

## CHAPTER THREE

# Ritual



Tsham mask from Tibet.

Ritual is of crucial significance to all human societies, and since the nineteenth century it has been a major focus for anthropologists interested in the study of religion. There are numerous definitions of ritual, but nearly all emphasize repetition, formality, the reliance upon symbols, and the capacity to intensify bonds within a community. Ritual is action. Anthony Wallace highlights the elevated role of ritual when he labels it the primary phenomenon of religion: “Ritual is religion in action; it is the cutting edge of the tool. Belief, although its recitation may be part of the ritual, or a ritual in its own right, serves to explain, to rationalize, to interpret and direct the energy of the ritual performance. . . . It is ritual which accomplishes what religion sets out to do” (1966: 102). While rituals encapsulate ideas central to a culture and are often closely tied to myths, they are intended to bring about specific ends.

Through ritual, religion is able to impress on people a commitment to their system of religious beliefs. Participants in a religious ritual are able to express group solidarity and loyalty. History abounds with examples of the importance of the individual experience in religion, yet there is no denying the overwhelming effect of group participation. As William Howells has pointed out, ritual helps individuals but does so by treating them as a whole group: “They are like a tangled head of hair, and ritual is the comb” (1962: 243).

Some anthropologists believe, along with Malinowski and other early functionalists, that ritual helps allay anxiety. Through the shared performance of group dances and ceremonies, humans are able to reduce the fears that often come when life’s events threaten their security and sense of well-being. Other scholars, such as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, have taken the opposite tack, claiming that ritual may actually create rather than allay anxiety and fears.

Are all rituals religious? Early anthropological theorists assumed that all ritual was sacred in nature, most likely because they dealt with societies in which many aspects of daily life held sacred significance. More-contemporary writers have noted, however, the ritual nature of ceremonies and actions that do not clearly invoke spirits or deities yet still express the fundamental beliefs, values, and social foundations of a group. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff call such actions *secular rituals*, highlighting their nonsacred status yet

also drawing attention to their powerful, multifaceted meanings (1977). One example is a birthday party celebrated at a senior citizen center, as documented by Elizabeth Colson. Although the party was clearly secular, it transformed participants into a community honoring their common characteristic, age (1977).

Most introductory textbooks in anthropology divide religious ritual into rites of passage and rites of intensification. Rites of passage mark transition points in the lives of individuals—for example, birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Rites of intensification occur during a crisis for a group and are thus more important in maintaining group equilibrium and solidarity. They are typically associated with natural phenomena, such as seasonal changes or a lack of rain, but other events, such as impending warfare, could also trigger a rite of intensification. Whatever precipitates the crisis, there is need of a ritual to lessen the anxiety that is felt by the group.

Although the division of rituals into this twofold scheme is useful, it does not adequately represent the variety of ritual occurring in the world's cultures. Wallace, for example, has outlined five major categories of ritual (1966: 107–66):

1. *Technological rituals*, designed to control nature for the purpose of human exploitation, comprise three subdivisions:
  - a. Divination rites, which help predict the future and gain hidden information
  - b. Rites of intensification, designed to help obtain food and alcohol
  - c. Protective rites, aimed at coping with the uncertainty of nature (for example, stormy seas, floods, crop disease, and bad luck)
2. *Therapy and antitherapy rituals* are designed to control human health. Curative rites exemplify therapy rituals; witchcraft and sorcery, antitherapy.
3. *Ideological rituals*, according to Wallace, are “intended to control, in a conservative way, the behavior, the mood, the sentiments and values of groups for the sake of the community as a whole.” They consist of four subcategories:
  - a. Rites of passage, which deal with role change and geographic movement (for example, marriages)
  - b. Rites of intensification, to ensure that people adhere to values and customs (for example, Sunday church service)
  - c. Taboos (ritual avoidances), courtesies (positive actions), and other arbitrary ceremonial obligations, which regulate human behavior
  - d. Rites of rebellion, which provide a form of “ritualized catharsis” that contributes to order and stability by allowing people to vent their frustrations
4. *Salvation rituals* aim at repairing damaged self-esteem and other forms of impaired identity. Wallace sees three common subdivisions in this category:
  - a. Possession, in which an individual's identity is altered by the presence of an alien spirit that occupies the body (exorcism is the usual treatment)
  - b. Ritual encouragement of an individual to accept an alternate identity, a process similar to the ritual procedure shamans undergo upon assuming a shamanic role
  - c. The mystic experience—loss of personal identity by abandoning the old self and achieving salvation by identifying with a sacred being
5. *Revitalization rituals* are aimed at what can be described as an identity crisis of an entire community. The revitalization movement may be seen as a religious movement (a ritual) that, through the help of a prophet, strives to create a better culture.

Regardless of the typological system used (and anthropologists have proposed others in addition to Wallace's), in practice the various types of ritual frequently overlap and may change over time.

It is similarly difficult to pinpoint the meaning or significance of ritual, particularly for all participants. This may vary between cultures, over time, and even between individuals in a given setting. Fiona Bowie writes (2000: 154–55):

Reactions to ritual acts cannot be predetermined. Regular attendance at a place of worship, for instance, may reveal a wide range of possible individual responses to a liturgy, from boredom, anger, and frustration to elevation, joy, the intensity of mystical communion, and a sense of unity with fellow worshipers. The individual may inwardly assent to or dissent from the ritual process. Commentators often stress the formulaic aspect of ritual—a ritual is not simply a spontaneous event created by an individual on the spur of the moment. What, however, about the family burial of a pet rabbit? Spontaneous prayers and actions, and accumulation of symbols (a flower, a memorial, a tree planted), may dignify the committal of the deceased animal.

There is no reason to assume that the multiple experiences of ritual felt by people in the industrialized West are any less a part of ritual participation than those of people in less developed parts of the world.

Some contemporary anthropologists have found it fruitful to compare ritual to theater or drama and to interpret ritual as a kind of cultural performance. It is intriguing to consider the possible parallels between ritual and other forms of enactment, including prescribed physical movements and actions, scripted communication, the use of special costumes or props, and the demarcation of sacred space as a kind of stage. Outwardly, the similarities between ritual and theater may appear strong, but the differences become clearer if one considers the goals and internal experiences of participants. "Participants in ritual may be 'acting,' but they are not necessarily 'just pretending'" (Ibid.: 159). Taking part in a ritual can have consequences for participants. For example, some rites of passage deliver an individual into a new stage of life, with new rights, responsibilities, and privileges.

Like other aspects of culture, ritual changes over time. In the contemporary West, there are myriad examples of new and revised ritual traditions, including national commemorations intended to intensify patriotism. The African-based holiday observance Kwanzaa was invented in 1966 by Maulana Karenga, a professor of black studies. Originally intended as a substitute for the European-based customs of the Christmas season, Kwanzaa has grown in acceptance and popularity among diverse communities of Americans. Feminist and New Age movements have experimented with the creation of new forms of ritual expression, often drawing upon participants' own interpretations of non-Western religions and myths. These experiments have resulted in various self-help guides to creating one's own rituals, as well as programs such as those designed to take high school students on rites of passage modeled after the vision quests of Native North Americans. Such borrowing has been controversial, and some Native American groups have begun to protest the use of their myths and rituals by outsiders, however well intentioned. Catherine Bell writes,

The ubiquitous dynamics of ritual appropriation are historically complex and politically charged, especially when socially or politically dominant groups appear to be mining the cultural traditions of the less powerful, taking the images they want and, by placing them in very new contexts, altering their meanings in ways that may sever these images from their own people. (1997: 240)

Whether we consider long-standing, highly formalized sacred rituals or the more inventive attempts to enact values in a ritual way, it is clear that ritual serves two functions. Ritual teaches participants—as well as anthropological observers—about the social arrangements

and values of a community yet also helps construct and create those very arrangements and values.

In the six articles in this chapter, we encounter a range of rituals and possible interpretations. Building upon the seminal work of early-twentieth-century anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, Victor W. Turner scrutinizes one phase of rites of passage as they are practiced around the world. The works of both Van Gennep and Turner have been highly influential in anthropology, and their focus upon rites of passage has undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of that phrase among the general public.

Daniel Gordon's article also scrutinizes an example of a rite of passage—female genital surgery as practiced in some countries of North Africa. Gordon emphasizes the significance of the procedures to participants themselves, including the females who advocate the surgery, and the controversial status of genital surgery within the nations where it is practiced.

Continuing in the intellectual vein of Victor Turner, Barbara G. Myerhoff's analysis of Huichol rituals explores how myth and symbolism create a sacred realm distant from everyday reality.

In the fourth article, Roy A. Rappaport takes a very different approach, emphasizing material and environmental explanations for ritual.

Elizabeth G. Harrison examines rituals carried out in Japan to memorialize dead children, including fetuses lost to miscarriage and abortion. Popular since the 1970s, these rituals have been criticized by the Japanese media and some Buddhist clergy yet are accepted by the lay public as Buddhist rituals that assist the deceased child. Harrison's study provides a strong example of how a ritual can mean different things to different people within a society and how a ritual's meaning can change over time.

In the final article, Horace Miner examines the body rituals of the Nacirema, a North American group that devotes a considerable portion of the day to ritual activity.

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# Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*

Victor W. Turner

*The following selection could not have been written were it not for the seminal writing on ritual by the French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957). Van Gennep is recognized by scholars as the first anthropologist to study the significance of rituals accompanying the transitional stages in a person's life—birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Ever since the publication of Les Rites de Passage in 1909, the phrase "rites of passage" has become part and parcel of anthropological literature. Van Gennep saw in human rituals three successive but separate stages: separation, margin, and aggregation. In the following selection, Victor Turner singles out the marginal, or liminal, period for examination. The liminal stage in rites of passage is when the initiates are removed and typically secluded from the rest of society—in effect, they become invisible, or, as in the title of this article, "betwixt and between." It is Turner's belief that the neophyte at the liminal stage has nothing—no status, property rank, or kinship position. He describes this condition as one of "sacred poverty." Turner concludes his article with an invitation to researchers of ritual to concentrate their efforts on the marginal stage, believing that this is where the basic building blocks of culture are exposed and therefore open for cross-cultural comparison. Victor Turner taught at Cornell and the University of Chicago. His major field research was done in Uganda, Zambia, and Mexico.*

In this paper, I wish to consider some of the sociocultural properties of the "liminal period" in that class of rituals which Arnold van Gennep has definitively characterized as "*rites de passage*." If our basic model of society is that of a "structure of positions," we must regard the period of margin or "liminality" as an interstructural situation. I shall consider, notably

in the case of initiation rites, some of the main features of instruction among the simpler societies. I shall also take note of certain symbolic themes that concretely express indigenous concepts about the nature of "interstructural" human beings.

*Rites de passage* are found in all societies but tend to reach their maximal expression in small-scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies, where change is bound up with biological and meteorological rhythms and recurrences rather than with technological innovations. Such rites indicate and constitute transitions between states. By "state" I mean here "a relatively fixed or stable condition" and would include in its

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meaning such social constancies as legal status, profession, office or calling, rank or degree. I hold it to designate also the condition of a person as determined by his culturally recognized degree of maturity as when one speaks of “the married or single state” or the “state of infancy.” The term “state” may also be applied to ecological conditions, or to the physical, mental or emotional condition in which a person or group may be found at a particular time. A man may thus be in a state of good or bad health; a society in a state of war or peace or a state of famine or of plenty. State, in short, is a more inclusive concept than status or office and refers to any type of stable or recurrent condition that is culturally recognized. One may, I suppose, also talk about “a state of transition,” since J. S. Mill has, after all, written of “a state of progressive movement,” but I prefer to regard transition as a process, a becoming, and in the case of *rites de passage* even a transformation—here an apt analogy would be water in process of being heated to boiling point, or a pupa changing from grub to moth. In any case, a transition has different cultural properties from those of a state, as I hope to show presently.

Van Gennep himself defined “*rites de passage*” as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.” To point up the contrast between “state” and “transition,” I employ “state” to include all his other terms. Van Gennep has shown that all rites of transition are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or *limen*), and aggregation. The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a “state”); during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state; in the third phase the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations of a clearly defined and “structural” type, and is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards. The most prominent type of *rites de passage* tends to accompany what Lloyd Warner (1959, 303) has called “the movement of a man through his lifetime, from a fixed placental placement within his mother’s womb

to his death and ultimate fixed point of his tombstone and final containment in his grave as a dead organism—punctuated by a number of critical moments of transition which all societies ritualize and publicly mark with suitable observances to impress the significance of the individual and the group on living members of the community. These are the important times of birth, puberty, marriage, and death.” However, as Van Gennep, Henri Junod, and others have shown, *rites de passage* are not confined to culturally defined life-crises but may accompany any change from one state to another, as when a whole tribe goes to war, or when it attests to the passage from scarcity to plenty by performing a first-fruits or a harvest festival. *Rites de passage*, too, are not restricted, sociologically speaking, to movements between ascribed statuses. They also concern entry into a new achieved status, whether this be a political office or membership of an exclusive club or secret society. They may admit persons into membership of a religious group where such a group does not include the whole society, or qualify them for the official duties of the cult, sometimes in a graded series of rites.

Since the main problem of this study is the nature and characteristics of transition in relatively stable societies, I shall focus attention on *rites de passage* that tend to have well-developed liminal periods. On the whole, initiation rites, whether into social maturity or cult membership, best exemplify transition, since they have well-marked and protracted marginal or liminal phases. I shall pay only brief heed here to rites of separation and aggregation, since these are more closely implicated in social structure than rites of liminality. Liminality during initiation is, therefore, the primary datum of this study, though I will draw on other aspects of passage ritual where the argument demands this. I may state here, partly as an aside, that I consider the term “ritual” to be more fittingly applied to forms of religious behavior associated with social transitions, while the term “ceremony” has a closer bearing on religious behavior associated with social states, where politico-legal institutions also have greater importance. Ritual is transformative, ceremony confirmatory.

The subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, “invisible.” As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we

are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture. A society's secular definitions do not allow for the existence of a not-boy-not-man, which is what a novice in a male puberty rite is (if he can be said to be anything). A set of essentially religious definitions co-exist with these which do set out to define the structurally indefinable "transitional-being." The transitional-being or "liminal *persona*" is defined by a name and by a set of symbols. The same name is very frequently employed to designate those who are being initiated into very different states of life. For example, among the Ndembu of Zambia the name *mwadi* may mean various things: it may stand for "a boy novice in circumcision rites," or "a chief-designate undergoing his installation rites," or, yet again, "the first or ritual wife" who has important ritual duties in the domestic family. Our own terms "initiate" and "neophyte" have a similar breadth of reference. It would seem from this that emphasis tends to be laid on the transition itself, rather than on the particular states between which it is taking place.

The symbolism attached to and surrounding the liminal *persona* is complex and bizarre. Much of it is modeled on human biological processes, which are conceived to be what Lévi-Strauss might call "isomorphic" with structural and cultural processes. They give an outward and visible form to an inward and conceptual process. The structural "invisibility" of liminal *personae* has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified. In so far as they are no longer classified, the symbols that represent them are, in many societies, drawn from the biology of death, decomposition, catabolism, and other physical processes that have a negative tinge, such as menstruation (frequently regarded as the absence or loss of a fetus). Thus, in some boys' initiations, newly circumcised boys are explicitly likened to menstruating women. Insofar as a neophyte is structurally "dead," he or she may be treated, for a long or short period, as a corpse is customarily treated in his or her society. See Stobaeus's quotation, probably from a lost work of Plutarch, "initiation and death correspond word for word and thing for thing." The neophyte may be buried, forced to lie motionless in the posture and direction of customary burial, may be stained black, or may be forced to live for a while in the company of masked and monstrous mummers representing, *inter alia*, the dead, or

worse still, the un-dead. The metaphor of dissolution is often applied to neophytes; they are allowed to go filthy and identified with the earth, the generalized matter into which every specific individual is rendered down. Particular form here becomes general matter; often their very names are taken from them and each is called solely by the generic term for "neophyte" or "initiand." (This useful neologism is employed by many modern anthropologists.)

The other aspect, that they are not yet classified, is often expressed in symbols modeled on processes of gestation and parturition. The neophytes are likened to or treated as embryos, newborn infants, or sucklings by symbolic means which vary from culture to culture. I shall return to this theme presently.

The essential feature of these symbolizations is that the neophytes are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories. Jakob Boehme, the German mystic whose obscure writings gave Hegel his celebrated dialectical "triad," liked to say that "In Yea and Nay all things consist." Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise. I will not pursue this point here but, after all, Plato, a speculative philosopher, if there ever was one, did acknowledge his philosophical debt to the teachings of the Eleusinian and Orphic initiations of Attica. We have no way of knowing whether primitive initiations merely conserved lore. Perhaps they also generated new thought and new custom.

Dr. Mary Douglas, of University College, London, has recently advanced (in a magnificent book *Purity and Danger* [1966]) the very interesting and illuminating view that the concept of pollution "is a reaction to protect cherished principles and categories from contradiction." She holds that, in effect, what is unclear and contradictory (from the perspective of social definition) tends to be regarded as (ritually) unclean. The unclear is the unclean: e.g., she examines the prohibitions on eating certain animals and crustaceans in Leviticus in the light of this hypothesis (these being creatures that cannot be unambiguously classified in terms of traditional criteria). From this standpoint, one would expect to find that transitional beings are

particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography), and are at the very least “betwixt and between” all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification. In fact, in confirmation of Dr. Douglas’s hypothesis, liminal *personae* nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, “inoculated” against them, through having been themselves initiated into the same state. I think that we may perhaps usefully discriminate here between the statics and dynamics of pollution situations. In other words, we may have to distinguish between pollution notions which concern states that have been ambiguously or contradictorily defined, and those which derive from ritualized transitions between states. In the first case, we are dealing with what has been defectively defined or ordered, in the second with what cannot be defined in static terms. We are not dealing with structural contradictions when we discuss liminality, but with the essentially unstructured (which is at once de-structured and prestructured) and often the people themselves see this in terms of bringing neophytes into close connection with deity or with superhuman power, with what is, in fact, often regarded as the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless. Since neophytes are not only structurally “invisible” (though physically visible) and ritually polluting, they are very commonly secluded, partially or completely, from the realm of culturally defined and ordered states and statuses. Often the indigenous term for the liminal period is, as among Ndembu, the locative form of a noun meaning “seclusion site” (*kunkunka*, *kung’ula*). The neophytes are sometimes said to “be in another place.” They have physical but not social “reality,” hence they have to be hidden, since it is a paradox, a scandal, to see what ought not to be there! Where they are not removed to a sacred place of concealment they are often disguised, in masks or grotesque costumes or striped with white, red, or black clay, and the like.

In societies dominantly structured by kinship institutions, sex distinctions have great structural importance. Patrilineal and matrilineal moieties and clans, rules of exogamy, and the like, rest and are built up on these distinctions. It is consistent with this to find that in liminal situations (in kinship-dominated

societies) neophytes are sometimes treated or symbolically represented as being neither male nor female. Alternatively, they may be symbolically assigned characteristics of both sexes, irrespective of their biological sex. (Bruno Bettelheim [1954] has collected much illustrative material on this point from initiation rites.) They are symbolically either sexless or bisexual and may be regarded as a kind of human *prima materia*—as undifferentiated raw material. It was perhaps from the rites of the Hellenic mystery religions that Plato derived his notion expressed in his *Symposium* that the first humans were androgynes. If the liminal period is seen as an interstructural phase in social dynamics, the symbolism both of androgyny and sexlessness immediately becomes intelligible in sociological terms without the need to import psychological (and especially depth-psychological) explanations. Since sex distinctions are important components of structural status, in a structureless realm they do not apply.

A further structurally negative characteristic of transitional beings is that they *have* nothing. They have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows. Their condition is indeed the very prototype of sacred poverty. Rights over property, goods, and services inhere in positions in the politico-jural structure. Since they do not occupy such positions, neophytes exercise no such rights. In the words of King Lear they represent “naked unaccommodated man.”

I have no time to analyze other symbolic themes that express these attributes of “structural invisibility,” ambiguity and neutrality. I want now to draw attention to certain positive aspects of liminality. Already we have noted how certain liminal processes are regarded as analogous to those of gestation, parturition, and suckling. Undoing, dissolution, decomposition are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns. It is interesting to note how, by the principle of the economy (or parsimony) of symbolic reference, logically antithetical processes of death and growth may be represented by the same tokens, for example, by huts and tunnels that are at once tombs and wombs, by lunar symbolism (for the same moon waxes and wanes), by snake symbolism (for the snake appears to die, but only to shed its old skin and appear in a new one), by bear symbolism

(for the bear “dies” in autumn and is “reborn” in spring), by nakedness (which is at once the mark of a newborn infant and a corpse prepared for burial), and by innumerable other symbolic formations and actions. This coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both.

I have spoken of the interstructural character of the liminal. However, between neophytes and their instructors (where these exist), and in connecting neophytes with one another, there exists a set of relations that compose a “social structure” of highly specific type. It is a structure of a very simple kind: between instructors and neophytes there is often complete authority and complete submission; among neophytes there is often complete equality. Between incumbents of positions in secular politico-jural systems there exist intricate and situationally shifting networks of rights and duties proportioned to their rank, status, and corporate affiliation. There are many different kinds of privileges and obligations, many degrees of superordination and subordination. In the liminal period such distinctions and gradations tend to be eliminated. Nevertheless, it must be understood that the authority of the elders over the neophytes is not based on legal sanctions; it is in a sense the personification of the self-evident authority of tradition. The authority of the elders is absolute, because it represents the absolute, the axiomatic values of society in which are expressed the “common good” and the common interest. The essence of the complete obedience of the neophytes is to submit to the elders but only in so far as they are in charge, so to speak, of the common good and represent in their persons the total community. That the authority in question is really quintessential tradition emerges clearly in societies where initiations are not collective but individual and where there are no instructors or *gurus*. For example, Omaha boys, like other North American Indians, go alone into the wilderness to fast and pray (Hocart, 1952: 160). This solitude is liminal between boyhood and manhood. If they dream that they receive a woman’s burden-strap, they feel compelled to dress and live henceforth in every way as women. Such men are known as *mixuga*. The authority of such a dream in such a situation is absolute. Alice Cummingham Fletcher tells of one Omaha who had been forced in this way

to live as a woman, but whose natural inclinations led him to rear a family and to go on the warpath. Here the *mixuga* was not an invert but a man bound by the authority of tribal beliefs and values. Among many Plains Indians, boys on their lonely Vision Quest inflicted ordeals and tests on themselves that amounted to tortures. These again were not basically self-tortures inflicted by a masochistic temperament but due to obedience to the authority of tradition in the liminal situation—a type of situation in which there is no room for secular compromise, evasion, manipulation, casuistry, and maneuver in the field of custom, rule, and norm. Here again a cultural explanation seems preferable to a psychological one. A normal man acts abnormally because he is obedient to tribal tradition, not out of disobedience to it. He does not evade but fulfills his duties as a citizen.

If complete obedience characterizes the relationship of neophyte to elder, complete equality usually characterizes the relationship of neophyte to neophyte, where the rites are collective. This comradeship must be distinguished from brotherhood or sibling relationship, since in the latter there is always the inequality of older and younger, which often achieves linguistic representation and may be maintained by legal sanctions. The liminal group is a community or comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions. This comradeship transcends distinctions of rank, age, kinship position, and, in some kinds of cultic group, even of sex. Much of the behavior recorded by ethnographers in seclusion situations falls under the principle: “Each for all, and all for each.” Among the Ndembu of Zambia, for example, all food brought for novices in circumcision seclusion by their mothers is shared equally among them. No special favors are bestowed on the sons of chiefs or headmen. Any food acquired by novices in the bush is taken by the elders and apportioned among the group. Deep friendships between novices are encouraged, and they sleep around lodge fires in clusters of four or five particular comrades. However, all are supposed to be linked by special ties which persist after the rites are over, even into old age. This friendship, known as *wubwambu* (from a term meaning “breast”) or *wulunda*, enables a man to claim privileges of hospitality of a far-reaching kind. I have no need here to dwell on the lifelong ties that are held to bind in close friendship those initiated into the same age-set in East African Nilo-Hamitic

and Bantu societies, into the same fraternity or sorority on an American campus, or into the same class in a naval or military academy in Western Europe.

This comradeship, with its familiarity, ease and, I would add, mutual outspokenness, is once more the product of interstructural liminality, with its scarcity of jurally sanctioned relationships and its emphasis on axiomatic values expressive of the common weal. People can “be themselves,” it is frequently said, when they are not acting institutionalized roles. Roles, too, carry responsibilities and in the liminal situation the main burden of responsibility is borne by the elders, leaving the neophytes free to develop interpersonal relationships as they will. They confront one another, as it were, integrally and not in compartmentalized fashion as actors of roles.

The passivity of neophytes to their instructors, their malleability, which is increased by submission to ordeal, their reduction to a uniform condition, are signs of the process whereby they are ground down to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to cope with their new station in life. Dr. Richards, in her superb study of Bemba girls’ puberty rites, *Chisungu*, has told us that Bemba speak of “growing a girl” when they mean initiating her (1956: 121). This term “to grow” well expresses how many peoples think of transition rites. We are inclined, as sociologists, to reify our abstractions (it is indeed a device which helps us to understand many kinds of social interconnection) and to talk about persons “moving through structural positions in a hierarchical frame” and the like. Not so the Bemba and the Shilluk of the Sudan who see the status or condition embodied or incarnate, if you like, *in* the person. To “grow” a girl into a woman is to effect an ontological transformation; it is not merely to convey an unchanging substance from one position to another by a quasi-mechanical force. Howitt saw Kuringals in Australia and I have seen Ndembu in Africa drive away grown-up men before a circumcision ceremony because they had not been initiated. Among Ndembu, men were also chased off because they had only been circumcised at the Mission Hospital and had not undergone the full bush seclusion according to the orthodox Ndembu rite. These biologically mature men had not been “made men” by the proper ritual procedures. It is the ritual and the esoteric teaching which grows girls and makes men. It is the ritual, too, which among Shilluk makes a

prince into a king, or, among Luvale, a cultivator into a hunter. The arcane knowledge or “*gnosis*” obtained in the liminal period is felt to change the inmost nature of the neophyte, impressing him, as a seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state. It is not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being. His apparent passivity is revealed as an absorption of powers which will become active after his social status has been redefined in the aggregation rites.

The structural simplicity of the liminal situation in many initiations is offset by its cultural complexity. I can touch on only one aspect of this vast subject matter here and raise three problems in connection with it. This aspect is the vital one of the communication of the *sacra*, the heart of the liminal matter.

Jane Harrison has shown that in the Greek Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries this communication of the *sacra* has three main components (1903: 144–60). By and large, this threefold classification holds good for initiation rites all over the world. *Sacra* may be communicated as: (1) exhibitions, “what is shown”; (2) actions, “what is done”; and (3) instructions, “what is said.”

“Exhibitions” would include evocatory instruments or sacred articles, such as relics of deities, heroes or ancestors, aboriginal *churingas*, sacred drums or other musical instruments, the contents of Amerindian medicine bundles, and the fan, cist and tympanum of Greek and Near Eastern mystery cults. In the Lesser Eleusinian Mysteries of Athens, *sacra* consisted of a bone, top, ball, tambourine, apples, mirror, fan, and woolly fleece. Other *sacra* include masks, images, figurines, and effigies; the pottery emblem (*mbusa*) of the Bemba would belong to this class. In some kinds of initiation, as for example the initiation into the shaman-diviner’s profession among the Saora of Middle India, described by Verrier Elwin (1955), pictures and icons representing the journeys of the dead or the adventures of supernatural beings may be shown to the initiands. A striking feature of such sacred articles is often their formal simplicity. It is their interpretation which is complex, not their outward form.

Among the “instructions” received by neophytes may be reckoned such matters as the revelation of the real, but secularly secret, names of the deities or spirits believed to preside over the rites—a very frequent procedure in African cultic or secret associations

(Turner, 1962: 36). They are also taught the main outlines of the theogony, cosmogony, and mythical history of their societies or cult, usually with reference to the *sacra* exhibited. Great importance is attached to keeping secret the nature of the *sacra*, the formulas chanted and instructions given about them. These constitute the crux of liminality, for while instruction is also given in ethical and social obligations, in law and in kinship rules, and in technology to fit neophytes for the duties of future office, no interdiction is placed on knowledge thus imparted since it tends to be current among uninitiated persons also.

I want to take up three problems in considering the communication of *sacra*. The first concerns their frequent disproportion, the second their monstrousness, and the third their mystery.

When one examines the masks, costumes, figurines, and such displayed in initiation situations, one is often struck, as I have been when observing Ndembu masks in circumcision and funerary rites, by the way in which certain natural and cultural features are represented as disproportionately large or small. A head, nose, or phallus, a hoe, bow, or meal mortar are represented as huge or tiny by comparison with other features of their context which retain their normal size. (For a good example of this, see "The Man Without Arms" in *Chisungu* [Richards, 1956: 211], a figurine of a lazy man with an enormous penis but no arms.) Sometimes things retain their customary shapes but are portrayed in unusual colors. What is the point of this exaggeration amounting sometimes to caricature? It seems to me that to enlarge or diminish or discolor in this way is a primordial mode of abstraction. The outstandingly exaggerated feature is made into an object of reflection. Usually it is not a univocal symbol that is thus represented but a multivocal one, a semantic molecule with many components. One example is the Bemba pottery emblem *Coshi wa ng'oma*, "The Nursing Mother," described by Audrey Richards in *Chisungu*. This is a clay figurine, nine inches high, of an exaggeratedly pregnant mother shown carrying four babies at the same time, one at her breast and three at her back. To this figurine is attached a riddling song:

My mother deceived me!  
*Coshi wa ng'oma!*  
 So you have deceived me;  
 I have become pregnant again.

Bemba women interpreted this to Richards as follows:

*Coshi wa ng'oma* was a midwife of legendary fame and is merely addressed in this song. The girl complains because her mother told her to wean her first child too soon so that it died; or alternatively, told her that she would take the first child if her daughter had a second one. But she was tricking her and now the girl has two babies to look after. The moral stressed is the duty of refusing intercourse with the husband before the baby is weaned, i.e., at the second or third year. This is a common Bemba practice.

In the figurine the exaggerated features are the number of children carried at once by the woman and her enormously distended belly. Coupled with the song, it encourages the novice to ponder upon two relationships vital to her, those with her mother and her husband. Unless the novice observes the Bemba weaning custom, her mother's desire for grandchildren to increase her matrilineage and her husband's desire for renewed sexual intercourse will between them actually destroy and not increase her offspring. Underlying this is the deeper moral that to abide by tribal custom and not to sin against it either by excess or defect is to live satisfactorily. Even to please those one loves may be to invite calamity, if such compliance defies the immemorial wisdom of the elders embodied in the *mbusa*. This wisdom is vouched for by the mythical and archetypal midwife *Coshi wa ng'oma*.

If the exaggeration of single features is not irrational but thought-provoking, the same may also be said about the representation of monsters. Earlier writers—such as J. A. McCulloch (1913) in his article on "Monsters" in *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*—are inclined to regard bizarre and monstrous masks and figures, such as frequently appear in the liminal period of initiations, as the product of "hallucinations, night-terrors and dreams." McCulloch goes on to argue that "as man drew little distinction (in primitive society) between himself and animals, as he thought that transformation from one to the other was possible, so he easily ran human and animal together. This in part accounts for animal-headed gods or animal-gods with human heads." My own view is the opposite one: that monsters are manufactured precisely to teach neophytes to distinguish clearly between the different factors of reality, as it is

conceived in their culture. Here, I think, William James's so-called "law of dissociation" may help us to clarify the problem of monsters. It may be stated as follows: when *a* and *b* occurred together as parts of the same total object, without being discriminated, the occurrence of one of these, *a*, in a new combination *ax*, favors the discrimination of *a*, *b*, and *x* from one another. As James himself put it, "What is associated now with one thing and now with another, tends to become dissociated from either, and to grow into an object of abstract contemplation by the mind. One might call this the law of dissociation by varying concomitants." (1918: 506).

From this standpoint, much of the grotesqueness and monstrosity of liminal *sacra* may be seen to be aimed not so much at terrorizing or bemusing neophytes into submission or out of their wits as at making them vividly and rapidly aware of what may be called the "factors" of their culture. I have myself seen Ndembu and Luvale masks that combine features of both sexes, have both animal and human attributes, and unite in a single representation human characteristics with those of the natural landscape. One *ikishi* mask is partly human and partly represents a grassy plain. Elements are withdrawn from their usual settings and combined with one another in a totally unique configuration, the monster or dragon. Monsters startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment they have hitherto taken for granted.

In discussing the structural aspect of liminality, I mentioned how neophytes are withdrawn from their structural positions and consequently from the values, norms, sentiments, and techniques associated with those positions. They are also divested of their previous habits of thought, feeling, and action. During the liminal period, neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection. In it those ideas, sentiments, and facts that had been hitherto for the neophytes bound up in configurations and accepted unthinkingly are, as it were, resolved into their constituents. These constituents are isolated and made into objects of reflection for the neophytes by such processes as componental exaggeration and dissociation by varying concomitants. The communication of *sacra* and other

forms of esoteric instruction really involves three processes, though these should not be regarded as in series but as in parallel. The first is the reduction of culture into recognized components or factors; the second is their recombination in fantastic or monstrous patterns and shapes; and the third is their recombination in ways that make sense with regard to the new state and status that the neophytes will enter.

The second process, monster- or fantasy-making, focuses attention on the components of the masks and effigies, which are so radically ill-assorted that they stand out and can be thought about. The monstrosity of the configuration throws its elements into relief. Put a man's head on a lion's body and you think about the human head in the abstract. Perhaps it becomes for you, as a member of a given culture and with the appropriate guidance, an emblem of chieftainship; or it may be explained as representing the soul as against the body; or intellect as contrasted with brute force, or innumerable other things. There could be less encouragement to reflect on heads and headship if that same head were firmly ensconced on its familiar, its all too familiar, human body. The man-lion monster also encourages the observer to think about lions, their habits, qualities, metaphorical properties, religious significance, and so on. More important than these, the relation between man and lion, empirical and metaphorical, may be speculated upon, and new ideas developed on this topic. Liminality here breaks, as it were, the cake of custom and enfranchises speculation. That is why I earlier mentioned Plato's self-confessed debt to the Greek mysteries. Liminality is the realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence. As in the works of Rabelais, there is a promiscuous intermingling and juxtaposing of the categories of event, experience, and knowledge, with a pedagogic intention.

But this liberty has fairly narrow limits. The neophytes return to secular society with more alert faculties perhaps and enhanced knowledge of how things work, but they have to become once more subject to custom and law. Like the Bemba girl I mentioned earlier, they are shown that ways of acting and thinking alternative to those laid down by the deities or ancestors are ultimately unworkable and may have disastrous consequences.

Moreover, in initiation, there are usually held to be certain axiomatic principles of construction, and certain basic building blocks that make up the cosmos and into whose nature no neophyte may inquire. Certain *sacra*, usually exhibited in the most arcane episodes of the liminal period, represent or may be interpreted in terms of these axiomatic principles and primordial constituents. Perhaps we may call these *sacerrima*, "most sacred things." Sometimes they are interpreted by a myth about the world-making activities of supernatural beings "at the beginning of things." Myths may be completely absent, however, as in the case of the Ndembu "mystery of the three rivers." . . . This mystery (*mpang'u*) is exhibited at circumcision and funerary cult association rites. Three trenches are dug in a consecrated site and filled respectively with white, red, and black water. These "rivers" are said to "flow from Nzambi," the High God. The instructors tell the neophytes, partly in riddling songs and partly in direct terms, what each river signifies. Each "river" is a multivocal symbol with a fan of referents ranging from life values, ethical ideas, and social norms, to grossly physiological processes and phenomena. They seem to be regarded as powers which, in varying combination, underlie or even constitute what Ndembu conceive to be reality. In no other context is the interpretation of whiteness, redness, and blackness so full; and nowhere else is such a close analogy drawn, even identity made, between these rivers and bodily fluids and emissions: whiteness = semen, milk; redness = menstrual blood, the blood of birth, blood shed by a weapon, etc.; blackness = feces, certain products of bodily decay, etc. This use of an aspect of human physiology as a model for social, cosmic, and religious ideas and processes is a variant of a widely distributed initiation theme: that the human body is a microcosm of the universe. The body may be pictured as androgynous, as male or female, or in terms of one or other of its developmental stages, as child, mature adult, and elder. On the other hand, as in the Ndembu case, certain of its properties may be abstracted. Whatever the mode of representation, the body is regarded as a sort of symbolic template for the communication of *gnosis*, mystical knowledge about the nature of things and how they came to be what they are. The cosmos may in some cases be regarded as a vast human body; in other belief systems, visible parts of the body may be taken to

portray invisible faculties such as reason, passion, wisdom and so on; in others again, the different parts of the social order are arrayed in terms of a human anatomical paradigm.

Whatever the precise mode of explaining reality by the body's attributes, *sacra* which illustrates this are always regarded as absolutely sacrosanct, as ultimate mysteries. We are here in the realm of what Warner (1959: 3–4) would call "nonrational or non-logical symbols" which

arise out of the basic individual and cultural assumptions, more often unconscious than not, from which most social action springs. They supply the solid core of mental and emotional life of each individual and group. This does not mean that they are irrational or maladaptive, or that man cannot often think in a reasonable way about them, but rather that they do not have their source in his rational processes. When they come into play, such factors as data, evidence, proof, and the facts and procedures of rational thought in action are apt to be secondary or unimportant.

The central cluster of nonlogical *sacra* is then the symbolic template of the whole system of beliefs and values in a given culture, its archetypal paradigm and ultimate measure. Neophytes shown these are often told that they are in the presence of forms established from the beginning of things. . . . I have used the metaphor of a seal or stamp in connection with the ontological character ascribed in many initiations to arcane knowledge. The term "archetype" denotes in Greek a master stamp or impress, and these *sacra*, presented with a numinous simplicity, stamp into the neophytes the basic assumptions of their culture. The neophytes are told also that they are being filled with mystical power by what they see and what they are told about it. According to the purpose of the initiation, this power confers on them capacities to undertake successfully the tasks of their new office, in this world or the next.

Thus, the communication of *sacra* both teaches the neophytes how to think with some degree of abstraction about their cultural milieu and gives them ultimate standards of reference. At the same time, it is believed to change their nature, transform them from one kind of human being into another. It intimately unites man and office. But for a variable while, there was an uncommitted man, an individual rather than a social *persona*, in a sacred community of individuals.

It is not only in the liminal period of initiations that the nakedness and vulnerability of the ritual subject receive symbolic stress. Let me quote from Hilda Kuper's description of the seclusion of the Swazi chief during the great *Incwala* ceremony. The *Incwala* is a national First-Fruits ritual, performed in the height of summer when the early crops ripen. The regiments of the Swazi nation assemble at the capital to celebrate its rites, "whereby the nation receives strength for the new year." The *Incwala* is at the same time "a play of kingship." The king's well-being is identified with that of the nation. Both require periodic ritual strengthening. Lunar symbolism is prominent in the rites, as we shall see, and the king, personifying the nation, during his seclusion represents the moon in transition between phases, neither waning nor waxing. Dr. Kuper, Professor Gluckman, and Professor Wilson have discussed the structural aspects of the *Incwala* which are clearly present in its rites of separation and aggregation. What we are about to examine are the interstructural aspects.

During his night and day of seclusion, the king, painted black, remains, says Dr. Kuper, "painted in blackness" and "in darkness"; he is unapproachable, dangerous to himself and others. He must cohabit that night with his first ritual wife (in a kind of "mystical marriage"—this ritual wife is, as it were, consecrated for such liminal situations).

The entire population is also temporarily in a state of taboo and seclusion. Ordinary activities and behavior are suspended; sexual intercourse is prohibited, no one may sleep late the following morning, and when they get up they are not allowed to touch each other, to wash the body, to sit on mats, to poke anything into the ground, or even to scratch their hair. The children are scolded if they play and make merry. The sound of songs that has stirred the capital for nearly a month is abruptly stilled; it is the day of *bacisa* (cause to *hide*). The king remains secluded; . . . all day he sits naked on a lion skin in the ritual hut of the harem or in the sacred enclosure in the royal cattle byre. Men of his inner circle see that he breaks none of the taboos . . . on this day the identification of the people with the king is very marked. The spies (who see to it that the people respect the taboos) do not say, "You are sleeping late" or "You are scratching," but "You cause the king to sleep," "You scratch him (the king)"; etc. (Kuper, 1947: 219–220).

Other symbolic acts are performed which exemplify the "darkness" and "waxing and waning moon" themes, for example, the slaughtering of a black ox, the painting of the queen mother with a black mixture—she is compared again to a half-moon, while the king is a full moon, and both are in eclipse until the paint is washed off finally with doctored water, and the ritual subject "comes once again into lightness and normality."

In this short passage we have an embarrassment of symbolic riches. I will mention only a few themes that bear on the argument of this paper. Let us look at the king's position first. He is symbolically invisible, "black," a moon between phases. He is also under obedience to traditional rules, and "men of his inner circle" see that he keeps them. He is also "naked," divested of the trappings of his office. He remains apart from the scenes of his political action in a sanctuary or ritual hut. He is also, it would seem, identified with the earth which the people are forbidden to stab, lest the king be affected. He is "hidden." The king, in short, has been divested of all the outward attributes, the "accidents," of his kingship and is reduced to its substance, the "earth" and "darkness" from which the normal, structured order of the Swazi kingdom will be regenerated "in lightness."

In this betwixt-and-between period, in this fruitful darkness, king and people are closely identified. There is a mystical solidarity between them, which contrasts sharply with the hierarchical rank-dominated structure of ordinary Swazi life. It is only in darkness, silence, celibacy, in the absence of merriment and movement that the king and people can thus be one. For every normal action is involved in the rights and obligations of a structure that defines status and establishes social distance between men. Only in their Trappist sabbath of transition may the Swazi regenerate the social tissues torn by conflicts arising from distinctions of status and discrepant structural norms.

I end this study with an invitation to investigators of ritual to focus their attention on the phenomena and processes of mid-transition. It is these, I hold, that paradoxically expose the basic building blocks of culture just when we pass out of and before we re-enter the structural realm. In *sacerrima* and their interpretations we have categories of data that may usefully be handled by the new sophisticated techniques of cross-cultural comparison.

# Female Circumcision in Egypt and Sudan: A Controversial Rite of Passage

Daniel Gordon

*Anthropologists have known and written about female genital operations for many years, but the subject has only recently been brought to the attention of the Western public. The practice currently is a hot issue in Egypt where human rights advocates, including women's groups and many physicians, are pitted against its proponents. Also termed female genital mutilation and (erroneously) female circumcision, this operation is widespread in Africa south of the Sahara; although practiced in several Islamic countries of North Africa, it is not present in 80 percent of the Muslim world.*

*Blending physiological and cultural data, Daniel Gordon's research focuses on the types of genital surgery common in Egypt and Sudan and the rationales employed by members of these societies to defend the practice. Although not a ritual marking the physiological change from adolescence to adulthood, as is the case in sub-Saharan Africa, female genital surgery in Egypt and Sudan is a rite of passage that moves immature females into what Gordon calls "social puberty," giving a child the status of a woman after the operation.*

*Gordon's work challenges the validity of cultural relativism and accuses anthropologists of advocating female genital surgery because of their nonjudgmental position, yet he makes plain that, although these operations are deeply imbedded in the male-dominated cultures of Egypt and Sudan, which stress female constraint and the separation of male and female worlds, women themselves are the strongest proponents of genital surgery for their daughters and granddaughters. This fact demands explanation that can be found only in the intricate weave of the fabric of Egyptian and Sudanic cultures.*

Despite its long history, its enduring prevalence, and the capacity of its practice to arouse emotional

response, the literature on female circumcision in the Arab world is surprisingly scant. . . . In the last decade, finally, with the development of feminist consciousness and the advent of an international women's health movement, there has been a growing perception that the largely descriptive approach taken in much of the existing literature is inappropriately passive in its response to the international health issue of "female genital mutilation" (Hosken 1982).

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*"Female Circumcision and Genital Operations in Egypt and the Sudan: A Dilemma for Medical Anthropology" by Daniel Gordon from MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY QUARTERLY, March 1, 1991. Copyright © 1991, American Anthropological Association. Reprinted by permission.*

In beginning, I must make it clear that the term “female circumcision,” although common throughout much of the literature, is an incorrect, euphemistic description for what is really a variety of operations which can be categorized into three main types. Literal circumcision is the least mutilating of the three procedures and is referred to as *sunna* (“duty”) in Arabic, since it is thought to be commanded or at least recommended by Islam. It corresponds most closely to the operation in males, involving removal of the clitoral prepuce (foreskin) by razor, knife, or smoldering stone, depending on where and by whom it is practiced. The second form, excision or clitoridectomy, involves the cutting out of the whole clitoris as well as parts or all of the labia minora. In its varying degrees it is the most common form practiced in Egypt. In the Sudan excision is not performed, but a similar operation, referred to as “intermediate circumcision” (El Dareer 1982: 4), involves removal of the clitoris, the anterior or all of the labia minora, and slices of the labia majora. El Dareer suggests that this procedure was invented as a compromise by Sudanese midwives when British legislation forbade the most extreme operations in 1946.

Pharaonic circumcision, or *tahara farowniyya* in Arabic, is the oldest of the three operations, attributed in folk legend to the time of the ancient Pharaohs (hence the name). It is most prevalent in the Sudan and Nubian Egypt. The most radical of the operations, it is often referred to as infibulation, because of its association with the ancient Roman practice of fastening a clasp, or fibula, through the labia majora of a woman to ensure her chastity. Pharaonic circumcision involves complete removal of the clitoris, labia minora and majora, with the two sides of the wound then stitched together, leaving a small pinhole opening for the drop by drop passage of urine and menstrual blood. The operation is done in a variety of ways, depending on where it is practiced. In rural settings, a small stick is often inserted to maintain the opening, and the two sides stitched together with thorns. Adhesives such as egg, oil, or wet cigarette paper are placed over the wound to promote healing. The girl’s legs are often bound together for as long as 40 days to ensure the desired tightly scarred aperture (El Dareer 1982: 1–20). In urban settings, stitching is likely to be done with catgut or silk sutures, and anesthesia and antibiotics are likely to be used.

The most extensive statistical survey of female genital operations done to date was carried out in the Sudan between 1977 and 1981 by the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Khartoum, with Dr. Asma El Dareer as chief investigator (El Dareer 1982). El Dareer’s team interviewed 3,210 women and 1,545 men, representing a random sampling of households throughout Northern Sudan. In addition to El Dareer, interviewers were Sudanese social workers and medical and college students, who all received a standardized training in administration of the questionnaire. The questionnaire included demographic information on age, religion, education, occupation, income, marital status, and circumcision history (method, type, operator, healing, complications, need for treatment). Cooperative respondents were followed further with open-ended questions on their recollections of the procedure, their support or opposition, and plans for their daughters. When permitted, a physical exam was performed to corroborate type of circumcision and evidence of complications. Ninety-five percent of the sample population responded to the questionnaire, and 95% of this group proceeded to the open-ended questions. Only 12 women were willing to undergo examination, meaning that nearly all information on operation type and on sequelae was reported and could not be corroborated.

What the survey showed was that a genital operation of some sort is nearly universal. Over 98% of the women questioned were circumcised—3% with the *sunna* procedure; 12% “intermediate”; and 83%, pharaonic (El Dareer 1982: 1). The strongest predictor of operation type was level of education. Seventy-five percent of pharaonically circumcised girls were from illiterate families, while educated parents were more likely to opt for the milder forms (El Dareer 1982: 22). Over 90% of the operations in the Sudan were performed by *dayas*, or midwives, the rest by doctors, nurses, or old men and women who inherited the role (El Dareer 1982: 17).

Survey information for Egypt is not nearly so extensive, but the incidence of female genital operations is certainly much lower. Estimates range from one-third (Hosken 1978: 152) to one-half (Rugh 1984: 160) of all Egyptian women. In addition, the variety of procedures is more moderate. Except for the Nubian south, virtually no pharaonic operations are performed. A 1965 study of 651 circumcised women

by two male Egyptian gynecologists reported that all circumcisions were variations of *sunna* and excision (Hansen 1972/73: 15).

That both the Egyptian and Sudanese governments recognize female genital operations as a health concern is evidenced by statutes in both countries which ban all but the most moderate forms. Sudan seems to have inherited a tradition of concern from the British Health Service, dating from the 1920s and 1930s, and now sponsors conferences and epidemiological research, such as El Dareer's, which use the language of medicine and epidemiology to oppose the practices. El Dareer, for example, is active in programs that educate rural Sudanese about the health hazards of female genital operations. In introducing the data from her survey, she explicitly states that her goal in carrying out such work is to reveal how the genital operations can best be eradicated.

Despite efforts to curb these practices, however, inadequate reporting renders the precise nature and extent of the health problem very difficult to assess. Perhaps most misleading is that few women relate the complications of circumcision to the operation, since it is generally believed to be harmless (El Dareer 1982: 28). Infections, for example, which are among the most common complications, are more likely to be attributed to the evil eye and treated by amulets, incantations, or a dip in the Nile (El Dareer 1982: 33). In addition, many women are reluctant to seek help from male physicians because of the area of the body they would have to expose on examination, and they therefore accept the painful consequences (El Dareer 1982: 28). Sufferers from the complications of the pharaonic procedure will often remain quiet because of the known illegality of the operation and the shame attached to endangering one's *daya* (El Dareer 1982: 28). El Dareer noted that of the 790 immediate complications reported to her, only 10% had been shown to medical personnel, and 85% of cases that in her opinion had later required serious medical attention went unreported (El Dareer 1982: 28). Mortality records are particularly incomplete. Primary fatalities (e.g., from hemorrhagic shock) are concealed for fear of legal repercussions, while secondary fatalities, such as death in childbirth, are not reported in a way that they can be related to the operations (Hosken 1982: 4).

Although the incidence of mortality is not known and the extent of morbidity is sketchy at best, the

complications of female genital operations have been described, if not quantified, with some consistency (e.g., Dewhurst and Michelson 1964; El Dareer 1982; El Saadawi 1980; Hathout 1963; Huddleston 1944; Koso-Thomas 1987; Mustafa 1966; Worsley 1938). The most immediate of these complications include pain from lack of anesthesia, hemorrhage of major blood vessels, and fatal shock from loss of blood. Pain and the fear associated with it can lead to acute urinary retention, as can trauma to the urethra. The nearly complete sealing off of the vagina in infibulation makes chronic urinary retention a standard complaint after this operation. Inability to void urine can lead to the formation of painful stones and, particularly when preceded by the use of unsterilized equipment and dressings, makes urinary tract infections a virtual certainty. Untreated lower urinary tract infections can ascend to the bladder and kidneys (pyelonephritis) with devastating consequences, including renal failure, septicemia, and death. Pelvic inflammatory disease (infection of the uterus and fallopian tubes) is also common, excruciatingly painful, and can render a woman infertile. Local infection, often accompanied by anemia from blood loss, causes slow and incomplete healing, a condition which favors formation of excessive scar tissue, or keloid. Keloid is a particular problem in Nubian Egypt and the Sudan, as its formation is most characteristic of the healing process of blacks. By one estimation, keloids occur in about half of infibulated women in the Sudan (Worsley 1938: 687). Keloids can cause vaginal obstruction, predisposing women to urinary and menstrual blockage even in the noninfibulated. At the extreme, complete obstruction of the vagina (whether secondary to infibulation or keloids) can lead to hematocolpos, the accumulation of menstrual blood in the vagina. This condition can persist for months or even years. There are, in fact, documented cases of young women who have been put to death by their families when an abnormal swelling caused by accumulated blood was incorrectly interpreted as pregnancy out of wedlock (El Saadawi 1980: 26). Vulvar abscesses and cysts, finally, are common in operations that involve stitching (pharaonic and intermediate) and are caused by inclusion of skin into the stitched wound. These can swell to an enormous size and persist for years.

Medical sequelae, particularly of the pharaonic operations, also have a profound effect on childbirth.

Accumulated scarring favors a prolonged and painful labor, as fibrous vulvar tissue fails to dilate during contractions. Hemorrhage often results from tearing through scar tissue or through the cervix or perineum. Rupture of the vagina leads to formation of fistulae with rectum or bladder, causing lifelong incontinence, discomfort, and odor. Furthermore, in all cases of pharaonic circumcision, the woman must be disinflubated, or cut open along the original scar, to permit passage of the baby. For its part, the child can be stillborn, brain damaged, or suffer malformations from the obstructed labor, lack of oxygen during the excessive time spent in the vaginal canal, or errant episiotomy cuts dealt by the *daya*.

While recognizing the difficulty of achieving an accurate quantification of these complications, a 1979 conference of the World Health Organization in Khartoum reported extensive experience of unanesthetized pain, hemorrhage, urinary retention, and infection in all forms of genital operation, but particularly in the pharaonic (Hosken 1982: 45). In El Dareer's survey, one-quarter of respondents reported immediate complications, with dysuria and hemorrhage the most common (each about 20% of all reported complications) (El Dareer 1982: 37).

When women in the sample were asked if they suffered from any of a list of known sequelae, 30% reported long-term consequences. Chronic urinary tract and pelvic infections were most commonly cited at about 25% each of all reported sequelae (El Dareer 1982: 28). In addition, the highest mortality rates in childbirth are reported from areas practicing circumcision (Hosken 1982: 110), although a cause and effect relationship cannot necessarily be inferred from this fact, since areas where the more radical procedures are done are also those regions with the lowest standard of living and the least adequate health care.

Evaluation of the immediate and long-term psychological impact of the operations has not been addressed, but the effects on sexual response seem fairly clear, despite the reluctance of women to discuss this topic (Rugh 1984: 110). Seventy-five percent of women in El Dareer's survey report either never experiencing sexual pleasure, or being totally indifferent to the notion (El Dareer 1982: 48). Scar tissue often makes sex painful, and with the substantial narrowing of the vaginal orifice in pharaonic circumcision, tearing and bleeding are greatly increased,

making first-time sex particularly feared (El Dareer 1982: 41). What is more, an infibulated woman usually needs to be cut open to allow intercourse. If not, full penetration can be a long and painful process taking many months (Boddy 1982: 686).

Although circumcised women do not consider many of the subsequent pains and complications they endure to be connected with their operations, one has to wonder why these operations are done in view of the immediate suffering alone. This question is intensified by the fact that on the books, at least, pharaonic circumcision in the Sudan and total clitoral excision in Egypt are forbidden, yet they continue to be practiced. Indeed, leniency of enforcement has been attributed to local riots and protests which accompanied the initial attempts to apply these laws (Hosken 1982: 105).

Several authors suggest that associations with and overtones of religious tradition make these practices more persistent than parallel customs in other cultures, such as foot binding in China, which simply disappeared when outlawed (Beck and Keddie 1980: 24). Indeed, El Dareer points out that religion and tradition are the most common reasons given by both women and men for the practice of these operations (El Dareer 1982: 67). The name *sunna*, or religious duty, which has become associated with one type of operation, implies unquestionable adherence for Muslims. When asked about these practices, people commonly respond, "We are following our religious teachings" (El Dareer 1982: 71), yet, interestingly, this same response is given even when non-*sunna* operations are being described (El Dareer 1982: 70). Thus, even to its religious defenders, the precise relationship of female genital operations to Islamic tradition, though apparently closely associated, is not so clear.

There is good evidence, in fact, that the custom is not even originally Islamic. Clitoridectomy and excision are practiced in West Africa from Mauritania to Cameroon, across central Africa to Chad, and in the East from Tanzania to Ethiopia; infibulation is customary in Mali, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Nigeria. This wide distribution of these practices in non-Islamic parts of Africa suggests that these operations are originally an African institution, adopted by Islam in its conquest of Egypt (Hansen 1972/73: 18). It should be noted in this regard that while female genital operations are practiced in several Islamic countries,

they are unknown in 80% of the Islamic world, most notably Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iran, and Iraq. Searching for precedent in Islamic texts, one finds that the operations are not mentioned anywhere in the Qur'an, although several statements from the companion *hadith*, the sayings of the Prophet, have a tradition of being interpreted as referring to female circumcision (Al Hibri 1982: 204). Even so, the traditions of *hadith* interpretation support only the most moderate of the operations. Egypt's 1959 statute banning all but partial clitoridectomy was based on a summary of religious opinion by the Ministry of Public Health. According to this source, it is unclear whether the *hadith* consider *khafd* (literally, reduction; in this context, the *sunna* operation) to be *sunna* (duty) or merely *makrama* (embellishment), but all interpretations agree that total excision is forbidden (Hosken 1982: 133).

In short, the commonly held conception among those who practice these operations, that they are dictated by religious tenets, has not been validated. Perhaps the interplay that arises between doctrine and a culturally embedded sense of what is right is more vague in Islam than some other religions, because there is no central religious authority to interpret and disseminate dogma to a largely illiterate populace. Religion and "tradition" are offered almost reflexively as an explanation for behavior patterns that are woven into the texture of society. This can be seen by the fact that many interviewees who supported the practice of female genital operations admitted to no clear or conscious rationale for doing so, or perhaps they were responding out of a deep fear of social criticism (El Dareer 1982: 78). Furthermore, many who opposed the operations still intended to subject their own daughters to them (El Dareer 1982: 82).

A window into understanding the belief patterns which undergird this sense of what is proper is offered by another popular explanation given by interviewees: cleanliness (El Dareer 1982: 73). The important role of this quality can be seen in the folk name for all the female genital operations: *tahara*, or purity. There is an extensive body of anecdotal material linking the operations to improved health, including prevention of stillbirth (Koso-Thomas 1987: 5) and relief from the generalized affliction of *el duda*, the "worm," which *dayas* sometimes claim to see jumping out when a girl is circumcised (El Dareer 1982: 13). As the name and the healing associated

with it imply, *tahara* refers to cleanliness rooted in deeper concerns.

What these concerns might be brings us to the most venerated anthropological explanation for mutilation operations—the rite of passage. In this construction, the operation serves as a marker of the movement from child to adult, in which the similarity between male and female is removed, permitting a ritual differentiation of the sexes (van Gennepe 1960[1908]: 72). There is certainly support for this argument among many African tribes, where the operation takes place at puberty and is accompanied by a naming ceremony. In the Sudan and Egypt, however, female genital surgery is performed well before puberty, usually between the ages of about five to nine, and does not, therefore, correspond to actual physiological change.

The key to understanding these operations is to recognize that they serve as something of a "social puberty," powerfully signifying the young girl's future passage into sexuality. In some areas of the Sudan and Nubian Egypt, this passage is ritualized by investing the operations with the form and symbolism of a wedding. The girl is adorned with gold and henna in the style of a bride, while Qur'anic verses are chanted and a groom is exhorted to come forward (Kennedy 1970: 179). In this way, the operation becomes part of the same ceremonial complex as marriage and childbirth. The involvement with blood and genitalia foreshadows the young girl's future role as wife and mother (Kennedy 1970: 179).

Although a circumcised girl may still be a child biologically, her status becomes that of a woman after her operation. She is no longer permitted to play outside or to socialize with boys her age; in some areas even school is forbidden, as she begins the task of waiting for a husband (El Dareer 1982: 71). As a woman, she is now subject to a strict code of modesty, one of the most fundamental patterns of belief and behavior in the Arab world as a whole, involving appropriate bodily covering, character traits such as bashfulness and naiveté, and associated customs and belief relating to chastity, fidelity, separation, and seclusion (Antoun 1968: 672).

The traditional pattern of female constraint involves a separation of male and female worlds, with propriety and honor accorded women at home and men in public. If they must go out, women should be accompanied by symbols of virtuous intent: modest

clothes, clear evidence of destination, the company of a child or adult relative (Rugh 1984: 186). There are separate male and female lines in stores and at bus depots, underscoring the forbidden nature of even the most superficial contact between unmarried men and women.

The reward for adherence to this code of modesty and separation is honor to the family and improved marriage prospects for the girl and her sisters. The punishment for its violation is shame (Rugh 1984: 160). An unmarried pregnant woman, for example, is considered bereft of honor and utterly alone. In certain areas it would not be unusual for her to commit suicide, or even to be murdered by her own family (El Saadawi 1980: 23).

Understanding the broader Arabic code of modesty and conceptions of female sexuality offers a clearer insight into the role of female genital operations. That the separation and seclusion of women is deeply connected to a particular orientation toward sexuality is not only intuitively plausible, but it is borne out by how early (prepubertally) these constraints are imposed and by their removal in old age. When a woman is no longer considered sexual, she is permitted to mix freely with men, often in a position of veneration and status (Antoun 1968: 677).

At the heart of the code of modesty is an ideology of female appetite, unpredictability, and lack of self-control (Antoun 1968: 678). The education of a young girl is a litany of what she is by nature likely to do but must avoid, because it is harmful, shameful, or religiously outlawed (El Saadawi 1980: 13). The ideal form of the code dictates the complete separation of the female threat to the public sphere. Absolute seclusion, however, is rarely an economically feasible option. Most Egyptians and Sudanese do not have the resources to maintain the required accoutrements of harems: extra servants, large gardens, high walls (Rugh 1984: 156). These features are more characteristic of countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where genital operations are not practiced. That these operations have, however, been reported as universal among nomadic Bedouin (Hosken 1982: 110) supports the contention that the genital operations, with the physical and symbolic barriers that they present, serve as a substitute for a more complete seclusion of women.

A man from the poor Bulaq community of Cairo is quoted by Rugh as saying,

In the cold countries of the north where the blood runs slowly, you do not have the need for the operation. But here in the warm countries we are more emotional and less restricted. Without this operation there is no telling what our women might do. For sure, one man would not be enough to satisfy them. (1984: 160)

It has been argued that this fear of female sexuality is a product of Arab concern with patrilineal purity (Beck and Keddie 1980: 8). Family and lineage are certainly of great importance in the Arab world, as evidenced by the slant of Islamic law and practice which, for example, do not recognize adoption (Antoun 1968: 689). Thus the genital operations can serve as a means for protecting lineage purity and, by extension, the honor of the woman's agnatic group (Beck and Keddie 1980). With extramarital sexuality at least symbolically prevented, there is a reduction of the destabilizing possibility that a given child may actually belong to another lineage. The genital scar—proudly called *nafsi*, “my own self,” by the bearer (Worsley 1938: 687)—attests to the value of definite possessions for the families involved: honor for the women's family of birth and purity of patrilineage for the family of her husband (Oldfield Hayes 1975: 623). A particularly tight infibulation, in fact, is often rewarded by an increased brideprice and by gifts from the groom to the bride's family (El Dareer 1982: 41). Likewise, to call a man the son of an uncircumcised mother is one of the severest insults in the Arab world (Hansen 1972/73: 19).

A fascinating proof for the undergirding of infibulation by the issue of patrilineage is provided by Kennedy's fieldwork among the Nubians, who inhabit the Nile between Aswan, Egypt, and Dongola, Sudan. When much of their agricultural land was inundated after construction of the Aswan High Dam, their forced dependence on urban wage labor began to shift emphasis to the nuclear family, eroding the centrality of land inheritance and lineage continuity. The result has been that Nubian girls are being subjected increasingly to the milder excision operation instead of full-scale infibulation (Kennedy 1970: 186).

Despite the emphasis or the preceding arguments on a male conception of sexuality, one cannot ignore the fact that women are the strongest proponents of the operations (Oldfield Hayes 1975: 624). It is the grandmothers who make all arrangements and preparations, often without the father's consent

(Oldfield Hayes 1975: 619). An argument can be made for there being significant economic impetus to perpetuate the respected role of the *daya*, the only achieved position of prestige that is available to women. The *daya*'s work provides a substantial contribution to the village economy, particularly in areas where pharaonic circumcision is the norm (Oldfield Hayes 1975: 627). In addition to the initial infibulation, a woman often needs to be deinfibulated on her wedding night, usually at a substantial fee, since the *daya* is brought in secretly to protect the husband from the public shame of having been unable to achieve penetration (Oldfield Hayes 1975: 627). Deinfibulation and subsequent reinfibulation are done also for infections, infertility, urinary and menstrual retention, and childbirth (El Dareer 1982: 51). There is also the additional phenomenon of widows, divorcees, and married women reinfibulating to appear virginal, some of them actually going through the procedure at regular intervals (El Dareer 1982: 51).

Another argument suggests that while men view these practices in terms of chastity and honor, women understand genital operations by focusing on fertility and deemphasizing sexuality (Boddy 1982). Based on her fieldwork in the Sudan, Boddy developed a linguistic and cultural exegesis which links fertility with enclosedness—a characteristic of infibulated genitalia. The idiom of enclosure is echoed in Sudanese folk medicine, where an accumulation of demons (*djinn*) is feared at all orifices, and many remedies are based on the assumption that illness is caused by things opening or coming apart. The enclosed womb protects a woman's truest possession, her fertility, as well as the future lineage of her husband. In this way, Boddy argues, infibulation is an assertive and symbolic act, controlled by women, in which the womb becomes a social space—enclosed, guarded, and impervious.

Analyses such as this present a stumbling block to Western political agitation against female genital operations. While it may be true, as Hosken asserts, that without "the [male] preference for women who have undergone the operations, the practice would die out" (Hosken 1982: 11), hopeful assertions such as this miss the cultural point. Preferences for ritual are not so much matters of personal predilection as they are deeply embedded solutions to group concerns—in this case to issues such as sexuality, fertility, and patrilineage.

From the perspective of those who would like to see these practices completely eradicated, one of the most frustrating aspects of the current practice of female genital operations has been its peripheral incorporation into the biomedical health care system. Thus, while the World Health Organization and other medical groups assume a "passive stance" (Hosken 1982: 272) with regard to these procedures, trained medical personnel, drugs, and equipment are being disseminated and used to perform genital operations (Hosken 1982: 287). In urban Sudan there has been an official policy of using the health care system for the operations in order to reduce complications through improved surgical conditions (Hosken 1982: 47). Physicians do about 2% of the urban operations, while *dayas* with government sponsored midwifery training (a legacy of the British) do about 35% (El Dareer 1982: 15).

From a medical perspective, this development has to be seen as encouraging. Sanitation is greatly improved, and antibiotics, anesthetics, and better aseptic techniques are all more likely to be used when trained operators perform the surgery (El Dareer 1982: 16). Perhaps even more important, particularly for the future, is what seems to be a slow turning away from the more extreme operations. The most sensitive barometer of potential change is probably the opinions of those who have been subjected to operations and are now themselves the parents of young girls. The interviews conducted by El Dareer throughout the Sudan show a striking discordance between the type of operation previously performed and that currently favored. While over 80% were infibulated, only 23% of women and 16% of men actually preferred this procedure, with the majority of men opting for *sunna* instead, most women favoring intermediate, and approximately 15% of respondents preferring no operation at all (El Dareer 1982: 69). While El Dareer's survey is not exhaustive, it represents the best statistical information available, at least for the Sudan, and could well be predictive of substantial moderation of future practice.

The most significant change in these practices is likely to be rooted in the inexorable Western influences of industrialization and urbanization. Kennedy has shown how Nubian custom changed as the importance of tribal descent was replaced by the urban focus on paid labor and the nuclear family. A similar case can be made for the major urban centers of the

Sudan, where the incidence of pharaonic operations is dropping in favor of the intermediate form (El Dareer 1982: 22). In Egypt, the process of urbanization is farther along, and a majority of the middle class now abstains from genital operations altogether (Hosken 1978: 152).

These small seeds of change leave us, still, with a dilemma of cross-cultural ethics. Konner's admonition that "female circumcision is one place where we ought to draw the line" argues for the increasingly popular Western movement of opposition to an alien practice that is painful, physically disfiguring, medically treacherous, and oppressive to women. There is considerable moral force to this stance, yet it is diluted in the end by a failure to place the female genital operations within the context of anthropological thought. Hosken even asserts that the practice, in its violence and subjugation, has "nothing to do with culture" (Hosken 1982: 1). This skirts not only the issue of culturally embedded meaning for those who practice and experience female genital operations but also our own cultural assumptions.

Cultural relativism, although it is not generally considered to be so, is also a position of advocacy. The anthropological enterprise of exploring what it means to be human through consideration of alien behavior has shown how customs and rituals are not isolated practices to be chosen or discarded at will, but they form a framework of interrelated idioms, a logic of daily life through which reality is ordered and experience mediated. Numerous studies have demonstrated how an entire culture is stressed when its customs are devalued, "modernized," or eliminated by the processes of urbanization and acculturation. Hypertension, loss of respect for the elders,

fragmentation of families, increased prevalence of depression and suicide have been documented among both urbanized Zulu (Scotch 1963) and Ethiopian immigrants to Israel (Weingrod 1987), to cite two examples.

The failings of anthropology in its study of female genital operations in Egypt and the Sudan have been its inability to integrate a consideration of the medical complications of the practice into its description and a denial of its own position of moral advocacy. Because of this, the international women's rights movement has not been far off base in considering anthropologists as perpetuating a cover-up. Although this has doubtless taken place outside of conscious awareness for the most part, with no intention to mislead, a decision to describe without judging does require certain blindspots.

With a capacity perhaps unique among non-Western practices in its ability to generate emotional debate and misunderstanding, the phenomenon of female genital operations can be seen as a compelling test-case in cross-cultural ethics for medical anthropology. The challenge is to develop an explanatory model that can integrate anthropological description, public health concerns, and our own cultural sensitivities. This last point is the most likely to be ignored because of its perceived antagonism to anthropology's nonjudgmental relativism. At the limits of our ability to understand another culture's practices, however, an articulated self-awareness helps to remind us that we are ourselves looking at the world through culturally trained eyes. While relativism is a powerful descriptive tool for getting inside another culture, both the describer and his audience have cultural agendas that must be considered as well.

# Return to Wirikuta: Ritual Reversal and Symbolic Continuity on the Peyote Hunt of the Huichol Indians

Barbara G. Myerhoff

*Persuasively illustrating the close integration of myth and symbolism within ritual, the following article by Barbara G. Myerhoff explores symbolic reversals and oppositions within the annual peyote hunt of the Huichol, an indigenous population of north-central Mexico. Based on fieldwork in 1965 and 1966, Myerhoff's work exemplifies the anthropological analysis of symbolism within a ritual context. A shaman leads small groups to Wirikuta, which is both an actual geographic location and a myth-based spiritual state, where everything ordinary is inverted. These reversals occur in naming, interpersonal behavior, ritual behavior, and emotional states. Through such ritual reversals, the author argues, a number of functions are served. Everyday existence is set apart from the sacred. The ordinary is turned into something extraordinary yet continuous. Peyote-seekers become supernatural deities and, in the dramatization that is ritual, act and behave within the realm of the sacred.*

*Although Barbara Myerhoff's early field research took place in Mexico, later in her career she documented Jewish communities in southern California. She paid special attention to rituals in the lives of elderly Jews. Her research is highlighted in two documentary films, both of which are excellent illustrations of a skilled ethnographer at work: "Number Our Days" (1983) and "In Her Own Time" (1985), both produced by Direct Cinema Ltd.*

God is day and night, winter summer, war peace, satiety hunger—all opposites, this is the meaning.

—Heraclitus

*Reprinted from Barbara G. Myerhoff, "Return to Wirikuta: Ritual Reversal and Symbolic Continuity on the Peyote Hunt of the Huichol Indians" from Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society, ed. By Barbara A. Babcock. Copyright © 1978 by Cornell University. Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.*

## The Peyote Hunt of the Huichol Indians

Rituals of opposition and reversal constitute a critical part of a lengthy religious ceremony, the peyote hunt, practiced by the Huichol Indians of north-central Mexico.<sup>1</sup> In order to understand the function

1. The Huichol Indians are a quasi-tribe of about 10,000 living in dispersed communities in north-central Mexico. They are among the least acculturated Mexican Indians and

of these rituals it is necessary to adumbrate the major features and purposes of the peyote hunt. Annually, small groups of Huichols, led by a shaman-priest or *mara'akáme*, return to Wirikuta to hunt the peyote. Wirikuta is a high desert several hundred miles from the Huichols' present abode in the Sierra Madre Occidental. Mythically and in all likelihood historically, it is their original homeland, the place once inhabited by the First People, the quasi-deified ancestors. But Wirikuta is much more than a geographical location; it is *illud tempus*, the paradisaical condition that existed before the creation of the world and mankind, and the condition that will prevail at the end of time.

In Wirikuta, as in the paradise envisioned in many creation myths, all is unity, a cosmic totality without barriers of any kind, without the differentiations that characterize the mundane mortal world. In Wirikuta, separations are obliterated—between sexes, between leader and led, young and old, animals and man, plants and animals, and man and the deities. The social order and the natural and supernatural realms are rejoined into their original state of seamless continuity. Wirikuta is the center of the four directions where, as the Huichol describe it, “All is unity, all is one, all is ourselves.”

In Wirikuta, the three major symbols of Huichol world view are likewise fused. These are the Deer, representing the Huichols' past life as nomadic hunters; the Maize, representing their present life as sedentary agriculturalists; and peyote, signifying the private, spiritual vision of each individual. To reenter Wirikuta, the peyote pilgrims must be transformed into the First People. They assume the identity of particular deities and literally hunt the peyote which grows in Wirikuta, tracking and following it in the form of deer footprints, stalking and shooting it with bow and arrow, consuming it in a climactic ceremony of total communion. Once the peyote has been hunted, consumed, and sufficient supplies have been gathered for use in the ceremonies of the coming year, the pilgrims hastily leave and return to their homes and to their mortal condition. The entire

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in part their resistance to outside influence is attributable to the complex and extraordinarily rich ritual and symbolic life they lead. A detailed presentation of the peyote hunt is presented in Myerhoff 1974. The fieldwork on which the present paper was based took place in 1965 and 1966.

peyote hunt is very complex, consisting of many rituals and symbols; here I will only concentrate on one set of rituals, those which concern reversal and opposition, and the part they play in enabling the pilgrims to experience the sense of totality and cosmic unity that is their overarching religious goal.

## Mythological and Ritual Aspects of Reversals

“In Wirikuta, we change the names of everything . . . everything is backwards.” Ramón Medina Silva, the officiating *mara'akáme*, who led the Peyote Hunt of 1966 in which I participated, thus explained the reversals that obtain during the pilgrimage. “The *mara'akáme* tells [the pilgrims], ‘Now we will change everything, all the meanings, because that is the way it must be with the *hikuritámete* [peyote pilgrims]. As it was in Ancient Times, so that all can be united.’”

The reversals to which he refers occur on four distinct levels: naming, interpersonal behavior, ritual behavior, and emotional states. The reversals in naming are very specific. Ideally, everything is its opposite and everything is newly named each year. But in fact, for many things there are often no clear opposites, and substitutions are made, chosen for reasons that are not always clear. Frequently the substitutions seem dictated by simple visual association—thus the head is a pot, the nose a penis, hair is cactus fiber. A great many of these substitutions recur each year and are standardized. Nevertheless, they are defined as opposites in this context and are treated as if they were spontaneous rather than patterned.

On the interpersonal-behavioral level, direct oppositions are more straightforward. One says yes when he or she means no. A person proffers a foot instead of a hand. Conversations are conducted with conversants standing back to back, and so forth. Behavior is also altered to correspond with the ritual identity of the participant. Thus the oldest man, transformed into a *nunutsi* or little child for the journey, is not permitted to gather firewood because “this work is too heavy and strenuous for one so young.”

The deities are portrayed as the opposite of mortals in that the former have no physiological needs. Thus the pilgrims, as the First People, disguise,

minimize, and forego their human physiological activities as much as possible. Sexual abstinence is practiced. Washing is forsworn. Eating, sleeping, and drinking are kept to an absolute minimum. Defecation and urination are said not to occur and are practiced covertly. All forms of social distinction and organization are minimized, and even the mara'akáme's leadership and direction are extremely oblique. The ordinary division of labor is suspended and altered in various ways. All forms of discord are strictly forbidden, and disruptive emotions such as jealousy and deceit, usually tolerated as part of the human condition, are completely proscribed for the pilgrims. No special treatment is afforded to children; no behavioral distinctions between the sexes are allowed. Even the separateness of the mara'akáme from his group is minimized, and his assistant immediately performs for him all rituals that the mara'akáme has just performed for the rest of the party.

In terms of ritual actions, reversals are quite clear. The cardinal directions, and up and down, are switched in behaviors which involve offering sacred water and food to the four corners and the center of the world. The fire is circled in a counterclockwise direction instead of clockwise as on normal ceremonial occasions. In Wirikuta, the mara'akáme's assistant sits to the latter's left instead of to his right.

Emotions as well as behaviors are altered on the basis of the pilgrims' transformation into deities. Since mortals would be jubilant, presumably, on returning to their pre-creation, mythical homeland, and grief-stricken on departing from it, the pilgrims weep as they reenter Wirikuta and are exultant on departing. This reflects the fact that they are deities leaving paradise, not mortals returning from it.

I should note also some of the attitudes and values toward the reversals that I observed. For example, there seems to be an aesthetic dimension since they regard some reversals as more satisfying than others. Humorous and ironic changes are a source of much laughter and delight. Thus the name of the wife of the mara'akáme was changed to "ugly *gringa*." The mara'akáme himself was the pope. The anthropologists' camper was a burro that drank much tequila. They also delight in compounding the reversals: "Ah what a pity that we have caught no peyote. Here we sit, sad, surrounded by

baskets of flowers under a cold sun." Thus said one pilgrim after a successful day of gathering baskets full of peyote, while standing in the moonlight. Mistakes and humorous improvisations are also the source of new reversals. When in a careless moment Los Angeles was referred to as "home," everyone was very pleased and amused; from then on home was Los Angeles and even in sacred chants and prayers this reversal was maintained. Accidental reversals such as this are just as obligatory as the conventional ones and the new ones "dreamed" by the mara'akáme. Mistakes are corrected with good will but firmly, and everyone shares in the responsibility for keeping track of the changes, reminding each other repeatedly of the changes that have been instituted. The more changes the better, and each day, as more are established, more attention by all is required to keep things straight. Normal conversation and behavior become more difficult with each new day's accumulation of changes. Sunsets are ugly. No one is tired. Peyote is sweet. The pilgrimage is a failure. There is too much food to eat, and so forth.

The reversals were not instituted or removed by any formal rituals, although it is said that there are such. It became apparent that the reversals were in effect at the periphery of Wirikuta when someone sneezed. This was received by uproarious laughter, for, the nose had become a penis and a sneeze, accordingly, was an off-color joke. After the peyote hunt, the reversals were set aside gradually as the group moved away from Wirikuta. On returning home, the pilgrims regaled those who had remained behind with descriptions of the reversals and the confusions they had engendered.

## The Functions and Symbolism of the Reversals

How should these ideas and actions concerning reversal and opposition be understood? In the Huichol context, they achieve several purposes simultaneously. Perhaps most familiar and straightforward is their function in transforming the mundane into the sacred by disguising the everyday features of environment, society, and behavior, and in the Durkheimian sense "setting it apart." As Ramón Medina Silva explained, "One changes everything . . . when [we] cross over there to the Peyote Country . . .

because it is a very sacred thing, it is the most sacred. It is our life, as one says. That is why nowadays one gives things other names. One changes everything. Only when they return home, then they call everything again what it is." Here the totality and scope of the reversals are important—actions, names, ritual, and everyday behaviors are altered so that participants are conscious at all times of the extraordinary nature of their undertaking. Nothing is natural, habitual, or taken for granted. The boundaries between the ordinary and the sacred are sharply defined and attention to this extraordinary state of affairs cannot lag when one has to be perpetually self-conscious and vigilant against lapses. Reversals promote the essential attitude of the sacred, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

The transformation of mortals into deities is related to this purpose. Again and again in theological, mythological, and ethnographic literature one encounters the impossibility of mortals entering a supernatural realm in their normal condition. The shaman transforms himself into a spirit in order to perform his duties as soul guide or psychopomp. This is the essence of the Symplegades motif in shamanism—the passage into the other world through the crashing gates, as Eliade (1964) points out. The "paradoxical passage" to the supernatural domain is open only to those who have been transformed from their human state into pure spirit. An apotheosis is required of those who would "cross over" and achieve the "breakthrough in planes." The peyote hunt opens Wirikuta to all proper pilgrims, but they, like the shaman, cannot enter in mortal form. To enter Wirikuta, the Huichol peyote-seekers do not merely impersonate the deities by assuming their names and garb. Ritually and symbolically, they *become* supernatural, disguising the mortal coil, abrogating human functions and forms.

This "backwardness" operates on two levels: as the deities, they are the obverse of mortals; as deities, they are going back, going backwards, and signifying this by doing everything backwards. Backwardness is found frequently in connection with supernatural states, and with the denial of humanity. Lugbara witches are inverted beings who walk on their heads (Middleton 1960). And in Genesis we find that "the inhabitants of paradise stand on their heads and walk on their hands; as do all the dead" (Graves and Patai 1966:73, citing Gen. 24:65). The

examples could be expanded indefinitely. Eliade suggests this widespread association of backwardness and the supernatural when he comments, "Consequently to do away with this state of [humanity] even if only provisionally, is equivalent to reestablishing the primordial condition of man, in other words, to banish time, to go backwards, to recover the 'paradisial' *illud tempus*" (1960:72).

A third function of these reversals is their provision of mnemonic, or aid to the imagination and memory, for conception and action. For a time the peyote pilgrims in the Huichol religion live in the supernatural. They go beyond invoking and discussing it, for Wirikuta exists in ritual as well as mythical terms. Ritual, unlike myth, requires action. Ritual is a dramatization. Pilgrims must not only imagine the unimaginable, they must behave within it. It is through its action dimension that ritual makes religious values "really real," and fuses the "lived-in" and the "dreamed-of order," as Geertz puts it. Full staging is necessary. The unfathomable—*illud tempus*, the primordial state before time—is the setting. Props, costumes, etiquette, vocabulary, emotions—all must be conceived and specified. The theme of opposition provides the details that are needed to make the drama credible and convincing; the metaphor of backwardness makes for a concretization and amplification of the ineffable. Again Eliade's writings offer an insight along these lines. He points out that the theme of *coincidentia oppositorum* is an "eschatological symbol par excellence, which denotes that Time and History have come to an end—in the lion lying down with the lamb" (1962:121). It is in the Garden of Eden that "opposites lie down together," it is there that conflicts and divisions are ultimately abolished and man's original innocence and wholeness are regained.

Separation, transformation, and concretization then are three purposes achieved by the reversals in Wirikuta. There is a fourth, perhaps the most important and common function of rituals of this nature. That is the capacity of reversals to invoke continuity through emphasis on opposition. How this operates in the Huichol case was explained in very precise terms by Ramón Medina Silva in a text he dictated about the 1966 peyote hunt five years later. He was elaborating on the beauties of Wirikuta and for the first time indicated that it was the state that would prevail at the end of time as well as that which characterized

the beginning. When the world ends, the First People would return. "All will be in unity, all will be one, all will be as you have seen it there, in Wirikuta." The present world, it became clear, was but a shallow and misleading interlude, a transient period characterized by difference and separations, bracketed by an enduring condition of totality and continuity.

When the world ends it will be like when the names of things are changed during the Peyote Hunt. All will be different, the opposite of what it is now. Now there are two eyes in the heavens, the Sun and the Moon. Then, the Moon will open his eye and become brighter. The sun will become dimmer. There will be no more difference between them. Then, no more men and no more women. No more child and no more adult. All will change places. Even the *mara'akáme* will no longer be separate. That is why there must always be a *nunutsi* when we go to Wirikuta. Because the old man and the tiny baby, they are the same.

—Personal communication, Los Angeles, 1971

Polarity reaffirms continuity. The baby and the adult ultimately are joined, ends of a single continuum. Watts states it as follows: "What exactly is polarity? It is something much more than simple duality or opposition. For to say that opposites are polar is to say much more than that they are joined . . . , that they are the terms, ends, or extremities of a single whole. Polar opposites are therefore inseparable opposites, like the poles of the earth or of a magnet, or the ends of a stick or the faces of a coin" (1970:45).

Surely the vision of an original condition of unity, before the world and mankind began, is one of the most common themes in religions of every nature and place. Again to draw on Eliade, "Among the 'primitive' peoples, just as among the Saints and the Christian theologians, mystic ecstasy is a return to Paradise, expressed by the overcoming of Time and History . . . , and [represents] a recovery of the primordial state of Man" (1960:72).

The theme of nostalgia for lost paradise recurs so often as to be counted by some as panhuman. Theories attribute this yearning to various causes: a lingering memory of the undifferentiated state in the womb, the unfilled wish for a happy childhood, a fantasy of premortal blessedness and purity, a form

of what the Jungians call uroboric incest, a fatal desire for nonbeing, and so forth (see Neumann 1954). Many theologians have viewed this vision of cosmic oneness as the essence of the mystical experience and of religious ecstasy. The particulars vary from one religion to the next but the ingredients are stable: paradise is that which existed before the beginning of time, before life and death, before light and darkness. Here animals and man lived in a state of easy companionship, speaking the same language, untroubled by thirst, hunger, pain, weariness, loneliness, struggle, or appetite. Humans knew neither discord nor distinction among themselves—they were sexless, without self-awareness, and indeed undifferentiated from the very gods. Then an irreversible and cataclysmic sundering took place and instead of wholeness there was separation, the separation that was Creation. Henceforth, the human organism was no longer indistinguishable from the cosmos. The primordial splitting left mankind as we know it now, forever haunted by remembrance of and attraction for an original condition of wholeness.

The reversals, then, express the most lamentable features of the human condition by emphasizing the loss of the paradisaical state of oneness. Humans are fragmented, incomplete, and isolated from the deities; they are vulnerable and literally mortal, which is to say helpless before the ravages of pain, time, and death. At the same time, the reversals remind mankind of the primordial wholeness that will again prevail when paradise is regained. Here is the theme expressed in a cultural form familiar to most of us, the Gospel according to Thomas:

They said to Him: Shall we then, being children enter the Kingdom? Jesus said to them:  
When you make the two one, and  
when you make the inner as the outer  
and the outer as the inner and the above  
as the below, and when  
you make the male and the female into a single one,  
so that the male will not be male and  
the female [not] be female, when you make  
eyes in the place of an eye, a hand  
in the place of a hand, and a foot in the place  
of a foot, an image in the place of an image,  
then shall you enter [the Kingdom].

—Logia 23–35, cited in Guillaumont et al.  
1959:17–19

## Conclusions

The theme of reversal, in all its permutations and combinations—opposition (complementary and binary), inversion, and dualism—has always been of great interest to anthropologists, mythographers, theologians, psychologists, linguists, and artists. The subject seems inexhaustible. In anthropology alone, we continue to unravel additional layers of meaning, to discover more and more functions fulfilled by reversals in various contexts. Recent studies especially have shown how reversals can be used to make statements about the social order—to affirm it, attack it, suspend it, redefine it, oppose it, buttress it, emphasize one part of it at the cost of another, and so forth. We see a magnificently fruitful image put to diverse purposes, capable of an overwhelming range of expression. Obviously there is no question of looking for the true or correct meaning in the use of reversals. We are dealing with a symbolic referent that has new meanings in every new context and within a single context embraces multiple and contradictory meanings simultaneously. In Wirikuta, the reversals accomplish many purposes and contain a major paradox. They emphasize the difference between Wirikuta and the mundane life, and the differentiated nature of the human condition. Also they stress the nondifferentiated nature of Wirikuta. The reversals thus portray differentiation and continuity at the same time. Both are true, separation and oneness, though this is contradictory and paradoxical. But this should come as no surprise, for paradox is the very quick of ritual. In ritual, as in the Garden, opposites are made to lie down together.

## Appendix: How the Names Are Changed on the Peyote Journey

*Text dictated by Ramón Medina Silva, mara'akáme of San Sebastián, Mexico, to explain the reversals used on the peyote hunt.*

Well, let's see now. I shall speak about how we do things when we go and seek the peyote, how we change the names of everything. How we call the things we see and do by another name for all those

days. Until we return. Because all must be done as it must be done. As it was laid down in the beginning. How it was when the mara'akáme who is Tatewarí<sup>2</sup> led all those great ones to Wirikuta. When they crossed over there, to the peyote country. Because that is a very sacred thing, it is the most sacred. It is our life, as one says. That is why nowadays one gives things other names. One changes everything. Only when they return home, then they call everything again that it is.

When everything is ready, when all the symbols which we take with us, the gourd bowls, the yarn discs, the arrows, everything has been made, when all have prayed together we set out. Then we must change everything, all the meanings. For instance: a pot which is black and round, it is called a head. It is the mara'akáme who directs everything. He is the one who listens in his dream, with his power and his knowledge. He speaks to Tatewarí, he speaks to Kauyumari.<sup>3</sup> Kauyumari tells him everything, how it must be. Then he says to his companions, if he is the leader of the journey to the peyote, look, this thing is this way, and this is how it must be done. He tells them, look, now we will change everything, all the meanings, because that is the way it must be with the *hikuritámete* (peyote pilgrims). As it was in ancient times, so that all can be united. As it was long ago, before the time of my grandfather, even before the time of his grandfather. So the mara'akáme has to see to everything, so that as much as possible all the words are changed. Only when one comes home, then everything can be changed back again to the way it was.

"Look," the mara'akáme says to them, "it is when you say 'good morning,' you mean 'good evening,' everything is backwards. You say 'goodbye, I am leaving you,' but you are really coming. You do not shake hands, you shake feet. You hold out your right foot to be shaken by the foot of your companion. You say 'good afternoon,' yet it is only morning."

So the mara'akáme tells them, as he has dreamed it. He dreams it differently each time. Every year they

2. Huichol name for the deity with whom the shaman has a special affinity, roughly translatable as Our Grandfather Fire.

3. Kauyumari is a trickster hero, quasi-deified and roughly translatable as Sacred Deer Person.

change the names of things differently because every year the mara'akáme dreams new names. Even if it is the same mara'akáme who leads the journey, he still changes the names each time differently.

And he watches who makes mistakes because there must be no error. One must use the names the mara'akáme has dreamed. Because if one makes an error it is not right. That is how it is. It is a beautiful thing because it is right. Daily, daily, the mara'akáme goes explaining everything to them so that they do not make mistakes. The mara'akáme says to a companion, "Look, why does that man over there watch us, why does he stare at us?" And then he says, "Look, what is it he has to stare at us?" "His eyes," says his companion. "No," the mara'akáme answers, "they are not his eyes, they are tomatoes." That is how he goes explaining how everything should be called.

When one makes cigarettes for the journey, one uses the dried husks of maize for the wrappings. And the tobacco, it is called the droppings of ants. Tortillas one calls bread. Beans one calls fruit from a tree. Maize is wheat. Water is tequila. Instead of saying, "Let us go and get water to drink," you say, "Ah, let us take tequila to eat." *Atole* [maize broth], that is brains. Sandals are cactus. Fingers are sticks. Hair, that is cactus fiber. The moon, that is a cold sun.

On all the trails on which we travel to the peyote country, as we see different things we make this change. That is because the peyote is very sacred, very sacred. That is why it is reversed. Therefore, when we see a dog, it is a cat, or it is a coyote. Ordinarily, when we see a dog, it is just a dog, but when we walk for the peyote it is a cat or a coyote or even something else, as the mara'akáme dreams it. When we see a burro, it is not a burro, it is a cow, or a horse. And when we see a horse, it is something else. When we see a dove or a small bird of some kind, is it a small bird? No, the mara'akáme says, it is an eagle, it is a hawk. Or a piglet, it is not a piglet, it is an armadillo. When we hunt the deer, which is very sacred, it is not a deer, on this journey. It is a lamb, or a cat. And the nets for catching deer? They are called sewing thread.

When we say come, it means go away. When we say "shh, quiet," it means to shout, and when we whistle or call to the front we are really calling to a person behind us. We speak in this direction here.

That one over there turns because he already knows how it is, how everything is reversed. To say, "Let us stay here," means to go, "let us go," and when we say "sit down," we mean, "stand up." It is also so when we have crossed over, when we are in the country of the peyote. Even the peyote is called by another name, as the mara'akáme dreamed. Then the peyote is flower or something else.

It is so with Tatewarí, with Tayaupa.<sup>4</sup> The mara'akáme, we call him Tatewarí. He is Tatewarí, he who leads us. But there in Wirikuta, one says something else. One calls him "the red one." And Tayaupa, he is "the shining one." So all is changed. Our companion who is old, he is called the child. Our companion who is young, he is the old one. When we want to speak of the machete, we say "hook." When one speaks of wood, one really means fish. Begging your pardon, instead of saying "to eat," we say "to defecate." And, begging your pardon, "I am going to urinate" means "I am going to drink water." When speaking of blowing one's nose, one says "give me the honey." "He is deaf" means "how well he hears." So everything is changed, everything is different or backwards.

The mara'akáme goes explaining how everything should be said, everything, many times, or his companions would forget and make errors. In the late afternoon, when all are gathered around Tatewarí, we all pray there, and the mara'akáme tells how it should be. So for instance he says, "Do not speak of this one or that one as serious. Say he is a jaguar. You see an old woman and her face is all wrinkled, coming from afar, do not say, 'Ah, there is a man,' say 'Ah, here comes a wooden image.' You say, 'Here comes the image of Santo Cristo.' Or if it is a woman coming, say 'Ah, here comes the image of Guadalupe.'"

Women, you call flowers. For the woman's skirts, you say, "bush," and for her blouse you say "palm roots." And a man's clothing, that too is changed. His clothing, you call his fur. His hat, that is a mushroom. Or it is his sandal. Begging your pardon, but what we carry down here, the testicles, they are called avocados. And the penis, that is his nose. That is how it is.

4. Our Father Sun.

When we come back with the peyote, the peyote which has been hunted, they make a ceremony and everything is changed back again. And those who are at home, when one returns they grab one and ask, "What is it you called things? How is it that now you call the hands hands but when you left you

called them feet?" Well, it is because they have changed the names back again. And they all want to know what they called things. One tells them, and there is laughter. That is how it is. Because it must be as it was said in the beginning, in ancient times. [Adapted from Myerhoff 1974]

# Ritual Regulation of Environmental Relations Among a New Guinea People

Roy A. Rappaport

*In this article, originally published in 1967, Roy A. Rappaport takes issue with anthropologists who emphasize only the symbolic and emotional aspects of ritual. To Rappaport, ritual may have observable, measurable, practical results, even if those results are not recognizable to the participants. By expanding his focus of study to include the ecosystem of which humans are a part, the author argues that the true functions of ritual may be understood.*

*Rappaport documents the Tsembaga, a small, politically egalitarian population in one of the interior valleys of New Guinea. The author presents a detailed description of the Tsembaga ecosystem and subsistence methods, emphasizing the place of pigs. Tsembaga carefully control the size of their pig herds, limiting reproduction and slaughtering pigs only for ritual purposes. After considering the cycle of rituals involving pig slaughter—which relates to warfare and maintaining relationships with allies—Rappaport concludes that the size of a pig herd actually determines the timing of some rituals, especially the kaiko, or “pig festival,” which redistributes pork to a large number of people in the territory. When the cost of maintaining a large number of pigs becomes too great, social forces call for the ritual. Therefore, the timing of Tsembaga rituals is connected to the natural environment, including other humans in the region. In clear opposition to such anthropologists as Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner, Rappaport concludes that “[r]eligious ritual may do much more than symbolize, validate, and intensify relationships.”*

*A key feature of Rappaport’s argument is his distinction between the “operational environment,” which can be observed by the anthropologist, and the “cognized environment,” or the Tsembaga’s perceived environment—including their reasons for rituals and beliefs about their effects. Rappaport maintains that the Tsembaga, like other peoples, do not see all the empirical effects of their rituals.*

Most functional studies of religious behavior in anthropology have as an analytic goal the elucidation of events, processes, or relationships occurring within a social unit of some sort. The social unit is

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*“Ritual regulation of environmental relations among a New Guinea people,”* *ETHNOLOGY* 6:17–30, 1967. Reprinted by permission.

not always well defined, but in some cases it appears to be a church, that is, a group of people who entertain similar beliefs about the universe, or a congregation, a group of people who participate together in the performance of religious rituals. There have been exceptions. Thus Vayda, Leeds, and Smith (1961) and O. K. Moore (1957) have clearly perceived

that the functions of religious ritual are not necessarily confined within the boundaries of a congregation or even a church. By and large, however, I believe that the following statement by Homans (1941: 172) represents fairly the dominant line of anthropological thought concerning the functions of religious ritual:

Ritual actions do not produce a practical result on the external world—that is one of the reasons why we call them ritual. But to make this statement is not to say that ritual has no function. Its function is not related to the world external to the society but to the internal constitution of the society. It gives the members of the society confidence, it dispels their anxieties, it disciplines their social organization.

No argument will be raised here against the sociological and psychological functions imputed by Homans, and many others before him, to ritual. They seem to me to be plausible. Nevertheless, in some cases at least, ritual does produce, in Homans' terms, "a practical result on the world" external not only to the social unit composed of those who participate together in ritual performances but also to the larger unit composed of those who entertain similar beliefs concerning the universe. The material presented here will show that the ritual cycles of the Tsembaga, and of other local territorial groups of Maring speakers living in the New Guinea interior, play an important part in regulating the relationships of these groups with both the nonhuman components of their immediate environments and the human components of their less immediate environments, that is, with other similar territorial groups. To be more specific, this regulation helps to maintain the biotic communities existing within their territories, redistributes land among people and people over land, and limits the frequency of fighting. In the absence of authoritative political statuses or offices, the ritual cycle likewise provides a means for mobilizing allies when warfare may be undertaken. It also provides a mechanism for redistributing local pig surpluses in the form of pork throughout a large regional population while helping to assure the local population of a supply of pork when its members are most in need of high quality protein.

Religious ritual may be defined, for the purposes of this paper, as the prescribed performance of conventionalized acts manifestly directed toward the involvement of nonempirical or supernatural

agencies in the affairs of the actors. While this definition relies upon the formal characteristics of the performances and upon the motives for undertaking them, attention will be focused upon the empirical effects of ritual performances and sequences of ritual performances. The religious rituals to be discussed are regarded as neither more nor less than part of the behavioral repertoire employed by an aggregate of organisms in adjusting to its environment.

The data upon which this paper is based were collected during fourteen months of field work among the Tsembaga, one of about twenty local groups of Maring speakers living in the Simbai and Jimi Valleys of the Bismarck Range in the Territory of New Guinea. The size of Maring local groups varies from a little over 100 to 900. The Tsembaga, who in 1963 numbered 204 persons, are located on the south wall of the Simbai Valley. The country in which they live differs from the true highlands in being lower, generally more rugged, and more heavily forested. Tsembaga territory rises, within a total surface area of 3.2 square miles, from an elevation of 2,200 feet at the Simbai river to 7,200 feet at the ridge crest. Gardens are cut in the secondary forests up to between 5,000 and 5,400 feet, above which the area remains in primary forest. Rainfall reaches 150 inches per year.

The Tsembaga have come into contact with the outside world only recently; the first government patrol to penetrate their territory arrived in 1954. They were considered uncontrolled by the Australian government until 1962, and they remain unmissionized to this day.

The 204 Tsembaga are distributed among five putatively patrilineal clans, which are, in turn, organized into more inclusive groupings on two hierarchical levels below that of the total local group. Internal political structure is highly egalitarian. There are no hereditary or elected chiefs, nor are there even "big men" who can regularly coerce or command the support of their clansmen or co-residents in economic or forceful enterprises.

It is convenient to regard the Tsembaga as a population in the ecological sense, that is, as one of the components of a system of trophic exchanges taking place within a bounded area. Tsembaga territory and the biotic community existing upon it may be conveniently viewed as an ecosystem. While it would be permissible arbitrarily to designate the Tsembaga as a population and their territory with its biota as an

ecosystem, there are also nonarbitrary reasons for doing so. An ecosystem is a system of material exchanges, and the Tsembaga maintain against other human groups exclusive access to the resources within their territorial borders. Conversely, it is from this territory alone that the Tsembaga ordinarily derive all of their foodstuffs and most of the other materials they require for survival. Less anthropocentrically, it may be justified to regard Tsembaga territory with its biota as an ecosystem in view of the rather localized nature of cyclical material exchanges in tropical rainforests.

As they are involved with the nonhuman biotic community within their territory in a set of trophic exchanges, so do they participate in other material relationships with other human groups external to their territory. Genetic materials are exchanged with other groups, and certain crucial items, such as stone axes, were in the past obtained from the outside. Furthermore, in the area occupied by the Maring speakers, more than one local group is usually involved in any process, either peaceful or warlike, through which people are redistributed over land and land redistributed among people.

The concept of the ecosystem, though it provides a convenient frame for the analysis of interspecific trophic exchanges taking place within limited geographical areas, does not comfortably accommodate intraspecific exchanges taking place over wider geographic areas. Some sort of geographic population model would be more useful for the analysis of the relationship of the local ecological population to the larger regional population of which it is a part, but we lack even a set of appropriate terms for such a model. Suffice it here to note that the relations of the Tsembaga to the total of other local human populations in their vicinity are similar to the relations of local aggregates of other animals to the totality of their species occupying broader and more or less continuous regions. This larger, more inclusive aggregate may resemble what geneticists mean by the term population, that is, an aggregate of interbreeding organisms persisting through an indefinite number of generations and either living or capable of living in isolation from similar aggregates of the same species. This is the unit which survives through long periods of time while its local ecological (*sensu stricto*) subunits, the units more or less independently involved in interspecific trophic exchanges such as the Tsembaga, are ephemeral.

Since it has been asserted that the ritual cycles of the Tsembaga regulate relationships within what may be regarded as a complex system, it is necessary, before proceeding to the ritual cycle itself, to describe briefly, and where possible in quantitative terms, some aspects of the place of the Tsembaga in this system.

The Tsembaga are bush-following horticulturalists. Staples include a range of root crops, taro (*Colocasia*) and sweet potatoes being most important, yams and manioc less so. In addition, a great variety of greens are raised, some of which are rich in protein. Sugar cane and some tree crops, particularly *Pandanus conoideus*, are also important.

All gardens are mixed, many of them containing all of the major root crops and many greens. Two named garden types are, however, distinguished by the crops which predominate in them. "Taro-yam gardens" were found to produce, on the basis of daily harvest records kept on entire gardens for close to one year, about 5,300,000 calories<sup>1</sup> per acre during their harvesting lives of 18 to 24 months; 85 percent of their yield is harvested between 24 and 76 weeks after planting. "Sugar-sweet potato gardens" produce about 4,600,000 calories per acre during their harvesting lives, 91 percent being taken between 24 and 76 weeks after planting. I estimated that approximately 310,000 calories per acre is expended on cutting, fencing, planting, maintaining, harvesting, and walking to and from taro-yam gardens. Sugar-sweet potato gardens required an expenditure of approximately 290,000 calories per acre.<sup>2</sup> These energy ratios, approximately 17:1 on taro-yam

1. Because the length of time in the field precluded the possibility of maintaining harvest records on single gardens from planting through abandonment, figures were based, in the case of both "taro-yam" and "sugar-sweet potato" gardens, on three separate gardens planted in successive years. Conversions from the gross weight to the caloric value of the yield were made by reference to the literature. The sources used are listed in Rappaport (1966: Appendix VIII).

2. Rough time and motion studies of each of the tasks involved in making, maintaining, harvesting, and walking to and from gardens were undertaken. Conversion to energy expenditure values was accomplished by reference to energy expenditure tables prepared by Hipsley and Kirk (1965: 43) on the basis of gas exchange measurements made during the performance of garden tasks by the Chimbu people of the New Guinea highlands.

gardens and 16:1 on sugar-sweet potato gardens, compare favorably with figures reported for swidden cultivation in other regions.<sup>3</sup>

Intake is high in comparison with the reported dietaries of other New Guinea populations. On the basis of daily consumption records kept for ten months on four households numbering in total sixteen persons, I estimated the average daily intake of adult males to be approximately 2,600 calories, and that of adult females to be around 2,200 calories. It may be mentioned here that the Tsembaga are small and short-statured. Adult males average 101 pounds in weight and approximately 58.5 inches in height; the corresponding averages for adult females are 85 pounds and 54.5 inches.<sup>4</sup>

Although 99 percent by weight of the food consumed is vegetable, the protein intake is high by New Guinea standards. The daily protein consumption of adult males from vegetable sources was estimated to be between 43 and 55 grams, of adult females 36 to 48 grams. Even with an adjustment for vegetable sources, these values are slightly in excess of the recently published WHO/FAO daily requirements (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 1964). The same is true of the younger age categories, although soft and discolored hair, a symptom of protein deficiency, was noted in a few children. The WHO/FAO protein requirements do not include a large "margin for safety" or allowance for stress; and, although no clinical assessments were undertaken, it may be suggested that the Tsembaga achieve nitrogen balance at a low level. In other words, their protein intake is probably marginal.

Measurements of all gardens made during 1962 and of some gardens made during 1963 indicate that, to support the human population, between .15 and .19 acres are put into cultivation per capita per year. Fallows range from 8 to 45 years. The area in sec-

ondary forest comprises approximately 1,000 acres, only 30 to 50 of which are in cultivation at any time. Assuming calories to be the limiting factor, and assuming an unchanging population structure, the territory could support—with no reduction in lengths of fallow and without cutting into the virgin forest from which the Tsembaga extract many important items—between 290 and 397 people if the pig population remained minimal. The size of the pig herd, however, fluctuates widely. Taking Maring pig husbandry procedures into consideration, I have estimated the human carrying capacity of the Tsembaga territory at between 270 and 320 people.

Because the timing of the ritual cycle is bound up with the demography of the pig herd, the place of the pig in Tsembaga adaptation must be examined.

First, being omnivorous, pigs keep residential areas free of garbage and human feces. Second, limited numbers of pigs rooting in secondary growth may help to hasten the development of that growth. The Tsembaga usually permit pigs to enter their gardens one and a half to two years after planting, by which time second-growth trees are well established there. The Tsembaga practice selective weeding; from the time the garden is planted, herbaceous species are removed, but tree species are allowed to remain. By the time cropping is discontinued and the pigs are let in, some of the trees in the garden are already ten to fifteen feet tall. These well-established trees are relatively impervious to damage by the pigs, which, in rooting for seeds and remaining tubers, eliminate many seeds and seedlings that, if allowed to develop, would provide some competition for the established trees. Moreover, in some Maring-speaking areas swiddens are planted twice, although this is not the case with the Tsembaga. After the first crop is almost exhausted, pigs are penned in the garden, where their rooting eliminates weeds and softens the ground, making the task of planting for a second time easier. The pigs, in other words, are used as cultivating machines.

Small numbers of pigs are easy to keep. They run free during the day and return home at night to receive their ration of garbage and substandard tubers, particularly sweet potatoes. Supplying the latter requires little extra work, for the substandard tubers are taken from the ground in the course of harvesting the daily ration for humans. Daily consumption records kept over a period of some months show

3. Marvin Harris, in an unpublished paper, estimates the ratio of energy return to energy input on Dyak (Borneo) rice swiddens at 10:1. His estimates of energy ratios on Tepotzlan (Meso-America) swiddens range from 13:1 on poor land to 29:1 on the best land.

4. Heights may be inaccurate. Many men wear their hair in large coiffures hardened with pandanus grease, and it was necessary in some instances to estimate the location of the top of the skull.

that the ration of tubers received by the pigs approximates in weight that consumed by adult humans, i.e., a little less than three pounds per day per pig.

If the pig herd grows large, however, the standard tubers incidentally obtained in the course of harvesting for human needs become insufficient, and it becomes necessary to harvest especially for the pigs. In other words, people must work for the pigs and perhaps even supply them with food fit for human consumption. Thus, as Vayda, Leeds, and Smith (1961: 71) have pointed out, there can be too many pigs for a given community.

This also holds true of the sanitary and cultivating services rendered by pigs. A small number of pigs is sufficient to keep residential areas clean, to suppress superfluous seedlings in abandoned gardens, and to soften the soil in gardens scheduled for second plantings. A larger herd, on the other hand, may be troublesome; the larger the number of pigs, the greater the possibility of their invasion of producing gardens, with concomitant damage not only to crops and young secondary growth but also to the relations between the pig owners and garden owners.

All male pigs are castrated at approximately three months of age, for boars, people say, are dangerous and do not grow as large as barrows. Pregnancies, therefore, are always the result of unions of domestic sows with feral males. Fecundity is thus only a fraction of its potential. During one twelve-month period only fourteen litters resulted out of a potential 99 or more pregnancies. Farrowing generally takes place in the forest, and mortality of the young is high. Only 32 of the offspring of the above-mentioned fourteen pregnancies were alive six months after birth. This number is barely sufficient to replace the number of adult animals which would have died or been killed during most years without pig festivals.

The Tsembaga almost never kill domestic pigs outside of ritual contexts. In ordinary times, when there is no pig festival in progress, these rituals are almost always associated with misfortunes or emergencies, notably warfare, illness, injury, or death. Rules state not only the contexts in which pigs are to be ritually slaughtered, but also who may partake of the flesh of the sacrificial animals. During warfare it is only the men participating in the fighting who eat the pork. In cases of illness or injury, it is only the victim and certain near relatives, particularly his co-resident agnates and spouses, who do so.

It is reasonable to assume that misfortune and emergency are likely to induce in the organisms experiencing them a complex of physiological changes known collectively as "stress." Physiological stress reactions occur not only in organisms which are infected with disease or traumatized, but also in those experiencing rage or fear (Houssay et al. 1955: 1096), or even prolonged anxiety (National Research Council 1963: 53). One important aspect of stress is the increased catabolization of protein (Houssay et al. 1955: 451; National Research Council 1963: 49), with a net loss of nitrogen from the tissues (Houssay et al. 1955: 450). This is a serious matter for organisms with a marginal protein intake. Antibody production is low (Berg 1948: 311), healing is slow (Large and Johnston 1948: 352), and a variety of symptoms of a serious nature are likely to develop (Lund and Levenson 1948: 349; Zintel 1964: 1043). The status of a protein-depleted animal, however, may be significantly improved in a relatively short period of time by the intake of high quality protein, and high protein diets are therefore routinely prescribed for surgical patients and those suffering from infectious diseases (Burton 1959: 231; Lund and Levenson 1948: 350; Elman 1951: 85ff.; Zintel 1964: 1043ff.).

It is precisely when they are undergoing physiological stress that the Tsembaga kill and consume their pigs, and it should be noted that they limit the consumption to those likely to be experiencing stress most profoundly. The Tsembaga, of course, know nothing of physiological stress. Native theories of the etiology and treatment of disease and injury implicate various categories of spirits to whom sacrifices must be made. Nevertheless, the behavior which is appropriate in terms of native understandings is also appropriate to the actual situation confronting the actors.

We may now outline in the barest of terms the Tsembaga ritual cycle. Space does not permit a description of its ideological correlates. It must suffice to note that the Tsembaga do not necessarily perceive all of the empirical effects which the anthropologist sees to flow from their ritual behavior. Such empirical consequences as they may perceive, moreover, are not central to their rationalizations of the performances. The Tsembaga say that they perform the rituals in order to rearrange their relationships with the supernatural world. We may only reiterate here that behavior undertaken in reference to their

“cognized environment”—an environment which includes as very important elements the spirits of ancestors—seems appropriate in their “operational environment,” the material environment specified by the anthropologist through operations of observation, including measurement.

Since the rituals are arranged in a cycle, description may commence at any point. The operation of the cycle becomes clearest if we begin with the rituals performed during warfare. Opponents in all cases occupy adjacent territories, in almost all cases on the same valley wall. After hostilities have broken out, each side performs certain rituals which place the opposing side in the formal category of “enemy.” A number of taboos prevail while hostilities continue. These include prohibitions on sexual intercourse and on the ingestion of certain things—food prepared by women, food grown on the lower portion of the territory, marsupials, eels, and while actually on the fighting ground, any liquid whatsoever.

One ritual practice associated with fighting which may have some physiological consequences deserves mention. Immediately before proceeding to the fighting ground, the warriors eat heavily salted pig fat. The ingestion of salt, coupled with the taboo on drinking, has the effect of shortening the fighting day, particularly since the Maring prefer to fight only on bright sunny days. When everyone gets unbearably thirsty, according to informants, fighting is broken off.

There may formerly have been other effects if the native salt contained sodium (the production of salt was discontinued some years previous to the field work, and no samples were obtained). The Maring diet seems to be deficient in sodium. The ingestion of large amounts of sodium just prior to fighting would have permitted the warriors to sweat normally without a lowering of blood volume and consequent weakness during the course of the fighting. The pork belly ingested with the salt would have provided them with a new burst of energy two hours or so after the commencement of the engagement. After fighting was finished for the day, lean pork was consumed, offsetting, at least to some extent, the nitrogen loss associated with the stressful fighting (personal communications from F. Dunn, W. McFarlane, and J. Sabine, 1965).

Fighting could continue sporadically for weeks. Occasionally it terminated in the rout of one of the

antagonistic groups, whose survivors would take refuge with kinsmen elsewhere. In such instances, the victors would lay waste their opponents’ groves and gardens, slaughter their pigs, and burn their houses. They would not, however, immediately annex the territory of the vanquished. The Maring say that they never take over the territory of an enemy for, even if it has been abandoned, the spirits of their ancestors remain to guard it against interlopers. Most fights, however, terminated in truces between the antagonists.

With the termination of hostilities a group which has not been driven off its territory performs a ritual called “planting the *rumbim*.” Every man puts his hand on the ritual plant, *rumbim* (*Cordyline fruticosa* (L.), A. Chev; *C. terminalis*, Kunth), as it is planted in the ground. The ancestors are addressed, in effect, as follows:

We thank you for helping us in the fight and permitting us to remain on our territory. We place our souls in this *rumbim* as we plant it on our ground. We ask you to care for this *rumbim*. We will kill pigs for you now, but they are few. In the future, when we have many pigs, we shall again give you pork and uproot the *rumbim* and stage a *kaiko* (pig festival). But until there are sufficient pigs to repay you the *rumbim* will remain in the ground.

This ritual is accompanied by the wholesale slaughter of pigs. Only juveniles remain alive. All adult and adolescent animals are killed, cooked, and dedicated to the ancestors. Some are consumed by the local group, but most are distributed to allies who assisted in the fight.

Some of the taboos which the group suffered during the time of fighting are abrogated by this ritual. Sexual intercourse is now permitted, liquids may be taken at any time, and food from any part of the territory may be eaten. But the group is still in debt to its allies and ancestors. People say it is still the time of the *bamp ku*, or “fighting stones,” which are actual objects used in the rituals associated with warfare. Although the fighting ceases when *rumbim* is planted, the concomitant obligations, debts to allies and ancestors, remain outstanding; and the fighting stones may not be put away until these obligations are fulfilled. The time of the fighting stones is a time of debt and danger which lasts until the *rumbim* is uprooted and a pig festival (*kaiko*) is staged.

Certain taboos persist during the time of the fighting stones. Marsupials, regarded as the pigs of

the ancestors of the high ground, may not be trapped until the debt to their masters has been repaid. Eels, the "pigs of the ancestors of the low ground," may neither be caught nor consumed. Prohibitions on all intercourse with the enemy come into force. One may not touch, talk to, or even look at a member of the enemy group, nor set foot on enemy ground. Even more important, a group may not attack another group while its ritual plant remains in the ground, for it has not yet fully rewarded its ancestors and allies for their assistance in the last fight. Until the debts to them have been paid, further assistance from them will not be forthcoming. A kind of "truce of god" thus prevails until the *rumbim* is uprooted and a *kaiko* completed.

To uproot the *rumbim* requires sufficient pigs. How many pigs are sufficient, and how long does it take to acquire them? The Tsembaga say that, if a place is "good," this can take as little as five years; but if a place is "bad," it may require ten years or longer. A bad place is one in which misfortunes are frequent and where, therefore, ritual demands for the killing of pigs arise frequently. A good place is one where such demands are infrequent. In a good place, the increase of the pig herd exceeds the ongoing ritual demands, and the herd grows rapidly. Sooner or later the substandard tubers incidentally obtained while harvesting become insufficient to feed the herd, and additional acreage must be put into production specifically for the pigs.

The work involved in caring for a large pig herd can be extremely burdensome. The Tsembaga herd just prior to the pig festival of 1962–63, when it numbered 169 animals, was receiving 54 percent of all the sweet potatoes and 82 percent of all the manioc harvested. These comprised 35.9 percent by weight of all root crops harvested. This figure is consistent with the difference between the amount of land under cultivation just previous to the pig festival, when the herd was at maximum size, and that immediately afterwards, when the pig herd was at minimum size. The former was 36.1 percent in excess of the latter.

I have estimated, on the basis of acreage yield and energy expenditure figures, that about 45,000 calories per year are expended in caring for one pig 120–150 pounds in size. It is upon women that most of the burden of pig keeping falls. If, from a woman's daily intake of about 2,200 calories, 950 calories are

allowed for basal metabolism, a woman has only 1,250 calories a day available for all her activities, which include gardening for her family, child care, and cooking, as well as tending pigs. It is clear that no woman can feed many pigs; only a few had as many as four in their care at the commencement of the festival; and it is not surprising that agitation to uproot the *rumbim* and stage the *kaiko* starts with the wives of the owners of large numbers of pigs.

A large herd is not only burdensome as far as energy expenditure is concerned; it becomes increasingly a nuisance as it expands. The more numerous pigs become, the more frequently are gardens invaded by them. Such events result in serious disturbances of local tranquillity. The garden owner often shoots, or attempts to shoot, the offending pig; and the pig owner commonly retorts by shooting, or attempting to shoot, either the garden owner, his wife, or one of his pigs. As more and more such events occur, the settlement, nucleated when the herd was small, disperses as people try to put as much distance as possible between their pigs and other people's gardens and between their gardens and other people's pigs. Occasionally this reaches its logical conclusion, and people begin to leave the territory, taking up residence with kinsmen in other local populations.

The number of pigs sufficient to become intolerable to the Tsembaga was below the capacity of the territory to carry pigs. I have estimated that, if the size and structure of the human population remained constant at the 1962–1963 level, a pig population of 140 to 240 animals averaging 100 to 150 pounds in size could be maintained perpetually by the Tsembaga without necessarily inducing environmental degradation. Since the size of the herd fluctuates, even higher cyclical maxima could be achieved. The level of toleration, however, is likely always to be below the carrying capacity, since the destructive capacity of the pigs is dependent upon the population density of both people and pigs, rather than upon population size. The denser the human population, the fewer pigs will be required to disrupt social life. If the carrying capacity is exceeded, it is likely to be exceeded by people and not by pigs.

The *kaiko* or pig festival, which commences with the planting of stakes at the boundary and the uprooting of the *rumbim*, is thus triggered by either the additional work attendant upon feeding pigs or the destructive capacity of the pigs themselves. It may

be said, then, that there are sufficient pigs to stage the *kaiko* when the relationship of pigs to people changes from one of mutualism to one of parasitism or competition.

A short time prior to the uprooting of the *rumbim*, stakes are planted at the boundary. If the enemy has continued to occupy its territory, the stakes are planted at the boundary which existed before the fight. If, on the other hand, the enemy has abandoned its territory, the victors may plant their stakes at a new boundary which encompasses areas previously occupied by the enemy. The Maring say, to be sure, that they never take land belonging to an enemy, but this land is regarded as vacant, since no *rumbim* was planted on it after the last fight. We may state here a rule of land redistribution in terms of the ritual cycle: *If one of a pair of antagonistic groups is able to uproot its rumbim before its opponents can plant their rumbim, it may occupy the latter's territory.*

Not only have the vanquished abandoned their territory; it is assumed that it has also been abandoned by their ancestors as well. The surviving members of the erstwhile enemy group have by this time resided with other groups for a number of years, and most if not all of them have already had occasion to sacrifice pigs to their ancestors at their new residences. In so doing they have invited these spirits to settle at the new locations of the living, where they will in the future receive sacrifices. Ancestors of vanquished groups thus relinquish their guardianship over the territory, making it available to victorious groups. Meanwhile, the *de facto* membership of the living in the groups with which they have taken refuge is converted eventually into *de jure* membership. Sooner or later the groups with which they have taken up residence will have occasion to plant *rumbim*, and the refugees, as co-residents, will participate, thus ritually validating their connection to the new territory and the new group. A rule of population redistribution may thus be stated in terms of ritual cycles: *A man becomes a member of a territorial group by participating with it in the planting of rumbim.*

The uprooting of the *rumbim* follows shortly after the planting of stakes at the boundary. On this particular occasion the Tsembaga killed 32 pigs out of their herd of 169. Much of the pork was distributed to allies and affines outside of the local group.

The taboo on trapping marsupials was also terminated at this time. Information is lacking concerning

the population dynamics of the local marsupials, but it may well be that the taboo which had prevailed since the last fight—that against taking them in traps—had conserved a fauna which might otherwise have become extinct.

The *kaiko* continues for about a year, during which period friendly groups are entertained from time to time. The guests receive presents of vegetable foods, and the hosts and male guests dance together throughout the night.

These events may be regarded as analogous to aspects of the social behavior of many nonhuman animals. First of all, they include massed epigamic, or courtship, displays (Wynne-Edwards 1962: 17). Young women are presented with samples of the eligible males of local groups with which they may not otherwise have had the opportunity to become familiar. The context, moreover, permits the young women to discriminate amongst this sample in terms of both endurance (signaled by how vigorously and how long a man dances) and wealth (signaled by the richness of a man's shell and feather finery).

More importantly, the massed dancing at these events may be regarded as epideictic display, communicating to the participants information concerning the size or density of the group (Wynne-Edwards 1962: 16). In many species such displays take place as a prelude to actions which adjust group size or density, and such is the case among the Maring. The massed dancing of the visitors at a *kaiko* entertainment communicates to the hosts, while the *rumbim* truce is still in force, information concerning the amount of support they may expect from the visitors in the bellicose enterprises that they are likely to embark upon soon after the termination of the pig festival.

Among the Maring there are no chiefs or other political authorities capable of commanding the support of a body of followers, and the decision to assist another group in warfare rests with each individual male. Allies are not recruited by appealing for help to other local groups as such. Rather, each member of the groups primarily involved in the hostilities appeals to his cognatic and affinal kinsmen in other local groups. These men, in turn, urge other of their co-residents and kinsmen to "help them fight." The channels through which invitations to dance are extended are precisely those through which appeals for military support are issued. The invitations go not

from group to group, but from kinsman to kinsman, the recipients of invitations urging their co-residents to "help them dance."

Invitations to dance do more than exercise the channels through which allies are recruited; they provide a means for judging their effectiveness. Dancing and fighting are regarded as in some sense equivalent. This equivalence is expressed in the similarity of some pre-fight and pre-dance rituals, and the Maring say that those who come to dance come to fight. The size of a visiting dancing contingent is consequently taken as a measure of the size of the contingent of warriors whose assistance may be expected in the next round of warfare.

In the morning the dancing ground turns into a trading ground. The items most frequently exchanged include axes, bird plumes, shell ornaments, an occasional baby pig, and, in former times, native salt. The *kaiko* thus facilitates trade by providing a market-like setting in which large numbers of traders can assemble. It likewise facilitates the movement of two critical items, salt and axes, by creating a demand for the bird plumes which may be exchanged for them.

The *kaiko* concludes with major pig sacrifices. On this particular occasion the Tsembaga butchered 105 adult and adolescent pigs, leaving only 60 juveniles and neonates alive. The survival of an additional fifteen adolescents and adults was only temporary, for they were scheduled as imminent victims. The pork yielded by the Tsembaga slaughter was estimated to weigh between 7,000 and 8,500 pounds, of which between 4,500 and 6,000 pounds were distributed to members of other local groups in 163 separate presentations. An estimated 2,000 to 3,000 people in seventeen local groups were the beneficiaries of the redistribution. The presentations, it should be mentioned, were not confined to pork. Sixteen Tsembaga men presented bridewealth or child-wealth, consisting largely of axes and shells, to their affines at this time.

The *kaiko* terminates on the day of the pig slaughter with the public presentation of salted pig belly to allies of the last fight. Presentations are made through the window in a high ceremonial fence built specially for the occasion at one end of the dance ground. The name of each honored man is announced to the assembled multitude as he charges to the window to receive his hero's portion. The fence is then ritually

torn down, and the fighting stones are put away. The pig festival and the ritual cycle have been completed, demonstrating, it may be suggested, the ecological and economic competence of the local population. The local population would now be free, if it were not for the presence of the government, to attack its enemy again, secure in the knowledge that the assistance of allies and ancestors would be forthcoming because they have received pork and the obligations to them have been fulfilled.

Usually fighting did break out again very soon after the completion of the ritual cycle. If peace still prevailed when the ceremonial fence had rotted completely—a process said to take about three years, a little longer than the length of time required to raise a pig to maximum size—*rumbim* was planted as if there had been a fight, and all adult and adolescent pigs were killed. When the pig herd was large enough so that the *rumbim* could be uprooted, peace could be made with former enemies if they were also able to dig out their *rumbim*. To put this in formal terms: *If a pair of antagonistic groups proceeds through two ritual cycles without resumption of hostilities their enmity may be terminated.*

The relations of the Tsembaga with their environment have been analyzed as a complex system composed of two subsystems. What may be called the "local subsystem" has been derived from the relations of the Tsembaga with the nonhuman components of their immediate or territorial environment. It corresponds to the ecosystem in which the Tsembaga participate. A second subsystem, one which corresponds to the larger regional population of which the Tsembaga are one of the constituent units and which may be designated as the "regional subsystem," has been derived from the relations of the Tsembaga with neighboring local populations similar to themselves.

It has been argued that rituals, arranged in repetitive sequences, regulate relations both within each of the subsystems and within the larger complex system as a whole. The timing of the ritual cycle is largely dependent upon changes in the states of the components of the local subsystem. But the *kaiko*, which is the culmination of the ritual cycle, does more than reverse changes which have taken place within the local subsystem. Its occurrence also affects relations among the components of the regional subsystem. During its performance, obligations to other local

populations are fulfilled, support for future military enterprises is rallied, and land from which enemies have earlier been driven is occupied. Its completion, furthermore, permits the local population to initiate warfare again. Conversely, warfare is terminated by rituals which preclude the reinitiation of warfare until the state of the local subsystem is again such that a *kaiko* may be staged and completed. Ritual among the Tsembaga and other Maring, in short, operates as both transducer, "translating" changes in the state of one subsystem into information which can effect changes in a second subsystem, and homeostat, maintaining a number of variables which in sum comprise the total system within ranges of viability. To repeat an earlier assertion, the operation of ritual among the Tsembaga and other Maring helps to maintain an undegraded environment, limits fighting to frequencies which do not endanger the existence of the regional population, adjusts man-land ratios, facilitates trade, distributes local surpluses of

pig throughout the regional population in the form of pork, and assures people of high quality protein when they are most in need of it.

Religious rituals and the supernatural orders toward which they are directed cannot be assumed *a priori* to be mere epiphenomena. Ritual may, and doubtless frequently does, do nothing more than validate and intensify the relationships which integrate the social unit, or symbolize the relationships which bind the social unit to its environment. But the interpretation of such presumably *sapiens*-specific phenomena as religious ritual within a framework which will also accommodate the behavior of other species shows, I think, that religious ritual may do much more than symbolize, validate, and intensify relationships. Indeed, it would not be improper to refer to the Tsembaga and the other entities with which they share their territory as a "ritually regulated ecosystem," and to the Tsembaga and their human neighbors as a "ritually regulated population."

# I Can Only Move My Feet Towards *mizuko kuyō*: Memorial Services for Dead Children in Japan

Elizabeth G. Harrison

*In this article, Elizabeth G. Harrison focuses on the disjunction between the various images of the Japanese practice of mizuko kuyō (mizuko, “water-child”; kuyō, memorial service). Mizuko is the name given in Japan to children who have died “out of order” (before their parents). Harrison believes that these memorial services provide a formal, public, ritualized way to acknowledge the existence of these children. She writes, “The object of such services is to appeal to an appropriate deity to provide for the well-being of the dead, to transfer merit to the karmic account of the dead child so that he or she may proceed more quickly to a felicitous rebirth, and to appease the dead so that they might become a benevolent influence in the lives of their living family.” Through the practice of mizuko kuyō, parents feel they are doing something constructive to help their mizuko. Harrison’s article also examines the arguments of several Buddhist priests, both for and against the practice of mizuko kuyō, at Buddhist sites. She also describes and analyzes the attitudes of the laypeople involved in mizuko kuyō services. At the close of the article, Harrison suggests that the practice of mizuko kuyō is a silent way of making people aware of the underlying tensions in women’s lives in Japan, utilizing the ritual and symbolic resources of Buddhism.*

*Mizuko*, literally ‘water-child’, is the name now given in Japan to children who have died ‘out of order’, that is, before their parents. This includes children who have died as a result of spontaneous or induced

abortion as well as stillborn infants and those who have died from any manner of illness or accident after they were born. The Japanese practice of *mizuko kuyō*, often identified as Buddhist memorial services for these dead children, centres around the performance of some variation of a memorial service for ancestral spirits (*senzo kuyō*). As such, the *mizuko* service usually includes elements which are standard to Buddhist memorial services in Japan: the chanting of special texts and presentation of offerings by clergy and audience, manipulation of religious implements

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*“I Can Only Move My Feet Towards mizuko kuyō: Memorial Services for Dead Children in Japan” by Elizabeth G. Harrison from BUDDHISM AND ABORTION by Damien Keown, pp. 93–120. Reprinted by permission of Palgrave Macmillan.*

and supervision of the audience by the clergy, and acts of purification performed by the audience.

The object of such services is to appeal to an appropriate deity to provide for the well-being of the dead, to transfer merit to the karmic account of the dead child so that he or she may proceed more quickly to a felicitous rebirth, and to appease the dead so that they might become a benevolent influence in the lives of their living family.

Visitors to Japan today can hardly miss seeing the rows of child-like figurines, as large as three or four feet or as small as two or three inches, that line pathways, shelves, and racks, both indoors and out, at temples and shrines across the country. They are visible evidence that tens of thousands of people, mostly women, have commissioned or participated in *mizuko kuyō* services for their children each year since the early 1970s. Despite the negative press which depicts them as passive dolls being manipulated by money-hungry priests, Japanese people, especially women, continue to participate, and *mizuko kuyō* has now become a routine practice at religious sites—primarily Buddhist temples—all around Japan. The connection of this practice with Buddhism is a created one, however, and until quite recently their relationship has not been an especially happy one.

Arising in the early postwar period as a reaction to the 1948 Eugenics Protection Law which made abortion legal in certain specified circumstances, *mizuko kuyō* was easily associated with Buddhism in the minds of the lay public. Historically, especially in medieval and pre-modern times, Buddhism in Japan had demonstrated a strong focus on death and the welfare of the dead. This interest was institutionalized in the early seventeenth century by the Tokugawa shogunate pronouncement that Buddhist temples would thenceforth be the site for funeral and ancestral rites for parishioners, thereby removing the locus of such formal observances from the home. The relocation was so successful that today, even though most funerals are not now done in temples, Buddhism in Japan is commonly known as ‘funeral Buddhism’ (*sōshiki bukkyō*), and anything having to do with death is first assumed to take place in a Buddhist context.

One interesting aspect of this Japanese Buddhist involvement in rituals associated with death is its focus on dead adults and the resulting lack of any

widely recognized, formal public rites for very young children who had died. In pre-modern Japan, it was thought that a child did not become a real ‘person’ until some time after birth; the evidence for this lies in the many customs which distinguished a newborn baby from other ‘people’, such as not giving it a name and not putting its arms through sleeves for a certain number of days after birth. The pre-modern saying ‘Until the age of seven, a child is of the *kami*’ (*nanasai made wa kami no uchi*) suggests that a child’s existence in this world remains unsettled until it reaches seven years of age. If it died before age seven, it was usually not given a proper funeral or burial in the manner of those who died at an older age; if it died before it was named, it most likely did not receive a funeral at all, and its birth would not have been registered. Such would have been the case for infants killed by infanticide, for example, as well as fetuses from pregnancies terminated by either spontaneous or induced abortion.

In the post-World War II context of the huge number of war dead and the new abortion law, when the number of reported abortions in Japan rose steadily to a peak of 1,170,143 in 1955, I would argue that children, including unborn aborted children, became recognized by some as a new type of war dead. Religious sites (most of them Buddhist) for performing memorial services for those children began to proliferate around the country in the 1970s. Several pseudo-Buddhist sites appeared as well, sites which made use of the identification of Buddhist forms with rituals for the dead to lend them legitimacy. By 1978, Buddhist priests and others who regularly performed services for *mizuko* were appearing on daytime television shows, further spreading word of the practice while the commentators sensationalized it. In 1984, when I began studying *mizuko kuyō*, it had become perhaps the most controversial practice in modern Japanese religious history: publicized by the mass media as a fad and a scam, denounced by many Buddhist clergy and some Buddhist institutions as un-Buddhist, yet nevertheless perpetuated by both clergy and lay participants all around Japan.

This paper will focus on the disjunction between the various images of the practice of *mizuko kuyō*. An overview of the images constructed in promotional literature and those presented by the media will give us a context for examining the arguments of several Buddhist priests both for and against the

appropriateness of this practice at Buddhist sites. Some of these reactions were delivered publicly, in print, while others were obtained privately in taped interviews. What has tended to go unnoticed in this debate over *mizuko kuyō* are the attitudes of the lay people who participate in or request *mizuko kuyō* services. We will consider the practice as it has been constructed by lay participants and how they see it informing their lives, particularly their feelings about and relationship to their dead (aborted) children in order to demonstrate the complexity of the practice that is lost in the more public images.

### Promotional and Media Images

By the mid-1980s, references to *mizuko kuyō* could be seen almost daily throughout Japan on billboards and posters, in advertisements in the public media, in newspaper and magazine articles, in publications available at religious sites and sold at bookstores, and even in comic books (*manga*). Much of this was promotional material meant to bring people to particular sites to participate in the practice as it was performed there. Many reasons were given for the need for such practice. In some cases, mothers were blamed for the death of their children, no matter how that death might have occurred, and told they must make amends through performance of *kuyō*. In others, the practice was put forth as a way for women who were grieving the loss of a child, whether before or after birth, to recover by establishing a relationship with the spirit of that child. Another approach was to promote the performance of *mizuko kuyō* as a way to help solve major, unforeseen problems occurring in a woman's life, such as the unexplained, grave illness of a living child, or a sudden, disastrous turn in the family's fortunes; in the mid-1980s such problems were often interpreted first as the result of the intervention of a forgotten *mizuko* into the family's affairs. As an extension of this, the practice was also portrayed as a way to encourage a family's *mizuko* to play the role of protector of its living family and to provide for the future of its siblings. Spiritualists went even further, often warning readers that forgotten, untended *mizuko* were angry and could be dangerous to the health and livelihood of their living relatives. In short, from the mid-1980s on, promotional literature, including television interviews, sought to establish the necessity of

the practice of *mizuko kuyō* for all dead children, although the special focus of the practice remained on dead unborn children, for they were most often forgotten.

In response to the obvious success of the new practice, the media began to publicize it in a different light, as a fad (*būmu*, lit. 'boom', implying great but short-lived popularity) and a money-making scheme. For example, a three-page photographic essay in a 1980 issue of *Shūkan Bunshun*, a popular weekly literary magazine, suggested several reasons for the 'Mizuko Jizō Boom'. According to the article, elderly women who had lost children due to the war, wives whose pregnancies had ended in miscarriage, and women who had aborted pregnancies resulting from 'free sex' were becoming religious (*bussnin ga dekite*) and buying statues of Jizō to offer for their dead children. In addition, temple priests, whom the article describes as 'very good at business', were making the most of this opportunity to make money by encouraging such sales. The article ends with the statement that 'no amount of this kind of *kuyō* will help dead children rest more easily'.

A 1983 TBS television special report on the 'Mizuko Boom' echoes this presentation. After examining the amount of money represented by the rows of memorial tablets for *mizuko* at one temple, the lines of people paying entrance fees to enter another temple for *mizuko kuyō*, and the number of orders for *Mizuko Jizō* statues being received by a foundry, the show's reporter interviews a religion critic who criticizes religious establishments for using people's suffering to create a 'boom' for themselves. The studio commentator remarks later, 'If someone does *mizuko kuyō* and is helped by it, then there is a reason for doing it. But I can't help feeling that this is [primarily] a business'. Although both of the reports described above at least acknowledge that participants may obtain some benefit or help from the practice, later pieces tend to focus on the negative business and manipulative aspects alone. A 1985 article entitled 'Temples in Japan Capitalize on Abortion' in the English-language *Mainichi Daily News* explains that 'guilt and dark superstition still nag at many Japanese who turn to abortion. In the past decade, Buddhist temples around the country have exploited that fact to build what one Japanese magazine has called a multimillion dollar "business of terror.'" The terror mentioned here is the fear of *tatari*, actual

physical reprisal from forgotten and uncared-for *mizuko*, which might take the form of illness or accident, birth defects or other problems with later children, or similar changes in circumstance that would disturb the harmony of the family and thus the rhythm of a woman's life. Such media images were simply built onto an already existing critique of religion in contemporary Japan as worldly and outdated.

It was in this context that I began studying *mizuko kuyō* in 1984. At that time I found Buddhist clergy and institutions around the country struggling to define their positions with respect to the new practice in light of the negative reputation it had acquired from the media. As we shall see in the next section, those who performed *mizuko kuyō* services were searching for Buddhist justifications for doing so, while those who rejected the practice also did so for ostensibly Buddhist reasons.

## Buddhist Clergy and *Mizuko Kuyō*

Perhaps the strongest reaction against *mizuko kuyō* as a Buddhist practice came from Nishi Honganji, one of the major subsects of Shin (Jōdo Shinshū or True Pure Land) Buddhism in Japan. After many years of posting messages condemning the practice on their roadside billboard in downtown Kyoto, an official sectarian study group finally published the rationale for this stance in 1988 in a small book about rebirth for women. The carefully constructed argument turns on the assertion that *mizuko kuyō* is not consistent with the original Buddhist meaning of *kuyō*: the new practice focuses on angry spirits of the dead, while originally, in the *sūtras*, *kuyō* meant to take care of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the *Sangha* with respect and offerings. The present practice is depicted as based on belief in evil spirits and the desire to appease them in order to avert disaster and bring good fortune, and for this reason it is dismissed as derived from folk customs and the intentional planning of certain individuals who sought to create a market. In Shin Buddhist terms, the practice misses the point in two ways. It defines the central problem to be the need for *kuyō* rather than the practice of abortion, which in Buddhism is seen as the taking of a life. And it draws a karmic connection between the spirits of dead children and real life problems, a belief that fourteenth-century Shin founder Shinran called

'imitation religion' (*nise no shūkyō*). Since that purported karmic connection is mistaken, *mizuko kuyō* might make the performer feel better, but it won't change the basic situation. In fact, according to this argument, the performer's real life problems will only get worse, since their true cause is not being addressed.

Most denials that *mizuko kuyō* is Buddhist have not been so well-articulated, however. As I interviewed clergy around the country in the mid- and late 1980s, I was told many times that *mizuko kuyō* was not Buddhist. The reasons given were usually very general: it is not in the *sūtras*; it's new (We've never talked about it before, have we?); it's based on *tatari*, which is not Buddhist; it was started by new religions, not Buddhist sects; it's only about making money, not about religion; it is simply a public way of condoning abortion and giving a quick moral fix. While the clergy who offered these reasons for refusing to perform the practice seemed sincere in their opposition to it, my sense was that some were as concerned with avoiding negative publicity as with the question of whether it was genuinely Buddhist or not.

On the other hand, many Buddhist clergy found *mizuko kuyō* completely within the sphere of normal and acceptable Buddhist practice. Arguments for this stance tended to be historical: it's in the *sūtras* (though no one would give a specific citation); it's just another form of ancestor worship; we've always done it, but under different names. The head priest of a Nichiren temple in Miyazu, Kyoto Prefecture, for example, explained that what is known as *mizuko kuyō* today began in medieval times as the performance of *segaki-e*, memorial services for unattended spirits of the dead wandering the lower realms of existence. Another head priest, of a Pure Land (Jōdo) temple in the city of Kyoto, claims that his temple was the birthplace of the practice of *mizuko kuyō* roughly a thousand years ago. It began with the priest Saichō's mother, according to the legend of the temple which was published as a children's story in 1982. When Saichō ascended Mt. Hiei to the north-east of Kyoto to open a monastic centre in the tenth century, his mother, unable to accompany him because she was a woman (and thus not allowed to ascend the sacred mountain), remained with her husband's family at the eastern foot of the mountain. On the death of her husband, her ties to his family

were cut, and having nowhere else to go she moved to the western outskirts of Kyoto to an area controlled by her brother. There she took up residence in a Buddhist chapel built on the remains of an older temple and spent her days as a Buddhist nun, praying, taking care of the chapel and children in the area. She became recognized throughout the area for her great compassion and love of children. One day, the story continues, someone left a newborn baby on her doorstep, knowing that she would care for it. She walked far and wide to beg milk for it, and that experience opened her heart to the plight of unwanted babies and babies who had died before, during or after birth. Particularly concerned for those who had died before and during birth, she had a stone monument in the shape of the Buddhist bodhisattva Jizō erected near her chapel and performed memorial services for them, praying that Jizō protect their spirits in the other world and that they achieve a good rebirth. This concern for the welfare of dead children, articulated as it was in a Buddhist ritual vocabulary, is claimed by the author of the story and by the priest at this particular temple to be the origin of *mizuko kuyō*.

While this story would seem to solve the problem of the relationship of *mizuko kuyō* to Buddhism, I hasten to add a postscript. Not long after I made the acquaintance of this priest and heard his story, I had the opportunity to interview the author he had commissioned to write it in publishable form. I asked to see the historical sources concerning *mizuko kuyō* that he had used for the book, but he replied that there were none. The temple priest had simply told him the story and asked that he, a Buddhist priest and celebrated author of Buddhist children's stories, turn it into a children's book. As far as he could tell, this story of the origin of *mizuko kuyō* was completely made up.

The conclusions to be drawn here are perhaps not so obvious as the reader might expect. In their collection of essays entitled *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm and Ranger have demonstrated both the ordinariness and the ideological power of invented traditions; no small part of that power is the ability to re-configure the collective memory, to efface any memory of a time when the invented tradition was not common practice. In the case of *mizuko kuyō*, this was accomplished by situating the practice within the Buddhist cultural space in which matters of

death and what comes after are generally articulated in Japan. From its beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s, *mizuko kuyō* has borrowed much of its ritual vocabulary from the contemporary Buddhist repertoire, as described above. But without a more substantial link between the two, such borrowing could only lend a surface legitimacy to the new practice; simple borrowing, or adaptation, of received elements into a new form would not, in such a short span of time, engender the kind of symbolic, even ideological power and concomitant public attempts at denial that we see in *mizuko kuyō* or the kind of effacement of memory that has resulted.

In creating the story of a contemporary practice originating a thousand years ago, the head priest of the Kyoto temple has given the practice a history, and that history is demonstrably Buddhist: the mother of a great Buddhist priest living a religious life and performing rituals for the dead in a Buddhist context cannot easily be construed in other than Buddhist terms. The Nichiren priest has done the same thing, though through a different set of associations. Since medieval times in Japan, the performance of *segaki-e* services for the wandering dead has been associated with the Buddhist vision of six realms of existence and has become an unremarked part of the annual celebration, performed in a Buddhist context, of ancestral spirits that takes place during mid- and late summer in Japan. The invention of these histories, as well as the claim that the practice can be found in the *sūtras*, thus serves to make it incontrovertibly Buddhist, and as such, an observance properly performed by priests at Buddhist sites around Japan.

The invention of a Buddhist history for *mizuko kuyō* does something more, however. It situates this new concern for the welfare of dead children and for their continuing tie to their living families within the symbolic system of Japanese Buddhism. On the one hand, this means that the power of that symbolic system can be mobilized and experienced through the new practice, giving it a depth usually not found in something so new. In giving offerings both to a deity and to the dead child, in saying prayers, in chanting Buddhist texts as part of a formal service, one is not simply taking part in a newly invented practice but in a(n invented) tradition which is tied to nearly fifteen hundred years of Buddhist presence in Japan. On the other hand, by establishing the practice as old rather

than new, these priests have made it a part of everyday life—not simply because it is available at more and more sites, but because it is a part of the arguably Buddhist fabric of life in Japan.

Inventing history is not the only tactic that has been used to bring the new practice of *mizuko kuyō* into the grammar of Buddhist practice in Japan, however. I have interviewed a number of local parish priests around the country who were originally strongly opposed to the practice, for many of the reasons given above, but who eventually decided to make it available to their parishioners. Their reasons for this change were similar: in the face of regular requests from temple parishioners for *mizuko* services or for a *mizuko* statue to be placed in the temple precincts as a locus for practice, they began to feel that their personal opposition to *mizuko kuyō* was leading them to avoid their duty to address the needs of their parishioners. In swallowing their misgivings and beginning to perform services for those who requested them or allowing parishioners to establish a temple site for their own *mizuko* observances, many of these priests saw themselves using a questionable practice as a means to bring lay people closer to the Buddhist path rather than as espousing or condoning the practice itself. Several described their versions of *mizuko* services not as *mizuko kuyō*, but as ‘chanting the *sūtras*’ (*okyō o yomu*) which, together with the homily or counselling given to the person who commissioned the service, was designed to shift the person’s focus away from their dead child toward how they might lead a more Buddhist life. Even Nishi Honganji, in the same publication (cited above) in which it argues that the practice is not Buddhist and therefore should not be done, suggests that Shin priests can address followers’ concerns related to *mizuko* in more generic Shin ways.

Together with the increasing repetition of *mizuko kuyō* observances at religious sites around the country since the late 1970s, these two tactics—of inventing history and of redirecting a practice toward an aim different from the one it is purported to address—have contributed in large part to the success of the invented tradition of *mizuko kuyō*. Whereas in the mid-1980s the practice was being questioned publicly in nearly every corner, today it goes largely unremarked and seems to have taken its place alongside ancestral services in the standard repertoire

performed by most Buddhist clergy throughout Japan. Questions of whether it is Buddhist or not have largely disappeared, as well they should: woven into the fabric of Buddhism in Japan by the redefinition of its history and by common performance, when performed at Buddhist temples *mizuko kuyō* is now effectively a Buddhist practice.

It is important to understand that the intentionality behind these tactics becomes irrelevant once they enter the public sphere; in public such constructions easily lose their determinacy, becoming available for appropriation by anyone sharing in the cultural soup. For example, we have seen how Buddhist clergy who originally objected to performing *mizuko kuyō* began to do so in an attempt to move lay people interested in the practice away from it. While it may have helped the clergy justify to themselves their involvement in a practice they objected to, in the public view this tactic nevertheless served to spread the practice as well as to make it more identifiable with Buddhist sites. It is this public view, that is, lay people’s constructions of the practice of *mizuko kuyō*, that we will turn to in the rest of the paper in order to understand how individual practitioners have appropriated public elements of the practice to make sense of their own experiences.

### Lay People’s *Mizuko Kuyō*

The promotional and media images of *mizuko kuyō* that we have examined above present a stereotypical image of the Japanese women who participate in the practice as passive and easily manipulated. Male participants—and there are more and more—are never mentioned. Told by money-hungry clergy and spiritualists that they must make amends to their dead children by taking part in *mizuko kuyō* services, which may mean paying substantial amounts of money, women are assumed to do so dutifully. Blamed for the death of their children, whether they were lost by abortion or otherwise, the mothers of *mizuko* are assumed to be motivated to participate in the practice by strong feelings of guilt and naive belief in the ‘dark superstition’ of *tatari*, which threatens that the spirits of their dead children can come back to harm them or their families. What is left out, along with recognition of men who participate in the practice, is any examination of the variety of motivations that bring people to *mizuko kuyō* and

any acknowledgment of participants' actions as considered and knowing, as active attempts to deal with the strong feelings that are tied up with the loss of a child.

The Buddhist clergy we have heard from, on the other hand, appear more concerned with the doctrinal implications of the new practice than with the people who take part in it. Only in the Kyoto priest's story of Saichō's mother do we find recognition of someone trying to address her feelings for dead children, but as a historical archetype, this story, too, keeps us safely distanced from the feelings and experiences of those who find personal reason to participate in *mizuko kuyō*. As we have seen above, clergy strategy has been to establish the practice within the universalized structure of Buddhism, where it would become routine and repeatable, and thus controllable. Here, too, we find the stereotype of Japanese women as passive and unknowing, guilt-ridden and in need of the help of the professional clergy to lead them onto the proper path.

In contemporary Japanese society, the loss of a child, whether through abortion, miscarriage, or any other means, is such a personal and private experience that it is difficult for anyone outside those immediately involved to obtain personal accounts of that experience; perhaps this is one reason the media and clergy constructions of *mizuko kuyō* have gone virtually unchallenged in the public forum. Especially in the case of miscarriage, when in Japan there may be some question of the mother's responsibility for the loss, and of abortion, which always raises the issue of responsibility, few if any of those involved are willing to discuss their thoughts openly. Yet it is precisely the thoughts of lay practitioners of *mizuko kuyō* that we need in order to uncover the complexity of the practice that has been flattened in the public constructions we have examined so far.

The material in this section is based primarily on written responses to a questionnaire composed by my collaborator and myself and made available to *mizuko kuyō* participants at a wide array of religious sites in Japan during 1987. The aim of the questionnaire was not to collect statistical data, but to elicit individual statements regarding *mizuko kuyō* and respondents' personal experience of it that would help us to understand the practice from the participants' point of view. I do not present this material here with any claim of its being a more valid view than those

we have examined above, however, for we must recognize lay people's *mizuko kuyō* as the same order of construction as those others. Rather, we will use these individual glimpses to interrogate the public images and to explore the tactical uses made of them by lay practitioners.

Respondents to the questionnaire described their feelings about their loss of a child in many different ways. They found that loss regrettable (*nasakenai* and *kuyashii*), unavoidable (*yamu naku*), and the result of selfishness on their part (*watashi no mikatte*), all terms from ordinary language which they might have used about any unfortunate event in their lives for which they felt some responsibility. While some specified that they were speaking of either an abortion or a miscarriage and a few sought to distinguish a different moral responsibility in the case of abortion, others did not. Most wrote of the relief they experienced after doing *mizuko kuyō* and of their intention of continuing it as long as they live. Indeed, one of the interesting aspects of the practice as it has become formalized in Japan over the last twenty years is the lack of any distinction in the ritual itself in relation to how the children being offered *kuyō* were lost: all *mizuko* are treated the same. For the most part, participants are aware of the circumstances which led to the death of the child they are commissioning the service for, but most clergy who perform the service and offer individual counselling do not ask and say they do not want to know those circumstances. Thus although the media has continued to sensationalize the practice as aimed specifically at women who have had abortions and some Buddhist clergy have rejected it for the same reason, it is clear from participants as well as from the structure of the practice that it is construed to be appropriate for anyone who has lost a child in any manner.

It is the sense of responsibility for having done something regrettable, I think, that is simplified and stereotyped as guilt in the public image of the practice. This is not to deny that guilt is a part of what many participants feel concerning the fact that they 'have' a *mizuko*. Indeed, a number of respondents expressed this feeling of guilt quite strongly: 'As I look at it now, I am tormented by the crime of having killed an individual life'. Yet the very naturalness of this feeling is brought into question by other statements on the questionnaire. 'These children, while they had tiny lives, were consigned from darkness

into darkness by the selfishness of adults when in reality they should have been growing up vigorously . . . This common image from both the promotional and the media constructions of the practice appears verbatim in a number of responses. While it serves to define the basis for feelings of guilt (mainly in the case of abortion), it is also an effective way of eliciting those feelings.

Despite the successful deployment of this image of guilt by those interested in expanding the *mizuko kuyō* market and by elements of the media interested in sensationalizing it (which amounts to the same thing), the sense of responsibility that participants acknowledge extends beyond the single event of the loss of the child to the circumstances which brought that event about. Many respondents expressed the grief they felt at the unavoidability of aborting a child:

We conceived a child, and as a result of talking it over with my boyfriend, I understood the difficulties in the future if I gave birth. Swallowing my tears, I aborted the child . . . (age 20)

I got pregnant right after the birth of my first child. Since I had no way to manage and had not yet recovered from the birth, I had no choice but to abort . . . (age 57)

The source of the strong emotion in these and many other statements like them is the authors' perception that they were in a situation where there was no choice other than abortion. If there was a choice, it was earlier, when something could have been done to prevent the conception of a child:

I had one abortion before I was married. After I married, I got pregnant right after my second child was born and had an abortion for economic reasons. I wanted to have both of those children, but in each case it was a situation in which I absolutely had to get an abortion . . . I am a nurse, and I berate myself now wondering how this could have happened. Knowing very well what to do [to prevent it], I have created two *mizuko* . . .

Yet in Japan reproductive control is in the hands of men on almost every level—sexually, as women are socialized to accept the wishes of their male partners; socially, in that women are brought up to see mothering as their main role; medically, in the overwhelmingly male control over all means of contraception (the condom is widely publicized as the

most effective means of birth control, which literally puts the decision to use it in the hands of the man); legally, in the male-controlled medical and governmental worlds which legislate (both publicly and in private) the conditions for abortion. In this context, it is not difficult to understand a woman's feeling of being caught in a situation in which the only seeming solution is the often anguishing one to have an abortion. Very few of our respondents suggested that, given the chance to relive their decision to have an abortion, they would give birth to the child instead. Rather, they expressed regret that they had conceived a child in the first place, hoped never to repeat that irresponsibility again (several wrote that the experience was a call for self-reflection, *hansei*), and thought it only right that they do something for the absent child.

Miscarriage, stillbirth, and child loss by more 'natural' causes are depicted by some in a similar way:

I lost three children by miscarriage and gave birth to one stillborn child. I have been doing *kuyō* in my own way for the stillborn child, but I felt somewhere in my heart that the three miscarriages were not my fault (*tsumi*) because they left before coming into this world. But I came to think that that wasn't so. Since each [miscarried] child came into my belly with a life that was supposed to enter into this world, after all I think they are my fault (*tsumi*), too. Now I'm simply filled with feelings of repentance for the sad thing I did [in not giving birth to them]. (age 59)

Here the sense of responsibility is more diffuse than in the case of abortion. The woman isn't sure whether to think of her miscarried children as her responsibility or not, but perhaps influenced by promotional literature or advertising for *mizuko kuyō*, she comes to think that they are no different from her stillborn child in their relationship to her. Other women who had had miscarriages stated they were always concerned to do something for the welfare of those children. In 1987 I interviewed an elderly woman who was attending the formal dedication of four small gilded *Mizuko Jizō* statues for her miscarried children at a rural Zen temple in Shiga Prefecture. Her miscarriages had come as she worked in the fields during the years after World War II. She saw the formal repertoire of *mizuko kuyō* as a way of 'doing something' for her dead children at long

last—even though she had offered a cup of water for them every day at her family’s home altar (*butsudan*), to her mind that informal, personal gesture was not sufficient.

Herein, I think, lies the heart of *mizuko kuyō*. It provides a formal, public, ritualized way to acknowledge the existence of a child—both its potential existence in this world as a result of its conception and its continuing existence somewhere else after death, to (re)establish a relationship with it, and to care for it wherever it may be. In this construction, although the child might be absent from this world, it nevertheless remains a child to its parents and a sibling to its living brothers and sisters. This acknowledgment of the child’s existence is implicit in the way many respondents expressed their reason for doing *mizuko kuyō*: I want to apologize to it (*ayamaritai*); I feel sorry for it (*kawaisō*); I’d like it to forgive me (*yurushite moraitai*); I want it to be reborn a Buddha (*jōbutsu shite moraitai*); I’m sorry (*sumanai* and *mōshiwake nai*, both expressions commonly used as a direct form of apology as well as to describe something inexcusable); the situation calls for recompense (*tsugunai*) or amends (*wabi*) to be made.

In the Japanese religious context of which Buddhism makes up one element, those who have died are believed to be reborn into another realm after a period of time for determining which of the six Buddhist realms of existence they will proceed to next; standard funeral practice defines this period to be forty-nine days. But because young and unborn children who had died were not included in standard funeral practice historically, their movement after death is only now, with the emergence of *mizuko kuyō*, being charted.

The most ubiquitous image of their situation depicts them stranded on the barren, rocky shore of the Sai River, which serves as the boundary between the Buddhist hells and other realms of existence. There they have nothing to do but pile stones into small towers (a common practice in Japan for earning karmic merit) and bemoan their separation from their parents. When demons cross the river from the hells and begin to harass them, the bodhisattva Jizō appears as protector. It is not clear how long this displacement out of the standard route to rebirth lasts for *mizuko*, but the implication is that they are stuck in this in-between existence on the river bank. The image suggests that they are unhappy and

uncomfortable, perhaps even in danger, in this place, and that they have no substantive way to help themselves. Here, once again, is an image that invites people to feel that they should do something for their *mizuko*.

Now, through the practice of *mizuko kuyō*, parents are able to do something constructive to help their *mizuko*. Attendance at or commissioning of a *mizuko* service is an opportunity for parents to accrue karmic merit on behalf of their dead children. Offerings of religious images, food, clothing and toys can be made to both the child and a deity, to bring comfort to the former and to enlist the protective aid of the latter. And money may be paid to the religious site to ensure continuing ritual care. Parents or other relatives of the *mizuko* do this with feelings of repentance (*zange*) and responsibility or guilt (*tsumi no ishiki* and *zaiakkan*) which, when coupled with the new relationship the practice enables them to establish with their absent child, has led many respondents to declare that they would not forget their absent child or children. Thus although we might view lay people’s continuing participation in *mizuko kuyō* as the result of coercion or manipulation, I think we must also see that participation as an act of silent resistance and subversion which turns the practice toward their own lives and motives: we will take part in this practice, as you suggest we should, but we will do so for the sake of our dead children, whom we will not forget, for we have made them a part of our lives once again.

For many women who have lost children through abortion or other means, the practice seems to resonate deeply with their feelings of loss and of responsibility. The elderly woman with three miscarriages and a stillborn child whom we met earlier wrote:

I went on the Saikoku pilgrimage of 33 temples. *Mizuko Jizō* was being worshipped at every one of the temples. Until then, in my heart I had never forgotten those children, and I had always felt deeply that I should do *kuyō* in some form for them. (age 59)

A twenty-five-year-old woman expressed similar feelings about her aborted child in poetic form:

There was someone I loved I believed.  
Forgive me . . . we were too young.  
I’ve lost something important, seen a destiny I  
should have known.

I can't forgive myself  
 What, in the end, can I do?  
 Lots of crying, tired, thinking  
 To give form to *kuyō* for that lost life  
 all I can do  
 is move my feet toward *mizuko kuyō*.

We cannot, of course, separate these women's own feelings from whatever outside influence they may have felt in an atmosphere in 1987 which encouraged women to admit their responsibility for not giving birth to and raising all their children. We can, however, acknowledge their participation in *mizuko kuyō* as a choice that made sense to them at the centre of contradictory messages from society. Socialized to believe that to be a woman is to be a mother and that as mothers they are responsible for their children's well-being, they have at the same time been socialized to accept the sexual advances of their men without real resistance and encouraged to assume responsibility for resulting pregnancies after the fact. For some, this tension between the need to mother and the need to make hard choices for the benefit of their own lives and the lives of their family is at least partially addressed by *mizuko kuyō*: it provides a way for women to mother their *mizuko* that is conceptually similar to the way they care for their living children.

In the case of a woman who has lost a child, her participation in *mizuko kuyō* acts as an acknowledgment that there was (by virtue of its conception), would have been (in that a child conceived is the seed of a child born), and still is a child, even though that child is not now present in the mundane sense of the word. Indeed, one of the most common explanations given for the failure, until now, of women to care for that absent child, wherever it may be, is its lack of a tangible form in this world; 'out of sight, out of mind' is the ruling paradigm here. To address this problem, the giving of a name (either a Buddhist 'dharma name' or, less commonly, a regular 'Keiko' or 'Tarō' name) or a form (such as *Jizō* or the bodhisattva Kannon) to the child is an almost universal element of *mizuko kuyō*. With this concrete artifact, the child's existence becomes visible and real.

And yet, for whom is the child's existence now made real? I think we must question the assumption that a woman's relationship with her child is based on its visible presence. While this may be the case for

those around the woman-mother, whose swelling belly or newborn baby provide visual cues for our construction of her motherhood, for the woman herself the relationship begins much earlier, and without visual aid. The physiological fact of pregnancy together with the social construction of motherhood within which the woman was raised combine to place her into an imaginary (in the psychoanalytical sense) relationship with her child from the moment she knows she is pregnant, as this woman describes:

I had a miscarriage when I was two months pregnant. I was in the hospital for a week before, but it was no use. The doctor said, 'There's no special cause for a miscarriage this early. The fetus probably wasn't strong enough'. But that fetus was my child from the day it was conceived in my body . . . So even though it was never born into this world, even though it has no form, it is still a member of my family. I did *kuyō* because that fetus's life was lost. I have the feeling that through my doing *kuyō*, that fetus will receive life sometime and give its first cry after birth somewhere . . . (age 27)

For some Japanese women, that relationship is not sustained beyond the fact of the pregnancy, and the lure of *mizuko kuyō* holds no allure at all, despite the strength of the social linking of womanhood with motherhood in Japan:

In my case, I became very depressed emotionally [after my abortion], but it was not a simple feeling of having done something wrong (*zaiakkan*). I just felt strongly that I wanted to say, 'I'm sorry' to my child. But with the passing of time (about a week?), I recovered completely and was back on my feet. (age 40)

Indeed, it is undoubtedly the case that the majority of Japanese women who have had abortions do not participate in *mizuko kuyō*. There are no statistics available on the number of people who do *mizuko kuyō* in Japan each year, and because of the personal nature of the issue it will probably be impossible to obtain anything more than a loose estimate based on those who identify themselves at particular sites. But I believe it is safe to say that the number of living Japanese women who have lost children through abortion or other means far exceeds the admittedly large number who participate in the practice. But that does not change the fact that many women do

participate and that the practice takes on a variety of meanings for them.

For some women, the practice is simply something to do because it should be done, as in these two responses from the questionnaire:

Just before my first son's wedding, his bride came down with a high fever, and other inconvenient things happened. Because of this, I asked someone to look into the situation and was told that I had better do *mizuko kuyō*. I was surprised, but I went to [a temple] and had it done. Since then, everything has been going well. (age 62)

Nothing in particular happened [to induce me to do *mizuko kuyō*]. I do it simply because everyone else does. Nothing bad has happened, and neither has anything good. I do it because I'm afraid I'll be talked about if I don't . . . (age 63)

It appears that the public *mizuko* rhetoric has been successful in convincing these women to take part in the practice, although their ambivalence is clear. Each does *mizuko kuyō* for her own sake, not for the sake of her absent child, and neither thinks in terms of an ongoing relationship with that child. In addition, neither sees herself becoming a better Buddhist through her participation. Then why do it? For both women, *mizuko kuyō* seems to provide a way of controlling their lives, in the face of unforeseen and unfortunate occurrences on the one hand and of social gossip on the other. The second woman almost certainly feels manipulated into performing *mizuko kuyō*; indeed, she writes later that she suspects that *mizuko kuyō* is done at temples according to 'mood' rather than from the heart. The first woman is more accepting of the practice, presumably because she feels it has helped make her situation (in this case, the situation of her son) more stable. Yet she, too, does not seem to be terribly invested in the practice. Her statement at the end of the questionnaire that 'I will continue doing *kuyō* for as long as I live' has the same unengaged ring to it as her statement that she began *kuyō* because someone told her to do it.

Many respondents wrote very differently of their involvement in *mizuko kuyō*, however. Some simply said they did *mizuko kuyō* because they could not forget, leaving the subject of their memory unspoken: there are bad feelings in my heart (*kokoro ni wadakamari ga aru*); it remains in my heart (*kokoro ni nokoru*); there's something that always pulls at my

heart (*itsumo kokoro ni hikkakaru mono ga ari*). Others were more explicit:

When my children were all grown and on their own, I was relieved, but the child I miscarried when I was young appeared before my eyes, and I wanted to do *kuyō* for it . . . (age 62)

It was about four months after the abortion [that I first did *kuyō*]. I had really wanted to do *kuyō* as soon as I could, so now I feel somewhat relieved. Everyday I feel that I did something terrible to my child, and I've never forgotten my child once. The only thing I can do for it now is *kuyō* . . . (age 20)

I'll continue to do *kuyō* because I'm always wondering what it would be like if that child were alive. (age 45)

These are people who cannot forget their lost children or the experience that led to their loss, and for whom *mizuko kuyō* provides the only way they can see to constructively address both the child's perceived situation and their own feelings. For these lay people the practice is a way to 'do something' for their dead children that could not be accomplished simply by remembering them informally at home. For them, the prayers, images, incense and other offerings made as part of the formalized practice become powerful through the relationship that is established between lay participant, child and deity as mediated by the Buddhist clergy and symbolic system. Many, perhaps most, participants are aware of the negative images of *mizuko kuyō* that we have reviewed above, but they do not seem to connect that criticism with their own practice; the intent of the clergy, whether it be greed or sectarian interest, is not central to the *mizuko* relationship, as one woman observes:

Recently one hears talk of temples that do *mizuko kuyō* for purposes of making money, but setting that aside, I think the feeling that one wants to do *kuyō* is a good thing. (age 30)

What is important is that the formal practice of *mizuko kuyō* gives lay people a way to care for absent children, although it is not only parents who take part for the sake of their own children. Mothers do *kuyō* for their grown children's *mizuko*; women participate for the sake of their mothers' or sisters' or grandmothers' unmemorialized *mizuko*; individuals

like the following thirty-year-old man do *kuyō* for their *mizuko* siblings:

I've just turned thirty recently, and the other day I heard for the first time that I have siblings who did not receive life in this world and became *mizuko*. I think that if they had been born, I probably wouldn't have had my life, and in this, my thirtieth year, I did *mizuko kuyō* for them for the first time.

And most say they will continue doing *kuyō* at least once a year (on the anniversary of the death; on a Buddhist festival day) for the rest of their lives. That so many would say this demonstrates the weight of the responsibility they feel, although we cannot know whether these intentions will be carried out. Many responses shared the sense of relief (*hotto shita kimochi*) or peace of mind (*anshin shita* and *kimochi ga ochitsukimashita*) that people felt after doing *mizuko kuyō*. But others show clearly that their authors do not consider the practice to fix anything other than their own need to do something:

I don't in the least think that everything will be forgiven by my doing *mizuko kuyō* now, but that's all there is to do. At least it's a start. (age 44)

I don't think I'll be forgiven for what I've done, but I do think I've been able to express my prayer for the baby to 'Please be at peace' and my hope that it will 'Please be reborn soon'. (age 22)

Participants and the dead children they are remembering through *mizuko kuyō* are not the only ones to benefit from the practice, however. Many respondents wrote that they were doing *kuyō* for the sake of their living children:

Having done *kuyō* will not take the obstruction from my heart, but I will continue in order to protect the growth of my two older sons. (age 35)

If I left things as they were, I wondered if my child would be wandering around in that world, and I wondered if things wouldn't begin to go badly for those in this world. That's why I did *mizuko kuyō*.

That kind of *kuyō* is for my sake and for my family's sake. I think it's necessary and very important so that life everyday will be fun and everyone will stay healthy and happy. (age 23)

These responses, and others like them, reflect several related understandings of the relationship between the world after death and this one. On the one hand,

*mizuko* in 'that world' may have some kind of malevolent influence on those related to them who are still living in this world. *Mizuko* may cause things to go badly in general (several respondents wrote that they had led very unlucky lives), or they may cause specific problems such as illness for specific individuals. A particular target for such interventions from 'that world' are the living siblings of *mizuko*. These children receive the constant attention of their parents and relatives, while *mizuko* have tended to be left out of the circle of family attention. This is the belief in *tatari*, reprisal from the spirit world, that spiritualists teach, the media hawks, and Buddhist clergy deplore. Several respondents gave very specific examples of ways in which they saw their *mizuko* asking for attention by intruding on their lives. In this context, the practice of *mizuko kuyō* becomes a redressive action by means of which practitioners can placate their *mizuko* and thereby alleviate the problems they have caused.

The quotations above suggest another construction of this relationship, however. If *mizuko* are taken to be members of the family, then they may be expected to take part in the family in a useful way, just as any living child would. From their vantage point in 'that world', they can influence the lives of their family for the better, becoming, in effect, private protective deities, and several respondents wrote of their *mizuko kuyō* as a way to enlist the protective services of their *mizuko* in assuring the health and success of other family members. In particular, the practice offers mothers new aid in raising their living children, and thus it becomes multivalent: it helps women mother all their children, both living and dead.

It should be clear from our treatment of lay people's constructions of *mizuko kuyō* above that this new Japanese practice is much more complex than either the promotional and media or the Buddhist clergy images allow. For the women we have heard, *mizuko kuyō* serves several functions. It provides a formalized public mechanism for acknowledging the existence of a child that may never have been formally recognized and for establishing a continuing relationship with that child in 'that world' after death. The *mizuko*, in effect, is reclaimed as part of the family and as such is given much the same kind of attention that those other absent members of the family, the ancestors, are given in Japan. This reclamation of absent children in turn helps some women reclaim their place as

mothers and provides a means for them to both care for and mourn the absence of their children—an absence which, although seen to be unavoidable in many cases (miscarriage, accident or abortion under social or family pressure, for example), was not necessarily a felicitous event for the woman involved.

Constructed in this way, the practice of *mizuko kuyō* becomes a silent way of bringing to the foreground of public awareness some of the underlying tensions in women's lives in Japan: the loneliness of being held responsible for almost single-handedly producing and raising children properly; the frustration of being in the middle of a sexual politics in which their sexuality is held ransom to the needs of their men and the state; the anguish of losing a child and of having few, if any, public ways of dealing with that loss. Integral as they are to the fabric of Japanese women's lives, such issues remain largely unspeakable as personal issues in Japan today despite (or perhaps because of) the beginnings of some academic

discussion by Japanese feminists in recent years. Indeed, I would suggest that it is the unspeakable nature of these issues which lies behind the flattened, over-simplified images of the practice that we have seen coming from media and clergy. To give credence to the lay constructions we have explored above would be to open a space for discourse; instead, we have loud, dismissive public images constructed almost with the force of Freudian denial.

I think we must see *mizuko kuyō* as a way for women to speak on those issues—not in so many words, but physically, to act out their personal sense of loss and responsibility and frustration from where they are, without threat of disruption to their lives. Buddhism provides the means for doing this, a powerful symbolic system, a rich repertoire of ritual, both of which are mediated by a cadre of experts, and a space (the physical space of its sites around Japan; the conceptual space opened by its symbols and ritual) in which to speak safely yet with effect.

# Body Ritual Among the Nacirema

Horace Miner

*This article is a classic of anthropological literature. In it, Horace Miner gives readers a thorough and exciting ethnographic account of the myriad of taboos and ceremonial behaviors that permeate the everyday activities of the members of a magic-ridden society. Focusing on secret rituals that are believed to prevent disease while beautifying the body, Miner demonstrates the importance of ceremonial specialists, such as the "holy-mouth-men" and the "listeners," in directing even the most routine aspects of daily life among the Nacirema. Miner finds it difficult to understand how the Nacirema have managed to exist so long under the burdens that they have imposed on themselves.*

The anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which different peoples behave in similar situations that he is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs. In fact, if all of the logically possible combinations of behavior have not been found somewhere in the world, he is apt to suspect that they must be present in some yet undescribed tribe. This point has, in fact, been expressed with respect to clan organization by Murdock (1949: 71). In this light, the magical beliefs and practices of the Nacirema present such unusual aspects that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go.

Professor Linton first brought the ritual of the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago (1936: 326), but the culture of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles.

Little is known of their origin, though tradition states that they came from the east. According to Nacirema mythology, their nation was originated by a culture hero, Notgnishaw, who is otherwise known for two great feasts of strength—the throwing of a piece of wampum across the river Pa-To-Mac and the chopping down of the cherry tree in which the Spirit of Truth resided.

Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people's time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the people. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremonial aspects and associated philosophy are unique.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man's only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of the powerful influences of ritual and ceremony. Every

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household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses and, in fact, the opulence of a house is often referred to in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses. Most houses are of wattle and daub construction, but the shrine rooms of the more wealthy are walled with stone. Poorer families imitate the rich by applying pottery plaques to their shrine walls.

While each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. The rites are normally only discussed with children, and then only during the period when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to establish sufficient rapport with the natives to examine these shrines and to have the rituals described to me.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm.

The charm is not disposed of after it has served its purpose, but is placed in the charm-box of the household shrine. As these magical materials are specific for certain ills, and the real or imagined maladies of the people are many, the charm-box is usually full to overflowing. The magical packets are so numerous that people forget what their purposes were and fear to use them again. While the natives are very vague on this point, we can only assume that the idea in retaining all the old magical materials is that their presence in the charm-box, before which the body rituals are conducted, will in some way protect the worshipper.

Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows his head before the charm-box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution. The holy

waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.

In the hierarchy of magical practitioners, and below the medicine men in prestige, are specialists whose designation is best translated "holy-mouth-men." The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them. (They also believe that a strong relationship exists between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual ablution of the mouth for children which is supposed to improve their moral fiber.)

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures.

In addition to the private mouth-rite, the people seek out a holy-mouth-man once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these objects in the exorcism of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. The holy-mouth-man opens the client's mouth and, using the above-mentioned tools, enlarges any holes which decay may have created in the teeth. Magical materials are put into these holes. If there are no naturally occurring holes in the teeth, large sections of one or more teeth are gouged out so that the supernatural substance can be applied. In the client's view, the purpose of these ministrations is to arrest decay and to draw friends. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy-mouth-men year after year, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay.

It is to be hoped that, when a thorough study of the Nacirema is made, there will be a careful inquiry into the personality structure of these people. One

has but to watch the gleam in the eye of a holy-mouth-man, as he jabs an awl into an exposed nerve, to suspect that a certain amount of sadism is involved. If this can be established, a very interesting pattern emerges, for most of the population shows definite masochistic tendencies. It was to these that Professor Linton referred in discussing a distinctive part of the daily body ritual which is performed only by men. This part of the rite involves scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument. Special women's rites are performed only four times during each lunar month, but what they lack in frequency is made up in barbarity. As part of this ceremony, women bake their heads in small ovens for about an hour. The theoretically interesting point is that what seems to be a preponderantly masochistic people have developed sadistic specialists.

The medicine men have an imposing temple, or *latipso*, in every community of any size. The more elaborate ceremonies required to treat very sick patients can only be performed at this temple. These ceremonies involve not only the thaumaturge but a permanent group of vestal maidens who move sedately about the temple chambers in distinctive costume and headdress.

The *latipso* ceremonies are so harsh that it is phenomenal that a fair proportion of the really sick natives who enter the temple ever recover. Small children whose indoctrination is still incomplete have been known to resist attempts to take them to the temple because "that is where you go to die." Despite this fact, sick adults are not only willing but eager to undergo the protracted ritual purification, if they can afford to do so. No matter how ill the supplicant or how grave the emergency, the guardians of many temples will not admit a client if he cannot give a rich gift to the custodian. Even after one has gained admission and survived the ceremonies, the guardians will not permit the neophyte to leave until he makes still another gift.

The supplicant entering the temple is first stripped of all his or her clothes. In every-day life the Nacirema avoids exposure of his body and its natural functions. Bathing and excretory acts are performed only in the secrecy of the household shrine, where they are ritualized as part of the body-rites. Psychological shock results from the fact that body secrecy is suddenly lost upon entry into the *latipso*. A man, whose own wife has never seen him in an

excretory act, suddenly finds himself naked and assisted by a vestal maiden while he performs his natural functions into a sacred vessel. This sort of ceremonial treatment is necessitated by the fact that the excreta are used by a diviner to ascertain the course and nature of the client's sickness. Female clients, on the other hand, find their naked bodies are subjected to the scrutiny, manipulation, and prodding of the medicine men.

Few supplicants in the temples are well enough to do anything but lie on their hard beds. The daily ceremonies, like the rites of the holy-mouth-men, involve discomfort and torture. With ritual precision, the vestals awaken their miserable charges each dawn and roll them about on their beds of pain while performing ablutions, in the formal movements of which the maidens are highly trained. At other times they insert magic wands in the supplicant's mouth or force him to eat substances which are supposed to be healing. From time to time the medicine men come to their clients and jab magically treated needles into their flesh. The fact that these temple ceremonies may not cure, and may even kill the neophyte, in no way decreases the people's faith in the medicine men.

There remains one other kind of practitioner, known as a "listener." This witch-doctor has the power to exorcise the devils that lodge in the heads of people who have been bewitched. The Nacirema believe that parents bewitch their own children. Mothers are particularly suspected of putting a curse on children while teaching them the secret body rituals. The counter-magic of the witch-doctor is unusual in its lack of ritual. The patient simply tells the "listener" all his troubles and fears, beginning with the earliest difficulties he can remember. The memory displayed by the Nacirema in these exorcism sessions is truly remarkable. It is not uncommon for the patient to bemoan the rejection he felt upon being weaned as a babe, and a few individuals even see their troubles going back to the traumatic effects of their own birth.

In conclusion, mention must be made of certain practices which have their base in native esthetics but which depend upon the pervasive aversion to the natural body and its functions. There are ritual fasts to make fat people thin and ceremonial feasts to make thin people fat. Still other rites are used to make women's breasts large if they are small, and

smaller if they are large. General dissatisfaction with breast shape is symbolized in the fact that the ideal form is virtually outside the range of human variation. A few women afflicted with almost inhuman hyper-mammary development are so idolized that they make a handsome living by simply going from village to village and permitting the natives to stare at them for a fee.

Reference has already been made to the fact that excretory functions are ritualized, routinized, and relegated to secrecy. Natural reproductive functions are similarly distorted. Intercourse is taboo as a topic and scheduled as an act. Efforts are made to avoid pregnancy by the use of magical materials or by limiting intercourse to certain phases of the moon. Conception is actually very infrequent. When pregnant, women dress so as to hide their condition. Parturition

takes place in secret, without friends or relatives to assist, and the majority of women do not nurse their infants.

Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has certainly shown them to be a magic-ridden people. It is hard to understand how they have managed to exist so long under the burdens which they have imposed upon themselves. But even such exotic customs as these take on real meaning when they are viewed with the insight provided by Malinowski when he wrote (1948: 70):

Looking from far and above, from our high places of safety in the developed civilization, it is easy to see all the crudity and irrelevance of magic. But without its power and guidance early man could not have mastered his practical difficulties as he has done, nor could man have advanced to the higher stages of civilization.

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