

A practical application of Indigenous Psychology in psychotherapy ?

In Senegal



Picture 1: This painting describes the traditional Ndëp ceremony.
Credits: Petit, 2013

Introduction

What does traditional healing mean for people in Senegal?

THE ETHNIC CONTEXT

In the region of West Africa, several countries are known for their astrology, geomancy, and traditional healing. The Dogon people of Mali have shown an immense body of knowledge referenced in the work of Marcel Griaule (1936). The Senegalese Indigenous healing has attracted many researchers, willing to capture its essence in studies and documentary films (Collomb & Zempleni, 1967, Govindama, 1994). And the global West African oral tradition was published many times, in the form of books and animation movies.

What these people and cultures have in common in the region, is the oral tradition, vehicle of mythology, knowledge and expertise. This is transmitted on to generations, through education, body techniques, training, and rites of passage. Senegal is a country where the largest part of the population is Muslim, therefore some elements of the Islamic religion have influenced Indigenous healing tradition. Some of the traditional healing techniques are based on religion, while some others kept their cultural roots.

The implementation of medical mental health facilities was influenced by local

systems, in the Senegalese famous Fann University Hospital since the creation of the Service of Psychiatry also called *Psychiatric Village* (Diop M.C & Collignon, 1978). Indeed, those services were opened and built around a large tree, facilitating a global gathering to organize group discussions, and conviviality.

Even though globalization and rural exodus have crowded capital cities, forced people to change their ways of life, and move to smaller habitations with less family members, traditional healing techniques are still very present. However, oral tradition, connected to the presence of grandparents in the household, tends to fade. Hence, there is a notable effort from cultural agencies, and universities to promote it, in the school system. Oral tradition being essential in the mechanism of transmission, is crucial to the establishment of sustainable mental health, because in West Africa, mental health means balance at a social and collective scale, and coherence from one generation to the next.

Examples of senegalese indigenous concepts?

----- RABS AND TUURS

To understand those concepts, I will introduce the idea of what I called **Parallelism**. In the Wolof, Lebou and Sereer cultures the reality is dual, including a visible and an invisible world. Both worlds cohabitate and live in constant interactions. Humans and animals share their lived experiences with invisible mythical creatures called Rabs and Tuurs.

"Every human being has a double who, like a shadow, lives every moment with him or her. This double was conceived at the same time as the human being by his parents-Rab who, in turn, were each begotten by their respective progenitors-Rab..."(Zempléni, 1966)

A Rab is an ancestral spirit, according to various authors (Zempleni, 1966 ; Govindama, 1999), connected to a person, whereas a Tuur is a mythical ancestor connected to a community. People refer to Tuur as a common ancestor and protector and have social gatherings and celebrations in their honor. The lack of celebration can be a reason for a loss of balance, in the form of natural, and/or health disorder. So, the recognition by the community of their fault can restore balance. Tuuru, Samp, or Xamb are moments and places of offerings, to please the Tuur or Rabs and maintain the bond with ancestry and the group as a whole.

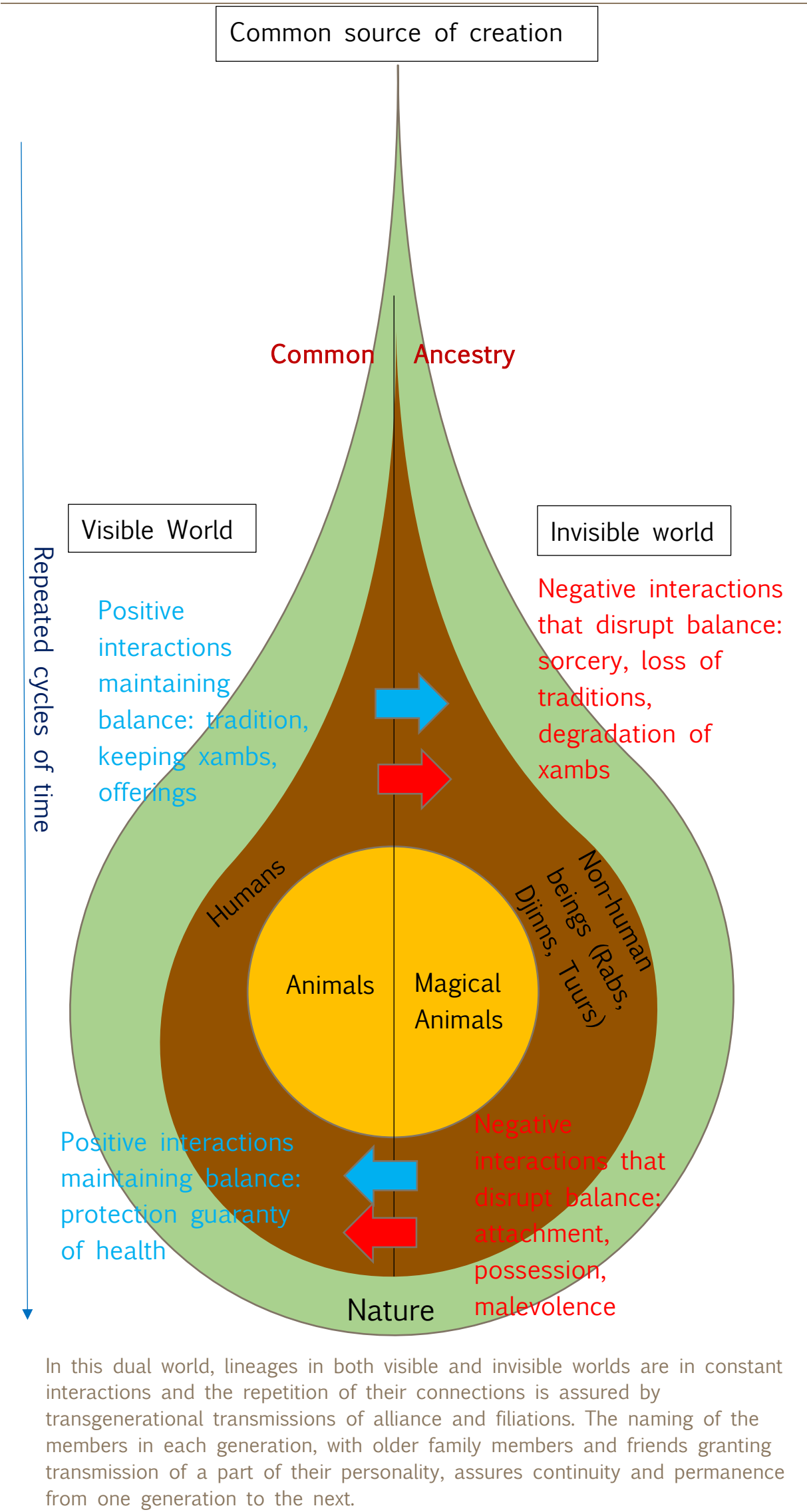


Picture 2: Xambs are commonly held in large baobab trees
Credits: Par Myriam Louviot (MyriamLouviot) — Travail personnel, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2717945>

How do traditional healers work in Senegal?

Looking through the lens of Parallelism?

Figure 1: Schematic representation of Paralellism



Practical example

Psychopathology of Rab possession?

---- WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

According to Govindama (1999), the symptoms exhibited by the possessed subject, which allows to recognize the action of the Rab, are as follows:

- Eating disorders (anorexia or bulimia) accompanied by weight loss can be interpreted as the action of the Rab who feeds on the subject's body and blood;
- Speech disorders (mutism);
- relationship disorders (withdrawal);
- Diffuse somatic disorders are considered to be the consequence of the action of incorporated Rab, which rises and falls in the body, exerting a gravity effect in the head and chest;
- locomotion disorders experienced as the Rab's desire to fix the subject (these disorders may be accompanied by bilateral paralysis of the limbs);
- increased dreaming;
- auditory and visual hallucinations;
- attacks of possession followed by temporary disturbances of consciousness, altering contact with reality.

The healer uses the client's dreams and hallucinations to try to identify the Rab. The therapeutic rite aims to establish a pact with the Rab to free the client from their malevolent action.

However, the Rab's action calls out not only to the client but also to the community, the extended family, who are involved in the therapeutic rite. Traditional healers think that the Rab in its ancestor's function (the absent, the unknown) manifests itself for a good reason, aiming to restore balance in the clients and their extended environment.

So, the ritual aims to reassemble the family and correct the anterior unbalance, that has created the occasion for the possession.

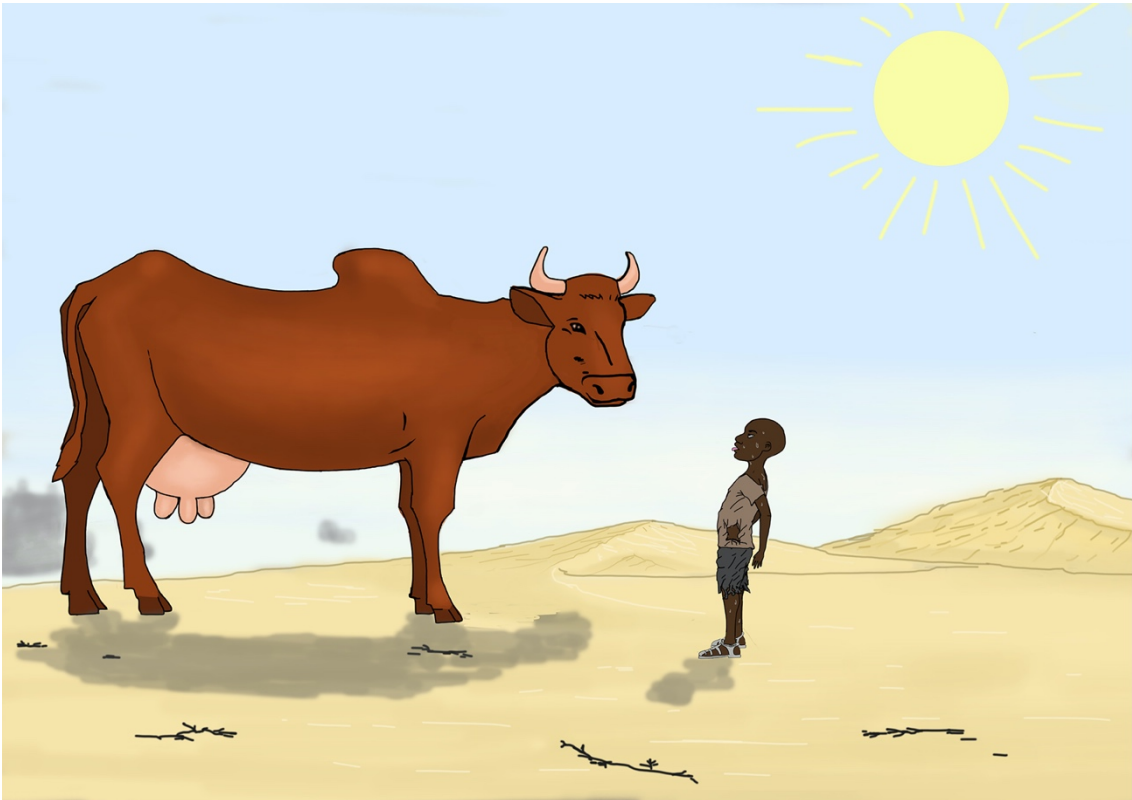
Hence, this system of belief is dual not only on the perspective of visible and invisible worlds but also in the dimension of time, because of the permanence and repetition mechanisms. In the invisible world, we find the same characteristics as in the human world. Thus, the Rab has a lineage, a family, a gender, a name, a race, a religion, etc. The individual Rab protects the one it accompanies, but in exchange, it also has its demands. If these demands are not met, it generates disorders within the individual, most often expressed in the disorganization of relationships with others. In this case, a tuuru or a samp may suffice. When it does not, the traditional healer has to perform a more complex ritual called the Ndëp. It is usually done as a group ceremony and requires the participation of the whole community.	Aminata Diop-Ben-Geloun did her doctoral research on the Ndëp and has interviewed a traditional healer named Mame Fat Seck. According to Mrs Seck, the Ndëp is reserved to wild or ancestral Rabs, when they generate disorders and suffering, because of their unpredictable and untamed nature. Rabs and Tuur are connected to nature, because the first of them used to live in the trees. When humans destroyed their homes, they found themselves wandering, looking for a place or a pact to seal, in search for a new home. As for Tuurs, their communities have xambs (altars) to commemorate them, and specific rituals to host them in ancestral trees. When their xambs are moved or destroyed without the necessary rituals, they can generate disorders. Mental illness is an example of the type or disorders that they can create.	Sereer people from Senegal also have traditional healing rituals to cure similar conditions. In Sereer, Rabs are called Pangol (sing. Fangol) and their traditional healing technique uses a calabash held on the client¹'s head during the time of the ritual. Omar Ndoye (2014) has conducted research on the symbolic representation of this part of the ritual. Indeed, he interprets its matricial symbolism as connected to the beginnings and the interior dimension, where the client returns to find peace. The possession seems to represent exterior turmoil, echoing the social unbalance. I cannot help but draw a link here with the dogon's representation of the myth of genesis, with the pale fox coming into the world out of Amma's womb with a piece of placenta covering the top of its head. Combining this mythical representation, to the healing ritual, I believe that the healer brings their client back to the origin to reseal the bond with their ancestry and repair the unbalance.
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The Ndëp: phases of the ritual

This ritual represents how mythical archetypes are present in the TH's work and overview the process. The TH acts for the community, involving them in the healing process, to reintegrate the client as an individual and they all participate in the treatment. Speech, songs and rhythm are essential in this ritual as they embody permanence and repetition of the global cultural narrative. Indeed, they document this moment as a phase of their shared history and associate it with their shared ancestry, to overcome mental illness together.

1. The **seet** is the first phase of this ritual, it is a consultation, where the Ndëpkat (TH specialized in Ndëp ceremonies) uses divination to analyze their client's condition. The TH asks questions and analyzes the client's dreams and experiences. At the opposite of a classic psychotherapy session, where the psychotherapist observes the clients, and stays neutral, to host their content into the session, the TH uses their senses, divination, visions and dreams, to analyze their clients' situation. They are completely melted in the frame of the session and their bodies become vessels for the rabs to manifest their demands.
2. The **saj** is the second phase of the ritual, it takes place at night, and the TH prepares the ritual with the agreements of the Tuur. The TH uses sour milk and sprays it with their mouth in all four cardinal directions of the place and then on the client. They perform a massage on the client's body, aiming for the rab to descend from it. There is music and drums and people are invited to participate to the danse, the client usually starts to be in transe, showing how the rab is manifesting its presence.
3. The **waccé** is the third phase. The rab is identified and nominated, the TH and the community make Natt, bakeries of millet representing parts of the client's body. It is distributed and eaten on this third phase. This symbolic ingestion reintegrates the client within the community.
4. The **bukuto** is the fourth phase, when the sacrificial animal (usually a cow) is brought and laid down on the right side. The client lays down on it, and both are covered by cloths. This phase is a symbolic inhumation mimicking a fusion between the client and the animal, aiming to lure the rab and transfer it to the animal.
5. The **rey** is the fifth phase, and this is when the killing takes place. During this phase, the illness is transferred to the animal, because the client is discreetly extracted from the scene and hidden, and the rab is now disconnected from them.
6. The **samp** is the last phase, when the TH builds the altar, home for the rab. Potteries are disposed in a hole, and are filled with parts of the sacrificial animal, roots, milk and blood. This altar is a new home for the rab, aiming to welcome it and keep it away from the client. Prayers and songs are performed during this phase to accompany the rab into its new home.

¹ The word client is used in this context because this how traditional healers call their patients (people who come to them for treatment).



Picture 3: Image of Tampsy, clinical psychotherapeutic tool inspired by African oral tradition

Introduce psychotherapeutic ways of implementing culture into clinical practice

For a culturally relevant psychotherapy

Although Parallelism can be understood as this dual representation of Reality to explain abnormality, it is an important parameter to understand normality in Wolof, Lebou and Sereer cultures among others. Indeed, rites of passages are key moments when the individual is imprinted in their lineage, and named, and this is when this perception of permanence and repetitions takes all its meaning.

Additionally, precautions for pregnant women not to attend to certain rituals or visit certain spaces are also explained by this duality. Indeed, the moment of pregnancy puts women on the line between both worlds, and susceptible to have their babies possessed by an invisible creature.

Therefore, cultural prescriptions, social rules and collectiveness have the role to maintain global stability within all existing entities, human and nonhuman, past, present and future. Rituals plunges the individual into the mythical untimely space/moment of the genesis, affirming their bond to ancestry. As every system, it faces challenges and the negotiation between past and present generations takes place in the actual moment, through people's lived experiences.

Understanding Parallelism is the key to analyze cultural beliefs, because it has extensions in all parts of the lived experience.

Firstly, the mothering techniques are to be understood through this lens:

- The newborn child comes from this invisible world and is attached to ours by its linkage to ancestry.
 - This is a fragile moment as invisible malevolent spirits can interfere and steal its body, so massages and prayers also have the role to protect the baby from these spirits.
 - Indeed, unexplained cryings can be interpreted as attacks of those spirits, and the baby should never be left alone.
 - Co-sleeping is naturally prioritized
- Analyzing through the lens of parallelism also allows another lecture of cognitive and neuro-developmental disorders, and they are culturally interpreted as representations of rabs' attacks on an insufficiently protected child.

Moreover, as explained above, many symptoms are attributed to Rabs and lead to mental challenges. Envy is a major explanation for other's malevolence, as people fear their neighbors, coworkers or family members' jealousy, who could summon and use those evil spirits to hurt them.

In this context, psychotherapy has to be culturally relevant and use culturally relevant tools, to make sense in peoples' reality and have an impact. This duality of existence has a symbolic meaning in cultures. In the previous lesson, the authors explained how a double listening (cultural and analytical) had to be applied to understand the Reality and elaborate on its symbolism. Indeed, we can find the roots of this duality in the first moments of life, also explained in Kleinian primary representation of psychism, and the existence of an all-powerful surmoic entity in the archaic relation to the mother. Humanhood has this dual representation of existence, and many religious systems acknowledge it through the ideas of good and evil. Although mental illness is globally explained by medicine, its first theorization was possession or malevolence, so traditional healing and sometimes religious healing techniques were developed long before the existence of psychiatry and psychology.

Narration and language are medias of socialization and allow the client to elaborate and subjectivize an experience. Thus, storytelling using oral tradition is a solid ground for psychotherapy because it offers elaboration and anchors peoples to mythical representation, while being in the safe space of free speech. Recalling myths and tales appeals to symbolic representations, but here somenone can take action and choose their own interpretation and teaching.



Picture 4: Image of Tampsy
Credits: Tampsy Optoa Sarl

Clinical case example

--- UNDERSTANDING RABS IN CLINICAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

In this clinical exampleⁱ, I will show how psychotherapy can help to make sense of an experience and take an active role, in the context of indigenous explanation for mental health challenges. Omar (fictional name) is a 22 years old young man who starts a psychotherapy when he is expelled from the third school with no degree and has a sad vision of the future. Omar was born at a somber moment of his family’s history. A few months before his birth, his eleven years old sister died of sudden unexplained illness. His father, attending the first session describes her as their bright beautiful child that they have never stopped mourning. According to him this grieving might be connected to his son’s incapacity to learn in school, because no one was really available to welcome him into the family. Although Omar witnesses his father’s ➡

speech, he has another explanation for his condition, and waits for him to leave the room, to share it: In Omar’s mother’s family, they have Tuurs and his condition is the consequences of the fact that they abandoned they Xambs, and did not honor their ancestors. According to him, the Tuurs are angry, and he is possessed by a rab from his ancestral family. His mother knows it and has contacted her family back at the village to organize the sacrifices, but his father refuses to pay the price, claiming that he does not believe in this explanation. Knowing this, Omar engages into every learning project with pessimism, because he “knows” that he does not have the potential. Indeed, when he reads directions, or performs actions, he is lost and never knows where to start. Understanding that Omar might have a developmental disorder that have impacted his learning, I advise him to seek a diagnosis from a psychomotor and a speech therapist. Unsurprisingly he is diagnosed with dyslexia and dyspraxia. Omar welcomes this diagnosis as a long overdue justice for his years spent in school, where he could not explain why he did not perform like his peers. During the psychotherapy, using the Tampsy storytelling tool, we explore his imagination and representations of his family and peers. The narration process allows his appropriation of the present moment. Indeed, as his father explained, ➡

Omar being born in a moment when his family was grieving, he was not integrated and given a place in the family’s history. He never really understood his condition, and neither did his family, still chocked by his sister’s disappearance. They were silenced with the fear of the invisible forces allegedly responsible for her death and his existence was conditional, never taken for granted. Everything about him was left to the realm of invisible forces, and his parent’s trauma prevented them to take action. This diagnosis reintroduces a long-lost conversation, where he starts to question his rab’s wills, and behaviors. Indeed, Omar sees its presence when he has a girlfriend, because the rab is jealous and creates conflicts in the relationship, and they break up. In his lonely history, the rab is a constant partner that was always there and whose love is total. Omar is not convinced of his willingness to perform the healing ritual. This bond is the most remarkable demonstration of love he has experienced. Suffering from an attachment disorder of the relationship with his parents, his connection to the invisible world has given him the attention he needed.

Barriers and challenges

One of the biggest challenges in applying indigenous lens to psychotherapy, is that the psychologist can make a confusion with their own subjective lens, which is not only cultural but also influenced by their own fears. The use of a tool as a projective media is helping to build a secure alliance and approach the imaginary with less fears. The process of storytelling is always a new discovery. Although tales are usually known by the audience, they can be presented in a graphic design appealing to free association, disarming defense mechanisms, to let unsolved conflicts come to the surface. Nevertheless, the richness of cultural and oral tradition opens limitless potential approaches to psychotherapy. From storytelling to psychodrama, through art therapy and clay molding, psychotherapists all face the challenge of methodology. ➡

Despite the need of standardization for the trainings, the methodology should not be a barrier for the implementation of culturally adequate methods. Indeed, the idea of rigor is itself a colonial representation, as nothing in psychological sciences is immobile, direct and strictly univocal. The quest for health is a continuous search for balance, to be anchored in the present moment, knowing the impact of the past and the aims and fears of the future. Psychologists willing to develop new culturally relevant techniques, should start from ground indigenous knowledge, define a media and then work with people to find how they can create together an alliance in the interest of wellness. This decolonized approach is the way we can be active in the healing process, with familiar keys to our internalized conflicts. Finally, according to Danilo Guimarães (2017): ➡

“For a psychologist who works in the interethnic field, it is very important to take into account the different cultural temporalities as the ways in which each culture constructs harmony. It can be achieved through the identification of which social, environmental, and cosmic elements are activated in order to coordinate mutual actions in a cultural field. The cultural psychologist in an interethnic situation needs to be able to understand how the claim for attending to elements that do not fit the cultural temporality of the people he is working with to produce noise or rupture.” (p. 376) A decolonized approach of the indigenous knowledge includes an understanding of temporality as a plural dimension, and Parallelism as a psychological representation of the world. These concepts set a frame of understanding, listening and elaborating people’s experience, to offer the most suitable accompaniment.

Tips

1

Always listen and welcome people’ explanation, and analyze what you see and hear, not what you think you know

2

THs have been parts of the mental healthcare system longer than psychologists, there is no rivalry between the two approaches, but complementarity

3

Keep in mind that people have chosen to come to psychologists for a reason, so they are the ones who have expectations from the psychotherapy, they are not the subjects of an experimentation

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ⁱ This clinical case example was presented at the Enclaving cities workshop, in September 2024, Dakar, Senegal)