



THE RITUAL PERSON AS SUBJECT OR OBJECT IN ANCIENT GREECE AND CENTRAL AFRICA

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An anthropologist, especially an Africanist, approaching the cultural remains of ancient Greece must needs be aware of an historical polarity set up in the minds of European scholars, at least since the eighteenth century, between Greece as the *fons et origo* of civilization itself and Africa as the locus and embodiment of savagery. Recent controversy related to Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* shows the continuing hold of this polarity on modern consciousness.¹

The tradition of regarding ancient Greece as the source of civilization's highest values inclines classicists to select for study only noble themes in theology, philosophy and aesthetics, and to neglect, even despise, the kind of plebeian and folkloric materials that anthropologists traditionally deal in. This tradition, and the nature of the residues available for study, has also inclined classicists to emphasize belief at the expense of ritual and other practices. Lastly, as James Redfield explains, classicists think of themselves as primarily concerned with mastery of a body of facts generally well established and available to all, and very little with "theory"; in this they are unlike anthropologists, whose "facts" are semi-private and who use them primarily to argue theoretical positions.² Classicists do, however, borrow perspectives and models from anthropology and other disciplines, usually without engaging in the theoretical discussions that qualify them.

¹ Masolo 1994: 21-23.

² Redfield 1991.

I have no idea what the Greek experience of mysteries was, but I will try to construct a set of vantage points from which one could at least speculate about that experience. I begin, cautiously, with a summary of similarities and differences, not between Greece and Africa but between the mysteries, as discussed by Walter Burkert, and aspects of ritual, not in “Africa,” which is a vast and various continent, but in Central Africa, a space corresponding approximately to the basin of the Congo River. I will use Central African ethnography to challenge a series of binary oppositions that recur in the study of ritual: subject/object, person/thing, central/marginal. We have to be aware of how these oppositions work in the minds of ritual participants (at least, the ideologues among them) and in our own minds, as a function of our own political issues and conceptual commitments. I also wish to question the assumption that in other times and places than the modern, religion and religious experience fell in a domain separate from the everyday.

Preliminary comparisons

Burkert is reluctant to call the mysteries “religions,” because for him a religion is an exclusive cult such as Christianity or Islam. By that criterion, African religions before the introduction of Christianity and Islam were not “religions” either, but I would like to use a stronger argument. We usually think of “religion” as a matter of “belief,” perhaps “belief in spiritual beings,” but any such definition tends to exclude from consideration our own beliefs, which we think of as knowledge.³ Central Africans do not see themselves as “believers” in what we call their religion, and understand their ritual procedures as technical manipulations of real forces. The usual word for a ritual practitioner in *nganga*, which comes from a verb meaning “to make, put together, produce, accomplish,” and is related to *ngangu*, “skill, intelligence, aptitude.”⁴ The operations of witchcraft, causing afflictions, and of rituals carried out to relieve them, though they mobilize occult, secret powers, are thought of as technical, not mystical or “supernatural;” the categorical distinction natural/supernatural is not recognized. It may be that in the course of rituals people have what we would call a religious experience, but that is not the goal or expectation; even possession

³ MacGaffey 1986: 1.

⁴ In central Africa closely related Bantu languages are spoken throughout. My examples are taken from KiKingo, a major language of the Atlantic coast.

experiences are thought of as technical, in that the animating force in the body has been temporarily displaced by following the appropriate procedures.

These terms are very much like those that apply to a figure Burkert calls the charismatic, characterized in an ancient manuscript as “he who makes the sacred a craft.” It is appropriate to remind ourselves that “mystery” in English once meant “craft.” In all craftsmanship, there is an invoking of tradition; knowledge is validated by its handing down from master to apprentice, from father (*se*) to son (*mwana*).⁵ The exclusivity of the knowledge is more important than its content, which may be negligible.

The three major forms of organization in the practice of the mysteries correspond to those to which an *nganga* might belong: “the itinerant practitioner or charismatic, the clergy attached to a sanctuary, and the association of worshipers in the form of a club.”⁶ In Kongo, the moral evaluations attached to the different organizational forms are similar to those applied by the ancients. Burkert tells us, “The charismatic works by himself at his own risk and profit....The normal situation for an itinerant practitioner would be a marginal existence threatened by poverty and exposed to hostility, contempt and ridicule by the establishment.” The other organizations were more respectable. The priestly figures at official sanctuaries were distinguished from the itinerant type by their hierarchical order and their relative stability and security, as in the case of the territorial shrines in Kongo. The “club” type, an egalitarian association of persons with common interest, fully integrated into family and polis, is exemplified in Kongo by the initiations of a major *nkisi* such as Lemba.⁷

An important difference between Greek and African mysteries depends on the fact that Greeks were literate. Although few texts survive, it is clear that books were used in mysteries as sources of knowledge, and much of what we know comes from the written accounts of observers and participants. Literacy, as Goody has argued, transforms communication in space and time and encourages not only the accumulation but the conscious elaboration of knowledge.⁸ Central Africans were not generally literate in pre-colonial time and have left no records of their own practices and experiences, which on the other hand

⁵ Burkert 1987: 31; Janzen 1982: 139.

⁶ Burkert 1987: 31.

⁷ Burkert 1987: 31-32; Janzen 1982; MacGaffey 1986: 170-75.

⁸ Goody 1977; Goody and Watt 1963.

have been observed to some extent by recent ethnographers. Nor do we dispose of representational art documenting African mysteries. Our data are not readily comparable, and show obvious lacunae.

A second difference is cosmological. Fundamental to Greek religious life was the gulf fixed between mortality and immortality; the goal of participants in mysteries was to improve their prospects in the next life by acquiring maps, passwords and advice about what to do and not to do on the journey to their preferred place in the other world. In Central Africa, the lands of the living and the dead are very close; one can shift from one to the other in the blink of an eye.⁹

The extraordinary experience.

Mysteries, according to Burkert, are initiation ceremonies, “cults in which admission and participation depend upon some personal ritual to be performed on the initiand.” They were “initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal, and secret character that aimed at a change of mind [consciousness] through experience of the sacred.” Burkert contrasts this sort of initiation with rites of passage, because admission did not depend on social status or age and did not lead to a change of status; instead, there was a personal change, represented as a changed relation to a deity.¹⁰ In African studies, since the work of V.W. Turner on the Ndembu of Zambia, such rituals have been called “cults of affliction.”

Burkert’s account of the “extraordinary experience” of mystery initiation closely parallels that of Turner, though he does not mention the latter’s work. He quotes an authoritative text from the fifth century A.D. on Eleusis: “[The ceremonies] cause sympathy of the souls with the ritual in a way that is unintelligible to us, and divine, so that some of the initiands are stricken with panic, being filled with divine awe; others assimilate themselves to the holy symbols, leave their own identity, become at home with the gods, and experience divine possession.” He discounts suggestions by some classical authors that this communion was induced by drugs, exhaustion or other purely physical stimuli.¹¹ For Turner, the extraordinary experience was an example of *communitas*, alternative to the ordinary and often alienating experience of structured social relations, *societas*. In the liminal space of the ritual, the initiand

⁹ MacGaffey 1986: 48-56.

¹⁰ Burkert 1987: 8, 11, 13.

¹¹ Burkert 1987: 114.

was confronted with paradoxical symbols that transcended all oppositions and disrupted normal expectations and reasoning, with the result that he or she was “cured” by being made spiritually whole.¹²

I do not wish to refute either of these interpretations, but I would like to address them with a certain skepticism. In Turner’s exemplary ethnographic account, Chihamba is a procedure for treating, by ritual exposure to the powerful spirit Kavula, afflictions that a diviner has attributed to a deceased relative of the afflicted. Persons who have been previously cured by this procedure compose a body of adepts who assist the *nganga* and the leaders in charge of the ritual, which takes several days. The result of the treatment, according to Turner, is that the afflicted have been “made spiritually whole” in “an atmosphere of mild diffused happiness.”¹³ This improvement is brought about by pushing the initiands through a prolonged and deliberately confusing confrontation with Kavula, whose attributes are multiple and contradictory, touching on many different aspects of ordinary Ndembu life.

We must note that Turner’s evaluation of the life-affirming efficacy of this and other rituals grew more favorable over the years, from 1962, when he published his first account of Chihamba, to 1975, when he elaborated and reissued it. His ethnographic report by itself contains no statements from adepts or initiands of their subjective experience. He supports his view of it by telling us what he himself felt as a participant observer, and by comments about “how perplexed” and “how bewildered” the initiands must be in the fact of radically contradictory experiences. He concludes by comparing their feelings with those of the women confronting the angel at Christ’s tomb, and the ambiguous and menacing “whiteness” of Kavula with that of Moby Dick. Both belong with others of their kind as examples of universal human effort to express what cannot be grasped, “pure act-of-being.”¹⁴ The “mild diffused happiness” resulting from Chihamba seems incommensurate both with these experiences and with the more than four days of complex ritual that Chihamba requires.

¹² Turner 1975: 185

¹³ Turner 1975.

¹⁴ Turner 1975: 179-203.

Structure and non-structure.

The conceptual setting for Turner's later account of Chihamba is the opposition he developed between two models of human relatedness, *societas* and *communitas*, which has been widely influential.¹⁵ *Societas* is "society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' and less'." *Communitas* is the opposite: an unstructured "communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders."¹⁶ It occurs in liminal situations, set apart from ordinary life, as in ritual, especially rites of passage. The germ of the concept was Turner's own experience as a pacifist assigned to a British bomb-disposal unit during World War II, a situation as liminal as one can imagine.¹⁷ In his juxtaposition of Revelation [liminal] and Divination [social] in his book of that name, it is clear that Turner did not like structures, which he saw as alienating and oppressive.

In the diffuse communion of the liminal situation of Ndembu ritual, the symbols deployed are themselves diffuse, polyvalent and autonomous. Turner says that unlike other scholars who begin with cosmology and then interpret symbols as expressions of its logic (Lévi-Strauss is envisaged), he was forced to begin with symbols because the Ndembu have hardly any myths or cosmological narratives.¹⁸ This remarkable assertion is itself an expression of the skepticism general among British anthropologists of the day towards the possibility of intellectual models developed by illiterate peoples.¹⁹ Turner himself assumed that myths were recognizable by their content, telling the deeds of sacred beings and semi-divine heroes in the creation of the world – Greek myths, for example. It is now recognized, however, since the work of De Heusch and others, that there are plenty of Central African myths: they are mostly about the journeys, often down rivers or across them, of persons and groups so little fantastic, to all seeming, that their stories have until recently been appropriated by historians as oral traditions recording real events, however obliquely.²⁰

¹⁵ Turner 1969: ch.s 3-5.

¹⁶ Turner 1969: 96.

¹⁷ Turner 1975: 21.

¹⁸ Turner 1969: 14.

¹⁹ MacGaffey 1986: 42.

²⁰ De Heusch 1982; MacGaffey 1975.

Kavula is only one, though perhaps the most important and most complex, of Ndembu “symbols,” whose polyvalence Turner examined in publications that raised the standard of religious ethnography in Africa. It is apparent from Turner’s own accounts of their rituals and beliefs that the Ndembu in fact have a cosmology, one that is common to the Central African peoples, expressed not in narrative but in the order of the rituals themselves.²¹ One index of it is the white cross associated with Kavula, which Turner attributes to Christian influence but which seems to represent Kavula’s role as mediator between the worlds of the living and the dead. It is most explicit in Turner’s own diagram of the spatial symbolism of *Isoma*, an affliction cult for women, in which the afflicted pass through a grave-like tunnel between the “hot” world of death and the “cool” world of life and renewal. Turner’s analysis of the symbolic materials in this ritual reveals a complex set of binary oppositions in which any one item may be linked to several planes of classification. Admittedly, all this sounds very much like *la pensée sauvage*, but Turner distanced his data from Lévi-Strauss’s grasp by asserting that Ndembu symbols engage the whole person and not just the mind. That of course is a gross misrepresentation of what Lévi-Strauss means by *la science du concret*.²²

Recent commentaries question Turner’s interpretations of his Ndembu material and his exaggerated picture of social structure as hierarchical, divisive and inflexible, and liminal situations as liberating and creative.²³ He believed the world of the elders to be “traditional,” but in fact it was a relatively recent response to British administrative politics.²⁴ On the other hand, according to Pritchett, “perhaps the most powerful, the most awe-inspiring experience of every Lunda [Ndembu] man’s life” is the circumcision ritual *Mukanda*. Unlike an affliction cult, *Mukanda* is a pillar of *societas*; a rite of passage focused both on hierarchy and on equality within grade, it explicitly separates boys from their mothers and subordinates them to the elders.²⁵

²¹ MacGaffey 2000a.

²² Lévi-Strauss 1962; Turner 1969: 11-43. Turner himself elsewhere explains the persistence of “healing” rituals that do not in fact heal by “the fact that they are part of a religious system which itself constitutes an explanation of the universe and guarantees the norms and values on which orderly social arrangements rest” (Turner 1967: 356).

²³ Rapport and Overing 2000: s.v. Liminality.

²⁴ Pritchett 2001: 89.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 143

I am suggesting that the contrast between cosmology and autonomous symbol, between structure and anti-structure, is an *a priori* rather than a visible fact and that the subjective experience of rituals cannot be predicted, but the issue here is not just whether Turner was misguided. The question whether there is a necessary opposition between the individual person, thought of as potentially autonomous and self-sufficient, and society, thought of as potentially alienating and oppressive, is fundamental to social science since its beginnings in the 18th century. The political recommendations implicit in these opposed positions are obvious, and explain the continuing energy of what is, logically, a meaningless debate.

Rituals, rocks and distributed personhood.

A short detour into the British Neolithic will demonstrate this continued vitality. The ritual practices of ancient Britons are even more difficult to comprehend than those of ancient Greece or contemporary Zambia, but the nature of the debate about them is familiar. Much of the recent literature about monumental henges and tombs, inspired partly by Foucault and Gramsci, takes it for granted that they were built by dominant minorities to maintain their authority over a passive majority, or as the jargon has it, to “reproduce dominant discourses.” The buildings obliged those who moved in them to experience themselves in particular ways and to submit to the order they represented.

Reviewing all of this, Joanna Brück notes that it presupposes a particular concept of the person that she traces to the “Cartesian” distinction between mind and body; as body, the person could be objectified for purposes of study and control. Alternatively, as “mind” and subject, the person could be credited with autonomy and rational self-determination.²⁶ These contrasting conception of the person are linked to a whole *pensée sauvage* of binary oppositions, such as those that seek to subordinate women to men. In reconstructions of Neolithic experience, it is alleged that the ancient Britons were divided into active subjects who used monumental architecture to impose on objectified others experiences by which they themselves were not influenced.²⁷

²⁶ [Brück 2001: 652](#). Brück’s analysis is not new. For a philosopher’s overview of the Cartesian duality, the subject/object opposition and other dichotomies associated with it, together with the political and moral implications of the debate about them, see (Bernstein 1983).

²⁷ [Brück 2001: 653](#)

Brück notes that this account of power resembles structures of authority in the Modern Western world, projected onto the Neolithic;²⁸ more precisely, it replicates not the structures themselves so much as a particular ideological representation of them.²⁹

It is noticeable in these discussions how much “theory” is laden with moral and political recommendations, with the result that purportedly analytical concepts are inextricably tied both to ancient Britain, post-war Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), or some other historical situation, and to the world of the writer and his public; in this respect they function as myths, inscribing the concerns of the present on the past. The trend at the moment, especially in the United States, in theory as in public life, is to emphasize the right of the individual to free thought and action, and to caricature those, like Durkheim, who have tried to show how “individual” thought is shaped by collective representations.³⁰ “Alternative” and allegedly enriching experiences are in vogue, in association with a general distrust of dominant discourses. It is difficult for proponents of these alternatives to see how American they are. Intellectual history is not determined by social history but is always constrained by it.

What is valuable is the perception that ritual is about power and is itself a more or less political activity, whatever else may characterize it. Brück, however, rightly points out that power can never be monopolized. The concept itself implies a measure of countervailing power; if slaves could not rebel it would not be necessary to keep them in chains. She therefore argues for the use of what she calls a relational model of personhood with respect to the Neolithic. A relational model indicates not only that personhood is realized in social relations with other persons, but that the quality of those relations is variable in time and space; one is never simply either subject or object, and there is room for multiple experiences of monuments and rituals.

A relational model of distributed personhood can carry a political message, as feminists have demonstrated, but it is surely much

²⁸ [Brück 2001: 651](#)

²⁹ Some say Brück has oversimplified the positions she criticizes. See correspondence in the same issue of the *JRAI*.

³⁰ “I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America...the majority raises formidable barriers around the liberty of opinion; within these barriers an author may write what he pleases, but woe to him if he goes beyond them.” De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, ch. 15; [Bradley 1956: 263-264](#).

closer to reality than the so-called Cartesian model.³¹ The fully objectified person exists nowhere, not even in the limiting cases of slavery, life imprisonment and the modern American corporate workplace. Brück mentions other societies (Hawaiian, Hindu) in which the person is not thought of as an indivisible, bounded unit and in which therefore the subject is not differentiated from object. In such instances, “powers of causation are often considered to reside outside the human individual, for example in the natural world or in gods, spirits and ancestors. In such a context, the person might not be perceived as possessing such a degree of freedom as in Modern Western society and the notion of the self as a transcendent, autonomous agent may not exist.”³² I would like to carry this notion back to Central Africa and then use it to think about Greek mysteries.

My information about personhood in Central Africa comes from the BaKongo of the Atlantic coast, but I believe that it is broadly representative of the rest of the region. BaKongo identify a person socially by the four matrilineal clans to which he or she is related, whose names he would have been expected to recite in the days before literacy and identity cards. These links are represented physically in the layout of the enclosure in which a deceased person’s wake is held, and some say that they correspond to the four limbs of his body. A person has no single name, but is known to different people by different names related to events in his social career. Distribution goes far beyond the social, however, and extends to his possessions and things with which he has been in contact, through which he may be bewitched.

The Kongo idea of the person does include a sense of irreducible individuality. The person is said, in various versions, to be made up of four parts: 1) a body in this world, which decays at death 2) an animating force, which expires at death 3) a personality inhabiting the land of the dead, which occupies 4) an immaterial appearance, visible for example when Grandfather appears in your dreams. After living a very long time in the land of the dead, to the point that he ceased to be remembered by the living, Grandfather “died the second death” and became an anonymous *simbi* spirit. As such, he still possessed intentionality and could decide to have himself incarnated in an *nkisi*, endowed with particular powers and characteristics. An *nkisi*, being in fact no more than a fabricated object, owed its “animation” exclusively

³¹ Gell 1998: 103-04; Strathern 1988: 12-16.

³² Brück 2001: 655.

to the fact that it was the focus of a network of social relations; when social obligations towards it were neglected, it reverted to the status of mere object. Even here there is some sense, although very thin, of a willful individual not reducible to his social role, since an *nkisi*, if we are to judge by the invocations addressed to it, could be implored, provoked, and insulted; it could, on its own, attack or summon someone, and could apparently be recalcitrant. An indigenous text says *nganga* might reprove his *nkisi*: “ ‘In some places they jeer at you, saying that you are nothing but a piece of wood and no *nkisi*’; so saying, the *nganga* pounds on his *nkisi*, mbu-mbu-mbu! to awaken it, that it should arise and go.”³³

Kongo souls and bodies are interchangeable. The soul may be placed in another body, or incarcerated in an animal, or in a complex, fabricated object which thereby became an *nkisi*, part of the necessary equipment in rituals intended to relieve affliction or promote prosperity. On the other hand, initiated chiefs, who served functions like those of *minkisi*, were ritually “fabricated” as though they were objects. Objectivity here is not a function of political subordination,³⁴ although the difference between chiefs and *minkisi*, supposedly, was that the former served the interests of the collectivity and the latter those of individuals, which are considered to be actually or potentially anti-social. The idea of a society in which individuals freely pursue their own inclinations suggests to villagers nothing but witchcraft (*kindoki*), although in real life, that is how they usually behave, like most of the world. We see, then, that Kongolese make a distinction between ordered “society” and the “autonomous” individual, much as Americans do, but attach opposite moral values to it.

A Kongo Initiation: *Kimpasi*

The sharp distinction between individual concerns and those of the collectivity is a normative feature of Kongo ideology: in practice it is a site of political struggle. From time to time, the claims of authority could be reasserted by ritual performances. One of these, in eastern Kongo, was a form of initiation called *Kimpasi*, which looks at first like a rite of passage, a traditional “puberty ritual.” This term is a function of an older anthropology which assumed that primitive man, lacking scientific understanding, could only assuage his anxieties in the face of

³³ MacGaffey 2000b: 106.

³⁴ MacGaffey 2000b: ch.s 5, 7.

natural phenomena by ritualizing them. I would like to look at *Kimpasi* in the perspective provided by Jean LaFontaine in an article on the extraordinarily painful circumcision ritual of the BaGisu in Kenya.³⁵

LaFontaine begins with Van Gennep's classic account of rites of passage, which taught generations of anthropologists that such rites transferred individuals from one status to another, as from child to adult. She points out that the statuses themselves are taken as given; the ritual is performed as though for the benefit of those undergoing it. But it also states and confirms the hierarchical relationship between juvenile and adult; in the Gisu example, the "successful" outcome of the ordeal vindicates the knowledge that is in the keeping of the elders, and thus strengthens their authority. The symbols of negation and reversal that multiply in the liminal space of the ritual emphasize rather than deny social boundaries; "the transfer of individuals across these boundaries is another means of achieving the same effect, that is, of maintaining discrete social divisions. The manipulation of individuals should thus be treated in the same way as the treatment of other symbols; that they are human beings should not blind us to this."³⁶

Kimpasi ("suffering") is described by the Jesuit ethnographer J. Van Wing, on the basis of information, not observation.³⁷ It was organized on the recommendation of a diviner by the elders of a group of villages, only when the community was deemed to be suffering from infertility, excessive infant mortality or an epidemic, all attributable to the anti-social activities of witches. It was thus a cult of collective affliction, believed to be caused by an excess of witchcraft, itself made possible by a breakdown of authority. Candidates for the initiation were adolescents, but not all of this age group was initiated; they were required to be single, in good health and of good character. Every village had to send at least a boy and a girl, but some youths volunteered because they looked forward to the praise-name they would acquire, the knowledge of magic, and the prospect of licentious dancing.

³⁵ La Fontaine 1977.

³⁶ LaFontaine 1977: 422-23. The same analysis applies very elegantly to graduation from a liberal arts college, which like many rites of passage is supposed to be very arduous, although in fact almost everybody passes. At Commencement, the elders parade in their academic regalia and congratulate the graduates on having mounted the first step, only the first step, on the academic staircase, whose authority the ritual confirms.

³⁷ Van Wing, 1959 [1937]).

The events of the ritual took place in a special camp outside the village and in the village's cemetery in the forest. The proceedings followed the classic formula for rites of passage, including death, rebirth in "the land of the dead," and return to the land of the living. The sequence "says" that over a prolonged period the candidates, and therefore the community, have been put in touch with *nkita* spirits that control fecundity and prosperity, knowledge of whom is represented in the various formulae, riddles and songs that they learn. Death and rebirth are not the goals of the ritual, merely its *mise en scène*.

Many of the songs are unabashedly erotic; Van Wing describes *Kimpasi* as above all a school of immorality. Not only missionaries but anthropologists are inclined to take an empiricist and naturalistic approach to African ritual, reluctant to admit its abstract and metaphorical character. As LaFontaine says: "Sexual symbolism is not so much a referent to human sexuality and fertility as an attempt to harness immaterial powers to social purposes. Its appearance in rites of initiation [is intelligible as] the mobilization of the causal force manifest in the process of reproduction."³⁸ In *Kimpasi*, the sexuality of youth is deployed, under discipline, to counter the community's difficulties in reproducing itself; those difficulties are held to be symptomatic of a breakdown of order, which is overcome by renewed contact with *nkita* spirits, rather than by more sexual activity.

In sociological perspective, the ritual, lasting as long as four years, restored social discipline among not only the candidates but in the community: quarrels were forbidden, food had to be provided, and graduates of *Kimpasi* were needed to assist the staff of the institution.³⁹ The initiands themselves were subject to frightening experiences, to semi-starvation at first, and to the penalty of real death should they break the rules. For all its liminality, both practical and symbolic, *Kimpasi* was controlled by the authorities for their own benefit as well as that of the community; entry was not usually a matter of individual choice, and the individual's experience, probably including some measure of bonding with fellow initiands, was not the main focus of the ritual. The elders used the bodies of the young as symbolic material to reiterate, as best

³⁸ LaFontaine 1985: 116.

³⁹ *Kimpasi*, found in eastern Kongo, is probably several hundred years old. By 1920 it had been suppressed. Misnamed a "secret society," it has been described in some detail, on the basis of information not observation, by the Jesuit, J. Van Wing, a missionary who spoke excellent KiKongo [Van Wing, 1959 [1937] #705].

they could, a dominant discourse. We are reminded that Turner defined *communitas* as a “communion of equal individual *who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders*” (emphasis added).

Ideology and experience.

Rituals are improvised and negotiated at each performance; like the societies that sustain them, they offer multiple opportunities and experiences to those who participate in them, within a limited range of “thinkable and socially acceptable action.”⁴⁰ Dominant discourses are often no more than desperate claims; they can be undermined, evaded, reinterpreted. Brück’s re-assertion of this familiar perspective with respect to the British Neolithic is cast in the current language of identity, personhood and empowerment. Her critique of representations of ancient experiences in the opposed terms of empowerment/disempowerment begins with the assertion that it is founded on a modern (“Cartesian”) conception of the person as monadic. If personhood is pictured instead as distributed (or as she says, following McKim Marriott, “dividual”), the various dichotomies are revealed as ideological constructions imposed on the data: subject/object, person/thing, power/authority, individual/collectivity, central/marginal.⁴¹

Is all this then mere ideology? Will we see the world more realistically if we discard it? Not necessarily. Conceptual frameworks shape experience and lead to new thoughts and discoveries, even in the minds of anthropologists. If people expect to fall in love, it is more likely that they will, although those spared the burden of this expectation may also fall in love, even in default of a word for the experience. If a people think of themselves as autonomous, self-sufficient persons able to direct their own lives, will it not make a difference to their experience, as well as their practice? Will they be more open to mysteries?

Burkert’s account of the mysteries suggests that they resemble the model of *communitas* more closely than does Chihamba. The account is relatively convincing because, although we have no good ethnographic account of the rituals, we have a number of native reports of the experience. Initiation is also voluntary, egalitarian and renewable. MW. Meyer says that after thoughtful Greeks began to have doubts about

⁴⁰ Brück 2001.

⁴¹ Concepts of personhood from several parts of the world are described in contributions by Lienhardt, LaFontaine, Elvin and Sanderson to (Carrithers, et al. 1985).

the Olympian deities, mysteries were popular “among people seeking new and more satisfying religious experiences.” The mysteries “emphasized an inwardness and privacy of worship within closed groups;” Eleusinian initiates experienced “enlightenment” after beholding sacred things.⁴² This sort of language seems not to fit Central African rituals. Kopytoff has argued that the word “worship” is inappropriate to describe “religious” dealings with ancestors, because their tone is that of secular dealings with living elders; he has been challenged on this, but from my experience he is right.⁴³ I have already said that Kongo rituals are described by the participants as technical procedures; training in them is a matter of knowledge, not belief or enlightenment.

On the other hand, the experience the mysteries are supposed to have conferred sounds very much like the modern, and perhaps especially Protestant, idea of religious experience; in 1635, on the cusp of modernity, Sir Thomas Browne wrote, “I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pursue my Reason to an *O altitudo!*” Is the scholarly reading of the mysteries anachronistic? Mere skepticism will not get us very far. A “modern” experience seems to presuppose a “modern” sense of the person. Is it possible that the ancient Greeks thought of the person in this way?

Marcel Mauss introduced “the category of the person” as an anthropological and philosophical topic. His approach was developmental. The Romans, he said, established the person as a *universitas juris*, a bearer of rights and duties, but it was the Christians who made of the social person (*personne morale*) a metaphysical entity, after “having noted its religious power,” and prepared the way for the Renaissance sense of the person as thinking, intentional subject, a self-conscious *moi*, as in Descartes. “One could not exaggerate the importance of the sectarian movements of the 17th and 18th centuries in shaping political and philosophical thought. It was there that were posed the questions about individual liberty, individual conscience, the right to communicate directly with God, to be one’s own priest, to have an inner God.”⁴⁴

Unfortunately for our purpose, Mauss has little to say specifically about the Greeks, but he implies that the category of the

⁴² Meyer 1987: 3-5.

⁴³ Kopytoff 1971.

⁴⁴ Mauss 968: 356-60.

person was little developed among them. Arnaldo Momigliano has taken up the question from the perspective of the Greek historians' concept of biography, and therefore of personal character, which became a separate literary genre only in the 4th century BC. He writes, "It is my impression that Greek and Roman historians, and especially biographers, talked about individuals in a manner which is not distant from our own."⁴⁵ That, however, does not say much about how individuals experienced their world, and particularly their religious world, and appears to leave intact the suggestion that the kind of personality, or conception of the personality, prerequisite to a personal quest for enlightenment might have evolved only in modern times.

Michael Carrithers is more aggressive, questioning Mauss's whole framework, which he says is merely an application of Durkheim's thesis that societies developed from mechanical to organic solidarity.⁴⁶ In the beginning, the individual was wholly swallowed up in society, and only became a self-conscious "person" as the division of labor advanced. Mauss says he has no intention of venturing into psychology or discussing the subjective individual interacting with others, but in fact, Carrithers points out, the essay is designed gradually to convince us that this sort of consciousness is a modern development from the Christian concept of the soul.⁴⁷ Mauss' story of the gradual emergence of the modern individual, free and equal, out of aboriginal mechanical solidarity, amounts to a diachronic precursor of Turner's opposition between *societas* and *communitas*.

So what were the Greeks thinking? There is no reason to assume that they lacked a sense of the self, though they may well have lacked an ideology of individualism. Burkert tells us that the individual was "discovered" in the sixth century BC, and that the first evidence of Mysteries dates from this period.⁴⁸ In this he is only following Bruno Snell's *The Discovery of the Mind*, originally a collection of essays written in Germany in the 1930's.⁴⁹ The book follows the complacently evolutionary reading of Greek culture that begins with Winckelmann and Hegel. Snell sets out to illustrate, rather than prove, the thesis that thought evolved in a straight and predestined line from the pre-Homeric

⁴⁵ Carrithers, et al. 1985: 89.

⁴⁶ Carrithers, et al. 1985: ch. 11.

⁴⁷ For recent overviews of this topic, see the articles "Agent and Agency" and "Consciousness" in Rapport and Overing 2000.

⁴⁸ Burkert 1987:11.

⁴⁹ Snell, 1960 [1953].

to the modern, from myth to logic, developing concepts of the moral, the aesthetic and of the self-motivated individual along the way. His method is philological: he looks for the “emergence” of terms translatable into modern European abstractions, and in their absence concludes that the capacity for abstract thought has not yet appeared. This method is ethnocentric at best, and familiar to anyone knowledgeable in the history of African studies.

An inconclusive conclusion

Given the variety of “the mysteries” and the changes that took place in them over hundreds of years (including changes in their position relative to state or tribal authorities), any effort to characterize subjective experiences of them may well be in vain. It follows that subjective experience cannot be the criterion for classifying these or any other rituals. Burkert says the outcome of initiation was a changed relation to a deity, but that could cover a great many kinds of change, as do such themes as “the quest for salvation” and “experience of the sacred.”⁵⁰ I find not only simplification but reification in these terms, and I suspect that Burkert’s emphasis on personal choice, which he contrasts with the allegedly prescriptive nature of the central cults, is derived from a version of the supposed opposition between the authoritative center and the willful margin, whose ideological strength we have repeatedly noticed.

The Mysteries were clearly “alternative” to the central cults of the polis and more or less liminal. One sign of this, besides their voluntary and occasional character, is the relative absence of sacrificial ritual in them. The rituals of the polis required sacrifice; sacrifice is clearly present in Mithraic ritual, but in the others we can be sure only of festival eating and drinking. Burkert is curiously vague on the subject, and his suggestions are weakened by his own resort to evolutionary assumptions.⁵¹ On the other hand, there were many other reasons for initiation besides the desire for a mystical experience, which perhaps happened only to a few, the *mystai* proper. Opportunities for orgies appealed to some, and others underwent initiation in order to fulfill an obligation after having been spared some calamity. Some of the indigenous statements of motive need only slight recasting to sound

⁵⁰ Burkert 1987: 8, 11, 13, 15.

⁵¹ Burkert 1987: 110-12.

familiar to an Africanist. The initiation of Apuleius was “determined by divine command through dreams.”⁵² A MuKongo who was told by a diviner that his affliction was due to a summons from a particular *nkisi* changed his relationship to that *nkisi* by undergoing initiation and becoming its *nganga*. A possible motive for conversion to Isis might be that a rich man, an object of envy on account of his wealth, found himself suffering from anxiety, sleeplessness and bad dreams;⁵³ these symptoms are very much like those that might have moved a wealthy Kongolese to be initiated to Lemba.⁵⁴ Those who wish to be initiated, says Tertullian, “turn first to the ‘father’ of the sacred rites, to map out what preparations have to be made;”⁵⁵ a Kongo initiate likewise is *mwana* (child) to his initiator, the *ngudi a nganga*.⁵⁶ If there is such a spread of motives, it seems like a reduction to say that the mysteries satisfied a desire for “new and more satisfying religious experiences.”⁵⁷ The idea of distinctly “religious” experience, separate from the mundane, is suspiciously modern.⁵⁸

It may well have been the case that “the extraordinary experience” was generally reserved to intellectuals. There are intellectuals in all societies, but full-time specialists are not found everywhere, and not all of them can record their thoughts in writing for comment and elaboration by succeeding generations. Such a process could produce increasingly subtle and systematic theories not only of the person, perhaps, as Carrithers suggests,⁵⁹ but of knowledge, symbols, and “mystery” itself. An Eleusinian initiate said, “I came out of the mystery hall feeling like a stranger to myself,” but he was a rhetor, an academic.⁶⁰ In the modern West, “alternative” experiences are most available to those who read books; “if you studiously undergo training, your inner life

⁵² Burkert 1987:10.

⁵³ Burkert 1987: 17.

⁵⁴ Janzen 1982: 317.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁶ MacGaffey 2000b: 90-91.

⁵⁷ Meyer 1987: 3.

⁵⁸ Bruno Latour offers a provocative critique of “religion” as, in effect, a modern invention of scientific rationalism. “In the good old days [i.e. other times and places than the Modern], supposedly “Ages of Faith,” people went to Church with the same alacrity, ordinariness, and lack of surprise as we now go shopping on Sunday” (Latour 2001).

⁵⁹ Carrithers, et al. 1985: 249.

⁶⁰ Burkert 1987:90.

changes, as does your experience of its isolation from an outer world.”⁶¹
It is precisely such individuals in ancient Greece whose experiences were most likely to be recorded for other and later intellectuals to argue about.

⁶¹ [Luhmann 1989: 181.](#)

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