



Review Paper

A sociological account of pain, suffering and death: individual and social experience

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Abstract

The social aspect of pain can be comprehended from the way society interprets and responds to the phenomenon of pain. Hence, pain can be examined in relation to death, which is inclusive of the social nature of death and consequent response of the living to the loss of the individual. The notion of death can also be examined in the context of symbolic death, as illustrated in the analysis of initiation rituals. The conversion of the initiand, as represented in terms of the symbolic death and rebirth, by the society reflects the subservience of the individual to the power of the collective. The ethnographic studies address the issue of the nature of authority exercised by the society and its relation to the individual experience of pain and suffering.

Keywords: Pain, mourning, suffering, symbolic death, initiand, stigma.

Introduction

An individual's experience of pain is mediated by social discourse. An attempt has been made here to examine the concept of pain in the context of death. At one level death is essentially a phenomenon which profoundly concerns the individual. Yet no society treats death as if it were the sole concern of the individual. It becomes a matter of concern for the whole community. Thus, I shall try to examine the forms through which the pain borne by the individual, at the loss of a loved person becomes collective in nature. The problem of death and renewal at the collective level has been described thus:

From the cradle to the grave, human existence has seemed to be in a state of flux, 'never continuing in one stay', a dying to be born again, exemplified in the decay and regeneration in nature. This has called forth a series of rites de passage at the critical junctions to obtain a fresh outpouring of life and power"¹.

From this consideration of the response of the society to the painful experience of the loss of an individual, I will then examine the notion of pain as associated with the phenomenon of symbolic death, as exemplified by 'initiation rites'. Thus the second section of this paper pertains to the manner in which the individual bears the pain of transition from childhood to an adult state. Does this imply the lack of autonomy of the individual and his complete submission before the society? In other words, is it possible for the individual to mediate his personal experience of pain without being totally absorbed by the social structure? I have attempted to examine this question in the last section with the help of three ethnographic sociological texts.

The Social Nature of Death

The social nature of death becomes most apparent in the distinction between 'natural' and 'social' death which is reflected in societal practices. For instance, a person, who is seriously ill, old or weak, may be considered 'dead' (mate) among the Eddystone Islanders, as studied by Rivers². It is not the physiological functioning of the individual which provides the basis for declaring him dead, but his social position in fact the burial preparations may begin even when the person is capable of making movements or vocalising. Another example, which can be cited, is of the suicides of Roman senators who preferred death to exile from political life, which can be seen as a way of harmonising social and physical death. One of the most interesting and yet puzzling example of social death preceding the physiological death of an individual is that of 'voodoo' death. It entails the rejection of a person, believed to be a victim of sorcery or one who has transgressed against an important taboo. The victim reportedly dies within a period of forty-eight hours after developing symptoms like nausea, lack of appetite and the like, as described by Eastwell³.

It would be clear from these examples that the links between the individual and the collective are manifold and complex. Every community has evolved customs for the disposal of the dead. These do not pose a serious challenge to the conceptualization of the relation between the individual and the collective, for their social character is clear and above dispute. What is interesting for the study of pain is that the death of an individual may cause intense pain to the affected kin and other members of the community. Does the response of the living to their loss, and death in general, reflect a customary response of the mourner, or

does the society allow the individually of the experiences to be retained? How can we capture the difference?

A description of some of the ethnographic accounts may prove useful in seeking an answer to this question. One such example is from the Australian aborigines which so impressed. 'Here is a scene', he said, which Spencer and Gillen witnessed among the Warramunga,

"...some of the women who had come from every direction, were lying prostrate on the body, while others were standing or kneeling around, digging the sharp ends of yam sticks into the crown of their heads, from which the blood streamed continuous all ... To one side, three men of the Thapungarti to class, who still wore their ceremonials decorations, sat down wailing loudly, with their backs towards the dying man, and in a minutes or two another and brandishing a stone knife. Reaching the camp, he suddenly gashed both thighs deeply, cutting right across the muscle, and unable to stand, fell down into the middle of the group, from which he was dragged out after a time by three female relatives who immediately applied their mouths to the gaping wounds while he lay exhausted. The man did not actually die until late in the evening. As soon as he had given up his last breath, the same scene was re-enacted. Only this time the wailing was still louder, and men and women, seized by veritable frenzy, were rushing about cutting themselves with knives and sharp pointed sticks the women battering one another's heads with fighting clubs, no one attempting to ward off either cuts or blows..."⁴.

Let us now take another example of the Kiwai Papuans of British New Guinea as studied by Landtman⁵. Among the Kiwai Papuans, immediately after a death has occurred in a village, the wail usual on such occasions is started by those present, in the form of loud sorrowful sounds to inform the whole village. The wailing is interrupted by sobs and tears of the singers. Sometimes the mourners while wailing rock their bodies to and fro, extend and draw in their legs or even roll about on the ground. It also happens that they let themselves intentionally fall from the verandah outside the 'gable' door or beat themselves with hand or stick. These violent signs or grief and pain are particularly expressed at the murder of some near friend. At the death of their first born child, the parents sometimes cut off their ear lobes, throwing them away in water or concealing them in the ground. At times the lobes are placed on the dead child and buried under it. The blood flowing from the wounds is occasionally allowed to drop on the dead body with their tears.

A third example may be taken of the Berwan of Borneo as studied by Metcalfe⁶. In this case the death is made known to the community by beating of the largest type of gong found in the long house, the variety called 'padung'. The pattern of striking that is used to announce a death (tucho) consists of repeated clusters of four to eight blows, persons of high status receiving more than humbler folk. Thus when a middle aged woman, UtanNir died, a wail arose from the women sitting

nearby the deceased. Their wailing took a formalized form 'beginning on a high note and descending the scale in a jerky staccato fashion until they ran out of breath'. Some knelt with their long hair thrown forward to cover their faces, while others were more restrained in their behaviour. Their wailing at time took a form of rebuke addressed to the dead women: "Why die at this moment when we are not ready to part with you?"⁶.

It would be clear from these examples that forms of expressing grief are highly formalized. Further it is not only the immediate kin who seem to be affected by grief but also distant kin of the dead person, the latter expressing their pain in the form of laments; in some societies they go to the extent of self-mutilation or infliction of injury. Moreover, the expression of pain appears not to be spontaneous but rather more formalised as in the case of ritualistic weeping seen in the Berwan funerary rituals. Does that imply that such behaviour is to be interpreted merely as customary obligation, rather than being a response to the pain and grief experienced by the members of a community? Durkheim⁴ is unequivocal on the point:

"Mourning is not a natural movement of private feelings wounded by cruel loss: it is a duty imposed by the group. One weeps, not simply because he is sad, but because he is forced to weep. It is a ritual attitude which he is forced to adopt out of respect for customs but which is, in large measure, independent of his affective state"⁴.

Thus for Durkheim⁴ mourning far from being an expression of grief may be simply a response to custom. He adds further, that at the occurrence of death, the society morally pressurizes its constituent members to harmonize their sentiments with the situation. Thus it is not only the real kin of the deceased who weep, lament and undergo painful mutilations themselves but are also joined by other members of the community.

Before I proceed further, it may be useful to introduce a distinction between 'bereavement' 'grief' and 'mourning', as these terms are used interchangeably in every day usage. The term 'bereavement' denotes the objective situation of an individual who has recently experienced the loss of someone significant through someone's death. 'Grief' is the emotional (affective) response to the loss which includes a number of psychological and somatic reactions. 'Mourning' refers to the act expressive of grief. These acts are shaped by the mourning practices of a society or cultural group which seems as guidelines for how bereaved persons are expected to behave, as explained by Stroebe⁷. Let us now consider the notion of pain as imbued in the social processes of mourning.

The Social Processes of Mourning

Thus mourning is the process through which grief and pain at the loss of the deceased is faced and if ultimately resolved over a period of time. It is also evident that mourning refers to acts performed by mourners at the time of death, which are

considered appropriate by the society. It then becomes necessary to explore the relationship between culture and grief and consequently of pain. Unfortunately in the work of anthropologists, such as Durkheim, Huntington⁸, Metcalfe and Radcliffe Brown⁹, Hertz¹⁰, the emphasis is on public rituals and mourning customs. The question of how such customs relate to emotion is not posed in their work.

A brief review of the theory of emotion seems important at this stage to help us in the understanding of grief and pain experienced by the individual. Psychologists who propound theories of emotion such as James¹¹, Averill¹² and Hochschild¹³ disagree among themselves on to the question as to whether emotional experience is merely a reflection of cultural norms or is patterned by bodily reactions accompanying or following a stressful event.

It may be best for our purposes to regard grief as a complex syndrome of emotional responses, which is constituted by social norms as well as bodily reactions. Thus, for instance, if a comparison is made between two Muslim communities, one from Cairo in Egypt and the other from Bali in Indonesia, we find significant variations in the display of grief.

The death of a child, in Cairo, results in intense heart rending grieving. The close family members cry as if 'pouring' their hearts out. The women scream, yell, beat their breasts and collapse in each other's arms. Such display of behaviour may continue for weeks or even months, punctuated by periods in which they sit speechless or listless. In contrast, when a child dies, in Bali, a different response is evoked. The mourners attempt to restrain their tears. Instead we find a montage of laughter, joking and cheerfulness mingled with mutely expressed sadness and an effort to maintain a calm composure.

In each community the significant others are under a social obligation to participate in the mourning process in different ways, but each way is considered appropriate for assuaging the grief of the bereaved. Neighbours and relatives congregate in the house of the bereaved, in Cairo, where apart from the lamentful shrieks; they kiss and hug the bereaved, listening to the grief stricken family members. It is believed that the pain must be expressed in order to be assuaged. In contrast, the Balinese Muslims believe that pain can only be counteracted by laughter. Underlying these contrasting views are different conceptions of the emotional stability of the people confronted with such a loss and stressful situation.

It would be clear from this description, that social norms and values govern the manner in which grief is expressed and thus transform it from an individual experience to an experience that can be shared by the collective. However, the customary control over mourning cannot be understood simply by stating that death is social fact or that mourning is collective process. It also indicates the dominance of the collective over the individual.

In other words the forms of mourning not only determine how grief will be expressed say through expressions of laughter or crying but also when it can be expressed. Thus among the Andaman Islanders, the person "sits down and wails and howls and the tears stream down his or her face" as discussed by Radcliffe Brown⁹. Such display, however, is permitted only at specific times after death. For instance, at the end of the period of mourning there is communal weeping by friends and mourners who have not earlier participated in the morning. Similarly, among Bara of Madagascar, wailing is permitted on only two occasions; first, while the body is lying in the women's hut before burial and second, before the secondary burial of the exhumed bodies Huntington and Metcalfe⁸. From these examples it is clear that the manner in which pain is manifested in the mourning process is determined by the society. There is also division of labour, in the mourning rituals, based on the criteria of sex. Among Merina of Central Madagascar, for instance, the funerary ceremony has two separate and distinct movements, as discussed by Parry¹⁴. There is no specific burial site for the corpse. The women act as chief mourners who express their pain and grief in various forms such as weeping or mild mutilating attempts like hitting their body. The second funerary ritual called the 'famidihana' entails the exhumation of totally decomposed dry body. The latter is removed from the original site of burial and carried over the shoulders of women who are accompanied by men. The body is finally placed in the ancestral tomb by men, as the women's entry in the tomb is prohibited.

Similarly in the African community which is patrilineal in character, it is the women who weep and lament, their wailing being long and loud, with a culturally distinctive melodic and rhythmic style, which is maintained even when they are sobbing. Hence the wailing is conventionalized in form. This does not imply that men do not feel sorrow or that pain experienced by women is more intense than men. What is evident is that the expressive functions are accorded to women while men deal with other aspects of the funeral.

The forms of mourning may vary across culture, so do the phases of grief which lack a universal character. In some societies, the period of mourning is abbreviated while in others it may extend to over a year. Thus among the Navajo the prescribed mourning period is only for four days, whereas among the Maya Indians of Mesoamerica the period for mourning is extensive, as seen in Steele¹⁵. Other societies, however, do not regard death as instantaneous. They construct an 'intermediary' period when the dead person belongs to the liminal period of being neither alive nor dead. The end of this intermediary period is marked by a 'great feast' during which the remains of the deceased are recovered, ritually processed and moved to a new location, as explained by Hertz. Among the Merina also, it is only the secondary funeral ceremony that marks the end of the mourning which is discussed by Parry. However the impact of these abbreviated versus prolonged periods of mourning, prescribed by society on the affected

individuals, has not been examined by any of the anthropologists. We cannot therefore, say how societal rhythm correspond to or contrast with individual rhythm in mourning. In the above discussion it is apparent that the process of mourning is socially determined. What happens when the society itself acts as an agent of pain? That is to say, how does this social infliction of pain affect the individual pain experience? I would like to deal with this question in the next section with reference to 'initiation' rites.

The Imagining of Death: The Initiation Rituals

The anthropological literature testifies to wide variations in customary forms of mourning, but does not pose the problem of how collective expressions of grief relate to the personal experience of death. In this section, I now pose the problem in a different way. How does society give images to the idea of death? Most societies have well developed systems of ideas about the fate of the dead person, the responsibilities of the living towards the dead, as also of other worldly space which constitute the destination of a dead experience of pain. These however, can tell us little about the experience of pain, although notions of hell and purgatory do deal with pain as punishment. It has therefore, seemed strategically important to locate a domain of ritual, within which a person is seen to undergo symbolic death and rebirth.

Due to the important place which is assigned to pain in this process of symbolic death and rebirth, the initiation rituals of a society can give us a fair understanding of how pain is imposed by society on the individual to make one internalize the idea of death. As Van Gennep¹⁶ had noted the idea of symbolic death holds an important place in initiation rituals but what needs to be added here, is an examination of place of pain in bringing about the transition from childhood to adult status.

An examination of the literature on initiation ritual shows that initiation ceremonies constitute a painful experience for the initiand. This can be illustrated with the help of some examples. Reik¹⁷ refers to Frazer's study of Karesan Islanders, where the initiation rituals entail the placing of the novice's head against a tree, *kakar*, full of black ants, so that the boy's neck is bitten by these ants. Among the Maskoke, the intiand may be whipped by the chief, until his hands become powerless, as discussed by Reik. The youth among the Mandan Indians is not allowed to eat or sleep for four days. Moreover a knife with a saw edge is thrust through his arm, forearm, thigh, calves, chest and shoulders. Finally pointed pieces of wood are inserted in his wounds. The ritual requires the imposition of excruciating pain, for the boy is made to swing on a rope, one end of which is tied to the pieces of wood in the chest or shoulders of the initiand. It is reported that the initiand often loses consciousness and hangs motionless.

A similar example may be taken of the Nuer as studied by Evans-Pritchard¹⁸. Among the Nuers, all males are initiated

from boyhood to manhood by a very severe operation, *gar* performed by the elders. The operation consists in cutting the brows to the bone, with a small knife, in six long cuts from ear to ear. The scars remain for life. The riskiness of the operation is well understood by the Nuer, for the father's consent is necessary for the operation. Furthermore, several boys are initiated simultaneously, as it is believed that for a single boy it may prove to be a lonely and fatal experience. After the operation, the boys remain for some time in partial seclusion and under stringent taboos, meant to protect them.

One may imagine that the imposition of such excruciating pain is reserved for the men in order to initiate them into the masculine values of heroism and stoicism in the face of pain. However, we find that the female initiation ceremonies, as illustrated, can be equally painful. Among the Gogo of Central Tanzania, for instance, the prepubertal ceremony for girls consists of the operation of 'clitoridectomy' and operation performed by older women who also initiate them into secrets of womanhood as discussed by Rigby, 1967¹⁹. The girls are taken into the bush by the women operations and their helpers, but unlike the initiation of boys, the girls do not live together in a camp. After the operation, they are returned immediately to their homesteads. They then undergo seclusion in their mothers *Kugati* or inside room. Men are permitted to see them after they are cured and ritually bathed. Yet the girl is not considered 'marriageable' till the onset of menstruation whereby she is secluded in her mother's house for a period ranging from two to four weeks.

Thus we find a difference between the male and female rituals, to the extent that the former inhabit a public domain during the period of initiation and their collective solidarity is reinforced. For the girls, what is emphasized is the private nature of the pain and instead of sharing this with other girls, each initiand is returned to the mother's hut to undergo seclusion in isolation. However, these painful rites proclaim the social recognition of the initiand. It seems that through the imposition of pain, society 'disciplines' the child into adulthood: the permanent marks of the painful experience on the body serving as a painful reminder through life of where the authority lies. Yet some differences between the genders also come to the surface, but let us look at the similarities in the over-whelming experience of initiand, as humiliation to be suffered in these rites. Among the Toda of Nilgiri Hills 'ritual defloration' of the girl by the elderly men of the community, is the main feature of the initiation rites. Thus her sexuality is shown to be under the control of society. Young girls are artificially deflowered by means of wooden instruments. The act is performed by old women in the course of the puberty ceremonies. The practice of female 'circumcision' by trimming the lesser labia and clitoris is very wide spread in Africa. A very obscure form of mutilation is the Australian subincision practice of, at the age of puberty, the cutting of the lower wall of urethra, as explained by Bhattacharya.

All these actions directed towards the mutilation of the vagina not only impose pain but also instill the idea that the vagina

instead of being experienced as an organ of pleasure it to be experienced as a site of pain. Thus adult sexuality for women is itself located in pain. Moreover, the imposition of pain and humiliation is encountered for the male initiands also as a price for adulthood. For example, among the Iatmul of New Guinea, the boys are 'bullied' in drinking filthy water as discussed by Bateson²⁰. A bone is suddenly jabbed against their gums making them bleed. After the infliction of wounds on the young boys, their partly healed backs are scrubbed and splashed with icy cold water, until they whimper with cold and misery. In the first week of seclusion, the boys are subjected to various painful tricks of this kind. In fact the degree of infliction of such painful tricks becomes a matter of competition among the elderly men of different moities. It is interesting to note that, during the early period of seclusion, the novices are spoken as 'wives' of the initiators whose penis they are made to handle. This not only serves to impose humiliating passivity on the boys but also teaching them by analogy, the place of the male sex as the one which impose humiliation on the female sex through sexual intercourse.

The initiation rites, thus, symbolise the authority of the collective as represented by the initiators (elderly man or women), as a powerful force which transforms the social status of the individual. Turner²¹ notes that, "This is death to the indistinct and amorphous state of childhood in order to be born into masculinity and personality". Yet he does not comment on how the rebirth is also acceptance of one's mutilated and humiliated state in relation to the powerful collective. From the above discussion, two themes appear clearly in the initiation rituals in relation to the problem of pain. First, initiation is modelled on death and rebirth and it is considered necessary that the initiand experiences himself or herself as a mutilated and humiliated person, although this humiliation is sublimated by subsequent symbols of rebirth and the rewards of being admitted to adult society. Secondly, society does not permit arbitrary imposition of pain. It specifies the form in which pain is to inflicted; it may specify the elders, who inflict the pain, example father, grandmother and the like, further there is a limitation in terms of time and space within which the pain is inflicted. Thus it is clear that these rites serve to establish the authority of the society and to secure the subordination of the initiand. What remains unclear to me, however, is why this subordination has to be established through painful and humiliating experiences?

It seems to me, that the pain inflicted and experienced signifies more than being a structural entity within an ordeal. In other words, it is not merely a signifier in a formal discourse of life and death. The central place accorded to pain in these rituals, points to the fact that the authority of the collective over the individual cannot be established without violence to the individual. Following Durkheim, the infliction of pain can be seen as necessary, and at least for Durkheim, in the emergence of a moral individual.

In other word, the cutting, biting, incising and other forms of torture not only represent the mutilated body but also the mutilated autonomy of the individual. The initiation into society is transferred into an unforgettable experience so that the awareness of being a matured social individual and the awareness of having borne pain becomes inseparable. To sum up, the rituals pertaining to death and the customary regulation of mourning serve to strengthen group solidarity. They reflect social values and reassert the broken link between life and death. But above all, they reflect the triumph of collectivity over the individual. The death of an individual, who is both a biological and social being, is experienced as the death of member of a community.

Thus, individual death is seen to threaten the existence of society and as for Durkheim, it tantamount to sacrilege. The exceptional violence with which society reacts, not only expresses its pain and loss, but also serves as an indicator of its aliveness and vitality and the need to maintain the continuity of the society Durkheim. From the above discussion it is apparent that whereas in death rituals and in customary forms of mourning, we see how the individual experience of grief relates, but tangentially, to the collective rhythms with which society mourns the loss of a member; in the initiation rituals, we see the society as the active agent of pain. By imposing pain upon the individual through collective rituals, it establishes its authority over the individual. Thus both these rituals show that the relation between individual experience and societal representation of such phenomenon as grief or pain, is indeed complex.

The availability of cultural forms may help the individual to express private emotions but equally the latter are given shape by the former. Above all, it seems that the individual experience himself as a member of society. To be a moral individual, in Durkheimian⁴ terms is also clearly to accept the limitations of individual existence, to acknowledge one's collective existence, and to subordinate oneself to society. This at least is the picture that emerges from the study of mourning rituals and initiation rituals. In the next section I will examine the question of the implications of the religious world view for individual creativity. That is to say, can an individual transform the personal experience of pain and suffering without becoming completely absorbed and subordinated to the collective?

The Society and the Individual experience of pain

In the last section I posed the question: what are the ways in which the individual may experience pain and suffering without being totally absorbed into the collective definitions of these experiences? Instead of pursuing the question in abstract and general terms, I would like to address the issues through the comparison of three different ethnographic contexts. These are: The Tallensi of West Africa studied by Fortes²², the female ascetics of Sri Lanka studied by Obeyesekere²³ and the people with a noticeable handicap, the stigmatized studied by Goffman²⁴.

The Tallensi of West Africa

Fortes uses the opposition between the story of Oedipus and Job to contrast Tale ideas about predetermined destiny and the struggle to sustain moral obligations. Suffering, then, is defined by them as the experience of the individual who is caught between the opposite pull; one who tries to maintain the moral axioms of filial piety but is constantly thwarted by destiny in maintaining these moral norms. The Tallensi are a patrilineal community where jural authority is vested in the hands of the father. The parents 'rights' over their offspring are absolute in nature, though the mother rights are described by Fortes as moral rather than jural in character. The individual's rights and duties are ascriptive, based on the principle of descent and kinship. A man lacks jural independence and rights to sacrifice to his ancestors during the life time of his father.

The Tale social structure emphasizes the dependence of children on their parents. The concept of filial piety forms an integral part of social system. The supreme act of filial piety owned by the sons is the performance of mortuary and funeral ceremonies for the parents. The latter play a vital role in regulating the behaviour of the individual. Although the lineage cult by definition is the cult of patrilineal, male ancestors, the spirits of maternal ancestors also play an important role in an individual's life.

At the first level, a person may be said to be defined primarily through the roles he occupies in society. Yet the Tale recognizes that individuals spill out of their roles. They may have wishes or desires that cannot be encapsulated within roles. The conceptual device that the Tallensi have for representing their wishes, is the idea of 'prenatal destiny'. It is said, that before a child is born he is in heaven, where he expresses his true desires that are to guide his earthly life. For instance he may have expressed desires regarding parent's spouse and children, which for the Tallensi account for individual variations in their relations. The good destiny is concretely represented through a shrine, Yin, which moves along the life course of a man from his mother's place to his wife's quarters and finally to his father's place where it is placed outside the house. The good prenatal destiny of man reveals itself, through a series of misfortunes or coincidences at critical junctures of his life, say when a youth falls seriously ill or kills a big game. For example, a 16-years-old youth, Zañ, while herding his father's cattle spotted a crocodile in the pool. He promptly shot it, took it home where the crocodile was eaten by the elders. His father then consulted a diviner, who revealed that the incident was a manifestation of Zañ's Destiny. It was, the latter's grandparents who were manifesting themselves in the crocodile and the arrow that had killed it. They were Zañ's Destiny ancestors. A shrine was then set up by Zañ to represent them.

Associated with prenatal destiny is the concept of 'spirit guardian'. After a child is born his father ascertains through a diviner which of his ancestors desire to keep this child as its

ward. The spirit guardian is seen as a protector of the self-interests of the child. Though all categories of ancestors can and do elect to be the spirit guardian of a man's children, his Destiny ancestors predominate amongst them. The Destiny ancestors may impose several taboos on the individual. For instance the ancestors may forbid their wards from wearing cloth garments or from cutting their hair and the like. These taboos are scrupulously observed by the concerned individual as disobedience may lead to misfortune, sickness or even death of the spouse or the child. An individual's destiny-then comprises of a unique configuration of ancestors who have of their own accord elected to exercise surveillance over his life cycle. The individual is personally accounted to these ancestors.

Thus the uniqueness of the life course of the individual is determined by the action of prenatal wishes or of the spirit guardian. The individual may receive help at critical junctures, if the spirit guardians are pleased. However when the individual fails at critical junctures, it is explained as a manifestation of the anger of ancestors or through the notion of 'evil' prenatal destiny. When a man is the victim of 'evil' prenatal destiny, the symptom is usually failure through some infirmity to marry or to make a livelihood. However, the pain and suffering related to evil prenatal wishes of the individual can be controlled to some extent. This is feasible by the enactment of ritual procedures in course of which appeal is made to the ancestors for exorcising the influence of the evil prenatal destiny.

After consulting a diviner, the Tallensi communicate with their ancestors through sacrifice, libation and prayers. The diviners reveal the configuration of ancestors involved in the concerned situation. Moreover, the diviners may be consulted by and on behalf of both individual and group times of family crisis like childbirth, sickness or death or at public crisis like drought, seasonal and ceremonial turning points like sowing and harvesting period. For example, the diviners may be consulted when a woman fails to bear children. The barrenness of a woman is a matter of concern for her husband's lineage as well her natal kin. A woman is expected to be 'naturally' productive. In cases where she is unable to fulfil her procreative role, this is attributed to her prenatal wishes, as confirmed by the diviners. Her father's lineage may then perform rites of exorcism at her married home. The appeal to the ancestors testifies their authority in relation to the individual. The ancestors are omnipotent, whose power and influence is manifested in the unforeseeable occurrences which upset the normal routine of the individual. In this relationship of man with his ancestors, morality in the sense of righteous conduct does not count. Complete obedience and service is demanded from the individual but this does not ensure the good will of the ancestors. The ancestors are easily offended and their anger is made known to the individual through misfortunes or accidents.

It is clear from the above discussion, that the society acknowledges the individual experience of pain through the concept of prenatal destiny. The individual is held responsible

for the misfortune that befalls on him, as it is his wishes which are being expressed in the accidents or similar painful experiences. Moreover the notion of evil prenatal destiny serves to explain the failure of the individual to fulfil basic social roles like those of the mother, wife and the like. Its victims are individuals who occupy a marginal position in the society. That is to say, the afflicted individuals are those who have failed to develop as mature social beings. The individual thus bears the pain of negation of the social relationships. The society endeavours to integrate the individual through the category of ancestors. The action of the ancestors cannot be gauged with reference to a particular set of values. Yet the ancestors are believed to be representing the moral axioms of the society. In other words the ancestors mediate the authority of the society.

Yet a certain inconsistency in Tale thought can be observed. At one level the individual is held responsible for the bearing of his pain. At the same time the ancestor or the destiny is held to be the ultimate source of suffering or pain inflicted on the individual. The predetermined nature of painful events, which evoke a sense of helplessness in the individual, is transformed into an experience controlled by the society, as represented by the ancestors. The submission of the individual to the ancestors symbolises his encapsulation in the Tale social order. Thus the individual perception of pain and painful experience is in conformity with the interpretation of that experience by the society. As a contrast to Fortes' conclusion about the social location of suffering and pain, one can consider Obeyesekere's²³ discussion of six female and one male ascetic of Sri Lanka. The central theme of Medusa's hair is that certain societal symbols, such as matted hair, have deep personal significance in the life of the individual. In other words, the stressful events in the life of the individual can be given meaning, when they can be expressed or communicated in a collectively understood idiom.

Medusa's hair

At times certain experiences are so painful and traumatic, though deeply embedded in the psyche of the individual that it becomes imperative for him to manifest his suffering and pain in terms of symbols laden with cultural meanings. The symbol of 'matted hair' provides such an example where its usage can be linked with painful emotional experiences of the individual, as seen in the cases of six female and one male ascetics, studied by Obeyesekere at Kataragama, a place of religious pilgrimage at Sri Lanka. It is interesting to note that the life histories of the seven ascetic reveal stressful events or experiences who bear a mark of similarity to a certain extent in. all would like to cite in brief two of the life histories of the female ascetics to illustrate this point.

The first case is of Karunavati Naniyo, a fifty-two year old woman, was brought up by her mother and grandmother childhood. Her elopement with her prospective brother-in-law caused great distress to her mother. "That jealousy, that rage pursued me after her death"²³. Her marriage she admitted was a

disaster. Her mother expired after Karunavati had spent 7-10 years of unsatisfactory married life, though the latter was unaware of her mother's death at that time. After some time she began to experience fits of possession, which she believed were caused by two benevolent ancestors, namely, her grandmother and mother respectively. She obtained her seven matted locks, as she believes to be, from Lord Huniyan, during her trip to the sacred mountain of Soma. She had made this trip as she wanted to renounce sexual relations with her husband. The second case refers to a 45 year old woman, Premavati Vitarana, who was adopted by her mother's brother at the age of eight. She suffered from occasional fainting spells which the exorcists claim to be the result of maleficent influence of Kalu Kumara, the Black Prince of Sinhala mythology who is believed to possess women erotically. At the age of twenty two she married an orderly, a love match disapproved by her parents, who formally disowned her. Her relationship with her husband was emotionally unsatisfactory. She had five children. She received her gift of 'arude' (divine possession) only after the birth of her last child, whereby she claimed to be possessed by her dead uncle.

In all the seven cases of ascetics, considered by Obeyesekere²³, a similarity in the pattern of their life events can be discerned. For instance, there is a defiance of parental authority, followed by entry into the married state. This is exemplified by Karunavati's case, as she left her mother and had eloped to get married. The marriage is not emotionally or at times sexually satisfactory, perhaps because of the early defiance of the parents. This is followed by possession of the parents or the concerned close relatives who had been previously defied or rejected by these ascetics, and who now serve as mediators between God and human being. An idealized relationship is thus established with the divine altar, which finally results in the gift of *arude* for the ascetic.

In all these cases, it is interesting to note the predominant theme of filial piety as signified by the attachment of Karunavati to her mother or of Premavati to her uncle. Both of them were unable to attend the funerals of their mother and uncle respectively. This feeling of guilt is intensified by their feeling of betrayal. Karunavati had married against the wishes of her mother, while Premavati had left her uncle's house in a fit of anger, the cause being the rivalry with her uncle's daughter. Her uncle pleaded with her to stay and died three months after her departure. Her feeling of guilt becomes conspicuous in statements like "My uncle died but I could not see his corpse with my own eyes... He died because of his pain at my departure... Why I left him in anger... My (step) father told me later that he died while talking about me..."²³.

Hence the individual suffering or pain is related to the pain caused by the individual to another person close to him like the mother, uncle or as the case may be. The pain experienced by the individual seems to be a kind of a self-punishment for the betrayal of the norm of filial piety. Thus the experience of the ascetics can be reduced to a single sequence of events. In the

initial traumatic and painful experience for the individual the spirit pursues the living persons for a certain period of time, its extent varying from days to months. Karunavati initially interpreted her attacks as revenge by her mother who wanted to take her as a human sacrifice. Symptoms like loss of appetite are of common occurrence in such experiences. In the case of Premavati, after the birth of her youngest child she began to suffer pain of mind and body. She was constantly possessed by the spirit of her dead uncle. She experienced fainting spells, revulsion for food and lost weight. Karunavati had a similar experience of the initial period of pain and suffering. This period is followed by a period of recovery, during which the dead spirit, which tormented her earlier, becomes a protector or guardian who act as an intermediary between the individual and god.

Although Obeyesekere places great emphasis on the lack of sexual satisfaction in the lives of these ascetics his theory of sexuality has been challenged. What is apparent from his discussion is that suffering is seen as a kind of expiation of the guilt experienced by the individual. In other words, activities like fire walking or hook hanging and the resultant pain borne by the individuals is a means of self punishment for causing pain and distress to the near ones and thus for re-establishing the former relationship based on trust.

The individual may employ culturally constructed categories of dreams, symptoms and visions to resolve this individual psychic conflict and pain. Thus, pain is not only experienced but is made apparent to the society by means of symptoms which are culturally recognized. For example the ascetic may legitimise his or her experience with the aid of cultural concepts like dreams or vision, which are accepted by the society. What remains unclear is the nature of pain experience. Is this experience as painless for the ascetics as they claim it to be?

The ascetics while performing acts like rolling on the burning sand, or piercing the body or even descent into the grave, do not seem to experience these activities as painful. Rather, it is claimed that they allow the ascetic to transcend pain encountered in other cultures. For instance, Sirima Hettiar-Acci, a thirty seven year old woman while relating her fire-walking and hook-hanging states:

“...By fire walking my *bhakti* for the God is increased. I can have peace inside me even though I have trouble, at home. I experience pleasure, *Vinoda*, here; my mind is calm, I feel no pain; ... I felt a slight pain, while I was being pierced with the hooks, but none while I was hanging from the tree. I saw my mother faint- nothing else. I had no thought, no sense of anything, as if I was unconscious”²³.

Several explanations can be offered for this subjective evaluation of the seemingly painful experience. The ascetics are aware of the possibility of the fire and the sword as source of pain. Yet they also believe that true devotion belies any

experience of pain, a concept culturally validated. In this interpretation, they receive societal support and cultural validation. However it also seems possible to interpret this as self-inflicted pain through which the ascetics atone for their transgressions against norms of filial piety. In the earlier section we saw how society establishes its authority over the individual, by close regulation of such emotion as grief and by the infliction of pain. In this section we see how the individual is punished or punishes himself through the experience of pain and suffering as atonement for transgression. The use of symbols of matted hair, dreams and the concept of ‘possession’ by the individual, allows the expression of pain in a manner that is understood by both individual and society. This would be clear if we took the same symbol, such as matted hair possession, in a different society, which does not endow the symbol with a similar meaning. Thus a discrepancy would come to exist between the meaning attributed by the individual and the society on such symbols. In such a case, the individual may be regarded as suffering from some mental disorder, rather than displaying religious piety as signs of guilt. These symbols, then, may be seen as product of an individual fantasy leading to self-estrangement from the collective, rather than finding validation within it. Thus it seems that culture plays an important role even in organizing disorder and transgression in which the experience of pain and suffering has a vital place.

Having discussed the individual pain experience, as mediated by cultural symbols, let us now consider the manner in which the society inflicts pain on the individual by placing him in a category ‘different’ from ‘normal’ members of the community. How does the individual perceive this differentiation? Does his response to this categorization vary with or is in accordance with the norms and values of the society.

Stigmatised Identity and the Individual perception of pain

The members of a society consider a set beliefs or attributes as ‘ordinary’ or ‘natural’, to be possessed by the individual. Yet certain category of attributes held to be different from others, are a source of social disgrace for the individual who possess them. It is this categorisation of attributes resulting in the ‘differentness’ of the individual which characterizes the process of ‘Stigmatization’. Thus, ‘stigma’ refers to an attribute which is discrediting, a failing, a shortcoming or a handicap of an individual or group of individual’s, which kind of separates them from the other constituent members of the society. The problem is to identify the notion of pain in this societal categorisation of attributes, which cause considerable suffering to an individual in the course of his life.

The individual bears the pain of stigma attached to his ‘social’ identity, which is the identity conferred on the individual by the society. The manner in which he responds to this stigmatised identity needs to be considered in relation to the norms of the society. For instance he may be defensive or indifferent to the

societal stigmatization of himself in his group, as in the case of orthodox Jews. His indifference is sustained by the identity beliefs of his own or the group to which he belongs, which make him feel that he is a fully fledged human being.

The response of the individual may also be related to his awareness of his stigma or differentness from others. This realization is based on the standard of values imbibed by him from the rest of the collective to gauge his own failings. This may result in lowering of self-esteem and a deep sense of shame and pain at the prospect of possessing 'defiling' attributes which the individual does not desire to possess. An example of such self-derogation and sense of shame can be discerned from the following quote:

"When I got up at last ...and had learned to walk again... I took a hand, glass and went to a long mirror to look at myself, and I went alone ... That person in the mirror couldn't be me. I felt inside like a healthy, ordinary, lucky person - Oh, not like the one in the mirror! Yet when I turned my face to the mirror there were my own eyes looking back, hot with shame ...".

The third type of response may be the 'concealment' of the 'discrediting' information about himself by the individual. This concealment or 'passing off' as the normal person, may itself cause further pain and the potential threat of exposure. For example in the words of a discreditable person: "When jokes are made about 'queers' I had to laugh with the rest, and when talk was about women, I had to invent conquests of my own. I hated myself at such moments, but there seemed to be nothing else that I could do. My whole life became a lie"²⁴. Thus it is not only the society which makes an individual feel the pain of his stigmatized identity, but the response of the individual in bearing this pain also is societal in nature, as there is acceptance or awareness by the latter of his differentness from other categories of society. This is evident in his endeavour to rectify or to correct, what the individual perceives to be the objective basis his stigma. For example a physically deformed person, say suffering from facial disfigurement, may undergo plastic surgery in order to acquire a face acceptable to the society. The individual may even attempt to master those areas of activities which his stigmatic condition prevents him from doing otherwise. For example a lame person may relearn to play or to swim or ride while a blind man may attempt proficiency at sports like skiing and mountain climbing.

The extremes to which the stigmatized is willing to go reflects the degree of painfulness of the situation. It is also a reflection of his 'personal' identity. That is to say that an individual, though belonging to a group, the stigmatized category in this case, is essentially a unique person. This uniqueness is associated with a kind of 'identity peg' and the unique combination of life history that comes to be attached to an individual, which differentiates him from others. Thus two individuals may bear the social identification of being alcoholics or mentally retarded but each has a personal identity of his own.

The latter in contrast with the 'social identity' can be validated by means of documentation of variables like age, sex, hand writing, name and the like. The biography attached to documented identity can place limitations on the ways in which an individual presents himself to others: Thus a past record stay in an asylum or prison can limit the attempt of person to conceal his 'stigma' and increase the possibility of exposure.

The potential threat of exposure further illustrates painful situation of the individual who is unsure of his categorization by the rest of the society. This is particularly poignant for individuals who do not bear a visible stigma, for instance, a homosexual or a prostitute. This leads to the question of subjective interpretation by individual of his situation, that is, to the notion of 'ego' identity. The latter differs from the social and personal identities as it pertains to the societal definition regarding the identity of the individual. The self-construction of image by the individual cannot be seen in isolation, as this reflective process is affected by his social and personal identification. It is not a clear cut process and this closer nexus of social, personal and ego identity is manifested in the dilemma faced by the individual in locating his place in the society. Does this mean that the individual perceives a certain ambiguity in relation to his position in the society?

The ambivalence towards self is indeed a painful process, as the individual may oscillate in his identification with the stigmatized group. The degree of identification may depend on the apparentness or obtrusiveness of the concerned stigma. For instance an alcoholic or a mental patient may consider a crippled or a blind man to be more stigmatized in relation to himself. Identification becomes more problematic and painful, when the individual is suddenly plunged into the category of stigmatized. For example an individual may become crippled due to some accident. Presumably he would suffer feeling of disloyalty and yet self-contempt for the group to which he belongs after the accident, as he may still support the norms of the wider society. This contempt or repulsion may make him ashamed of his situation. He is then faced with a painful situation, as he can neither reject nor accept the stigmatized group. It is the societal norms and values which hinder his transition and consequent acceptance of his changed identity. What then is the role of the society in this adaption of the stigmatised identity, by the individual?

Conclusion

The role of the society is evident in the suggestions, whether professional or of other nature, made to the stigmatized person. The suggestions pertain to the manner in which the individual defines himself. For instance, pattern of revealing and concealing may be suggested. For example, an ex-mental patient may be advised to conceal stigma from mere acquaintances but to reveal his condition to his spouse family and close friends. The contradiction is apparent as the individual may be advised to define himself like any other normal human being yet he is

reminded of his differentness. For example he may warned against 'minstrelization'. From the above discussion, it is clear that the phenomenon of pain is regulated by the society, as exemplified in the process of mourning. We have seen that the society itself may act as an 'agent of pain', as illustrated by the analysis of initiation rites. In this context, pain serves as a means to inscribe the authority of the society over the individual. Furthermore, the individual may also manifest his personal pain experience with the aid of cultural concepts like 'prenatal' destiny, cultural symbols like matted hair and cultural constructs like stigma. So the phenomenon of pain, though experienced by the individual, is a matter of concern for the whole society.

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