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Typical Forms of Transference among West Africans (1)

The authors analysed thirteen normal adult members of the Dogon people in Mali (2), applying the usual psycho-analytic technique. The first aim was to get information about the psychodynamics and structure of these personalities. A secondary aim was to check how far psychoanalytic technique and theory are appropriate to enable one to understand their inner life.

In this context it should be mentioned that some characteristics of the 'normal' ego would not be compatible with clinical normality among Europeans. These characteristics depend upon the vicissitudes of the instinctual drives of the oral phase which reach a level of extraordinary differentiation. Furthermore, the ego, in contrast with the Western world, is able to turn the differentiated oral tendencies to its advantage. In the analytic process all subjects showed good capacity for transference which aroused instinctual demands stemming from different levels without showing fear, inhibition, or disintegration. Their ego oscillated between one form of relationship and another or even functioned simultaneously on different levels. This flexibility did not prevent their having a rich repertory of well-established identificatory mechanisms. They entered freely into different forms of identificatory relationship to the analyst and emerged from them again-as they did with objects in their own surroundings.

The appearance of a white man among a closed group like the Dogon, a Negro people of West Africa, came as an obvious disturbance and the subjects reacted to this disturbing factor in characteristic ways. They tended to distribute libidinal cathexes among a number of objects and tried by all possible means to avoid any internalization of relations to a single person such as the psycho-analyst. This defence was not directed against the object itself nor against specific inner dangers (instinctual drives) but against the emergence of isolated relations to a second person. It was very curious to observe that no Dogon men and women would ever fail to get other people to share the analytic relationship when they felt impelled to communicate something intimate in their psychic life. The course of the transference was strikingly the same in every case and centred on a clearly defined tendency. In the instinctual field tendencies were displayed which seemed to illustrate the pattern of 'distribution' as it is performed by a mother and a childlike form of 'demanding'. In the sphere of the ego a marked tendency towards identification was apparent. The peculiar quality of the personality of the Dogon who were analysed could be easily recognized in the transference reactions which lead to the conclusion that personality components arising at the oral level are more numerous than those stemming from the anal level. The individual directed his

libido towards any objects that attracted his attention or his curiosity. However, he avoided forming an object relationship to the analyst as a person; only the group could internalize the relationship to him. The individual or the group also tended to enter into mobile and reversible identificatory relationship.

During the analysis of a young Dogon woman whose husband had been away for a long time, this state of affairs became obvious in the fact that it was practically impossible to speak to her alone. A whole group of women continuously took part in everything that occurred within the analytic situation. The woman spoke French with the analyst and gave a running translation of every sentence for the listening group. She could, however, speak with the stranger only when at least one person from her

(1) Read at the 23rd International Psycho-Analytical Congress Stockholm July-August 1963.

(2) The research is published in a book by Parin, P., Morgenthaler, F., and Parin-Matthèy, G. : *Die Weissen denken zuviel* (Zurich: Atlantis, 1963.)

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circle of friends was present who understood French. A young girl and a boy who were attending school were generally present as silent supervisors of the conversation to shield the subject from the danger of isolation. Just as in European culture it is regarded as offensive to make sexual allusions in public, so the Dogon regard it as offensive for two persons to talk together in public in a foreign language without bystanders being able to follow the conversation.

Contrary to what might have been expected, the supervisory group exercised no sort of prohibitive function. Rather, it encouraged the young woman and even the analyst to make their relationship to each other more intense and more intimate. It was not long before they revealed the content of her wishes by making open demands, in words and gestures, for a sexual relationship. The erotic drives were not inhibited and the strange white man did not frighten her. The group identified itself with the wish of the young woman to enter into a sexual relationship with a man. The young woman must have had such wishes in order to belong to the women's group. However, it was the group that reacted to the person of the analyst and not the single individual. The subject read French poems aloud from a reader or showed the amber ornament given to her by her mother as a sign that she was ready for marriage. The libidinal demands were accorded recognition, quite freely and without any inhibition. They were expressed in words and presented in gestures by the women's group, while the chief person in the relationship, the young woman, in her conversation with the analyst acted out the demands of the group and expressed them in a typically pre-object manner: ' Do you see this young woman with her child " she would say for example ,she is

beautiful, isn't she, this woman, she is married. I too am married and shall have children when my husband returns, but that woman who is now coming over to us because she has heard that we are speaking together is a widow. Her husband has died. We are all very sad. My father will tell me what man I should marry.'

External perceptions focused her feelings even more strongly than instinctual drives. The consciousness of being married became blurred under the pressure of the transference situation, which, on the one hand, was determined by the identifications made by the group with the subject and, on the other hand, by the instinctual drives that were activated. The expectation of satisfying sexual wishes was less than the expectation of following the ideals of the women's group through a sexual fantasy. In this way the feeling of belonging to the group could be strengthened. Her ego could function as a group ego. The ego of the individual was capable of admitting aim-inhibited gratifications from the relationship to other members of the group.

Both the young woman and the group showed signs of sadness, forlornness, and anxiety only when the analytic relationship developed in a way that emotionally strengthened the separation of the young woman from the group.

In the analytic process it was naturally one of the analyst's aims to achieve a deepening of the relationship to his subject by means of his interpretations. This could be achieved more successfully with subjects who were in less urgent need of the cooperative group. The anxieties that developed from the transference in this way were at first generally warded off by attempts at identification with the analyst, or were in this manner overcome. The group was ordinarily called in only if the anxiety went on increasing because the relationship to the analyst was dangerously deepened precisely by the attempted identifications. However, it became apparent that with an increase in the transference tension still other defensive measures could make their appearance, which, phenomenologically, could be described as regressions, but which in fact represented regressions in the service of the ego. The further the analytic process went and the more a subject succeeded in effecting an identification with the analyst and maintaining it free of anxiety, the more evident were regressive adaptations on the part of the ego brought to bear against the object-orientated relationship to the analyst.

The way in which anxiety resulting from the transference situation was combated or overcome can best be illustrated by an example of a change in the transference significance of the analyst. A 24-year-old Dogon man who at the beginning had met the white stranger with profound distrust was led to change his views with surprising speed. All that was necessary was for him to receive the analyst in the presence of the village elders. From then on it was also easier for him to speak to the white man by himself. He expressed feelings which were perhaps vague in their friendliness but were nevertheless such as would be taken to refer to

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a good friend. It was just because of this that object cathexis, which took on a threatening aspect, resulted in a short space of time. He first eluded the emergent anxiety by calling in a young Dogon whom he effectively involved in the analytic relationship. The interpretation of this defence ended in the subject's decision to leave the village for a few days. There was a certain lack of clarity concerning the duration of his absence. When finally, to bring home to him the meaning of the passage of time, the analyst laid out side by side five straws and began to explain that the first straw stood for the day on which they were then speaking, the subject, surprisingly, seized the first and fifth straws and threw them both away. 'These days do not exist among the Dogon' he said, 'we don't count these two days'. The interpretation that the analyst gave ran thus: 'You throw these two days away because you do not wish to come any more to our discussions. You are afraid of me and are glad to have the opportunity of going away tomorrow'. The subject burst out laughing and laid the five straws next to one another himself, whereupon he began to count the days. When he got to the fifth straw he said: 'And that is the day on which we shall meet again here under the tree'.

After his return we met as agreed. He looked quickly for some straws and laid them out side by side. Jokingly he threw two away, picked them up again and threw two others away. His action was like a new kind of greeting. A few days later he dropped the welcoming game with the straws and brought instead a new game. Following up a conversation about the colour of the skin of white men and black men, he said: 'It is all the same whether the skin is white or black'. As he said this he touched first the analyst and then himself and repeated: 'It is the same whether the skin is white or black' touched the analyst again and then himself again. The whole thing became a game which he now pursued until suddenly he touched the analyst and talked about black skin and when touching himself talked about white skin. He noticed this and we had a good laugh over it.

Later on in the conversation signs of local and autopsychic disorientation became apparent. He told of his voyage on the sea as a soldier and added that everything was again going round in circles in his head. Then he stated that a place which he knew well enough lay in a direction which was quite obviously wrong, there being no possibility of doubt that under other psychic conditions he would have been able to give the direction exactly.

For the time being there was a profound disruption in the ego-functions. After he had warded off the increasingly object-orientated relationship to the analyst by involving another Dogon in the analysis, he turned from the animate to the inanimate, to the straws which the analyst had previously offered to him. The contact effected by way of the inanimate object was replaced by a more direct contact by way of tactile gestures, whereupon signs of autopsychic and local disorientation made their appearance. Finally he regressed to somatic forms of expression in that

he continued the analytic exchange by urinating, at the same time pointing out that the fluidity of speech would keep the human relationship free of conflicts. 'People have to talk together' he said, 'then they know more about life'. He laughed, spat, and said: 'I am going to go urinate' stood up, turned to one side, and looking back at the analyst, went on: 'If people talk together they learn what others are thinking and others learn what we are thinking as we speak to them. That's the way it goes, it flows on and on and we become clever. Whoever does not play along remains stuck where he is and becomes ill. Is that the way it is in your country too?' This development arose from the powerful object-oriented transference on to the analyst. The explanation of this tie was sufficient to introduce a process of release which took place in a few days without the changes in the ego-functions remaining.

The overcoming of transference anxiety did not always succeed by way of partial reversible regressions in the service of the ego. In the case of the same young man manifest anxiety was on one occasion overcome after a projection was resorted to in order to make an identification possible.

The analyst was ill for several days and the subject was afraid the analyst would die. His recovery left him in possession of superior power and therefore made him appear especially dangerous. The subject welcomed the analyst with the observation that not every illness had to end in death. Then he became excited and began to talk about masks. According to Dogon usage women must not participate in the masked festival. Suddenly he jumped up, seized two dry branches which were lying on the ground and stuck them upright in front of the analyst. One of them was clearly longer than the other. Bending

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over the branches and standing over the analyst, he explained the meaning of his performance in a state of obvious inner excitement, in the following words:

'The man is always higher, the woman is much lower. But on a quite ordinary day, when there are no masks, there are women everywhere who order the man about. The man feels bound. He is afraid. But today he is free. That's why masks were invented. And so finally we have peace. We look at the dancing masks. Nothing but men, we can all have a good time. We can relax, the women are locked up.'

By means of this little ritual the young man was showing how important the analyst had become for him. In his relationship to him he was undergoing the experience of his secret anxiety before woman. He had made the analyst into a woman, and the anxieties bound up with this had been transferred on to him.

This development in the analysis did not go back to a homosexual tendency but was the immediate consequence of the deepening of the contact with the individual personality of the analyst which dangerously furthered his isolation from the group.

The sexual relationship to the woman is for the Dogon the only available pattern for such a development. In all other respects contact with the woman is divisible and can exist as a group experience. The illness of the analyst had terrified the young man. It acted as a signal for the anxiety piling up within him, which was increasing day by day as he went on speaking with the analyst.

After the performance of the little rite intended to exercise his anxiety, the white stranger appeared to lose his threatening aspect. He could identify himself, because he again saw in the analyst a man such as he was himself.