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Sadness, Soul Loss and Healing Among the Yolmo Sherpa¹

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The Yolmo Sherpa of Helambu, Nepal often experience illness in the form of "soul loss" wherein a sudden fright causes the *bla* or 'soul' to vacate the body and wander about the countryside. When the soul is lost (*bla kalsin*) one lacks the strength and volition to eat, work, travel, and socialize. One has trouble sleeping, witnesses inauspicious dreams, and is prone to further illnesses. If a Yolmo falls sick in this manner he summons a *bombo*. This shaman divines how the soul was lost, and where it has wandered, how best to retrieve it. He then ritually searches for and 'calls' the lost soul back into his patients' body.

I wish here to examine why and how such souls are lost, and how Yolmo healers return them to their owners. Specifically, I wish to study the relation between emotion, knowledge, illness and healing among this Himalayan people. What are the emotional and epistemological foundations of soul loss? How do emotions and knowledge play into the *bombo's* healing efforts?

To begin to answer these questions, we must first consider Yolmo epistemologies of self and other. As for the self, the Yolmo consider it difficult to fathom all aspects of self-experience. Though the *sem* or 'heart-mind' is the locus of personal knowledge and consciousness, there is much that goes on in one's life that this organ of thought and consciousness is not privy to. While the villagers say that "one can know everything about, and that is in, one's *sem*," one can never know all that happens to one's self. For instance, while one's fate and constitution is written on a mirror lodged in the forehead, one can never obtain knowledge of what is stored there. The Yolmo cite a Nepali proverb that catches this dilemma: "written by gods, covered by skin, how can it be seen?"

These limits to self-knowledge directly effect Yolmo understandings of illness. As much of one's existence is hidden from conscious view, often one falls ill without knowing the cause of one's distress. Souls are lost and other illnesses occur without one being aware of it. Only shamanic divination can reveal what has happened and how to ameliorate it.

It is even more difficult to know of others than it is to know oneself. The Yolmo think of the body as a house with one's life-forces dwelling within it. As the body hides its contents from the eyes of others, the Yolmo consider it extremely difficult to know what one's neighbors are thinking or feeling. As villagers have asked me many times, "how can you know what is in another person's heart [*sem*]?" A Yolmo *tser-lu*, or "song of sadness," bemoans the consequences of such for personal distress:

When a forest catches fire
everyone sees it
[but] when one's heart catches fire
only one's own self knows

The import of this song is that while a forest's distress is visible to all, the torments of the heart lie noticed solely by the sufferer.

Along with lamenting the limits of emotional empathy, the Yolmo strive to maintain an equilibrium in their social lives by controlling the expression of personal desires which may run against the social grain. They therefore feel it inappropriate to let others know what they are feeling, and so one needs to control or "hide" one's thoughts and emotions from others. The Yolmo thus exhibit a culture of privacy, revealing little of their inner worlds of others.

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These epistemological limits effect the communication of emotions, for there exist profound circumscriptions on emotional expression. As personal experience is hidden from the gaze of others, anger, sadness and grief are not easily communicated in day-to-day interactions. When angry, a Yolmo will not show it; when grief-stricken, he will hold it within his heart. One sad song sums up the consequences of all this as follows:

If I stay sadness falls to me,
if I go my little feet may ache
the sorrow of little feet hurting,
to whom can I tell?

Now despite the need to "hide" one's emotions, the Yolmo strongly value the ability to express personal distress--to "clean the heart, that is, of distressful emotions." "Lice fill my hair," sings the tragic hero of one folk song,

but I've no mother to extract them
thoughts fill my heart
but I've no mother to explain them to

Separated from family, the singer bemoans a head infested with lice and a heart full of worrisome thoughts. One villager, in explaining the significance of this song, told me that just as one needs to clean one's clothes when dirty, so one needs to clean one's heart when soiled by emotions. However, the absence of intimates can make it difficult to do so, and the heart may go uncleansed.

In general, the Yolmo tend to avoid emotionally intense situations, either through avoiding the circumstances which can lead to such situations, denying their relevance, or refusing to dwell upon them. Rather than confront the terms of their sadness they evade them. As one song puts it,

Better not to think,
if I think I feel sad
to work with one's thoughts
it doesn't help anything

This avoidance of emotionally intense situations spills over, I believe, into the ways that the Yolmo are able to think about emotions. In short, the Yolmo lack a detailed idiom to articulate emotional distress, either interpersonally or intrapsychically. Grief, sadness and anger are, to use Robert Levy's (1973; 1984) term, "hypocognized."

I wish to suggest that these cultural limitations on self-knowledge and emotional expression and empathy relate to the experience of "soul loss." As it is difficult to express emotions to others, personal experiences of distress are left "uncleansed." "Soul loss" thus results from intense experiences of emotional distress which cannot be readily communicated to others.

Case studies support the claim that soul loss is founded upon emotional distress. Often I observed villagers losing their souls after suffering intense grief or sorrow--usually triggered by the death of an intimate. For instance, one middle-aged woman fell ill soon after learning that a close relative had died. She suffered from headaches, fever, a loss of appetite, frightening dreams, and a "heaviness" in the body that weakened her desire to work, move about, and socialize. Soon after falling ill, she consulted a *bombo* who divined that she had lost her soul upon stumbling into a stream while travelling to her relative's funeral.

Another, elderly man fell ill while mourning for a close friend who died in his sleep. Suffering from insomnia, a loss of appetite, and troublesome dreams (such as encountering graveyards and dead persons), he said he probably lost his soul while "walking, alone and frightened, upon a road at night." When I first talked with him, he said he was "just ill from old age, getting older, and afraid of dying," but in fact he was very weak and fragile.

While these example give a sense of how soul loss relates to emotional distress, we must turn to shamanic healings to understand how knowledge ties into illness and healing. During the curing

ceremony, *bombos* beseech gods to enter their bodies. These deities then speak through the shaman's mouth to reveal to an attentive audience the cause, nature and potential cure of the patient's illness. In one divination, for instance, a god revealed the following concerning a patient's ill-health:

Within the last seven months and seven days,
part of the 'soul' (*tse*, or 'life') was lost (*nyamne*, or 'diminished')
During this time, you did not know (of this) in the *sem*,
you did not see with the eye.
When the 'soul' was lost,
you had fallen into fierce anger.

While this passage relates one man's anger to soul loss (specifically, a 'diminished life-span'), in another the god links this illness to a woman's sadness and emotional distress.

The 'soul' has been lost. When the 'soul' was lost,
many tears fell from the eyes.
...When these tears fall from the eyes,
the *sem* is ill with "confusion,"
and she is unable to hold the *sem*.
...in the *sem* there is much "restlessness."

What is most striking about these divinations is that the relationship between soul loss and emotional distress, though readily noted through divination, is not acknowledged on an overt level among the Yolmo. When I subsequently asked the villagers if excessive anger or sadness could cause one's soul to be lost, they doubted the possibility of this happening. And yet the deity 'possessing' the *bombo* clearly states that grief and "fierce anger" induced these illnesses.

What's going on here, then? For one, it would appear that emotional distress lies at the very root of the 'soul loss' experience. It would also appear that the *bombo*'s divinations provide a medium to communicate such distress to others. These two ideas are intertwined: if the healing ceremony serves as a forum to communicate emotional distress, then illness itself may be effected when an individual experiencing grief, sadness or anger is unable to express these feelings to others--precisely because the culture deems it inappropriate to do so. The *bombo*'s divinations thus provide a discursive outlet to communicate or "cleanse" emotions which cannot be otherwise expressed in Yolmo society. Healings, then, are a strategy for communication.

But note that the divination communicates not only to others the play between emotions and illness. Divinations inform the patients themselves of the emotional basis of their illnesses before the divination: as the deity put it, they did not "know in the *sem*," they did not "see with the eye." I would suggest that because Yolmo society prohibits certain understandings of self-experience, including that of emotions, sufferers of soul loss are unaware of the specific emotional foundations of this illness. Shamanic divinations, in turn, are an education into self-experience.

These divinations thus form part of a cultural system of knowledge, the elements of which are as follows. As we have seen, knowing of self and other is a difficult task for the Yolmo. Unable to see within another's heart nor fathom those dimensions of self-experience external to what the *sem* or 'mind' knows, there is much to life that one cannot obtain knowledge of through profane means. Hearts are broken and souls are lost without one being aware of their occurrence.

But the same culture that imposes such harsh limits to personal and interpersonal awareness also provides mechanisms through which this knowledge can be tapped into, for divinations into self and other enable the Yolmo to get some sense of those experiences considered unknowable through secular means. This is where the *bombo* comes in, for he is able to map the vast areas of experience that the *sem* or conscious 'mind' itself cannot approach. A trickster of knowledge, the shaman is able to transcend the limits of self and interpersonal knowledge as set by the culture.

Gregory Bateson (1972:319) once wrote on the self that,

The total self-corrective unit which processes information, or, as I say, "thinks" and "acts" and "decides," is a system whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or of what is popularly called the "self" or "consciousness."

If we compare Bateson's epistemology of the self to that of the Yolmo, we can see that the latter's "self-system" includes aspects of personal experience exceeding the boundaries of the 'conscious mind' or *sem*. There is much that one can not know with the heart, nor see with the eye--but the "self-system" still knows about such matters at some implicit, "unconscious" level. If these matters are of a distressful nature (as with the anger and grief above), then the system communicates to the 'conscious mind' what it knows through divinations into realms of human experience deemed "unknowable"--knowledge, that is, which the west deems as tacit, covert, or unconscious (Levy 1984:227).

I take the divine to be a metaphor for such knowledge. Said to "know everything," the gods stand for all that humans cannot obtain insight into through profane means. Invoked when someone lies sick, their job is to make known what culture does not (and perhaps cannot) permit its members to know in their everyday lives.

As this knowledge comes into play primarily when one is sick, it is evident that the gods are telling the Yolmo mostly about the corrective mechanisms necessary for health. Indeed, these cures are in large part epistemological ones. To divine is to heal. For a while it may be "healthy" and perhaps necessary for Yolmo society to inhibit certain understandings of self and other, these same limits may spawn pathological side-effects. As the body hides its contents from the eyes of other, it is difficult to communicate personal distress to another when the heart, as the song goes, is on fire. And since what is not known cannot be put into words, many of the less tangible aspects of self-experience, such as emotional distress, cannot be communicated to or understood by the conscious mind of the *sem*. Illness is thus evoked when the self fails to express its distress to others or the 'mind', and a break-down of the cultural system of knowledge occurs. Lacking a language, emotional distress leaves no lasting footprints, either in the mind of another or the charted regions of the self.

In sum, the shaman's art is to map those uncharted regions of self-experience, giving image to pain by voicing the language of the gods. As we have seen, soul is one such language, a language of grief, sadness, and emotional distress.

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