

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Tuesday, 08 November 2005

Reading

- Robert R. Desjarlais, *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas*, chs. 8-10, pp. 198-253.
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Our current texts have less to do with political economy.

What does the methodology permit you to understand of local life and what does it fail to explore? Desjarlais could have given more attention to political economy locally and social tensions in the society as part of a broader “political body” (Scheper-Hughes & Lock). By giving much more weight to sensory experience, he was more successful in trying to give the reader a sense of daily life to the Yolmo people.

What is it that anthropologists attend to?

- ☞ Desjarlais looks at the aesthetics of experience from a **microcosmic** orientation.
- ☞ Could he adequately represent illness through **experiential ethnography**? How does illness and healing fit into the Yolmo world view?

Yolmo healing is situated in their **social relations**, geographic space and landscape. In their **cosmology** – heaven, hell, and the human realm – the body and illness is always addressed in the world of ritual so that the ritual is extended.

“aesthetics of experience”

The aesthetic is also the ethical – looking at experience at this local level also deals with examining people’s values in a microcosmic way – how people move through space, how they get ill, how attend to everyday life. Unless you attend to everyday experience, it will be hard to understand illness.

How does **gender** figure into this text?

- ☞ **emotional expression** – women, children, the elderly are portrayed as not having a strong connection between the heartmind and the brain (like Enlightenment discourse in West)
- ☞ what is highly valued (and, by extension, politically valued) is the ability to contain emotions
- ☞ what is happening in the social order and how it accords to the conception of anatomy
- ☞ Desjarlais = sickness as result of social tensions but no political critique within the society (e.g. feminist critique) – thus there is a naturalization of the [gendered] social order
- ☞ Scheper-Hughes and Lock = illness as a form of political protest
- ☞ e.g. shamans re-harmonize the social order – not a political body analysis but instead looks at aesthetic/sensory experience (a weakness of the text is this lack of political context)

songs are prescriptive – how you *should* feel and how you *should* express yourself, also provides context for people to express emotion through **indirect medium** of the song

p. 142: divination that woman has lost her spirit, malaise/sorrow from losing family members

- *Why do some people suffer from soul loss but others don't?*

Soul loss is somewhat similar to **depression** as we understand it. The Western notion of depression includes sadness, withdrawn, loss of motivation, self-loathing, powerlessness, loss of hope, lethargy, self-isolation, loss of appetite, excessive sleep.

The experience is very **visceral** for the woman with soul loss less of existential angst. Link back to William James – what people experienced before conversion as more heady. For the Yolmo woman, the pain was situated **in the body**. This mirrors the Haitian experience of full body pain.

Somatization = experience at bodily level the emotional distress person is suffering from, can become pathological (may develop compulsive care-seeking behavior to find healing but not address what is fundamentally wrong)

There is the **critique of somatization** because it is linked to ideas of hysteria. There was the idea that certain groups (women, children, ethnic groups) more prone to **experience emotional stress at bodily level**. Certain groups or certain cultures tend to have experience of fully body pain that doesn't correspond to something "physiological." Desjarlais is trying to attend to **visceral experience as a legitimate form of expression** that isn't stigmatized. He's critical of cognitive explanations. He's not trying to assess her psychoanalytic state – he examines distress through sensory experiences of suffering. How is it that shamans promote healing? They too are attended to sensory level of experience in their practice. This is another domain that is underanalyzed in theories of suffering.

There is the argument that **ritual** is a symbolic process about meaning but Desjarlais says we must look at the level of **sensory experience** and examine what is actually being healed.

How do people even know they're actually sick? One could be feeling ill because of social situation or status. Or, if they are feeling anger, it can be attributed to a demon/ghost (**external agent**) and not their own feelings of injustice. The **shaman as mediator** to diagnose at the level of the **social body**.

- *Would the shamanistic healing be as effective if you weren't in that frame of reference?*

p. 171-175: **ritual exorcism**

- œ social gathering, people (family and community) gathered, altar set up, ritual food
 - œ attention to spirits in directions, acknowledgment of sacred geography outside of ritual space
 - œ invitation for the spirit to enter the shaman's body for divination
 - œ source of illness is linked to the space inside the room, what is occurring geographically, and also people present
 - œ the sensory aspects that are employed, Desjarlais says these are all on some level helping to activate or renew a sense of energy in the patient – but it's not just about the patient, it's engaging all present
 - œ diagnose what it is wrong at the very visceral sensory level
 - œ pulse = assess a spiritual imbalance
- issues of **efficacy** – if you don't diagnose the root causes of illness, you can treat the surface symptoms but not be truly healed

The shaman divines the illness and people in community attribute the shaman's knowledge to the god that is in the shaman during the ceremony. Shaman still has **tacit knowledge** – unconscious understanding/sensory knowledge of what's going on with the body, knowledge communicated through non-verbal means. There seems to be a tension in Desjarlais' writing of what it is that the Yolmo people think is happening in the ritual.

- *Is Desjarlais saying that in reality these ghosts/demons/witches who might afflict a person aren't actually "real" in that what the shaman is doing is not necessarily bringing in a god of an independent existence per se but is in a way "performing" the knowledge that he has acquired?*

p. 182

only through ritual process that he shamans can actually know what's going on
"empathy of form when one body makes sense of another"

Is it possible for the shaman to diagnose what is happening without going through the ritual process? Desjarlais says no! He argues that what is crucial during the process is the enlivening of the senses, the attention to the senses – this is the focus, not to create meaning for the patient or invoking various symbols. Instead it's about enabling their bodies to feel something different through the invocation of different sensory means that can bring about change and healing for another person

Compare to the Favret-Saada article...

- ∞ process of unbewitching is to **address social tension**
- ∞ how can we compare different types of ritual action?
- ∞ how does this affect the sense of **personhood** and how is an individual socially situated?
- ∞ how similar are these experiences?

French case – there was a loss of force rather than soul loss, unbewitcher as mediator

Yolmo case – everything being done *around* the person, the community is involved in the healing, the shaman is the one re-anchoring the soul but the patient still has to do something once re-anchored

When does shamanism fail? Does the experience recur when something similar happens again? we don't know with the F-S case long term what happened with the person with a loss of potency. Desjarlais gave example of some who got "addicted" to exorcism or the first process wasn't efficacious or other events occurred that brought up their feelings of malaise again.

When rituals fail, how is it interpreted? Do shamans themselves recognize categories they can't heal? Desjarlais says if it's a social problem it's more amenable to shamanistic healing. But if it's more a personal thing, it could be like chronic depression or PTSD.

Haitians have gone through traditional realms of healing but these realms have sometimes failed to relieve some of their suffering (physical suffering or guilt). Some of the forms of suffering they endured (attacks on own person, or witness violence on family members, or general chaos in community) – all these were outside the bounds of traditional healers. Healers didn't have repertoire to deal with losses so extreme. For example, forced rape or witnessing of violation of loved ones – there was more difficulty to recover. These same cases presented more difficulty

over time to try and recover back to day to day life, and these manifest in a somatic sense.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights – notion of the person that is very individualistic, inherent rights for all of us

- ∞ rhetoric outside of Haitian frame of understanding suffering but had some efficacy for changing how they experience themselves in aftermath
- ∞ how are differently political discourses effective in healing certain emotional distresses?

Yolmo **healing as collective process**. Energy ebbs and flows in body. Restoring sense of vitality involved shaman's journey to retrieve spirit and redeposit physically. Her eating afterwards helped to anchor it.

Wild images – narration of shaman's journey to find spirit doesn't have much logical sense of it (p. 210). What we would think of random places in space are possible places of where a spirit could be – no narrative form. Series of images is invoked for patient and other participants. The **unbound nature of images** – no logical, narrative, progressive structure that evolves. This wildness of the images promotes the vitality of the person.

- ∞ p. 215 (paraphrased): “**engagement** itself is meant to be curative...the complexity and intention of the perceptions engages the spirit”

- *Do you think this non-linear method could be effective here in the West? Or, because we tend to have a more rationalistic engagement, would it be effective? Are we that different?*
- *How successful do you think Desjarlais was in his representation?*