

53

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Personality traits susceptible to deterioration under the impact of cultural change (paradigms from the Dogon (Mali) and the Agni (Ivory Coast))

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I wish to show, by means of two examples, that it is sometimes possible for the psychoanalyst to formulate, and even to forecast, the circumstances and modalities in which important personality traits deteriorate under the impact of cultural change.

The first example is taken from the Dogon people of the Mali Republic, known to us through the works of Griaule, Dieterlen and others. They are heathen planters with a patrilinear family organization. Dr. Morgenthaler, my wife and I went there in 1960 and paid them a second short visit in 1966.

We studied the Agni in 1966. Theirs is a matrilinear organization and they live in the jungle of the eastern Ivory Coast. They are an Akan people, the cousins of the famous Ashanti.

Of the two peoples mentioned, different as they are from each other within the framework of the West African area, it cannot be said that they have suffered much damage from the impact of cultural change. Indeed, with our objective in view - the psychoanalytic understanding of normal persons in a given culture - we took care to choose societies in which ways of living have proved particularly resistant and in which the people can be described with Riesmann as « tradition-directed ».

54

They were, however, exposed to quite different pressures from the outer world. The Dogon people could offer the colonial power no economic advantages. Their traditional production of millet was extended to cover the cultivation of onions for intra-African export. They could meet the political pressure of the communist party and state organization of the Mali Republic since 1960 as well as they had met the pressure of the colonial power. On the one hand they paid their tribute patiently and remained poor, adopting the attitude of freeman peasants of old times; on the other hand they had the good fortune to be all of one accord and thus to remain true to their manners and customs.

The Agni, formerly gatherers, hunters and looting warriors with aggressive kingdoms were divested of their power, split up politically and have been counted as decadent since the western world has known them. One can hardly imagine a more powerful impulse towards cultural change than that to which they have been subjected during the last 80 years, i. e. the repeated change from one way of production and one economic system to another. Today as plantation owners they produce coffee for the world market. Köbben and Dupire have investigated the problem which stems from this situation, i. e. that of the « Djoulas », the foreign workers from the North. However even they, numerous details apart, remain true to their traditions, attempting to adapt modern life to their own habits rather than submit established customs to a radical change.

I am making these remarks merely to stress that it is not psychological factors which are the prime influence in maintaining or changing a given culture. The most important factor of all may be a people's dependence on its material conditions of life; it is these that have their effect on social institutions and relationships. The psychological changes observable in groups and individuals are rather the consequence than the cause of such changes.

Our procedure was nevertheless to concentrate our attention primarily on the psychological processes. There are several reasons for doing so: the first is to be sought in the nature of our method of investigation, which is the application of psychoanalytic method and theory - of the so-called metapsychology - to human beings who are members of foreign societies. Our objective

55

was to get to know the inner life of individuals who have grown up in a special cultural setting.

As some of you, perhaps, are not familiar with our procedure, I shall take the liberty of giving you a brief summary of our method of investigation. The psychoanalytic technique of exploration, which follows as closely as possible that of Freudian analysis, consists in holding repeated individual sessions with a very limited number of persons. We do not ask questions, but interpret the resistances which are effective in preventing further communications. The interpretations are based on assumptions and reconstructions which are modified and verified in terms of the reactions of the subject. In this manner we are able to arrive at more complete reconstructions of the thoughts, feelings and motivations of the person concerned. These observations are compared again and again with other psychological observations along with the social institutions and economic factors. Among these are child rearing procedures, history, economic background, family organization, value systems and so on. The process may be compared with a feedback between individual psychic processes (which become observable in terms of dialogue) and the outer world. It is not the restricted number of persons investigated that is of importance here, but

the very large number of facts gleaned from the dialogue, insofar as this information can be subsumed under the heading of a psychodynamic or psychogenetic theory .

The forces with which we have to deal are instinctual energies, i. e. psychic energies which have their origin in the biological sphere. Their effect on those areas which are the most important ones for human behaviour is not a direct one; they become noticeable as solutions of inner conflicts that are more or less charged with tension and have placed themselves in the service of the material needs of life and of the search for solutions to social problems. Whereas psychodynamic theory focuses its attention on this play of forces, psychogenetic theory is concerned with mental development, with the origin and formation of the psychodynamic functional systems, with the consequences of the mutual interchange between the outer world, in particular the social sphere, and hereditary factors, the « Anlage » of the individual.

Both come under the heading of the so-called structural

56

theory: the formation of relatively stable structures (the ego and the super-ego) which in their functioning are relatively independent of the demands of the instinctual drives and of the outer world. The ego can be described as a functional combination which came into being during the process of mental development under the effect of mutual interchange with the social environment. Its relative autonomy, a fundamental concept of the psychoanalytic clinic, more or less corresponds to what we mean when we speak of a personality that functions relatively well within the framework of a given culture.

Our system of concepts which traces its growth to the clinical application of psychoanalysis renders possible a description of the individual in his particular society. We regard our method as suitable for studying the process of cultural change because we can observe its effects at the point where it first makes itself felt as psychopathology. At the centre of our description stands the individual who no longer functions in the same manner as he did before the change in this environment. Collective manifestations, however, as well as those of a material nature, are first described as outer influences, although these, of course, in a second stage of the procedure, are examined as to the part played by psychological factors.

For the purpose of our description we have chosen personality traits which guarantee good functioning in the social context and which, in the given society, are frequent and normal and contribute to the well-being and feeling of identity of the persons concerned. Furthermore we were able to observe in the case of some individuals a complete or partial, temporary or lasting impairment of those psychic functions and express them in psychological terms. In doing so we

confine ourselves to those influences which can be grasped in terms of their psychological effects, though we do not exclude other factors.

During the course of their mental development the Dogon people develop the ability to establish two specific types of stable, identificatory relationships to their fellows. When adulthood has been reached these are firmly established ego functions. They guarantee a relative ego autonomy, i. e. insofar as an individual can maintain these identificatory relationships to his fellows, his mental equilibrium remains undisturbed. One of these types of identification is a simultaneous or alternating

57

identificatory relationship such as that which may arise between an older and younger brother. We have called this the identification with the (vertical) father-brother sequence. The other type is that with a number of equals of the same sex, persons of the same age group (*tumo*) who are interchangeable, in accordance with the social, horizontal structure of the age group, which is a social unit dependent on a higher authority.

If persons suitable for this identificatory relationship are not available, or should definite modalities which can lead to identification not take place (conventional occasions such as work, dancing, drinking in common) there ensue typical temporary or lasting disturbances of ego autonomy and a general dysfunctioning of the personality as a whole.

It is unfortunately not possible in the time at our disposal to impart to you the wealth of convincing detail which we gained during the many sessions devoted to psychoanalytic investigation. (Our protocols have been published) .

After the initial resistances had been overcome, all the Dogon began to adopt the same attitude towards us that they would otherwise have taken up in relation to an older or younger brother. This occurred no matter what the age of the person concerned and was subject to rapid changes. If I did not give the advice that was expected of an older brother, my partner in the dialogue immediately gave me advice as if I were an inexperienced younger brother. If I interpreted the meaning of this behaviour pattern, I instantly became a person of the same standing both of us being faced with an exterior and superior, but benevolent authority. For him I had become a member of the same age-group, i. e. of the « *tumo* ». Were both these types of relationship were concerned the entire personality was in equilibrium, a fact which implies that the ego functions had remained unimpaired. It was clear that the relationships were identificatory, i. e. the subjects of the investigation ascribed to me their own feelings and attitude of mind. There were, however, various occasions when these two types of experiencing relationship without tension no longer

sufficed, and this was especially the case when we succeeded in interpreting the two identificatory processes, the result being that the person under investigation came face to face with us as individuals. If our

58

response to the need to identify was either negative or merely insufficient, other forms of identification which were partly regressive or immature came into play and they behaved in a disturbed manner. It is not possible to examine such occurrences here. Such changes in behaviour were particularly marked if we requested our partner in the dialogue to remain seated when he felt the need to walk about with us, or if we requested him to stay alone with us when he wanted other Dogon to join us.

Observation of early childhood provides us with indications as to the origin of these personality traits. Dogon mothers carry and feed their children at the breast until they are three or three and a half years old. During this period children are in constant, naked contact with their mothers and share all her movements. They therefore retain to a marked degree the capacity for kinaesthetic empathy and other modalities of primary identification up to a stage of development in which these modalities are integrated into a relatively developed ego endowed with speech and other functions of the secondary process. Where our children are concerned such capacities remain at a rudimentary level. The European mother's attitude of granting and refusing love which begins when the child is at the breast, and the struggles of separation which come with sphincter mastery mean that the ego will follow other paths of development. The Dogon mother turns her back on the child at the time of weaning, and leaves it alone with its group of companions, both sexes at the beginning, which constitutes a hierarchy of protective, motherly and restrictive persons among whom the parents are no more than two adults among many.

The integration into the group and the well-being of the children strikes us as being astonishing. Life from now on offers opportunities for differentiation of the ability to establish identificatory relationships with the members of the group. When a solution to important conflicts has to be found or specific tasks have to be undertaken, there is always a social institution which provides a suitable framework of reference for the identificatory need and renders it significant in terms of the emotions and solutions to conflicts, finally giving shape to the personality as a whole.

Examples of such social procedures are

59

within the « horizontal » sequence of the « tumo » initiation and circumcision before puberty, membership of the mask society at adolescence, work in common and courtship when founding a

household; for the « vertical » identificatory type integration into the sibling group, into the extended family and the village. The various practical and ritual functions which accompany these steps provide the modalities of movement in common, of drinking together and similar ones, all of which help to facilitate identification.

We should like to show by means of a few examples what happens when the environment no longer harmonises with this personality trait proper to the culture concerned.

A jovial, industrious and intelligent Dogon about thirty years of age went to Mopti on the Niger a foreign town. For an entire day he behaved in such a disturbed manner that, left to himself, he did not even take the trouble to go into the shade or satisfy his thirst on the banks of the river. He simply did what he was told to do, just like an automaton. The impression he made was that of a catatonic schizophrenic, but he immediately returned to normal as soon as he got back to his village.

Two Dogon who meet somewhere abroad establish contact with each other by means of the traditional greetings and, if at all possible, tell each other fables and amusing folktales. After that they have not only met a friend, but their mood changes for a while, they become more active, more able to tackle their jobs.

In one village in which some years ago the cult of Islam was voluntarily adopted, and all ancient rituals, including the mask dances, had been done away with, inhabitants subjected to the Rorschach test showed personality structures with many more inhibitions and restrictions than in the other villages.

The disturbances became much clearer in those individual cases subjected to psychoanalytic investigation and in whom the above-mentioned types of identification could not function properly. They behaved like neurotics, i. e. they could not come to terms with their inner conflicts and were insufficiently adapted to their social environment. Adaptation to new ways of life was more difficult for them than for other people. Examples: A young father of a family had practically grown up in a nuclear

60

family under control of an overprotective mother; a young man who, as a child, had not been able to adapt himself to a Dogon children's group because, at that time, his parents had been far a way from the land of the Dogon; a youth who did not belong to a « tumo » because his rather idiosyncratic father had initiated and circumcised him in isolation from the others and then sent him to a school outside the village. They were all, however, not absolutely incapable of forming identificatory types of relationship. As soon as a number of conflicts had been eased they were

able to relinquish their hold on us - in such cases we were working as therapists - and reassume their place within their social context.

We were able to assess what would happen if ways of life were changed so that the environment would no longer be suitable for this acquired ability. For a long time, i. e. until the respective forms of education, including all habits, value systems and solutions to conflict situations had changed, the Dogon would have to renounce the better part of their socially characteristic behaviour. In this connection it would be a matter of indifference whether the influence calling for social change was overpopulation causing emigration, a new means of production favouring individual as opposed to group work, or compulsory Islamization or any other influence on traditional customs that would change the modalities of social life. They would have, as individuals and as a people, a much poorer chance of making a success of life, and in all likelihood there would be an increase in the number of the mentally ill.

Up to now it is just the need and ability of the Dogon to establish identificatory relationships, along with the family and social organization and the intensively ritualized mythic or religious and political institutions which have given proof of great stability. The wide spread Islamization of all the neighbouring peoples - as well as Christianization - has exercised little influence. The changes of recent times have rather been integrated into the society and have not been conducive to alienation and mental illness.

The way of life, family and social structure of the Agni are so entirely different that one cannot expect any considerable psychological similarities with the Dogon. It is common knowledge that the matrilinear organization is not merely a mirror-

61

image of the patrilinear. We are, as a matter of fact, of the opinion that it is not permissible to speak of a family structure that either approximates to or is analogous to ours. The social environment in which the Agni child grows up and develops is rather characterized by a multitude of social circles each with its own function to perform, though these cut across and complete with each other and act vicariously for the other. Each one of these, several or all of them together constitute, as the occasion demands, what can be described as a family system. This peculiar social world effects a fundamentally different outcome of the conflicts of early childhood.

Where the Agni are concerned we shall, as in the case of the Dogon, isolate a personality trait which is crucial for their individual well-being and smooth social functioning. When in what

follows we speak of identification we mean to imply an unconscious internalization of a completely isolated characteristic of an admired or feared individual, this being radically different from the identificatory relationship in which one establishes contact with another human being by regarding oneself as essentially similar to the person concerned.

Adult Agni depend on being able to subordinate themselves to a powerful authority that keeps them under strict control. When this has taken place they can identify themselves with the active-aggressive aspects of the authority's personality and thus become active themselves. If suitable authorities are not available, they are created by processes of durable projection, alloplastic identification and/or by investing in fantasy the persons to whom specific social roles have been assigned with the necessary qualities. The authorities concerned are newly created or taken over from other cultures. But if these too are a failure, the functioning of the ego is severely disturbed and various areas of the personality are affected.

Those who are acquainted with the nature of psychoanalytic practice will not be surprised to hear that these persons could not stand the analyst's tolerance. For these people -at least at the commencement of the dialogue, and repeatedly even later -we were aggressive, interfering and manipulatory partial objects. Their own speech and even their own thoughts were experienced as the expression of an unavoidable compulsion which proceeded from the analyst. However, in relation to

62

us, as well as to their relatives they were in need of a compulsion in order to be able to establish a meaningful relationship. If the compulsion ceased because the outer world did not give them any further opportunity to perceive us in this manner, ego regressions were the consequence. If the fear of aggressive violation was too great they likewise developed the defense of Ego-regression: paranoid fantasies appeared, perceptions were blurred, thinking was confused and speech degenerated into a jumble of words as happens with some schizophrenics. However, before long, such people recovered without further help and had soon reinstated the pattern of benevolent obsession with its source in the outer world.

Here too we shall have to impose limits on ourselves and by-pass the wealth of evidence derived from the observation of repeated connections between on the one hand experiences of early childhood, social institutions and the activities of adult life and on the other hand transference reactions, memories and fantasies.

The Agni mother carries and breast-feeds her children in a manner which seems to meet all the needs of the baby. The mother experiences herself -consciously -as an instrument which is there to

give immediate and complete satisfaction to all the needs of the child. As soon as the infant can walk, i. e. generally in the first half of the second year, it is suddenly weaned and the mother cuts herself off emotionally from her child. The conscious justification for this is that she must make room for the next child. Emotionally, however, the Agni mother cannot tolerate the child's becoming independent of her; the baby was a part of her own self. In the years that follow those of early childhood -the relationship between children and adults is peculiar. The toddler is fed and cared for in a severe and loveless manner. Orders are given with severity and are often satirical in tone; there is almost no exchange of words between the infant and the adult. That intensive contact which remains is an enema with a sharp suspension of red pepper administered once or twice daily by the mother. This procedure, which is a source of pain for the baby though emotionally bearable, assumes for the toddler the form of an unavoidable violation. In these years the child is unhappy, shows signs of apathy, vocal and motoric stereotypes and similar symptoms

63

of the most intense frustration, punctuated by attacks of impotent and often aimless rage. Between the ages of five and seven the picture changes. Girls begin to take part in those activities which appertain to the woman's sphere; they are learned by imitation and peremptory instructions. The boys get together in groups, play with each other and grow in intelligence, in the ability to learn and even in bodily skills. Closer observation shows that these groups are often split up by impulsive envy and helpless rage. The great majority have now become addicted to the enemas and remain so for life in a context of hypochondriacal anxieties in connection with bodily functions.

Puberty and the choice of a profession and partner in adolescence bring in their wake reactions - this applies to all the boys, though girls are somewhat less affected - which in our society would be taken as signs of a crisis or even be regarded as a sign of severe psychopathology: depressive moods, lack of activity, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, a vagrant life and minor acts of delinquency. The desire to learn is non-existent.

Despite this gloomy picture these people become active members of a social group. The pressures exercised by strict teachers make exceptionally knowledgeable pupils out of them. The demands imposed by the maternal lineage are regarded by them as being unavoidable. If no such demands are made, they start quarreling and the conflict is smoothed over by courts of arbitration, the impositions of which must be adhered to. In cases, however, in which the personal distress involved exceeds normal limits, the individual concerned feels that he is under a witch's spell (such women, by the way, belong, with few exceptions, to the maternal lineage) and goes in

search of a sorceress, pays a visit to a shrine or to a foreign holy man. These authorities impose strict requirements and rules of conduct. The peculiar thing is that they can be adhered to. The individual concerned experiences well-being for a certain period, recovers his self-esteem and a certain activity potential.

It seems that an unbearable emotional frustration, a loss of object relationship and uncontrollable affects hit the Agni child just at the time when it should learn to act independently. Developments which are proper to the phallic phase remain incomplete: the integration of feeling, the consolidation of the

64

sense of self, the learning of active solutions to problems and the corresponding skills. With the exception of the skills which never undergo further development, the social order provides that which is essential for effective social behaviour. The need to be placed under compulsion and violated had taken shape during early childhood in the course of the child's precarious relationship to the mother. The matrilinear kinship organization, which sets its stamp on all larger social organizations, is characterized by the fact that power and the formation of will are the prerogatives of the women, though executive functions and the external signs of the deployment of power are in the hands of the men. The identification with these characteristic features forms an ideal complement to their mental equipment; it invests the personality trait described with energy and purpose.

Under such circumstances it is not to be wondered at that the Agni villages which have a chief or king with a strong personality function well, while neighbouring villages in every respect similar are in a state of anomy and decay. Those who are acquainted with the history of the Akan cultures know how many « motherly » traits can be ascribed to those cruel kings who dealt with their subjects as Agni mothers deal with their toddlers. It is an important aspect of the religious and social syncretism of the Agni that they are compelled to seek and create authorities if such are not forthcoming in their society.

Today things seem to have reached the point characterized by the following symptomatic picture: thousands of psychosomatic cases flock to the healer Edjro. His treatment does not have any lasting effect. The institution of the chief, robbed of its material and physical means of power for seventy years, is increasingly more hard put to it to provide competent representatives. An economy of industrial crops can, in the long run, only be a success if it is planned years in advance and provided with the necessary skills. The Agni, endowed as they are with good

intelligence, soon come to grips with the facts of the modern situation. The personality trait mentioned above compels them to cling to the old forms of social organization.

In our opinion the personality threatens to deteriorate to an increasing and more serious extent the more the family and social organization is modified. The conclusion seems to

65

impose itself that culture change among the Agni can only take effect without serious disturbance if the new social order provides for persons or institutions invested with authority, prestige and unrestricted power, while at the same time exercising those functions associated with « motherly » care. This would correspond to the given psycho-social structure of the Agni as it is today.

In order to demonstrate that other solutions are not without the bounds of possibility. I should like to sketch a relatively minor psychohygienic operation which could put a stop to further negative developments. The children, after weaning up to school age, should be gathered into groups and placed under the guidance of trained girls under supervision, their function being to encourage the children to join in collective games and develop active learning processes. Through such simple measures the loss of the object could, to some extent, be avoided, emotional frustration reduced and, above all, the formation of achievements and durable, total identifications could be rendered possible.

Neither the value-systems of the Agni nor their emotional attitudes to their children would stand in the way of such procedure. Such measures would serve to bridge over the duration of time required before a thorough restructuration of the family customs and educational habits can come about.

It is a matter of difference whether the future political structure and ways of production take on a more individual or collective shape. The development of a more highly technological society is not possible if independent behaviour can only take place under the impact of a power that keeps the individual under strict control.

We have attempted to assess personality traits which could deteriorate under the impact of cultural change. With regard to the process how cultural change brings about deterioration and with regard to its results, psychoanalytic investigation was able to reach further conclusions. Above all it is the following rule that seems to emerge, i. e. persons who are most firmly rooted in traditional ways of life, and function best therein, are those who will best be able to adapt themselves to cultural change. Those people who gradually, from generation to generation, had

66

to abandon piecemeal their traditional ways of life and acquired personality structure will not succeed so well. It is a task of the social sciences to determine whether and under which conditions this is valid for social groups as well.

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