PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATION AND THE CHOICE OF SPIRITUAL SYMBOLS: A CASE STUDY

Daniel J. Carlat
San Francisco, California

What is the relationship between psychological and spiritual growth? Within the context of psychotherapy, this question becomes particularly relevant when patients report experiences described as "mystical," "spiritual," "religious," or "psychic." While such experiences are often seen as tangential to the specific therapeutic issues being discussed, patients may be moved to make major life decisions as a result. When this is the case, therapists who have been raised and trained in a secular tradition are faced with a quandary. While they may want to work with experiences that are central to their patients' lives in the hopes of making therapeutic progress, they may also feel skeptical of the patients' claims, and feel compelled to reinterpret them in psychological terms. Such reinterpretation, however, may alienate patients who see it as an effort to reduce their spiritual experiences to the "mundane" level of psychopathology.

Gananath Obeyesekere, a psychiatrically-oriented anthropologist (Obeyesekere, 1981, 1985) offers an analytic framework for interpreting such experiences. In his view, spiritual and religious experiences and behaviors can be interpreted in psychological terms, but are not reduced in the process. Instead, he sees the spiritual impulse as being a potentially

---

I am grateful to Nancy Kaltreider, Kathryn Lee, and Carlos Camargo Jr., who read early drafts and offered some very helpful comments.

Identifying characteristics of the case study subject have been altered to provide anonymity.

Copyright © 1989 Transpersonal Institute
valuable mechanism for the working through of psychological conflicts. The first section of this paper outlines Obeyesekere's analytic framework, while the second section makes use of the theory in analyzing the psychological meaning of an American woman's spiritual quest, both in the United States and in Peru.

OBEYESEKERE: THE ECSTATIC PRIESTESSES OF SRI LANKA

Obeyesekere has written about the ways that behaviors which might be diagnosed as psychopathology in the West may instead be labeled expressions of religious piety or fervor in non-industrialized societies. In his book, Medusa's Hair (Obeyesekere, 1981), Obeyesekere is concerned with those Hindus and Buddhists of Sri Lanka who make a yearly pilgrimage to the holy site of Kataragama. In particular, he focuses on the ecstatic priestesses who subscribe to a syncretic religion which combines features of Hinduism and Sinhala Buddhism. Drawing on a series of in-depth interviews and observations, Obeyesekere describes the experiences and motivations that lead six different Sri Lankan women to become ecstatic priestesses.

He discerns a pattern in the development of their priestly powers. Typically, the woman experiences an initial loss of sexual pleasure, generally caused by conflicts with her husband. She soon has visions or dreams of Hindu Gods, followed by a period of sickness, or "pissu," in which she feels that she is possessed by a "preta," a spirit which is a dead relative punishing her for an old wrong. During this period the priestess-aspirant puts herself on a hard ascetic regimen including a near starvation diet. This sickness culminates in an ecstatic experience in which the evil possession is replaced by the God. In dreams and in visions, many heavily-laden with sexual content, the priestess seals a spiritual pact with the God, who "gives" her a number of matted locks of hair (hence the title of Obeyesekere's book). These matted locks soon appear on the aspirant's head and signal to the rest of the world that she is a powerful priestess. She spends the rest of her life communicating with the God and conducting healing rituals for Sri Lankans who come to her.

Obeyesekere interprets the priestess's experience and behaviors as efforts to express and resolve psychological conflicts in socially sanctioned ways. A sexually frustrated woman in Sri Lanka is not permitted to seek another sexual partner; however, she can fulfill her sexual needs by having a spiritual union with a Hindu God, which is a recognized cultural symbol. The matted locks that appear as a result of this ecstatic
union (which are frequently described with words that are reminiscent of the orgasmic experience) are interpreted by Obeyesekere as symbolic of the God's penis. The author interprets the initial possession by the dead relative (the "preta") as reflecting a deep sense of guilt, consequent upon an earlier rift in the family. The "dark night of the soul" (i.e., the sickness) that follows the possession serves psychologically as an expiation, and the woman's reward for undergoing the ordeal is the replacement of the condemning relative with the loving and spiritualizing God.

Thus, Obeyesekere interprets the spiritual path of these aspirants as a way of resolving psychological conflicts that might otherwise find no satisfactory resolution. In a Western society, which lacks a living system of mythology, such problems would be dealt with in the context of psychotherapy—to Obeyesekere's mind less effectively. Why? Because the Western method labels the experiences of guilt and possession "symptoms," thereby tending to pull the stigmatized "patient" away from acceptance by society. In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, these experiences are given cultural meaning, and the priestesses are integrated within their society as a result of the symbolic resolution of their conflicts.

Is one approach actually more efficacious than the other? This question has not been addressed empirically with regard to Obeyesekere's population of priestesses. However, Waxler has shown that the 5-year outcome of first admission schizophrenic patients in Sri Lanka is much better than in industrialized countries (Waxler, 1979). She hypothesizes that cultural factors account for this difference, in particular the tolerance that the family has for mental illness, and the fact that Sinhalese explain mental illness in terms of external causation, thereby shifting blame away from the patient.

Returning to Obeyesekere, we must ask whether his analytic approach entails a "reduction" of spiritual experiences to the level of primary psychological and biological drives. In various sections of Medusa's Hair, Obeyesekere makes it clear that he does not believe in the objective existence of the Gods and spirits reported by his respondents. However, in discussing a priestess's spiritual awakening, he states that "... we cannot speak of a frustrated orgasm now receiving expression, since the biological drive is fully infused with the spiritual; eros is agape" (p. 89). Obeyesekere is saying that there may exist a valid and irreducible spiritual drive in humans, which in many cases will contain and interact with psychological motivations and conflicts. Spirituality exists; it is the choice of spiritual symbols that is influenced by psychological motivations.
CASE STUDY: DIANE

Diane (a pseudonym) is a 29 year-old psychology doctoral student who was introduced to the author at a talk which she gave at her professional school. She subsequently agreed to two tape-recorded interviews at her home, each of which lasted approximately two hours. In addition, short interviews were conducted by phone. These interviews were ethnographic in nature, and were not intended to be psychotherapeutic. However, the border-zone between "interview" and "therapy" is ill-defined, and Diane found that the interviews dovetailed with and enriched her sessions with her psychotherapist.

Diane grew up in a Midwestern city with her parents and her two brothers. Her father is a mathematician and an avowed atheist who, she says, was "totally unavailable emotionally or even physically," a recluse in his own house who would closet himself in the attic to work on math projects, often skipping family meals. He was very critical of his children, yelling at them, for example, when they asked "stupid questions" about their math homework. Of the three siblings, he treated Diane the best, especially when she was younger than 10. With her he would share his "occult side," which came out unpredictably in comments such as "I was a dolphin before this life." Once, he and Diane tried to move a door with their minds. However, for the most part he was as outspoken in his skepticism of psychic phenomena as he was in his disbelief in God.

Diane's mother was warmer than her father, and kept the family together. She had been raised as a strict Greek Orthodox, but she dropped her religion when she married, at her husband's insistence. During Diane's childhood years, similar conflicts occurred and her parents rarely interacted, relating only to the extent that they shared a house. They divorced when Diane was 18.

Diane's relationship with and feelings toward her father are complex. She feels that she was deeply wounded by her relationship with him, and she says that ever since then she has become involved with men who are as emotionally distant and as critical as was her father. She feels a longing to bond with a father who was emotionally available to her only sporadically and when she was very young. The early hint of a bond made the later distancing all the more poignant. But Diane also feels that she served as a parent to her father, summoning up the courage in various instances to scold him and to force him to relate to her and to others on a more human level. She rarely sees him, as he lives alone in his house in the Midwest. By contrast, Diane sees her mother frequently, since she lives only
one block away. She says that she has had periods of feeling
distant toward her mother, but has been getting along well with
her recently.

Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Diane felt as
though she were the "odd one" in the family. "I was always
saying things I wasn't supposed to say, things about people's
true feelings that they didn't want to hear or talk about. They
called me a "junior psychologist." Her sense of being "out of
place" led her to leave home at the age of 17 in search of "the
perfect educational environment." She attended a number of
midwestern universities, eventually graduating with a degree in
psychology. She then moved from the midwest to enroll in a
psychology master's program which blended Eastern and
Western approaches. It was in this cultural milieu that she
finally felt "at home;" she received "total confirmation" of her
personality. "It was the first time I really believed I wasn't
crazy. All those things I used to say that would make people so
annoyed were appreciated here. People would stop me in the
halls and say, 'You're really powerful.'"

After attaining her master's degree, she enrolled in her school's
doctoral program in clinical psychology. Her education has
included courses in shamanistic rituals and drama therapy. She
has become adept at conducting healing rituals combining
music, story-telling, and the use of crystals. In addition, she has
seen a number of patients in her role as a psychotherapist.

<Comment: Diane's central psychological issues involve her
search for parental, especially paternal, reconciliation and
social belonging. At 17, Diane leaves her family with the sense
of being an "outsider." She feels that she has unusual powers,
both in terms of her psychic abilities and her psychological
intuitions; however, her family regards her as "weird" and
"crazy" because of these abilities. She finally finds a sense of
personal validation when she enrolls in her master's program.
Here she is told that she is a "powerful" woman, and she
becomes trained into the role of a psychotherapist/healer.]

In the spring of 1988, she took a three-week vacation in Peru to
visit a friend, Shelly (a pseudonym). Soon after she arrived she
became ill. On the first day of her illness, the man Shelly was
living with, a Peruvian "healer," gave Diane what he called a
"purification," which entailed his emitting a "beam of heat"
from his hand to her stomach. Within a few minutes, Diane
vomited, and for the next four days she was sick with a high
fever. "I was moaning and complaining about being sick, and
the man came up to me and said, 'You be grateful! You're being
purified and cleansed. My toxins are too hard and I can't burn
them out with a fever, but you can.' His words really did something to me. I accepted the illness; I saw it as a way of beginning this humbling thing, this surrendering myself to greater forces:

[Comment: The Peruvian healer who sanctifies her illness is the first in a series of powerful male figures before whom she adopts a humble and submissive stance, which mirrors the quality of many of her childhood interactions with her father. But this is a caring father figure, who recruits Diane into a sacred cultural system. This is emotionally compelling for her because at a relatively early age Diane did feel bonded with her father, who was a fact-oriented atheist. For such a figure to open up to the sacred world and in fact to actively recruit Diane into it is symbolically to bring about a powerful emotional bonding between father and daughter.]

Several days after her illness, Diane and Shelly participated in a shamanistic ritual. The account continues in Diane's words:

I came up to the shaman and he passed a sword over my body and yelled for demons to leave me. Then he said, in Spanish, "Her third eye is open now-she's ready." At that moment my knees went weak. It was like someone had stripped away all my defenses. I felt vulnerable, and I wanted to cry. But the shaman kept telling me to "be strong." He called over another Peruvian, explaining to me that he was a taxi driver whose car had been stolen by a "brujo"--an evil sorcerer. He wanted me to use my psychic powers to find the engine of the car. I closed my eyes and saw an image of the engine buried underneath a kitchen nearby. Then they kept asking me for the address, but I didn't want to tell them... And then I knew what was wrong. There was this hatred between the taxi driver and the brujo. I knew that was the essence of it. So I didn't want to just go and tell them this stuff, this address. No! That's when I went up to the taxi driver and started saying, "This man (the brujo) used to be part of your family!" The taxi driver denied it at first, but later admitted that long ago his daughter had been engaged to the brujo's son, and the son had backed out at the last minute. From this event had grown a hatred between the two fathers, who had once been close friends. All this time, the shaman keeps saying, "What's the address, what's the address?" It was just like the parental stuff that I'd gotten as a kid: "Don't talk about the real stuff, keep it under the rug." So I told Shelly, "Let's get this shaman out of here," and he left.

Just then Shelly says, "The brujo's here." I could feel an evil presence, and the brujo came and inhabited Shelly's face. We encouraged the taxi driver to look into Shelly's face, and to find love for the brujo, I felt this light inside of me, and I knew I had to transmit it to the taxi driver. It wasn't a blissful kind of love though, there was a sense of desperation. It felt like I had to use this
beam of light to break down his emotional barriers. Eventually, I saw the brujo come out of Shelly's body in the form of a little boy who curled up and went to sleep. It was as though we'd gotten to the core of the brujo's needs, which was just to be a little boy and to be nurtured. The taxi driver turned to Shelly and I and said, "You are both angels." I felt blissful, like I was made out of light.

[Comment: One might question the veracity of Diane's claims; yet, whether they are "real" in the objective sense or not, they clearly had profound psychological meaning for her. Again, she is confronted with a powerful male figure who exhorts her to "be strong." As before, she takes the emotional stance of a little girl in front of the powerful father—she feels stripped of her defenses, weak-kneed, and on the verge of tears. But instead of bringing about a reconciliation with this shaman, she adopts the position of power and actually replaces him. Like her parents, the shaman is not interested and indeed is threatened by her efforts to delve into the emotional reality of the situation, that is, the supposed underlying feelings of hatred between the taxi driver and the brujo. Like her mathematician father, the shaman demands the correct "answer"—the address. By getting rid of the shaman, she symbolically exorcises from her own personality the critical and punitive aspects of her father. However, she does not want to do away with him entirely. After the shaman leaves, the focus of paternal symbolism moves now to the taxi driver, whom she is "desperate" to heal. She is successful: the taxi driver's hatred for the brujo begins to melt, with the result that the brujo sheds his persona of evil, emerging in the form of a sleeping and nurtured child. Symbolically, Diane is that child, and the taxi driver is her father whose critical heart has been softened by the ritual. In fact, Diane recounts times in her childhood when she played this sort of "healing" role with her father, encouraging him to treat others more gently. On the spiritual level, Diane's feeling of "bliss" is the appropriate ecstasy of the healer who has successfully brought love into hearts of others; on the psychological level, it is the delight of a daughter whose atheist "father" uses the rhetoric of Christianity to validate her.]

Diane returned to the United States convinced that she had to go back to Peru, this time for several months. Within three weeks, she had quit everything—her school, her psychotherapy practice, and a half-time job. She returned to Peru because she wanted to be "trained." "Sure," she said, "I'm a psychotherapist, but that's not really what I want to do—it's the closest that this society can come to what I really am. I was tired of weekend shamanistic workshops with Mr. X, Y or Z white shaman. I wanted the real thing."
Another factor in her decision to leave was the dissolution of a year-long relationship with a man who, she said, was very much like her father in terms of being emotionally distant and critical of her. The break-up was causing her a great deal of pain, so that for the first four months of her stay in South America, she said, "I processed that relationship. I was traveling with three psychologist friends, and I talked with them a lot to get him out of my system. I had a lot of anger toward him."

Most of this time was spent in Ecuador, and when she arrived in Peru, an entirely different phase of her experience began. She felt that she had worked through her anger and hurt, and she soon met an herbalist who told her about the "Apus' - angelic beings who protect particular mountains, villages, even whole countries and continents. She urged Diane to try to make contact with them. Diane describes the subsequent ritual in the following terms:

I simply went into a trance state, and I started crying and begging for the Apus to come - there was a lot of stuff about humbling myself. I felt a cold wind, and then I could feel a presence, and I sensed an image of a big mountain man with long hair and a beard - it was the Icepeak Apu. But he was very far away, like when you're a kid and you're talking to your dad and he's distant - he's not interested in what you're saying because you've done something to annoy him. I felt such tremendous emotion. It was like I was saying "please, please talk to me." I was sobbing, shaking. I realized I had to prove my sincerity, I had to show that I was humble, that I was sorry, that I didn't know what I was doing when I hadn't paid homage to the Apu's sacred spaces. And then finally I felt this warm kiss on my forehead, I felt this wonderful warm feeling, and I knew that I had really communicated.

[Comment: Following her break-up with her boyfriend, like Obeyesekere's respondents she enters a "dark night of the soul." For four months in Ecuador she is possessed, not by "pretas," but by the anger and hurt resulting from a failed relationship. As with the priestess-aspirants of Sri Lanka, the resolution of these feelings coincides with an ecstatic union with the divine. For the third time, Diane humbles and submits herself before a powerful male figure, this time whom she explicitly likens to her father. The result is a bonding with the Apu, sealed, not with matted locks, but with a kiss on the forehead, a typically fatherly gesture. Again, there are two levels of interpretation here: on the spiritual level, Diane has made the vital communication with the angels, and she is well on her way to becoming a priestess; on the symbolic/ psychological level, she has bonded with her father.]

After this initial communication with the Apus, everything
began to "fall into place" for Diane. She was able to contact shamans who had been impossible to reach. She met a group of Peruvians who held periodic meetings to communicate with the Apus. They invited her to a meeting where, she recalled:

We were all seated at a long table and they called to the Apus, I heard this flapping of wings, and I heard one of the Apus landing on the table. Then they called the Head Apu of Bolivia who came flying down and told me that I was a woman of power and that I had to find the great Apu that lives in the "West." I was supposed to bring this Apu back to South America to work with his South American brothers. They said they were empowering me to do this work. After the session the group told me that it had been prophesied that a powerful North American would come to their group and help them do their work, and they believed that I was that person. It was incredible. It was like being in a fairy tale—these people were saying to me, "We've been waiting for you, you're going to be our powerful priestess."

Diane returned to the United States in order to earn enough money to go back to Peru. It was during this short period that these interviews took place. Her goal is to witness and to document the existence of the Apus. She feels that the Apus have empowered her to do "psychic readings," and this is how she earned money while in the States. "I don't actually see the Apus," she says, "but I feel their presence all the time. I know that they're always near me, always ready to help me."

CONCLUSION

Like the ecstatic priestesses of Sri Lanka, Diane has pursued a spiritual path which has led to dual outcomes: on a psychological level, she has symbolically reconciled herself with her distant father, and on a spiritual level, she has become a priestess invested with a mission and special powers. Diane differs from Obeyesekere's respondents in that she is from a secular society adopting the religious symbols of a culture where mythology is still alive in the popular mind. Why has she adopted these religious symbols and not, for example, the symbols of Christianity? On the basis of her family history, I speculate that for her to have adopted Christianity would have been tantamount symbolically to a rejection of her father, who married on the condition that his wife abandon her Greek Orthodox religion. Thus, it would have been difficult for Diane to mediate a symbolic rapprochement with her father within the context of Christianity. Peruvian shamanistic symbolism attracted Diane because it includes a tradition of powerful and exhorting male figures upon which she could readily project her feelings toward her father, while at the same time the tradition...
lacked the negative connotations of Christianity within her family.

A more significant factor in her choice of Peruvian symbolism may have been that these symbols were set in a social context, like the one described by Obeyesekere in Sri Lanka, that allowed and encouraged the personal experience of cultural symbols. Thus Diane was able to "own" the symbols and give them her own private and psychodynamic meanings, something that would have been more difficult to do within the context of a religion with more conventionalized symbols.

What, then, have we learned about the relationship between spiritual and psychological growth? In both the cases of Diane and the ecstatic priestesses of Sri Lanka, spiritual and psychological growth interact intimately with one another. We've seen that psychological conflicts and the ensuing need to resolve such conflicts can act as a motivator for the individual to go on a spiritual quest. Surely this is not the only such motivator; specific sociocultural factors and perhaps genuine spiritual callings also play a role, especially in determining the spiritual path chosen. Following Obeyesekere, I have withheld judgment on this issue of whether or not Diane had a genuine spiritual calling, and have interpreted her experiences psychologically in order to explore what motivated her to express her spirituality via the symbolism of a country and a culture that was alien to her. Diane's narrative illustrates that when an individual is allowed to elaborate her spiritual experiences without encountering a skeptical response, she may develop insight into the psychological meaning of her quest. The result is that her sense of spiritual purpose is not threatened, while at the same time (as was true for Diane) she may become receptive to psychodynamic interpretations of her experiences. Within the context of psychotherapy, this would presumably enhance the patient's ability to integrate spiritual experiences with her psychological life.

REFERENCES

