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THRESHOLDS AND SYNERGIES BETWEEN THE SOUL AND CULTURE: THE PERSONAL SYMBOL IN THE PSYCHOANALYTIC ANTHROPOLOGY OF GANANATH OBEYESEKERE

LIMIARES E SINERGIAS ENTRE O ANÍMICO E A CULTURA: O SÍMBOLO PESSOAL NA ANTROPOLOGIA PSICANALÍTICA DE GANANATH OBEYESEKERE

UMBRALES Y SINERGIAS ENTRE EL ALMA Y LA CULTURA: EL SÍMBOLO PERSONAL EN LA ANTROPOLOGÍA PSICOANALÍTICA DE GANANATH OBEYESEKERE

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ABSTRACT: The Personal Symbol is a fundamental conceptual operator in Gananath Obeyesekere's work. This operator is defined and redefined throughout his works. Obeyesekere maintains a conceptual openness, allowing his field experiences, case studies, and theoretical developments to continually contribute to his formulations. Like Freud, Obeyesekere presents a paradigmatic case for the development of this conceptual operator in his Psychoanalytic Anthropology. Abdin, a Sinhalese Muslim who was led to perform rites from another religious tradition (Hinduism), first appears in *Medusa's Hair* (1981) and later in *The Work of Culture* (1990b). The personal symbol operator parallels the reconsiderations of this case analysis, resulting in a conceptual operator that is open in its definition but articulated with other operators: deep motivation and cultural work. This article presents this trajectory and highlights the theoretical-methodological relevance of the concept for the fieldwork of Psychoanalytic Anthropology proposed by the author.

KEYWORDS: Symbolism; Anthropology; Psychoanalysis; Unconscious; Culture.

EDITORA IBERO-AMERICANA

RESUMO: *Símbolo Pessoal é um operador-conceitual fundamental na obra de Gananath Obeyesekere. Esse operador é definido e redefinido ao longo das obras; Obeyesekere mantém uma abertura conceitual, dando espaço para que suas experiências de campo, estudos de caso e desenvolvimentos teóricos contribuam continuamente para suas formulações. Tal como Freud, Obeyesekere apresenta um caso paradigmático para o desenvolvimento desse operador conceitual em sua Antropologia Psicanalítica. Abdin, um cingalês muçulmano que foi levado a performar ritos de outra tradição religiosa (hinduísta), aparece primeiramente em Medusa's Hair (1981) e, posteriormente, em The Work of Culture (1990b). O operador símbolo pessoal caminha paralelamente às reconsiderações da análise desse caso, resultando em um operador-conceitual aberto em sua definição, mas articulado com outros operadores: motivação profunda e trabalho da cultura. Este artigo apresenta essa trajetória e evidencia a relevância teórico-metodológica do conceito para o trabalho de campo da Antropologia Psicanalítica proposta pelo autor.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Simbolismo; Antropologia; Psicanálise; Inconsciente; Cultura.*

RESUMEN: *El Símbolo Personal es un operador conceptual fundamental en la obra de Gananath Obeyesekere. Este operador se define y redefine a lo largo de su obra. Obeyesekere mantiene una apertura conceptual, lo que permite que sus experiencias de campo, estudios de caso y desarrollos teóricos contribuyan continuamente a sus formulaciones. Al igual que Freud, Obeyesekere presenta un caso paradigmático del desarrollo de este operador conceptual en su Antropología Psicoanalítica. Abdin, un musulmán cingalés que fue inducido a realizar ritos de otra tradición religiosa (el hinduismo), aparece por primera vez en El cabello de Medusa (1981) y posteriormente en El trabajo de la cultura (1990b). El operador del símbolo personal se asemeja a las reconsideraciones de este análisis de caso, dando como resultado un operador conceptual abierto en su definición, pero articulado con otros operadores: motivación profunda y trabajo cultural. Este artículo presenta esta trayectoria y destaca la relevancia teórico-metodológica del concepto para el trabajo de campo de la Antropología Psicoanalítica propuesto por el autor.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Simbolismo; Antropología; Psicoanálisis; Inconsciente; Cultura.*

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INTRODUCTION

Gananath Obeyesekere was born in Sri Lanka in 1930 and is currently Professor Emeritus at Princeton University. In 2011, he was honored by the Society for Psychological Anthropology for his substantial contributions to the fields of Psychology/Psychoanalysis and Anthropology. His early works aligned with the "anthropological trends" of his time, with history forming the foundation of his analyses. Among Obeyesekere's works is *Land Tenure in Village Ceylon* (1967), an ethnographic description of the village society of Madagama, Sri Lanka. However, he soon shifted his analytical focus, adopting Psychoanalysis as a key tool for anthropological inquiry. This shift is evident in works such as *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (1981), *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (1984), *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (1988), and *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (1990b). In these works, Obeyesekere revisits Freudian metapsychology as a conceptual framework, demonstrating that Psychoanalysis can be employed as a methodological instrument for ethnographic and anthropological practice. Nonetheless, he emphasizes his alignment with the formulations of Freud's first topography, arguing that the second topography and the notion of the ego belong to a specifically Western cultural context, as Freud himself suggested and as reinforced by contemporary authors: the ego is not an original psychic instance (Iannini & Tavares, 2020, p. 11).

Obeyesekere became widely known in the West through his controversy with Marshall Sahlins (1995), thoroughly analyzed in Brandolin's (2019) work. Beyond this debate, however, his conceptual contributions have not been sufficiently discussed. For the purposes of this article, the focus will be on Obeyesekere as a singular author and on the development of one of his central conceptual tools: the "personal symbol." In a brief preface to *The Work of Culture*, Alfred Harris notes that the lectures compiled in the book are direct developments of the foundations laid in the two-preceding works, *Medusa's Hair* and *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*, highlighting their intimate conceptual continuity. Nevertheless, *The Work of Culture*, being the last of the three, offers both a synthesis and a maturation of the preceding works, as well as the proposal of new theoretical directions—such as the emphasis on psychic processes of regression and symbolic progression that transcend the purely biographical dimension of the cases analyzed.

Accordingly, this article will primarily analyze *The Work of Culture* (1990). The central objective is a question that pervades much of the author's scholarship and illuminates future pathways for understanding both his work and the controversies in which he engaged (Obeyesekere, 1992). This is the conceptual operator of the "personal symbol," whose examination, as previously mentioned, requires as a backdrop the psychoanalytic-ethnographic considerations developed by the author, particularly concerning one of his main informants (Abdin).

Methodologically, this study follows a chronological and interpretative trajectory through selected works of Obeyesekere, emphasizing an analytical reading of the Abdin case, which is considered paradigmatic for the development of the notion of the personal symbol.

Described in *Medusa's Hair* and revisited in *The Work of Culture*, Obeyesekere makes important qualifications regarding his theoretical conclusions, not only about Abdin but also about his construction of the concept of the personal symbol. Whereas *Medusa's Hair* focuses more on detailed case descriptions with brief interpretative remarks, *The Work of Culture* is marked by greater theoretical density. The third work, completing the author's foundational triad, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*, will receive only limited attention here, as its primary focus is neither the Abdin case nor the development of the notion of the personal symbol. Our analysis will therefore proceed with a description of the Abdin case in *Medusa's Hair* and *The Work of Culture*, followed by a synthesis of the author's theoretical discussion.

Such an analytical undertaking is justified by the uniqueness and rigor demonstrated by Obeyesekere in the development of his conceptual operator, the Personal Symbol. This notion initially disrupts the dichotomous logic between the public and private spheres, establishing continuity between psychological and cultural dimensions, and thus serves as a valuable tool for the fields of Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and intersecting areas such as Ethnopsychology and the concept of Participatory Listening (Bairrão, 2005; 2015), Macedo and Bairrão (2011), Macedo (2024), Psychoanalytic Anthropology as proposed by Paul-Laurent (Lindenmeyer, 2018), Resende (2015), and Cultural Psychology (Shweder, 1991; Shweder & Sullivan, 1993; Sharma, 2021; Pires, 2023), among others.

Symbolic Dynamics

The personal symbol is arguably the most significant conceptual operator developed by Obeyesekere, functioning as a boundary concept between the public and the private. To understand how the author arrives at this formulation, it is necessary to briefly review his understanding of symbols in general, as well as his divergences from prevailing anthropological perspectives of his time.

It was in response to a concrete challenge within the hegemonic understanding of symbols in Social Anthropology that Obeyesekere found it necessary to formulate a symbolic notion capable of accounting for the phenomena he observed in the field. According to him, there was a strong tendency in the Social Sciences to treat culture-related questions as pertaining exclusively to group processes, while individual motivations were relegated to the domain of Psychology. In his essay, he is categorical: "I demonstrate that this view is mistaken and show how certain cultural symbols are articulated with individual experience." These are the

Personal Symbols: "cultural symbols operating at the levels of both personality and culture" (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 1–2).

Obeyesekere begins by highlighting the discussion raised by Edmund Leach regarding the distinction between Public Symbols and Private Symbols. Leach argues that Public Symbols are tied to cultural matters, thus falling within the scope of Social Anthropology, whereas Private Symbols are linked to psychic matters, belonging to the field of Psychology. Obeyesekere contends that this distinction between public and private symbols is indeed representative of mainstream Social Anthropology but is insufficient to explain certain symbolic dynamics. He demonstrates that public symbols may have psychic components, and Private Symbols may contain cultural elements (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 13).

From this discussion emerges the need to formulate a new category of symbols: the Personal Symbols, which "must be related to the individual's life experience and the broader institutional context in which they are embedded" (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 13). To this end, Obeyesekere (1984, p. 13) introduces the notion of psychological symbols, subdividing them into Personal Symbols—which, according to the author, involve a deep (unconscious) motivation—and psychogenetic symbols, which lack such deep motivation.

Since Obeyesekere's (1984) primary focus is on the personal symbol, he offers only a brief explanation of psychogenetic symbols, using them primarily as a point of contrast:

> Psychogenetic symbols originate in the unconscious or are derived from the dream repertoire; but the origin of symbols must be analytically separated from their ongoing operational meaning. This is frequently the case in myths and rituals: symbols originating from unconscious sources are used to express meanings that have nothing to do with their origin. (p. 13)

This contrast between psychogenetic symbols and Personal Symbols provides the foundation for a dual critique developed by the author: one directed at the anti-psychological stance of Social Anthropology, and the other at the anti-institutional stance of Psychoanalysis.

Taking Leach as a representative figure of Social Anthropology, Obeyesekere's critique focuses on the false dichotomy between the public and the private, based on the presence or absence of psychological elements: "he clearly acknowledges the importance of individual psychology; but he adopts the classical social anthropological position that individual psychology cannot have cultural significance, or that publicly shared symbols cannot have individual psychological meaning" (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 14). In a certain way, Obeyesekere appears to follow Freud's assertion that "all individual psychology is at the same time social psychology" (Freud, 2020[1921], p. 137).

After clarifying how Obeyesekere conceives of symbols in general and employs his notion of the Personal Symbol to overcome the inadequate division between public and private, a second key element arises: the relationship between symbol and symptom, already noted in Freudian works (Freud, 2010[1916]). According to Obeyesekere (1990b, p. 12), both symbol and symptom encompass motive and meaning; however, in the case of the symptom, the domain of the motive prevails, whereas in the case of the symbol, meaning predominates.

This dynamic becomes clearer through the analysis of the Abdin case, where Obeyesekere demonstrates that Abdin's symbolic system exhibits an overdetermination of archaic infantile motivations and an underdetermination of shared meaning, rendering his Personal Symbols weak and superficial. "Overdetermination by meaning helps transcend domination by motive" (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 12–13).

A deeper understanding of the Personal Symbol allows Obeyesekere to transpose this analytical dynamic into the ethnographic field and to establish a dialogue between public–private and symbol–symptom:

> Personal symbols are like the technical discourse employed in psychoanalytic therapy in one respect: they constitute a mediated language existing between the privatized language of symptoms and the common language of everyday communication. But, unlike psychoanalytic discourse, personal symbols do not constitute a rationalized theoretical language that binds patient and therapist. They are public symbols that allow the expression of the individual's unconscious thoughts; yet, insofar as they make sense to others, they also allow communication with others in the language of everyday discourse. This dual hermeneutic of personal symbols is integral to their nature, a dual impulse of personal self-reflection and public communication. (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 23)

A third crucial element in the symbolic dynamics presented by Obeyesekere is the dialectic between progression and regression, aimed at establishing an internal critique of Psychoanalytic Anthropology, which tended to view cultural phenomena as direct reflections of deep motivations or defensive systems, in which philosophical and cosmological notions were treated as subsidiary products of secondary processes (Obeyesekere, 1990b, pp. 51).

According to Obeyesekere, a fundamental problem for Psychoanalytic Anthropology lies in understanding how deep motivations are transformed into symbolic forms—whether they are Personal Symbols, myths, or collective representations (Obeyesekere, 1990b, pp. 53).

It is essential to highlight that, although Obeyesekere does not fully adhere to Freudian theory, selectively employing it where he deems it useful, Psychoanalysis remains deeply embedded in his theoretical articulations. His use of the notions of progression and regression

is no exception: "if we call progressive the direction which the psychic process follows from the unconscious to waking life, we may say that the dream has a 'regressive' character" (Freud, 2017[1900], p. 572). Obeyesekere (1990b) grounds his interpretation in this dynamic understanding of dream-work as presented by Freud (2014[1916]):

> In it, Freud traces the manifest dream regressively to its archaic roots in unconscious infantile motivations; then, from these motivations, he advances progressively to construct the rules by which the dream thoughts (the deep motivations) are transformed into the manifest dream. (p. 54)

This symbolic dynamic emerges more explicitly in later works by Obeyesekere and is even highlighted by the author as something not previously perceived in earlier writings (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 19–20). Through his analyses of ascetic case studies in Sri Lanka, this dynamic becomes clearer. According to him, the Abdin case is unique, as the preexisting systems of symbols used to express deep motivations are transformed into Personal Symbols, and these symbols, like all others, operate at varying degrees of symbolic removal from archaic motivations (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 19).

What the author terms *Symbolic Remove* can be understood as a distancing or detachment from the underlying motivation, constituting a form of sublimation or elaboration. In Abdin's case, this process appears ineffective for two main reasons: a sociocultural one (Abdin came from a Muslim family, whereas the symbols and rituals in question were of Hindu-Buddhist origin) and a dialectical-psychic one. Abdin reported that the neurotic phenomenon of compulsive and obsessive repetition still operated through the symbolic system. In contrast, in other cases—notably that of a female ascetic from a Buddhist family background, with a significant, broad, and fluid continuity with the cultural tradition underlying the practiced rituals—to which Obeyesekere refers for comparative purposes: "the initial symbolic performance is never repeated; she overcomes her childhood terrors; and the symbols enable her to move prospectively away from these sources of motivation toward another reality she has defined for herself" (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 19).

Sociocultural factors are essential for Obeyesekere, but not merely at a semantic or superficial level; they are tied to the person's existential experiences and are thus subordinated to the psychological dialectic of regression-progression (*symbolic remove*) (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 20).

The dynamics of symbolic removal demand careful attention because, according to Obeyesekere, it represents a key challenge for Psychoanalytic Anthropology, even surpassing issues such as "normal/pathological," as argued by Devereux (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 58).

Symbolic removal suggests that, although there may initially be a connection between symbol and motivation, such a connection can eventually be lost as a result of increasing detachment:

> Complete disconnection is indeed rare, but one may reasonably argue that the more the symbol is removed from its sources of motivation, the more it acquires the attribute of arbitrariness, thus approaching the Saussurean idea of the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified. (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 58)

According to the author, both Freud and his followers who engaged with Psychoanalytic Anthropology often posited a direct isomorphism between symbol and symptom, "if not a mere replication of symbol and symptom" (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 57). Although Obeyesekere maintains an analytical distinction between symptom and symbol, this is not always possible. In this sense, the concept of symbolic removal and its associated levels of symbolization helps address this difficulty by acknowledging that "some symbolic forms are closer to or are isomorphic with symptoms, whereas others are much more distant from them" (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 57).

Abdin

First introduced by Obeyesekere in *Medusa's Hair* (1981) and later revisited in *The Work of Culture* (1990b), the case of Tuan Sahid Abdin was paradigmatic for the author's analyses. Among the eight cases studied in the 1981 work, he was the only individual identified by Obeyesekere as male and of Muslim descent and upbringing.

Born on August 13, 1938, Abdin was the eldest of thirteen siblings, with only the youngest being female, all children of Nona Balgis, his father's second wife. The first wife, Reyanthumma, bore no children. As a child, Abdin and Reyanthumma were abandoned by his father and lived together in near destitution. Abdin believed that she was, in fact, his biological mother and loved her deeply. Throughout his childhood, Abdin encountered his father only sporadically and randomly on the streets of the city, but he never stopped to greet or speak with him. At the age of fourteen, his father found him while he was engaged in gambling; the encounter was traumatic, as the father forcibly took him away and, as punishment and a lesson, inflicted a cut on Abdin's hand so that he would never again engage in such games. It was only as a young adult that Abdin reconciled with his father, though their relationship remained distant and marked by submission.

Despite this strained paternal relationship, Abdin maintained a close bond with his paternal grandmother, a woman well-versed in Hindu magic and rituals considered unorthodox, according to Obeyesekere (1981, p. 144). From an early age, Abdin was taken by her to participate in such rituals. She passed away shortly before Abdin's eighth birthday; however,

even after her death, she became a sort of guiding spirit for him, claiming she would protect him and impart her knowledge to him.

Through dreams, he was instructed to undertake a journey to be initiated in a ritual at Kataragama, but due to his impoverished circumstances, this seemed unattainable. At the age of twelve, he and his foster mother, Reyanthumma, managed to secure the necessary financial support and made the journey. Abdin was ritually initiated, his tongue was pierced, and he devoted his life to Hindu deities, despite being a Muslim. This, apparently, did not generate significant internal conflict, only some syncretic perceptions.

Under pressure from Reyanthumma, at the age of nineteen, Abdin married a young woman of Muslim descent; however, the marriage lasted only three months, after which he enlisted in the army. One year later, again at his mother's insistence, he married another Muslim woman, but this union ended in divorce after six months, with Abdin claiming he had been betrayed. In 1961, Abdin was implicated in a plan by a small group within the army to orchestrate a coup and was subsequently imprisoned, sharing a cell with a Buddhist.

It was in prison that Abdin made a decision that could alter the course of his life. Together with his Buddhist cellmate, they made a vow—a promise contingent on their acquittal and release. The Buddhist made a moderate promise, committing to lead a devout life if freed; Abdin, in devotion to the deities, promised himself severe penance on behalf of the gods. Eighteen months later, Abdin was acquitted and attempted to establish financial stability, but with difficulty. He ran a small teahouse near his father's home and assisted others in certain rituals, though these activities did not provide sufficient income for his livelihood. During one of these sporadic rituals in 1965, he met his third wife, an older, married woman with nine children, who left her husband to be with Abdin. They had a daughter in 1967 (a significant event that will be detailed later) and formalized their marriage in 1971.

In conversations with Obeyesekere, Abdin reported a troubled relationship with his sexual life, stating that sexual activity and his devout religious life were not in harmony. According to him, sexual activity depleted and destroyed the divine energy essential for connecting with the deities and participating in rituals. He reported receiving constant guidance regarding the necessity of abstaining from sexual relations to maintain his relationship with the gods. Abdin claimed to have had sexual relations only once with his first wife and none with his second, which required candid discussions with his current wife. He expressed love and care for her akin to that of a mother or sister, without sexual appeal.

Subsequent conversations revealed to Obeyesekere that Abdin suffered from impotence. When asked about the daughter he had with his third wife, he recounted the story behind her conception. For a long time, Abdin petitioned the gods, expressing his strong desire to have a child despite the divine injunctions against sexual relations. He implored the goddess Pattini

that, for a few days, he might be able to engage in intercourse with his wife. A few days later, in a dream, a little girl was revealed to him, accompanied by a warning: he would have this daughter, whom he should love and treat well, never striking her; in gratitude, he was to honor the goddess Pattini by giving the child her name. Accordingly, Abdin and his wife conceived a child, ritually named Binna Nacciya (the Muslim designation of the goddess Pattini), but for legal reasons, she was registered as Nihara Abdin. In 1978, his foster mother, Reyanthumma, passed away, and a year later, his father also died after a prolonged period of severely deteriorated health and paralysis.

Obeyesekere provides a detailed account of a ritual for the goddess Kali, which Abdin was commissioned to perform in 1976. A businessman, claiming to have been bewitched by competitors, required the undoing of the spell. Abdin performed the ritual with the assistance of a colleague.

The ritual began around 6:00 p.m. in one of the rooms of the client's house. Abdin first set up the ritual elements and organized the room, though without particular concern for cleanliness. According to Obeyesekere, the fact that Abdin was Muslim by family heritage and Hindu by ritual association meant he had not fully internalized notions of "purity" and "pollution" (Obeyesekere, 1981, p. 151). He placed an image of the goddess Kali, made from a mixture of dough and saffron, on the floor, accompanied by flowers, fruits, and incense. The Kali image was terrifying in appearance, adorned with a red cloth (*sari*), a protruding tongue (also red to represent blood), and canine teeth made of garlic. Meanwhile, the client (also referred to as the patient) lay on a mat next to the image of Kali.

After describing the setting, Obeyesekere provides an overview of the ritual scene, highlighting Abdin's actions and the instruments he employed, as well as the first deities he invoked. By approximately 6:30 p.m., Abdin was ready to begin the ritual, dressed in a red cloth similar to Kali's attire and seated before the image of the goddess. Under the illumination of lamps, amid incense smoke and fragrance, and playing a drum (*udakki*) alongside his assistant, Abdin commenced the ritual. He held a coconut, which would later be broken, and a torch in his hands, while murmuring mantras in Tamil, invoking the deities Siva, Ganes, Skanda (Kataragama), and Sudalayi (the cemetery demon, analogous to the Sinhala Mahasona) (Obeyesekere, 1981, p. 151).

The ritual proceeded, and by approximately 6:20 p.m., Abdin invoked another group of deities, described by Obeyesekere as the Seven Sisters (Kali, Pommari, Isvari, Issakeyi, Adiye, Nili, and Bhagavati). Obeyesekere transcribes Abdin's words:

> I call Mother Pommari, protect all men and women. I salute the Seven Sisters, caranam [refuge]; please, come to the feast I have here and have mercy on me, Isvari, Amma [mother] Isvari. Amma Isvari, I call you by this name, and in this name [form], you have

> the power of control over us, Amma. I now call you Issakeyi, Adiye, the very evil Nili, I call you amma, I call you the burning fire, she who did terrible things in the cemetery … who controls the cemetery and performs black revenge magic [pali]. Om Kali, I call you bloody [uthirai] Maha Kali, I call you mother, amma, who performs a bloody sacrifice. (Obeyesekere, 1981, p. 151-152)

From this point in the ritual, Obeyesekere notes certain specific features of Abdin, such as stammering and bodily tremors when mentioning Kali. While his assistant played the drum, Abdin stared at the image of Kali, trembling and stammering, and began to mimic her by protruding and cutting his tongue, allowing blood to flow so that the red coloration on his mouth, chin, and chest resembled that of Kali's image. He then pressed the lit torch against his chest and struck his face (Obeyesekere, 1981, p. 152).

By this time, it was past 6:45 p.m., and the ritual description emphasizes the cuts to Abdin's tongue and the blood flowing from his mouth, symbolically aligning him with the goddess Kali, who is depicted with a red tongue protruding from her mouth. This act of Abdin's would later receive focused attention in Obeyesekere's interpretations. Throughout the ritual, Abdin also delivered prophecies to the client, though only at the end of the first part did he reveal one, transcribed verbatim by Obeyesekere: "If you do not think I am Kali, think of someone who eats a corpse … hear, there, caranam … Amma, amma, hit me and control me, caranam amma, amma" (Obeyesekere, 1981, p. 153).

After an approximately thirty-minute break, during which Abdin emerged from the trance, drank water, and spoke with Obeyesekere, the ritual resumed and lasted a few more minutes. During this time, Abdin re-entered a trance and, with some difficulty breathing, delivered additional prophecies to other family members, blessed them, and finally, "the drums stop, and Abdin collapses onto the floor unconscious" (Obeyesekere, 1981, p. 154).

O relevante aqui são alguns fatos específicos, como as ações de Abdin quando em transe e recebendo as divindades: por exemplo, Kali, ele precisa ofendê-la e, ao mesmo tempo, sempre chamá-la de mãe, assim como faz com a deusa Pattini. Ele quebrava cocos sobre sua própria cabeça e cortava a língua com uma lâmina.

Of particular interest are Abdin's actions while in trance and in receiving the deities. For instance, in the case of Kali, he had to simultaneously offend her and address her as mother, similar to his practice with the goddess Pattini. He broke coconuts over his head and cut his tongue with a blade. When Obeyesekere asked whether he truly believed Kali was a virgin mother who did not menstruate, he initially replied that he could not believe she did not menstruate, later asserting that she menstruated through her mouth, hence her red lips. In Obeyesekere's interpretation, this conception of the virgin mother's menstruation and Abdin's

tongue-cutting are closely linked. Such cuts, within the ritual context in which he participated, were unusual practices, scarcely documented among others, making this particularity of high interest to the author.

Obeyesekere concludes this account in *Medusa's Hair* with observations about the case. The entire ritual and trance sequence performed by Abdin can be seen as a reenactment of his traumatic experiences with his authoritarian father. In particular, the tongue-cutting evokes multiple simultaneous events: his initiation into the Hindu ritual world in Kataragama, when his tongue was pierced for the first time at age twelve; his identification with and reception of the goddess Kali, who menstruated through her mouth; and finally, his personal castration (impotence) resulting from the traumas of his relationship with his father.

In *The Work of Culture*, Obeyesekere revisits the Abdin case, updating certain events, such as the death of his father in 1979. Following this event, Abdin experienced a serious health complication, broadly described as a "stroke," resulting in hospitalization and paralysis of the entire left side of his body. While physicians attributed this paralysis to the stroke, Obeyesekere interprets it as potentially closer to a hysterical episode. It is important to note that whenever Obeyesekere employs Freudian or psychoanalytic terms and concepts, he does not reduce the situation to a strictly pathological framework; rather, he draws approximations and parallels to enable a more intelligible relationship between cultural manifestations and an anthropologically grounded understanding informed by psychoanalysis.

Obeyesekere learned of Abdin's condition through a colleague in Sri Lanka, as he was in the United States at the time. He immediately requested that his colleague assist Abdin with medical expenses and subsequently traveled to visit his friend, who, for Obeyesekere, not coincidentally, was using the same wheelchair that his ailing father had used before passing away.

In the same year, Abdin refused, for the first time, to participate in the annual ritual at Kataragama. Obeyesekere interprets Abdin's paralysis in the wheelchair as a form of penitence expressed through symptoms rather than through symbols, as he had traditionally done during his annual ritual, suspended from hooks on the cart. By 1980, Obeyesekere describes Abdin as a decrepit and near-moribund figure, with an unkempt beard, dressed in rags, yet extremely happy to see Obeyesekere after several years. According to Obeyesekere, this encounter constituted a clear transference moment, in which he was positioned as the "Benevolent Father," caring for and concerned with Abdin's welfare.

After "skipping" a year of his penitential ritual at Kataragama, Abdin spoke with Obeyesekere, expressing a desire to return and perform it again, hanging from the hooks on the cart and traversing the entire route through the shrines, exactly as prescribed. Obeyesekere encouraged him, and the ritual was duly performed. Following this event, Abdin regained the ability to walk and move the previously paralyzed limbs reasonably well. In subsequent years,

1981, 1982, and 1983, Abdin no longer wished to perform his hook-based penitential ritual, but he did visit Kataragama, observing the festival and making offerings to the deities.

Analyzing the case, Obeyesekere acknowledges that he never saw Abdin as a potential full-time ritual specialist. From his perspective, there was a significant sociocultural limitation: Abdin was a Muslim, initiated into and practicing Hindu cults, who could never, through these symbolic systems—within which he remained an outsider by origin—fully exorcize his traumatic past.

Personal Symbol: an operator?

Obeyesekere draws a parallel between Abdin's case and those of several priestesses studied in *Medusa's Hair* to illustrate the function of the Personal Symbol. In one instance, a woman possessed by malevolent spirits, lamenting and feeling culpable for the death of a close relative, participated in rituals, recovered, became a priestess, and dedicated her life to devotion to the deities, thereby alleviating her guilt and resolving her trauma. For Obeyesekere, this exemplifies that an individual's dramas are always simultaneously subjective and objective. Deep Motivations are channeled and objectified within a cultural symbolic system. In this case, the woman processed her personal dramas through a system in which these elements acquire meaning and purpose.

According to Obeyesekere, symbols and symptoms simultaneously contain both motive and meaning; however, while the symptom is more closely tied to the field of motive (deep motivations), the symbol aligns more with the field of meaning (cultural and objective). This distinction is particularly evident in Abdin's case. When he performed his penitential ritual at Kataragama, at first glance, it resembled the priestess's actions: expressing his traumas through a culturally intelligible symbol, thus assigning meaning to them. However, Abdin required continual repetition of this process; otherwise, the symptoms—such as paralysis—manifested more strongly and persistently as expressions of his trauma.

It is of paramount importance to emphasize that, although Obeyesekere defines the Personal Symbol, he does not do so in a single instance, nor always in the same way. At first glance, this may appear to indicate a conceptual weakness; however, a closer reading reveals a dynamism inherent to the concept and a constant openness allowing it to complement, develop, and mature. This process of conceptual reformulation is a fundamental aspect of the author's theoretical development, explicitly acknowledged by him (Obeyesekere, 1987) and well recognized within the field of Psychoanalysis, as it allows central theoretical notions to be understood more as operators than as fixed concepts.

According to Obeyesekere, one operative dimension of the Personal Symbol lies in its capacity to elicit reflexivity in the individual. Here, he bridges the notions of cultural symbol and ethnic symbol: the former, a generic term used in Anthropology by Lévi-Strauss and Edmund Leach, refers to any symbolic figure or act whose meaning is intelligible only to those who understand the culture in which it is embedded (for example, the deities of a particular locale or the significance of certain objects). The latter, a term coined by Georges Devereux, designates symbols that "may provide adjustment but not introspective self-awareness or 'curative insight,' as this is supposedly only achievable in an analytic session" (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 21). Obeyesekere confirms that, in practical and objective terms, the Personal Symbol corresponds to Devereux's Ethnic Symbol; yet he differentiates them in that, for him, the Personal Symbol not only facilitates certain adjustments of the individual to their cultural environment but also promotes introspection and "curative insight," engendering a continuous process of regression and progression within the chains of memory, thereby updating and transforming the individual's understanding of both the symbol and themselves. However, as in Abdin's case, when Personal Symbols are superficial, "the individual employing them possesses little reflexivity; when reflection occurs, it revolves around infantile motivations, as in psychoanalytic free association" (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 12). He notes that Freud might have used the term "rationalization" to describe this phenomenon. In the case of the ascetics he studied, "overdetermination by meaning helps to transcend domination by motive" (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 13).

Regarding the reflexive potential of the Personal Symbol and his divergence from Devereux, Obeyesekere asserts that reflexivity and self-awareness are not absent among religious specialists nor exclusive to psychoanalysis; rather, reflexivity is itself based on a cultural language, occurring only within such a cultural medium. The insight that emerges in psychoanalysis is merely one form, as much a product of culture as are the self-awareness languages of the ecstatic practitioners (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 23–24).

Thus, Obeyesekere concludes that the symbolic potential of societies is likely linked to reflexivity, consciousness, or self-awareness. Regressive symbolization may facilitate abreaction and catharsis, whereas progressive symbolization may encourage intellectual and philosophical reflection, depending on the constraints imposed by a group's historical tradition (Obeyesekere, 1990b, p. 62).

Despite the multiple definitions and elaborations of the Personal Symbol, a central characteristic emerges throughout Obeyesekere's work: the Personal Symbol operates simultaneously on individual and social levels. This, far from indicating indecision in analytical focus, more accurately constitutes a critique of contemporary social anthropology, which relied on dichotomies—distinguishing public from private—as well as a critique of a strand of psychoanalytic thought that assumes every act has an underlying unconscious motivation. Following

this sequence of critiques directed at Devereux and other representatives of Psychoanalytic Anthropology—"Abram Kardiner, Erik Erikson, and Melford E. Spiro" (Obeyesekere, 1990a, p. 270)—Obeyesekere does not operate through complementarity, which still relies on a cultural exterior and psychic interior (Domingues & Wonsoski, 2023), but rather through a continuity without rupture. It is noteworthy that, despite mentioning dissenting authors, Obeyesekere does not reference Róheim (1967), whose work was foundational for nearly all the aforementioned authors.

For Obeyesekere, everything ultimately comes down to a capacity for communication, for transmitting emotions and affects. It is in this light that his reliance on Freudian theory becomes clear. The Personal Symbol represents, for him, the crucial intersection of social and anthropological theories with psychoanalytic thought—or, depending on the analytical perspective, a profound critique thereof.

CONCLUSION

From the outset, in the introduction to *The Work of Culture*, Obeyesekere makes clear that his rereading of Ricoeur (1977) and his hermeneutic analysis of Freud, yet again, were pivotal in rethinking his critiques and theoretical constructions at the intersection of anthropology and psychoanalysis, as well as in the ongoing reformulations and refinements of the notion of the Personal Symbol. Contrary to the prevailing academic trend of increasing specialization and subdivision of fields, Obeyesekere integrates Anthropology and Psychoanalysis in continuity, proposing a composite approach that draws on both disciplines for theoretical formulation and practical application.

What Obeyesekere regards as a significant advance in his conceptualization of the Personal Symbol, from *Medusa's Hair* to *The Work of Culture*, is the focus on the past and childhood and their expression in the contemporary life of the individual—that is, the psychic dynamics of progression, regression, and symbolic removal, alongside the biographical context of the cases. Anticipating a later critique of ethnographic practice, he argues that classical ethnography freezes a situation in time; however, this does not imply that the lives of those studied are equally frozen. A past exists, and a future will exist, both of which are presentified in the person's experience, and this must be considered in ethnographic work and in the analysis of the Personal Symbol. Ignoring it is to blind oneself to a full understanding of events and people.

Obeyesekere demonstrates a profound concern with avoiding the reduction of the individual to a mere product of their cultural environment. For him, individuals exercise agency, but to apprehend it requires attending to their statements, which, beyond the current ethnographic context, are rooted in motivational, historical, cultural, and bodily dimensions. Anthropology

and Psychoanalysis, in isolation, sometimes fail in this respect; it is in their intersection that such shortcomings are mitigated, bringing together techniques, concepts, and operators from both fields. It becomes possible to listen to the subject, understand the Personal Symbols, and avoid reducing the individual to a puppet of psychic or cultural structures. The Personal Symbol, therefore, not only articulates and communicates a statement but also inscribes culture within the individual's existence. Present across multiple biographies, it is continuously mobilized, compounded, densified, and re-signified by people. This process unfolds without rigid separation between internal and external, psychological and social, symptom and symbol; spiritual and cultural experiences operate simultaneously.

Obeyesekere's initial step in elaborating the Personal Symbol was precisely to break the old dichotomy in social anthropology between public and private. This critique alone is already sufficient to position the Personal Symbol as highly relevant in contemporary discussions in Anthropology and Psychoanalysis, as it constitutes a singular and innovative concept for transcending a still-dominant dichotomous worldview: individual versus society, psychological versus cultural, fieldwork versus desk work.

In addition to opening space, as a conceptual operator, for new theoretical articulations that sustain continuity between elements formerly perceived as binary opposites, the Personal Symbol also functions as a practical tool in ethnographic practice. It enables observation, participation, and attentive listening in the field without being constrained by the poles of such dichotomies. Its impact, however, extends further, surpassing theoretical elaborations and practical applications to enter the political realm, offering the potential for transformation through reflection and moving beyond a deterministic understanding of culture.

Because individuals can re-signify symbols of their own culture to give meaning to life experiences and process traumas, the Personal Symbol becomes a crucial instrument for contesting hegemonic discourses of domination, as in the case of coloniality. In this sense, Obeyesekere anticipates certain emerging decolonial critiques in the Americas, positioning himself as a powerful ally of this perspective, even if this contribution may have gone largely unnoticed by his usual Western interlocutors and readers. In Sri Lanka, his homeland, he is recognized and distinguished for this type of critical engagement (Abeysekara, 2022).

According to Obeyesekere's own analysis, the Personal Symbol in Abdin lacks reflexivity, preventing him from achieving symbolic removal and, consequently, hindering the transformation of his elaboration of childhood traumas into the realm of symbolic recognition supported by his inhabited cultural context. This apparent fragility of the Personal Symbol in Abdin, as noted by Obeyesekere, refers to the superficiality of its meaning (progression) and its strong rooting in deep motivation (regression); this indicates a low degree of reflexivity, resulting in the nonrealization of the symbol's transformative potential within Abdin himself (symbolic removal). What

seems to elude Obeyesekere is precisely the reflexive power of the Personal Symbol beyond a single direction (healing or symptomatic relief). The Personal Symbol exists both in Abdin's body and in cultural recognition (e.g., tangled hair), yet, for Abdin, it is linked more closely to the symptom than to meaning. On the other hand, it also exists in Obeyesekere as a conceptual operator; this operator traverses Obeyesekere, his work, and his relationship with his friend and informant Abdin, acquiring intrinsic value within the reflexive logic in question. In other words, the reflexive potential of the Personal Symbol is not limited to Abdin but constitutes a logical-reflexive extension of the field itself, occupying an "other" position that transcends the ethnographer/informant dyad.

This reflexive potential of the Personal Symbol extends further, underpinning the reflections developed in the present text. It is precisely this potential that allows a transition from interpersonal analysis to an argument regarding a third position. The Personal Symbol intervenes in the research; its reflexive power affects all participants.

Obeyesekere's questioning of the depth of meaning of Abdin's Personal Symbol enabled his continuous reflection and reformulation of the conceptual operator, transforming its definitions and opening new perspectives for his work, even more so than the highly reflexive Personal Symbols observed in the other ascetic subjects. In other words, engaging with a notion that disrupts conceptual dichotomies also breaks with the idea that it is merely a product of the author's or the informant's thought, relocating it to an "other" position that intervenes in the reflection of both and even extends to the authorship of the present text, enabling consideration of hegemonic and colonial discourses entrenched in dichotomous frameworks.

Abdin and Obeyesekere are equally reflexive participants from the standpoint of the third position of the Personal Symbol, now qualifiable as intervening in this relationship. Obeyesekere's theoretical trajectory is continuous with the ethnographic path experienced with Abdin; ethnographer and informant now meet outside the dichotomous logic. From this intervening third position, it can be asserted that Obeyesekere not only writes about the Personal Symbol but also writes with it. This places the author himself in the position of subject within his own writing.

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