

Cancer, persecution and ordeal

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Abstract

Cameroonian cancer patients more often consider spiritual explanations for the etiology of their sickness. In their opinion, it is the outcome of a witchcraft attack, and as such, they believe they should be treated by a traditional healer. The experience and expression of the theme of persecution, combined with the confrontation with death through cancer puts the patient in a situation akin to 'an ordeal'. Indeed, these patients often refer to an external authority when confronted with lethal danger as in other forms of ordalic behavior. The psychoanalytic psychotherapy of a female breast cancer patient allowed us to observe two types of so-called ordalic behavior: On the one hand the ancient perspective where the subject is passive, namely the perception of her sickness as the outcome of the transgression of the vow of chastity by her parents and the consequence of a witchcraft attack by the uncle; on the other hand, a more contemporary perspective with voluntary and repetitive confrontation with danger through astral travel. Both types of ordalic behavior permitted the resurgence and treatment of perinatal and periconceptual danger fantasies of the patient. As such, they allowed the reconstruction and restoration of bond and narcissism of the subject. It also showed that being around death in fantasy and reality, may be a mobilizer of the symbolization process.