

AN UNUSUAL BIRTHMARK CASE THOUGHT TO BE LINKED TO A PERSON WHO HAD PREVIOUSLY DIED¹

H. H. JÜRGEN KEIL

AND

JIM B. TUCKER

University of Tasmania

University of Virginia

Summary.—The following case report describes a Burmese subject with an unusual birthmark and birth defects thought by local people to be linked to events surrounding the death of his mother's first husband. The nature of the link is explored, including how the assumption of a linkage could have led to subsequent events.

Moody (1946), in discussing abreaction, reported the case of a man who had what was termed a psychosomatic experience. During a previous hospitalization, he had been restrained, and his hands and arms were tied. During his later psychosomatic experience, he reexperienced this previous traumatic incident as an "extraordinarily faithful repetition." In particular, his right forearm developed indentations resembling rope marks.

In countries with a traditional belief in reincarnation, birthmarks are often regarded as an indication that a person who has died, i.e., the previous personality, has been reborn. The birthmarks of the newly born child are usually associated with injuries, birthmarks, or other specific features of the previous personality (Stevenson, 1993).

In Europe, until the beginning of this century, an alternative notion of maternal impression was used at times to explain similarities between traumatic impressions—usually experienced by a woman during pregnancy but occasionally earlier—and corresponding birthmarks or birth defects on her child. For example, a case of a woman who gave birth to a child with one arm, after being shocked by the sight during her pregnancy of a man with one arm, was thought to represent a maternal impression. A recent review (Martensen & Jones, 1997) dismissed this idea completely even though several authors (Farkas & Farkas, 1974; Williams & Pembroke, 1988; Stevenson, 1992) had reported recent cases in support of it.

Abandoning this hypothesis at the beginning of this century was in line with the view, at that time, that the human fetus is sufficiently encapsulated to shield it from short-term physiological and mental changes experienced by its mother. It is now known, however, that the placenta is not so much a barrier as it is a selective filter, and many substances cross it quite freely

¹Please address correspondence to H. H. Jürgen Keil, Ph.D., School of Psychology, University of Tasmania, GPO Box 252-30 Hobart, Tasmania 7001 Australia or e-mail (hkeil@tassie.net.au).

(Little & VanBeveren, 1996). This does not as yet account for the possible linkage between the mental image experienced by a pregnant woman and a corresponding mark developing on the fetus, but perhaps makes it more plausible in general. There is evidence that mental images can have specific physiological effects. Two examples are wounds, including blisters, produced on the skin of hypnotic subjects (Pattie, 1941; Ullman, 1947) and stigmata, lesions matching the wounds of Jesus that have appeared on some pious monks and other persons (Thurston, 1952; Harrison, 1981; Marinelli, 1993). Maternal impressions involve the skin of a fetus rather than that of a born person, but in all these cases, the mechanism remains unknown.

In the following report, a Burmese subject has a very unusual ropelike birthmark that is still clearly visible and is thought by his family to relate to the traumatic death of his mother's first husband. In Burma (now called Myanmar) where this case was studied, it is assumed that the linkage is due to some surviving mental elements of the previous personality which may already be active in the unborn child and which may create certain physiological characteristics, including birthmarks, consistent with putative abnormalities on the previous personality.

This belief in reincarnation can be strengthened if, as is often the case, the child, in addition to having apparent physiological similarities, can also, at an age of about 2 to 4, describe some aspects of the previous life without any apparent access to such information. The following case shows how such factors have produced the belief that a child is the reincarnation of his mother's deceased first husband. A discussion then follows that briefly explores how such beliefs could have shaped subsequent events and relationships.

CASE REPORT

The Death of MMS

MMS lived with his wife at an airforce base and parachute training school. In November 1968, he participated in a night exercise during which he was dropped from a Dakota plane 800 feet above the airforce base. MMS was one of 23 trainees dropped during this exercise. Most likely due to a change in the wind speed, MMS was dropped too close to the edge of the airfield and landed in a pond which has a diameter of about 300 feet and which is up to 15 feet deep. (In 1996 we had an opportunity to inspect this area.)

All the other trainees had landed on the field, and it took perhaps 10 to 20 minutes for MMS to be located. He was found in the pond with the parachute on top of him. The parachute covered a substantial area of the pond. MMS appeared to be dead. He was taken to the clinic at the base. When a doctor examined him, his heart was not beating. Attempts to revive him failed. He had water in his lungs and had suffocated. His body was

then taken to a military hospital where an autopsy was performed. A detailed report was prepared but no longer exists. A short report sighted by our interpreter listed MMS's cause of death as being due to suffocation.

When interviewed, the medical officers who had been present were confident that MMS's hands and fingers were not injured. They also regarded it as unlikely that MMS's body had any prominent marks at the time of his death.

MMS died at age 20. He had been married for one year and did not have any children.

The Birth and Early Life of YTK

One year and some months after MMS's death, his widow married one of his comrades. She subsequently gave birth to a boy, YTK, who was born prematurely at 7 months gestation in a military hospital on January 25, 1971. At that time, he was noted to have birthmarks and birth defects. On his right lower leg was a birthmark that had the appearance of three rings or ropelike marks going around the leg (Fig. 1A). Such a birthmark is unusual, even when compared to others' birthmarks. In a report of 224 cases of birthmarks or birth defects that families thought were related to a previous life, 10 were judged to correspond to marks made by ropes (Stevenson, 1997).

In addition to the birthmark, YTK's hands were not fully formed. Several of his fingers were fused together, and some of the fingers were only partially formed. Medical personnel reportedly photographed the lesions at that time, but we were unable to locate the photograph. YTK underwent several operations on his hands, but they remain noticeably deformed with several apparent constriction rings (Fig. 1B).

YTK started to talk when he was about 18 months old. When he was between 3 and 5 years old, he talked about coming from the sky, being entangled in ropes, and dying in a pond. He talked about this while playing and according to his mother spoke quite normally. YTK believes that he was more emotional when he talked in this way. He stopped talking about what could be regarded as a previous life when he was about 5 years old.

YTK's parents lived at the airforce base until he was about 5 years old. During this time, training continued, and parachutists could be seen quite frequently by YTK. No accidents occurred during this time. When YTK was young, he slept on a cot that was suspended from the ceiling with parachute ropes. According to his mother, he could not have heard anything about the accident and death of MMS at that stage because no one spoke about them when he was present. It is unclear, however, how effectively YTK was screened from information about MMS, even if this was always intended.

YTK believes that he is MMS reborn, and, in fact, he told us in 1995



FIG. 1. Left: Photograph of YTK's birthmark on the lower leg and Right: of his hands showing constrictive rings

that he then still had some memories of the presumed previous life. His mother told us that she is about 80% sure of this interpretation of the case. Observing YTK together with his mother, it could be argued that an unusual bond exists between them, but this is difficult to judge.

YTK's grandmother told us that when YTK was a young child, she heard him speak about coming from the sky. She regards his statements as normal and due to the environment of the airbase. Nevertheless, she believes, on account of the birthmarks and birth defects, that YTK may well be the "rebirth" of MMS.

Investigation of the Case

The account of MMS's life and death is based on interviews with 12 persons, including YTK, his mother, his maternal grandparents, 2 medical officers who examined MMS after the accident, 3 officers, and 2 cotrainees from the airforce base. In addition, in 1996 we were able to inspect the area where MMS died.

Although this case was investigated (during five visits in 1995–1999) 25 years after the subject's birth and 27 years after the death of the previous person, it was possible to obtain fairly accurate and reliable information due to a number of factors, as follows:

MMS died during a military exercise at an airforce base under unusual circumstances that several independent witnesses could still remember vividly. Due to damage by termites, some detailed records are no longer available, and access to the remaining ones is restricted; nevertheless, a brief document referring to MMS and his death was found by our interpreter Ko Myint Aung, who provided us with accurate copies of relevant details.

A Burmese collaborator of Ian Stevenson, who has investigated similar cases for many years (see references), had received some information about the case when YTK was a young child, but he was unable to visit YTK at that time. As a completely independent outsider, his recollection of what he was then told agrees with the accounts later told by our informants.

YTK's father did not try to stop his son from talking when YTK apparently referred to a previous life. He was sensitive, however, about the interpretation that his son may be the rebirth of his wife's first husband. YTK's father did not allow any relevant discussions and investigations as long as he could control it. In 1995, when JK met YTK for the first time, he no longer lived at home. When JK met his mother, his father was not at home, and she spoke freely about the events. She also said that she would have refused to talk had her husband been present.

DISCUSSION

There is no doubt that in countries such as Burma with a traditional acceptance of reincarnation, the events discussed here are almost always interpreted in reference to the concept of reincarnation. Possible alternative interpretations are seldom considered. YTK is readily accepted, including by professional persons in Burma such as senior medical and military professionals, as an example of reincarnation.

Such a belief is bolstered by other similar cases. This case is an unusual one, but it has similarities with other cases involving birthmarks that are thought to be related to deceased persons (Stevenson, 1997). The birthmarks in such cases are normally associated with wounds or other physical marks on the corresponding previous personalities. The body of the previous personality in this case, however, did not have any obvious physical marks, or at least, not any for a sufficient period of time to be noticed by those who found and examined him.

When a much larger number of investigations were carried out, a few similar cases with correspondences between mental images and birthmarks were recorded. Stevenson (1997) described the case of Bruce Peck, whose

grandfather had repeatedly expressed the wish to return with only one hand or arm in his next life. After his grandfather died, Bruce Peck was born with his right hand and part of that forearm missing. Before he was born, both of Bruce Peck's parents, along with another informant, had heard his grandfather express his wish.

Before considering this issue further, we need to address the possibility that the birthmark was due to an injury after birth. Such a possibility seems unlikely. YTK's mother stated clearly that the birthmark was present at birth. A photograph (copied by JK) shows YTK as a child of about 4 years when the ropelike mark was obviously present. When YTK was very young, airforce members at the base were also aware that he had this mark. Yet, it is difficult to be certain who at his birth saw the birthmark and who might still be available as a witness. YTK's father would be such a person, but as noted above, he cannot be contacted.

There is no obvious explanation for how a mishap at the age of about 3 or less could have caused the ropelike mark as shown on a photo when YTK was about 4, and we can conclude that, while perhaps possible, it is extremely unlikely that some unspecified event caused the mark after YTK was born.

In the analysis so far, only the ropelike mark has been discussed. YTK had and to some extent still has birth defects in connection with his hands and particularly with his fingers that also might be interpreted as being associated with the death of MMS. No early photographs of these defects exist, and YTK had several operations to improve the use of his fingers. Consequently it is difficult to reconstruct the actual defects as they occurred at birth, but the constriction rings provide strong evidence for an intrauterine etiology (Flatt, 1977; Stock & Stock, 1979).

On the basis of the evidence, it is possible and even very likely that MMS's legs were entangled in the parachute ropes, and his leg may have had a perhaps only faintly visible mark for a limited time. It is quite unlikely, though, that MMS's hands and fingers were injured in any way. The birth defects of YTK's hands, however, may be related to a specific physiological condition known as cadaveric spasm (Gordon & Shapiro, 1982; Knight, 1991). This is an unusual condition that tends to occur in rapid deaths associated with great emotional intensity, and it usually affects one group of muscles, such as the muscles of the forearms or hands, rather than the whole body. For reasons that are not understood, these muscles do not relax as the other muscles do during the period of primary flaccidity at the time of death. An example of cadaveric spasm that is often cited is a drowning victim whose body is found still clutching grass or weeds from the body of water in which it is found. As noted above, the autopsy report from MMS's death is not available, but his mode of death is certainly a situation

that could be associated with cadaveric spasm. If it did occur as MMS attempted to free himself from the entanglement, it would have led MMS's hands to be in a position very similar to that of the lesions of YTK's hands at his birth.

As a young child, YTK also made some statements that were thought to represent paranormal information about MMS's life. Unfortunately, due to the age of the case, witnesses were unable to give many specifics about the statements, and it is unclear how big a role they played in intensifying the belief of a linkage between MMS and YTK.

A key question the reader confronts in this case is whether the birthmark and birth defects of the subject are related to the events which caused the death of his mother's first husband or whether the appearance of this relationship is simply due to chance. If one does not want to rely on mere chance events as an explanation, the maternal impression concept provides an alternative to reincarnation. According to this idea, the maternal impression on the fetus may be assumed to be caused by a mental image or impression that YTK's mother generated in her mind. The fact that MMS's hands remained free of real injuries is not significant if YTK's mother imagined how desperately MMS tried to pull on the parachute ropes to free himself. YTK's mother only saw MMS's body dressed and gloved after he died, and she thought YTK's marks were in agreement with real marks on MMS. After more than 25 years, it is difficult or impossible to make an accurate assessment of the state of mind of YTK's mother at the time of her first husband's death, yet it seems reasonable to conjecture that she relived quite intensely in her mind MMS's presumed desperate use of his hands.

From a psychological standpoint, the cause of the birth defects is unknown, but it is clear that regardless of their cause, they created the belief in the family that YTK was the rebirth of MMS. This belief must have affected interactions that YTK's parents, as well as other persons in this community in which reincarnation is a core religious doctrine, had with him. We can then speculate about how it influenced his emotional development. As noted above, YTK appeared to have a very close relationship to his mother, and this is certainly understandable given her belief that he was her deceased husband returned.

This belief could also have led to misinterpretation by the family of statements that YTK made as a young child. Since his mother assumed that YTK was MMS reborn, she may have remembered him making statements about MMS's life in much more detail than he actually did, and she may have welcomed any statements as confirmation that her deceased husband had returned. His father, meanwhile, may have resented this idea, but how it affected his relationship with his son is not clear since he would not cooperate with an interview. Certainly, the family's belief that YTK was MMS

reborn could have led to his own belief that he is, and since suggestion in other circumstances has been shown to be capable of producing false memories (Loftus, 1997), perhaps that suggestion led to the memories that he says he still has of the previous life. The suggestion would have been subtler in this case than in studies producing false memories, but it would also have been more pervasive since YTK's family and likely his community took his birth defects as evidence that he was MMS reborn.

The details of this case lead to multiple interpretations, namely, the local interpretation of reincarnation, the concept of maternal impression, and the psychological scenario of idiopathic birth defects leading to a powerful course of suggestion.

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