

Man, the Womb and the Sea: The Roots of the Symbolism of Water

Author: Odent, Michel

Publication info: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal 7. 3 (Spring 1993): 187-193.

[ProQuest document link](#)

Abstract: None available.

Full Text: Headnote ABSTRACT: Water has always been a powerful symbol for human beings. Water is critical to life. First, the human fetus grows in the amniotic fluid. Second, the scientific context of the 1990s suggests a new vision of Homo sapiens as a primate that, although genetically related to the chimpanzees, has adapted to a particular environment through a land-sea interface. In this paper the origins of the power of water symbolism is explored, particularly in the context of the birth process. The power of water as a symbol has been known and used everywhere through the ages. The symbolism of water has been employed by all religions, through sacred springs, sacred rivers, the ritual of baptism, etc. The beneficial therapeutic power of water has always been taken into account, and hot springs and spas are still used extensively without any clear theoretical basis. Meanwhile, the erotic power of water also has been expressed by many artists, in particular in poetry, cinema, music, and paintings. In most known cultures water has always been a feminine symbol; water is a symbol of the mother. What are the roots of this symbolism? What are the origins of the power of water on human beings?

FETAL LIFE AND FLUIDS For those who are familiar with the concept of pre- and perinatal psychology, some answers come immediately to mind: we are mammals; we spend our fetal life in the amniotic fluid. Such interpretations are suggested by the work of Ferenczi, the Hungarian disciple of Freud. According to Ferenczi, any episode of sexual life can be interpreted as a return to the amniotic fluid (Ferenczi, 1924). Such interpretations also come to mind to those who are familiar with the psychedelic research of S. Grof and in particular with what he calls the first perinatal matrix (Grof, 1975). According to Grof, the undisturbed intrauterine state can be associated with a consciousness of the ocean or an aquatic life form (whale, fish, jellyfish, etc.), while disturbances of intrauterine life can be associated with images and experiences of underwater dangers or polluted streams. Those who have experienced birth in complete privacy often share the same kinds of interpretation. Many laboring women seem to regress and communicate with their mother, often calling for her at the end of the first stage, just before the "fetus ejection reflex" (Odent, 1987). It seems that laboring women often communicate with their mothers at the time when the primitive part of the brain—all the structures around the hypothalamus—is active. This part of the brain is what releases the hormones that are necessary for efficient uterine contractions. It develops while the human being is surrounded by the amniotic fluid. These interpretations might have been considered as sufficient until recently. In the 1990s, comparisons of human nuclear DNA and the mitochondrial DNA through the method of DNA hybridization, and comparisons of the amino acids of the proteins have enabled molecular biology to evaluate the genetic distance between two species of mammals. Man now appears to be a kind of third chimpanzee [1] (Diamond, 1991). One can now claim that Homo sapiens, Pan troglodytes and Pan paniscus are as closely related as different species of mammals can be (Lewin, 1991). The genetic distance (1.6%) between us and the other chimpanzees is less than that between two species of gibbons (2.2%) and less than that between gorilla and chimpanzee. More the gap between us and the chimpanzees is reduced—and more intriguing become the morphological and behavioral features that make humans distinct. MAN'S UNIQUE BIOLOGICAL LINK TO THE SEA It is the "encephalization quotient" that makes Homo sapiens radically different from the chimpanzees. If we consider that our body weight is in the same region as that of Pan troglodytes, our brain is four times the size one would expect. This means a huge jump in terms of complexity, insofar as a thousand billion cells in the human brain are making thousands of connections with others. It is a change of scale. Nutritionists now have a new interpretation to propose. They had nothing to say about this discrepancy as long as they were considering only the fatty acids

essential for the survival of mammals (linoleic acid and the other members of the omega 6 family). It is a different matter now given the concept that fatty acids are essential for the brain (Bourre, 1989). Docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) is now known as the most abundant essential fatty acid belonging to the structural lipids of the brain. DHA is a long chain omega 3 polyunsaturated fatty acid abundant in the seafood chain. So we have a new perspective of the primate homo as a member of the group of the big-brained mammals, along with the sea mammals and, especially, the cetaceans (Odent, 1990a). From the point of view of our ideal nutritional needs in terms of fatty acids, one can claim that we are adapted to the coastal seafood chain: in other words, to the land-sea interface. If the evolution of the mammalian brain has been influenced by nutritional factors (Crawford, 1972), it means that, more generally speaking, the available food is an underestimated "driving force" in the process of evolution (Crawford, 1989). It is worth noting that, during the phase of development of the brain, human beings have a certain amount of the fatty acids available that are supposed to be specific to the seafood chain. During the fetal period, the human placenta has the capacity to concentrate long chain polyunsaturated omega 3 fatty acids from the mother's brain blood (by a process of "biomagnification"), and a certain amount of these fatty acids are taken in by the baby when it is breastfed. The presence of these fatty acids is confined to human milk and the milk of the sea mammals-not land mammals. More generally speaking, many modern nutritionists claim that humans cannot be totally healthy without occasionally consuming seafood. So, suddenly, a better knowledge of the structural lipids of the brain and a better awareness of our basic nutritional needs has suggested that there is a specific link between humans and the sea that does not exist for other apes. In fact, all the obvious differences between man and chimpanzee can be construed as the result of human adaptation to the sea (Odent, 1990b). For example, some mechanisms of thermoregulation are specific to humans. To cope with a cold environment we do not have hair covering our bodies like other land primates but a layer of fat under our skin like the sea mammals. To protect ourselves against a hot atmosphere we use a costly mechanism that has been considered by some biologists to be a mistake of nature: sweating through our specialised "eccrine" glands, our bodies become depleted of huge quantities of water and salt. But this mechanism would make sense if our species were originally adapted to the coastal zones, an environment where water and salt were at our disposal without any restriction. Take, as another example, the way we express some of our emotions with tears: having salt glands is a sign of having adapted to the sea. A mother seal can cry like a human mother and secrete tears if she is separated from her baby. Sea birds also have salt glands. And consider our hands: a sort of webbing limits the movements of our thumbs. On our feet, the first and second toes are connected by this webbing. They are separated among the other apes. Moreover, webbing between the second and third toes is a common congenital abnormality, and it is well known that when an abnormality is an additional feature it means that it probably had a role to play at a certain stage of our evolution. There is also our low larynx and the whole anatomy of our upper respiratory tract, which is adapted to diving. Additionally, our diving reflex ensures that if we put our face in a basin of water, our heart beat slows down. Let us mention finally our sexual behavior, which has a lot in common with the sexual behavior of the cetaceans: copulating face to face and being orgasmic. Among land mammals, the male tends to approach the female from behind and the land primates are not very orgasmic. It is significant that one of the only exceptions to this rule are the chimpanzee-pygmy or bonobos (*Pan paniscus*) who like swimming and are particularly adapted to swamps. They copulate face to face and are obviously orgasmic. THE AQUATIC APE THEORY The scientific context of the 1990s gives more weight to the "aquatic ape theory", first proposed in Germany (Max Westenhofer, 1942), and the brainchild of Sir Alister Hardy. It was popularised in books by Elaine Morgan (Morgan, 1982). According to this theory, homo sapiens emerged when our ancestors had to adapt to the sea or, at least, to the land-sea interface. One interpretation is that homo sapiens emerged on an island, a zone isolated from the rest of the continent, at a time when East Africa was partly covered by the sea. The mysterious "baboon marker" gives support to this interpretation. All of the African primates, and only the African primates, except *Homo sapiens* (Todaro, 1980) have a biological scar in their DNA, suggesting that at a

certain period they had to face an infectious disease caused by a retrovirus. This fact suggests that either the emergence of humans happened outside of Africa, or that it happened on an island. (It has been well known since Darwin's time that the process of evolution is accelerated on islands.) At a time when other hypotheses put forward by the fossil hunters are being dismissed one by one, there are more and more reasons, in the 1990s, to bring into the limelight the theory of the aquatic ape, a theory, which has previously been ignored in academic circles, or just "kept on the list in the meanwhile" (Isaac, 1983). This theory is not in contradiction with the views of certain modern-day experts in human nature—namely, advertisers. These experts know how to catch our attention. They know that you can sell anything by showing waves, calm water, pictures recalling the mermaids (the most universal legend), dolphins, etc. This trick is used to sell anything from cars, cognac, shampoos, perfumes, products of daily life, and medicines, etc. The aquatic-ape theory is fruitful insofar as it lends significance to the human attraction to water in particular circumstances. My own interest in the relationship between humans and water developed dramatically in the 1970s, when I noticed that many women in labor are attracted to water, with many asking for showers or baths. I bought a children's inflatable round paddling pool and installed it in the maternity unit of our hospital (a French state hospital). It was soon apparent that immersion in warm water (at body temperature) facilitates the first stage of labor (dilation of the cervix), and reduces the use of drugs provided that the mother-to-be does not enter the water before the onset of hard labor and not before a certain degree of dilation of the cervix (Odent, 1983). We could easily find some simple physiological explanations for the positive effects of immersion in warm water during the first stage of labor; one of them being that, in such conditions, the level of adrenaline is probably as low as possible. But we have understood from some experiences of birthing that such simple physiological interpretations are not always sufficient. Water can trigger a more dramatic reaction than a lowering of adrenaline. On several occasions some women would suddenly lose their inhibitions just by looking at the inviting blue water, or on hearing the noise of water filling the pool, so that their babies were born on the floor by the pool. Our vision of homo sapiens as a primate adapted to the land-sea interface gives a dimension to the use of water during labor that goes beyond that of a method to facilitate the birth process and to replace drugs (Odent, 1992).

SUMMARY A theory is only useful as long as it stimulates research. The aquaticape theory is useful. For example, it is because I am more and more convinced of the special link between homo sapiens and the sea that I am involved in a research project about nutrition during pregnancy. I am following a group of women who have a high intake of oily seafood (diet rich in omega 3 polyunsaturated fatty acids). We can easily imagine that a liquid milieu has been imprinted deeply on our individual memory in one respect, and on our collective memory as a species in another respect. First, the primitive structures of our brain develop mostly during fetal life, that is to say in the amniotic fluid. This is a point in common with the other mammals and in particular with our cousins the chimpanzees. second, the recent neocortical brain structures might have reached their huge development during a marine phase of our evolution. This is specifically human. There is no wonder that water is such a powerful symbol.

References

REFERENCE NOTES

1. It is obvious that in this context, man refers to the female and male individuals belonging to the species Homo sapiens. Chimpanzee refers to the female and male individuals belonging to the species Pan troglodytes and Pan paniscus.

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Publication title: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal

Volume: 7

Issue: 3

Pages: 187-193

Number of pages: 7

Publication year: 1993

Publication date: Spring 1993

Year: 1993

Publisher: Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health

Place of publication: New York

Country of publication: United States

Journal subject: Medical Sciences--Obstetrics And Gynecology, Psychology, Birth Control

ISSN: 08833095

Source type: Scholarly Journals

Language of publication: English

Document type: General Information

ProQuest document ID: 198778957

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198778957?accountid=36557>

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Last updated: 2010-06-06

Database: ProQuest Public Health

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