

PSYCHONEUROSES AMONG PRIMITIVE TRIBES

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Table of Contents

<u>PSYCHONEUROSES AMONG PRIMITIVE TRIBES</u>	1
<u>ISADOR H. CORIAT, M. D.</u>	2

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THE complex construction of a psychoneurosis in an adult, due to the influence exerted by the multiplicity of factors of civilization and cultural advancement, is sometimes so bewildering as to almost defy all attempts at analysis. In children, the organization of a psychoneurosis is usually very simple, almost monosymptomatic, and in children too, we often discover these neuroses in the actual process of making. When adult life is reached, the individual has left behind him all the factors of his childhood life and all the repressed experiences and desires which tend to produce his adult characteristics. Among adults of primitive races however, where the mental organization is far less complex than that of civilized man, certain psychoneurotic disturbances are found, which if analyzed, might disclose the mental mechanisms of these disturbances reduced to their simplest terms.

It has been my good fortune to be able to secure data of this sort, pertaining to certain curious nervous attacks which occur among the primitive races of the Fuegian Archipelago. These facts were supplied me, following along the lines of a questionnaire, by the well known explorer Charles Wellington Furlong, F. R. G. S., who in 1907–1908, was in charge of the first scientific expedition to cross through the heart of Tierra del Fuego. Mr. Furlong's keen powers of observation, have made the data unusually complete. While he had no theory to offer in explanation of the attacks as seen among these primitive tribes, yet it is interesting to note, that certain of the facts corroborate the well-known ideas of sexual repression as elaborated by Freud. The mental organization of these people likewise, seems to substantiate certain psychoanalytic conceptions. For a clear comprehension of these attack, certain preliminary anthropological and geographical data are necessary.

The following data relates to the running amuck or outburst, among the Yahgan and Ona tribes of the Fuegian Archipelago. This data was obtained in 1907 and 1908 during expeditions through the regions of the Fuegian Archipelago.

The Yahgans, some forty years ago, numbered perhaps 2,500 but in 1908 had been reduced through contact with civilization and principally through an epidemic of measles to 173. These peoples are canoe Indians and inhabit today the island coasts from Beale Island to the Wollastons inclusive, in the neighborhood of Cape Horn; from about 54 degrees 50' S. Lat. to about 55 degrees 56' S. Lat., making them the southern-most inhabitants of the world. The Ona Indians, a taller and finer race physically, who are foot Indians, occupy the mountain and forest regions of southern Tierra del Fuego from approximately 53 degrees 50' S. Lat. to 55 degrees 3' S. Lat. The Onas formerly occupied the entire northern half of Tierra del Fuego and possibly numbered some 3,000, but through contact and warfare with the whites, who drove them south off the open lands of the north, they have been reduced to about 300. These peoples are of a light cinnamon colored skin, black haired, and of a decided Amerindian type. The Onas are above average stature, the Yahgans below it.

It is not an infrequent occurrence for individuals among both the Yahgans and Onas to be subject to sudden outbursts of furor and violence. At such times the individual will generally dash from the wigwam and rush wildly away, and will continue running until nearly or completely exhausted. The one afflicted may dash madly through the woods or sometimes climb up dangerous cliffs. At such times, however, it is the custom of some of the men to follow closely behind to see that harm does not come through injury against trees, stumbling, or falling from the cliffs. However, at such times they rarely touch the afflicted one except to prevent harm, and finally will lead him back to the camp, when the attack is over or when he is exhausted.

While the attack occurs both among men and women, it seems to be more prevalent among men. The individuals in whom these attacks predominate are men in the prime of life, ranging from 25 to 35 years of age.

PSYCHONEUROSES AMONG PRIMITIVE TRIBES

These people are polygamous and as it is the custom for the old men to marry young girls, thus leaving the old women to the younger men, which in many instances causes a scarcity of women, it leaves a somewhat undesirable condition.

In many instances the character of the attack confines itself to the mad rushing away, as above described, at other times attempts to injure or kill others are made. For instance, a rancher of Tierra del Fuego, was in the company of some Onas when suddenly a hatchet whizzed by him, barely missing his head, and buried itself in a log of the Indian shelter. This was the result of an attack which seized upon one of the Onas who was afflicted thus from time to time. The actual outburst in this case was sudden, although it is difficult to tell how long it might have been coming on in the form of brooding, which seems to be a premonitory phase of this condition.

Concerning a personal experience with one of the early phases of an attack, Mr. Furlong states as follows:—"I am fully convinced that one night, while camping alone with Onas in the heart of the Fuegian forests, that my head man Aanakin, who had a good many killings to his credit, was brooding as he sat in his wigwam, which opened towards the fire; he watched me for nearly an hour with an attitude and expression which reminded me of the look a dog takes on sometimes before he snaps. Aanakin I knew to be of a very moody nature but this particular mood was so marked and portended evil so noticeably toward me without any apparent cause, that I decided to do something to break its mental trend. So putting fresh wood on the fire, to make a more brilliant blaze, I walked directly into his wigwam and motioned to one of his two wives, who were lying beside him. There was a passing look of half-anger, half-surprise, but I gave no time for his mind to dwell in the same mood, for simultaneously I produced my note book and pencil and began to make drawings of animals and other things they were familiar with. They like to watch one draw and name the thing, and so I kept them busy for perhaps an hour, and finally had them in gales of laughter. I am quite convinced that I forestalled an attack or a condition akin to it."

It seems that an attack usually begins suddenly. However, an instance is given where an Ona became moody and realized that one of these attacks was coming on and putting his hands together begged to have his wrists and feet bound in order that he would not do himself or others any harm, or that it would not be thought that he meant to kill and consequently be shot in self defence. This would in a way seem to indicate that there was no amnesia for the attack, as the Indian undoubtedly realized what he had done in previous attacks.

The moody state and the realization of what might follow as the attack comes on demonstrates a sense of uneasiness as the premonitory symptom of an attack, which ends in a state of utter exhaustion and sleep. The normal condition is resumed, practically on the awakening from sleep and recovery of strength.

From a description of Donald McMillan the explorer, the Eskimo Piblokto strongly resembles these attacks of the Ona and Yahgan Indians with the exception that Piblokto was particularly prevalent among the women.

How an attack begins is shown by the case of Aanakin, an Ona of Furlong's expedition. A certain form of melancholia, brooding or moodiness, seems to precede many of these attacks, with a realization sometimes that an attack is coming upon them. The Onas not being naturally a quarrelsome people, it may be that this realization and foreboding of the attack accounts for their tendency to run away from their associates, when they have endured the strain as long as they can, thus placing themselves in a position to avoid deliberate attack or injury to those about them.

It was further stated, in answer to the questionnaire—"I cannot give you absolute data regarding laughing or crying in an attack, screaming, yells, foaming at the mouth, biting of tongue, tearing of clothes, although I am of the opinion that any or all of these things may and do occur. As to violent resistance, the case, where the man wished to be bound, would show there was violent resistance, and it is probable that partly for this reason the Onas and Yahgans do not molest the afflicted except to prevent them from harming themselves, preferring to wait until the paroxysm exhausts them. I cannot state positively as to whether the attack is explained by the natives as being due to an evil spirit. While these people are polygamous, though having no religious form of worship, they usually believe when any one has a disease that something has entered them or some one who dislikes them has surreptitiously sent some small animal or an arrow into them. Among the Yahgans the 'Yuccamoosh' (doctors) or magicians proceed to pretend to extract these objects by a form of squeezing and hugging the patient, in the meantime blowing, hissing, etc., to force the object or evil out. I have never known of their doing this, however, to a person suffering from an attack.

"I am unable to supply any direct data as to the relation of love, hunger, sexuality, death of relatives or absent

PSYCHONEUROSES AMONG PRIMITIVE TRIBES

relatives to an attack. On the death of a relative the Yahgans go through incantations in the form of a sort of weird death chant, which they often sing in unison at certain times of the day and night. They paint their faces to show the death to strangers, but they rarely mention the name of the dead, in fact by most it is considered an offence to do so. They say simply 'He is gone,' 'He is no more'; they feel the loss of relatives very keenly and sorrow for them, and sometimes become violent with grief and rage.

"Regarding the primitive type of mental organization among these natives,—despite Darwin's first opinion of them, which was subsequently modified, I consider these people inherently intelligent, though of a very primitive type as far as their culture is concerned, probably the most primitive in this hemisphere, perhaps in the world, as the Onas are today living in the Stone Age. Dr. E. Von Hornbostel of Berlin University, who has collaborated with me in making a special study of my phonographic records of their songs, informs me that these songs are the most primitive American-Indian songs of which they have any record." Of importance for a clear understanding of the mental traits of these Indian tribes, as the source from which these attacks develop, are the study of their dreams, their system of taboos and their myths. So far as could be determined from the data supplied, the dreams of these primitive races strongly resemble the dreams of children, as these aboriginal tribes possess many childlike attributes. In fact up to a certain age the civilized child is really a little savage, with his strong egotism and feelings of rivalry, his taboos, his jealousies and his few or no altruistic tendencies. In the child as in the savage, the wish and the thought are synonymous, both want their desires immediately gratified, although such gratification may be impossible in reality. The dreams of the Yahgan Indians are simple wish fulfilments, without disguise or elaboration, like the dreams of a civilized child.

The Yahgan attitude toward death is the same as that of many primitive races. Any reference to death is strongly tabooed amongst them and to transgress this taboo, exposes the individual to grave danger and severe punishment, even the punishment of the thing tabooed. Thus the person who transgresses this taboo becomes himself taboo by arousing the anger or resentment of other members of the tribe. However, a certain ambivalent tendency seems to be present, for while the word death and the mention of the dead is prohibited, yet they feel deep grief and sorrow for dead relatives. Transgression of the taboo may arouse the other aspect of the ambivalent attitude, (for instance anger instead of sorrow) and it thus becomes a source of danger to the guilty individual and so by contagion and imitation to the community. This ambivalent tendency which leads to taboos is prominent among primitive races as well as in civilized children for instance, in the latter, the taboo of pronouncing certain words which leads to stammering or the taboo of objects possessing a sexual significance in producing kleptomania. As civilization and cultural advancement increase or as the child becomes the adult, the taboo tendency gradually declines, yet under certain conditions it may manifest itself as a psychoneurotic symptom. Since these particular primitive races have no conception of immortality, this taboo cannot be a religious or a moral obligation or prohibition, but a social phenomenon for the benefit of the tribe or for the physical welfare of the individuals comprising the tribe. Freud also has pointed out how the avoidance of the names of the dead because of fear of offence to the living is found among certain South American tribes.

A third factor of importance is a study of their myths. These are the savage's day dreams. The relation between myths and dreams is well known, both having their roots in the unconscious thinking of the race. In the individual this unconscious mental process produces dreams, in the race and society, myths. Only one instance will be cited, the legend of the Yahgan Indians concerning the creation of the first man and woman. When one of the tribe was asked how the first human being came into the world, he replied that a long time ago the first man came down from the sky on a rope and later, the woman followed. Here is a striking instance of how an adult Indian had applied his knowledge of individual births literally to a cosmic process, a genuine creation myth as a form of symbolic thinking. There seems little doubt in this case, that the sky, which to all savages appears like a bowl, represented the uterus and the rope, the umbilical cord. The resemblance of this myth to certain birth and parturition dreams, as encountered in the psychoanalytic investigations of civilized adults, is certainly striking.

How is this mass of material to be interpreted? The mental traits of these people, as shown by an analysis of their taboos, myths and dreams, are very primitive in organization, in fact, according to Mr. Furlong, they represent the most primitive types of culture in the world and are today actually living in the Stone Age. Individuals of such primitive mental traits have not learned to successfully repress their emotions and hence are liable to sudden emotional outbursts. Substitution and repression in civilized races are utilized to cover our complex and multifarious ways of expressing our social wishes and wants. In the savage there is little or no

PSYCHONEUROSES AMONG PRIMITIVE TRIBES

repression and substitution, because his desires are simple and easily satisfied.

These primitive people therefore resemble children, without inhibitions or repressions and hence their attacks of violence and furor as above described are sudden emotional reactions, perhaps hysterical, but without any phenomena of conversion. The relation of the attacks to an unsatisfied sexual craving is shown by the fact that the attacks occur only in young men whose libido remains unsatisfied, because according to tribal custom they are compelled to marry old women, or, in the words of the explorer who lived among these people, "old derelicts." This factor, combined with the observation that the victims of the attacks are free from loss of consciousness and amnesia and the absence of an absolute evidence pointing to foaming at the mouth or biting of the tongue, would seem to indicate that the outburst was hysterical rather than epileptic in nature. It would thus correspond to the Piblokto of the Eskimos as described by Brill. This resemblance was also noted by the explorer in his comparative description of the two disorders.

It seems that the attacks themselves are motivated, not so much by the actual gross sexual as by an ungratified or only partially gratified love which would occur in a man who is compelled by social and tribal custom to marry an old woman. Among the Eskimos this factor is at work in the women, among the Fuegians in the men. Conversion phenomena were absent, because their mental organization is very simple, in the same way that childhood hysteria is free from conversion symptoms or at the most is monosymptomatic.

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