



Persona

Sonoko Toyoda

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We develop our personality not only so that it becomes rooted in our nature but also so that it is adequate to the social and environmental demands around us. Jung named this socially adapted aspect of the personality “persona”. The origin of this Latin word goes back to the masks worn by actors in antiquity. The mask, or persona, looks like ourselves, but it is largely influenced by the outer world; therefore, it is a kind of compromise between the individual and society. Persona is how we appear to other people and how we want to be seen by other people. We have various personae during our lifetime, according to each developmental phase, our gender identity, social status, and so on. As Jung says, “The persona is a complicated system of relations between the individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual.”¹ Jung also calls the persona an “outer attitude” in comparison with an “inner attitude”² and emphasizes that the persona is not individual but collective.

Commonly, in private life, a person takes off his/her social mask and at home wears a more intimate mask. Thus, e. g. a shrewd businessman can be a gentle father with his family. But when the persona is too rigid, or if one strongly identifies with it, then one keeps it on even in private life, and their family might be afflicted or negatively influenced by it. A father who cannot take off his mask of a rigorous teacher when he is at home can sometimes behave in a way that may humiliate his children.

Persona is an important concept in Jung’s Analytical Psychology. In a sense, it is a gateway which beckons one to go into the deep, unknown vast domain of the psyche, namely the unconscious. The persona itself is in the domain of consciousness, and is thus easily accessible and visible. However, it plays an important role in triggering the unconscious turbulence, which urges people to turn to the path of individuation. Individuation, namely self-realization, is the imperative force that compels a person to aim to be an individual, to be their true self. Individuation is a natural force even though we are unconscious of it until certain necessity for it arises.

Jung regards the psyche as the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious, and the persona relates the individual to the outer objective world, that is, the

collective consciousness. At the same time, in our inner psyche there is another functional part, which relates the individual to the collective unconscious and which compensates for the persona in the opposite position. Jung named this other inner figure that he encountered in his personal experience, the “anima” - a kind of soul image whose feminine element compensates his persona as masculine in the outer world. (Therefore, for women, Jung posits the “animus” with masculine traits.) Anima is a compromise between the individual and the collective unconscious, that is, the world of historical images or primordial images. In other words, persona is a bridge to the collective consciousness, whereas anima is a bridge to the collective unconscious. Persona and anima function complementarily to each other.

This psychic mechanism explains how e. g. a man who has the persona of a strong man in the outer world, can be quite powerless inwardly as he is affected by his anima. While the function of anima/animus is unseen in the dark unconscious, the function of the persona is in the bright light of consciousness. It is important to distinguish between who a person is and how he/she appears to others, so that we become conscious of our invisible relations to the unconscious and to differentiate ourselves from our soul image - anima/animus.

We build our persona out of necessity, but if we identify with our persona and neglect or suppress our inner self, our unconscious will retaliate. As Jung says, “These identifications with a social role are very fruitful source of neuroses. A man cannot get rid of himself in favour of an artificial personality without punishment.”³ The person who has a rigid persona or who identifies with his persona is less resistant to the influence from the collective unconscious because the psychic totality becomes unbalanced. Jung goes on to say:

“If the ego identifies with persona, the subject’s centre of gravity lies in the unconscious. It is then practically identical with the collective unconscious, because the whole personality is collective. In those cases there is a strong pull towards the unconscious and, at the same time, violent resistance to it on the part of consciousness because the destruction of conscious ideals is feared.”⁴

According to Jung, the dissolution of the persona inevitably occurs in the process of individuation. This amounts to a collapse of the conscious attitude, and the person finds himself/herself tossed about by the unconscious. Sometimes a person tries to restore their shattered persona but in this regressive act they become smaller and more limited than before, or they may identify with archetypal images of the collective unconscious in place of the lost

persona. In the latter case, they naturally become inflated, which can cause many problems. There is no short-cut in the individuation process. What is needed is a patient dialogue with the images from the unconscious and finding a new balance within the totality of the psyche.

From the cultural point of view, my impression is that Japanese people have a less distinct persona than Western people. This might be because the dividing line between consciousness and the unconscious is somewhat blurred for Japanese people, and their ego is more permeable to the unconscious. Interestingly, in the Japanese traditional Noh theater only the main actor wears a mask, and his role often represents a mysterious feminine ghost who has emerged from another world.

Nowadays, however, Japan is facing a serious social problem as an increasing number of people are withdrawing from society. They have not been able to develop a persona and are thus frightened of contacts with the outer world. Typically, in the background of such a reclusive person, there is a mother who clings to her mother role, which she identifies with her persona. As a consequence, the collective unconscious inflates her role into the archetypal Great Mother, whose tremendous power prevents the development of her child's independence.

It may be that for the purpose of individuation, it is crucial to construct a more clearly delineated persona within the Japanese psyche, in order to maintain psychic balance.

Perhaps this can be said about other countries too, not only Japan, as we are all now living in an age that requires major adjustment to the global culture of change and diversity. Of course, the current culture liberates us from the rigid social roles and prejudices, but at the same time, it necessitates that we seek to establish a new psychic balance. Persona is not just an external mask – it also reflects our inner soul.



***Sonoko Toyoda** graduated from Nagoya University with a major in French literature in 1972, and studied clinical psychology in the post graduate course of Kyoto University (M. Educational Studies 1983). She received her Diploma in Analytical Psychology from C.G. Jung Institute in Zurich in 1992. Since then, she has had a private practice in Kyoto, whereas she also taught in two private universities as a professor for 15 years. Currently she has a private practice in Tokyo, too. She is chief-editor of Japanese Journal of Jungian Psychology, and president of AJAJ (Association of Jungian Analysts, Japan). She is the author of *Memories of Our Lost Hands: Searching for feminine spirituality and creativity*.*

¹ C.G. Jung, CW7, par. 305

² C.G. Jung, CW6, par. 801

³ C.G. Jung, CW7, par.307

⁴ C.G. Jung, CW7, par. 509