

## Pain As Cultural Drama

Jacob Bilmes  
Alan Howard  
University of Hawaii

Pain infliction studies most often seem to focus on the psychic nature and personality of the inflictor and/or victim. Such emphasis can easily blur or otherwise distort the social context of pain-giving and pain receiving activities. Beginning with a simplified description of the circumstances surrounding Huron torture of prisoners of war (see Trigger 1969:47-51), we will attempt to show that proceedings such as this constitute an ingeniously constructed cultural drama based on some universal implications of pain infliction.

Upon capturing an enemy warrior the Huron war party would tear out his fingernails and cut or bite off the fingers that he used to draw a bow. They made a speech to him, explaining that the tortures he was to suffer were retribution for cruelties practised by his people on the Huron. Then they transported him to a Huron settlement. At the village to which he was assigned the prisoner was "adopted" by a family that had lost a member in warfare. The prisoner replaced the lost member and was treated with ironic courtesy and affection. On rare occasions, the family might decide to spare the prisoner's life and accept him as a member. Usually, however, he was condemned to death by torture. Always, though, they treated him with solicitude, as if he were indeed the lost family member. On the night his ordeal was to begin, the prisoner hosted a feast for the entire village. He invited the Huron to amuse themselves in torturing him, which they proceeded to do. About the actual tortures, suffice it to say that they were extremely unpleasant. The prisoner endeavored to behave himself bravely throughout. The torture might last from one night to six days. It was essential, however, that he die in the light of the sun, for his life was a sacrifice to the sun. During the torture his tormentors spoke to him in a solicitous but highly ironic way. On the morning he was to die he was placed on an outdoor scaffold and eventually executed. His heart was cut out and his hands and feet chopped off. His flesh was cooked and ritually eaten and, if he had been especially brave, the young men ate his roasted heart.

The cultural uses of pain can be classified in three broad interpenetrating categories: utilitarian, expressive (retributive-sadistic); and symbolic. Examples of utilitarian uses of pain are corporal punishment of children or criminals, where pain is used as a negative incentive, and torture of prisoners for information. Of course, any occasion of pain-infliction may have an expressive component. And the fact that pain is being used as an incentive does not preclude its having a symbolic component as well, as when a child's use of bad language is punished by "washing" his mouth with soap. The Huron, their savage treatment of prisoners notwithstanding, were little given to the utilitarian use of pain. They did not use physical punishments on their children, and although they might interrogate their prisoners in order to obtain military information, they never tortured them for this purpose. Huron torture was decidedly symbolic and expressive.

As a symbolic feature of cultural dramas, pain is almost always associated with changes in the status of the victim. It is used in connection with ceremonies whose function is either to elevate or degrade the "victim." There are three classes of participants in such a ceremony — inflictor, victim, and audience. The audience gives the ceremony its character as a drama. The inflictor is more than a functionary — in a sense, he is as central to the drama as the victim. The inflictor stands as a representative of the social category to which the victim is either being assimilated (in the case of elevation) or contrasted (in the case of degradation). Thus, to some degree, the inflictor's own status is on the line together with that of the victim. If the ceremony is not successful the inflictor's status as a cultural model who has the right to do what he is doing is brought into question.

That infliction of pain is frequently associated with change in status is clear from the anthropological and historical literature. Painful initiations and torture of heretics and criminals are obvious examples. The reasons for this association are perhaps not so clear. We speculate that a person displaying pain in public is in an abnormal and awe-inspiring state. He arouses strong emotions in the audience. This highlights the victim's liminality. He is not a normal member of society. He is sacred or polluted, and not to be approached casually. (The Apaches, Basso (1970) informs us, will not speak to a grief-stricken person.) The initiate is already surrounded by taboos (VanGennep 1960, Turner 1974). In his moments of pain, he reaches the extremes of liminality and social instability. His old status is obliterated and he is ready to enter a new one. In this context, the infliction of pain may be seen as a rite of intensification.

The reincorporation of the initiate at a higher level is frequently signified or accomplished by cooking him symbolically. The Murngin youth is steamed for a day or two after initiation (Warner 1964:473-4). Ngoni initiation includes jumping back and forth over a fire (Read 1961:645). Among the Mardudjara, the initiate, after circumcision, kneels on a shield over a smoking fire (Tonkinson 1978:74). This also brings to mind the widespread custom of roasting women over a fire after the pain of childbirth. Commenting on this custom, Levi-Strauss suggests that the fire "has the effect of making sure that a natural [we would say "liminal"] creature is at one and the same time *cooked and socialized*" (1970:336).

The ritual infliction of pain can be used to degrade as well as elevate. Pain is a boundary marker without directional arrows. Foucault (1977:3ff) describes the highly ritualized, but nonetheless distressingly rigorous torture of a regicide. He interprets

the scene as the imprinting of the Prince's power on the body of the victim. But where power is expressed, so is subjugation. Where the Prince's power is asserted, that of the victim is denied. The victim, who cannot protect his own body, is demeaned and debased. Indeed, even in painful initiations whose main outcome is the elevation of the victim, there is an element of degradation, a final assertion of power by his tormentors. In some initiations, this message is stark. Iatmul initiations, although they result ultimately in the elevation of the initiate, appear to be degrading in many of their particulars (Bateson 1958:130ff). The only occasions in which the ritual infliction of pain is not degrading are certain rituals wherein the pain is self-inflicted. The sun dance of the Cheyenne and other plains tribes may be cited as an example of such a ritual. But even self-inflicted pain may have an element of degradation, particularly when it is done to efface a sin. Christian self-flagellation and certain forms of Japanese harikiri come to mind as examples. The inflictor/victim publicly admits his wrongdoing even as he atones for it.

The medieval treatment of regicides and unrepentant heretics (Lea 1878, Foucault 1977) or the reported Ibo punishments for adultery (Hives 1968) are instances of pure degradation ceremonies, just as the sun dance uses pain purely for elevation. It is interesting to note that medieval torture often culminated in the destruction of the victim's body by fire, a practice which is at the same time analogous to and an inversion of the symbolic cooking of the initiate. The unfortunate heretic was deliberately overdone.

Thus far, we have suggested that pain, because it promotes the perception of the victim's liminality, is frequently inflicted during rites of passage. We have suggested, furthermore, that these rites may have the purpose of elevating or degrading the victim, and may in fact temporarily degrade him, even in the course of permanently elevating him. We have not, however, yet considered the behavior of the victim as an element in the success or failure of the proceedings. The victim is not necessarily, nor indeed ordinarily, a passive object of the ritual. Although in some initiation rituals, the manner in which the initiate bears pain is said to be of no import (e.g., Bateson 1958:130), this appears to be the exception rather than the norm. Among the aborigines of the Gibson Desert of Australia, for example, initiates "must not cry out in pain lest they be ridiculed later" (Gould 1968:61). Although they earn their new status by undergoing the necessary experiences, that status may be to a certain extent "spoiled" by poor comportment under pain. The ability to maintain self-composure under the stress of intense pain seems to be widely, if not universally, admired. By exhibiting this ability, the victim in effect answers his tormentors' assertion of political power with his own assertion of spiritual power. The initiate rises triumphantly from the ashes of his own degradation. The most debasing aspect of Iatmul initiation, as described by Bateson, does not reside in the cruel behavior of the adult men but in the fact that no one is

interested in how the initiates bear up under their ordeals.

In most ceremonies featuring the infliction of pain, the comportment of the victim is a crucial element. When the victim's behavior is consistent with the cultural objective of the ceremony, all is well. When the victim is to be elevated, he should demonstrate poise and bravery under pain. In degradation ceremonies, the victim is expected to behave in an uncontrolled and contemptible manner. The degree of pain inflicted and the preparation of the victim for his ordeal are generally designed to make these outcomes likely. But sometimes things do not work out as planned. The initiate may bear up poorly under pain, show himself to be unworthy even as he is being declared worthy, and to some extent spoil his own elevation. Or the victim who is to be degraded may, against all expectation, bear himself admirably, thus raising doubts about the "official" interpretation of the event.

This latter possibility is the source of a recurring image in Western culture. It occurs frequently in Christian mythology, and is epitomized by the crucifixion of Christ. It is one of the most reliable devices in movies and novels. Foucault (1977:67), commenting on a time in Western history when torture and public execution were commonly practiced, writes: "A convicted criminal could become after his death a sort of saint, his memory honoured and his grave respected." This might occur as a result of the apparent sincerity of the criminal's repentance. "But indomitability was an alternative claim to greatness: by not giving in under torture, he gave proof of a strength that no power had succeeded in bending" (1977:67). The painful degradation ceremony contains within itself the seeds of its own inversion. Beccaria (1801:59) was wrong when he wrote that "torture renders the victim infamous, and therefore cannot take infamy away." Over time the criminal or the heretic, by virtue of his exemplary behavior under trying circumstances, may come to be perceived as a hero or a saint. When this happens, the implications are revolutionary because in degradation ceremonies the victim's and the inflictor's moral positions are defined in opposition to one another. In undertaking such ceremonies, the authorities put their own reputations at risk, for if the ceremony happens to misfire and the victim comes to be perceived as hero, then the inflictors will accordingly be lowered to the status of villain. (Over time, authorities may solve the problem by reincorporating the victim at an elevated level, as with the canonization of Joan of Arc.) Authorities may find themselves vying with revolutionaries for control of the story of what really happened at a degradation ceremony.

Thus, in cultural dramas of pain infliction, messages of political power are often juxtaposed with conflicting messages of spiritual power. This presents delicate problems to those who stage such dramas, and the Huron solution is an especially interesting one. The Huron began by setting the entire drama in a frame of reciprocity. Their treatment of the prisoner was to be retribution for injuries done

them by the prisoner's people. By their "acceptance" of him into a Huron family, the prisoner was elevated from outsider to insider. Although this acceptance was a sham, a drama within a drama, it sounded a note that was echoed throughout. Moreover, the mock acceptance might on some occasions become real acceptance. The accepting of the prisoner as a member always had an edge of reality to it. During the torture, his tormentors again treated him with mock solicitude, as if he were one of them. The prisoner as member is a recurring theme. At the same time, the treatment of the prisoner, including the ironic solicitude, was highly degrading. The tribe imprinted its power on the body of its enemy. The prisoner, on the other hand, comported himself bravely if he could, asserting his spiritual power. Indeed, this was expected of him. The ceremony included contradictory symbolism. Even as he was degraded and outcast, the prisoner elevated himself through his behavior, and the ritual itself contained elements suggesting that this prisoner was being accepted as a member at the same time his alien status was being dramatized.

In the final scene, the anomalies are resolved. We have seen that in initiation ceremonies the initiate may be symbolically cooked, while in certain degradation ceremonies the body of the victim is destroyed by fire. The Huron neatly combined the two by actually cooking the prisoner. Then, having degraded their prisoner in the extreme, and in the process having ennobled him, they finally did in earnest what they had all along been foreshadowing ironically. They elevated the prisoner from outsider to insider. They made him Huron. They ate him. Degradation and elevation are consummated in one ceremony. The cultural contradiction implicit in the drama of pain infliction is fully realized and fully resolved.

Analysis of cultural dramas such as these suggest the need for a general framework for pain symbolism. Pain is a primal experience with an inherent non-symbolic "meaning." We do not need to be taught that pain is bad and to be avoided — even nonhuman animals know that much. However, as with all human experience, pain is grist for the cultural mill. If we take the case of Huron torture to be prototypical insofar as it contains all the basic elements of pain as a focal cultural drama — degradation, endurance, elevation and incorporation — it raises some fundamental questions about the significance of pain symbolism for the operation of institutions in which the experience of pain is integral, such as medical institutions.

An examination of our own, Western, cultural practices reveals an anomaly of sorts. We have done everything possible to remove the experience of pain from the public arena, while at the same time our literature and religion focus upon suffering in the context of persecution/degradation, heroic endurance, spiritual ascendance, and vindication/incorporation. Thus our medical system operates both to remove pain from patients' awareness and to remove patients from audiences to a much greater extent than most non-Western systems, even though

our ultimate cultural heroes, such as Christ, gained their status by virtue of their public ordeals. Although we have reduced the cultural dramas of pain to fiction and myth, we have preserved the salient images in our literature and in our minds. This leads us to ask whether it is possible that the specter of this prototypical drama may be haunting Western medicine in disguised and as yet unanalyzed ways. For example, is it possible that the drama of pain affects physicians' role performance, assuming that the way in which patients bear pain may implicitly reflect upon the status of both healer and patient? Might the healer then be cast into a position analogous to that of an inflictor of pain, with the patient's enhanced liminality rendering his own status anomalous? Is the American penchant for anaesthetic drugs and patient isolation a response (or over-response) to such potential anomalies? Other medical questions concern the effects of responses to pain on a patient's recuperation. If we assume that most American patients have internalized their sense of pain symbolism through exposure to prototypical pain-centered dramas, is it possible that successful endurance elevates the sufferer's spirits, thereby contributing to rehabilitation? Does failure to endure pain with dignity have a reverse effect?

Though many of the conclusions suggested in this brief paper are admittedly speculative, the questions concerning pain infliction posed above and elsewhere are real and in obvious need of substantive answers. Hopefully, a fuller inquiry by anthropologists into the crosscultural circumstances of pain exchange will generate a deeper understanding of this phenomenon in its various cultural dramatic aspects. Clearly, pain and its infliction is an area of human experience that has received insufficient attention as a topic in theoretical literature.

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