," *Capitalism* 5 (2024): 152–99.

Tylor, E. B. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 volumes. London: J. Murray, 1871.

Vimalassery, Manu, Juliana Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, "Special Issue: On Colonial Unknowing," *Theory and Event* 19 (2016).

Wall, L. Lewis. *Hausa Medicine: Illness and Well-Being in a West African Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988.

Watts, Michael. "Review: *Hausa Medicine*," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 22 (1989): 519–21.