**The contribution of Sudhir Kakar to the studies on Culture and Psyche**

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In the early 1990s, while researching the relations between psychoanalysis and anthropology, on the suggestion of a colleague, I read a book written by Sudhir Kakar, an author I did not know. It was *Shamans, mystics and doctors* (Kakar S., 1982), an in-depth analysis of the relations between psychoanalysis, as a theoretical-clinical model, and traditional therapies in the complex context of Indian culture that includes Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and other religions. In reading that book I noticed a style that resonated with my own way of searching for a correlation between the psychic and social areas of human behavior. From that detailed analysis of Indian ideas on the formation of the subject (person), the relations between body and mind, philosophies that entail specific views of the world in its cosmic dimension, I could see a spontaneous but nonetheless rigorous capacity for connecting the models, theories and clinical aspects of psychoanalysis with cultural aspects without ever ending in reductionism. This led me to follow Kakar’s work in its further developments in areas such as sexuality in India, the position and role of gurus, the relations with family figures in childhood, violence between Hindus and Muslims. All these themes are found in his essays and novels that describe Indian society, its mythology, the psychic dimension of interiority at individual and group level. In the history of the relations between psychoanalysis and anthropology, starting from Freud’s early essays, psychoanalysis has tended to interpret the psychic and relational “realities” of other cultures in reductive terms based on an evolutionary view that sees other cultures in terms of a misconstrued “primitivism”. On the other hand, anthropology, although extremely interested in psychoanalysis, tended to disregard deep unconscious dimensions and the importance of interiority in the complexity of social and cultural processes.

Kakar’s work, in particular *Culture and Psyche. Selected essays*, now translated into Italian, allows us to consider an “intermediate” way that includes the anthropological dimensions in the context of psychoanalytical dynamics at the social and individual level, and vice-versa. Kakar’s work, in fact, based on a thorough psychoanalytical and anthropological reflection on clinical experience in India, is on one side fully immersed in the local dimension of Indian culture, and, on the other, allows to highlight the more general relationship between *culture* and the *unconscious,* according to parameters that tend to go beyond the positions that entail a priority of one term over the other. In his view, that I totally share, the unconscious does not come before culture and vice-versa, the unconscious is already in itself cultural. This position is similar to those that at different levels try to overcome the nature/nurture dualism or the innatist/environmental opposition.

The essays collected in this book describe a complexity that starts with Kakar’s reflections on his experience as an Indian born psychoanalyst training in a Western country. He wonders what should be the position of a psychoanalyst analyzing a patient from a different culture in a language that is not his mother tongue. The question is not only knowing the basic elements of the “other” culture well enough, that is however desirable, but creating a resonance in analysis with those cultural elements so that they “exist” fully as “factors” in the analytical field. This becomes meaningful when the analyst is aware of his position that is itself affected by cultural elements in a self-reflective mode. It is a crucial starting point for laying the foundations of a cultural psychology or better of a cultural psychoanalysis that, following Kakar’s lead, when extended to non-Western cultures, does not confine itself to the model of the Western man, psychically overdetermined. generalizing it and adjusting it inappropriately to other social contexts.

Among the major themes of these essays we find that Kakar pays attention to various aspects typical of the Indian patient that in general is high-middle class and influenced in part by Western values, but, at the level of unconscious processes, reveals a relevant psychic component that is formed on the basis of the traits of Indian or, more specifically, Hindu culture. Among the multiple psychic functioning modes presented I would stress the special primary maternal relation that emerges through stronger fusion and longer dependence than in the West. In these terms, pre-oedipal issues prevail over classical Oedipal ones and the formation of gender identity entails greater ambiguity or better a more explicit presence of both male and female, that not necessarily implies a pathologically ambivalent position. This can be seen both in individual clinical analysis and in the narrative themes of Hindu mythology, as represented by polytheistic gods and strictly related to the structure and function of basic family and kin relations in Indian culture (Kakar S., 1981). In addition, it seems that the tendency of Indian culture towards a spontaneous form of reflectiveness and introspection, even if quite different from the Western one that favors an enlightened attitude that sees individuals as integral and openly rational persons, has produced a special interest for psychoanalysis.

As Kakar tells us, already in the 1920s Bose had founded the Indian Psychoanalytical Society that later became a member of the International Psychoanalytical Association. Already at the time Indian psychoanalysis tried to adapt to the classical model or to the Kleinian tradition but also expressed, and still expresses, more “creative” and original modes of integration between different elements where psychoanalysis acquires a more authentic and flexible relation to the values and issues of Indian culture. A basic aspect, that Kakar considers specific of Indian psychoanalysis but also extends to other non-Western cultures, is the tendency to privilege social and group relations over individual ones. As a result, Kakar is convinced that the models of relational psychoanalysis and object relational analysis correspond more to the principles and values of Indian culture than the classical drive theory.

An important aspect underlined by the author refers to the consideration of some basic elements related to the relations between individuals and groups, rationality and irrationality, secularism and mysticism that, even if prevailing at different rates in different cultures in different ways and times, are however present in all cultures. This idea corresponds to the valuable reflections made by the Indian Nobel laureate Amartya Sen who recently wrote about the complexity of Indian identity and found “atheist” and “secular” elements even in ancient Sanskrit texts (Sen A., 2015). In a previous work, Sen had already extended to other Eastern contexts his research on the forms of democracy that had taken hold in different moments of history in various areas of the East (Sen A., 2006). Also, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai analyzed some recent forms of democracy in Indian cities that coalesced around the tight to decent living quarters that could be the basis on which the poorest groups of citizens could “aspire”, we could even say “narcissistically” in addition to financially and practically, to better living conditions (Appadurai A, 2015).

In my opinion, what seems different today between India and some other Eastern countries and the West is the perception of greater permeability that allows an explicit presence of the dimensions and figures of the present and of cultural traditions. In the case histories reported by Kakar, but also in public rituals, we see that the images of gods are present along with mythical Hindu tales. On the other hand, a recent paper by the Italian scholar of myths, Maurizio Bettini (2017) invites us to reflect on the importance of classical culture in Italy, in particular as it is taught at school. Even if it is not as evident in daily life as it is in India, the culture of the polytheistic religions of Romans and Greeks is present in Italy not only in historical monuments, in Renaissance art and in literature, but also in the fantasies and cultural memories in general, even if highly syncretized with the Christian tradition and with contemporary human conditions.

If we follow this line of thought, it appears evident that diversity and the related feeling of alterity, in this case between Italian, or broadly speaking Western, culture and the Indian, Eastern tradition, is not a question of substance but of size and relations that occur in different ways. As I have tried to prove, identities are imperfect and do not concern essences or substances but are expressions of forms of life that, even if always contiguous, cannot be reduced one to the other in a rigid and simplistic way (Lombardozzi A., 2015). In the psychoanalytical domain, already Erik Erikson (1974) had presented a conception of identity as a process that takes place all through an individual’s life cycle and cannot be separated from cultural and historical factors. Kakar too agrees with Erikson’s thought and has been inspired by him and by having cooperated with him.

I would also like to mention two chapters that are tightly linked and contain Kakar’s view of religion and mysticism and touch on the different ideas that Freud and Jung held on this. Freud’s position is well known and expressed in his essays *The future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929), in the latter in a more mediate way. As Kakar reminds us, Freud was inspired by the Enlightenment and proved rather distant in his letter to Romain Rolland on the mysticism of the “Indian jungle” and its “oceanic feeling”. He also considered religious phenomena as a form of illusion that is necessary for psychic survival but represents a defense and a form of disguise as opposed to a more lay conception. Jung’s position on religion and, in particular, Indian mysticism that he mistakenly included in the “yoga” category, unlike Freud’s was characterized by an excessive idealization of India and its philosophies. Modern men would have lost touch with a form of authentic participation in a “numinous” reality, thus undergoing an irrevocable loss.

Kakar’s critical position as a lay Hinduist still linked to his culture in its most relevant expressions highlights the limitations of the positions of both great psychoanalytical masters. On one side Freud in his analysis of religion and of social formations repeats the Western concept that considers the “other” cultures as expressions of “primitive” and “irrational” beliefs, in a reductionist position. Jung, on the other hand, falls in the opposite temptation of considering the “other” cultures, in particular Indian religiosity, as expressions of the values of the “good savage”, removed from the complexity and richness of the ritual practices that characterize India’s social anthropology and psychology. Kakar invites us to overcome both prejudices, the evolutionary and the orientalist (in the sense of Edward Said), that misread the reality of Indian culture with its potential and contradictions.

Aside from the criticism I mentioned above, Kakar locates himself well inside the Freudian psychoanalytical tradition and is one of the most reputed scholars in the field of Psychoanalysis and Culture, along with Geza Roheim, George Devereux, Abram Kardiner, Erik Erikson, and others.

Personally, I praise his sensitivity and openness to a cultural psychoanalysis as well as his flexibility in making recourse to various models in psychoanalysis. I feel attuned with his analysis of some Indian psycho-cultural paradigms and with Erikson’s cycle of human life, with Bion’s suggestion (and he was born and raised in India in a British family) to analysists to practice the absence of memory and desire with their patients (Bion W.R., 1970). This stance Is in a sense parallel to the free floating mental state of gurus as reference figures. In Indian culture, such figures can be assimilated to the function of cohesion of the Self that, following Kohut (1977) concerns the internalized self-object as guarantor of the constancy of existing in individual and group development.

To close this presentation of Kakar’s beautiful book I would like to suggest an analogy taken from Appadurai’s essay on the role of cricket in Indian society. Cricket, an essentially British sport, was very successfully adopted by Indians probably because of a creative syncretic capacity of Indian culture that can assimilate the rules of this game to enhance Indian identity (Appadurai A., 2006). In time, Indian teams have created a playing style that allows players to feel both cricket players and real Indians. Following Kakar’s teaching we can imagine something similar for the complex articulation of psychoanalysis and culture in India.