

## CONVENTIONAL WAR AND CHEMICAL WARFARE IN A LUOI FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL ANGLE

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**T**he work we are going to present is in the multi-disciplinary study of CEDRATE in coordination with Jacques Maître. The paper is to present what we are doing in the field of psychology. The paper is written by two authors - *Concepcion de la Garza-Doray*, a psychological analyst, who cannot attend this conference, and I, a doctor of psychiatry. I'd like to add that both of us have been trained in anthropology. Our study was conducted in A Luoi Valley, where I still remember its special features: A Luoi Valley lies close to the border with Laos, on the central highlands, south of the 17th Parallel. This area was in the past covered by thick tropical forests, with many perinial trees and rich fauna such as tigers, wild buffaloes which can weigh one ton each, and wild elephants. Rare archive photos show us beautiful villages of the Pako and Ta Oi ethnic minority groups with their houses-on-stilt. The people here lived on hunting and gathering of forest products and slash and burn cultivation. Today, such images of the past rarely exist, yet the belief in supernatural power and the worshipping of totem and ancestors are still popular, even legendary clans are being restored here. The shaman seems to be the origin of these cultures.

How to present possible contributions of psychology to clarifying issues related to Agent Orange/dioxin and suggest therapeutic answers? I still remember a workshop sponsored by a French psychological analyst about 10 years ago in Hanoi. He undertook a very heavy task, e.i. to explain the work of Sigmund Freud in 40 minutes. He used his time to retell one of the *Humorous Stories of Vietnam*, in a collection which was sold by the Hoan Kiem (Restored Sword" Lake side. I remember it was about a man who was shot by an arrow in his shin. The story tells about the debate between a foreign expert who suggested cutting off the arrow so that it would not be protruding outside the shin, and a local expert who said the arrow inside the shin must be treated. I cannot find this story again, but I remember it implies something very important relating to psychology.

Psychology is a science comprising many disciplines and many theoretical schools. There are psychology of development, mental measurement, experimental psychology, social psychology, perception psychology, behavior psychology etc. Of those disciplines, sometimes psychological analysis is called psychologie des

profondeurs (psychology of profundity). This means, opposite to the psychology which is only interested in behaviors [*Behaviorsm*], the psychology of profundity is interested in the profundity of behaviors.

### **Wounds caused by « the war with conventional weapons » to families**

To illustrate the concerns over the documentation resource study of « *psychology of profundity* », I'd like to provide the case of a young man whom I met in Hong Kim Commune in A Luoi Valley. He lost many parts of his body. He lost his right hand, many fingers on his left hand and his right foot. He does not carry artificial limbs. He seems to be very careless with his moustache and his hair is long and rumped. He is half-naked, making others see clearly the burns of smokes on his chest. At first, he wanted to make visitors misunderstand that he himself cut off his hand and foot with a knife.

Why did he want others to believe that he used a knife to cut off his hand and foot ? What is his motivation to burn himself with the cigarettes ? The scars of burns concentrate on his chest to show others that he is the culprit of his lost limbs. What do all these mean ? To answer our questions, he said if he did burn himself with the cigarettes, he did not fear. His story seems to be unreasonable but it will be very significant if we know the real cause of his wounds: a hand grenade, the vestige of war, exploded in his garden. Of course, the event reappeared in a small context, and in the way he was the author, the burns were suddenly caused by the hand grenade, this is the way to suppress the fear, to retell the sudden incident he suffered earlier in the form of another event pre-meditated by him, thus he was the one who intentionally caused it. This emphasizes a very important aspect of psychology on mental wounds : it was not the event that caused injuries itself, it was the event that when it happened, he felt he could not think of what happened to him and could not do anything about it. In short, what caused the wounds does not exist when facing the incident with his personality.

We can give another example on the act one tried to take after the event happened, in the imagination, in face of the sudden event one could not do anything then. It was a comment we have collected in a city of Turkey, which was destroyed by an earthquake. The population there have been haunted by earthquakes that can happen to them any time. They live in tents and do not dare to come back to their houses. An international non-governmental organization had a very awkward idea of building among tents a plastic house on a huge plastic spring that can swing. This unreasonable act (making a game in such a situation) has become a good instrument of treatment for the children there, because by creating the movement in that house, the children can imagine they are the hosts of the earthquakes.

And the psychologists can raise other questions. They wonder the pain of the injury caused by himself (the burns caused by the cigarettes) cannot set the mind of that young man at rest in face of the fact that he suffered too much loss of his limbs, his body is incomplete, but he can use artificial parts : an artificial foot, an artificial hand and artificial fingers.

Finally, the psychologists have to pay attention to what has happened between that man and his neighbours. In case of the young man in Hong Kim Commune, we talked to his father. He was a courageous fighter in the war. He was once injured and sent to a convalescence in a rural area in North Vietnam. There he met his wife.

The way the man retells what he has undergone shows no emotion. It's just a pile of information. But when we asked him to tell us his feelings when he effectively and consciously cared for his son after the explosion of the hand grenade, he seemed to be very emotional while telling us that he had never had such a fear like that in his life. Listening to his father's story, the boy reacted immediately: he quickly left the house, hopping on his only one leg and disappeared at the back of the house. The fact that the boy disappeared when listening to his father's retelling his story can be explained in many ways we will not want to develop here.

Here we want to enter another aspect of psychological analysis, that is the links between humans. The father can suffer many psychological wounds caused by the war, the injuries he tried to avoid thinking of. That is a conscious process [avoiding reminiscence about the saddest aspects of war], but it is also an unconscious process which is called by the psychological analysis branch as fiber split: scenes of injuries exist in one's mind, but in the form of dry information without any feeling. On the contrary, the feeling one had when the event happened exists as a pure emotional memory which can rise up if something reminisces it that linked with the event, sometimes through something which is a bit similar (a word, a taste, a colour etc.). In the case we are considering, the relation between the father and the son is marked by this aspect. For the father, his son may be a live memory of all his bad experiences. And maybe for the father, his son, after all, suffers heaviest wounds of war in the family. For him, the father represents a period of history of the country that he did not know, but injures him deep in his flesh.

Can this psychological analysis bring about any benefit to improve the psychological state of this family? It needs imagination. It's impossible to have any formula. Right in the place, in our first meeting, we recorded the portrait of the son when he pointed to his wounds, yet he did it like a person of good conduct. However, people can imagine that the mediators, not necessarily psychologists, but

who understand the circumstance, can help transmit the stories of the father to their children. For instance, in this specific case, the mediator can help the father and mother listen to what their son want to say through his self-injuring behaviors. And then, to be more general, an action could be undertaken in A Luoi Valley and would have been supported.

### **The importance of « classic » wounds of war.**

So, in A Dot Village, the war veterans are used to get together to reminisce their war that lasted for 30 to 40 years. They talk about the dreams that hurt them:

*« At night I still dream of the fiercest moment when there was nothing to eat. I met myself and my dead companions in arms and other companions who are still alive. We do not know who else we can share those bad experiences with except those who have undergone war. In the war, I had some nightmares. I twas normal. But why after the war, I still dream about such scenes ? They are still those nightmares, those companions in arms and their dresses. Years have elapsed, yet the nightmares are the same.*

*But sometimes, there are dreams of happiness. I dream about my very close companions in arms. We meet again by the side of a stream after a long time .....*

Question: Can you tell those nightmares to the women who have experienced war ?

A woman interrupted : *I took part in the war for 15 years as a woman fighter in a logistic unit. I also had nightmares and I have shared them with other women in the War Veterans' Association, but we, women meet less often. At night, I dream about my companions who are either alive or already dead. But my husband talks about war more than me.*

Question : How old were you when you started to join the fight ?

Answer : *17 ».*

Those statements should be encouraged. Moreover, retelling such stories about war to the next generations may be important, because in general, people listen to less personal things than what the war veterans said. People can think of a place where the memories of the war veterans are still preserved. They are not places as *Vet Centers*, in the US, but places of history of Vietnam and also the history of the world.

By the way, it is noted that in A Luoi Valley, the presence of modernity makes generations closer unreasonably. Many young people did not believe what the adults talked about the war. But the scenes shown on the TV network are more convincing to them about the reality of that war and the destruction caused by the

enemy. The fact that the young generation acknowledges the sufferings of the soldiers and the meaning of their fighting cannot eliminate the nightmares, but can allow the consideration of such nightmares as the scars of war which remain significant for the present time. That is the full acknowledgement of the war veterans with their dignity.

### **Impacts of the chemical warfare:**

#### **Agent Orange/dioxin**

The psychological impacts of the chemical warfare, especially of Agent Orange/dioxin, are more complicated than what we just discussed. This is because this chemical warfare, objectively, has had complicated impacts which have been expressed under different forms by time.

We imagine those impacts starting from the concept « support – stay », the concept we use to describe both psychological and sociological characteristics of the matter we are discussing. As you know, they are two words put together : support and stay.

1) In the West, there is an important philosophical tradition around the term: « support», but in general in sociology at present, it points to a specific support to a subject in social life : family, occupation, financial income, friends etc.

2) The word « étayage » (stay), at first has the same meaning with the word support, but it is more on the side of psychology and psychological analysis. For example, the psychological analysis discipline has a theory of desire for pleasant feeling which is developed when a child sucks on its mother's breast and this first pleasant feeling is the (étayer) (stay) of the sexual instinct of a grown-up person. This desire for pleasant feeling of the child sucking its mother's breast concentrates on itself, and long afterward, people can say that such a desire « *pays the way* » for an experience of the adults toward the opposite sex and toward the reproduction of humans. It « *pays the way* », just like the ancient valley of a river that can suggest a direction for a modern mountainous road.

3) Why do we combine these two concepts: support and étayage? It is because when people face a complicated situation, it is marked by mental injuries caused by real events, such events are not in their imagination, but leave psychological vestiges and so they must be analyzed at the same time at what is happening in the psychological life and in the outside, objective fact. In another words, objective aspects must be related, not talking about an individual person, for instance, the display of personification of nature [such as the theory of origin of the universe] which has been handed down for thousands of years and the spiritual life of everyone, the life

which has been guided, directed and supported by a system of expression not belonging to any individual person.

It is the dialectics on real support, outside, not belonging to any individual person, and the imaginative support, inside and individual, that we will clarify in our theory of trauma.

### **Four stages of the psychological warfare within the chemical warfare in A Luoi Valley**

In the next session, we will survey four stages in the evolution of attack of the support-stay, linked to four types of consecutive events by time when the US sprayed Agent Orange.

#### **1- The post-spraying period:**

##### **Nature is distorted.**

The main thing here is the damage of the symbols that create the links between humans and nature. The totem belief and the belief of the Pako and Ta Oi people are characterized by supernatural creatures considered to have supernatural power on humans through nature, and supposed to be directly present in the close world: water, forest, soil, a plant species or an animal... So what happened after each chemical spraying ?

It is more frightened than an instant panic and several evidence on the feelings of those who witnessed herbicide and defoliant sprayings which remain in their memory on the surprise of a strange phenomenon. A veteran retold his naive delusion : young soliders are « *like children, knowing nothing* ». They even ran to see that marvellous scene: « *They sprayed in the afternoon, it was beautiful. [...] We even took those kegs [dropped] to contain water* »

Some others are less naive, like three veterans whom we met in A Dot, as they have experienced chemical sprayings because they were holding most vulnerable positions and they were surprized by the instantaneity of the destruction of forests: « *Leaves wheathered immediately* ». Moreover, these strange substances, oily, made them feel itchy and unconscious, but they could not imagine that those destructive substances can damage human health.

So, the main thing in the first instance is that people paid attention to the nature around and close to them which seemed to be distorted, like looking at a distorting mirror. For example, they described fish in the river as « *luminescing flourescent colour* », vegetable roots as swelling up and blackening, trees falling

leaves rapidly, animals dying and humans feeling strangely irritating... But the symbolic relation between human and Nature has not been changed completely.

People imagined clearly that the forest Genies must be very angry at human for destructing nature, but genies remain a reference, allowing people to think of events, even if the relation between the shaman and those genies does not remain as it was before the war. An advanced age person in A Ngo said:

*« Before the war, there were forest genies and 'fortune tellers' [shamans]. But with dioxin poisonous substance, all trees have been destroyed. So the genies had to move to father places. They did not die, but it is hard to meet the ».*

Question: Can people « meet » genies ?

Answer : *'Forune tellers' can meet genies. The genies have long beard and white hair... In the past, all ailments were caused by forest genies and ghosts. 'Shamans » know whether those illnesses are caused by forest, stream or earth genies..... »*

And in the system of belief in gods and deities, the dialogue can continue even when the shamans cannot 'meet' discontented genies :

*« If the disease is caused by the forest Genie, the shaman will go to forests to pray and gather leaves to organize a ceremony for treatment of the disease. And then, he returns to the patient's house. The shaman asks for a sacrifice. Everyone shares the sacrificed animal, except the patient who is not allowed to eat it. And the ceremony continues with leaves gathered from the forest put on the body of the patient. »*

After all, people try to restore the dialogue with Gods, just like making symbolic tombs for wandering souls. People tell us that there are many «wandering souls » in this area where many dead bodies had not been burried decently, where there were many missing people or people who died without having anyone to maintain the continuity of their family line. But, the souls, in a large number, which cannot be grasped and cause worrying anxiety, can incarnate into grasshoppers flying on the feet when people walk through the pasture. Therefore, they consider grasshoppers as « wandering souls»:

*« When people have to die far from home, their dead bodies cannot be taken back to be burried, many grasshoppers are caught and kept in a box. People think that they are the souls of the dead and so they burry those grasshoppers in the box ».*

(Pa ko Village, A Luoi Valley).

## **2. Dioxin: a strange substance, limit of the witchcraft thinking and symbolically personified Nature**

The A Ngo villager who told us the traditional ways of treatment of diseases by shamans [«fortune tellers »], ended the story by saying: “*If all those ways of treatment are not effective, they would say that the disease is not caused by Gods, but ‘dioxin’*”. So it means it enters into another system. The support – stay of the symbolic system is withdrawn. And people have to face a strange subject, the word: dioxin. In the past, the shaman had got replies expressed instantly through their acts which were considered treatment of diseases. But sciences now open up possibilities of stopping certain beliefs in real symbolic rites. Before returning it to the truth of history (the decision of a US President on the launch of Operation Ranch hand), the term Dioxin is linked with a world that cannot approach and is not the origin of unhappiness. Medicine makes this new word, but cannot be able to affect the object that it designates.

The support – stay, being attacked here, is simply a way of witchcraft thinking, describing that a personified Nature is always being influenced by symbolic acts.

The elimination of Nature is personified as an injuring situation, because it is left everyone to the discretion of a strange fact, whose shape is not clearly seen, with that fact, there cannot be any dialogue. Scientific labour, of course cannot be read. So what is in between human and this terrible fact, a reality that does not follow any human rules? Nothing if it is not human society itself that must withdraw from its own power something to relieve their unhappiness, injustice and lack of human dignity. Basically, it is the reply of the society at national and of course international levels. It is the support, but also an acknowledgement of crimes. And the nature, disillusion in the relation with Nature and with the world in general and with history should be re-defined. People see what Jacques Maitre called a “*historic religion*”. It is a complicated system and one of the expressions of this system is the fact that some clans took the sir name of Uncle Ho.

## **3. Children’s diseases: fear of racial preservation**

The third level overcome when children were born deformed who often contract diseases which have never been known before. It is the support – stay that is attacked, it is the time perspective, the heredity, the continuity of family line, the future that gives meaning to the present and the past. The maintenance of the continuity of family line has practical aspects: Who will care for parents in their advanced age when they have no healthy children to care for them, but on the contrary, parents have to support their children until whenever they can?

Before being explained by dioxin, this phenomenon was assigned to each individual the determinism or the living conditions in the war:

*“After the war, people started to give birth to abnormal children. With the first abnormal children, they thought it was their fate. But more and more children were born with birth defects and illnesses, people thought it was possibly because during the war they were so hungry for everything was destroyed by chemical sprays that they ate darkened manioc and dead fish... [...] And then, the living conditions of the women during the war were very miserable. When leaving the underground shelters, women had to carry heavy papooses. And a woman waited for her children, sometimes, women gave birth on the road...”*

The explanation with dioxin has turned a situation experienced as a destiny and like lack of human dignity into a cause at the national level: *“For only several years now since having TV, people know that in other parts of Vietnam, there are also children born with deformities.”*

And here, it is the same. Attaching importance to necessary assistance to relieve the consequences, at least in economic aspect, of the disorder of family lines, and bearing responsibility of caring for people with disability to give them a foothold in society and prospects of an independent life are important factors to overcome trauma.

#### **4. Genetic disorder – destruction of genetic heritage of human kind?**

There remains this strange object that even science has to stop in front of it. A hypothesis stresses that, in fact, many children have been born deformed due to genetic disorder, this means the disorder can transfer to their children and grandchildren, sometimes can skip to many generations. In this case, it is not only a disaster to the families concerned, but it is an attack to the set of human haploid genes. In another words, it is the attack against the memory of life placed in the set of human genes, and as known to everyone, it is a common property of human kind.

Now, the scientific debate on this issue is on the aspect of epidemiology. And it is bogged down in the matter of methodologies without a way out. Such an approach to the issue tends to throttle the debate, because when a section of international community demands that Vietnam implement, with a real size compared to the ill population, measurement of invaluable dioxin in blood. This is what happens when people follow an ideal assessment which cannot be achieved because of the management of evidence is always questionable.

On the contrary, people can reverse the issue of evidence by posing the question: Whether there is an attack against the set of human haploid genes any

where on this planet? So we touch a legal issue: if there is such an attack and if it did not lead to a certain consequence: we are in the situation in which someone has lit the fire to burn the common roof and the fire is extinguished by itself. Does this action lose its criminal characteristic?

So we have said in the Workshop on Agent Orange/Dioxin in Paris a year ago that research should be expanded to the mechanism of possible effects of dioxin on the system of haploid genes. And we raised a question, which, in our opinion, is not a hypothesis, but a confirmation that dioxin clearly affects what is called protéines chaperons. What is it?

Since 1998, with the studies by Susan Lindquist and Susan Ruthford, researchers at the University of Chicago, we know that these protéines allow maintaining genetic change in the system of the set of haploid genes in a virtual form. This has been proved when we neutralize protéines chaperons, we'll see deformed wings, two rib-cages and other deformities appeared in drosophila.

Yet, dioxin affects this protective system, i.e. protéines chaperons, because it gets a chemical key to infiltrate into the core of cell, AhR, normally used in this protective protéines system. This may not really make the system of haploid genes disordered or to what extent it may make it disordered when causing clinical consequences. This is what we want geneticists and experts of molecular biology to show us.

As psychological analyst and doctors of psychiatry, of course we cannot go further than what we have presented. On the contrary, we see very clearly that this is an attack against a system that links the body shape of an individual with that of a common body of mankind.

In this case, an issue of ethics relating to the whole human kind is raised. Whether in the near future we will see, in one of those who were affected most strongly, devils and monsters who are not humans? Or on the contrary, it is considered that those persons are humans who have suffered heaviest injuries and most terrible injustice: a scheme to separate them from human shape. If we look at the situation in this way, it will be considered that the wounds of someone will also be the loss of the integrity of the whole mankind.

Therefore, there must be symbolic acts which can be heard, even outside Vietnam. Such acts can rally artists to fight for the cause of defending human dignity. They will have to reconfirm that those people with serious disabilities belong to the history of human kind. They will have to confirm the need to prevent similar acts against mankind in the future. They must highly value the admirable industrious labour which we have seen in families and villages trying to help those

victims to integrate into community as well as great efforts of the national community of Vietnam. And they will have to emphasize the urgency of measures for strengthening international solidarity to help those people with serious disabilities reintegrate into human community.