Hindu Gods, Snakes, and Fairies Images in Sandplay Therapy Process of Nepalese Earthquake Survivors

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<Abstract>
On April 25, 2015 Nepal suffered a 7.8 magnitude earthquake that killed more than 8,000 people and left hundreds of thousands vulnerable. Three months later, in July the Korean Society of Sandplay Therapy and Namseoul University provided sandplay therapy to children in the city of Bhaktapur. They provided sandplay therapy to the children in a free and protected place to help prevent them from developing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In the first therapy session, the clients created fearful, chaotic, and disorganized scenes with images of buried houses and frightened people, while in the last session images of snakes, Hindu gods, and fairies appeared. This paper will describe in detail two clients' images to understand the religious context. The purpose of this paper is: to identify children's problems, behavior changes after the earthquake, to seek the healing process through the images seen during the sandplay therapy, and to understand how these images are related to religious belief in order to help the client to feel better.

Keywords: sandplay therapy, Nepal earthquake, Hinduism, images, children

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Ⅰ. Introduction

The 2015 Nepal Earthquake killed nearly 9000 people, injured almost 22,000, and destroyed over a half million homes. Bhaktapur is located near Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. According to Post Disasters Needs Assessments (PDNA) report, Bhaktapur was one of the crisis hit areas and 82% of households reported housing damage as a result of the earthquakes. More than 4000 people lost their lives in Kathmandu alone (Factsheet, 2015). 42% of Nepal’s populations are the children who have suffered after the earthquakes with psychological distress such as serious fear, trauma and loss (http://reliefweb.int/). Natural disasters like earthquake is unpredictable and uncontrollable affecting to the populations causing injury, death, and destruction (Altindag et al., 2005). It can lead to short and long-term psychological consequences (Spittlehouse et al., 2014). PTSD and major depression are the most common psychological outcomes resulting from earthquake (Oflaz et al., 2008). A new study has shown that PTSD remains a common post-earthquake mental health problem even five years after the disaster (Zhang et al., 2015).

Sandplay therapy is a nonverbal therapy (Chen et al., 2009) that helps clients to express their emotions freely. Psychological relief work after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake in Japan by Tochio Kawai (2015) well explains why psychotherapeutic and psychiatric supports are important after a natural disaster like earthquake. The case study by Kawai after the devastating earthquake in Japan is a good example of how the psyche reflects on the shock in the drawing images suggesting psychological recovery. The images that were used during the therapy process have many potential meanings and values that help understand the client’s situation. Images seen in the sandtray are particularly relevant to clients’ culture and religion. Cultural, religious level of meaning embodied in the objects is essential for the therapist in exploring the possibilities (Speier, 2000).

Ⅱ. Hindu religious background

Hinduism is the world’s third-largest religion, with at least a billion adherents. Its
chief deities are Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer. As their names indicate, Brahma represents creative energy, Vishnu represents preservation energy, and Shiva represents destructive energy. Hindus believe the three deities form a trinity which they call the Trimurti ("three forms") that in turn incarnates as a single avatar known as Dattatreya. The three are said to complete each other’s existence, so that one cannot be without the other. Together, their combined energies are known as the centripetal, balancing and centrifugal forces of the universe (www.hinduwebsite.com).

In Hinduism, there are various myths, beliefs, legends, and scriptures that are associated with snakes. Hindus may worship snakes in temples through religious ceremonies and prayers. The snake has a complex ritual and spiritual meaning for it represents life as well as
death and eternity as well as materiality. Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, Indra, and Krishna are associated with snakes.

The Lord Shiva is often depicted as wearing a garland of snakes around his neck. Shaivism is the cult of Shiva and in this branch of Hinduism, the Lord Shiva is known as Pashupatinath. Pashu means “animal” and patinath means “lord,” and hence Shiva is called the “Lord of All Creatures” (Kashmir Shaivism, 2002). The snake draped around Shiva’s neck has different meanings: when the snake represents the evil in the world then wearing a snake around his neck prevents evil from happening; when the snake represents the power of kundalini, a primal energy, then the snake around his neck represents an active involvement in divine activity; and when the snake represents passions and desires, then the snake around his neck sends the message to his devotees that he has overcome all desires (Kashmir Shaivism, 2002; www.hinduwebsite.com).

According to the 2001 census, 80.62% of Nepalese are Hindu. Therefore the Nepalese clients of this study often used figures of snakes, Shiva, Vishnu, and Buddha in their sandpictures. Unfortunately, Brahma figure was not available in the therapy room. Shiva and snake images appeared mostly in the first session, symbolizing anger and destruction, whereas Vishnu and Buddha images most often appeared in the last session, symbolizing hope and a positive healing process.

### III. Sandplay therapy process

The therapy group was comprised of 50 participants who were residents living in Bhaktapur. During the research team’s first visit to Nepal in July 2015, each client was given three 45-minute sandplay therapy sessions. In this paper, the sandplay processes for client “A” and client “B” are discussed. Client A was a 9-year-old boy. His house was damaged from the earthquake but his family escaped unharmed. He had been an active boy, but after the disaster his mother noticed that his hands had started shaking when he did his homework and he had lost interest in going to school. His school teacher reported that he cried all day asking for his mother. At the time of therapy, he was living in a tent with his family.
Client B was an 11-year-old girl. Both her mother and her teacher reported that after the earthquake, the girl developed health problems such as feeling pain, coughing, and runny nose as well as other issues such as being easily frightened of moving objects, wetting her bed, and losing interest in her studies. Her house had collapsed during the earthquake, and her mother was seriously injured when the roof fell on her. The client’s mother was receiving medical treatment at the time of client’s therapy program. The overall aim of this program was to help children express themselves freely through sandplay therapy and thereby reduce their fear, anger, and emotional anxiety.

1. Emptiness, loss

Image 1 was created by client A during his second therapy session. In the first session he had refused to play with the sand. In the second session, he placed figures in the sandtray but kept them to a corner. He would touch the sand and just move his fingers in the tray. He was very nervous and afraid, often looking out the window.

The therapist sought to respect his feelings by creating a silent environment that might make him feel more comfortable. The client and the therapist spent almost half of the session in silence. Despite having created a silent environment for him, the therapist realized that moving objects in the sandtray was reminding the client of the earthquake. Sometimes
sounds coming from outside also distracted him. Then in the middle of the session the client said, “I’m scared. I want to go.” Therefore the session terminated early. Nevertheless, this half-session was still sufficient to help the therapist understand the client’s feelings of fear, emptiness, and loss.

2. Collapse, chaos, and disorganization

In his third session, client A remained quiet and distracted. In this session, he brought many miniatures. Those he buried in the sand were mostly people, houses, and furniture. Image 2 shows the chaotic, disorganized aftermath of the earthquake with people everywhere and buried and collapsed houses.

Image 2: Collapse, chaos and disorganization

The boy looked at the therapist and said, “The earthquake killed and damaged.” Afterwards, he would not touch the tray. He explained there was an army trying to help the wounded, frightened, and helpless people. Then he took a deep breath and looked more relaxed. He appeared to be less distracted by his surroundings. Symptoms may vary from minimum to severe based on personal experiences and emotional responses to the incident (Vogel & Vernberg, 1993). Although the client needed to continue therapy, the army might
have represented hope because the client’s mother explained that after the third session, he did not complain about going to school.

3. Fearful, surrender

In her first session, client B buried houses and people, including children, in the sand. Then she placed a black snake on the sand. She also placed some human figures who had frightened expression on their face and making a posture of surrender. The client looked afraid and kept eyeing the snake. “The dark snake has killed many people. Those dead are buried inside [the sand] and these remaining people are surrendering in fear. Oh! I am afraid because of this black snake.”

The client’s story echoed the imagery of snakes in Hinduism. Curious, the therapist found a related video clip on YouTube, in which a woman explains, “There is a belief that a man killed a father snake (Naga). A revengeful mother snake (Nagin) borrowed the spirit of a woman from that village and spoke through her that she wants to take revenge for her children having to become orphans.” (Why Earthquake Came In Nepal - Religious Faith, YouTube). Another video, released on April 28, reported that a dead snake with a head like a man’s was found in Lamjung, Nepal. The villagers believed that the occurrence of a natural
disaster was attributable to the mistakes of human beings (Snake Like Man Head Killed: Nepal Earthquake, YouTube).

These videos reveal that many Nepalese still believe religious factors can explain the earthquake in their country. Although she was unaware of the story of the snake with the manlike head, client B’s psyche during the therapy process was actively associated with Hindu beliefs. There is still tension between science and religious faith but there is also evidence that science and religious faith are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Kashmir Shaivism, 2002). The Nagas of Hindu mythology are still very much a part of the culture of regions in Asia with large Hindu populations, namely India, Nepal, and Bali in Indonesia.

Worshipping the Nagas
(https://www.wikipedia.org/)

The Nagas are considered nature spirits and the protectors of springs, wells, and rivers. They bring rain and fertility, but also disasters such as floods and drought. Hindus believe a person who harms or kills a snake will cause infertility and delay in marriage (Kashmir Shaivism, 2002). Hindu stories about the Nagas represent negative aspects such as disasters like floods, droughts, and earthquakes. The images seen in the sandtray are related to this religious background, which helped the therapist to understand the client’s problems.
4. Green snake, Buddha, and good fairies as protectors

In her second session, client B brought many figures of people, animals, temples, Buddha, fairies, and a baby. “People were living happily but one day bad fairies and good fairies fought. A giant snake came to the city and tried to kill many people. Some of them ran away and some went to pray to Buddha for their safety.” She explained that she was not afraid of the green snake because it was not as scary as the black snake.

In Hinduism, the snake represents not only negative aspects but also positive aspects such as hope, new life, materiality, and eternity (Kashmir Saivism, 2002). This is the reason why Hindus worship snakes to bring good luck. In India, there is an ancient festival called “Nag Panchami: that is held in the city of Shravan during the monsoon season in July and August. This festival celebrates the victory of Lord Krishna: “Mahabharata explained that Lord Krishna conquered Nag Kalia and put an end to his evil deeds on the day of Shrawan Panchami. People began to celebrate this occasion as ‘Nag Panchami,’ which means victory over evil.” Hindus believe that praying to the Nagas will free them from the fear of snakes and also protect them from all evils.
5. Vital, hopeful: Sophia’s wishes come true

During the third session client B said, "My mother was always sick because my father beat her and me. We don’t live with my father. My mother, brother and I are living in a tent. … Now my father is not with us, there are no fights and no sickness. … So I am happy.” Her story made the therapist curious because the way she explained her circumstances was entirely different than that in the previous session. However, the therapist had to wait until she played with the sand.
The client made the sandpicture (Image 5) with a lot of effort. The therapist sensed that both the client’s conscious and unconscious were involved in the work. But after creating the picture, the client became quiet and looked sad. The therapist asked her if she was all right. The client replied, “My father doesn’t want to meet me but he meets my brother outside home. He really doesn’t like me because I am a girl.” When asked why she thought so, the client said, “My father beats my mother and me. My brother also beats me.” When the therapist asked her to explain her sandpicture, the client said, “The hen is with her kids. There’s a cow and a house.” The client identified herself with the Sophia figure in yellow and her mother with the woman wearing a white wedding dress. The therapist asked the client whether she knew the story of Sophia and she did not. Then the therapist asked the girl what the figures representing her and her mother were doing. The girl replied, “I wish to ride a boat with my mother.”

The children’s book “Sophia’s Journey” is about a young princess named Sophia. Sophia does not have many friends, and every year on her birthday she makes a wish that she should be able to have a party with her friends. One day, Sophia decides to go for a walk, hoping to find a friend or two. While walking she meets nine animal friends. When they all return to Sophia’s kingdom, they have a party and Sophia’s wish finally comes true.

The therapist had a talk with the client’s mother after the therapy. The mother explained, “After playing with sand I obtained the power to make an important decision in my life. I was able to separate from my violent husband to protect myself and my children. In the past I couldn’t because of social and cultural prejudices. But this time, I prioritized myself and my children.” The conversation with the mother helped the therapist to understand the client more. Client B will need long-term therapy in the future because her problems were not only the earthquake but also the abusive environment at home. She had experienced mental anguish after the earthquake, mostly related to re-experiencing the trauma through flashbacks, a symptom of PTSD (Basoglu et. al., 2004). However, her psyche was helping her to see her mother as a separate, independent being. Like Sophia, she was waiting for her wish to come true. There is hope for her so long as she is able to enjoy a supportive environment.
IV. Conclusion

Sandplay is a unique natural therapy process. It is helpful in normalizing difficult relational experiences for those in psychological distress after an earthquake. This conceptualization of relational fields allows us to describe and give importance to understanding the client’s psyche. The therapists have a common understanding of the images and symbols that children use during the sandplay therapy. The figures in the first session were buried and disorganized houses, war games, and a violent black snake, and in the third session there appeared armies, a green snake, good fairies, and Hindu gods. The therapist observed that the clients were in a psychological distress. They were terrified, confused, sick and afraid of moving objects. A black snake and a green snake that appeared in clients’ sandpictures had both a negative aspect and a positive aspect, which is in accordance with Hindu beliefs. It was very actively during the therapeutic process to help overcome their problems related to the earthquake. The black snake might represent the damages from the earthquake, and the green snake possibly plays the role of healing the clients. There were armies and fairies to help the client to hope for a better future.

The evidence of this study lacks other measurements. Sandplay therapy sessions were short and therefore reliability is limited. However, the processes of sandplay therapy with those images which appear in the sandtray were important and able to show positive transformation. The healing process (Jung, 1961) can be realized in the last third session for both clients. Also, both parents and teachers reported changes such as client A and client B were now able to concentrate on their studies and appeared far less fearful after therapy. Client A’s schoolteacher reported that he stopped looking for his mom at school. Client B stopped wetting her bed and was persuaded to sleep in the house after the disaster. The sandpicture images were related to the clients’ culture and religion, helping the therapist to understand the importance of religious knowledge. The results of this program encouraged the therapist to set goals and continue the long-term therapy process in the future.
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