

Massage in Melanesia

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When I was working in the Solomon Islands with Mr A. M. Hocart,¹ it was our custom, whenever possible, to accompany the native medicos on their visits to their patients. On one of these occasions the treatment consisted chiefly of abdominal massage carried on, so far as I could tell, just as it would have been by a European expert. On questioning the woman who was the subject of the treatment, I learned that she was suffering from chronic constipation, and if the matter had not been gone into more fully, it might have been supposed that the Solomon Islanders treated this disease according to the most modern and scientific therapeutics. Further inquiries, however, brought out the fact that the treatment we had observed was for the purpose of destroying an octopus which, according to the native pathology, was the cause of the woman's troubles. She was said to be suffering from a disease called *nggasin*, caused by the presence of an octopus in her body, and an inquiry into the diagnosis revealed the belief that the tentacles of the octopus would pass upwards, and when they reached the head of the patient, would kill her. The object of the treatment was to kill the octopus, and the treatment had already been carried out for several days, so that the octopus, which had at first been very large, had now become small, and was expected soon to disappear altogether. This

result, however, was not ascribed so much to the mechanical action of the manipulation as to the formulæ and other features of the treatment which accompanied the massage.

On another occasion I observed the treatment of a case of supra-orbital neuralgia. The brow was kneaded carefully for a time and then a fold of the skin was caught and a motion made as though something were being drawn through the skin. The invisible object called *tagosoro* was thus extracted and blown away. I asked the leech² to carry out the treatment for *tagosoro* on my own forearm, and kneading manipulations, exactly like those of our own massage, were carried out till, by a sudden movement he showed me how he would have caught the *tagosoro* if it had been there, and would have blown it away. Here again a superficial inquiry would have seemed to show the existence of a massage indistinguishable from our own, and applied to conditions to which, according to our ideas, it is well adapted. It was only through systematic inquiry that it was discovered that the ideas underlying the treatment were wholly different from our own, and that the whole process rested upon a magico-religious basis. My object in describing this feature of Melanesian therapeutics is as an example of a difficulty which confronts that department of the history of Medicine which attempts to deal with origins. A few years ago

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I should have had no hesitation in regarding this Melanesian practice as an example of the growth of a rational therapeutical measure out of a magical or religious rite. I should have supposed that the practices of the Solomon Islanders were originally designed to extract the octopus or the *tagosoro* from the body, and that it would only be necessary to slough off what we regard as the superstitious aspect of the practice to have a true therapeutical measure. I should have regarded the Melanesian practice as one which has preserved for us a stage in the process of evolution whereby medicine evolved out of magic and, as a matter of fact, I believe that the vast majority of my anthropological colleagues, at any rate in this country, would still be fully satisfied with this view.

Many students of anthropology, however, are coming to see that human institutions have not had so simple a history as this view implies, and that many of the cases, formerly supposed to show stages in a process of a simple and direct evolution, are rather the outcome of the blending of peoples and their cultures. The example I have described will show the possibility that Melanesian massage, as we now find it, may have had a very different history. It is possible that massage, much in the form in which it is found among ourselves and so many other peoples of the earth, was introduced into Melanesia by an immigrant people, and that the beliefs in the octopus or the *tagosoro* are merely the outcome of attempts to account for the success of the new treatment on lines suggested by the pathological ideas of the indigenous people. The process would be like that among ourselves when any new treatment, if sufficiently successful to attract attention, is explained according to the current pathology and therapeutics of the day. A case analogous to that of my Melanesian example would be the orthodox explanation of the success of Christian Science based on the pathological distinction between organic and functional diseases and the therapeutical ideas summed up in the term "suggestion." Before we accept Melanesian massage as an example showing us a stage in the evolution of a medical remedy out of a magico-religious rite, it is necessary to suggest the alternative hypothesis that it may

have been the result of a blend between an introduced therapeutical measure and an indigenous belief. According to this, disease is due to animals or other agents which have found their way into the human body.

I cannot attempt here to deal fully with the evidence which would enable us to weigh the two hypotheses against one another, for the subject can only be treated adequately in conjunction with the study of many other features of culture. I can now point only to two considerations. One is that true massage, such as is practised by ourselves, apparently exists in Polynesia. It is, of course, possible that deeper inquiry would show that, underlying Polynesian massage, there are ideas which give it a special character, just as we found to be the case with the massage of the Solomon Islands. But the way in which the Polynesians use massage as a restorative suggests that the massage of this people is a true therapeutical measure thoroughly comparable with our own practice. True massage thus seems to exist in the same part of the globe as the Solomon Islands. On the hypothesis of transmission, it may have been introduced into those islands by Polynesian castaways, who often found their way to the Solomon Islands, or more probably may have been brought to these islands by the same people who were responsible for its introduction into Polynesia.

A second consideration, to which it is very difficult to know how much weight to attach, is the extraordinary similarity of the massage of the Solomon Islanders to the true therapeutical practice. When I observed the massage applied to others and experienced its application to my own arm, the manipulations seemed to me to be like those of true massage rather than the result of an attempt to catch an animal or some less material agent. When we consider the intense conservatism of people of rude culture, their tendency for generation after generation to carry out operations in the traditional way, I cannot help feeling that the resemblance of their manipulations to those of true massage may be the perpetuation of the practice as it was originally taught to them, although the ideas underlying the practice have come to be very different from those of their teachers.

My object in this place, however, is not merely to introduce a curiosity nor to lay down any dogmatic view of its origin, but rather to point out a basic difficulty which confronts those who attempt to trace out the origins of medical beliefs and practices. Medicine is a social institution. It comprises a set of beliefs and practices which only become possible when held and carried out by members of an organized society, among whom a high degree of the division of labour and specialization of the social function has come into being. Any principles and methods found to be of value in the study of social institutions in general cannot be ignored by the historian of medicine. Here, as in other departments of human culture, the outstanding problem of to-day is to determine how far similar practices in different parts of the world have arisen

independently, and how far they are the outcome of transmission from people to people. The fundamental importance of this problem is at last adequately recognized by the student of human culture, and I have ventured to use Melanesian massage as a means of calling attention to a problem which must be faced by all who attempt to study the origins and early history of medicine.

NOTES

- 1 As members of the Percy Sladen Trust Expedition.
- 2 Mr Hocart has suggested that this old word should be used as a technical term for the practitioners of the rude art, which can be called neither medicine nor magic, but lies somewhere between the two.