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Ego and Orality in the Analysis of West Africans

The authors studied thirteen normal adults of the Dogon people in Mali. The primary aim of the investigation was to learn about the psychodynamics and the psychic structure of these individuals, rather than to generalize about the personality of the Dogon or of West Africans. A secondary purpose of the study was to evaluate the appropriateness of the psychoanalytic technique as a tool in understanding the inner life of people living in a traditional West African society.

Our preliminary studies of the Dogon culture were based on the ethnological and sociological publications of Marcel Griaule, his collaborators and successors (Palau-Marti, 1957). The interviews were conducted in French since many Dogon of traditional manners and customs attended French primary schools (managed by African schoolmasters) which were erected in some villages thirty to fifty years ago.

Our technique was, so far as possible, the usual psychoanalytic one. The investigation was interrupted after twenty to forty sessions, at a time too short for the establishment of a firm transference-neurosis. (1) We derived our findings mainly from the resistances and from the transference reactions which were provoked by our interpretations.

This paper summarizes some results of the investigation. The case histories (expanded by the results of one hundred Rorschach tests) and the discussion of them in the frame of the anthropological background has been published recently (Parin et al., 1963). The following abstract is to be understood as a reconstruction such as occurs in an analysis intended to further psychoanalytic views about the connection between ego functions and the vicissitudes of the instinctual drives.

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(1) Whether psychoanalytically conducted sessions interrupted after twenty to forty sessions may be called psychoanalysis is not relevant to this paper.

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Some characteristics of the "normal" ego of the Dogon would, if encountered in Europeans, be incompatible with clinical normality. The Dogon ego oscillates between one form of gratification and another. It is capable of simultaneously admitting instinctual demands which stem from

different stages of the development of the instincts, with neither anxiety nor inhibitions. There are no signs of disintegration. Judging by the stage of development of the various admissible instinctual urges, we would have to speak of a tendency toward total regression. Owing to the reversibility of the process and because the total personality involved in it remains intact, it is better to say that this ego displays a high degree of flexibility. The relationship to objects is also alternating: sometimes one object is exchanged for another, at other times the relationship to one and the same person is altered. In particular, different readily distinguishable forms of identificatory relationships can replace one another, the Dogon having at their disposal a copious repertory of well-developed modal identifications.

We derive these ego characteristics from the evolution of the instinctual strivings out of the oral stage. Oral urges undergo an extraordinary differentiation and gain admittance into the ego of the adult.

We will shortly describe some facts of Dogon infancy and childhood, laying stress on these events necessary for the understanding of the inner life of all thirteen adults. These events lead to inner experiences which shape an integral part of the psychological make-up of the Dogon. The Dogon mother, as a rule, nurses her child until around the end of its third year. During this time it enjoys an immediate gratification of all wishes which the mother can satisfy. The child never has to wait for nourishment: it is nursed the instant it expresses the slightest discomfort; at night it can suckle whenever it likes. The mother never leaves the child alone for a single moment. In the daytime she carries it naked, bound to her by a cloth, on her naked back. The child shares all the mother's movements and accompanies her to work and to dance. At night it lies in her arms. It sometimes happens that the mother hands the child over for some minutes or hours to another woman, who gives it exactly the same treatment. The child is never laid down alone; after its first attempts to walk it is picked up again every time. The mother observes strict sexual continence until the child is weaned. She is thus all the more emotionally bound to the child. The Dogon maintain that a child would never put up with being weaned, and thus separated from the mother, and at the same time experiencing the arrival of a brother or sister.

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During the nursing period there is no sort of discipline or training, no alternation between the mother's demonstrations of love and her withdrawals of interest. Her behavior is not characterized by granting and refusing, but rather by unconditioned yielding to the child's demands. The child is not trained in cleanliness by the mother. Sphincter mastery is learned later by imitation of older playmates, with no sort of compulsion being involved.

The child is weaned abruptly. It is left alone with its group of companions, seldom taken up on the mother's back again, and eats and sleeps with a troop of playmates of the same age or older. It is in this community that it remains.

As the children grow older separate groups of boys and girls are formed. The adults of the same sex in the whole consanguinity, beginning with the elder brothers or sisters, constitute an ascending hierarchy of "parental" authorities, with the actual parents playing a leading role. The disciplinary functions of upbringing are exercised by all older persons.

It is in this context that oral strivings mature. The urge to appropriate is often mitigated by the wish to distribute. Against the cessation of a gratification there is mobilized the tendency to substitute any other gratification at hand. The mitigation and aim inhibition of the instinctual demands from the oral stage appear to be facilitated by kinesthetic and tactile experiences.

Working together and participating in communal singing and dancing pacify these urges, which during the long nursing period were linked with other oral demands. Greed or envy hardly ever appear in the behavior of adults.

The primary omnipotence on the part of the child is obviously not surrendered, as among Europeans, to the mother. The child acquires the mastery of inner and outer stimuli in unison with her: it shares its omnipotence with her. Later in life self-esteem does not depend so much on the independence of the individual, or on the harmony of the ego with internalized demands in the superego. Close integration with a group, communal rhythmic movements, and communal eating and drinking reconstitute self-esteem, should it be shaken.

Imminent loss of an object leads to depressive feelings of loss and forlornness. If an object is lost it may be easily replaced by another one. It seems that separation anxiety is experienced relatively late and that experiences of primary anxiety are less traumatic than ours. Adults have no pronounced tendency toward anxiety in connection with physical threats. But they experience castration anxiety provoked by the oedipal

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conflict as a fear of being neglected or abandoned by the sexual partner.

It is impossible to prove the existence among these people of the experience of defiantly confronting an object, of feeling cut off from it, which we inherit from our experience of the sado-anal stage. Hostility does not separate. It does not have to be internalized in order to spare the loved object. Love and hate can be directed concurrently to the same object. This ambivalence generates but slight tension.

The Dogon appear to preserve all the possibilities of oral gratification for the phallic stage of development. What is most striking is the very slight fusion of these urges with aggressiveness. Since the anal fixations as well are lacking, aggressiveness is not internalized. Rather there is no separation from objects.

These circumstances exert a great influence on further development, having such an influence on ego formation that they not only apply to the child at the beginning of the phallic stage but, as it were, can be detected unaltered in the oral characteristics of the ego of adults. In this connection, however, the Dogon lack other features which we should otherwise rightly expect in the case of oral fixations. They do not suffer from "primary guilt feelings" and have but a slight tendency toward anxiety. To be sure, they easily project their emergent fears onto the external world, but they are capable of quickly retracting these projections, in that their ego orients differently to objects and that anxiety-laden objects are easily exchanged for reassuring ones.

To understand how the Dogon manage the oedipal conflict, which for them as for us is inevitable as soon as the phallic demands of the boy are directed toward the mother, we should recall a peculiarity which Freud (1905) ascribed to the ancient Greeks: instead of, like us, warding off the impulse, they exalted it even when it was returned toward an unworthy object.

The Dogon do not experience their incest demand as we do, with an anally-influenced desire to possess the mother and to kill the father. The conflict refers more to the incestuous object than to the instinctual demand. They demand that the mother not turn away and they wish to obtain further gratification from her. At the stage of oral regression an exchange of one gratifying object for another is possible. The way has already been prepared for the capacity to make such an exchange in the experiences of the nursing period. Among Europeans, incestuous love develops in accordance with the object-oriented type. We expect gratification from the exclusive possession of the desired object. Every other gratification of

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urges has been frustrated by premature weaning. The confrontation with the disciplinary mother in the anal stage has confirmed the first refusal and warding off of impulses and strengthened the fixation on the object.

Owing to the fact that among the Dogon the oedipal conflicts often coincide with the period of weaning, the shifting of castration anxiety onto the mother is facilitated. Later in life the Dogon man fears that his wife will leave him (or that he will have no children from her), if incestuous demands are mobilized. The castration anxiety then is, at least in part, lived out at the oral level. This account neglects not only the significance of phallic-narcissistic wishes but also the role played by the father. The father is felt to be the rival for the phallic-aggressive urges. The sadistic

wish to kill the father, however, does not appear as it does among Europeans. Rather there emerges the wish to incorporate the father, to devour him (or to be merged in him), to be devoured by him.

The conflict with the father is experienced in an "oral" way. Passivity and activity rapidly alternate. Devouring and being devoured are, again, less object-bound, not fixated on the nonpermissive authority figure. The outcome of this struggle is not the permanent introjection of an aggression-laden object. What emerges, rather, is a readiness to identify with partners of the same sex, a readiness which is maintained throughout life.

There is no doubt that in the oedipal conflicts lasting ego modifications are acquired. The opportunity offered to the child and the youth to integrate on a basis of identification with shifting but firmly organized social groups leads to the moulding of these ego modifications into several characteristic modes or forms of identificatory relationships. A Dogon can simply feel like a comrade of all those of his age and sex who were circumcised at the same time. Or, he can be integrated in the hierarchical line of his younger and elder brothers, extending up to the fathers and the dead ancestors of the whole people, he himself being subordinated to his elders and ranking above those younger than himself. A description of these and still other possibilities of identifying that are available to the adult Dogon would far exceed the scope of this paper.

We should like to stress what all these ego modifications have in common. Above all, they are always identificatory relationships to several (at least two) persons, and generally to an entire group. The tendency to identify is from childhood on the basis for the eminent capacity for social cohesion possessed by the Dogon people. It is probably based on the experience of the ego of entering into alternating identifications with

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the aggressor in the face of the oedipal threat. This becomes clear in the subordination to the elder brother and the simultaneous authority over the younger brother. Adult Dogon behave as if they had gone through the positive and the negative outcomes of the oedipus conflict concurrently, the former to be sure, without sadism, the latter without any anal or masochistic development.

For the Dogon, identification is not merely a means of social integration. It replaces or accompanies the most important possibilities open to the adult to gratify his urges. For this reason we can speak of identificatory relationships just as Freud regarded identification as a preliminary stage of object relationship on the genital level. Many of these relationships, as follows from their origin, have as their inherent character mutual incorporation, and this is much more clearly evident than it is among normal Europeans. All of them, however, lead to a state of placidity and repose only if instinctual demands were wholly neutralized.

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The ego of the Dogon can come to terms with mature oral instinctual demands without experiencing guilt or anxiety. With this inherent safety factor their ego can adapt to various other instinctual demands. It remains elastic and flexible. However, it is also quite dependent on the attitude of all the partners. Without them it can orient itself only with difficulty and easily loses all hope of gratification. It functions as a group ego.

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