

A Review of the Book

SKILL AND TRUST – The Tovil Healing Ritual of Sri Lanka as Culture-Specific Psychotherapy by Beatrice Vogt, Ph.D.

(Published 1999 by VU University Press, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; paperback 358 pages, illustrations, index, Sinhala and Tamil summary, price US\$ 27.50, available from Vijitha Yapa Bookshop.)

It is still common in our villages to resort to healing rituals to treat mental illnesses. Tovil, as these traditional healing rituals are known, had not received much in depth study from the point of view of psychotherapy. They had been relegated to the field of superstition by the elite and received very scant attention.

In this book for the first time an attempt has been made by Beatrice Vogt to recognise similarities between Sri Lankan healing rituals and psychodrama. The author a psychotherapist by training and professor of ethnological psychology at the University of Zurich is indeed qualified to do so. During the years 1985–88 which she spent in Kandy, she was able to become a pupil of a Tovil healer, Upasena Gurunnanse of Amunugama, who imparted to her his skills.

She has observed that the most important skill of the Tovil healer consists in the fostering of the trust of the patient in him. The author points out that the methodical skill of the healer and the grounded trust of the patient are the conditions of the psychic process leading to healing during a Tovil, as they are crucial for a successful cure. This I suppose is the justification for the title of the book Skill and Trust. She also highlights how the therapeutic practice of the healer fits in the Sinhala Buddhist view of the world.

The terms used in the healing rituals are often derived from Buddhist psychology. The author was curious to find out how the healers saw the functioning of their rituals as coming within a Buddhist ethical context. To examine these aspects, she adopts a refreshingly unsophisticated and modest approach when she says:

"The idea is to learn from the foreign culture rather than to interpret it in terms of our scientific, religious, or socio-political value systems by which it is surely not guided."

This is quite a contrary to the highly patronising and harshly critical approach of certain scholars during the earlier part of this century who condemned as superstition and myth the traditional practices and beliefs of the Buddhists of this country.

The book, which contains eleven chapters, deals with a variety of subjects such as Meetings with Healers, The Cultural Context of the Tovil Healing Rituals, Tovil in the Kandyan Highlands, etc. Chapter ix dealing with examples of treatment by Tovil gives fascinating details of such instances as observed by the author.

Of particular significance is the attempt made to give equivalents in Buddhist phraseology of the words used by the healers. A large number of these technical words in the vocabulary of the healer is from the Abhidhamma. The author however admits that in this treatise she has not undertaken a comparison between terms of the textual Abhidhamma and the same terms as they appear in the orally handed down psychology of the Tovil. Her concern here has been to provide a kind of inventory of the concepts used by the healers that correspond terminologically to those of the Abhidhamma.

It is hoped that she will pursue these comparative studies with the same enthusiasm and depth of scholarship as she has shown in the current book. Skill and Trust as a pioneer work has made an outstanding scholastic contribution to open up for further research a field of knowledge, which has hitherto been confined to a limited group of healers. This book has given stature and credibility to what was fast becoming a lost science.

An exhaustive bibliography and an index of terms from Abhidhamma and the psychology of Tovil, in some cases with short definitions enhance the value of the book.

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