

Reaction to Tragic Loss of Sociocultural Environment in the Adivasi Tribes: A Rorschach Study*

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Introduction

Hermann Rorschach considered his work to be a “key to the understanding of culture” and his method “a potential for exploring that which unites.” All sorts of cultural groups have been studied with the Rorschach test, such as Hallowell (1945) with respect to American Indian Tribes; Cora Du Bois in the Indonesian Islands (Abel, 1973); Bert Kaplan with Zuñi, Navaho, Mormons, and Spanish-Americans (1954); L. Bryce Boyer with Chiricaua and Mescalero Apaches (1989); the Lantis study of Nunivak Eskimo personality (1953); Mukerji (1961) studies of Indians; George de Vos’ studies of Japanese Americans (1989); and Risto Fried’s interpretation of popular responses in Finland (1973). These fascinating studies support the statement by V. Franchi and A. Andronikof (1999): “The Rorschach Comprehensive System proves to be an instrument capable of tapping those aspects of an individual’s inner referential world considered to be universal to all cultures. It captures each individual’s unique ‘way of being in the world’.”

However, these data also point out the fact that frequencies and distribution of variables among non-Western and nonindustrial societies are different from current Western normative data. Culture, if defined as a traditional way of life best adapted to the local environmental demands

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and developed within the framework of a particular language, molds the inner world of individuals, i.e., their modes of reacting, reasoning, and expressing their feelings. The difficult task of a “Western” researcher when dealing with “exotic” cultures is to understand the specific ways by which the inner world is expressed and to stop reasoning in comparative terms.

But what happens when the environment suddenly changes, as so often happens nowadays throughout the world, and traditional ways of life are no longer adapted?

In an attempt to answer this question, we used the Rorschach method in a study of the Adivasi tribes from the State of Kerala in the South-West of India. The Adivasi people have deep awareness of a grave crisis with respect to their cultural identity. Throughout their history, the Adivasi tribes have suffered from hostility, oppression, and exploitation from the larger nontribal communities in India. They are now confronted with the tragic loss of their sociocultural environment. They feel that, ultimately, they will vanish into the mainstream of the Indian people. The major factors causing these changes in ethnic culture are Christianization, Hinduization, and government policies of antitribal education.

Our personal experience with Rorschach protocols for traditional people started with 12 Rorschach protocols of polar Eskimos living in North-West Greenland. The protocols were collected by Pr. Jean Malaurie during his scientific mission in Greenland in 1950–1951 but the results were published years later (Beizmann, Malaurie & Trouche-Simon, 1987). It was followed by 45 Rorschach protocols from Eskimos and Tchoukchies living in Tchoukotka (North-East Siberia) during Pr. Jean Malaurie’s Russian and French expedition (1990). The results were published in the book “Tchoukotka 1990” (Salaün de Kertanguy, in press).

In 1993, we used the Rorschach method in a study of 150 young immigrants in France, boys and girls aged 15 to 25, whose parents came from many different countries and varied ethnic backgrounds and who were attending 2-year training courses with the aim of integrating them into French society (Trouche-Simon, 1996). History and current affairs show that human migration inevitably leads to confrontation in the country that hosts immigrants. Meanwhile, in the 1990s, the phenomenon of major cross-migrations has accelerated the disappearance of many original cultures in the world.

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Context

Tribes represent 8 million persons in India (0.8%) and 1.20% in the State of Kerala.

1. The State of Kerala benefits from the best social services in India in terms of life conditions, health, and education for nontribal Indian ethnic groups. The district of Wayanaad, once the paradise of tribal culture, is a vivid example of how the interests of the tribes have been bypassed in the promotion of cash crops.
2. Following the independence of India, policies of economic development led to the destruction of forests. As a result, the Kerala tribes were forced to leave their territories. They were obliged to shift into farming and join the governmental school programs. These programs were dramatically unsuited for them. Forests, once the core of the tribal culture and life, had become no-entry zones for tribal people.
3. The advent of Hinduism and Christianity destroyed the tribes' animistic belief system. Ethnic groups in Kerala and elsewhere in India are facing challenges to their cultural identities, mainly because of the changes taking place in and around their communities.
4. The tribes have been in danger for almost 20 years. They were not able to protect their own community and family life. Younger generations have become victims of the usual urban problems such as alcoholism, unemployment, gambling, delinquency, and the like. Rehabilitation programs devised for displaced tribal people throughout the country produced utter poverty and disease among them. With no land, no capital, and no marketable skills, the tribal individual has few life choices. His only asset is manual labor, but this is undervalued in the modern marketplace.
5. Since the 1980's, tribal children have been forced to learn lessons in the established regional languages that are alien to them. Many adults are compelled into adult education programs to learn the alphabets of nontribal languages. The tribal culture is denied and depreciated by them.
6. Almost all tribal villagers have their own gods and spirits, who guard and protect them from disease and natural disasters. The villagers believe that almost all their ancestors turn into spirits that wander around the village while residing in the hills and valleys, in trees or in stones of unusual shape and sizes. The strong relationship between

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the dead and the living is one of the basic sources for the tribal sense of community. The predominance of Hinduism throughout India represents one more threat to ethnic identity and culture. Tribal deities have been uprooted and replaced by Hindu gods in many places. Traditionally, tribal people do not have temples or idols.

7. The younger generation does not take pride in the rich oral tradition of tribal communities. Political parties lavishly use tribal dances and music to add color to their own processions.

In summary, the ethnic tribal groups of South-West India are undergoing changes over which they do not have any control. The changes have had terrible repercussions: abject poverty, rampant diseases, starvation, deaths, landlessness, exploitation of women, and loss of the traditional religious and social references.

Theoretical Research Context

The present study aims to explore the strategies the Adivasi tribes resort to in coping with the stress of forced acculturation.

Description of the Sample and Procedures

There are some 15 different tribes living in Kerala. We met the four major ones regarding population, process of integration and places of living. They are:

- *The Paniyas*: The Paniyas are casual laborers. They own no land, have no capital, and are unskilled. They are considered a Negroid race and are the poorest among the Wayanaad tribes.
- *The Naikas*: The Naikas engage in gathering fruits and hunting wild animals from the forest.
- *The Kuruma*: The Kuruma are trained farmers and represent the more educated people of the tribes and the upper caste.
- *The Urallis*: The Urallis are artisans; landless and nomadic tribes.

The study was prepared during two stays that occurred one year ago in Kerala. We conducted the project in collaboration with an Indian sociopsychologist and his team and their Indian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) called *HILDA*.

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We offered training sessions in the administration of the chosen tools of investigation (a sociodemographic questionnaire, thematic and free drawings, Raven's progressive Matrices, Card 2 of the T.A.T., and an interview guide developed by Dr. B. Gibello (unpublished) exploring the nature, variety, and knowledge of the symbolic value of cultural objects and traditions). The Rorschach test (Exner, 1993) was administered individually by the first author of this article, duly trained in the Comprehensive System.

The preparation also involved recommendations for simultaneous translation, and we tested the procedures with several volunteer subjects prior to the study. The translator was a referral source person who managed to establish good relationships both with the tribes and the Indian people.

Selection of subjects was done according to the general cultural objective of the research. We took into consideration the people's voluntary acceptance to take part in this research in collaboration with the members of Hilda's NGO. Biography certificates were available for the identification of the ethnic and family origin of the subjects. Subjects presenting behavioral problems in school and in the villages were excluded from the sample.

All Rorschach protocols were scored and completed according to Exner's Comprehensive System and reviewed by a colleague not participating in this study, to whom we are most grateful.

Tests were administered in two settings:

1. In different villages during stays of about two days;
2. In a forest site at the edge of the big city of Sultan Battery, close to a school where wild elephants are trained. Many tribal families came to stay for five days. The atmosphere and the exchange between different ethnic groups were very pleasant.

Total Sample

Our group consisted of 45 subjects: 17 men and 28 women aged 14 to 66 (the mean age was 23). Subjects of both sexes belonged to the four major ethnic groups of Adivasi tribes. Educational levels ranged from illiteracy to elementary school.

Results

In this paper we only report the major Rorschach data: *R*, *High Lambda* style, *Blends*, *EA*, *M*, *Sum C*, *FM*, *H*, *A*, Other contents (*Bt*, *Ls*, *Cl*, *Na*, *Ge*), and Coping Deficit Index.

Total Group

Table 1 indicates that this population as a whole is not well prepared to adjust to acculturation demands: High Lambdas, low EAs, and positive CDIs all point to difficulties in adapting to novel contexts, complex situations, or unfavorable environments.

Table 1. Total group selected variables.

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Freq
R	22	8.69	14	44	45
L	2.28	1.89	0.24	10.33	45
EA*	3.02	2.24	0.5	13	41
M*	2.27	2.26	1	12	26
SumC*	1.81	1.05	0.5	4.5	37
FM*	3.35	1.88	1	8	43
All H*	4.11	3.91	1	20	38
Bt+Ls+Na*	4.8	4.43	0	10.33	39
Isolate*	0.28	0.18	0.04	0.65	42
AllA	8.04	3.78	2	21	45

* Mean calculated on frequency

Table 2. Miscellaneous variables.

	Freq	%
L > 0.99	36	80%
CDI > 3	32	72%
No Blends	24	53%
M = 0	19	42%
SumC = 0	8	18%
Pure H = 0	18	41%
AllH = 0	7	17%

Table 3. Comparison of educated (E) vs non-educated (NE) groups.

	E N = 27	NE N = 18
M = 0	49%	34%
Lambda > 0.99	52%	39%

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It is to be noted that color determinants are much more frequent than human movement determinants, as only eight protocols have SumC = 0, vs 19 which have no M. This indicates that this population is more affectively than ideationally oriented.

The low frequency of M responses is linked with the low frequency of human responses. Instead of human responses, protocols display a huge amount of nature contents (Bt, Ls, Na). This finding provides us with a good insight into the inner referential world of the Adivasi population: they perceive themselves not as individual entities, but rather as participants in a natural environment.

Educated vs Noneducated Tribespersons

Further analysis of the data yielded an interesting and counter-intuitive finding. Our sample was composed of persons who had been brought up in traditional ways and persons who had been taught in regular state schools. The whole sample was then divided into 2 groups, according to whether the subjects had been educated in state schools (Group E) or not (Group NE).

- Group E: 27 subjects, mean age 18.7
- Group NE: 18 subjects, mean age 40.6

Table 3 indicates that in the group characterized by regular state school education (Group E), 49% of the subjects have zero M, as opposed to 34% in group NE; 52% in group E have a high Lambda, versus 39% in group NE.

Discussion

Low EA, High Lambda Style and a positive *Coping Deficit Index*, absence or paucity of M, and especially of *Pure Human content* suggest that while the tribes were well adapted in their limited and well-known forest environment, they have a general deficit in capacities for coping with other life experiences and challenges in more stressful and complicated sociocultural situations.

The very High Lambda Style combined with a Rorschach protocol of average length indicates a particular style of functioning characteristic

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of a subject whose attitude and relation to his environment is very economical. This finding describes people who are less efficient in their adaptation toward the new outside world.

We know that an exaggerated focus on form perception leaves little room for fantasy and spontaneity. Pure form responses are often used for avoiding involvement and dynamic relationship with the others.

In this specific context, we tend to interpret the pure form response as a *primitive* defense against traumatism (Ephraim, 1999). It can also be understood as a self-renouncement in the face of the demands of the nontribal communities: They are forced to leave their nomadic way of life in the forest, go to non-Adivasi schools, and work as *coolies* (employees) in the city. Regular state schooling is primarily focused on “Western” cognitive processes without providing models for developing an interest in identifying with others and growing in human experience. Thus, one might say that the result of low frequency of M, and larger Form responses should be an indicator of adaptive response and behavior used by the tribes against their psychic traumatism. This was found especially in the young tribal generation (Riquelme & Da Ruos, 1999; Ho-A-Sim, 1999), and can point also to efforts to remain in contact with reality.

A Key to Understanding the Data

There exists an important discrepancy between the Rorschach data and the actual attitudes and behaviors of the Adivasi people. In our contacts with them, they displayed a unique relational capacity, a great interest in the procedures and tests, and a high social awareness. They did not resemble the Western “Low EA-High lambda” type of person. It is, thus, legitimate to hypothesize that Rorschach determinants are improper to capture non-Western culture-specific channels of expression of psychological processes. This might be due to the importance of introspection and language for scoring determinants.

Furthermore, analysis of contents shows that the Adivasi people give mostly natural contents, as opposed to human or human made objects.

If we consider these contents as representing a shift from human response, most of our subjects demonstrate that their interest in interpersonal relationship cannot be adequately defined or understood without recognition of their cultural environment, sociological system and traditional symbolic means.

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Conclusion

This study concerns people of Adivasi tribes from the South of India, in the state of Kerala. It has shown that this population is ill-prepared for the dramatic cultural and social transformations that have been imposed on them.

It is striking to see that western style schooling has a negative effect on both development of resources and capacity to deal with complexity.

We have proposed that an *avoidant style* employed by the subjects in effect is used in a constructive way to protect their internal and external realities against misunderstanding, despising, and rejection by foreign cultures.

The most important point is the nonrecognition and the devaluation by the foreign culture of the sociocultural identity of the Adivasi tribes.

The contemporary nonadapted school's educational programs as administered through the regular State school system are probably the single most important element causing this negative sociocultural transformation and forced integration of the Adivasi tribes.

There exist great individual variations in our relatively small group. We are aware that the demonstration of the effects of acculturation of the tribes is probably not sufficient. These data call for prudent generalization. But there is an open door to pursue the analysis of the other data and the encounter with other traditional populations, for the sake of better understanding their psychological functioning in the context of their cultural rules and symbols. These data show, however, how important the use of updated and representative population references is in the psychodiagnostic process. It led us also to consider the subjects in their psychological and environmental social, economic, and cultural sphere as a whole. Further and larger studies still need to be completed.

The history of minority populations confronted with modernity is often that of enslavement and personal suffering. This study has identified a population of individuals exposed to experiences involving loss of family rules, less interest in daily life, and unfavorable interaction with the environment. Unfortunately, they seem to have no choice and are obliged to trust a totally new and unfamiliar nontribal culture, itself a source of distorted interpersonal relationships.

In summary, the findings demonstrated the validity of the Rorschach for measuring the effects of the identity transformation at the interface of cultures. The Rorschach Comprehensive System enables us to consid-

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er that *psychic traumatism* could be correlated with a *High Lambda Style* in revealing factors such as complexity avoidance, cautious expression of affects, narrow and limited frames of reference, and an inclination to view situations in the simplest possible terms.

The results in the present study appear to represent a perspective for future explorations into the role of psychological and contextual factors in the acculturation of ethnic minorities and “traditional” people and also a better understanding of cultural diversity in psychology. It seems possible to try to compare different civilizations or human populations with respect to the level of their psychological functioning and their cultural life conditions.

Limits of the Study

We have seen a group of 45 subjects of tribal culture coming from the same region of India in the process of acculturation with the indigenous nation which was becoming culturally very complex. The information obtained in this research, indicating the possible presence of psychological specific symptoms due to cultural reasons, circumstantial factors, and interethnic-cultural frictions, has to be taken with certain reservations. The representativeness and the number of people in our sample can to a certain extent be questioned, and the sample lacks homogeneity regarding age. Caution should therefore be taken in the interpretation of data.

Thus, further research is needed to address more clearly the question of age and/or school education level in the larger population of the Adivasi or in other cultures. Nevertheless, the present findings do highlight the importance of the unadapted school programs and have implications for the training of the nontribal professionals in their evaluation and intervention among the Adivasi tribes after our stay.

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Résumé

Ce travail a son origine dans la question posée du devenir des peuples traditionnels dans le contexte du changement culturel accéléré par les processus de modernité des sociétés occidentalisées et industrielles. L'étude présentée prolonge une longue recherche psychosociologique et ethnoclinique menée auprès de peuples arctiques: Inuit du Groenland, Esquimaux de Sibérie orientale et Tchouktches (expéditions scientifiques de Jean Malaurie de 1950 à nos jours).

Elle a été réalisée auprès de tribus Adivasi du sud de l'Inde et doit se poursuivre chez des peuples nomades et semi-nomades d'Asie centrale.

Le questionnement est double:

Premièrement, le test de Rorschach est-il transférable à d'autres cultures que celles, industrialisées et occidentalisées, où il a été inventé?

Deuxièmement, le test de Rorschach en Système Intégré peut-il être questionné comme outil d'aide à la prédiction des processus comportementaux, cognitifs et affectifs de sujets confrontés à des situations de mouvances culturelles, sociales et économiques inattendues ou forcées?

Le contenu de cet article est une réponse à ce questionnement.

Les auteurs présentent les résultats obtenus au test de Rorschach de peuples traditionnels, tribus Adivasi du sud de l'Inde, soumis à de profondes transformations de leur milieu environnant. Le contrôle exagéré des affects et l'attitude de distanciation, freinant l'expression ouverte et extériorisée de leur vécu personnel et relationnel, aboutissent à une importante coartation affective et cognitive.

Ce résultat a été interprété comme un signe de traumatisme psychique

coûteux, comme une impossibilité à lutter face à une angoisse probablement envahissante qui témoigne de l'importance de l'impact de l'environnement: plus il y a de décalage et de déracinement avec le lieu d'origine, plus il y aurait des risques de défaillance identitaire.

Mais cet état d'inhibition et de coartation des tribus permettrait aussi l'élaboration d'interrelations simplificatrices et constituerait une position d'a-conflitualité avec les Indiens non-tribus, groupe culturellement et économiquement dominant. En effet, les réponses qui s'expriment uniquement par la forme font cependant référence au réel, à l'objectivité, ce qui serait un compromis adaptatif.

Des études ont montré que l'activité fantasmatique est mobilisée par la perte et le traumatisme. Ce mode privilégié d'interaction avec l'autre, sans implication projective ni attraction sensorielle, est celui qui est utilisé par ces tribus. La situation traumatique ne semble pas pouvoir favoriser les capacités d'expression pulsionnelle ni les représentations fantasmatiques.

L'auteur s'interroge également sur les aspects *pathologiques* des indices au Rorschach repérés dans les groupes précédemment étudiés, Inuit du Groenland, Esquimaux de Sibérie orientale et Tchouktches et particulièrement chez les tribus Adivasi de cette étude. Les données obtenues ont été envisagées comme une *attitude défensive opérante* et comme une *nécessité de survie psychique identitaire et culturelle* particulièrement nécessaires pour faire face à des circonstances déstabilisantes du nouveau milieu environnant.

Ce qui pourrait alors découler de ces réflexions, c'est une conception du pathologique qui ne serait pas forcément symétrique ni applicable d'une culture à l'autre.

Le pathologique pourrait avoir une autre signification que celle d'un indicateur de déviance ou de troubles divers.

En conclusion, cette étude montre que l'utilisation du test de Rorschach en Système Intégré en interculturel est pertinente. L'interprétation doit cependant tenir compte des caractéristiques intrinsèques du fonctionnement psychique du sujet dans ses aptitudes à transposer ses multiples registres perceptifs, cognitifs, imaginaires et symboliques selon les concepts théoriques de l'universalité du psychisme, dans un contexte à définir à chaque fois, et variant d'un type de culture à l'autre selon les principes du culturalisme.

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio es el de comprobar la utilidad del Rorschach (Sistema Comprensivo) en el contexto de la psicología transcultural. Esta cuestión ha sido largamente debatida desde antiguo por muchos autores: Hallowell (1938,1945) en sus trabajos sobre las tribus indias americanas, Cora Du Bois (1953) con pobladores de las islas de Indonesia, Bert Kaplan (1954) con sujetos zuñi, navajos, mormones y americanos de origen hispano; L. Bryce Boyer (1962) con chiricauas, mezcaleros y apaches y, posteriormente (1972) con esquimales; George De Vos (1970) con grupos de americanos, japoneses y coreanos; y Risto Freíd (1973) buscando las respuestas Populares en Finlandia. V. Franchi y A. Andronikof (1999) escribieron “el Sistema Comprensivo de Rorschach” se muestra como un enfoque capaz de capturar aquellos aspectos referenciales del mundo interno, que se consideran universales en todas las culturas. Mediante él se accede al personal “modo de ver el mundo de cada individuo.” I. Weiner (1995) también señaló que: “a pesar de la nacionalidad, origen étnico o estatus sociocultural, las respuestas al Rorschach son capaces de señalar qué tipo de persona es cada uno y los conflictos y luchas internas que influyen en su conducta.”

Los movimientos migratorios se han acelerado y han crecido exponencialmente en algunos países. Groenlandia, Siberia y la India se encuentran con muchas dificultades para mantener una adaptación social óptima ante los cambios y nuevas realidades culturales y socioeconómicas. Estos hechos nos llevaron a intentar comprender qué ocurre con la población tradicional, que siempre vivió en un mismo ecosistema y en territorios protegidos, cuando es sometida a una brutal transformación social, cultural y/o económica. Por ejemplo:

- Los esquimales del pueblo de Thulé no estaban preparados para acoger las instalaciones de una importante base militar americana y lucharon contra la decisión del gobierno de tener que ceder a los militares gran parte de su territorio de caza.
- Los tchoutktchies y esquimales del nordeste de Siberia tuvieron que sobrevivir con muchas dificultades al colapso del régimen comunista y al descubrimiento del modo de vida occidental.
- Las tribus adivasi de la India tuvieron muchos problemas y movimientos sociales cuando pasaron repentinamente a ser esclavos de otras tribus no indias.

El Sistema Comprensivo nos ha mostrado el vacío psíquico y la

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afectividad oculta, que reducen la disponibilidad de los recursos e indican la existencia de un trauma psicológico, debido probablemente al no reconocimiento de la identidad sociocultural original de cada tribu, en especial entre los más jóvenes.

Sin embargo, la gente de las tribus del distrito de Wayanaad (Estado de Kerala, al sur de la India) nos ofrecieron un rayo de esperanza durante la ejecución de este proyecto. A través de la recuperación de sus típicas formas de expresión, como el teatro callejero y la música folklórica, los jóvenes están intentando volver a captar los recuerdos de las generaciones anteriores. Estas formas de arte, en su propia lengua materna, les devuelven la esperanza de poder revivir sus tradiciones, creencias y cultura, que estaban casi perdidas en los últimos años. En sus esfuerzos por transferir los conceptos de la forma de vida tribal a los jóvenes, los dirigentes están abriendo nuevas vías para retener la identidad cultural de varios grupos étnicos del sur de la India.