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COMMENTS...

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CHILDREN IN EXCEPTIONAL SITUATIONS:
THE ROLE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN
DESIGNING PROGRAMMES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

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"For we think that, although the hazards of life have caused you to be disabled, you are right to protest at the tops of your voices that society should never confine you to a ghetto or relegate you to the sidelines, whether in family life, at school, in professional life, or in life in general. I belong to a society that subscribes to a particular philosophy where the disabled are concerned: we consider them to be the children of God."

- Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, Director-General of Unesco:

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is meant to emphasize the need for anthropological research about the way in which children in exceptional situations are integrated or non-integrated in so-called traditional and developing communities. Up to now a really neglected subject in anthropological theory and research is the study of the relationships between children in exceptional situations and their environment in traditional and developing societies. Such a study could be of great help for the understanding of the social organization and the philosophical background of such cultures.

What is proposed to be so investigated is how communities react against children who are for one reason or another outside the group we generally consider as normal children. If something is to be done for the integration of such children, for example, in a society where the traditional way of living is subjected to strong modernizing influences, it should be clear to the authorities and to the officers of child protection agencies that the only thoroughly fruitful way for pragmatic interference demands an insight into the way members of the local community traditionally deal with the problem of such children. For example, let us take the case of children born out of wedlock. To set up legal regulations copied from those of a quite different social context - maybe from French or English marriage legislation - can prove to be more disturbing from the view of child protection than the local way of dealing with natural children.

The same can be said of the problems resulting from the alienation of handicapped children who are isolated in institutions for special education, in far-away towns.
This paper, however, does not concern itself with therapeutic strategies that need to be adopted for the promotion of the mental health of both the child and the community in which it lives.

II. WHO ARE CHILDREN IN EXCEPTIONAL SITUATIONS

They are the children who are regarded in a given culture as physically or socially abnormal. As a matter of fact, abnormality and normality are culturally fixed categories. That is, a child with a particular disability may be considered a normal child in one culture and an abnormal child in another. This can be illustrated by reference to mentally retarded children. In a traditional rural or nomadic society, mentally retarded children may be integrated in the economic and social life without much difficulty and are not stigmatised as abnormal. The same cannot be said in an industrialized urban community where learning abilities and scholarly achievements are valued and rewarded. Here a mentally retarded child is quickly eliminated from school and transferred to institutions for special education. From this moment on the child will be considered by his environment to be abnormal and will be so stigmatized throughout his life.

As far as the anthropological research on children in exceptional situations is concerned, there is a difference between the physically exceptional and the socially exceptional child.

The physically exceptional children, according to the analysis of ethnographic facts, fall into such categories as:

(i) The sensory, motor or mentally handicapped child;

(ii) The albino child;

(iii) The child with minor defects: e.g. a child with one finger or toe less or extra; and with a harelip

(iv) The child with physical characteristics (not necessarily a handicap) which impose upon him a mark of abnormality: e.g. when milk-teeth erupt first out of the upper jaw-bone and not as usually out of the lower.
The socially exceptional children fall into the following categories:

(i) Children with specific prenatal and natal characteristics, i.e.
   - twins and triplets;
   - occupying a special position in the order of conceptions or births, e.g. a child born after twins, a child born after one or several mis-carriages or still-born children; a first child;
   - born in an exceptional way, e.g. born with their feet first or born with a caul;
   - declared or believed that they are reborn spirits or that they have been procreated by spirits.

(ii) Children of special persons, e.g.
   - of ministers of magic and religion;
   - of persons of high-status such as chiefs, kings, princesses, heads of extended families and the like;
   - of persons of low-status: (i.e. marginal social groups, such as of slave and serf descent).

(iii) Children born out of exceptional sexual relations, e.g.:
   - permitted pre-marital or extra-marital sexual relations, such as children procreated in the name of a sterile or deceased person;
   - imposed sexual relations such as those in conformity with religious, magical or political regulations.
- forbidden sexual relations: natural, adulterous and incestuous

(iv) Children in specific circumstances, e.g.

- orphans;
- adopted children;
- children of divorced parents;
- other specific circumstances such as when a child is dedicated to a spirit and is considered a sorcerer or a witch; when it is born posthumous and given in pledge; or when a girl replaces, as spouse, her deceased sister or niece.

III. A SAMPLE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL FINDINGS RELATING TO CHILDREN IN EXCEPTIONAL SITUATIONS

Other than on the situation of twins or orphans, there is a dearth of valid information on exceptional children in ethnographic literature. When something is said about handicapped children, what is mostly mentioned relates to whether they are kept alive or not. There is hardly any information about how they are cared for and educated.

An investigation about the way a community reacts against its exceptional children can be undertaken by an outside researcher only when he has begun to enjoy the fullest confidence of his informants. Therefore, a cross-cultural study of the children in exceptional situations would have to rely most of all on investigations done by local researchers. The active interest of psychopedagogical, medical and anthropological sections of universities in the developing world and research centres and of child protection agencies is therefore essential.
Some reliable information concerning children with physical handicaps or malformations has been traced for this paper from twenty-seven Central African societies, of them only seven societies have envisaged to kill or to let die those children, and even in them, individuals could react differently. About the Manja (1), living in the south of the Central African Republic, it is reported that a handicapped or mis-shapen new-born would probably be killed, but the father could also give this child to a friend who, then, might or might not let it live (2).

The influence of the prevailing concept of life and of magico-religious faith on the lot of children with a handicap or a malformation is very great. Sometimes, the birth of such children is attributed to the will of a deity or an ancestral spirit, perhaps as a punishment for a transgression of social and religious norms. If this is the case, the parents and members of the concerned families are expected to accept their fate.

The Lendu from north-eastern Zaire interpret the birth of children with certain malformations in this way (3). With reference to this it can be mentioned that the idea that the birth of handicapped or mis-shapen children is an expression of God's will or even punishment, continues to be current among European christianized people here and there.

An example for the direct impact of magical belief is the association of malformation with sorcery. In former times, among the Mpangu, a division of the Kongo-people from lower Zaire, squint-eyed children were killed because they were assumed to be sorcerers. In the system of their belief, sorcerers were described as people with a double sight. The same author, who reported this in 1938 writes that squint-eyes still hinder normal relations between adults (4). A specific handicap or malformation could also be interpreted as a proof for the supernatural origin of a child. The attitude in regard to an albino is typical of this. There are different examples of the traditional belief in the supernatural origin of albino children in the Central African area. When albinos are seen as reborn spirits, they are treated with great respect, but, sometimes, they are also feared (5). Among different Kongo subgroups, albino children really had a special status, and with them also twins and other children who had been declared - sometimes after divination following a dream - to be a reincarnation of some spirit. About the Solongo it is said that such a child has a
separate existence from both the parents through whom he became a human being. His parents should take care not to sadden him, or even worse, to vex him. If he is improperly treated, he would choose to die as a human being, become a spirit again and take vengeance from these unworthy parents and on the whole village. To express his will, a wish or even a caprice, the spirit-child uses some other person of the family or from the village and reveals in a dream what he wants. The person who dreams about such a spirit-child will immediately inform the parents who as quickly as possible comply with the demands (6).

Most Central African societies take care of their handicapped children in one way or another. As one looks through the list of traditional remedies and takes into account the magical ways of healing, it is quite clear that the healthy members tried to help and, if possible, to cure the disabled members of their community. Thus, if an Ngbaka child from north-western Zaire was born with a malformation, a wood-carver would be asked to reproduce this malformation in a statue which the family would use in cults for the benefit of the handicapped child (7).

A given culture may also create an exceptional situation for a normal child. The Ngbandi, also from north-western Zaire, sometimes classified as twins, a child born alone. This was the case when something indicated that the new-born had "eaten" his twin-brother or sister inside the mother's womb. A sign for such an incident could have been the baby had one finger or toe less or extra, or that a member of the family had dreamed about such an incident and that this dream was confirmed by divination. This child born alone was then venerated as it had to be done for twins (8).

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Many of these traditional ways by which Central African communities dealt with some categories of exceptional children may now belong to former times. But the persistent influence of traditional belief and reactions has been sufficiently demonstrated concerning Europeans and North-Americans living in modern towns, and still better concerning those living in rural districts (9). So, by neglecting these attitudes, the promotion of an adapted way of integrating exceptional children into quickly changing societies of the developing world is obstructed for the greater part. This may be
illustrated with reference to the experience of several voluntary organizations which worked with disabled children in Tunisia.

During discussions with the staff of these organizations, they stressed the necessity of knowing the social, economic and cultural background in relation to the problems of the exceptional child. For example, some actions in favour of blind and deaf-mute children that are seen as fundamental by the organizations, do not yield good results if traditional attitudes and opinions are ignored. Social and cultural circumstances, as feeding and housing habits, also influence the occurrence of those two mentioned handicaps. Even traditional marriage regulations may prove to be a cause for blindness and deafness as this is the case with consanguine marriages.

How can the members of the medical staff and the social workers adequately influence the mentality of the public and the reactions of the family, give advice to the parents about the care and education their child needs or convince them of the necessity to send their child to far-away institutions where it will receive special education, if they have no information about the local way of dealing with such children?

IV. RELATING SPECIAL EDUCATION TO SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

Reasons directly connected with special education demand that socio-cultural factors be given due consideration.

First of all, it is necessary to adapt to local situations, the measurement techniques that must determine if a child is able to follow special education. Attempts to use European and North-American intelligence and personality tests with non-Western populations have raised many doubts about the usefulness and validity of such testing in a cross-cultural way. It has already been said in connection to the testing of North-American exceptional children that:

"Many of these tests are so inadequately sampled that their results are not even applicable to non-white subjects." (10).
This statement gives us an idea of the problems which psychological anthropology has to face when methods from experimental psychology are to be used.

Anthropological research may help to overcome some other difficulties such as the adjustment of didactic material needed for special education and the insertion, in training programmes of personnel in charge of special education, of some knowledge about traditional opinions and reactions relating to such children. Both these aspects are very important as it is the policy of most governments to integrate as much as possible the handicapped and other exceptional children in the economic life and development process, so that the accent is put on special education and not on charity. The scope of this educational effort can be illustrated by reference to the fact that sixty percent of twenty thousand blind children tested in Tunisia were found to have the aptitudes to play an active role in the national economy and development (II).

CONCLUSION

One can only define exceptionality in relation to normality. To answer the question:

"How are we to measure maladjustment if the incidence of its classifiable subtypes varies from culture to culture and from social class to social class?" (12)

Anthropology could probably be of some help, if the influence of tradition and acculturation is analysed. It would, therefore, be useful to integrate the results of an anthropological study of the child in exceptional situations into the therapeutical and developmental strategies.
REFERENCES

(1) The name of the people or community is written only by the stem and eventual prefixes have been dropped, e.g. the Bakongo are designated as the Kongo and the Asolongo as the Solongo.


(3) Maenhout M., Les Walendu, Bulletin des Juridictions Indigènes et du Droit Coutumier Congolais, 1939, No.3, p.69,

(4) Van Wing J., Etudes Bakongo II. Religion et Magie, Institut Royal Colonial Beige, Bruxelles, 1938, p.106.

(5) Last year a trial was held by the Grand Jury in Liège, Belgium, against a Senegale woman, from north-eastern Zaire, mother of six children. She was accused of the murder of her albino child by dropping it into the Meuse river, on the 22nd of January 1979. This albino child was born in Brussels on the 19th of July 1978 because its mother had come to Belgium for the delivery. When she remarked that her newborn remained pale, although he had negroid traits, she tried to make him black by all means. She then returned to Zaire leaving the child in the care of a Belgium couple. Although this couple proposed to adopt the child they had looked after over a period of eight months, upon the mother's return she stated she had come back to take the child to show it to the head of the family in Zaire. She then dropped the child in the nearby river. She had been under such strong pressure during the period she had spent at home that she had finally acted, according to her declaration, for the best interest of her albino child. In the Senegale society it is believed that an albino child is a reborn waterspirit who should be rendered to the world of spirits, because it is a serious threat to the whole community.


(7) Burssens H., La Fonction de la sculpture traditionnelle chez les Ngbaka, Brousse, Novembre 1958, p.16.


