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CULTURAL IMPACT OF THE APOLLO PROGRAM – THE CASE OF THE “APOLLO DISEASES”
IN AFRICA.

Abstract

In 1969, people in the West African country of Ghana started to experience painful inflammations of the eyes of a nature not seen before. They called this type of acute hemorrhagic conjunctivitis “Apollo,” making a causal link between the disease and the landing on the Moon of two Apollo 11 astronauts. From Ghana, the disease spread to other parts of Africa and the word, and the name spread with it. At about the same time, yam cultures in the same part of the world started to be affected by a disease which was also called “Apollo”, being attributed to the human incursion in the celestial domain. The explanations in both cases ranged from spiritual disturbances resulting in divine punishment, to the alleged harmfulness of the lunar dust to terrestrial life, part of these being due to NASA’s publicity surrounding the quarantine measures taken towards the astronauts and lunar samples.

Expanding from my 2011 Astropolitics article “Space Exploration and Folk Beliefs on Climate Change”, this paper will examine the folk etymologies of the “Apollo Diseases” in their anthropological aspects, in the context of William Ogburn’s theory of Cultural Lag. This preliminary presentation will then be expanded in what is intended to be an exhaustive analysis of the phenomenon of associating correlated events – one in outer space and other ones on Earth – and attributing a causal link between the two of them.