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Excerpt

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1

Introduction

This book is a theoretical essay, an exploration of an idea which was suggested by an earlier much more specific and much less speculative piece of work. This earlier study was a history of the Malagasy circumcision ritual which was published as *From Blessing to Violence* (Bloch 1986). This historical study revealed that, while some aspects of the ritual adapted functionally to changing politico-economic circumstances, other aspects remained unchanged through time. These unchanging aspects were not in any sense arbitrary; rather they made up a central minimal structure or 'core' of the ritual process. The different historical forms taken at one time or another by Malagasy circumcision always related to this core as logical elaborations of it, although at some periods the ritual was very much elaborated while at others it was reduced to its simplest form.

Since this simplest form of the ritual process persisted unchanged even when its context was changing, it presented a problem for those theories which explain phenomena in terms of their fit with other aspects of culture and society. The explanation could only be that it depended on matters which could not be reduced to the specific, historical circumstances in which the performances of the ritual occurred. I present this essay as an exploration of the nature of this irreducible core of the ritual process, and the factors which do in fact determine it.

The enquiry is not, however, confined to Madagascar. In fact, while in one light Merina circumcision ritual appears as specific and typical of well-known Malagasy cultural themes, in another light it seems to concern aspects of the human predicament which would be relevant in very many cultures. The structure which I perceive in the basic minimal form of Merina ritual seems to me to be present in a wide range of religious phenomena from many parts of the world, each of which again displays these two sides: each belongs to its own specific culture, yet each also shows a striking structural resemblance to the others. This claim to quasi-universality may seem surprising. However, it will be justified at least in part if the suggestion I shall develop in this book

about the relationship between religious process and notions of biological life and death are found to be convincing.

To pursue this exploration, I have deliberately chosen an extremely varied set of ethnographic examples. All of these are forms of what I would broadly refer to as religious phenomena. But although it was Merina circumcision which started me off on this search, not all of my examples are rituals of the same sort. Thus, the Merina circumcision ritual could be described as initiation, as could the Papua New Guinean example discussed in the next chapter, but none of the other examples in the book could be called initiation rituals. And although I find the unchanging aspects of religious process mainly in rituals, the book also takes in subjects which anthropologists would not normally call rituals at all: myth from Malaysia (chapter 7) and some observations which might more usually be found labelled as kinship or politics (chapter 5). The range of rituals discussed in the book includes rituals from East Africa and South East Asia which are normally called sacrifices (chapter 3), spirit mediumship from southern Africa and the Philippines (chapters 3 and 5), millenarian cults from Madagascar and the Near East (chapter 6), marriage rituals from Tibet and ancient Rome (chapter 5) and total ritual systems from India and Japan which contain a little of all these elements (chapter 4).

This crossing of established categories is of course nothing new. Anthropologists are increasingly familiar with the idea that such terms as 'sacrifice', 'possession' and 'initiation' have a very limited validity in religious anthropology. Such definitions are always rooted in a specific cultural tradition, whether that of the author or of the people he writes about, and are therefore inadequate for cross-cultural analysis. They may be used provisionally, as convenient pointers, but if their application is stretched beyond that they become arbitrary. If general theoretical interpretations are to be attempted at all, they cannot be confined within these sorts of definitions. What is needed, and what is attempted in part here, is some much more all-embracing framework which sidesteps some of the old problems.

This is undoubtedly an exercise fraught with dangers, both methodological and theoretical. Having got hold of the idea of a widely present structure within religious processes, we would surely find it easy to make a tendentious selection of examples, and make this structure appear to be present everywhere. Or else, one might present the evidence in such a way as to highlight only the aspects which fit the theory, obscuring those which do not. Whether I have sufficiently avoided these pitfalls must in the end be judged by the reader, since it would be impossible to present enough examples to demonstrate generality at the level at which the claim is being made. The selection of examples from very different cultures may go some way towards substantiating the argument, but more importantly readers and critics may choose to continue the exercise by trying to see whether what is proposed here stands up to the test of other cases they know. As for the problem of skewed

presentation, I hope at least that by taking my (inevitably much abbreviated) ethnographic examples from widely available sources I have made it easy for readers to go back to the originals and consider for themselves whether the examples fit my argument.

The theoretical problems raised by the enterprise are rather different. First, there is a familiar difficulty with arguments such as this. Inevitably, the demonstration of the presence of structural similarities in the religious phenomena discussed seems almost to beg the question; it presumes the existence of what it wants to show exists. This problem is I think to some extent unavoidable, and the argument will finally depend on its ability to persuade the independent reader that the structures discussed are real and not merely the imagination of the author. However, this is a not uncommon problem of attempts to push beyond established theoretical and ethnographic interpretations, and I hope to convince the reader that it will be worth the risk.

Secondly, there is the problem of what is meant by the concept under discussion in this book, of a minimum irreducible structure which is common to many ritual and other religious phenomena. This will become gradually clearer in its specifics as the argument is developed through the examples in the main text. I should, however, perhaps dispense with two general points here. Firstly, I do not intend to suggest something like a 'lowest common denominator' of a range of examples. This sort of definition (for instance of 'kinship' or 'marriage') characterised much anthropological writing in the fifties and sixties (Needham 1971), but the similarities claimed between cases have almost always been much too vague to be helpful.

My intentions are somewhat closer to those of writers who, like the historian of religions Mircea Eliade, explicitly claimed to be describing an essence or 'archetype' of a particular class of phenomena. Eliade claimed that in his 'archetypes' he was able to identify the irreducible components of religious ideas in different cultures (Eliade 1969). My approach is similar to Eliade's in that both his 'archetypes' and the minimal structures which I identify are seen as the product of general characteristics of human beings. Yet the general characteristics envisaged in the two arguments could not be more different. Eliade's archetypes do not in any way relate to the material existence of human beings. The character of his archetypes therefore remains vague and mystical.

By contrast with Eliade, I argue that the startling quasi-universality of the minimal religious structures I identify rests on something much more specific. That is, it derives from the fact that the vast majority of societies represent human life as occurring within a permanent framework which transcends the natural transformative process of birth, growth, reproduction, ageing and death. It is the near-universality of this construct, I argue, which accounts for the occurrence and re-occurrence of the same structural pattern in ritual and other religious representations at many times and in many places. Ultimately, therefore, I am seeking to establish a connection between a religious

construction and universal human constraints. Of course, this book cannot be considered to have provided a satisfactory demonstration of such a connection, and does not claim to do so, but it was with this aim in view that the exploration of which it forms a part was undertaken, and in this direction that the theoretical conclusions presented here will lead.

The nature of the ritual processes I am concerned with will gradually become clearer in the light of the examples discussed in subsequent chapters. However, a brief presentation can be given here, as a preliminary guide to the argument which follows.

These irreducible structures of religious phenomena are ritual representations of the existence of human beings in time. In fact this ritual representation is a simple transformation of the material processes of life in plants and animals as well as humans. The transformation takes place in an idiom which has two distinguishing features: first, it is accomplished through a classic three-stage dialectical process, and secondly it involves a marked element of violence or (to use a term less familiar in our society than in many of those discussed here) of conquest. I shall refer to this process as the idiom of 'rebounding violence'.

In all cultures there is a level of perception where birth is seen as either the beginning of or at least a significant stage in the period of growth which has the potential to engender further reproduction. The reproductive stage is in turn seen at one level of perception as followed by a period of gradual decay leading to death. This process is perceived as common to all kinds of living things. Further, the transformative dialectic of different kinds of living things is seen as linked, if only because one species provides food for another.

The representation of life in rituals begins with a complete inversion of everyday understandings. The life evoked in rituals is an 'other' life, described by such words as 'beyond' and 'invisible', and located 'in the sky', 'under the earth' or 'on a mountain where nobody goes'. In these ritual representations, instead of birth and growth leading to a successful existence, it is weakening and death which lead to a successful existence. For example, initiation frequently begins with a symbolic 'killing' of the initiates, a 'killing' which negates their birth and nurturing. The social and political significance of such a passage is that by entering into a world beyond process, through the passage of reversal, one can then be part of an entity beyond process, for example, a member of a descent group. Thus, by leaving this life, it is possible to see oneself and others as part of something permanent, therefore life-transcending.

Moving out of this world into another can, however, only be a partial answer to the problem posed by the politico-social requirement of constructing a totality consisting of living beings, which is, unlike its constituent parts, permanent. The reason why the move into the beyond is ultimately politically unsatisfactory is simply that, if you leave this life, you leave this life, and so the constructed totality becomes of no relevance to the here and now. For

example, in the case of initiation, if the result of the ritual were that the initiates had become part of an enduring entity in the 'other world', this entity would have no political significance.

In fact, in the cases examined in this book, a solution seems to be found which rejoins the here and now and the transcendental units which the rituals create. At first sight, this solution appears to be simply a contradiction of the move into the other world since it is a return into this world. However, as we shall see, the contradiction is avoided by making the return into this world something quite different from the departure from it. In the first part of the ritual the here and now is simply left behind by the move towards the transcendental. This initial movement represents the transcendental as supremely desirable and the here and now as of no value. The return is different. In the return the transcendental is not left behind but continues to be attached to those who made the initial move in its direction; its value is not negated. Secondly, the return to the here and now is really a conquest of the here and now by the transcendental. In the case of initiation, the initiate does not merely return to the world he had left behind. He is a changed person, a permanently transcendental person who can therefore dominate the here and now of which he previously was a part.

The return is therefore a conquest of the kind of thing which had been abandoned but, as if to mark the difference between the going and the coming back, the actual identity of the vital here and now is altered. Vitality is regained, but it is not the home-grown native vitality which was discarded in the first part of the rituals that is regained, but, instead, a conquered vitality obtained from *outside* beings, usually animals, but sometimes plants, other peoples or women. In ritual representations, native vitality is replaced by a conquered, external, consumed vitality. It is through this substitution that an image is created in which humans can leave this life and join the transcendental, yet still not be alienated from the here and now. They become part of permanent institutions, and as superior beings they can reincorporate the present life through the idiom of conquest or consumption.

If the rituals dramatise a journey of the person to the beyond and a conquering return, this mirrors a similar two-way experience which is felt as taking place inside the person. The first part of the rituals involves an experiential dichotomisation of the subjects into an over-vital side and a transcendental side. Then, as in the external drama, the transcendental drives out the vital so that the person becomes, for a time, entirely transcendental. This victory of one side of the person over the other is what requires the first element of violence in the rituals.

This violence is, however, only a preliminary to a subsequent violence which involves the triumphant experiential recovery of vitality into the person by the transcendental element. However (and again as in the external drama), this recovery of vitality does not compromise the superiority of the transcendental identity, because the recovered vitality is mastered by the transcendental.

Unlike the native vitality of the first stage which must be driven out of oneself, the vitality reintroduced in the second stage is taken from external sources and is consumed as the food of the transcendental subject, often literally through the mouth. This second violence can therefore be considered as the consequence of the first; it is the elimination of ordinary vitality which necessitates its replacement by a new, plundered vitality, and the contact with the transcendental which provides the impetus for this forced substitution. The whole ritual process can therefore be understood as the construction of a form of 'rebounding violence' both at the public and at the experiential level.

In some ways this argument is similar to the old model usually attributed to Van Gennep for rites of passage; in other ways it is different (Van Gennep 1909). Van Gennep stressed how actors pass from a stage where they are separated from society, to a liminal state, to a stage where they are reintegrated into society. I retain the idea of the three stages but I attribute to them quite a different content. While Van Gennep sees the drama of the first stage as a separation between the primary actor and the group he or she leaves behind, I see it principally as a dramatically constructed dichotomisation located within the body of each of the participants. The second stage for Van Gennep, and even more for Turner, is a period of liminality quite separate from the rest of the sequence (Turner 1969). Here it is seen as the moment when the initiate is given the transcendental part of his identity which will dominate for the rest of his life. Finally, Van Gennep describes the third stage as a reintegration into society, and Turner as a reintegration into the mundane world. Here the third stage is not seen as a return to the condition left behind in the first stage but as an aggressive consumption of a vitality which is *different* in origin from that which had originally been lost.

Van Gennep and Turner have little to say about violence. In so far as they recognise it, it is a mark of the initial stage of separation. They completely miss the significance of the much more dramatic violence of the return to the mundane. For me, however, this conquering and consuming is central because it is what explains the political outcomes of religious action. First of all, it needs to be violent, otherwise the subordination of vitality would not be demonstrated. Secondly, this final consumption is outwardly directed towards other species. In many of the examples discussed we shall see how the consumption of animals, for example, can be represented as merely a preliminary to expansionist violence against neighbours.

The book argues, therefore, that in the core ritual structure which it identifies, the sequence which leads to 'rebounding violence', there lies an explanation of the symbolism of violence present in so many religious phenomena. Furthermore, it argues that there also lies the explanation of the often-noted fact that religion so easily furnishes an idiom of expansionist violence to people in a whole range of societies, an idiom which, under certain circumstances, becomes a legitimisation for actual violence.

Such a conclusion may seem close to that reached by such writers as Girard

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(1972) and Burkert (1983), who see an indissoluble link between violence and religion, but it does so for totally different reasons. These writers assume an innate aggressiveness in humans which is expressed, and to a certain extent purged, by ritual. In contrast I do not base myself on some innate propensity to violence but argue that violence is itself a result of the attempt to create the transcendental in religion and politics.

Much of the content of this book was originally presented as four lectures commemorating the great American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, and although dealing with topics which were not his immediate concerns I hope the book follows in his tradition. In fact, I believe that a consideration of the relation between the religious and the political would have interested Lewis Henry Morgan for a number of reasons.

Firstly, even though he wrote very little about religion as such, Morgan was possibly the greatest exponent of what has always characterised anthropology, that is the demonstration that aspects of life which other human sciences choose to separate are fundamentally interconnected. Secondly, Morgan never disguised the fact that his aim was to understand how human societies have become the kind of phenomena they are in a way which both places human beings in the wider processes of evolution and recognises the unique implications of human psychology for human evolution. Thirdly, this book deals with one of Morgan's central concerns: understanding the way in which human beings can create representations of seemingly permanent institutions, such as what Morgan called the clan or the gens, against the lived experience of their own mortality and the discontinuous biological processes of human life. Finally, in returning to very basic questions of anthropology, which inevitably have evolutionary implications, I am quite consciously following Morgan's lead. Morgan recognised that this kind of study could not escape a consideration of the moral implications of human social evolution, since anthropologists, like other human scientists, are peculiar in that for them the observer and the observed are ultimately identical.

A number of recent writers have argued that cross-cultural theory inevitably involves the author in an arrogant domination of the subject being discussed. This does not seem to me to be true. Rather, it is the self-conscious refusal to engage in attempts at explanation which I feel is the danger for the anthropologist. Like Morgan, I believe that to propose a theory is to implicate ourselves as much as other peoples in the explanation. The continuing value of Morgan's work today seems to me to show that it is only by attempting to understand in this way that we can move on, even if the conclusions reached are provisional and incomplete. It is surely by this essay into understanding that we acknowledge our connectedness with and involvement in the world, and the continuity between our own and other societies.

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Initiation

One of the better-known groups of people in modern anthropology are the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea. This is partly because they have been so well described by a number of anthropologists, especially F. E. Williams, and partly because the ethnography has been subtly reanalysed by, among others, Schwimmer, and above all by Iteanu, who has recently published a brilliant, careful and convincing reanalysis of the available material. In this chapter I use Iteanu's work to flesh out the very abstract outline of rebounding violence which was given in the previous chapter. In particular I follow Iteanu's analysis of Orokaiva initiation, which acts out the transformation which gives this book its title: the transformation of initiates from prey into hunters. However, in the end, this chapter reaches very different theoretical conclusions from those of Iteanu and a brief discussion of these differences will serve to define and advance the argument.

Like so many peoples around the world the Orokavia practise the kind of rituals which have been called 'initiations' in anthropological literature. This is because passing through these rituals is considered an essential step to beginning or continuing life as a full moral person. The initiation ritual of the Orokavia is reminiscent of that of many other peoples and is typical of the part of New Guinea in which they live. This local character is nowhere clearer than in the fact that the ritual seems to be concerned as much with pigs, birds and spirits as it is with the human beings it initiates. It differs from other New Guinea initiation rituals, however, in that the initiates are both girls and boys. Although I ignore the significance of this fact in this chapter, I shall return to it in chapter 5, which deals with the relevance of gender for the issues concerned in this book.

At the time set for the ritual the first important act is that the Orokaiva village is invaded from the outside by people who have been hiding, lurking in the encircling bush. These people wear masks decorated with bird feathers and pigs' tusks, behave in ways which are reminiscent of birds and imitate the sound made by birds. The masked actors represent spirits, especially the ancestral spirits of dead people of the village. These masked intruders,

shouting that they are spirits, arrive as if from the forest and chase the children, maltreating them. The intruders are terrifying; they advance biting and assaulting trees and pigs, and shouting in the direction of the children 'Bite, bite, bite'.¹ Meanwhile the parents beg the spirits not to 'kill' the children. As Iteanu points out, the intruders act as though they were hunters stalking wild pigs. In fact they are seeking the children who are to be initiated, but the image of the pig hunt is continued as they chase the children hither and thither, before finally herding them onto a platform reminiscent of the ones on which dead bodies may be placed and of the type on which pigs are killed, cut up and distributed at major rituals.

It is not difficult to imagine that the whole proceeding must be extremely frightening for the initiates but this is also true for their parents. The reason is that it is believed that the ritual may very possibly lead to the death of the children and Iteanu assures us that this indeed happens not infrequently. This means that in agreeing to let their children be initiated and in participating in the proceedings the adults are willingly submitting to an attack on their children and by extension on themselves. This co-operation with an external attack which often involves, as here, a notion of penetration, whether this be bodily or geographical, is an essential element of the pattern this book examines.

The initial pig hunt may be a symbolic representation of the killing of the children, but at least at this stage of the proceedings the children do not die. What happens after they have been driven onto the platform is that they are covered in a blinding cape and taken out of the village to an isolated hut in the bush where they are forbidden to eat normal food, where they are not allowed to wash or speak aloud and from where they are not allowed to look out. In the initiation hut the children are told that by now they too have become spirits of the dead. This is because becoming a spirit is what the Orokaiva believe happens after death and the children have gone through a process which mimics their 'death'. After all, they have been hunted as though they were pigs, taken to a platform of the kind on which pigs are killed, cut up and their meat distributed and they, like the dead, have lost their individuality, their sense of sight and their power of audible and articulate speech.

In the initiation huts the initiates are thus symbolically dead and can therefore be considered to have become spirits. There they undergo various ordeals and are taught a number of secrets. Above all they are shown the feathers of the masks they will be able to wear as initiated adults. The Orokaiva say that during the seclusion the initiates' feathers 'grow' on them. There the initiates are taught to play the sacred flutes and bull roarers that are represented as the 'voices' of the spirits. They are also taught spirit dances, which only initiated persons can know and perform. One can therefore say that from the time of their initiation to their real death the Orokaiva will remain partly spirits and this transformation will be manifested by their right to put on spirit masks to make the spirits be heard through the playing of flutes

and bull roarers, and to represent, or perhaps be, spirits in rituals such as initiation.

After a considerable time of seclusion in the initiation hut the initiates return to the village apparently quite transformed. A key element of this transformation is the relation of the initiates to pigs. Previously, the last time they were in the village, the children had been ritually killed at the hands of the masked adults as though they were pigs. Now, after their sojourn in the initiation hut, the initiates, who have partly become spirits themselves, return not as prey but as hunters of pigs, shouting the same formula which had been addressed to them 'Bite, bite, bite'. Iteanu puts the matter thus: 'from having been victims the children have become murderers of these other "children" who are in fact pigs' (Iteanu 1983: 111). This transformation is marked by much of the symbolism which makes hunters of the initiated children and also, as we shall see, killers. This is literally so in the case of the initiation described by Chinnery and Beaver (1915), where the first act required of the emergent children is that they must participate in a pig hunt.² In all cases the symbolism of the initiate as a hunter-cum-warrior is underlined by the triumphant dance they perform on returning to the village and above all by the fact that they climb on to a similar platform to which they had been driven as hunted pigs, and where they now strut, themselves distributing the meat of killed pigs. This time, however, it is real pigs which have been hunted and real meat which is offered.

The completion of the transformation of prey into hunter is clear for all to see. At the beginning the children were taken on to the platform as hunted pigs by masked and feathered intruders representing spirits who shouted 'Bite, bite, bite'. Now shouting the very same words, dressed in the feather masks which have grown on them, representing the spirits which they have in part become, they distribute the meat of hunted and killed pigs.³

Anthropologists have long been familiar with the general pattern of initiation rituals which this Orokaiva example follows, although, as Iteanu points out, they have often tended to concentrate on the supposed social or psychological functions these rituals might fulfil, rather than on the content of the symbolism or on what the actors say the rituals are about. Nonetheless the contention that the transformation of the initiates from victims into killers is a typical aspect of these rituals is one which ought to be easily accepted by most scholars in the field.

In this book, however, it is my intention to propose that this simple pattern applies well beyond initiation and has much greater significance for our understanding of the nature of human beings than it does merely as a recurrent feature of a special type of ritual. The dramatic transformation of prey into hunter, which we saw among the Orokaiva, underlies in different forms the practices which can easily be subsumed under the English word 'religion', as well as many practices which cannot. I shall argue that sacrifice, spirit possession, fertility rituals and funerals contain the same underlying