

The Hindu Gods, Snakes, and Fairies Images in the Sandplay  
Therapy Process of the Nepalese Earthquake Survivors  
네팔 지진 생존자의 모래놀이치료 과정에서 나타난  
힌두 신, 뱀, 요정 이미지

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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

Nepal Earthquake killed nearly 9000 people, injured nearly 22,000 and over a half million homes have been destroyed on April, 2015 (Nepal earthquake, 2015). Bhaktapur is located near Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. According to PDNA report, it is one of the crisis hit areas and 82% of households reported housing damage as a result of the earthquakes, 2015. More than 4000 people lost their lives only in the Kathmandu (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).

The sandplay therapy is known as nonverbal therapy (Chen, C. R., and H. Y. Shen. 2009), which help these clients to feel free to express their emotions. Psychological relief work after the 11 march 2011 earthquake in Japan by Tochio Kawai is well explained about why psychotherapist and psychiatrist support is important during the natural disaster like earthquake. Kawai's case study after the earthquake in Japan is a good example of how the psyche reflects on the shock in the drawing images suggested psychological recovery (Kawai,T. 2015). The images that used during the therapy process have many potential meanings may value for understanding the client's situation. Images seen in the sand tray are particularly relevant in the client culture and religion. Cultural, religious level of meaning embodied in the objects is essential for the therapist in exploring the possibilities (Speier, A. H. 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](http://www.hinduwebsite.com)).



The Three Energies  
(<https://www.wikipedia.org/>)

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, eternity as well as materiality. Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, Indra, and Krishna are associated with snakes.



Lord Shiva  
(<https://www.wikipedia.org/>)

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', 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 stands for the meaning that is actively involved in divine activity; and when the snake represents passions and desires then a 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. During the therapy process, the clients often used images of snakes, Shiva, Vishnu, and Buddha. An image of Brahma was not available in the therapy room. Shiva and snake images appeared mostly in the first session, where they symbolized anger and destruction, whereas Vishnu and Buddha images appeared in the last session, where they symbolized hope and a positive healing process.

### III. Process of Sandplay Therapy

The therapy group comprised 50 participants who were selected from residents living in Bhaktapur. The session time was 45 minutes for each client and 3 sessions were provided on the team's first visit in July 2015. 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 in the earthquake but his family escaped unharmed. He had been an active boy before the earthquake but afterwards his mother noticed that his hands had started shaking when he did his homework, he had lost interest in going to school, and his teacher reported that he cried all day asking for his mother. By this time he was living in a tent with his family.

Client 'B' is an 11 year old girl. Both her mother and her teacher reported the girl as having 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 their roof collapsed. The client's mother was receiving medical treatment when we met her. We engaged the children in sandplay therapy in order to help them freely express themselves and thereby reduce their fear, anger, and emotional anxiety.

#### IV. Emptiness, Loss

Image 1 was made by client 'A' in the second session. In the first session he had refused to play. In the second session, he placed figures in the sand tray but kept them in one of the corners. He would touch the sand and just move his fingers in the tray. He was very nervous and afraid, often looking at the window.



Image 1. Emptiness and loss

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 the session in silence. Despite having created a silent environment for him, the therapist realized that moving objects in the sand tray 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 afraid, I want to go." Nevertheless, this half-session was still sufficient to help the therapist understand the client's fear, emptiness, and sense of loss.

## V. Collapse, Chaos & Disorganization

In the 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 & 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 after the third session that he did not complain about going to school.

## VI. Fearful, surrender

In the first session, client 'B' buried houses and people, including children. Then she placed a

black snake on the sand. She also placed some fearful-looking and surrender-type human images in the sand. The girl looked fearful and kept watching the snake. She said the “dark snake has killed many people; those are buried inside and these remaining people are fearful and surrendering. Oh! I am afraid because of this black snake.”



Image 3. Fearful, surrender

The client's story echoed the imagery of snakes in Hinduism. Curious, the therapist found a story on YouTube. In this video, “there is a belief that a man killed a father snake (Naga), a mother snake (Nagin) wants to take a revenge, mother snake borrowed the spirit of a woman from that village and spoke that her children are orphans so she wants to take a revenge” (Why Earthquake Came In Nepal - Religious Faith, YouTube). Another video, released on 28th April, reported there was a dead snake with a head like a man's which had been found in Lamjung, Nepal. The villagers believed if a person made any mistake then a disaster would occur (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, the client'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 Saivism, 2002). Hindu stories about the Nagas represent negative aspects such as disasters like floods, droughts, and earthquakes. The images seen in the sand tray are related to this religious background and help the therapist to understand the client's problems.

## VII. Green snake, Buddha and good fairies as protectors

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



Image 4: Green snake, Buddha, and good fairies

In Hinduism, the snake not only represents negative aspects but it also represents 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. There is an ancient Indian festival called Nag Panchami that is held in Shravan (July/August), during the monsoon season. This festival is to celebrate 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 believe that is the reason why people started celebrating this as Nag Panchami means as win over evil." Hindus believe that praying to the Nagas will free them from the fear of snakes and also protect them from all evils.



Nag Panchami: The Day of the Snake

(<https://www.wikipedia.org/>)

### VIII. Vital, hopeful: Sophia's wishes come true

In the third session, client 'B' said, "My mother was always sick before 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." For a moment, her story made the therapist curious because the way she explained her circumstances was totally different than in the previous session. However, the therapist had to wait until she played with the sand.



Image 5: Vital, hopeful

The client made the sand picture in Image 5 with a lot of effort. The therapist sensed both the client's conscious and unconscious involvement in her work, but after she made it the girl became quiet and looked sad. The therapist asked her if she was alright. The girl 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 daughter." The therapist asked her, "Why do you think so?" She replied, "My father beats my mother and me. My brother also beats me." The therapist asked her to explain her sand picture. The girl said the "hen is with her kids, cow, house," and said that she was the Sophia miniature wearing yellow and the woman wearing the white wedding dress was her mother. The therapist asked the girl 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 in the sand. 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 who does not have many friends and every year on her birthday she makes a wish, that one day she will have a party with her friends. So one day, Sophia decides to go for a walk, hoping to find a friend or two. While walking she meets a total of nine animal friends. When they all return to Sophia's Kingdom, they have a party and Sophia's wish finally comes true.

The therapist met the client's mother after the session. The mother shared that "after I played with sand I got 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. I used to think about the society and culture before. But this time I gave priority to me and my children." Conversations 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 after the earthquake but also her abusive environment at home. She has experienced mental anguish after the earthquake, mostly related to re-experiencing the trauma through flashbacks, a symptom of PTSD (Basoglu M, Kilic C, Salcioglu E, Livanou M, 2004). However, her psyche is helping her to see her mother as independent. Like Sophia, she is waiting for her wish to come true. There is hope if she can enjoy a supportive environment.

## IX. Conclusion

Sandplay is a unique natural therapy process. It is helpful to normalize difficult relational experiences for those in psychological distress after earthquake. This conceptualization of relational fields allows us to describe and give importance to understanding the client's psyche. During the sandplay therapy process, the therapists have common understandings with the images, symbols that children use during the sandplay therapy. The miniatures 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 psychological distress. They were in fearful situations, confused, sick and afraid of moving objects. A black and a green snake appeared in the sessions and according to Hindu beliefs, the snake has both a negative part and a positive part. It was very actively during the therapeutic process to help overcome their problems related to the earthquake. A black snake

might represent earthquake damage and a green snake might play a positive role in healing a client. 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 reliability is limited by the fact. However, the processes of sandplay therapy with those images which appear in the sand tray 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. A teacher said that client 'A' stopped looking for his mom in school, and client 'B' stopped wetting the bed and was persuaded to sleep in the house after the disaster. The images are related to the clients' culture and religion, helping the therapist to understand the importance of religious knowledge. This therapy encouraged the therapist to set goals and continue the long-term therapy process in the future.

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