

LEARNING FROM THE MASSAI WHY PSYCHOTHERAPY MUST BE TRANSCULTURAL

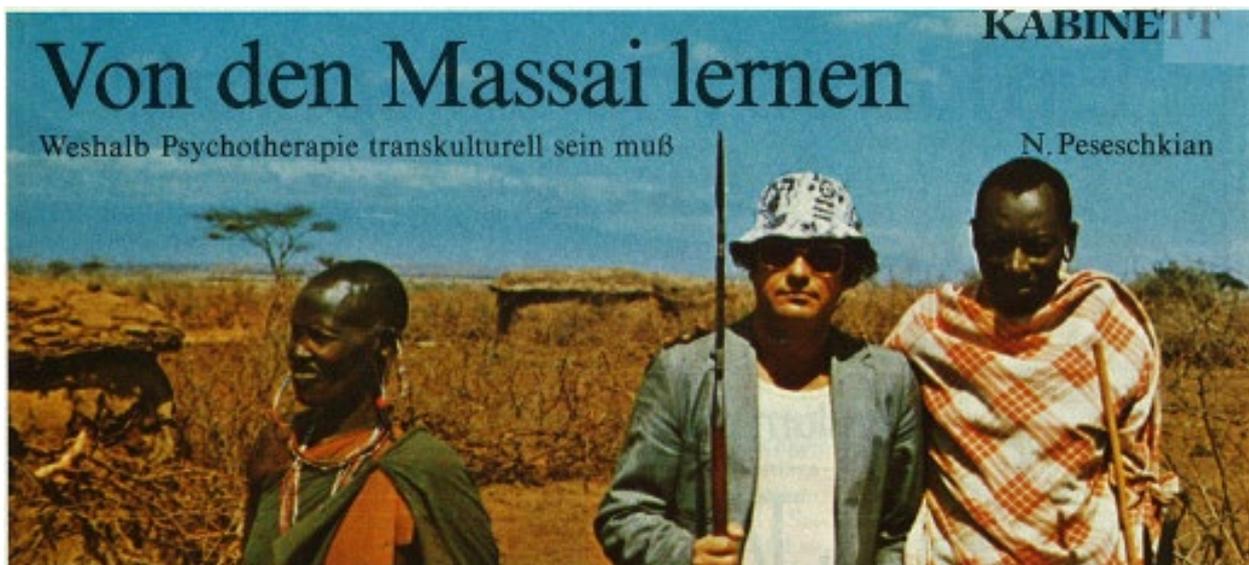


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In the face of the variety of educational systems, the differing economic conditions, the immense number of different life experiences, the individuality of each person, the specificity of his/her needs - in the face of all these factors, is it possible in any way to develop one rule for education and psychotherapy? There are also innumerable interests, communities, nations, races and peoples in this world who shape the thoughts, views and opinions of individuals according to different customs, flavors, temperaments and moral positions. Would we then not have a system

of education and of un-education (psychotherapy) which could be equally valid for all, and which must become a last over which all are beaten? The opposite would be that the diversity of the social and individual circumstances would actuate social conflicts of unheard-of proportions. All this leads to two basic questions: How are people different? and what do all people have in common?

In that positive psychotherapy deals with elementary human capacities, it is in a position to address people of all languages and levels of society and to work through transcultural problems

effectively.

Psychopathological motivations

In order to understand observable behavior, we need background information which gives us yardsticks for the judgment which will come later. This means that as well as considering the transcultural conditions, the conditions of the person's life history which first gave a behavior a meaning must also be considered.

We emphasize the significance of the psychosocial background against which the specific conflict dynamics develop and try to broaden our view of the concept of the illness and to complement and broaden it with the view of new, therapeutic possibilities. Taking positive measures also means that we try to take the broadest possible view of the interpretation of a symptom or of the illness with the purpose of influencing the patient's and his/her family's understanding of the illness and of him/herself and to control disturbing interference from the premedical area.

Transcultural concepts and their effects: For example, the Massai

Among the Massai it is common to pierce the ears in many locations, to wear many earrings both set in and dangling. The lower ear lobe is pierced and gradually covered with larger and larger objects. This custom, which we understand as coming from the Massai tradition, is also no stranger to the European tradition, as unbelievable as it may seem on first sight. So I found an aphorism which is probably a hundred years old but belongs to the tradition that goes back to the Middle Ages:

*"Little ring in the ear,
No, more piercing will not I,
But if it wards off deathly sick,
I may do it bye and bye."*

We see that a folk-medical justification is used here. People try to prevent illnesses. In the case of the Massai, it is used to strengthen the important bodily functions such as sight, which are extraordinarily important for survival on the steppe. Even if our scientific neurophysiology has not yet developed a clear explanation for this, another traditional branch of learning, namely, Chinese acupuncture, has been able to embrace this folk-medical behavior in different ways. Many

medical programs in the developing countries have failed because people only looked at medical problems from a scientific point of view, rather than seeing the people rooted in their cultures. According to the Oriental motto:

*"Give a man a fish and he can eat for a day,
Teach him to fish and he can eat for a lifetime."*

Sociological bases for a transcultural psychotherapy

In Germany, when someone goes out for a walk and meets someone he/she knows, a question comes up just after the greeting: "How are you?" and is answered with: "Thank God, and how are you?" In the Orient this repartee goes a little differently: "How are you? How is your family?" The question about the family simply belongs there and is seldom forgotten.

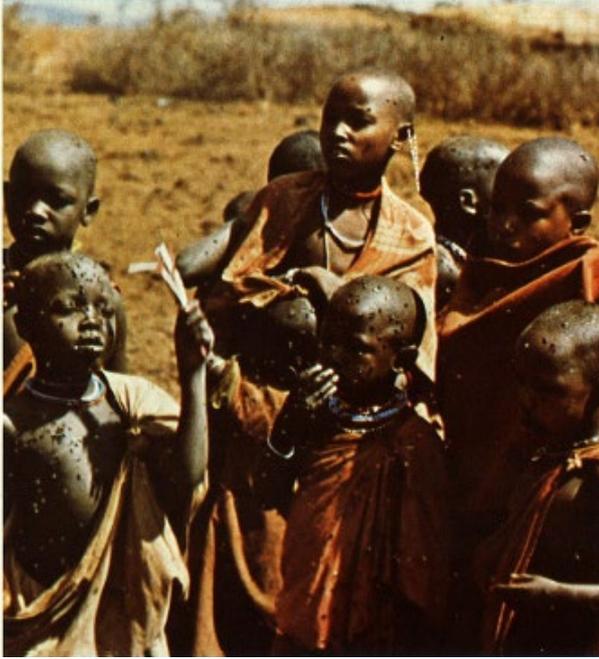
It seems that cloaked in these different rituals of polite greeting are different concepts of identity. In the West the ego is considered the reference point of one's own identity. It is accepted that if the ego is in order, it must also be all right with the family, the work, etc. The Oriental concept offers another balance: When my family is all right, then I am also all right. The family is part of one's own identity and self-worth. When the Massai in Kenya meet one another, they greet each other with the following words: "I hope your cattle are fine!" The cattle are their only livelihood. They take the greatest care and concern for their cattle and from them obtain their three staple foods: meat, milk and blood.

Among the Asmat, a tribe from southwestern New Guinea, there is a mythology of the isolated existence of people. To take a guest into one's family group as one's own child opens a glimpse into the most intimate sphere of life. A certain ritual takes place which symbolically offers the guest protection and safety. The wife approaches the guest and as a sign of friendship, shows him her naked breast and indicates that he should drink from it. Thus the guest is symbolically adopted and the host demonstrates his readiness to accept the guest as his own child and to care for him as such. The meaning of such an adoption ritual is in the elimination of any social tension. Likewise, however, with the adoption, responsibility is also transferred; from now on the guest must look out for the well being of the family. Both the family and their "adopted" guest are aware of their duties and responsibilities toward one another.

These concepts have their pros and cons. In my work it is not a question of proving that one view or the other is correct. We wish to examine the conditions in which these concepts have

developed, describe the consequences which they entail and look for possibilities for moving with them therapeutically toward self-help (cf. Peseschkian 1980).

Life history and way of life



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The Massai live in small settlements which are spread throughout the broad area. Each settlement consists of a certain number of families who pool their resources and help each other with their daily needs. The low huts have provided the families from time immemorial with welcoming and safe accommodations and they can also serve as stalls for young or sick cattle.

The Massais' love for their children is very great. A mother carries her child on her shoulders everywhere. She breastfeeds her child often and continues until the child is two or three years old. The warm, constant physical contact and the tender, motherly care are the first and basic elements of the trust which a child places in his parents. Among the Massai, this also creates the basis for the unconditional devotion to family and clan which will come later. The body (even of the babies) is rubbed with an oaker-colored mixture and with mutton fat which provide protection from the heat and insect

bites. The Massai warriors particularly take special care of the ornamentation of the face and of the body. The motifs are rich in variation and principally come from the imaginations of the individuals. In time of war they have the purpose of presenting a terrifying face to the enemy. During peacetime the decorations serve to make others awestruck, particularly the young ladies.

Under their grandmothers' loving eyes the children play in front of the huts in the settlement.

The firstborn and the last born have the same rights and the same esteem. The Massai make no difference between children of different ages and this is also true for children who weren't born into the family but were adopted. The Massai do not place any particular value on being the biological fathers of their children. Childhood sexuality passes without interruption to puberty. The parents do not try to suppress their children's sexuality, so there is neither castration anxiety nor Oedipus conflict.

*"Ye are all the flowers of one branch and the fruits of one tree"
(from the Baha'i religion)*



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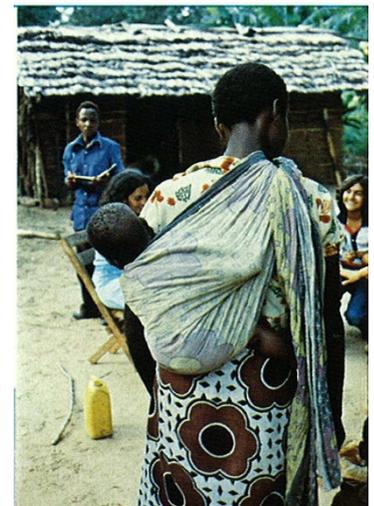
The different types of labor are strictly divided between men and women. The building of the hut is entirely woman's work and she also takes care of any other domestic work. The man manages and cares for the cattle. During breaks they play an African game or fashion colorful, classical jewellery.

The nature of the Massai, their existence as nomads and shepherds, has shaped their political and social structure. This is based on a division of the male population into age groups. With the passing of the years, individuals receive special rights; those of advanced age are afforded the greatest rights and more authority.

When the young Massai enter the first youngest adult age group, they are called "morán" or junior warriors. They are in service to the community. During this period they learn their people's traditions, the hunt, the dances and the singing. Before they become "senior warriors," they can neither marry nor possess cattle.

The haircut is a business that takes place within various ceremonies. In order to be beautiful and accepted, the women must go around with completely shaven heads. The young "morán", on the other hand, bedeck themselves with long hair gathered into plaits which are ornamented with an enhancer made of fat and red clay.

When evening comes to the small settlements, the people and animals return to the fenced enclosure and the entrance is locked. Perhaps it is easy for someone to feel the desire to gather and to give a thought for Enkai, or God, who appears to the Massai as wind, rain and thunder. Perhaps a person might think of the last day, the one on which he or she, like all the others, would be wrapped in an oxen skin, would be brought to the Savanna and be left their under Enkai's free heaven. He/she would be left on the bare earth and not buried, for the ground is holy and must not be defiled by human hands.



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Practical consequences of a transcultural psychotherapy

Yet, observing the Massai raises the question: Does not a modern person of the 20th century also long for a higher culture which is carried forward by partners on a basis of equality, a culture in which all their capacities would be developed? a culture in which we would feel related to all other people on earth, and unity with all life and with the Creator of everything? Does not the modern person wish to recapture the inner life of such people as the

Massai, though coupled with the external life of science and a new ethos?

Learning and understanding

During the last 50 years we human beings have murdered 70 million other human beings, human beings whom we did not even know by name. We have denied the essential difference which raises us above the animals. We have sought to live in their world, which has benefited us as little as if the animals had turned into trees and the trees into

stones. We spend our time concocting elaborate excuses for our behavior, for which we always hold somebody else responsible and from which we believe someone else should rescue us.

Once again we see that nothing in these cultural systems is good in itself. Their qualities are only proven by the effects which they have on the people who live within them and to the extent to which the rules of their game allow for constructive engagement with other socio-cultural systems and with their members (cf. Peseschkian, 1979). So there is much which members of different cultural systems could learn from one another, if they could only learn to understand one another.

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