

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Thursday, 03 November 2005

Reading

- Robert R. Desjarlais, *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas*, chs. 4-7, pp. 90-197.
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Desjarlais' work showcases the uses of ethnography to elicit people's experiences, e.g. "soul loss" doesn't map directly onto depression.

student presentation

Robert Desjarlais teaches at Sarah Lawrence College. He worked in Nepal as well as with the homeless in Boston.

We must understand the culture to understand their bodily experience.

- *How do we construct everyday lived experience?*
- *How do we use our bodies to interpret our surroundings?*

There are diverse actors with direct experiences. Sensory experiences have different meanings according to particular culture but are uniform overall.

In Nepal there is **hierarchal geographic distribution**, e.g. Tibetan Lamas are at the top of the mountain (around the temples), then the Tamang and Yolmo (those with local shamanic practices, little consultation with Tibetan medicine but similar nonetheless). Evident here is the relation of **illness** to **society** and **geography**. **Spacial organization** is also important, e.g. the Yolmo conceptualization of the cosmos and their relation to the five directions and how that correlated to the body (similar to Classen and Scheper-Hughes and Lock).

The household wants to be independent but must conform to social life (village, temple). Surface harmony is maintained in the family as well as with outsiders. Thus, **harmony is a major social value**. This begs the question, what are a culture's values and how are they embodied? (Chapter 2 covers cultural values and themes thereof.)

A central tension in Yolmo life was **autonomy vs. interdependence** between subgroups and individuals. Individuals were characterized by the **heart/mind** dialectic which dictated that a person's action will eventually align with society.

There was a **fundamental tension** between **personal desire** and meeting **social needs** – note how this relates to the *individual body* and the *social body* of Scheper-Hughes and Lock. This reflects notions of how **personhood** affects **psychological stress** and how this stress influences the vulnerability to affliction.

The Yolmo always wanted the whole body to be photographed. Here we see how the body is filled with icons and images. It is a space to be valuable and to be filled with meaningful artifacts. As such, **the body is a microcosm of the whole world**. (This also relates to know the

body is analogized to the house in Yolmo metaphors.)

Illness is related beyond the body – ghosts/demons have *intrusions* into the body, and the shaman *extracts* them. Once the ghost goes deeper inside the body, the affliction becomes less curable – to prevent things from getting to this, amulets/rings are worn to **protect the body from invasion**. It is the shaman that binds the body.

Shamanic healing practices are also ways to **bring emotions** into the open.

Ch. 3: **Aesthetic forms** are local ways of being, embodied by **visceral experiences** instead of concrete experiences. The concept of aesthetic forms addresses how people relate to emotions and experience the world – they arise from culture/society. The aesthetic experience affects a person's behavior and feeling.

For the Yolmo, to be healthy was a **balancing of life**.

- *Is Desjarlais meeting the claims he sets out with?*

He address **issues of representation**, arguing that anthropology needs to take into account the **sensory level** more. There has been a shift in **methodology** that has moved increasingly to **reflexivity**.

- *What is the legitimate way of producing knowledge?*

Desjarlais says that field experience can shed light *locally* but did not argue that his experience was exactly the same as the Yolmo's. This **phenomenological view** takes into account **intersubjectivity** and the different forms of communication beyond the spoken level. There is *not* a direct mapping of one's own culture onto the culture that is being studied.

Desjarlais' sensory experience acts as a **map of analysis** for the lived experience. Here we reiterate Csordas: *do we read experiences as texts or at different levels?* The level of analysis of semiotics/meaning moves to a deeper examination of what is *felt* at the level of the body.

Anthropology of the senses now adds more to **epistemology**. There are now different ways write about and express experience. Ethnographers know things that they are not explicitly told. There is more to field experience than simply verbal communication.

Yolmo notions of embodiment are relational. How is the individual situated in the community? How does he/she relate to the cosmos and external forces that can penetrate him/her? The concept is socially relational but is not bounded – what is happening at the sensory level? The sensory experience relates to cultural values of the individual.

There is a **matter of distance** for critical assessment. Desjarlais addresses questions of gender, roles, process of leaving home/kin, and separation (e.g. Yolmo songs of pain). *Is methodology of looking at formal forms of expression truly indicative of lived experience?* How patterned are an individual's experiences of emotion? Notions of personhood affect illness. Illness could be a protest or response to loss.

Desjarlais' argument takes away from the **political realm** and instead looks at the values and

symbolism at the sensory level. *What information does this approach give us?*