SOME THOUGHTS ON THE PROCESS OF IMMIGRATION

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Introduction

> An Indian man sits quietly in the Heathrow Airport Terminal. He seems to look at something inside himself and his eyes are empty, inward looking. After a couple of days the terminal staff starts to notice him and ask what is he doing, why does he not go out and leave the terminal like all the other passengers? He answers that he has flown from Bombay to London and is now waiting for his soul to arrive.

I suspect this is true for all immigrants. For some the soul never arrives. In many cases it takes three generations to become a full member of the new society, to be fully born into it.

Throughout history human beings have moved from place to place. Very few people in modern times are ab-originals, people who have been there from the beginning. Numerous studies have approached immigration from the viewpoint of politics, culture, religion, sociology, and economics. It has been only recently that the subject of immigration has become the focus of health professionals and psychotherapists. So far surprisingly few psychoanalytical articles have been published about immigration and its hidden unconscious meanings.

Freud's metaphor

Sigmund Freud had a metaphor for an individual human life as a migration of peoples. When a tribe or nation move on their way to a new area, there are some particular places where the whole group has to stop. These can be natural obstacles, river crossings, battlefields, or very good areas to live. Wherever the nation stops for a longer period of time, some families from the group decide to stay while the main group continues its migration further on. When there is a major obstacle or crisis confronted by the main group, it withdraws along its previous route and stops at those spots where a part of the group had settled to live earlier. Freud called these points fixation points and he used this metaphor to characterise regression, that is a return to an earlier state of functioning.

This metaphor is not only helpful in describing the processes and vicissitudes of human life, it is also helpful in describing the immigration process itself.

Conscious and unconscious fantasies

When people get to the point of immigration, they have certain fantasies about

the new country. It is almost always seen as a better place to live, the land of milk and honey, the promised land. It is the place where life will be as it was thought to be, the land of harmony, success, prosperity, beauty and peace. God's own zone. All the people in the new country will be welcoming of them and they will experience a boost of internal and material growth. In general, the new land is a place where the problems experienced in the old country cease to exist and a new, better life starts. The new land is the land of hope where the nurturing earth mother will take care of her (new) children.

On a deeper, unconscious level the new land represents forbidden knowledge. In the myth of Eden, Adam and Eve go to a new zone and eat from the tree of the knowledge, and their eyes open. Consequently they are expelled from the paradise. The voluntary immigration to a new zone turns out to be an exile.

In the Oedipus myth the baby Oedipus 'immigrates' to a new country. When he grows, he wants to know the truth about his life, and visits the Oracle in Delphi. The Oracle tells Oedipus that he will kill his father and marry his mother. To avoid this terrible fate, Oedipus emigrates again. On the road, without knowing it, he kills his real birth father, Laius, and then struggles with the Sphinx, who asks him a riddle. Oedipus has the answer, beats the Sphinx, and wins his birth mother as the prize for liberating the town from the terrible Sphinx-monster. In his new place, as the king of Thebes, married to his mother, Oedipus rules, and procreates several children and for a while everything seems good. Then, odd things start to happen in Thebes. There is a pestilence, people die and become disturbed. Oedipus needs new knowledge, which leads to the realisation of the incest and hence to the destruction of his life to that point. He blinds himself. The ability to see the world is taken away, and, at the same time, his ability to see inside, his insight, increases. Oedipus pays a high price for his knowledge – essentially, for his growth.

When Abraham, the Patriarch, leaves Ur, the city of his ancestors to emigrate with his people in search of the new promised land, he responds to the call of God. He wants knowledge, and he is called to pay a high price too. God tempts him and he is called to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, until eventually God intervenes.

It seems to be in our unconscious that curiosity and sin are equated. Curiosity is a forbidden proclivity and to be inquisitive and to desire new knowledge is in a way a sinful act. The Biblical meaning of knowing is sexual intercourse: "and Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived, and bare Cain and said I have gotten a man from the Lord". In our unconscious to 'know' has sexual meaning too, and it is therefore prohibited. In the same way, to get to know a new country is like entering a forbidden zone.

Winnicott looks at the growth process from the point of aggression. According to him, the growing up of a human being is, on the unconscious level, experienced

as a forbidden and aggressive act and creates feelings of guilt so that one might feel that one is not allowed to do it.

Consider again the myth of Eden. It can be taken to symbolise a birth. You are expelled from Paradise and you have to start your journey in this land. You become painfully aware of good and bad, you are faced with the most primitive anxieties, persecutory anxiety and depression, and you have lost the ideal object. You are haunted by horrors which you have to face on your own and there is the loss of a continuous food supply via the umbilical cord. ("in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread".) You are in a new, unknown territory. This (re)birth trauma is to a certain extent the immigrant's experience.

Issues of identity

The central problem for every immigrant is a transitory loss of stable identity, that is, the sense of one's continuous being as an entity, distinguishable from all others. A sense of identity includes the relation between an individual and the group. The connection to others is an essential part of the identity of every human being and the sense of stable identity is only developed in interaction with one's own group. Within the concept of stable identity we can distinguish at least three components: spatial, temporal and social integration.

> Spatial integration refers to the interrelationship between the parts of the self, including physical self and it gives the person cohesion and makes it possible to compare and contrast objects. It helps the person to distinguish between self and non self – in other words, individuation. (I am this and this, different from the others.)
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> Temporal integration connects the different experiences over time and establishes continuity between the different experiences of self from one moment to the next. It forms the groundwork for the feeling of sameness. (I am the same person as I was earlier in my life in different circumstances and I see that I have changed, but still feel that all this belongs to me.)
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> Social integration is established by projective and introjective identification and it has to do with relations between aspects of self and aspects of objects/other people. It forms the basis for the feeling of belonging. (I belong to this family, and I am part of this group of people and a part of this nation.)

Usually all these different aspects of identity are shaken and at least partially lost for some time during the immigration process.

A recent television documentary about immigrants was interesting in this respect. It was obvious that most of the immigrants interviewed suffered from nostalgia. They had very idealised ideas about the country of origin and they

established their identity mainly on the traditions of their old country. It was surprising to see how badly they needed those traditions to feel who they were, to have a sense of identity.

Adaptation

In an immigrant's life both this rebirth and birth trauma are often relived during the adaptation process to the new land. On one hand, for most the new land is the good, idealised part and the old country is the worthless and bad one. It seems to be of vital importance to keep this dissociation, because if not, the consequent confusion is too much to handle. The identity crisis that is created by immigration heals slowly and subsequently the dissociation has to be maintained for a while. To assimilate good and bad and to tolerate ambivalence is an arduous and painful process and for some people it is never possible to progress further than the dichotomy of black and white, good and evil. On the other hand, for others the old is the home and the new land is only a colony. Sometimes this continues over several generations, as in a third generation New Zealander, still speaking of England as home.

Transitional space

As psychotherapists we know that creating a transitional space, an internal playground, for the patient in the session is often of vital importance. If you are not able to create it, the therapy does not sound right. Winnicott says that there is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing and from playing to shared playing and from this to cultural experiences. The space where the cultural experience is located is the potential space between the individual and the environment (originally the object). Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play. Winnicott calls this area of cultural experience the third area. (The other two areas are the inner, personal, psychic reality and the actual world with the individual living in it.) This intermediate area varies from one individual to another. The capacity to trust has a major impact on its development. The child must be able to trust mother to be able to create and develop this intermediate area. When immigrants encounter the new country, having usually lost a lot of the support network that was there in the old country, they are extremely vulnerable and easily lose trust in new people and in themselves. To find somebody, or something to use as a transitional object, is of vital importance. To find one person and to attach to them, and to be able to cling to them is often the only thing needed to help the immigrant to develop their new 'play area'. If nobody is available, the consequences can be far reaching. Paranoid anxieties and paranoia are the most common problems among immigrants.

The physical environment

When an immigrant leaves the homeland, everything in the old country continues

to change and people die. The physical environment stays as it is. You remember your town, its houses, your holiday places and secret spots. They become much more representative of the old country than the people living there. The internal image of the old country becomes a landscape. During the time of upheaval the importance of permanence of the land and landscape increases. To a certain degree the same seems to happen in the new country too. A friend of mine, a colleague, who had arrived in New Zealand three years prior to me, said after my arrival: "All your images and perceptions of this country will change, only the landscape and the beauty of the nature, will stay". After being here for five years I agree entirely with him. I continue to find myself stunned by the beauty of the New Zealand scenery.

Language

For an immigrant, the saddest thing is that whenever you open your mouth to say something, people realise that you are not from here. You are different, odd, strange, a foreigner. Language is the most resistant to change. The only exceptions are children who can acquire the new, local accent and speak as the locals do.

The loss of your native language is very painful and changes your life more than anything else. "After I had lived in NZ for ten years I went back to visit my old country. I felt one of them, nobody noticed me, I was one of the crowd, it was wonderful. I was also surprised to find how easy it was to express myself, how little energy was needed for writing and talking and everyday life. I had been totally unaware how much energy I had spent by using English, which was my second language".

The structures of different languages are very different and the ways in which language creates images and transmits them, are very different from one language to another. For an immigrant the learning of the new language means therefore also moving to a new and different world of concepts and thinking. Chomsky says that language makes order possible in the world. In every language the order is different. Ricoeur says that language is not only spoken, it also speaks. So when a person learns the language, they simultaneously take on board unconsciously the many hidden meanings of the words. The language speaks at different levels. Consider multi-levelled expressions like 'cover up', 'striking', 'mind blowing', 'pull your socks up'. We work and our job works on us, it changes us. If you are a truck driver, this job, driving around, changes you and makes you more and more a truck driver. In the same way, the language you speak changes you, it works on you. So every immigrant who comes to a country where their own language is not spoken starts to change just because of the continuous work of the language. It forms a threat to the old identity and the old ways of seeing themselves and the world around them.

The speed with which immigrants learn the new language is strongly related to their attitude to the new culture and their own sense of identity. Sometimes a new immigrant learns the local accent surprisingly quickly and to our surprise this person may go into a deep depression in a couple of years. It then becomes obvious that this way of integrating to the new country was a manic attempt to avoid all the pain the shift had caused. Conversely, with other immigrants we see that the new language does not progress. It is mostly the feeling of losing one's identity that prevents the integration and change that is necessary to becoming a member of the new society.

Even being born in an English speaking environment, still presents some problems. Your accent differentiates you and it might be a surprise to you that, in spite of your fluent English, you are seen as a foreigner.

Settling

Sometimes it happens that after the new country is first idealised, the reality turns to disappointment and the old country becomes idealised and a target of nostalgic thoughts and feelings. It often leads the newcomer to return to the old country, and the same de-idealisation process is repeated again in the country of origin. There are people who have done three returns to the old country and three subsequent re-immigrations and then finally settled into the new land. This kind of movement back and forth finally solves the immigrants' ambivalence and helps them to accept the reality of the new country.

In most cases immigrants are surprisingly active and, in fact, pro active. This is one of the advantages of having left all the old stuff behind. In the home country they were once helpless babies and traces of this helplessness and dependency on parents and parental figures stayed with them. When they emigrate and leave them behind, all the world becomes their playground. It is easier for them to feel free to do what they think is wise and what they want. In the new country inhibitions can seem much milder. If to be potent means, on the unconscious level, an attack or insult towards the parents, like taking their place, then to have left the parents behind means they do not control in the same way. Another issue that contributes to effectiveness is the internalisation of the parents. When you have nothing to do with them in the reality, they start to live inside in the same way as happens after the parents have died. They live inside you and you can use their wisdom and cross fertilise it with the wisdom of the new objects in the country of immigration.

If we think of the immigrant as a bridge between two countries, two cultures and two different societies, we see the positive, connecting side of immigration. The world is, by their mere existence, made a more stable and a more understanding and tolerant place to live in. The immigrants often complain about this bridge-feeling, one foot in the old and the other in the new country. It is also a problem

for the receiving people. They may feel that immigrants are never really like them, being in a way unfaithful by keeping their old habits and old contacts. It seems hard for the immigrants too to see that is also a privilege and an unavoidable part of their life.

New immigrants, by their lack of knowledge of the new culture, and by their fragile balance and tendency to imitate, may also be an easy prey for all kinds of extremist movements, social, political and spiritual. We get what we deserve. The environment, or new country is like a mirror. You see your own image. If you are optimistic, positive and full of joy, you will do well. If you are pessimistic, full of negative expectations and critical of the new country, you will get a negative response and it will be hard for you.

Given that, the reactions of the receiving people can generally be divided into two groups. The first reaction is when the immigrant is experienced as a new sibling, an intruder, who disrupts the old good balance and harmony. The immigrant is considered stupid, ignorant and does not deserve to be here as they steal 'our' possessions and do not respect all the work 'we' have done before they arrived. They are a very suitable target for all kind of negative projections. In their very vulnerable state they may be extremely easily provoked to react to these projections. At times vicious cycles of resentment and hatred over several generations are established. In general the newcomer, like the new baby in the family, changes the host country.

The second type of reaction in the receptor group is a very positive, idealising attitude. In their unconscious the newcomer represents the saviour who will rescue the community and bring them a miracle. This kind of messianic expectation can never be fulfilled and when the receptor group starts to realise that the newcomer was not the Messiah, the reaction may easily turn to disappointment and even hostility. Sometimes they feel cheated and the newcomer is seen as a traitor, ready to be crucified.

In most cases, however, over time the reactions of the newcomers and the receiving group become more balanced and a gradual integration takes place.

New Zealand as the country of immigration

Since 1840 New Zealand has gained over 800,000 people as immigrants, just over 5,000 each year. In general natural increase has contributed for about 75% of the annual increase and immigration for about 20 – 25%. Net immigration has never been higher than 40% of the annual increase of the population. The 1991 census found that 84.2% of New Zealanders were born here. The number of New Zealand residents or citizens born overseas was 561,000, of which 240,000 were Britons, and 98,000 from different Pacific Islands. Australian born were third, at 48,000. The fifth largest group were Dutch, 24,000. None of the rest was over 10,000.

For the newcomer, New Zealand is a beautiful country to come into. People are kind and caring, they say "Don't worry, it will be OK" Very soon the immigrant starts to realise that there are two separate communities, Maoris and Pakehas, who have very little in common. The next realisation might be that there is also a great distance between men and women, and a lot of hostility and unresolved issues between genders. It all seems very adolescent and the same sense of a young nation is increased when the newcomer finds out that there is very little intimacy between people. They may find that the history of the land is strongly reflected in the attitudes of its people. Who owns the land; is it all Maori land; to whom does NZ belong. And the confusion is not made easier when they find that even Maoris speak of Hawaiki as their home, the place they go, when they die.

New Zealanders are passionate democrats and strong supporters of an egalitarian society. The negative side of this is the so-called tall poppy syndrome and lack of authority, which makes the society feel like a kindy. Boundaries are blurred, you do not know who is responsible and it seems to be important to avoid open conflicts and confrontations. The immigrant will be surprised that the police are the most respected professionals in the country, politicians among the least. The number of lawyers and accountants is huge and there are lots of laws but nobody seems to bother about them. Some traditions, like celebrating Christmas, give an impression that Santa Claus has not so far acclimatised, he still continues his job in his red fur coat in the middle of the Southern summer.

People are very practical, they do a lot and doing is very much emphasised at the cost of being.

The experience of space is exhilarating. Also the lack of a long cultural heritage makes the newcomer feel that the spiritual space is much larger that in the old country. I believe that for a newcomer New Zealand is a pleasant challenge. In the rural areas where the traditional Kiwi-culture still prevails, the newcomers might find themselves quite alien and isolated, but in the major cities the excitement of the changing society is easy to feel and to be caught up in. All newcomers will find themselves with the same question as the natives: What is New Zealand culture, what is the New Zealand identity?

In the film *The Piano* the immigrant's situation is beautifully described. Ada, the European lady, arrives at the coast of a big, big sea. She is left on her own, with no support, in her clumsy attire and scarce belongings. The piano is an important part of her past and helps her to survive. She also has her daughter, with whom her liveliness and loving feelings can continue undisturbed, but it is only through the piano and with the help of music that she finds a way to adapt to the new environment. Her music and the piano, a piece from her homeland and her connection to her lost partner, the father of her daughter, and her better days in

the past, help her keep alive and enable her to start to love and feel passion in her new country.

The piano and the music she plays create the transitional space where her existence and life can continue. Winnicott says that transitional space is the area where the culture and play take their place. In that space Ada is alive and fully present. She is herself and she is beautiful. Baines, an Englishman with Maori tattoos, is able to see it and falls in love with Ada. He wants to be in that space with Ada and little by little that transitional space carries them together. Later on in the film it is the same piano which becomes a trap that almost kills her. She has to detach herself from her past, which the piano symbolises, to be able to be re-born in the new land. Only through the dramatic, suicidal dive with the piano and her desperate act to detach her ankle from the coil of rope attached to the sinking piano, is she able to start her life as an independent woman in the new country. She says: "Down there [under the water] I got a surprise. My will chose life."

She has eventually gained her feeling of belonging here and begun establishing her identity as a New Zealander.