

# Transcultural aspects of healing

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## **Abstract**

*Migration is a problematic process where racism may lead to mental disorders. This paper reports my recent ethnographic study of the Chinese migration in Jamaica, which shows that identity needs to be understood in a wider transcultural context. The issues of transcultural identity and its relationship to the art of healing led to a comparison of European psychotherapy with various healing approaches across cultures including: Yolmo spirit callings, Tamang healing, Chinese Medicine and the healing performances of Bali. They show that art, drama, medicine, philosophy, religion, and treatment are an integral part of social life, which were similar in western societies in the past. Recent western approaches, such as the use of emotional Intelligence, recognise the importance of emotions such as anger, fear, happiness, love, surprise, disgust, sadness and grief. The influence of music and poetry on both illness and health are well known in the west. However, unlike European approaches, the performance arts of healing stress the importance of engaging the senses, thereby recreating the socio-psychological realities of human experience.*

## **Introduction**

*A form of dynamic psychotherapy that takes into account the whole being of the patient - not only the individual concepts and constructs as presented to the therapist, but also the patient's communal life experience in the world - both past and present. The very fact of being from another culture involves both conscious and unconscious assumptions, both in the patient and in the therapist. (italic added, Kareem, 1978).*

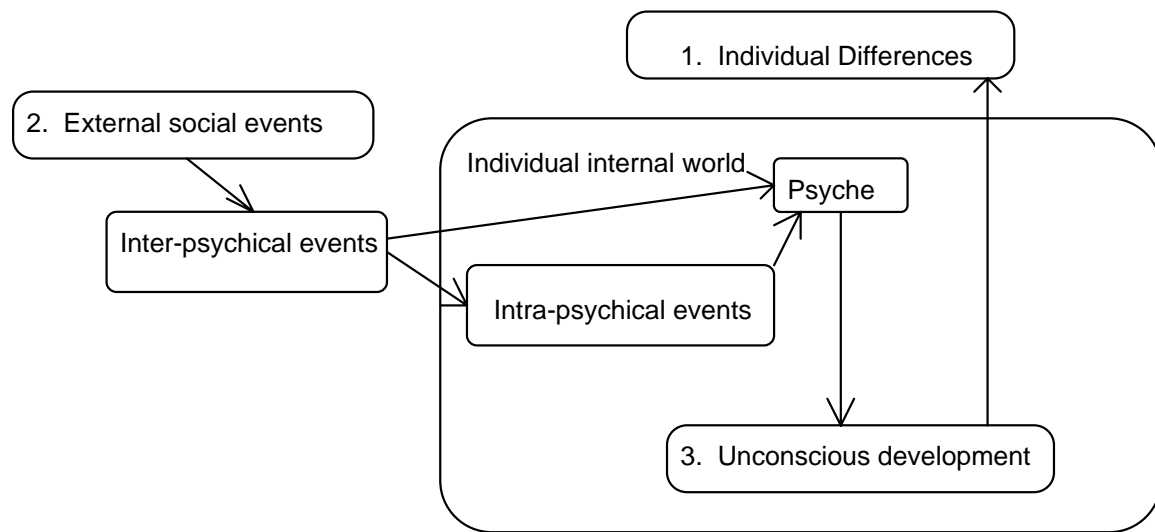
According to the above definition of intercultural therapy, it consists of the following key elements:

- Dynamic psychotherapy
- Whole being
- Communal life experience
- From another culture (cross-cultural experience)
- Conscious
- Unconscious assumptions

In this paper, I shall focus the complex issues of cross-cultural experience within the context of art of healing. It consists of the following core assumptions:

1. There are intrinsic individual differences.
2. The social interactions ('inter-psychic events') in one's external world affect the individual psyche ('intra-psychic events').
3. The above (inter- and intra-psychic events) influence the development of individuals' unconscious life.

The above development compounds the individual differences that exist in the first place. The process can be formulated diagrammatically, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Model of unconscious development**

### ***Definition of transcultural art of healing***

From the above perspective, I define transcultural art of healing as an artistic, social and self-reflective practice which examines both the healer’s and client’s whole communal life experience. Healers help to increase awareness of the ironies and contradictions in clients’ own self and social identity, and struggle with them to achieve their realistic aspirations.

### ***Migration & Mental Health***

From personal experience, I know that migration is stressful. We also know that stress can lead to mental illness. There is a link between negative and positive life events and causation of mental disorders, such as depression, across cultures Ali El-Hadi (2004). However, very little is known about the impact of racial life events on members of ethnic minorities.

In Britain, schizophrenia in the African-Caribbean population is four times higher than in the white population. Interestingly, higher rates of schizophrenia have been found in the second generation compared to the original migrants. This implies that mental illness and distress may be due to racism rather than the stress of migration. (See El-Hadi 2004; Bhugra & Ayonrine 2001; Bhugra & Bhui 2001; Bhui & Bhugra 2002; Chakraborty & Mckenzie, 2002; Sashidharan 2001; Cheng, 2001; Bhugra, D. & Mckenzie, 2003).

Not all migrants have the same experiences or the same reasons for migration. We need to distinguish between various different groups:

- The settlers
- Migrant workers
- Asylum seekers
- Refugees
- Primary migrants
- Second generation

In this section, I will single out the factor *identity* as a space of investigation, as it links to my ethnographic project - 0,1 Space & Identity. The project took me on a journey to Jamaica to carry out fieldwork investigating the issues of cross-cultural identity and how it changes over generations (primary and secondary).

### ***0, 1 Space & Identity***

0, 1 Space & Identity is a project which aims to aspire individuals and communities with an understanding of our diverse heritages.

'0' (Generation 0) represents those people like myself who have a cross-cultural experience. '1' represents the first generation that was born locally but have a dual cultural heritage through their parentage. 'O' also symbolizes space, and '1' Identity – "Out of Many 1 People".

For the project, I took a cross-cultural journey and investigated the impact of migration upon people's sense of displacement, belonging, space and places and their identity over generations. The concept behind 0, 1 Space & Identity is to examine the effect of migration (0), and any subsequent experiences of disillusionment, displacement, alienation and/or reintegration, and how those experiences impacted on the next generation (1) and beyond.

### ***The story of Chinese Migration into Jamaica***

According to the Jamaican Chinese Association at Kingston (Levy, 2003), the Chinese migration to Jamaica began at the end of slavery in the West Indies in the mid-nineteenth century. There was an increase in production costs, and a shortage of labour supply, which focused mostly on securing workers from Africa and India as well as southeast China. Workers were made to sign contracts by which they were legally bound to work for a specified number of years.

During my fieldwork, I learned more about the Chinese-Jamaican history, culture and their sense of identity (Law, 2004).

...  
But you know what meck a shut  
Up mi mout  
For me know what your name is  
But mi naw talk  
For me no want no body know  
Say

Dem use to call Man Stalk.  
An nex time you si mi  
No meck mi haffi commit no sin  
My name is Lee  
So don't badder call mi  
No Missa Chin.

"Everythin in a name"  
By Easton Lee

The sights and sounds of multi-ethnic childhood in rural Jamaica inspired Father Easton Lee. He was born in 1931 to a Chinese father from Guangzhou, China, and a racially mixed mother at Wait-a-bit, a small district in Trelawny, Jamaica. In 2001, Easton was ordained as a priest in the Anglican Church. For his history of outstanding work towards National Development in the fields of Culture and Social Development, he has received numerous awards.

Lee's family on his father's side have lived in the same village in China for over two thousand years. His father once told him:

"Children of China should study medicine and architecture so that one day they can re-build China"

I thought, "What a typical Chinese value!" without realizing that I was making a stereotype of my own culture.

Easton Lee told me his job is to alleviate human suffering, not to add to it:

"Jamaicans are a new race of people. We have been uprooted from where we belong and brought together and we're still trying to find an identity, while at the same time being made to feel inferior. We don't know who we come from."

The life of rural communities revolves around the church, the school and the village shops. These are the social spaces where "everybody told everybody else's story". He spent many evenings hidden below the counter of his parents' shop, where he learnt the village gossip from the local folk who were unaware of his presence. The "sweetness" of a familiar dialect became his memory of old time Jamaica.

### ***Culture, Place and Space, Self and Identity***

Within the European discourse, migration is part of the phenomenon of globalization. The processes are less attributable to late modernity than they are to late capitalism (Harvey, 1989). Chinese migration into Jamaica and subsequent integration into the wider Jamaican community has resulted in a marked degree of homogeneity. The Chinese in Jamaica continue to attach a great deal of value to the maintenance of their ethnic identity. The National Motto, "*Out of Many, One People*" is an ideal that requires understanding, patience, respect and restraint from all people on the island.

Many anthropologists tend to equate ethnicity with identity. The concept of self is a social construction of identity – a social identity (Jenkins, 1996). However individual identity is not the same as social identity. Identities are points of 'suture' between the subjects and their social world, which discursive practices construct themselves (Hall, 1996).

From my fieldwork, I conclude that identity needs to be understood in the wider context of the 'self' and 'identity', which have important psychological and social dimensions across time, generation, spaces and places. What makes transcultural healing important is its emphasis on the *cross-cultural* journey as an antecedent for the individual suffering such as racism. Our identity is the result of the quality of our suffering (Craib 1998). In order for psychodynamic therapy to work, it is important for clients to find an identity that is linked to their roots (Kareem, 1992). Thus it is important to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between the European psychotherapy and the alternative approach of healing arts across the world. In the next section, I will explore a few examples of these systems from the east. These include:

- Yolmo spirit callings.
- Tamang healing.
- Emotional balance in Chinese Medicine.
- Healing Performances of Bali.

### ***Yolmo spirit callings***

Yolmo wa (the Yolmo people) are community oriented. Their way of life is characterized by chatting with others, smoking cigarettes and shoeing chickens. In times of suffering any physical and psychological distress, they turn to local shamans for healing.

Robert Desjarlais (1996) spent over a year living in a village in the Helambu of Nepal in the late 1980s and learnt the craft of healing from a Yolmo 'grandfather shaman'. He learnt about the magical flight to search for and 'call back' the lost spirit.

According to Robert Desjarlais (1996), Yolmo wa believe that a person consists of four life forces:

- rNam Shes (Soul)
- BLa (Spirit)
- Tshe (Life span)
- Srog (Physical support)

The above system is summarized in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Four life forces in Yolmo wa**

<b>Life Forces</b>	<i>rNam Shes</i> (Soul)	<i>BLa</i> (Spirit)	<i>Tshe</i> (Life span)	<i>Srog</i> (Physical support)
<b>Function</b>	Awareness	Vitality	Strength	Physical strength
<b>Consequence if lost</b>	Death	Lack of vitality	Loss of vigour. Shorter life span	Loss of physical strength
<b>Recovery strategy</b>	Transmigration of soul through funeral rites	Bla gug (summoning the spirit)	Tshe grup (enhancing life)	Srog dgu mi (recovering life support)

BLa (pronounced 'la' with the silent Tibetan prefix 'b') is the spiritual essence that bestows energy to the body and volition to the sems (heart mind). The sems is the locus of personal desire, knowledge and imagination. Each of the life forces can depart from the body leading to illnesses or death. Loss of bLa leads to the loss of vitality with difficulty getting out of bed, walking up hills or even talking and socializing with family.

The aetiology of illness is attributed to the spirit loss – when bLa leaves the body, it can fall into the hands of shi 'dre (a ghost) or boksi (a witch) and be carried into the land of the dead. This may be caused when one is startled or nervous, by a sudden fall or during a solitary walk near a cremation ground.

Symptoms of spirit loss are very similar to those seen in depression (c.f. Balinese, Bateson & Mead, 1942):

- Trouble sleeping, bad dreams, cannot get up quickly.
- Dullness, lack of alertness.
- The pulse becomes slow and irregular.
- Loss of kinaesthetic attentiveness and sense of presence – a sense of 'away-ness',

The recovery strategy of spirit loss consists of several stages. A shaman arrives at the client's home at sunset and performs a 'spirit-hooking' ceremony. Playing drums, singing and chanting, the shaman journeys on a magical flight to the land of dead, searching for the spirit and returning it to the person's body.

## ***Tamang healing***

Tamang healers journey to divine 'hidden' lands to recover lost shadow-souls. Magyars descend into the 'underworld' to overtake a soul before it reaches 'The Water of Forgetfulness'. A Tamang shaman calls out places where lost souls can 'get stuck':

In a heaven of the homeless,  
In a heaven of confusion.  
In a heaven of distress,  
In a heaven of rumorous gossip,  
In a heaven of cannibals,  
In a heaven of closed months,  
In a heaven of licentious sex

These searches resemble similar soul-callings throughout the world.

Your parents are HERE.  
Your brothers and sisters are HERE.  
Your friends are HERE.  
The three white and three sweet foods are HERE.  
If you would drink tasty beer, it's HERE.  
If you would eat fat meat, it's HERE.  
If you would eat boiled-down food, it's HERE.  
Plentiful, sweet tasty food is HERE.  
If you would wear good clothes, they're HERE.  
If you would ride a good horse, it's HERE.  
Don't go there, there! Come HERE, HERE!  
Don't follow to the land of the death lords!  
A-bo-lo-lo, come HERE!"

The above rites were derived from the Elegies of Chu practiced by Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist priests some two thousand years ago to lure vital souls into a person's world of presence. The rites represent a system of philosophy and treatment that is very different from the western way of treating people with physical and mental illnesses.

Compare this with the ancient Chinese Elegies of Ch'u, which depict a 'summoner's' ornate invocation to the strayed soul of a sick king to leave 'the earth's far corners' and return to its 'old abode':

O Soul, go not to the north!  
In the north is the Frozen Mountain,  
And the Torch Dragon, glaring red;  
And Tai river that cannot be crossed,  
Whose depths are unfathomable;  
And the sky is white and glittering,  
And all is congealed with cold.  
O soul, go not to the north!  
There is no bourn there to your journeying...

## ***Emotional balance in Chinese Medicine***

Balanced emotion is the key to disease prevention as demonstrated by the Chinese philosophy:

Attained harmony with Heaven and Earth and followed closely the laws of the eight winds. They were able to worldly affairs, and within their hearts there was neither hatred nor anger. They did not wish to separate their activities from the world. They did not over-exert their bodies at physical labour and they did not over-exert their mind by strenuous meditation. They were not concerned about anything. They regarded inner happiness and peace as fundamental, and contentment as the highest achievement. Their bodies could never be harmed and their mental faculties never be dissipated. Thus they could reach the age of one hundred years or more. (*Huang Ti Nei Ching* in Veith, 1972).

The central role is to restore the person's emotional balance according to the principle of Yin and Yang. The objective is to restore internal harmony (Croizier, 1968, e.g. see Lock, 1980).

Unlike Western psychotherapy, Chinese treatment is herb-oriented (Tseng, 1973). Chinese people distrust 'talk therapy' (Kleinman, 1977). Somatisation of psychological problems leads to popular treatments using herbs and rituals. (Kleinman, 1980, Lee, 1980). Wu (1982) summarized six interrelated components in the classical framework of Chinese medical systems:

1. Yin Yang.
2. Health and organ.
3. Ching Ch'i (semen and blood)
4. Ching Lo (respiration and pathway).
5. Disease and aetiology.
6. Diagnosis and treatment (Jen-min, 1974)

*Yin and Yang.* A balance of Yin and Yang will contribute to a sound mind and body. The physiology is described in terms of five Yin viscera six Yang internal organs. The heart is regarded as the site to govern both mind and body (five Yin viscera six Yang). Palpation, apprehension, memory loss, insomnia and mental illnesses are associated with its malfunction.

*Health and organ.* Ching Ch'i (semen and blood) are the vital substances in the body. Ching belongs to Yang and Ch'i to Ying.

*Ching and Lo* (respiration and pathway or meridians). Ching Lo connects all part of the body with vital points under the skin (those stimulated in acupuncture). Weak ching causes weak ch'i, causing the vulnerable body to be attacked by disease.

*Disease and aetiology.* Six evils - wind, wetness, cold, heat, dryness and fire - are the external causes of disease. Seven emotions - joy, anger, worry, contemplation, sorrow (grief), apprehension, and fright - are the internal causes of illness.

### *Diagnosis and treatment*

The diagnosis and treatment is based on the legend *Huang Ti Nei Ching Su Wen* (*The Yellow Emperor's Esoteric Canon*), which has been used as the 'bible' of

Chinese medicine for two thousand years. According to the legend, Nature has four seasons and five elements that store up the power of creation and grant long life (*Huang Ti Nei Ching Su Wen Chapter 2 Section 5*). These five elements are transformed into human emotion (joy, anger, sorrow, grief and fear) via the five viscera. Excessive human emotion damages health. Balance of emotion (moderation) is the key to long life (Jen-min, 1974).

- Joy and anger -> spirit.
- Cold and heat -> the body.
- Anger -> Yin [form], liver. (counterbalance: sorrow).
- Joy -> heart. (counterbalance: fear).
- Grief -> lungs (counterbalance: joy).
- Sorrow -> stomach and spleen (counterbalance: anger).
- Fear -> kidneys (counterbalance: sorrow).

According to the Treatise on the Previous Mechanism of the Viscera (*Huang Ti Nei Ching Su Wen Chapter 6*), when joy is felt, it creates a large vacuum, forcing the kidneys to ascend. Anger arises from the fullness of the liver. Sorrow arises from the fullness of lungs. Fear releases the impulses of spleen. Grief releases the impulse of the heart. When joy and anger are without moderation, then cold and heat exceed all measure and life is no longer secure. Yin and Yang should be respected to an equal extent.

## ***Healing Performances of Bali***

The medical system of Bali is comparable to the Chinese system. There are seven energy points in the body called cakra, which are passed through meditation (by Kunakened dalini-Sakti in a form called the 'flower-strewn path').

Angela Hobart visited Bali between 1996-1998 to study the healing performances there. She found the healing performances interwoven with the customs of the community. The ritual events and performances are expressed in a form of annual religious festival (Galungan) that lasts for ten days. During the celebrations, the Barongs sing and dance to dramatize stories with masked figures 'refracting varying nuances of meanings in moving through the different ritual contexts of the celebration'.

The mythological figures Rangda and Barongs are life giving and life destroying. Barong Ket, a fabulous lion-like creature in a masked figure form, manifests 'divine light from the intangible realm of existence'. Rangda, (the Goddess of Power) and Calon Arang, ('a purveyor of destruction'), helps the villagers "[to get] in touch with the wilderness, the dark power of sorcery, and the 'poisons' that can penetrate human consciousness". The participants in the festival become integrated with the protecting forces of the gods in the "magic circle of creation" (Hobart, 2003).

## ***Similarities in philosophies and treatments***

The previous review of arts of healing across various eastern cultures shows that art, drama, medicine, philosophy, religion, and treatment are an integral part of social life in modern societies. This was also the case in the past in the west. For instance:

“The heart has its reasons, which reason knows not.”  
Pascal (1623-62) wrote in *Pensées*.

Wu (1982) discussed four aspects of psychotherapy used in Chinese medicine:

- Mind-body relationship.
- Legend
- Ssu Chen (Four diagnostic methods) - wen (questioning), wang (observation), wen (auscultation/olfaction [smelling]), and ch'ieh (palpation) (translated by Porkert, 1967).
- Prevention with emphasis on balanced emotion.

The above concepts have been given value in the recent trend of Emotional Intelligence, with the acknowledgement of the importance of balancing various kinds of emotions.

## ***Differences in philosophies and treatments***

There is a huge overlap between eastern and western practice in healing. However, the understanding and discourse about the process of healing are very different. For instance, in Europe, metaphors are used to create wild imagery. They are so called 'bound' images, as they are concrete representations aroused by the verbal element and belong to the production of sense.

In healing performances, wild images are 'unbound' images. They attend to tangible features of the cultural landscape that excite the senses, rather than narratives. They invoke a sense of presence, volition and attentiveness. The tactile and precise aesthetic form of the images prompts attention, awareness and volition. The noisy human activities draw participants into here and now, crafting apathy into attentiveness and fatigue into vitality. The heart-mind opens up a range of possibilities, to a world exterior to itself.

The European anthropological interpretations of healing performance consists of:

- Symbolic
- Intellectual
- Social.

The healing efficacy, from European anthropological perspectives, is evaluated in terms of:

- Act of catharsis.
- Increase in self-understanding.
- Resolutions of social conflicts.

However, the healing performances involve the sensory dimension, which is different from the dominant European anthropological interpretations. If the healing performance is to be considered successful, it must change the presence of senses and how a person feels. The performances change how a body feels by activating the senses with a cacophony of music, taste, sight, touch and kinaesthesia. Healing transformations in the east take within all senses – the visceral reaches of eyes, the ears, the skin, and the tongue. The dramatic actions and the aesthetic performances engage participants and evoke emotional responses. The chants do not necessarily facilitate any social construction of reality. Robert Desjarlais (1996) noticed that not all villagers respond to spirit-calling rites. However, they do help a person to participate, anew, in everyday life. The healing performances involve the imagining of a symbolic ascent from darkness to light, weakness to strength, fragmentation to integration, disharmony to harmony, and defilement to purity. They are not mythical narratives but art in a form of images and poems. They evoke an array of tactile images that in turn evoke a change of perception and sensibility, which contribute to states of health. The symbolic shift from illness to health in the arts is not a method, but a process as well as a structure, like scaffolding. People are transformed artistically, physically and psychologically. Unlike European approaches, the arts do not simply convey information, but they stress the importance of engaging the senses, thereby recreating the socio-psychological realities of human experience (Schieffelin, 1985, 1996, Desjarlais, 1996; Hobart, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

As discussed in the previous Section, the arts of healing emphasize the whole social being across many different cultures as an important ingredient for both mental and physical health. For example, the traditional Chinese medical practitioners view the mind and body relationship with the view of the place of the human in the universe (Wu, 1982). External forces (cultural, political and religious) have significant impact upon our mind and body (example, see Good, 1977 and Cox, 1996). This is the reason why rituals in certain cultures can transform individuals' perceptions of their situation, for example healing performances of Bali (Hobart, 2003). The psychodynamic model assumes the universal aspects of the human quality, and thus glosses over the social aspect of the human world. The aspect of the Social Unconscious in the psychodynamic model's id is under developed. The core philosophical challenge of practitioners in arts of healing is to work through their own theoretical contradiction. On the one hand, the therapist accepts the individual differences in human beings, while, on the other, one seeks the human universality. In this search process, the therapeutic contradictions are the human contradictions:

- Universality exists in diversity.
- Difference itself is universal - a shared human quality.

To address the above contradictions, it is important for the practitioners to engage all the senses of their clients, and help them to recreate the socio-psychological realities of human experience.

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