

Electronic Antiquity 12.1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Sandra Blakely, *Ancient Mysteries, Modern Secrets*

James Redfield: *Anthropology and the Fate of the Soul*

Jens Holzhausen: *Poetry and Mysteries: Euripides Bacchae and the Dionysiac Rites*

Sarolta Takács: *Initiations and Mysteries in Apuleius' Metamorphoses*

Nikolay Grintser: *What did mysteries mean to ancient Greeks?*

Wyatt MacGaffey: *The Ritual Person as Subject or Object in Ancient Greece and Central Africa*

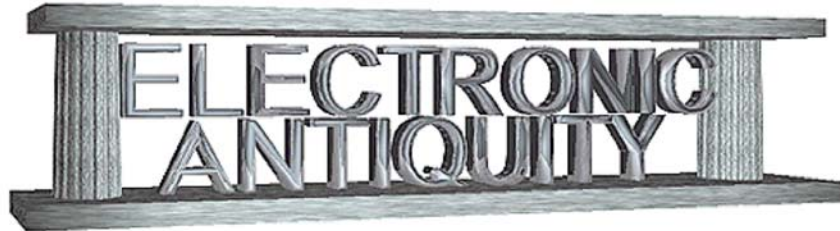
Thomas O. Beidelman: *African and Classical Secrecy and Disclosure: the Kaguru of East Africa and the Ancient Greeks*

Bill Murphy: *Geometry and Grammar of Mystery: Ancient Mystery Religions and West African Secret Societies*

Mark Auslander: *Going by the Trees: Death and Regeneration in Georgia's Haunted Landscapes*, with a response from Peter Bing

Peter Bing: Response to Auslander

Afterword: Mark Risjord: *Surveying the Mysteries: Epistemological Reflections on Multidisciplinary Inquiry*



INTRODUCTION: ANCIENT MYSTERIES, MODERN SECRETS

Sandra Blakely, Emory University

sblakel@emory.edu

Classics and Anthropology share a long history of interaction.¹ Anthropologists of the nineteenth century brought a classical training to their work, and included ancient law, kinship and cities in their earliest studies.² The fields drifted apart in the early of the 20th century; the rift seems a response to various causes, including increasing specialization, the rise of fieldwork, the excesses of the Cambridge ritualists, and the perception that the study of the living would reduce the status of the Classical past.³ From the 1960s onward, however, the disciplinary divide has been crossed under various standards. Anglo-American scholars have pursued economic anthropology and Weberian historical sociology; the Paris school has built on the intellectual heritage of Durkheim, Saussure

¹ A full discussion of this long, complex interaction, and a complete bibliography of those who contribute to it, lie beyond the confines of this introduction. In this volume, Beidelman provides an anthropologist's perspective on the question, and Redfield a classicist's. See also [Detienne 2001, 2007](#); [Redfield 1991, 1983](#); [Wyatt 1988](#); [Vidal-Naquet 1986: 129-142](#); [Maurizio 1995](#); [Svenbro 1993](#); [Bettini 1991](#); [Konstan 1981](#); [Valeri 1981](#); [Gernet 1981](#); [Humphreys 1978: 17-30](#); [Lloyd 1978](#); [Finley 1971](#); [Gouldner 1965](#); [Cole 1967 \(1990\)](#); [Kluckhohn 1961](#). [Marett 1908](#) provides an overview of the status of the two fields 100 years ago. For evaluation of the reaction against the Cambridge ritualists, and more recent approaches to the questions they addressed, see [Versnel 1990a](#), [Henderson 1993](#), [Ackerman 2002: 159-197](#); [Segal 1998](#); [Strenski 1996](#).

² [Maine 1861](#); [de Coulange 1864](#); [Morgan 1878](#).

³ [Gouldner 1965: 4](#) makes an eloquent response to these concerns.

and Levi-Strauss; evolutionary hypotheses and van Gennep's models for initiation inform scholarship in Greek religion; Cohen, Cartledge and others have renewed the comparative study of ancient law.⁴ While Classical archaeology was characterized in the 1980s as resistant to anthropology, more recent work, particularly in ancient cult, has engaged directly with social science paradigms.⁵ Classicists researching sexuality, the family, and colonialism draw frequently on anthropological data and models,⁶ and systematic comparisons have been pursued between ancient Greek and living cultures, including China, Africa and Tibet.⁷

The mysteries have figured but little in this relationship. This is despite a long Classical interest in cults and rituals sealed by secrecy, a century of sociological and anthropological approaches to the questions of secrecy, and the current fashion for interdisciplinary projects.⁸ There are good reasons for this, deriving from both the topic and the history of these disciplines. Mystery cults compound the inherent difficulties of studying ancient religion—fragmentary sources, biases and anachronisms reflecting the Christian perspective, and incongruity between textual and material data—with stipulations of discretion, which

⁴ evolutionary models, Burkert 2001; Girard 1972; Hamerton-Kelly 1987; for reflections on the hostility with which the Paris school has been met among some Classicists, see Versnel 1990: 28-30, who refers to Ellinger 1984: 7-29.

⁵ Morris 1994; Jameson 1994; Snodgrass 1994; Dyson 1993; Snodgrass 1987; Kyriakidis 2007. Fogelin 2007 considers recent approaches to ritual in non-Mediterranean as well as Mediterranean archaeology.

⁶ bibliographic resources and surveys include <http://www.stoa.org/diotima/> for gender and sexuality; Tsetschladze 2006: xxiii-lxxxiii, and Lyons and Papadopoulos 2002: 1-23 for colonization; Cartledge 1995 for further reading on law, economics, family and gender studies, and religion.

⁷ comparisons with China, Lloyd 2006; 2004; 2002; 1996; with Africa, Blakely 2006; Lamberg 1990; Miller 1987; Lévêque 1978; Woronoff and Foet 1974; Chaumartin 1977; with Tibet, Geoffrey 1989, Bremmer 1983; with Hebrew, Boman 1952; Charachidzé 1986 addresses the survival of ancient Greek traditions, and comparison between modern peasant cultures and ancient traditions, in the Caucasus. While these reflect Classicists taking up anthropological comparanda, Beidelman 1989 offers an anthropologist's perspective on ancient Greek material.

⁸ A welcome exception is Kippenberg and Stroumsa 1995, who directly address the question of secrecy, as articulated by Georg Simmel, and the study of ancient Mediterranean religions; their volume includes contributions by Bremmer (1995) and Burkert (1995) on the question for the ancient Greek mysteries.

were widely (almost surprisingly) maintained. The study of ritual has been from the start an interdisciplinary undertaking, and the mysteries demand an array of specializations within Classical studies—philology, history, archaeology and art history—which make the scholarly task daunting even without the addition of another field’s perspectives. ‘Mysteries,’ moreover, are an untidy category for investigation, as the term was used in the ancient world to designate private cures, local rites, and great international sanctuaries, forms which typically fall into discrete categories in scholarly investigation. The mysteries also lack the typical stimuli for comparative studies, offering neither clear parallels with other traditions, nor origins in the great civilizations which interacted with Greece and Rome. The obvious candidates for comparison, moreover, may be misleading. The ancient aitiologies of even the most distinctly foreign mystery gods—the Great Mother, Isis, and Mithras—examined against the evidence for these gods in their homelands, reveal the projection of Greek or Roman realities into an imaginary Anatolian, Egyptian or Persian past. The ritual form of the mysteries, regardless of which gods they celebrate, remains distinctly Greek.⁹

Comparanda for the mysteries were found, however, in two scholarly traditions: anthropological models of ‘primitive’ religions, and Christianity. These traditions were informed by assumptions and methodologies which differ substantially from those used in anthropology today. The search for primitive comparanda flourished in the early 20th century, when evolutionary paradigms dominated the social sciences. Subject cultures were interpreted as a living museum of early man, and their rituals as the rites from which later religions evolved. Two broad categories of those rites seemed the likely origins for ancient mysteries: celebrations of the agrarian cycle, and initiations connected with rites of passage.¹⁰ Comparisons with Christianity responded to the striking use of the language of the mystery religions in the New Testament, and the significance of the mysteries as part of the historical context of early Christianity.¹¹ The degree of influence or distance

⁹ This contradicts the long tradition that the mysteries were essentially oriental religions: [Burkert 1987](#): 2-3; [van den Heever 2005](#):16-21; for the Great Mother, [Roller 1999](#): 173-4; [Versnel 1990](#): 108; for Mithras, [Beck 1984](#): 2013-14 n. 14; 2067; 2066 n. 96; 2071-74; [Colpe 1975](#); for Isis: [Ferguson 2003](#): 272.

¹⁰ [Klauck 2000](#): 89; see also [Burkert 2004](#): 91-92; [Versnel 1990b](#): 48-74; [Calame 1999](#): 284.

¹¹ [Wiens 1980](#); [Metzger 1955](#); [Hamilton 1977](#).

between the two has fueled several traditions of debate. The Apologetic tradition sought to equate Catholicism to its pagan predecessors, and distance Protestantism from any taint of pagan association. The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* of the late 19th century either affirmed the derivation of Christian concepts and rites from the traditional cults, or argued for the mysteries as preparation for Christianity. Neither approach to comparison, as Smith notes, is ‘innocent’; their potential to cast light on ancient cultures is subordinate to their polemical use.¹² They are methodologically flawed, as they rely on implicit models of either identity or incomparability; the data are decontextualized, and referred to in generalizing terms. In anthropology, in contrast, the value of comparanda is heuristic rather than historical. A second cultural context broadens the base for the testing of models, and also may help destabilize the unexamined paradigms an investigator may bring to the field. This leads to a productive reformulation and testing of models, which are meant to change over time, as indeed the cultures and objects of study are understood to develop.

This capacity for scholarly models to change over time is what most distinguishes comparative work in Classics from the anthropological tradition. As is often the case when one field borrows from another, Classics has characteristically appealed to anthropology’s seminal authors and models, but failed to engage with the subsequent work which tested and modified those propositions.¹³ Evolutionary models, for example, came under fire in anthropological communities as early as the 1890s for their rigid unilinearity. Application to specific social and historical contexts have yielded more nuanced models, in which the complexity of cultures once deemed primitive plays a central role.¹⁴ The older model, however, often holds sway in Classics, where ‘primitive’ cultures may be summoned as reasonable analogies for data which is missing from the lacunous Greek past.¹⁵ Such comparanda

¹² Smith 1990: 25, 34 41 *et passim*.

¹³ see MacGaffey, this volume; Leitao 2003: 110.

¹⁴ Apter 1991; Sienkewicz 1991: 184; Lewis 1998: 713; see also Sanderson 1995.

¹⁵ Lévêque, 1978; Lamberg 1990; Jeanmaire 1939: 7-8, 156-161 addressed the question of comparison between Greek and non-urban, traditional cultures; the conversation was further developed by Brelich 1961, 1969. Graf 2003 notes the persistence of a reductive approach to comparanda; Loraux 1993: 4 observes the tendency for comparative studies to be restricted to the search for origins of Greek cultural institutions in the Near East, and cites examples from 1929 to

would seem particularly unhelpful for the mysteries, both because of their floruit into late antiquity, and the sophistication of the cultural forms through which we study them: philosophy, poetry, drama, architecture.¹⁶ These stand at an impossible remove from the ethnographic subject as the traditional classicist imagined him.

This impossible remove, however, is more apparent than real— not only because of the sophistication of cultures once deemed primitive, but because of theoretical bases developed specifically for the study of secrecy. These have developed over the past 100 years, beginning with Georg Simmel's seminal essay in 1908. They provide a theoretical framework capable of embracing data from widely divergent cultures - urban and non-urban, literate and non-literate, as well as ancient and modern. Secrecy, Simmel argued, is more than keeping silent. It is a strategy of communication, which employs the categories specific to its cultural setting, including spoken, graphic and written conventions. These conventions, and the deployment of secrecy, respond to historical eventualities and reflect perennial cultural needs, making secrecy a valuable avenue for cultural investigations. At the same time, the cross-cultural consistencies of secrecy as a human practice make it a useful framework for comparative studies. Classicists seeking insight from the anthropological world may find as much in methodology as they do in corroborating data.¹⁷

The hypothesis that Classics and anthropology could find common ground in the mysteries provided the impetus for a conference held at Emory University in Spring of 2002. The conference was a practical experiment in interdisciplinarity. Rather than ask Classicists to incorporate anthropological perspectives in their papers, anthropologists were invited to the conference, where they presented research based on their own fieldwork. The juxtaposition of papers, and the presentation of responses from the opposite discipline, provided the interdisciplinary element. The discussion was lively, unpredictable, and characterized by astonishment at the depth and breadth of the disciplinary divide. It

1953; [Arens 1988](#) offers an anthropologist's positive reflection on the use of sociological models among those studying the Greek past.

¹⁶ Jane Harrison (1912: xxi) famously complained of her weariness at the crudity of primitive societies, which she endured only in order to gain new light on the more delectable bits from Greek antiquity.

¹⁷ Archaeology has taken up the question of secrecy both within and beyond the Mediterranean: see [Hastorf 2007](#); [Levy 2006:13](#); [Commence et al. 2006:788](#); [Peatfield 1994:153](#); [Blakely 2009](#).

seemed a good thing that anthropologists are used to studying cultures other than their own, and that classicists are comfortable addressing data which is difficult to decipher. A consensus emerged that these two academic cultures are so foreign to each other as to be nearly incomprehensible, and prospects for a fruitful union seemed dubious at best. In an academic age which praises interdisciplinarity, the reality of submitting one's discipline to the review of the other proved intimidating and perplexing, although, thanks to the grace and intelligence of the participants, a matter of good humor.

The conference thus foregrounded the challenges of interdisciplinarity, and illustrated why interactions between Classics and anthropology, numerous as they are, have not been more productive or sustained. The differences between the fields fall into three categories: the role of theory, the nature of the primary data, and the ability to address the realities of daily life. Strategies for addressing each of these suggest new ways of crossing the disciplinary divide; none of them require that scholars master the entire arsenal of theory, history, and method in the second field.

The most substantial distinction between the fields is the approach to theory. Classicists begin from the particular, anthropologists from the theoretical.¹⁸ The goal of the classicist is characteristically to cast light on a historical question; the more specific that question is, the more amenable it is to the kinds of data available for the study of the past, which often come from widely separated authors, eras and regions. As Holzhausen's paper demonstrates, these data must be presented with due attention to their distance from each other. Specificity is a sensible—and intellectually responsible—response to a fragmentary record, rather than attempting, as it were, to glue all sherds together into one enormous vase. The goal of the anthropologist, in contrast, is to use a specific culture to support the development of theory—testing, challenging and modifying models which constitute the framework for discussion in the field. The value of the models is not predicative, but heuristic—the extent to which they open new perspectives, stimulate questions and sharpen debate. Theoretical issues allow fruitful discussion to occur among anthropologists specializing in widely separate cultures. Because of this, a good anthropological paper will both provide an overview of the subject culture—the view from 30,000 feet—and position the article's contribution in anthropological thought, with respect to its

¹⁸ See MacGaffey, this volume; [Redfield 1991](#); [Humphreys 1978](#): 22.

intellectual genealogy as well as contemporary discussions. This dual responsibility—to cultural description, and to theory building—is the foundation of anthropological publications, and determines the style, tone and scope of papers in the discipline. Classicists who engage with anthropology would profitably begin by taking up these challenges, articulating clearly the setting of the topic in historical and geographical terms, and identifying the intellectual trajectories to which their discussion contributes. The latter would be of substantially more aid, to readers outside the discipline, than ad-hominem responses to other scholars.

A second distinction between the fields is the primary data. Classicists and anthropologists both work in the western intellectual tradition, but Classicists are the keepers of the *fons et origo* of the academy—the term, indeed, derived from the gymnasium named for the hero Akademos in classical Athens. Classicists thus remain within the Western tradition, and study a tradition they consider their own, while anthropologists step into a culture to which they are foreign.¹⁹ Both fields recognize the tensions resulting from the combination of closeness to and distance from the object of their study. The anthropologist's immersion into the subject culture is never complete, and the classicist is frequently aware of the distance occasioned by the fragmentary condition of the sources, the separation of the centuries, and—most definitional for the discipline—the textual form of the sources themselves. Broadly speaking, the anthropologist's avenue into a culture is human contact—the classicist's are texts. Peter Bing describes the jealousy a classicist feels when reading an anthropologist's paper: the anthropologist knows his informant by name, can walk with him through his landscape, and hear his stories as he tells them. The intimacy of such exchanges cannot be reproduced in the study of dead cultures. The closest analogy, as demonstrated in several of the papers in this volume, is the focus on literary genres, styles, and authors. Sarolta Takács' study of *The Golden Ass*, the only extant Roman novel, demonstrates how Apuleius' literary craftsmanship articulates the social reality of keeping secrets. Much is said, but nothing revealed, and the reader encounters, as do the novel's characters, the limitations of human perception and understanding. Holzhausen notes that Euripides is first and last a dramatist: his concerns for performance shape his presentation of the Bacchic cult, and scholars who hasten to liturgical conclusions based on his play are overlooking

¹⁹ [Redfield 1991](#): 6.

the nature of their source. Texts are the classicist's informants: while we cannot hear the authors' voices or see their gestures, the literary genres themselves were cultural constructions, artifacts created in response to their social and historical setting. Anthropologists seeking to work on ancient cultures could deepen their readings by engaging with the double filters of the author when identifiable, the genre in every case. This would open their work more fully to Classical readers, and provide a means for investigating a question—the rules which govern communication within the subject culture—which is essential to the anthropological project. Such a strategy could stimulate collaborative projects between anthropologists and classicists, the classicist acting as a guide through the tangled jungles of philological scholarship and literary theory. Redfield notes, of this conference, that the Classicists seem to have been summoned in order to learn something from the anthropologists. In a collaborative project of the type proposed, this type of interaction could yield to a more balanced exchange.

A third division between the disciplines concerns the significance of the quotidian. Beidelman, MacGaffey and Murphy all note the need to ground the analysis of symbol and ritual in day-to-day realities. Such a grounding is necessary if a scholarly argument is to be meaningful not just within the academy, but for the human subjects who inhabit the culture in question. For a classicist, however, the sources which have been preserved typically reflect the most elite cultural perspective. Choice as well as chance determined the composition of the surviving corpus of classical texts, and even apparently humble forms—pastoral poetry, Theokritos' idylls—come with a thick patina of learned constructions. The distance between the personal and the monumental is part of the distinction between anthropology and classics. The philological papers in this collection suggest two routes for closing that gap: engagement with non-canonical sources, and the integration of a broad range of data types. Nikolay Grintser engages himself in an activity much favored by his ancient subject culture—etymological analysis. He presents scientifically plausible etymologies but does not omit their popular, non-canonical counterparts, the folk and joke etymologies in which the ancient world was rich, and which convey most directly the conceptions of the common man. Jens Holzhausen traces the elements of his argument through their appearance in iconography, classical texts, sacred laws, priesthoods, and epigraphical records of associations. These demonstrate the saturation of these concepts into his subject culture, beyond narrow geographical and temporal limits.

Moving from a specific problem to a broader cultural perspective, this approach resonates with the anthropologist's concern, which Beidelman articulates, to identify certain patterns as characteristic of Greek culture, despite the centuries and regions which Greek civilization encompassed. Classical data, though elite and fragmentary, can support the investigation of the non-elite perspectives and persistent cultural patterns which inform anthropological study. The distinction between the fields, however, cannot be brushed away: more meaningful use of anthropological models in Classics will rely, in part, on recognizing that these models are constructed from the data of daily life, and valued for the degree to which they articulate those realities.

The conference thus suggested three new avenues toward cooperation and communication between these two disciplines. It also, in the final analysis, affirmed the hypothesis which inspired it: secrecy is a promising arena for comparative and collaborative research. This is less because of any single paper's contribution, than because of patterns which emerge from a conspectus of the papers. Scholars from both disciplines are in substantial agreement on the fundamentals of the study of secrecy. They approach it as a social practice, rather than a matter of contents to be revealed; they also share a concern for two distinct categories of social practice: institutions, and patterns of speech. Kaguru, Kimpassi and Kpelle initiations show formal hierarchies comparable to the cults of Isis, Eleusis and Dionysos. Speech and semantics play a central role in McGaffey, Beidelman and Auslander's papers, and are the natural infrastructure for the philological contributions. Both disciplines, in addition, consider the relationship between secrecy and the social practices of craft, priesthoods, and gender distinctions. These categories and questions offer promising frameworks for well-focused comparative, even collaborative studies in the future.

As secrecy is a social process, it is appropriate that a collection devoted to it present a crystallization of the process through which these fields investigate secrecy, on the one hand, and also view each other. The two efforts are not unrelated. The conference was convened so that the two disciplines could become less obscure, certainly less deliberately veiled, to each other. What we determined, by the conference's end, was that do have secrets we keep, if unknowingly. In order to open that *kiste*—we had to first identify that it existed.

SUMMARY OF PAPERS

In his keynote address, *Anthropology and the Fate of the Soul*, James Redfield notes that anthropologists have had little interest in the mysteries, largely because the rites' eschatological focus has no role in the kinds of cultures anthropologists typically investigate. Mysteries, focused on the individual's concern for the afterlife, are essentially anti-social when contrasted with funerary rites, which allow society as a whole to resolve the ambivalence of a person departed in fact, but lingering in memory. These positions emerged in the work of Herz and Rohde, an anthropologist and a classicist working some 100 years ago. The anti-social character of mysteries could be overcome: Eleusis flourished in part because it effectively separated the mysteries from Athenian life, and mysteries flourished in Greek communities less bound by tradition, the colonies of the far west and the Black Sea. The flourish of the mysteries in these regions demonstrates the extent to which ritual forms respond to social context. In the sixth century BCE, the time of the mysteries' invention, this context included the emergence of rationalism, as defined in sociology, and charismatic leadership. Both of these represent a break from tradition, and may be viewed as steps toward a kind of first modernism in Archaic and Classical Greece. This 'modernism' is a more natural focus for sociology than for anthropology, given the traditional focus of the latter on the earliest forms of social development. Suitable as sociology may be for pursuing the mysteries, however, its theories must be applied with care: Athens remains a substantial remove from modernity as we know it, and sociological theory offers no easy fixes for the investigation of antiquity.

Jens Holzhausen addresses the venerable argument within Classics that Euripides' *Bacchae* is a reliable guide to the mysteries of Dionysos. He argues that the allusions in the play to *oreibasia*, *sparagmos*, *omophagia* and mystic rites, placed in the context of other ancient sources for these practices, fail to suggest a fifth century ritual reality in which all were combined. *Oreibasia* is not clearly connected to the mysteries, nor was it, in practice, conducted by women only; *sparagmos* is not clearly combined with both mysteries and Orphism until the Hellenistic period. Fragment 471 from Euripides' *Cretans* offers a new possibility for correspondence between Euripides' text, ritual practice and Dionysiac myth. The fragment speaks of the 'performance of thunder'; the concept resonates with Dionysos' violent birth by

lightning, to which Euripides refers in other plays. Euripides freely combined disparate Dionysiac rituals to serve his dramaturgical needs: he is first a playwright, only secondarily (at best) a historian of religion. The scholarly drive to reconstruct a ritual reality, however, has often blinded us to this fact. Euripides is no more impartial a guide to the mysteries than *Parsival* would be to the Eucharist.

Sarolta Takács takes up Apuleius' novel *The Golden Ass*, or *Metamorphoses*, considered as vital a source for the mysteries of Isis as Euripides is for those of Dionysos. Arguments in favor of the novel as a source for the mysteries have viewed it through a number of critical lenses, finding comparanda in Christianity, neo-Platonism, and theology. Takács approaches the text and these arguments from a new angle, based on a close analysis of the narratological techniques and the critique of epistemology which runs throughout the novel. Lucius' shifting form, from man to ass and back again through the grace of Isis, embodies the realities of the initiate's liminal state. Metamorphosis was already a popular literary theme in Rome, where Ovid's *Metamorphoses* had wide readership. Apuleius undergirds the narrative with a constantly shifting dichotomy between perception and reality. This grants the reader access to the experience and the emotion of the author-actor who is the novel's center, so that boundaries are broken between the real and fictional worlds. The most critical boundary, however, remains—that between the initiate and the non-initiate. The combination of apparently permeable categories with persistent cognitive inadequacy ensures that the secrecy of the rites remains intact.

In *What did Mysteries Mean to Ancient Greeks?*, Nikolay Grintser opens up a third cornerstone of the classicist's approach to the question of the mysteries: the etymology of the word 'mystery' itself. The term has long been derived from stems meaning 'to keep silent' and 'to keep the eyes closed;' other etymologies, however, were known and discussed in antiquity, including a stem which has received very little scholarly attention to date: the mouse. This tiny rodent offers an enormous semantic range, which is surprisingly and thoroughly apt for the fertility rituals, cults of the dead, and mysteries as we understand them, combining crops, the earth, the underworld, magic and prophecy, blindness, sexuality and progeny. The use of mice in religious contexts from Hittite, Asia Minor, Slavic and Germanic contexts demonstrates that these connections are not unique to Greece, but may be traced through many examples of Indo-European civilizations. The mouse' association with mysteries has been little explored in scholarship, and in

fact in antiquity was dismissed as a joke. This dismissal itself, as well as the intricacy of its semantic realm, suggests it was all the more suitable for rites whose contents stayed hidden, even while their reality informed the most public of displays—including Aristophanes' comic chorus, Grintser's last and most provocative example.

In *The Ritual Person as Subject or Object in Ancient Greece and Central Africa*, Wyatt MacGaffey critiques the argument that the focus on the individual most distinguished the mysteries from other ritual experiences. The contemporary concept of the individual is a creation of Western critical paradigms, based in the Cartesian construction of an autonomous person opposed to the social collective. This opposition, though foundational for the social sciences, is not recognized in all cultures, and is demonstrably inadequate for the Kongo. Kongo cultures identify the individual through four matrilineal clans, and four parts: the body; an animating force; the personality, which inhabits the land of the dead until it is forgotten; and the anonymous *simbi* spirit. This *simbi* can be incarnated in a *nkisi*, a created object which is animated when the focus of social relations, a mere object when neglected. The *nkisi* has volition, however, beyond its social role, as it is able to attack, summon, or display emotion. Kimpasi initiations are rites of passage. While the young are the ostensible focus, the rites are not made available to all youth, and much of the rituals' force is devoted to affirming the authority of the elders and responding to local crises. Brück's relational model of personhood, in which identity is realized in social relations, is a more suitable paradigm for this ritual than one relying on a simple bifurcation between individual and collective. The individual proposed as the focus of the Greek mysteries is similarly problematic; he emerges naturally from evolutionary models in Classical scholarship and modern Protestant ideas of religiosity, but has only slender attestation in the ancient sources for the rites. The closest analogy would be the intellectuals, whose writings are a primary sources for the ancient mysteries, but who can hardly be considered a typical initiate or an adequate representation of the many thousands who experienced initiation. Greek mysteries and Kimpasi initiations thus share a lack of centrality for the individual who has been proposed in both cases as the focus of ritual action.

Thomas Beidelman, in *African and Classical Secrecy and Disclosure: The Kaguru of East Africa and the Ancient Greeks*, uses his fieldwork among the Kaguru of East Africa to propose approaches to secrecy in Greek contexts from Homer to Classical Athens. Among the Kaguru, management of information about persons is essential to one's

affairs. The most significant object of secrecy is sexuality, which is linked to kinship, resources of land, labor, and ancestors, and may bind an individual to competing loyalties. This network of associations is what makes sex powerful, and so a matter of secrecy. Its facts, however, are widely known. The secrets of sexuality which are revealed in puberty initiations are twofold: the rules and etiquette for speaking about sexuality, and the full semantic force of the symbols which refer to sexuality in daily Kaguru life. These rules may be ignored by so-called joking relations, who are at liberty to speak things otherwise unutterable. Greek culture shows an analogous connection between sexuality, reproductive power, and core cultural values: sexuality is central to rituals which both apply special rules of secrecy, and suspend ordinary principles of discretion. Perennial Greek concerns for honor, the separation of genders, competitiveness, and the risk of public shame create a context in which one seeks to conceal damaging information about one's self. Women, characteristically marginalized from civic life, were nevertheless needed to make the system work. Dramas, mourning rituals, mystery cults, and civic festivals became occasions on which their ordinarily veiled lives became a matter of public disclosure. As in Kaguru initiation, the contents of the Greek mysteries consisted of quite ordinary things. Their narration, and analysis of the tensions and problems of every day affairs, was the key to their power.

William Murphy, in *Geometry and Grammar of Mystery: Ancient Mystery Religions and West African Secret Societies*, defines mystery as the "known unknown" which evokes wonder, and secrecy as the social practice of setting aside something as mysterious. He offers two critical concepts for building a framework for the comparison of Greek mysteries and Liberian secret societies. A geometry of secrecy, drawing on Simmel, traces the patterns generated in human relations by the act of keeping a secret; a grammar of secrecy is the network of rules which, in Wittgenstein's sense, determine which linguistic moves make sense. These may be combined to yield a broad social theory of knowledge concerned with relations of social hierarchy, social control, and differential access to knowledge. One may specify a set of features which are variables in an abstract model; use these to test historical and ethnographic reality; and consider similarities and differences. Applying this model to ancient Greece and to the Kpelle of Liberia, Murphy demonstrates common concerns for the relationship of secrecy to political power, social hierarchy, and authoritative speech. Mysteries emerge as a system of meanings, centered on a social object, whose signs

must be explained by an authoritative interlocutor. Mysteries are, first and last, a matter of social relations: at the core of the mysteries is the relationship of the individual to society. They may be ranked as one of the major abstract social questions, along with Power, Work, and Beauty; the task of the anthropologist is to link these to concrete social life.

Mark Auslander, in *Going by the Trees: Death and Regeneration in Georgia's Haunted Landscapes*, draws an analogy between contemporary responses to the history of lynching and the function of the ancient mystery cults. Within the African American communities of the semi-rural south, trees embody both the memories of family tradition and community violence. Women characteristically recall the redemptive associations of the trees, root-working and folk medicine, and the nearly universally attested metaphor of the trees as a model for kinship groups. Men, in contrast, hold more ambivalent feelings, as the trees recall the lynchings which reduced men to the status of animals, and the slavery which rendered their own genealogies unclear. These darker memories are often unspoken: their secret contents haunt the landscape in the psychoanalytical sense of unresolved contradictions. Trees evoke simultaneous identification with and distance from the generation of the parents and their battles with Jim Crow. Contemporary attempts to confront these repressed associations offer analogy to the ancient mysteries, as they seek to move across the boundaries of life and death, visible and invisible, and regenerate personal and collective vitality. The ritualistic quality of these attempts is reflected by the emergence of witnessing, a genre of narrative beyond fiction and non-fiction, in which truth is infused with images of transformation, cyclical passage between life and death, and final prophetic vision. Artistic expression, community memorials, and activities including the cleaning and restoration of African American cemeteries may be characterized as rituals of inversion which respond to this haunted reality.

Peter Bing offers a response, noting the classicist's wonder and distance from the anthropological project. Classical tree-lore shows striking parallels to the semantic ranges of the American South: the olive tree on the Athenian acropolis, the miraculous cornel-tree on the Palatine, the living tree built into Odysseus' bed. There are notable differences, however: the source of animation for the ancient trees is female, and the trees are typically the locus of death for women rather than men; except when fashioned into a cross for crucifixion, ancient trees have none of the associations with the dead which characterize their African American counterparts. Perhaps most striking is the total lack of

evidence with regard to trees for the social practices of secrecy, through which the trees articulate both pride and protection of their deep semantic range. Ancient material does not seem to share in the urgency of contemporary life, or the emergence of new rituals seeking to reconcile restless memory. As the tale of the true cross demonstrates, however, the images so resonant in contemporary life often have their own roots in the continuing transformation of an ancient reality.

Mark Risjord provides an afterword to the conference in *Surveying the Mysteries: Epistemological Reflections on Multidisciplinary Inquiry*. Risjord uses the metaphor of triangulation, which behavioral and health sciences have borrowed from the practice of surveying. Methodological triangulation involves the multiplication of analytical techniques; it is distinguished from theoretical triangulation, in which multiple conceptual frameworks are brought to bear. Both types of triangulation were already at work, though not formally announced, in the papers presented at the conference. MacGaffey uses theoretical triangulation to change the kinds of questions one can ask of the data; Grintser, through methodological triangulation, opens our eyes to the validity of formerly ignored hypotheses from folk etymologies. Triangulation may also undermine a thesis, and challenge long-held views. Stimulating arguments, it clarifies the nature of the questions asked and the unexamined prejudices of the investigators, and so may lead to more meaningful investigations. Risjord cautions that such projects should be undertaken only reflectively: they rely on a willingness to engage in the analysis of one's own inquiry, a process which is as challenging as it is promising.

WORKS CITED

- Ackerman, R. 2002. *The Myth and Ritual School*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Apter, A. 1991. "The Embodiment of Paradox: Yoruba Kingship and Female Power." *Cultural Anthropology* 6(2): 212-229.
- Arens, W. 1988. "An Anthropological Approach to Ritual: Evidence, Context and Interpretation." In R. Hägg, N. Marinatos and G.C. Nordquist, ed.s, *Early Greek Cult Practice*. Stockholm: Paul Aströms Förlag. pp. 223-228.
- Beck, R. 1984. "Mithraism since Franz Cumont," *ANRW* II.17.4: 2002-2115.
- Beidelman, T.O. 1989. "Agonistic Exchange: Homeric Reciprocity and the Heritage of Simmel and Mauss." *Cultural Anthropology* 4(3): 227-259.
- Bettini, M. 1991. *Anthropology and Roman Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Blakely, S. 2009. "Toward an archaeology of secrecy: power, paradox, and the Great Gods of Samothrace." in Y. Rowan, ed., *Beyond Belief: The Archaeology of Religion and Ritual*, Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropology Association, vol. 19 (forthcoming)
- _____, 2007. "Pherekydes' Daktyloi: ritual, technology, and the Presocratic Perspective." *Kernos* 20: 43-67
- _____, 2006. *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy in Ancient Greece and Recent Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Boman, T. 1952. *Das hebräische Denken im Vergleich mit dem Griechischen*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Brelich, A. 1969. *Paides e Parthenoi*. Rome: Edizione dell'Ateneo.
- _____, 1961. "The Historical Development of the Institution of Initiation in the Classical Ages." *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 9: 267-283.
- Bremmer, J.N. 1995. 'Religious Secrets and Secrecy in Classical Greece.' In H.G. Kippenberg and G.G. Stroumsa, ed.s, *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*. Leiden: Brill. pp. 61-78.
- _____, 1983. "Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece." *HSCP* 87: 299-320.

- Burkert, W. 2004. "Initiation." In *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum*, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum; Basel: Fondation pour le lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae. pp. 91-124.
- _____, 2001. *Savage Energies: lessons of myth and ritual in ancient Greece*, tr. P. Bing. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____, 1995. "Der geheime Reiz des Verborgenen: Antike Mysterienkulte." In H.G. Kippenberg and G.G. Stroumsa, eds., *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*. Leiden: Brill. pp. 79-100.
- _____, 1987. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Calame, C. 1999. "Indigenous and Modern Perspectives on Tribal Initiation Rites: Education According to Plato," in M.W. Padilla, ed., *Rites of Passage in Ancient Greece: Literature, Religion, Society*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press. pp. 278-312.
- Cartledge, P. 1995. "The Greeks and Anthropology." *Classics Ireland 2*: 17-28.
- _____, 1993. *The Greeks. A portrait of Self and Others*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cartledge, P., Millett, P., and Todd, S. (eds.). 1990. *NOMOS. Essays in Athenian Law, Society and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Charachidzé, G. *Prométhée ou le Caucase*. Paris: Payot, 1986
- Chaumartin, F.R. 1977. "Le rapport de l'homme au monde dans les cultures négro-africaines et gréco-romaine." In *Langues, Littérature, histoire anciennes. Mélanges LS. Senghor*. Dakar: Les Nouvelles Éd. Africaines. pp. 55-78.
- Cohen, D. 1991. *Law, Sexuality and Society. The enforcement of morals in Classical Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cole, T. 1967 (1990) *Democritus and the sources of Greek anthropology*. Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press.
- Colpe, C. 1975. "Mithras-Verehrung, Mithras-Kult und die Existenz Iranischer Mysterien." In J.R. Hinnels, ed., *Mithraic Studies: Proceedings of the First Internatioal Congress of Mithriac Studies*. pp. 378-405.
- Commenge, C., T.E. Levy, D. Alon, and E. Kansa. 2006. "Gilat's Figurines: Exploring the Social and Symbolic Dimensions of Representation." In T. Levy, ed., *Archaeology, Anthropology and Cult: The Sanctuary at Gilat, Israel*. London: Equinox. pp. 739-830.
- de Coulange, F. 1864. *La cité antique*. Paris: Durand.

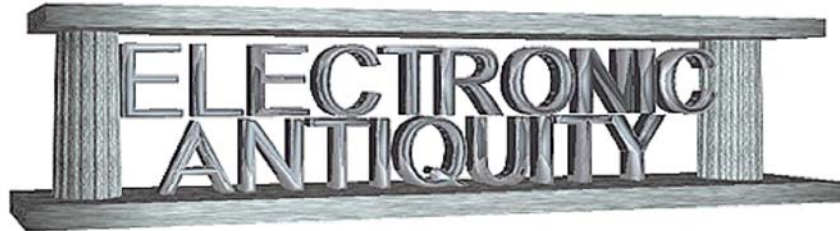
- Detienne, M. 2007. *The Greeks and Us: A Comparative Anthropology of Ancient Greece*, tr. J. Lloyd. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- _____, 2001. "Back to the village: a tropism of Hellenists?" *History of Religions* 41 (2): 99-113. (in French, "Rentrer au village: un tropisme de l'hellénisme?" *L'Homme* (157): 137-150.)
- Dodd, D.B. and C.A. Faraone, ed.s. 2003. *Initiation in ancient Greek rituals and narratives: new critical perspectives*. New York: Routledge.
- Dyson, S.J. 1993. "From New to New Age Archaeology: Archaeological Theory and Classical Archaeology—A 1990s Perspective." *AJA* 97 (2): 195-206.
- Ellinger, P. 1984. "Vingt ans de recherches sur les mythes dans la domaine de l'antiquité grecque." *REA* 86: 7-29.
- Ferguson, E. 2003. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (3rd edition). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Finley, M. 1971. "Anthropology and the Classics." In M.I. Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History*. New York: Viking Press. pp. 102-119.
- Fogelin, L. 2007. "The Archaeology of Religious Ritual." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36:55-71.
- Geoffrey, A.W. 1989. "Neuchung: A Modern Parallel to the Delphic Oracle?" *Greece & Rome* 36: 152-157.
- Gernet, L. 1981. *The Anthropology of Ancient Greece*, tr. J. Hamilton and B. Nagy. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Girard, R. 1972. *La violence et le sacré*. Paris: Grasset.
- Gouldner, A.W. 1965. *Enter Plato: classical Greece and the origins of social theory*. New York: Basic Books.
- Graf, F. 2003. "Initiation: a concept with a troubled history." In D. Dodd and C. Faraone, ed.s, *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives: New Critical Perspectives*. London: Routledge. pp. 3-24.
- Hamerton-Kelly, R.G. 1987. *Violent Origins. Walter Burkert, René Girard, and Jonathan Z. Smith on Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hamilton, J.D.B. 1977. "The Church and the Language of Mystery: The First Four Centuries." *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 53: 479-494.
- Harrison, J. 1912. *Themis: a study of the social origins of Greek religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hastorf, C. 2007. "Archaeological Andean Rituals: Performance, Liturgy, and Meaning." In E. Kyriakidis, ed., *The Archaeology of Ritual*. Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology. pp. 77-108.

- van den Heever, G.A. 2005. *Loose Fictions and Frivolous Fabrications”: Ancient Fiction and the Mystery Religions of the Early Imperial Era*. Dissertation, University of South Africa.
- Henderson, J. 1993. “Introduction.” In F.M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, ed. T.H. Gaster. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. pp. xi-xxiii.
- Humphreys, S. 1978. *Anthropology and the Greeks*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Jameson, M. 1994. “Response.” In I. Morris, ed., *Classical Greece: Ancient Histories and Modern Archaeologies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 48-16.
- Jeanmaire, H. 1939. *Couroi et Courètes: essai sur l’éducation spartiate et sur les rites d’adolescence dans ‘antiquité hellénique*. Lille: Bibliothèque universitaire.
- Kippenberg, H.G., and G.G. Stroumsa. 1995. “Introduction: Secrecy and its Benefits.” In H.G. Kippenberg and G.G. Stroumsa, ed.s, *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*. Leiden: Brill. pp. xiii-xxiv.
- Klauck, H-J. 2000. *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, tr. B. McNeil. Edinburgh; T&T Clark.
- Kluckhohn, C. 1961. *Anthropology and the Classics*. Providence: Brown University Press.
- Konstan, D. 1981. “An anthropology of Euripides’ *Cyclops*.” *Ramus* 10: 87-103.
- Kyriakidis, E., ed. 2007. *The Archaeology of Ritual*. Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology.
- Lamberg, M. 1990. “Nomkhubulwana: The Zulu Demeter.” *Akroterion* 35: 46-59.
- Leitao D. 2003. “Adolescent Hair-growing and Hair-cutting rituals in Ancient Greece: A sociological approach.” in D. Dodd and C. Faraone, ed.s, *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives: New Critical Perspectives*. London: Routledge. pp. 109-129.
- Lévêque, P. 1978. “Religions africains et religion grecque: pour une analyse des ideologies religieuses.” In *Afrique noire et monde méditerranéen dans l’antiquité, Colloque de Dakar: 19-24 janvier 1976*. Dakar-Abidjan: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines. pp. 196-231.
- Levy, T.E. 2006. “Archaeology, Anthropology and Cult: Exploring Religion in Formative Middle Range Societies.” in T. Levy, ed.,

- Archaeology, Anthropology and Cult: The Sanctuary at Gilat, Israel.* London: Equinox. pp. 3-33.
- Lewis, H.S. 1998. "The Misrepresentation of Anthropology and its Consequences." *American Anthropologist* n.s. 100 (3): 716-731.
- Lloyd, G.E.R. 2006. *Principles and practices in ancient Greek and Chinese science.* Aldershot England, Burlington, VT; Ashgate/Variorum.
- _____, 2004. *Ancient worlds, modern reflections: philosophical perspectives on Greek and Chinese science and culture.* Oxford: The Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____, 2002. *The ambitions of curiosity: understanding the world in ancient Greece and China.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- _____, 1996. *Adversaries and authorities; investigations into ancient Greek and Chinese science.* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- _____, 1978. "Classicists and their Kin." *TLS* Oct. 27, 1266.
- Loraux, N. 1993. *The children of Athena: Athenian ideas about citizenship and the division between the sexes*, tr. C. Levine. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Lyons, C.L. and J.K. Papadopoulos, 2002. "Archaeology and Colonialism." In C.L. Lyons and J.K. Papadopoulos, ed.s, *The Archaeology of Colonialism.* Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute. pp. 1-23.
- Maine, H.S. 1861. *Ancient Law.* London: John Murray
- Marett, R.R. 1908. *Anthropology and the Classics.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Maurizio, L. 1995. "Anthropology and spirit possession: a reconsideration of the Pythia's role at Delphi." *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115: 69-86.
- Metzger, B.M. 1955. "Considerations of Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions and Early Christianity." *Harvard Theological Review* 48 (1): 1-20.
- Miller, J-C. 1987. "Mythologie et sacrifice." *L'Homme* 104: 76-89.
- Morgan, L.H. 1878. *Ancient Society.* New York: H. Holt.
- Morris, I. 1994. "Archaeologies of Greece." In I. Morris, ed., *Classical Greece: Ancient Histories and Modern Archaeologies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 8-47.
- Peatfield, A. 1994. "Cognitive Aspects of Religious Symbolism: An Archaeologist's Perspective." *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 4:149-155.

- Redfield, J. 1991. "Classics and Anthropology." *Arion*, 3rd series, 1.2: 5-23.
- _____, 1983. review of L. Gernet, *The Anthropology of Ancient Greece*. *American Journal of Philology* 104(4): 398-403.
- Roller, L. 1999. *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rudolph, K. 1992 "Das frühe Christentum als religionsgeschichtliches Phänomen." In K. Rudolph, ed. *Geschichte und Probleme der Religionswissenschaft*. Leiden: Brill. pp. 301-320.
- Sanderson, S.K. 1995. *Social transformations: a general theory of historical development*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell.
- Segal, R.A. ed. 1998. *The Myth and Ritual Theory: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sienkewicz, T.J. 1991. "The Greeks Are Indeed like the Others: Myth and Society in the West African Sunjata." In D.C. Pozzi and J.M. Wickersam, ed.s, *Myth and the Polis*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 182-202.
- Smith, J.Z. 1990. *Drudgery Divine: On The Comparison of Early Christianites and teh Religions of Late Antiquity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Snodgrass, A.J. 1994. "Response: the archaeological aspect." In I. Morris, ed., *Classical Greece: Ancient Histories and Modern Archaeologies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 197-200.
- _____, 1987. *An Archaeology of Greece: the present state and future scope of a discipline*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Strenski, I. 1996. "The Rise of Ritual and the Hegemony of Myth: Sylvain Lévi, the Durkheimians, and Max Müller." In L. Patton and W. Doniger, ed.s, *Myth and Method*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia. pp. 52-81.
- Svenbro.J. 1993. *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece*. Tr. J. Lloyd. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Tsetsckhladze, G.R. 2006. "Introduction: Revisiting Ancient Greek Colonization." In G.R. Tsetsckhladze, ed., *Greek Colonisation: An account of Greek colonies and other settlements overseas*. Vol. 1. Brill: Leiden. pp. xxiii- lxxxiii.
- Valeri, V. 1981. review of Humphreys, *Anthropology and the Greeks*. *Classical Philology* 76 (1): 63-66.
- Versnel, H.S. 1990a. "What's Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander: Myth and Ritual, Old and New." In L. Edmunds, ed.,

- Approaches to Greek Myth*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. pp. 23-90.
- _____, 1990b. *Ter Unus: Isis, Dionysos, Hermes: Three studies in henotheism*. Leiden: Brill.
- Vidal-Naquet, P. 1986. *The Black Hunter*, tr. A. Szegedy-Maszak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wedderburn, A.J.M. 1982. "Paul and the Hellenistic Mystery Cults." In U. Bianchi and M.J. Vermaseren, ed.s, *La Soteriologia dei Culti Orientali nell'Impero Romano*. Leiden: Brill. pp. 817-833.
- Wiens, D.H. 1980. "Mystery Concepts in Primitive Christianity and Its Environment." *ANRW II* 23.2: 1248-1284.
- Woronoff, M. and F. Foeet. 1974. "Parallélismes et convergences des structures initiatiques dans les civilisations de l'Afrique noire et de la Grèce antique." *Annales de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaine de l'Université de Dakar* (Paris) 4: 17-43.
- Wyatt, W. 1988. "Anthropology and the Classics." *New England Classical Newsletter* 15 (3): 13-22.



ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE FATE OF THE SOUL

James Redfield, University of Chicago

jmredfie@uchicago.edu

This conference brings together classicists and anthropologists for a discussion on ancient mystery cults. To me it falls to open these proceedings. I am certainly no anthropologist and I suppose something of an outlier as a classicist; as one between the groups it is evidently my role is to play the margin and mediate between the parties. Before beginning, let me observe that I suffer under the rhetorical disability of speaking to two disparate audiences; when I find myself explaining something anthropological to the classicists I'm liable to display to the anthropologists my naïveté, while the classical material included for the information of the anthropologists is liable to grate on the classicists as overly familiar. A glance at the handout will reveal that it rounds up the usual suspects. I ask the indulgence of both groups.

I begin with an observation that these two groups are not symmetrically arranged around the topic; ancient mystery cults belong to Classics, and it seems evident that the anthropologists are here to teach the classicists something. The first thing I have to say, however, is this: the anthropological literature, so far as I have read it, has next to nothing to contribute on this topic. Once I have explained this point—which will take me a while—I am then going to go on to suggest that an anthropological way of thinking may after all be of some use here—although, for reasons I shall explain, the term “sociological” is perhaps to be preferred.

For the purposes of this argument I am defining a mystery cult as a cult which offers initiates a better fate in the afterlife. I understand that this is a highly contentious definition, that the mysteries of Samothrace, for instance, by this definition might not even qualify. However I am

interested in mysteries from this point of view, and I am taking as my starting point these familiar lines from the *Hymn to Demeter*:

ὄλβιος ὅς τὰδ' ὄρωρεν ἐριχθονίων ἀνθρώρων
ὅς δ' ἀτελής ἱερῶν, ὅς τ' ἄμορος, οὐ ροθ' ὁμοίων
αἴσαν ἔχει φθίμενός περ ὑπὸ ζόφωι εὐρώεντι.

Prosperous that earth-dwelling human who has seen these things;
But he who is imperfect in the sacred, who is without share,
has never
A portion of similar things, once perished down in the wide darkness.

Hymn to Demeter 480-483

“These things” in the Hymn are the Eleusinian mysteries; Eleusis was the mother sanctuary of Greek mystery religion—honored above all others, says Pausanias, as much as a god excels a hero (10.31.11) and widely imitated. Pausanias mentions sanctuaries derivative from Eleusis in Phlius (2.14.12), Pheneia (8.15.2-4) and Megalopolis (8.31.7), and there were surely others; “Eleusina” is an epiklesis of Demeter in several places (Pausanias 3.20.5, 9.4.3).

Eleusis, further, certainly promised a better afterlife. Aristophanes in his play about the underworld actually brings the initiates on stage, dancing by torchlight into the sacred meadow, and lets them boast their special fate:

μόνοις γὰρ ἡμῖν ἥλιοςθή
καὶ φέγγος ἱερὸν ἔστιν,
ὅσοι μεμυήμεθηεὐσεβῆ τε διήγομενθή
τρόπον περὶ τοὺς ξένουςθή
καὶ τοὺς ἰδιώτας.

We alone have the sun and the sacred light, we who are initiate and have kept a godly disposition toward strangers and the little people.

Aristophanes *Frogs* 454-459

Certainly the Eleusinian mysteries promised advantages in this world also, but their main thrust was always eschatological. And that is why anthropology does not help us with them. The main work of

anthropology until recently at least has been inquiry into preliterate societies, and preliterate societies do not seem to entertain the notion of personal immortality, at least not in the sense which I am about to specify. Indeed from an anthropological point of view it is confusing to call Greek mystery cults “initiations,” since anthropologists generally use the term for coming-of-age ceremonies or for rituals of admission to some secret society (there is some overlap between the two) and for these, worldly advantages are the whole point. An initiation (anthropologically) is one type of rite of passage, and as such brings with it a new worldly status.

Another type of rite of passage, which does have next-world implications, is the funeral. Let us briefly sample the anthropological literature, taking up an essay now about a century old: Robert Hertz’s “A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death.”¹ Hertz draws on a variety of field reports and focuses on reburial, a custom found in many parts of the world whereby the funeral is double, with an opening phase at the time of death and a concluding phase considerably—years, even—later. During the intervening period the soul of the departed lingers close to the earth, and is dangerous; the survivors are in mourning, entangled with the deceased, and may be socially segregated. Only after the final ceremony of permanent burial does the soul depart for the land of the dead; the survivors are then set free and can resume normal life. Hertz saw the pattern of this sequence (*avant le lettre*) as Van Gennep’s familiar three parts: separation, liminality, and reaggregation;² he further saw that not only are the mourners reaggregated but so is the departed—into a new social status, that of an ancestor. With permanent burial, Hertz asserts, the dead become respectable and we are reconciled with them. This is a transfiguration, and it implies a resurrection—sometimes literal, in the sense that the soul will be reborn in a new person; sometimes sociological, in the sense that the living person who is lost to us returns as a powerful ancestor, possibly the object of cult. In any case society cannot lose any of the persons who compose it. The dead are obviously gone but at the same time they remain; this must be a transformation, the acquisition of a new social status. The funeral therefore is an initiation.

That concludes my summary of Hertz. I would add that the survival of the dead is a culture universal, and must be so because it is

¹ Hertz 1960: 27-86.

² Van Gennep 1960 [1908]: 10-11 and *passim*.

empirical and undeniable: the departed linger in our thoughts, they shape our feelings and actions. They can disappear as individuals but must survive socially; they persist *to others*. Rituals cope with this fact. Through the process of the funeral the dead go away—nearly everyone seems to have some idea of a land of the dead—and at the same time they are restored to us as members of a group with whom we can have stable relations. Probably the prospect of this double transformation was sometimes consoling to individuals—to leave descendents, a monument, and unforgettable story—but that did not make it a concept of personal immortality. Personal immortality is a personal project, something to look forward to or fear as a personal experience, shaped by choices made in life. This is rather social immortality, or rather social continuation, a life after death which is actually not eternal because it is meaningful only as long as the living continue the social relation. Most often the great-grandfathers—whom the Greeks called *tritopateres*—are still with us, but the generations before them are faded into a generalized space of origins.

I now proceed to a transition from anthropology to Classics by setting next to Hertz a monograph roughly contemporary with his: Erwin Rohde's *Psyche*.³ In the first part of this two-part book Rohde discusses two contrasting ideas: the Homeric afterlife, where the dead persist insubstantially in Hades, powerless twittering shades – except for a privileged few who avoid death altogether and are translated to the Isles of the Blessed or some similar location beyond our reach – and in contrast with this, the notion of the powerful hero who survives in a cave, or as the presiding spirit of a tomb, or in some other way. Being German, Rohde wants to see these two as related by some kind of historical development; he has, however, considerable difficulty in working out the chronology, since he wants to put hero cult before Homer, although Homer is his earliest source. We need not trouble ourselves with this problem: we can rather see the two as the two halves of Hertz's double transformation: Homer speaks of the departure of the dead, hero cult of their transfigured persistence. Gregory Nagy further suggests that the epic emphasizes departure in order to insist on that special kind of persistence which the epic itself provides: “a song for men to come,” and excludes hero cult because, being associated with the hero's tomb, it is inherently local, contrary to the pan-Hellenic

³ Rohde 1925 (1893).

aspirations of epic.⁴ Nagy's suggestion certainly has the advantage of taking these contrasting ideas as two complementary aspects of a synchronic system.

Be that as it may, we can say that everything that is in Rohde's Part One (with a single exception, to which I come later) is also in Hertz: the departure of the dead, their persistence, the need to care for them, their power to affect the living. Rohde also can see that none of this implies an idea of personal immortality, of what we personally can expect beyond the grave, and in this connection he makes a link between Classics and anthropology:

From such a cult no dogmatic or distinctly outlined picture of the life of the departed could have been deduced... Everything in this connection dealt with the relation of the dead to the living... This is the point at which the cult of the souls and belief in the existence of the souls stopped short among many of the "savage" people who have no history... Such traditional beliefs...left the nature of the disembodied soul vague and undefined; they viewed it purely from the standpoint of the living and almost entirely in its relations with this world.

Rohde 1925: 217

In his second part Rohde takes up Greek ideas of personal immortality, beginning with ecstatic Dionysiac cult, which achieved purification of the soul through wild and enthusiastic rituals. This focus on the condition of the soul, says Rohde, led "naturally" to a concern for its ultimate fate; thus Rohde moves from purification to eschatology, to the idea of rebirth, and of reward and punishment after death. He does not, however, treat mystery cults in his discussion of personal immortality; his chapter on Eleusis is in Part One, where it seems to me quite out of place – indeed Eleusis is the "one exception" to which I referred earlier. Rohde's reasons are somewhat unclear – in fact he nowhere clearly states the principle which divides Part One from Part Two. From scattered remarks in his text, however, I venture to draw the following formulae and attribute them to him: Greek political society was founded on an anthropogony which recognized an absolute distinction between the divine and the human. Hero cult, which might

⁴ Nagy 1979: 114-119.

seem to place the heroes as intermediate divine figures – once mortal, now immortal – does not violate this rule because the heroes are essentially local figures and thus members of the communities which possess them; they are mortals whose potency persists and indeed increases after death, but they have not become gods, they remain on our side of the line. Dionysiac ecstatic cult, by contrast, breached the line between human and divine, offered direct contact with the divine, and gave rise to purification rituals with an eschatological aspect promising admission after death into the company of the gods. Such a religion is *mystical* according to Rohde's definition: for him, mysticism is a human aspiration to directly experience the divine, perhaps even to achieve divinity. Mysticism, he goes on, was inherently anti-political – as was philosophy, its religious heir – and as such culturally marginal until the post-classical period, when the breakdown of political society opened the way for the social diffusion of mystical beliefs. Eleusis, however, already established in the archaic period, was a mainstream political institution; therefore (and this is Rohde's paradoxical formulation) “the mysteries did not point the way to mysticism.”⁵ It is notable that Rohde says nothing of that Dionysiac element in Eleusinian cult.

Be that as it may, Rohde did establish two points which must be taken as fundamental in the study of Greek mystery cults and Greek mysticism: 1) mysticism was not immemorial in Greek lands, but came into existence at a definite period, and 2) the Greek mystical spirit was at some level hostile to the city state.

These two points were taken up – along with Rohde's definition of mysticism – by Dario Sabbatucci, a leading member of the Rome school (founded by Raffaele Pettazoni and particularly associated with Angelo Brelich) in his important and neglected monograph: *Saggio sul misticismo Greco*.⁶ Sabbatucci's understanding of Greek mysticism is fundamentally sociological (I prefer this term to “anthropological” because we are dealing here with a literate society); for Sabbatucci, the key to understanding of mysticism is to grasp its anti-social character. He speaks of the *rottura mistica*, the mystic breaking away, and the *rovesciamento di valori*, the inversion of values. That the Greeks tell us that their mystic rites were all imported from elsewhere, from Thrace or Anatolia, is for him the way in which they express their understanding

⁵ Rohde 1925: 225.

⁶ Sabbatucci 1965: 51-52; 65; 126; 131; 165-166; 187; 194; 207; 216; 225.

that the mystical tendency, even if produced within the culture, is in some sense alien to it. Our term for this paradox is “counter-cultural.”

Greek mysticism seems from its origins to have been a culturally marginal activity. From the sixth century B.C. onward there circulated through Greek territory persons offering participation in various privately organized exotic cults. These offered healing and purification – there being considerable overlap between the two, since disease was often seen as the result of some impurity, one’s own or an ancestor’s – and also a better fate after death. The best general description is in Adeimantus’ speech in Plato’s *Republic* Book Two:

ἀγύρταιώ ἐςκαίωμάντειρσὲπιπλοισίωνώθύραςώιόντερσὼ
 πείθουσινώ ὡςῶ ἔστιώ παρὰ ὡ σφίσιώ ὑναμίσω ἐκὼ θεῶνὼ
 ποριζομένη ὡ θυσίαις ὡ καὶ ὡ πωρῶ αἷς εἴτε ὡ ἀδίκημάτου
 ἔγονεν αὐτοῦ ἢ προγόνων, ἀκεῖσθαι μεθ’ ἡδονῶν τε καὶ ὡ
 ἔορτῶν, ἐάν τε τινα ἐχθρὸν πημῆναι ἐθέλη, μετὰ σμικρῶν ὡ
 ἀπανῶ ὁμοίωσὼ καὶ ὡν ἀδίκῳ βλάψει, επαγωγῆς τισὼ
 καὶ ὡ καταδέσμοις ... βίβλων ὡ ἐκὼ μαδονὼ παρέχονται ὡ
 Μουσαίου καὶ ὡ Ὀρφέως, Σελήνης ὡ τε ὡ καὶ ὡ Μουσῶν ὡ
 ἐκόνων, ὡς ὡ φασί, καθ’ ὡς ὡ θηπολοῦσιν, πείθοντερσὼ ὡ
 μόνον ὡ δὲ ὡ τας ὡ ἀλλὰ ὡ καὶ ὡ πόλεις, ὡς ὡ πρῶ ὡ λύσεις ὡ τε ὡ καὶ ὡ
 καθαρμοὶ ὡ ἀδικημάτων ὡ ἀθυσίων ὡ καὶ ὡ τελευτήσασιν, ὡς ὡ
 ἡ ὡ ελετὰ ὡς ὡ καλοῦσιν, αἷ ὡ τῶν ὡ ἐκεῖ ὡ κακῶν ὡ ἀπολύουσιν ὡ
 ἡμᾶς, μὴ θύσαντερσὼ ἐῶν ὡ περιμένει.

Mendicants and seers come to the doors of the rich and convince them that they have a power acquired from gods with their sacrifices and charms; in case you or one of your ancestors is liable for some injustice, they can heal it through delightful feasting, or if someone wants to harm an enemy, for a modest price—no matter if it is an unjust man against a just one—they will do injury with certain charms and binding spells... They produce a crowd of books by Orpheus and Musaeus, children of the Muses and the Moon, as they say, which guide their sacrifices, and thus convince not only private persons but even cities that through sacrifice and playful delights liberation and purification from injustice are possible during one’s lifetime, and also for the dead—these they call “perfections”, which release us from evil over there, while dreadful things there await those who have failed to sacrifice.

Plato *Republic*
364b-366b

Adeimantus' rhetoric has caused him to lump together quite a range of mystical operators, ranging from an international star like Epimenides of Crete, who purified the whole city of Athens after the murder of suppliants, down to the small-time charismatics who hawked from door to door their curses, love-charms, and promises of eternal bliss. These were literate; all of them carried and some of them wrote books, most often ascribed to Orpheus. For this reason and for want of a better label we call them generically "Orphics." Epimenides wrote "*mysteria* and purifications" in prose (Suda *s.v.*); Pherecydes, who is supposed to have been the teacher of Pythagoras, wrote about war in heaven and these writings, we are told (Origen *Contra Celsum* 6.42) became the basis for *mysteria* concerning the battle of the Titans and the Giants against the gods. Euthyphro in Plato's dialogue knows of such stories "and stories even more wonderful than these, which the many do not know...which if you heard them you would surely be astounded" (Plato *Euthyphro* 6b-c). These stories, in other words, although they were written down, were in a way secrets; they were transmitted in limited networks, like the cabala and such kinds of lore.

Although the masters of this kind of wisdom varied considerably in their social standing, sociologically they were all somewhat similar: cultural specialists, free-lance, itinerant, offering their expertise in an open market. A comic poet (Nikophon fr. 19) can class "dealers in mysteries" with dealers in anchovies, charcoal, books, baskets, or whatever. This is what Walter Burkert calls "craft" mysticism.⁷ The most notable of these was Empedocles of Akragas, who traveled from town to town preaching reincarnation and vegetarianism, offering prophecy and healing and control over the weather. Empedocles did not, however, ascribe his writings to Orpheus but proudly signed them himself; he created a complete cosmology based on the four elements and the interplay of love and hate. He was his own authority and in his own person a typical charismatic prophet; he had been, he explains, a god in heaven, but had been expelled for blood guilt and had had to begin all over again at the bottom of the great chain of being, as a vegetable; through a succession of lives he had worked his way up as a fish, as a bird, as a beast, and was now a man about to become again a

⁷ Burkert 1982: 5-19.

god. For Empedocles, it seems, all the charismatics shared some such history:

εἰς δ' ἐτέλος ἰμάντειν ἔπεικαὶ μνοπόλοισι καὶ ἤητροῖς
καὶ ὑπρόμοισι ἀνθρώποισιν ἐπιχθονίοισι ὑπέλονται
ἔνθεν ἰάνα βλαστοῦσι θεοὶ ἰμῆσι φέριστοι
ἀθανάτοισι ἄλλου ἀνὸ μέστιοι μᾶντο τράπεζοι
ἔοντες, ἀνδρείων ἰαχέων ἰαπόκληροι ἰάτειρεῖς.

In the end they become seers and makers of hymns and healers

And leaders among humans bound to the earth;
Thence they grow to gods greatest in honors,
Sharing the hearth, the table, with the other immortals
Without share of manly sorrows, unwearied.

Empedocles fr. 146, 147 *DK*

Empedocles, in other words, saw in the mystics, in the religious seers, poets, and healers of his day, a living link between mortal and immortal, an embodiment of the abolition of that abyss which in mainstream Greek religion divided these two.

Empedocles was of course a Sicilian; it was in the Greek West, and to some extent in the North, around the Black Sea, that this kind of religiosity had its greatest success. Also in the West, in Italy, mysticism successfully made the transition from “craft” to “sect” when Pythagoras of Samos, who seems to have begun as a free-lance Orphic like the others (Ion of Chios—fr. 2 *DK*—tells us that he wrote under the name of Orpheus) came west to Croton and succeeded in establishing there a community and a mode of life which survived him, and which he called “philosophy”—with enormous long-term consequences for the history of culture.

Nevertheless in the classical period Orphism never became respectable. To purify a whole city is no mean achievement, and it is true that we hear no scorn of Epimenides, but on the other hand we do not hear admiration either, only a collection of miracle stories: that he slept fifty-seven years in a cave, for instance, and lived on magic food provided by the nymphs. Lesser figures are uniformly mocked—except by their own followers, of course; Heraclitus already in the sixth century fulminated against “night workers, magicians, bacchics, maenads, mystics...those things people accept as mysteries are mystic unholiness” (Heraclitus fr. 14 *DK*). Euthyphro complains that when he

reveals to the public divine matters and prophecys the future they all laugh at him (Plato *Euthyphro* 2c). Theseus in Euripides' *Hippolytus* captures some mainstream stereotypes when, thinking (erroneously) that his son is an Orphic, he says:

σὺ δὴ θεοῖσιν ὡς περισσὸς ὢν ἀνήρθ᾽ Ἡ
 ξύνει; σὺ σώφρων καὶ κακῶν ἀκήρατος;
 ...
 Ἦδ᾽ Ἡσὺν αὔχει καὶ δι᾽ ἀψύχου βορᾶς Ἡ
 σίτοις καπήλευ', Ὀρφέα δ' ἄνακτ' ἔχων Ἡ
 βάκχευε πολλῶν γραμμάτων τιμῶν καπνοῦς.

So you are such a superior person as to consort
 With gods? You are temperate and undefiled of evil?

...
 Go boast your diet and trade for reputation
 Abstaining from animal food. Take Orpheus as your lord,
 Be ecstatic, valuing the smoke of many writings.

Euripides *Hippolytus* 948-954

Similarly Demosthenes thinks to discredit his opponent Aeschines by telling how in his youth he had helped his mother with mystic initiations (Demosthenes, *de Falsa Legatione* 199). They are a topic for mockery; so also Euthyphro complains that when he tries to prophecy the Athenians all laugh at him (Plato, *Euthyphro* 3b5-3c4).

How then are we to explain the status of the Eleusinian mysteries? They were Orphic, at least in the sense that (according to one tradition) they were founded by Orpheus ([Euripides] *Rhesus* 943f, cf. Aristophanes *Frogs* 1032). And they were certainly reputable. By the late fifth century the mysteries were being used as part of Athenian imperial cultural politics; all cities in the Athenian empire were required to join Athens in paying them first-fruits, and the other cities were invited to join in as well.⁸ There is nothing apolitical about this, or counter-cultural either.

Sabbatucci suggests a solution. He begins with the observation that the mysteries are oddly unconnected with life. There were no special requirements for initiation, except that one had to be Greek and not guilty of murder—and since blood guilt for the Greeks entailed exclusion from any public place or public occasion these exclusions are equivalent

⁸ Meiggs & Lewis 1969: 217-223 (# 73); IG i² 76

to saying that one had to be a member of the social (not the political) community. Furthermore the initiates seem to have returned to ordinary life very much as they were before. There is no suggestion in our sources that initiation at Eleusis involved forgiveness of sins or the purification of the soul; Aristophanes seems to be the only writer to suggest that the initiates were held to a standard of conduct. Nor did initiation result in any special privileges, powers, or responsibilities; the initiates lived like the others. An initiation, says Sabbatucci should be *initial* to something; Eleusis, by contrast, was a completion. People were somehow unsatisfied until they had been there. “This initiation was the end and not a mere means, a destination and not a point of departure, a conclusion and not an introduction.”⁹

As for the next life, the difference Eleusis made is left pretty well unspecified. Sophocles, 150 years after the Hymn to Demeter, is still saying nothing more than that there was a difference.

ὡς ἔτρισόλβιοιέ

κεῖνοι βροτῶν, οἵ ἐταῦτα εἰσέρχθεντες ἐτέληέ
 μόλωσ' ἐς Ἐιδου· ἐτοῖσδε ἐγ' ἀράμιονοις ἄκεῖ
 ζῆν ἔστι, τοῖσδ' ἄλλοισι ἐπάντ' ἔχειν ἄκακέ

Surely these are thrice-blessed among mortals, who having
 seen these rites go into Hades. These alone have life there;
 the others have every evil.

Sophocles *TGF* fr. 837

Those who are initiates in this life are initiates in the next; the emphasis is on what they have seen, not on how this has made them different. As notions of the terrors of the underworld evolved, there does seem to have developed some sense that those who had been to Eleusis were sheltered from the worst of fates, from wallowing eternally in the mud or carrying water in a sieve (Pausanias 10.31.11). Otherwise the next-world advantages, like the this-world advantages, remain abstract and undiscussed. All this, says Sabbatucci, makes the Eleusinian mysteries resemble not an initiation but a pilgrimage. There was a collective journey to a special sacred place where the pilgrims were received by resident sacred personnel; all this was experienced as a temporary departure from the mundane world. Eleusis was not so much a gateway to the other-worldly as an actual experience of it. As such it was

⁹ [Sabbatucci 1965](#): 137.

an experience which exactly had *nothing to do* with this life. The difference Eleusis made was that one had been there, exactly that. And as in the case of a pilgrimage, there was no reason to go more than once – although one might go back to conduct another neophyte.

Pilgrimages, as Victor Turner has taught us, are anti-structural events, intermissions in the ordered pattern of social life. As such they are characterized by *communitas*, the suspension or dissolution of social hierarchy. Similarly, everyone was welcome at Eleusis: male and female, slave and free. All present formed a transient community – transient because the bond linked not all those who had been through the ritual – Eleusis was not a portal to a secret society, like the Free Masons – but bonded those who had been initiated together. In this respect also Eleusis was like a pilgrimage.

Planned intermissions in the social order are part of the social order; institutionalized anti-structure sustains the structure even while offering an alternative to it. Examples are the Carnival, Halloween, Purim, Yom Kippur, New Year's Eve. Pilgrimages also can (although they need not) recur at regular intervals. In these terms we can understand how the Athenians acculturated the counter-cultural. Whereas the Orphics summoned their adepts to break with established society and embark upon a new life marked by special clothing and diet, Eleusis opened a window on another life with the understanding that the meaning of the experience need not be sought in this world since it was yet to come. Eleusis was the way the Athenian community and the Greeks in general could participate in the promise of the Orphics, and yet at the same time Eleusis protected established society from the Orphics by segregating in time and space the radicalism of their eschatology.

In this way, following Sabbatucci, I would deal with Rohde's exception. And with this result in hand we can return to Rohde's two parts, and ask: what is the difference which makes the difference? On the one hand, we have the eschatology of Part One, the persistence of the dead; this is world-wide and immemorial. On the other, we have the eschatology of Part Two, personal immortality, which exists only this side of a definite temporal frontier. What happened to make the difference? What (and this is my sociological question) are the social preconditions of the emergence of a counter culture?

On the issue of chronology, it is worth saying at this point that the Eleusinian Mysteries, which of course claimed to be of enormous antiquity, are now-a-days generally thought to have originated early in the sixth century. The *Hymn to Demeter* is dated to about that time, and

the first buildings in the sanctuary somewhat later. This places the Mysteries in the generation of Epimenides and Pherecydes, who were, so far as we know, the earliest of the Orphics. The whole development, in other words, was more or less synchronous. This brings us to a discussion of the chronological horizon.

The early sixth century is one of the periods – depending on what we mean by “city state” and what we mean by “invent” – when we can say the city state was invented. This was the period of the lawgivers: Solon at Athens, Chilon at Sparta, Zaleucus at Locri and probably also Charondas in Catania. This was also the high-water mark in old-world Greece of the tyrants, and while the Greeks always spoke of the rule of a tyrant as the negation of politics, tyranny seems in many Greek states to have been a necessary phase of political development. In the West this was the period when, after a pause, new areas such as southern France were colonized, and many cities – Metapontum, for instance, and Cyrene – were reformed and repopulated. This was the age of the Seven Sages – Thales and Solon, certainly, and the list often includes Periander the tyrant and Pittacus, who was a kind of dictator. In this time the Greeks first struck coins and built stone temples. It was the period when the great games: Olympic, Pythia, Isthmian and Nemean – were organized into a pan-Hellenic cycle.

Altogether this can be considered an important phase of rationalization. This term I derive from sociology; it does not mean that people became more reasonable. Reason we have always with us, probably since the Neanderthals; rationalization is a specific use of reason, having to do with the self-conscious adaptation of means and ends, often involving prior planning. A predictable cycle of games makes it possible for athletes to compete in them all. A stone temple is not only much more expensive than a wooden one, it also involves a careful plan – because the stones must be cut to size ahead of time. A lawgiver thinks of a city as something like a building that can be reconstructed in terms of an idea. Rationalization is in contrast to improvisation, and also in contrast to tradition: it moves into the future in an ordered thoughtful way. It is associated with quantification, cost-benefit analysis, and a lucidity aspiring to the condition of mathematics; the plans it provides may not be successful but, in order to be rational, they must be intelligible.

Rationality – and I use the term as I find it in Max Weber¹⁰ - is instrumental; there is for Weber no rationality of the ends. The expert has rational authority to the degree that he can tell us how to achieve our projects; he cannot evaluate them. Socrates remarks that we pay the ship captain a couple of drachmae to take us to Egypt and entrust him with our lives, but we would not want our daughter to marry him because, while he can get us to Egypt, he does not know whether or not we ought to go there. He is skilled but not wise. But where is wisdom to be found? Philosophy has typically attempted to ground our activity in nature, to identify certain goods as natural: health, self-determination, love. But philosophy has often found itself in conflict with religion, which may prescribe unhealthy asceticism, loss of self, righteous wrath and/or acceptance of persecution. There can be reasonable dispute about these matters, but it does not seem possible to settle the issues rationally. Sociology therefore tends to take values as given. Usually they are cultural norms, which is to say, they are given by tradition. When tradition fails the values may be asserted charismatically, through some claim to revealed or prophetic wisdom. Charismatic authority stands with rational and traditional as Weber's third type. Reason says: I'm not saying this is the thing to do; I'm saying if you want to do that this is the way to do it. Tradition says: I say this is the thing to do because it is, and that's the end of it – which might even be right, even if unhelpful. Charisma says: this is the thing to do because I say so – a much chancier proposition.

Because they are jointly in contrast to tradition, charisma and rationalism are siblings and often co-inhabit. Charisma and rationality can work together when charisma prescribes the ends, rationality the means. Utopian societies partake of both, and both are at home on the frontier; where the bonds of tradition are relatively weak there is room for ingenious novelties and weird sects. Early Greek philosophy surely partook of both: Pythagorean mathematics and Empedoclean physics aspired to rationality, yet both Empedocles and Pythagoras, were miracle workers. Ancient tradition made the link in another way by making Gorgias the pupil of Empedocles, as if relativistic rhetoric could derive from a revelation of the absolute. Orphism was charismatic; sophistry, founded on the utility of the word, was rational. Socrates, a generation later, combined the two another way, joining dialectic to myth.

¹⁰ Weber 1947[1920]: 123.

Through a parallel dialectic we can understand the development of Athenian mystery cult as an aspect of, as well as a response to, the development of the city state. Archaic and classic Greek development was a kind of first modernism, nowhere more so than in Athens. From Solon through Peisistratus to Pericles the city of Athens developed in size, wealth and power. In the process institutions became increasingly impersonal, quantity replaced quality as the economy became increasingly monetized and wealth tended to replace inherited status. Life became more secular and values more relative; such developments generate a hunger for the sacred and the absolute. Whatever else the Mysteries may have been, they were certainly an experience of the absolutely sacred. And they were focused on the experience – indeed, that is their link to personal immortality – which is a form of individualism, and thus arises in the social conditions which produce that social construct, the individual.

That, within the compass of a walnut shell, is my account of the historical setting of the Eleusinian mysteries. I began with the assertion that anthropology cannot help us here, and went on to attempt a small piece of what Lévi-Strauss calls “anthropology of the past.”¹¹ This paradox provokes a few reflections on anthropology and the Classics.

Anthropology begins with Montaigne on cannibals and Rousseau on the origins of inequality; it was however in the field of classical studies that it first became in any important sense empirical, because the ancients were the first “others” of whom European scholars had any sufficient empirical knowledge. It is enough to mention three books published within a few years of each other—and of *The Origin of Species*, for that matter—namely: Sir Henry Maine *Ancient Law* and Ludwig Bachofen *Mutterrecht*, both 1861, and N. D. Fustel de Coulanges *The Ancient City*, 1864. All these were products of a classical education. Nevertheless social science and the Classics soon parted company – and indeed all three of the books I have mentioned were not so much interested in the past as in what was before the past, some primordial age of which the ancient material might display some survivals. Fustel is most explicit about this, when he says “we must transport ourselves beyond the time of which history has preserved the recollection, to those distant ages during which domestic institutions were established, and social institutions were prepared.”¹² His first two

¹¹ Lévi-Strauss 1966[1962]: 233; 242-43; 256.

¹² Fustel de Coulange 1864: 75.

parts (the only parts of the book most people remember) are a *histoire imaginaire* very like Rousseau—illustrated, indeed, by “survivals”, but survivals which he can identify as such only because they illustrate his imagined past. Very much the same can be said of Bachofen; Maine, as an Englishman, is more empirical, but even he grounds his understanding of development in an original condition like that of the Cyclopes, each giving the law to his own household.¹³

Anthropology, in fact, began with a search for origins, for a primeval condition before history. Therefore anthropologists quickly turned to ahistorical societies, to those who divide time into a near present and a mythical past. Although each of these societies has a history they do not present it as part of their self-description; therefore on the principle that you go by what the natives say, the anthropologist could safely neglect it. Culture, since Tylor the key term, was conceived as a stable system. Anthropology thus became the adversary of history.

The ancient societies we study in the field of Classics were, however, nothing if not historical and self-consciously so. They do not have “a culture”; they existed in a dialectic of tradition and innovation, tense with conflicting and competing self-descriptive accounts of what it means to be civilized in their way. Anthropology tends to find all this puzzling and somewhat irritating; that is why those who have attempted to think anthropologically about the ancients have whenever possible continued, from Frazier and the Cambridge School right up through Benveniste and Dumézil, to use ancient material as a way into some imaginatively reconstructed prior past. Structuralism, as represented by the Paris School and others, dehistoricizes in a different way, positing underlying patterns which persist, which are in history but not of it, so that chronology can be (more or less) neglected.

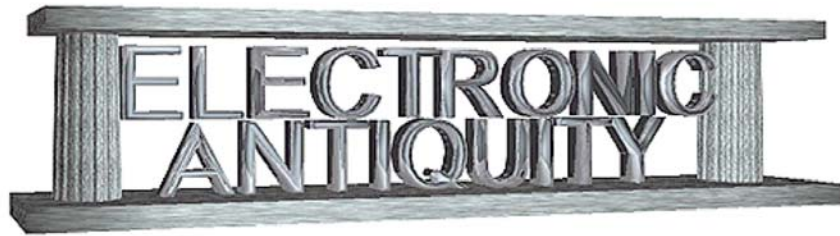
Therefore I have made the shift from anthropology to sociology. In sociology we are studying not the others but ourselves. Of course we are always studying ourselves, in the sense that we are motivated by puzzles that we have, and that are therefore somehow about us, but sociology builds from the top down rather than from the bottom up; it starts with the modern condition and then asks (sometimes) how did we get here? All the “great transformations” – from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity, the arrival of the Protestant ethic, the disembedding of the economy – are accounts of how modernism happened. Through these accounts sociology finds

¹³ [Maine 1920](#) [1861]: 133.

itself deeply engaged in history – but (from the point of view of Classics) the wrong history. This problem I have attempted to address by characterizing the classical period as a “first modernism.” The similarities with the modern period are striking, but so are the differences. The classical city did transform the conditions of life, but without important technological change, did monetize its economy, but it did not create capitalism, did develop the idea of citizenship but without an ideology of natural right, did create forms of personal religion but without creating competing confessions – except for the philosophical schools. Communities became larger and more impersonal, but were still mainly face-to-face. I could go on, but I have gone on long enough. I mean only to suggest that the concepts of social theory are indeed relevant to Classics, but that they have to be rethought as they are put to use; they cannot be simply “applied”, as if they were bumper-stickers or paint in a can.

WORKS CITED

- Bachofen, L. 1948 [1861]. *Die Mutterrecht*. Basel-Stuttgart: K. Meuli.
- Burkert, W. 1982. "Craft Versus Sect: The Problem of Orphics and Pythagoreans." In B.F. Meyer and E.P. Sanders, ed.s, *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. pp.1-22.
- Fustel de Coulanges, N. D. 1980 (1864). *The Ancient City*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hertz, R. 1960 [1907]. *Death and the Right Hand*. Glencoe, IL.: Free Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1966 [1962]. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Maine, S. H. 1920 [1861]. *Ancient law*. London: John Murray.
- Meiggs, R. and D. Lewis, ed.s. 1969. *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the end of the Fifth Century B.C.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nagy, G. 1979. *The Best of the Achaeans*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Rohde, E. 1925 [1st ed. 1893]. *Psyche*. London & New York: Keegan Paul & Harcourt, Brace.
- Sabatucci, D. 1965. *Saggio sul misticismo greco*. Rome: Ateneo & Bizzari.
- Turner, V. 1974. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.
- Van Gennep, A. 1960 [1908]. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Weber, M. 1947 [1920]. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Trans. by A.M. Henderson; T. Parsons, ed. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.



POETRY AND MYSTERIES: EURIPIDES' *BACCHAE* AND THE DIONYSIAC RITES

Jens Holzhausen, Free University of Berlin

jens.holzhausen@fen-net.de

The mysteries of Dionysus have been discussed so much that nobody will expect from me either striking novelties or a complete knowledge of what has been written about them. In this paper I shall therefore restrict myself to examining the limited question of whether the *Bacchae*, the tragedy written by Euripides in his Macedonian exile in about 407 B.C., can be considered as evidence for these mysteries. The clearest support for this point of view has been given by the most recent commentator on the play, Richard Seaford: “Of the fifth-century evidence for the Dionysiac mysteries the most important is the *Bacchae* itself” and “In his *Bacchae* Euripides dramatized the aition of the Dionysiac mysteries at Thebes.”¹

Plutarch would have interpreted the *Bacchae* in the same way as Seaford. He refers to a source which explains the partiality of Alexander the Great’s mother for snakes (*vit. Alex.* 2):

¹ Seaford 1981· 253, 268; 1994; 1996a (the most important review is by Friedrich 2000). cf. Bron 1987, 145: “Il fait également allusion à des rites d’initiation et à des cérémonies mystérieques ...”

Leinieks 1996, 152 represents the opposite position: “To sum up, there is no evidence in the play that Euripides wanted Dionysiac religion in the *Bacchae* to be understood as a mystery cult.”

ἕτεροςχδὲ περὶ τούτωνχἔστι λόγος. ὡς πᾶσαιχμὲν ἀχ
 τῆδε γυναιῖκες ἔνοχοι τοῖς Ὀρφικοῖς οὔσαι καὶ τοῖς περὶ
 τὸνχ Διόνθσονχ ὄργιασμοῖςχ ἔκχ τοῦ πάνυχ παλαιοῦ.
 Κλώδωνέσχ τεχ καὶ Μιμαλλόνεςχ ἔπωνθμίανχ ἔχοθσαι,
 πολλὰ ταῖςχ Ἡδωνίσιχ καὶ ταῖςχ περὶ τὸν Αἶμον Ὑρήχσαιςχ
 ὁμοιαχδρῶσιν·χάφ' ὠνχδοκεῖ καὶ τὸ υρησκεύεινχ ὄνομαχ
 ταῖςχ κατακόροιςχ γενέσθαιχ καὶ περιέργοιςχ ἐρουργίαις·χῆ
 δ' Ὀλυμπιάς μᾶλλονχ ἑτέρωνχ ηλώσασαχ τᾶςχ κατοχάς.
 καὶ τοὺςχ ἔνθουσιασμοῦςχ ἑχάγουσαχ βαρβαρικώτερον.
 ὄφειςχ μεγάλουςχ εἰροχθειςχ ἑφείλκετοχ τοῖςχ θιάσοις. οχ
 πολλάκιςχ ἔκχ τοῦ κιττοῦ καὶ τῶνχ μθστικῶνχ λίκνωνχ
 παραναδύμενοιχ καὶ περιελιπτόμενοιχ τοῖςχ θύρσοιςχ τῶνχ
 γυναικῶν καὶ τοῖς στεφάνοις. ἔξέπληττον τοὺς ἄνδρας.

But concerning these matters there is another story to this effect: all the women of these parts were addicted to the Orphic rites and the orgies of Dionysus from very ancient times (being called Klodones and Mimallones), and imitated in many ways the practices of the Edonian women and the Thracian women about Mount Haemus, from whom, as it would seem, the word “threskeuein” came to be applied to the celebration of extravagant and superstitious ceremonies. Now Olympias, who affected these divine possessions more zealously than other women, and carried out these divine inspirations in wilder fashion, used to provide the revelling companies with great tame serpents, which would often lift their heads from out the ivy and the mystic winnowing-baskets, or coil themselves about the wands and garlands of the women, thus terrifying the men.

There is obviously a relationship between Olympias' ὄργιασμός and the ὄργια (*Ba.* 34, 262, 470, 471, 476, 482, 1080, cf. 416) of Euripides' Theban women. Snakes, ivy, thyrsos and wreaths are also found there; the Theban women are also organised in three Thiasoi and they also terrify the men, though in a different way. At one point, Orpheus' name is even mentioned, but there is an important difference: Euripides' chorus mentions the lyreplayer who brings trees and wild animals together on Mount Olympus (*Ba.* 561–2), but there is no reason to think that the festival bore his name. The rest of the key words are not found in Euripides: he knows nothing of either

Klodonos or Mimallonos,² “divine inspiration” (ἐνθουσιασμοί) or “divine possession” (κατοχαί); also the technical term θρησκευεῖν is unknown to him. The most important difference is clearly the lack of the “mystic winnowing baskets:” not only does he not mention these baskets which played an important role in the mysteries, but there is no mention of any of the words with the root *mu-*: μυστήρια, μύησις, μύστης, μυστικός. Instead, Euripides uses the term τελεταί in five places (*Ba.* 22, 74, 238, 260, 465).³ In the plural form the word occurs in Euripides only in the *Bacchae*, in the singular it occurs once in *Iphigenia Taurica* (958–60):

κλύωέ Ἰ Ἀθηναίοισιέτᾶμᾶ υστυχέ
 τελετηῆνέ εν έσθαι. κᾶτιέτὸνᾶνόμονᾶένειν.
 χοέ ρεξᾶγγοξᾶΠαλλάδοξέτιμ νᾶλεών.

Now are my woes to Athens made,
 I hear, a festival, and yet the custom lives
 that Pallas' people keep the Feast of Cups.

Orestes is referring here to the non-mystical festival of the Choes, at which everyone had his own jug, from which he drank wine. The term τελεταί can be used in both a mystical and non-mystical context,⁴ so the context is decisive. In the Parodos of the *Bacchae*, the word has the clearest echoes of the language of the mysteries (*Ba.* 73–82):

² Cf. Callixenus *FGrHist* 627 F 2 line 149 (ed. Jacoby): Μακέταιέ αἰέ καλούμεναιέΜιμαλλόνεξέjoin the Great Procession at Alexandria in 275 B.C.

³ Cf. Eur. *Ba.* 40 εἰ γὰρ έπόλινέτήνδᾶ κμαθεινᾶώέᾶτέλεστονέοὔσανέτᾶνέ μᾶνᾶβακχευμάτᾶνᾶand 485

τᾶέ ἰεράνᾶνᾶκτωρᾶῆᾶμεθ' ἡμέρανέτελεῖξ; disputed are the lines *Ba.* 859–61 νᾶσεταιέ δᾶέτὸνᾶΔιὸξᾶΔιόνᾶσον, ᾶξᾶ(Diggle 1994: 327 after Jacobs: ...ᾶς) πέφυκεν ενᾶτέλειᾶ(Diggle 1994: 327: μέρει) θεόξᾶ εινότατος, ᾶνθρώποισιέ ἠπιώτατος. I translate the transmitted text (*pace* Seaford 1996a: 217, see note 65): “He will recognise Dionysos as son of Zeus, who at last turns out to be for mankind a most terrible, but also a most gentle god.”

⁴ Cf. Graf 1974: 32 (and n. 48): “Freilichbezeichnet τελετηή nicht den eigentlichen Mysterienkult, sondern (mindestens noch in klassischer Zeit) jede kultische Feier;” cf. Leinieks 1996: 131.

μάκαρ. ὅστις εὐδαίμων τελετῶν θεῶν εἰδῶς
βιοτὴν ἁγιστεύει καὶ θιασεύεται ψυχὴν
ἐν ὄρεσσι ἀκχεύων ὁσίοις καθαρμοῖσιν.
τά τε ματρὸς μεγάλας ὄργια Κυβέλας θεμιτεύων
ἄνθη θύρσον τε τινάσσων κισσῶν τε στεφανωθεὶς
Διόνυσον θεραπεύει.

O blessed is he who, truly happy, knowing the initiations of the gods, is pure in life and joins his soul to the thiasos in the mountains performing Bacchic ritual with holy purifications, and correctly celebrating the Orgia (ecstatic feasts) of the great mother Kybele, and shaking the thyrsos up and down and crowned with ivy, serves Dionysus.

The *macarismus*, the emphasis on knowledge, pure conduct and holy cleansing, point to the context of the mysteries.⁵ The connection to the Orgia of Kybele is conspicuous. According to this, the worship of Dionysus consists of celebrating the Great Mother. Here, the poet seems to see both rituals as a unity. In a similar way, the initiation (τελετή) and the Bacchic cult in the mountains (ἐν ὄρεσσι ἀκχεύειν)⁶ are connected. The question arises whether this relationship between the τελετή and Βακχεία only occurs on the literary level, or whether the women's cult can really be seen as a mystical initiation.

Before this question can be answered, we must examine whether the dramatist intended his depiction to have any relation to the rites as really practised. This is strongly suggested by the fact that the myth which is the basis of the play tells how the god introduced his cult into a Greek city for the first time and what opposition he had to overcome. It is difficult to decide whether this myth contains an historical kernel and recalls the original, or even ever-present opposition to the worship of the god, or whether it rather describes the form and character of the cult, through telling the story of its introduction. How old the myth is, is unknown. The oldest pictorial

⁵ Cf. Schlesier 1998: 56–67.

⁶ ἀκχεύειν in four places (*Ba.* 251, 313, 343, 807), once ἀκχιάζειν (*Ba.* 931). As nouns Euripides uses βακχεία (in sing. *Ba.* 126, 232, in pl. *Ba.* 218, 1293), ἀκχευμα (in sing. *Ba.* 608, in pl. *Ba.* 40, 317, 567, 720, 724) and βάκχευσις (in sing. *Ba.* 357).

representation of the dismemberment of Pentheus comes from the last quarter of the 6th century (520–510 B.C.);⁷ the first mention in literature in Hekataios (*FGrH* 1 F 31) and the tragedy *Pentheus*, attributed to Thespis,⁸ also date from this time. In the picture on the vase, one of the women tearing Pentheus to pieces has a name; ironically, she is called “Galene,” “windless calm.” This seems to foreshadow already the Euripidean paradox that basically peaceful and friendly women become violent killers under the god’s influence and as a reaction to an attack. One may assume that at the end of the play Dionysus, now in divine form, described the future form of his worship after the removal of his opponents.⁹ Unfortunately this section, which would have contained the clearest connection to the reality of the cult, has not come down to us. This loss is compensated on the one hand by the song of the Chorus of the Parodos, in which Dionysus’ followers, the Lydian women, sing of the cult (*Ba.* 64–166), and on the other hand through the fact that in Euripides’ portrayal, the opposition to the god and his cult are related to one another in a special way. For the god forces first the Theban women and then Pentheus too, in the state of madness he causes, to do the very thing they reject. The punishment for refusing to worship the god consists paradoxically in the enforced practice of the cult. So the women don’t worship the god voluntarily, and the unholy compulsion reaches its peak in the murder of their own son and king: the myth dramatised by Euripides demonstrates a perverted form of the cult. This negative omen, as it were, must be taken into consideration in the reconstruction of the Bacchic cult. It is reflected, for example, in the fact that the Asian women of the chorus are at no point described as “raving” (μαίνεσθαι) and that they are only referred to as Maenads (μαινάδες) once in the entire play (*Ba.* 601). This corresponds to what is found elsewhere in Attic drama which,

⁷ Boston *MFA* 10, 221a-f, Euphronios attributed (*ARV* 16,14), cf. *LIMC* 312 (Nr. 39).

⁸ *TrGF* I 1 T 1 and F 1c (ed. Snell); cf. Diog. L. 6.92: Aristoxenus accused Heracleides Ponticus of forging tragedies under the name of Thespis; if so he would have kept the titles.

⁹ The text after Eur. *Ba.* 1324 is missing; cf. the Hypothesis (lines 16–17): Διόνυσος δὲ ἐπιφανεῖς (ὧ) μὲν πᾶσι παρήγγειλεν κτλ. Diggle 1994: 289 suggests <τελετάς>, see Friedrich 2000: 139–41, who is very sceptical.

other than Homer,¹⁰ is almost the only source for the name up to the 5th century: apart from the Erinyes (Aeschyl. *Eum.* 500) and Cassandra (Eur. *Tr.* 172, 307, 349, 415, El. 1032), who are compared to Maenads, there are only six places where the god's followers are called Maenads. With one exception only (Eur. *Ion* 552), in each case the reference is to non-human creatures.¹¹ Consistent with this is the fact that Dionysus' female followers on the vases are never referred to as Maenads.¹² Similarly, Dionysus' own madness is already mentioned by Euripides himself as being caused by a hostile attack from Hera.¹³ Perhaps even Dionysus' raving in Homer, when he was driven from Lykurgus into the sea with his nurses, can also be understood in this sense.

We know from Plutarch of a similar case – the daughters of Minyas and the rite connected with them in Orchomenos (*Aet. Gr.* 38, 299E-F). The myth is witnessed by Antonius Liberalis (*Met.* 10) for Nikander and Corinna. The Minyads refused to participate in the worship of Dionysus (τελεταὶ ἢ μυστήρια τοῦ θεοῦ). Here, too, the god finally compels them to do so, and in their madness they cast lots to decide which of their sons they should sacrifice. They then tore the chosen one limb from limb. Plutarch reports that now, at the annual feast of the “Agrionia,” their female descendants flee and are pursued by Dionysus with a sword. A priest would take on the role of Dionysus and in Plutarch's time, he even killed a woman. If

¹⁰ *Il.* 22.460 about Andromache: μαινάδι ἴση (cf. *Il.* 6.389 Andromache: μαινομένη ἠϊκίαι) and *Hymn. in Cer.* 386 about Demeter: εὐτεῖ μαιναῖσι ὄρος ἰ κατάιδά σκιον ἰύλης. Μαινάσι is here not a name but means, as in *Il.* 6.389: “like a raving woman/nymph.”

¹¹ Aeschyl. fr. 382 πάτερ Ἰ Θέοινε, μαινάδων ἰ ζευκτήριε, Soph. *OT* 212 οἰνῶ παῖ Βάκχον ἰ εὖιον, Μαινάδων ἰ ὀμόστολον, Achaeus *TrGF* I 20 F 16 (ed. Snell) ἕνα στροσι ὤσ τεῖ μαινάς, [Eur.] *Phoen.* 1752 ἰθ' ἀλλά ἰ βρόμοσι ἰ ναῖ τε ἰ σηκόσι ἰ βᾶτος ἰ ὄρεσι ἰ μαινάδων, Aristoph. *Lys.* 1284 ἐπιῖ δέ ἰ Νύσιον, ὄσι μετὰ ἰ μαινάσι ἰ βᾶκχιοσι ὄμματὰ ἰ δαίεται, cf. Timoth. fr. 2b (= Plut. *de superst.* 170A) about Artemis (!): θυιά δαῖ φοιβά δαῖ μαινά δαῖ λυσσά δα.

¹² Cf. Callixenus *FGrHist* 627 F 2 (ed. Jacoby), who mentions neither “maenads” nor “Bacchants” in connection with the Great Procession (see note 2), but Μιμαλλόνες, Βασσάρα (after Aeschylus' tragedy?) and Λυδαῖ (after Eur. *Ba.*).

¹³ Eur. *Cycl.* 3–4 πρῶτον ἰ μὲν ἰ νῆν ἰ κ' ἰ ἐμμανῆσι ἰ Ἡρασι ἰ ὕπο / Νύμφασι ὄρεῖασι ἰ ἐκλιπῶν ἰ ὤχου ἰ τροφούς.

Achaios *TrGF* I 20 F 20 (ed. Snell) (= Philod. *de piet.* 36), Plat. *Nom.* 672b, Euphorion fr. 14, Apollod. 3,5,1, Nonn. *Dion.* 32,98–150.

Plutarch's description of the events of this feast is accurate, the rite consists of a repeated performance of the myth. The women are playing the madness of their predecessors, and their state of mind is not genuine. How far this can be applied to the cult of the Theban women can only be a matter of conjecture here. However, it is clear to see the problems that arise out of the relationship between a myth describing a perverted form of a cult, and its reality.

In reconstructing the cult of the Bacchantes from Euripides' play, scholars have generally made it easier for themselves. The complete poetic picture is taken as evidence for the reality, apart from all the elements which are completely incompatible with rational, enlightened thinking. This includes a large number of details. Euripides surrounds the god with a multitude of miracles: the collapse of the palace; the rivers of milk, honey and wine, which the Bacchantes cause to spring from the earth; the snakes, which lick the blood from their cheeks; the women's dealings with wild animals which they even suckle; and their ability to put armed men to flight, to attack and plunder villages. If one explains away the collapse of the palace by saying that the Bacchantes imagined it, the other details must either be ignored or attributed to the myth, because there could be no equivalent for them in historical reality. It is clear that the criterion for the decision is simply the interpreter's readiness to accept the possibility of the supernatural phenomena. There are some elements for which there is no unified opinion as to whether they belong solely in the myth or also in the cult's reality; among these is the tearing to pieces of animals and eating the raw flesh, the so-called *Omophagia*. Here, many prefer the helpful explanation that these customs stem from an earlier period or an uncivilised area. Gradually, in Greece, these cruel practices of the cult paled, and Apollonian civilisation took the place of Dionysiac madness. This selection procedure, in which the only criterion is the commentator's rationalism, is methodologically not convincing. If the dramatist wanted to portray reality in his play, it is inexplicable that he should include unreal elements which cannot be separated in the text. The author's intention, at least, thus makes it problematic to connect the myth to the reality of the cult.

This problem can be further illuminated by the study of a single detail. In the *Parodos*, the chorus of Asian women call on Thebes, Dionysus' mother's city, to crown itself with wreaths, to put

on the skin of a young deer, to take the narthex wand and to follow Dionysus into the mountains (*Ba.* 115–19):

Βρόμιος εὖτ' ἄ η θιάσους εἰς ὄρος εἰς ὄρος, ἔνθαφίενειό
θηλυγενῆς ὄχλος ἄφ' ἰστῶνὸ παρὸ κερκίδωνὸ τ'
οἴστρηθεις Διονύσῳ.

... whenever Bromios leads the thiasoi to the mountain, to
the mountain, where there waits
the female throng stung to frenzy from their looms and
shuttles by Dionysus.

The text differentiates clearly between the women of Thebes who, as Dionysus emphasises, are all already in the Kithairon (*Ba.* 35–6), and the other Thiasoi, in which Dionysus leads the men of Thebes to the women in the mountains. Only two men follow this summons: Teiresias and Cadmus, who take the Bacchic utensils and set off into the mountains. They seem to have actually met the women, for Cadmus says later that he and Teiresias have returned “from the Bacchantes” (*Ba.* 1224 βακχῶνὸπάρᾱ).¹⁴ If we take this detail as cultic reality, we must conclude that the women went into the mountains, that the men followed them, and that both groups worshipped the god together in the mountains. A reference from another tragedy, *Ion*, can be added here.¹⁵ When Xuthos wants to explain to Ion that he is his son, he reconstructs the moment of his conception. Xuthos was in the Thiasos of the Maenads of Bakchios (*Ion* 552 ἐθιάσευσ' Μαινάσινὸγεῖβακχίου); drunk with wine, he fathered his son.¹⁶ This image of a joint Bacchic cult of men and women is contrary to everything one can read on the subject. I quote Henrichs: “In Greece proper, ritual maenadism was restricted to

¹⁴ *pace* Henrichs 1984: 69: “Nor do Cadmus and Teiresias ... ever join in the rites of the real maenads on the mountain.”

¹⁵ See some pictures on vases in Bérard and Bron 1989: 130 fig. 179, 140 fig. 190.

¹⁶ Cf. Eur. *Phoen.* 21–2 about Laios: ἠδονῆ ἕνδους ἄεζόστεῖβακχίανὸ (codd. βακχεῖον, s. *POxy* 3321 βακχίον) πεσῶν ἄεσπειρενὸ ἡμῖν ὀπαῖῶα. The transmitted text is perhaps right, cf. Mastronarde 1994: 147: βακχεῖονὸ “a group devoted to Bacchic activity, a thiasos.” So Laios met Iokaste in her “thiasos” and fathered Oidipus.

women, at least down to the end of the Hellenistic period.”¹⁷ But this image also derives ultimately from Euripides. For as Pentheus finally decides to go to the Bacchantes, the stranger/Dionysus persuades him to disguise himself as a woman, since the Maenads would kill him if he were discovered as a man (*Ba.* 823 ἦν ἄν ρώφθῆς ἄκεῖ).¹⁸ In order to resolve the inconsistency, it has been assumed that Teiresias and Cadmus also dressed up as women.¹⁹ However, there is not the slightest indication of such ritual transvestism in the text. Pentheus would hardly have failed to comment if the two old men had confronted him dressed as women. So Euripides’ text remains contradictory. On the one hand there is the summons to the men of Thebes, to follow the Bacchantes into the mountains, which is really followed by two of them, and on the other hand the deadly danger of approaching the Maenads as a man. One solution to the problem could be that Euripides has combined different forms of Dionysus-worship: the Bacchic cult of the women and the male followers of the god, who took part in processions and parades at other festivals.²⁰ Thus he alludes to the festival of the “Return” of Dionysus (Καταγώγιω), for which there is evidence in Miletus and Priene and which was also celebrated in the streets of Athens as the return of Dionysus in the ship-cart,²¹ but which had nothing to do with the Bacchic cult of the women in the mountains (*Ba.* 83–7):

Ἰτεωβάκχαι, Ἰτεωβάκχαι, Βρόμιονωπαῖδαθεδὼνωθεοῦ
 Διόνυσον κατάγουσαι
 Φρυγῶναξέξωρ ὠνῶν Ἑλλάδος αἰεὶ εὐρυχόρους ἀγυιάς.
 τὸν Βρόμιον·ω

¹⁷ Henrichs 1978: 133; about the thiasos of οἱ Καταιβάται in Magnesia, he argues “The thiasos must have included male members, if so it cannot have been genuinely maenadic.”

¹⁸ Cf. Eur. *Ba.* 732 θηρώμεθ’ ἀνδρῶν τῶνδ’ ὑπ’·ω

¹⁹ *pace* Versnel 1990: 120 n. 94: “... in order to join the Bacchic thiasoi men had to undergo transvestism, as Pentheus, Kadmos and Teiresias did.”

²⁰ Cf. the Iacchus-Procession in Aristoph. *Ran.* 156–7 θιασοὺς εὐδαίμωνας ἄνδρῶν ὠγυνηαῖων. Cf. Heraclit. B 15 about men and women at the Phallos-Procession: εἰ μὴ ἄρα Διονύσῳ πομπὴν ἄποιοντο καὶ ὠμνεον ἄσμ’ ἰδοίοισιν, ἀναιδέστατα κείργαστ’ ἄν·ὠ αὐτὸς ὠδὲ ὠ Αἰδης καὶ ὠ Διόνυσος, ὅτε ὠ μαίνονται καὶ ληναίζουσιν.

²¹ *LSAM* 48, 21 (Miletus), *LSAM* 37 = Sylloge³ 1003 (Priene), *IG* II² 1368, 114 = Sylloge³ 1109 (Athens, 178 A.D.).

“Onward bacchant, onward bacchant, bringing back Bromios, a god and a son of a god, Dionysus, from the Phrygian mountains to the streets of Greece, broad for dancing, Bromios.”

So Euripides combined female and male forms of the Dionysus-worship. The reason behind the combination is, of course, integral to the dramaturgy of the play: the summons to the male inhabitants to follow the women into the mountains serves to prepare for the entrance of the two Bacchantes Cadmus and Teiresias. Euripides is first and foremost a dramatist, not a religious historian.

Despite this rather banal perception, scholars have used Euripides again and again as a source of information about the cult of Dionysus.²² There is good reason for this: there are almost no non-literary sources from the 5th century for the female Bacchic cult. We do indeed have a large number of pictorial representations from the 6th century onwards, showing females among Dionysus' followers; the problems which arise from the literary representations are simply repeated, however, in this medium. The transference of the mythical pictures on the vases into cultic reality is fraught with problems; the consensus is that the pictures are neither an illustration of literary sources, nor an accurate depiction of cultic reality, but that their iconography speaks a language complete in itself, which is no longer clearly legible for us. One need only recall the controversial “Lenaen-vases,” whose connection to the Athenian festivals has been in dispute since Nilsson and Deubner; Peirce has recently stated that they cannot be associated with any specific festival at all.²³

In light of the state of the sources, we must use the evidence of later times in order to reconstruct the cult which is the basis of the play and to decide whether there is any relationship with the mysteries. However, even this evidence is sparse. The most comprehensive report is that of Diodorus in the second half of the first century B.C. He reports what the Greeks say about the Bacchic women's cult in Greece (τά αἰ ἄ τοῖς Ἑλλησι λεγόμενα), so he is not describing his own views (4.3.3):

²² Cf. [Versnel 1990](#): “Euripides' *Bacchae* offers the most complete description of what we believe we must understand by bacchic orgia.”

²³ Cf. [Peirce 1998](#), [Frontisi-Ducroux 1991](#).

διὸ καὶ παρὺ πολλὰς τῶν Ἑλληνίδων πόλεων διὺ
 τριῶν ἑτῶν κχεῖ ἰά τε γυναικῶν ἀθροίζεσθαι, καὶ παῖς
 παρθένους νόμιμον εἶναι θυρσοφορεῖν καὶ
 συνενθουσιάζειν ἑαζούσας καὶ τιμώσας ἵπτον θεόν· ὑπὸ δὲ
 γυναικῶν κατὰ συστήματα θυσιάζειν τῶν θεῶν καὶ
 βακχεύειν καὶ καθόλου τῆν παρουσίαν μνεῖν τοῦ
 Διονύσου. μιμουμένας τὴν ἱστορουμένας τὸ παλαιὸν
 παρεδρεύειν τῶν θεῶν Μαινάδας.

(The Greeks tell, that) consequently in many Greek cities every other year Bacchic bands of women gather, and it is lawful for the maidens to carry the thyrsus and to join in the frenzied revelry, crying out: “Euai!” and honoring the god; while the matrons, forming thiasoi to the god, celebrate the Bacchic rites and in general extol with hymns the presence of Dionysus, in this manner acting the part of the Maenads, who, as history records, were of old the companions of the god.

In the Parodos, Euripides speaks of a Trieteris, a festival which takes place every two years (*Ba.* 133),²⁴ though the reason for the biennial rhythm is not clear.²⁵ The distinction between the unmarried women, who carry the Thyrsos and take part in the enthusiastic action with their cries of εὐή, and the married women who form the Thiasos and practise the Bacchic cult, is not found in Euripides, who depicts all the women of Thebes as being driven into the mountains together (*Ba.* 35–6). Diodorus’ description recalls the sentence quoted by Plato: νάρθηκοφόροι μὲν πολλοί, βάκχοι δὲ τεύπαυροι (*Phaid.* 69c). It is also interesting that the cult is interpreted as an imitation of the mythic Maenads who accompany the god: Diodorus is certainly thinking of Euripides’ representation. For the god dances with his worshippers in Euripides (*Ba.* 62–3 ἐγὼ δὲ βάκχαις, ἔσὺ Κιθαιρῶνος, πτυχὺν ἐλθὼν εἰσὶ, συμμετασχῆσω χορῶν). As

²⁴ Cf. *LSAM* 48, 20 (Miletus, see page), *IG* II² 1368, 43. 69. 113. 153 (Athens, 178 A.D.): ἀμφιετέριδες; cf. Orphic hymn. 52.10 and 53.1.

²⁵ Diodorus 4.3.2 connects it with the god’s journey to India; after two years he returned.

Henrichs has indicated, we must assume that Euripides' play influenced the later cult.

One would love to know to which cities Diodorus referred. Thebes was certainly one of them. In the case of this “mother-city of the Bacchants” (ματρόπολις Βακχῶν), as the Chorus in *Antigone* sings (*Ant.* 1122), it becomes clear how inadequate our sources are: there is not a single non-literary document for Thebes.²⁶ An inscription from Magnesia at Maeander was taken for one. The Archimystes Apollonios Mokolles had a marble plaque erected there in the 2nd century A.D., which reproduces an old oracle of the god at Delphi (ἄρχαῖος χρησμός) (*IMagn.* 215, 24–36):²⁷

ἐλθέτε δὲ ἐς Θήβης ἱερὸν πέδον, ὄφρα λάβητεω
 Μαινώδας αἰ γεινήσιν Εἰνοῦς ἄπο Καδμείηςω
 αἰ δ' μείν δώσουσιν καὶ ὄργια καὶ νόμιμα ἐσθλω
 καὶ θιάσους Βάκχοιο καθειδρῦσουσιν ἐν ἄστει.
 κατω τὸν ἀχρησμὸν διω τῶν ἀθεοπρόπων ἀδόθησαν ἀέκω
 Θηβῶν Μαινάδες τρεῖς Κοσκῶ, Βαυβῶ, Θετταλήω καὶ ἡ
 μὲν Κοσκῶ συνήγαγεν ἄσπονδον ἄπλατανιστηνῶν, ἡ
 δὲ Βαυβῶ τὸν ἀπὸ πόλεως, ἡ δὲ Θετταλή τὸν τῶν
 Καταιβατῶν.

Go to the holy plain of Thebes to fetch Maenads from the race of Cadmeian Ino. They will bring you maenadic rites and noble customs and will establish thiasoi of Bacchus in your city. In accordance with the oracle, and through the agency of the envoys, three Maenads were brought from Thebes: Kosko, Baubo, and Thettale. And Kosko organized the thiasus named after the plane tree, Baubo the thiasus outside the city, and Thettale the thiasus named after Kataibates.

²⁶ There is some evidence in literature; so the first named “human” maenad from Theben is Antigone, cf. [Eur.] *Phoen.* 1754–6: Καδμείαν ᾧ νεβρίδαω στολιδωσαμένα ποτ' ἐγὼ Σεμέλας θίασον ἱερὸν ὄρεισιν ἀνεχόρευσα. cf. Timagoras *FGrH* 381 F1: the Niobides come to Mt. Kithairon, Verg. *Georg.* 3.43 and *Aen.* 4.300–3, Stat. *Theb.* 2.79–80 and 4.371, Lact. *Inst.* 1.22.15.

²⁷ Cf. Kern 1900: 139–40, cf. Henrichs 1978: 123–34.

Apollonios' source is unclear; a reference to the Celtic invasion in the years 279/8 indicates the first half of the 3rd century.²⁸ The authenticity of the oracle is disputed, as is the question of whether the three Theban Maenads are historical persons. The title Maenad, which is rare in non-literary texts, the significant names and the reference to Ino seem to point to the sphere of myth. Even if the oracle is not genuine, it shows that the introduction of Dionysiac Thiasoi was seen as the adoption of a Theban cult; whether it really refers to an actual cult, rather than the mythical cult as represented by Euripides, remains an open question.

The findings for Athens are similarly inadequate; there are five feasts of Dionysus, but there is no evidence for any of them that the women left their houses in an ecstatic state and stormed into the mountains. The "Lenaea" indicate the Maenadic cult by the name λῆναι, but there is no historical evidence. In connection with the Anthesteria, we hear of a Dionysiac women's assembly in the context of the so-called Holy Wedding of Basilinna with Dionysus.²⁹ This assembly performs unspeakable holy sacrifices for the city (ἔθνεφτὰ ἄρρηταφέρὰ πῆρ τῆσφπόλεως) in the holy place ἐνφ Λίμναις.³⁰ Before this, the Basilinna had to accept an oath from her assistants, the 14 "revered women" (γεγαίραι): the words are as follows (Ps. Dem. *Or.* 59 *contra Neair.* 78):

Ἄγιστεύωφκαὶ εἰμὶ καθαρὰ καὶ ἀγνή ἀπόφ(τε)φτῶνφ
ἄλλωνφ τῶνφ οφ καθαρευόντωνφ καὶ ἀπ' ἀνδρωςφ

²⁸ The time of the cult-transfer is dated in the inscription through the name "Akrodemus," who was prytanus (unfortunately he is unknown to us). If Apollonios' source was written in the first half of the 3rd century, its author may have dated the oracle and cult-transfer much earlier. Cf. the fragment from the Μαγνητικάφφ Possis *FGrHist* 480 F 1 (ed. Jacoby) (= Athen. 12, 533D/E): Πόσσιςφδ' ἐνφρίτωφφΜαγνητικῶνφτὸνφΘεμιστοκλῆς φησίνφώφ Διονυσφφ οοπότηφ θυσιάσανταφ καίφ τήνφ Χοῶνφ ἐορτήνφ αὐτόθιφ καταδείξαι.

²⁹ Cf. Plut. *mul. virt.* 251E about Elis: αἰφπεριφτὸνφΔιόνυσονφφιεραίφ γυναῖκες, ἄσφέκκαίδεκαφκαλοῦσιν; Pausanias 6.26.1, they celebrate the Θυῖα with a wine-miracle and call Dionysos a bull; *Oreibasia* is not mentioned. Pausanias 3.13.7 mentions for Sparta an assembly of 11 Διονυσιάδες; cf. Hesych. s.v.

Δύσμαιναι· αἱ ἐνφ πάρτη χορίτιδες βάκχαι.

³⁰ This holy place is perhaps named in Aristoph. *Lys.* 1 Βακχεῖον.

συνουσίας, καὶ τὰ θεοίνια καὶ τὰ ἰοβάκχαια γεραρῶ τῶς
Διονύσῳ κατὰ τὰ πάτρια καὶ ἐνς τοῖ καθήκουσις
χρόνοις.

I live a holy life and am pure and unstained by all else that
pollutes and by commerce with man, and I will celebrate the
Theoinia and Iobaccheia in Honour of Dionysus in
accordance with custom and at the established times.

In Euripides' *Bacchae*, the cult call "Io Bacchos" occurs in a
different form: Dionysus calls ἰὼ βάκχαι, ἰὼ βάκχαισιν to the Asian
women (*Ba.* 577). It is not clear what is behind the θεοίνια καὶ
ἰοβάκχαια: the rituals performed by the women remain secret. They
operate in the oldest Dionysus-temple in the centre of the city (south
of the Acropolis); there is no mention of Maenadic activity in the
mountains. We only hear about such things from Pausanias in the 2nd
century A.D. (10.4.3); a group of Athenian women (unfortunately he
does not mention how many) went to Delphi,³¹ to Mt. Parnassus,
every second year in winter (in the months of
Dadaphorios/Maimakterion) to celebrate the Orgia of Dionysus with
the women of Delphi, the Thyiades.³² Euripides mentions this
Delphic cult in the *Bacchae* (*Ba.* 306–9),³³ but not the name
Thyiades.³⁴ We have Plutarch to thank for further information.³⁵ He

³¹ Does he mean the 14 "revered women"?

³² Cf. Paus. 10.32.7 ἀπὸς δὲ τοῦς Κωρυκίους χαλεπὸν ἦδη καὶ ἀνδρῶν
εὐζώνων πρὸς τὰς ἀκράστικέσθαι τοῦς Παρνασσούστας δὲ νεφῶν τε γέσθαι
ἀνωτέρως τὰς ἀκράστικαὶς Θυιάδες ἐπὶ τούτοις τῶς Διονύσῳ καὶ τῶς
Ἀπόλλωνι αἰνούνται.

³³ Eur. *Ba.* 306–9 ἔτ' αὐτὸν δ' ὀψηκὰ πῖς Δελφίσις πέτραις / πηδῶντας οὐν
πεύκαισις δὲ κόρυφον σπλάκα. / πάλλοντας καὶ σείοντας βακχεῖον κλάδον,
/ μέγαν τ' ἀν' Ἑλλάδ'. Cf. Soph. *Ant.* 1126–30 σὲ δ' ὑπὲρ δὲ δόφους
πέτρας / στέροψ' ὄπωπε / λιγυῖς, ἐνθα Κωρύκται / στείχουσις Νύμφαις
Βακχίδες / Κασταλίας τε νῆμα.

³⁴ In *Ion* Euripides calls the participants in the "Torch Festival" (φάνας
Βακχίου) "the Maenads of Bacchios" (*Ion* 550–2) and Aristophanes in the
Clouds "Delphic Bacchae" (*Nub.* 603–6). Paus. 10.6.4 says that Thyia, the
daughter of Kastalios, has given Apollo a son, named Delphus. Thyiades
are mentioned by Aeschyl. *Th.* 498 and 836 (both a comparison), *Supp.* 564
(Ἰοσας θυιάς Ἥρας) and Soph. *Ant.* 1149–51 Ζηνὸς γένεθλον, προφάνηθ',
ῶναξ, σαῖς ἄμασπεριπόλοις Θυιάσιν; cf. Alkm. fr. 63 (= *Schol. min. Hom.*
Il. 6,21) named the γένης Νυμφῶνς(!): Ναῖδες τες α μπάδες τες Θυιάδες τε.

provides the earliest non-poetic evidence for a female Bacchic cult from the year 354/3 B.C. It is important to realise that more than 400 years lie between the testimony and the facts reported. Plutarch tells the attractive story that the women of Amphissa protected the Thyiades from Delphi, who had got lost in the hostile city and had fallen asleep from exhaustion in the market-place, giving them food and accompanying them home (*mulier. virt.* 249E/F).

The evidence examined so far leads to the conclusion that a biennial rite took place, in which a certain group of women set off into the mountains, to worship the god there in a natural setting, undoubtedly accompanied by ritual dance and music. There is definite evidence for this rite in Delphi; one may assume that it applies to Thebes as well. The number of women who took part, their precise activities and their state of mind, are not clear from the texts. Above all, it is not clear whether this form of the cult was preceded by an initiation or whether the ritual itself is to be understood as the initiation. Two further inscriptions, both from Miletus, could suggest this. One is the gravestone of the Milesian Priestess Alkmeionis from the 3rd or 2nd century B.C. (W. Peek, *Versinschriften* Nr. 1344)³⁶:

τὴν σίην χαίρειμ, πολιήτιδες ε πατε Βάκχαιδ
 ἰρείην· χρηστῆ τοῦτο γυναικὶ θέμις.
 ὕμᾱς κείς ὄρος ἦγε καὶ ὄργια πάντα καὶ ἰρᾶό
 ἦνικεμ πάσης ἐρχομένη πρὸ πόλεως.
 τοῦνομα ἔτις ξεῖνος ἀωείρεται, Ἀλκμειωνίδ
 ἢ Ῥοδίῳθ, καλῶμ μοῖραν ἐπισταμνένη.

Bacchantes of the city, say “Farewell you holy priestess.”
 This is what a good woman deserves. She led you to the
 mountain and carried all the sacred objects and implements,
 marching in procession before the whole city. Should some
 stranger ask for her name: Alkmeonis, daughter of Rhodios,
 who knew her share of the blessings.

³⁵ Cf. Plut. *Is. Os.* 364E: Klea is the ἀρχηγὴς of the Delphic Thyiades; *de prom. frig.* 953D: Thyiades are in danger on Mt. Parnassus because of a snowstorm.

³⁶ Translation from [Henrichs 1978: 148](#), cf. [Merkelbach 1972](#).

The text provides clear evidence of ritual *Oreibasia*, the going into the mountains, in the 3rd century B.C. The obvious distinction between public (πολιτήτιες) and private Bacchants is interesting. A procession is also referred to, in front of which the priestess carries the sacred implements. One would very much like to know what exactly is meant by this. The last verse is decisive; it has been compared to the Mystery formula “I fled from the evil and I found salvation” (Ἐφυγον κακόν, εὔρον ἄμεινον).³⁷ From this, one could conclude that the priestess was initiated in the Dionysus-mysteries or performed them herself; however, a connection to *Oreibasia* is not definite; the inscription gives no support to the suggestion that the female maenadism belongs to the mysteries.

The same goes for the important cult law from Miletus in 276/5 B.C. The surviving text regulates various duties and rights of the priesthood of Dionysus, which could be bought. The most important passage in our context reads (F. Sokolowski *LSAM* Nr. 48, lines 18–20)

κα ἔάν τις υν ἡ βούληται τελεῖν τῷ Διονύσῳ τῷ
 Βακχίῳ ἐν τῇ πόλει ἢ ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ ἢ ἐν τοῖς νήσοις,
 [ἀπο]ιδότω τῇ ἱερείᾳ στατῆρα κατ' ἑκάστην
 τριετηρίαν.

And when a woman wishes to perform the initiation in the cult of Dionysus Bacchius in the city or in the country or on the islands, she should give the priestess a Stater (a sum of money) in each two-year festival period.

This concerns private forms of the cult, which are subordinated to the state priestess through payments of money. It only mentions a woman who undertakes the initiation. Whether the two-year rhythm includes the dates of the initiation, or merely regulates the times of the payments, cannot be decided. The number of initiated women does not seem to correlate with the sum to be paid. The greatest difficulty arising from the text is whether there is a connection between this initiation and the Thiasoi mentioned at the beginning of the text (lines 1–3):

³⁷ Ps. Dem. 18.259 in the context of the Dionysus-Sabazius-mysteries; cf. Paus. *atticista* e 87 in connection with a wedding in Athens.

τανδὲ ἡ ἱέρεια ἐπι[τελέσ]ησ' ἅ ἱερά π' ἐρ τῆς πόλεως
[πάσης] μὴ ἐξεῖναι ὠμοφάγιον ἐμ αλεῖνὸ μηθενὶ
πρότερον [ἢ ἢ ἱε]ρειαὸ π' ἐρ τῆς πόλεως ὅεμ ἀλλ' μὴ
ἐξεῖναι δὲ μηδὲ [συν]αγαγεῖν τὸν θίασον ὅ μηθενὶ
πρότερον τοῦ δημοσίου.

When the priestess performs the sacred rites for the whole city, no-one is permitted to throw the Omophagion before the priestess does this for the city, and no-one is permitted to gather his Thiasos before the public one has been gathered.

Apart from the cryptic reference to the Omophagia, it is clear that this passage deals with the rivalry between the private and public forms of the cult. Unlike the information about Magnesia, there only seems to have been a single public Thiasos in Miletus, as well as several private ones, which drew members away from the public one. The public cult is apparently an all-female Thiasos, since it is led by a priestess; whether this also applies to the private ones is not indicated. It is not clear what form the activity of these Thiasoi took; there is no mention of Oreibasias. Only if the two passages are combined - and they are twelve lines apart - can one claim that the gathering of the Thiasoi (συναγαγεῖν) consists of the act of initiation (τελεῖν). The text does not indicate that, and the difficulties of the Euripides' play cannot be solved; they are simply repeated within this document from Miletus.

To solve our problem, we must look now from the other side, exploring more closely the Dionysus-mysteries, confining ourselves to evidence from the 5th century³⁸. The most important text is in Herodotus and reports the initiation of the king of the Scythians, Scyles, in Olbia, a Milesian colony north of the Black Sea on the River Borysthenes, in the middle of the 5th century (4.79):

Ἐπεθύμησε Ὀδίων ὕσφρα βακχεῖω τελεσθῆναι ἄμελλοντι δὲ
οἱ ἐς χεῖρας ὄψεσθαι ὅ τῆν ὀ τελετῆν ἔνετο ὄφασμα ὄ
μέγιστον. ἦν οἱ ἐν ὀ Βορυσθενεῖ τῶν ὀ πόλιος ὀκίης

³⁸ Cf. Heraclit. B 14: νυκτιπόλοις, μάγοις, βᾶκχοις, λῆναις, μύσαις ὄ τούτοις ὀ ἀπειλεῖ ὄ ἄμετᾶ ὀ ἄνατον, τούτοις ὀ μαντεύεται ὄ ὀ δᾶ πῦρ ὄ ἄ ὀ ὀ νόμιζόμενα κατ' ἀνθρώπους ὀ φιστήρια ἀνιερωστί φινεῦνται.

μεγάλης καὶ ἰσχυρῆς πολυτελείας περιβολῆς καὶ ὑψηλῆς αὐτῆς ὄψεως
 ἐνέσκηψε βέλος καὶ ἠϋμένον κατεκάκησεν ἅσα, Σκυλησὶ δὲ οὐδὲν
 οὐδὲν τοῦτο χεῖνε κακῆ ἥσσαν χέπετ ἐλέσθη ἡ τελετή.
 Σκύθαι δὲ οὗτοι βακχεύειν πέριχ' Ἑλλησι χόνοι διζουσι· χούῃ
 γάρ φασι χοῖκος εἶναι θεὸν χεξευρίσκειν τοχτοχ ὅστις
 μαίνεσθαι χένάγει χάνθρωπους. Ἐπίτεχ δὲ ἐτελέσθη τῶν
 Βακχείων οὐ Σκύλης. διεπρήστευσεν τῶν τις
 Βορυσθενείτων χπρὸς τοὺς Σκύθας γλέγων· “Ἡμῖν γάρ
 καταγελάτε, ὦ Σκύθαι, ὅτι βακχεύομεν καὶ ἡμέας ὁ θεὸς
 λαμβάνει· νῦν οὗτος οὐδαίμων καὶ ὑπέτερον βασιλέα
 χλελάβηκε, καὶ ὁ βακχεύει τε καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ
 μαίνεται. εἰ δὲ ὑμοὶ χἀπιστέετε, ἔπεσθε, καὶ ὑμῖν χέγω
 δείξω.” εἶπον τοχ τῶν Σκυθέων χοχ προεστεῶτες, καὶ
 αὐτοὺς χἀναγαγὼν χὸ Βορυσθενείτης χλάθρη χέπὶ ὑπύργον
 κατεῖσε. Ἐπίτεχ δὲ ὑπαρήχον τῶν χθιάσων χὸ Σκύλης καὶ
 εἶδόν χ μιν βακχεύοντα χοχ Σκύθαι, χάρτα χ συμφορῆν
 μεγάλην χέποισαντο, ἐξελθόντες δὲ ἐσήχαινον πάση τῇ
 στρατιῇ τὰ ὕδοιεν.

Scyles conceived a desire to be initiated into the rites of the Bacchic Dionysus; and when he was about to begin the sacred mysteries, he saw a wondrous vision. He had in the city of the Borysthenites a spacious house great and costly ... this house was smitten by a thunderbolt and wholly destroyed by fire. But despite this Scyles performed the rite to the end. Now the Scythians make this Bacchic revelling a reproach against the Greeks, saying that it is not reasonable to set up a god who leads men on to madness. So when Scyles had been initiated into the Bacchic rite, some one of the Borysthenites scoffed at the Scythians: “Why,” said he, “you Scythians mock us for revelling and being possessed by the god; but now this deity has taken possession of your own king, so that he is revelling and is maddened by the god. If you will not believe me, follow me now and I will show him to you.” The chief men among the Scythians followed him, and the Borysthenite brought them up secretly and set them on a tower; whence presently, when Scyles passed by with his company of worshippers, they saw him among the

revellers; being greatly moved at this, they left the city and told the whole army what they had seen.

If one compares this text with Diodorus' description of the Bacchic women's cult, a certain closeness is evident: both texts speak of βακχεύειν, both mention a Thiasos, both refer to the ecstatic state or possession by the god. But there are also differences: Herodotus describes the unique initiation of one man and his procession through the city, Diodorus a biennial festival of women which takes place in natural surroundings. If one interprets Euripides' play as the ἱερὸς ὄγος of the Dionysus-mysteries, one must assume that the dramatist would have united the two forms of the cult in the character of Pentheus. When Pentheus takes the form of a female Bacchant and wants to partake of the cult, he would symbolise the path of the one to be initiated. The dismemberment by the women would be not only the punishment for the rejection of the cult, but would at the same time point to the completion of the initiation into the mysteries which would have consisted of a ritual death by dismemberment. Seaford and others see the religious-historical background of the play in this way: "Of contemporary ritual the *Bacchae* reflects two seemingly different kinds: on the one hand the ὄρειβασία and σπαραγμός performed by the female thiasos, and on the other hand the mystic initiation of the male Pentheus."³⁹ The expression "two seemingly different kinds" shows the same problem once again: does Pentheus' fate really reflect the ritual act of initiation and is the participation in the Bacchic activity of the women really bound to such a ritual initiation?

Since the spectacular find of the "golden plates," above all in Southern Italy, the image of the Dionysus-mysteries in the 5th century has changed. The most important evidence in our context comes from Hipponion at the end of the 5th century and speaks of the path the initiated should take in the underworld (*SEG* 26, 1139, 15–16 = *SEG* 40, 824 = B^H Zuntz = I A 1 Pugliese)

α δὴ α συχνᾶν ὁδὸν ἔρχεαι ἄν τε α ἄ οιλ
 μύσται α βᾶκχοι ἱερᾶν στείχουσι εἰνοί .

³⁹ Seaford 1981: 265; cf. Bron 1987: 145: "Le culte n'est pas réservé aux femmes; chacun peut devenir bacchant, homme ou femme, mais il faut être initié."

And so go the long way, the sacred way, which the other
Mystics and Bacchants, the blessed ones, also take.

Another text tells the dead man to say to Persephone in the
underworld (Pelinna 1–2 = II B 3–4, 2 Pugliese):

εἶπε ν Φερσεφόνα σ' ὅτι Βάχχιος αὐτὸς ἔλυσε.

Tell Persephone that Bacchus himself has released you.

The inscription from a burial place in Cumae from the middle of the
5th century B.C. is also famous (F. Solokowski, *LSCG* Suppl. 120):

οὐ θέμις ἐνταῦθα κεῖσθαι εἰ μὴ τὸν βεβαχχευμένονω

No-one may be buried here, apart from he who is initiated in
the cult of Bacchus.

Here, an initiation in a secret cult society, which claimed a special
burial ground, is related to Dionysus-Bacchus. It is possible that
Euripides, particularly in Thessaly, where golden plates have also
been found, had this form of Dionysus-cult in mind and that he
conceived his play in light of this.⁴⁰ For Dionysus-Bacchus played an
important part in the imaginative world of the initiations revealed by
the golden plates. The highly controversial question arises whether
there is a relationship between these cults and the phenomenon
known as Orphism. “Orphic” is the term for the myth of the chthonic
Dionysus, son of Zeus and Persephone, who was dismembered by
the Titans, boiled and roasted, whereupon Zeus struck the murderers

⁴⁰ It is an open question whether Dionysus-mysteries existed in Athens the
5th century B.C. alongside the mysteries of Eleusis, s. Obbink 1993: 78:
“Initiation into Dionysiac mysteries possibly did not take place in
Attica.” But it is obvious that there was knowledge of them: see Aristoph.
Ran. 357 in comic transference: ὅστις ὡ μὴδὲ Κρατίνου τοῦ ταυροφάγου
γλώττης βακχεῖ ἐτελέσθη. cf. Plat. *Leg.* 815c ὅση μὲν βακχεία τ' ἐστίνω
καὶ τῶν ταύταις ἐπομένων, ἅς Νύμφας τε καὶ Πᾶνας καὶ Σειληνοὺς καὶ
Σατύρους ἀπονομάζοντες, ὡς ἄσασιν, μιμοῦνται ἀκατωνωμένους, περίω
καθαροὺς ἀκατελετάσων ἀποτελούντων, σύμπαν ἀποῦτο αἴης
ὀρχήσεως τὸ γένος οὔθ' ὡς εἰρηνικὸν οὔθ' ὡς πολεμικὸν οὔθ' ὅτι ποτέω
βούλεται ῥάδιον ἀφορίσασθαι.

with a bolt of lightning. Opinions differ as to the age of this myth; when Plato speaks of the “age-old titanic nature” of mankind (παλαιὰ Τιτανικὴ φύσις) he may testify to the myth (*Leg.* 701b/c):⁴¹ possibly it was to be found in the “Theogonia” which was quoted by the Peripatetic Eudemos (frg. 150,2–3: ἡ παρὰ ὤ Περιπατητικῶν Εὐδήμω τῶν ἀναγεγραμμένων νηπιῶν τοῦ Ὀρφῶτος οὐσα θεολογία). According to later sources, this myth embodies the ἱερὸς λόγος of the Dionysus-mysteries.⁴² If this myth already played a part in the Orphic or Dionysus-mysteries in the 5th or even the 6th century, this would increase the probability that the dismemberment of Pentheus reflects the mystic fate of the god and of those initiated in his cult, and that Euripides at least hints at this ἱερὸς λόγος in his drama.

There is important epigraphic evidence from the 5th century for a connection between the Orphic movement and the Dionysus-mysteries.⁴³ Olbia, of all places, the scene of Scyles’ initiation, was the site where “bone tablets” were found in 1951, though they were published much later: on one of them has been scratched: Dio (meaning Διόνυσος) Ὀρφικί(τ)ο(Ὀρφικῶ / Ὀρφικῶν).⁴⁴ The

⁴¹ Cf. Pind. fr. 133 (= Plat. *Men.* 81b): οἷσι δὲ Φερσεφόνα ποινὰν παλαιούτ πενθεοστδέξεται. It is far from clear that this means the murder of Dionysus. Paus. 8.37.5 (OF Test. 194) mentions Onomakritos as author of the myth. Unfortunately the Derveni Papyrus ends before Dionysus can appear.

⁴² Cf. Plut. *Is. Os.* 360F τὰ γὰρ Τιτανικὰ καὶ Τιτανικὰ παρ’ Ἑλλησιν τὰ δόματα ... φυγαί τε τῶν Διονύσου καὶ πλάναι τῶν Δήμητρος οὐδὲν ἀπολείπουσι τῶν Ὀσιριακῶν καὶ Τυφωρικῶν ἄλλων τῶν ὄντων πάντων ἕξουσι τὰ ἀνέδην τῶν μυθολογουμένων ἀκούειν τὰ ὄσα τε μυστικῶς τῶν ἱεροῦ περικαλυπτόμενα καὶ τελεταῖς τῶν ῥητῶν διασώζονται καὶ τὰ θέατα πρὸς τοὺς πολλούς, ὅμοιον ἔχει λόγον τῶν 365A Ὀμολογεῖται δὲ καὶ τὰ Τιτανικὰ καὶ Νυκτέλια τοῖς τλεγομένοις τῶν Ὀσίριδος διασπασμοῖς καὶ τὰ ἀναβιώσει καὶ παλιγγενεσίαις: Cf. Plut. *esu carn.* 996c τὰ γὰρ δὴ περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον μεμυθωμένα πάθη τοῦ διαμελισμοῦ καὶ τὰ Τιτανικὰ ἐπ’ αὐτὸν τολμήματα γευσασμένων τε τοῦ φόνου κολάσεις [τε τούτων] καὶ κεραυνώσεις, ἠνιγμένος τε στίμιθος τῆς τῆν παλιγγενεσίαν. Cf. Clem. *protr.* 17,2–18,2 with the most detailed description of the Dionysus-mysteries against the background of the Titanic myth.

⁴³ Later evidence: Damagetos (3./2. cent. B.C.) in *AP* 7.9.5 (Ὀρφεύς), ὅστ ποτε καὶ τελετὰς μυστηρίδας εὔρετο τοῦ Βάκχου. Diod. 3.65.6, Ps. *Apoll. Bibl.* 1.15, OF test. 94–101 (ed. Kern).

⁴⁴ Cf. West 1982: 17–19.

exact meaning of these words is, however, uncertain. Apart from a controversial passage in Herodotus,⁴⁵ it is once again Euripides who links Orpheus and the Bacchic cult (Eur. *Hipp.* 952–5):

ἤδη νυν αὖχει καὶ δι' ἀψύχου βορᾶςφ
σίτοις καπήλευ' Ὀρφέα τ' ἄνακτ' ἔχωνφ
βάκχευε πολλῶν γραμμάτων τιμῶν καπνούςφ

Now you may plume yourself, now by a vegetable diet
play the showman with your food, and with Orpheus for
your lord hold your covens and honour all the vaporious
screeds.

It is not clear how far the term βακχεύειν here simply refers generally to ostentatious religious behaviour, since Hippolytos is not a follower of Dionysus but of Artemis. Vegetarianism and initiation are connected, however, in a fragment from Euripides' tragedy *Cretans*. Probably first performed before 425 B.C., it is perhaps the most important evidence from the 5th century for the Orphic dismemberment myth of Dionysus. The Chorus of the initiates in the mysteries of Zeus Idaeos sing in the Parodos (frg. 471):

ἄγνὸν δὲ βίονφτείνομενφἔξ' ὄμφΔιδὸςφ'Ιδαίουμφμύστηςφ
γενόμηνηφ
καὶ νυκτιπόλουφΖαγρέωςφβροντᾶςφτοῦς τ' ὠμοφάγουςφ
δαίτας τελέσαςφ
Μητρί τ' ρείωφδᾶδαςφἀνασχῶνηφκαὶ Κουρήτωνφ(ὠ)
βάκχος ἔκλήθηνηφ σιωθεῖς.
πάλλευκα δ' ἔχων εἴματα φεύγω γένεσίν τε βροτῶν καὶ
νεκροθήκηςφ
οὐ χριμπτόμενοςφτήνηφτ' ἔμφψύχωνφβρωῶσινφἔδεστῶνηφ
πεφύλαγμαι.

⁴⁵ Hdt. 2.81 about the prohibition of wool in Aegyptian burials: ὁμολογέουσιφδὲφταῦταφτοῖσιφὈρφικοῖσιφκαλεομένοισιφκαὶφΒακχικοῖσι, ἐοῦσι δὲ Αἰγυπτίοισι, καὶφ υθαγορείοισι (in the short version of the text καὶφΒακχικοῖσι, ἐοῦσιφδὲφΑἰγυπτίοισιφis missing). If the long version is authentic, Herodotus mentions three groups: the Orphics, the Bacchic Initiates, and the Pythagoreans, but he doesn't identify them as one and the same group.

I lead a pure life, since I became a mystic of Zeus of Ida and since I performed the thunder of Zagreus, who roams at night, and the meal of raw meat and since I waved for the mother of the mountains the torches and the Kouretes <...> and I am called “Bacchus” as one of the sanctified. I wear all-white clothing, I avoid human reproduction, do not touch graves and deny myself the consumption of living creatures.

The name of Zagreus, in particular, has led scholars to think of the Orphic myth of the dismemberment of Dionysus, although the name does not occur at all in the preserved Orphic texts, where Persephone’s son is called Dionysus.⁴⁶ The Hellenistic poet Callimachus provides the first evidence for the name Dionysus Zagreus for the son of Persephone and Zeus (frg. 43.117: *υἱὸν Διόνυσον ὠζαγρεῶσιν ὠμίνην*).⁴⁷ Callimachus is also the first witness of the dismemberment myth, although he does not use the name of Zagreus in this context (frg. 517 and 643). Plutarch is the first to use the name.⁴⁸ Apart from the name Zagreus, the mention of thunder (*ρονταῖ*) could also recall the myth of the Titans. There is no mention, however, of lightning sent by Zeus or striking the Titans: it is linked with Zagreus instead. The expression *Ζαγρέωσῶ ροντᾶς ὠ τελέσας* is very difficult linguistically, so it is generally changed to *Ζαγρέωσῶ οὔτης* (the following *τε* being omitted).⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Cf. West 1983: 153: “The name was probably not used in the Orphic narrative, for there is no trace of it in the fragments, the Orphic hymns, or the many references to the myth in the Neoplatonists.”

⁴⁷ Arrian. *An.* 2.16.3: the chthonic Dionysus connected with the Eleusinian Iacchus, cf. Luk. *Salt.* 39: Iacchus is dismembered by the Titans. Later evidence for the Orphic Dionysos: Diod. 3.64.1, 4.4.1, 5.75.4, Ovid *Met.* 6.114, Hyg. *Fab.* 155, Athenag. *pro Christ.* 20 und 32 (OF 58–9), Tatian. *Adv. Graec.* 8, Orph. hym. 30.7, Philostr. *Ep.* 30.

⁴⁸ Plut. *de E apud Delph.* 389A: τῆς δ’ εἰς πνεύματα αἰὲς ὕδωρ καὶ γῆν καὶ βῶστρον αἰὲς αἰ φυτῶν ζώων τε γενέσεις τροπῆς ὠ ὑτοῦ καὶ διακοσμήσεως β τὸ μὲν ὠπάθημ καὶ ὠτῆν ὠ μεταβολῆν ὠ διασπασμόν ὠ τινὰ καὶ ὠ διαμῆλιμόν ὠ ἰνίττονται Διόνυσον ὠ δὲ ὠ καὶ ὠ Ζαγρέα καὶ ὠ Νυκτέλιον καὶ ὠ Ἄσοδαίτην ὠ αὐτὸν ὠ νομάζουσι καὶ φθοράς τινὰς καὶ ἀφανισμοὺς εἶτα ὠ ἀναβιώσεις ὠ καὶ ὠ παλιγγενεσί ὠ ὠ κεί ὠ αἰς ὠ εἰρημέναις ὠ μεταβολαῖς ὠ πίνιγματα ὠ καὶ ὠ μυθεύματα ὠ περαίνουσι. The best evidence for Zagreus is to be found in Nonnos.

⁴⁹ Diels: Βούτας, Wilamowitz: οὔτης cf. Eur. fr. 203 N.²: οὔκολοι in Dionysus’ service, cf. Lukian *Salt.* 79; Dionysos as bull cf. Eur. *Ba.* 100,

Zagreus' conjectural bull-form has led scholars to propose a link to the Orphic myth, according to which the subterranean Dionysus appears in the form of a bull, first in Hellenistic times in Euphorion (frg. 14 Powell).⁵⁰ But conjecture is hardly an adequate basis. The text does not provide convincing proof of Euripides' knowledge of the Orphic myth. The mention of the Omophagia is, rather, contrary to the Orphic myth: the dismembered Dionysus is boiled and roasted by the Titans, not eaten raw. It is equally unlikely that Rhea, the mother of the gods, is meant in place of Persephone as the mother of Dionysus-Zagreus.⁵¹

I propose another interpretation of the fragment. All of its textual elements can also be found in the *Bacchae*: the name "Bacchus," the Omophagia (Eur. *Ba.* 139), the emphasis on the "holy, pure life" (ἄγνῶν δὲ βίον) (*Ba.* 74 βιοτὰν ἄγιστεύει). The mother of the gods and the Kuretes figure in the chorus' song in the Parodos of the *Bacchae* (*Ba.* 120–9):

θαλάμευμ κουρήτων ζάθεοί τε Κρήταςβᾶ
 Διογενέτορες ἔναυλοι, ἔνθα ἀρικόρυθες ἄντροιςβᾶ
 βυρσότονον κύκλωμ τόδε μοι Κορύβαντες ηὔρον·βᾶ
 κχείαι δ' ἄμ συντόνωι κέρασαν ἠδυβόαι Φρυγίωνᾶ
 αὐλῶνᾶ πνεύματιᾶ Μάτρὸςᾶ τεᾶ ῥέ ζᾶ ἔς χέρα θῆκαν,
 κτύπον εὐᾶσμ σιᾶ κχᾶν.

Oh lair of the Kouretes and sacred Zeus-begetting haunts of Crete, where the triple-helmeted Korybantes in the cave invented for me this hide-streched circle. And in the intense bacchic dance they mixed it with the sweet-shouting breath of Phrygian pipes, and put it in the hand of mother Rhea, a beat for the bacchants' cries of joy.

918–22, 1017, Plut. *Mor.* 299b, 364e/f, Aristot. *Ath. pol.* 3 (the "Boukoleion" as place for the Holy Wedding).

⁵⁰ Cf. Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2,16: ταῦρος ἄδράκοντος ἀκαϊάπατήρ ἄταύρου ἄδράκων, *Dion.* 6, 165. 205–9.

⁵¹ Cf. Philodemus *de piet.* 44 (OF 36): Rhea collects the limbs of the dismembered Dionysus (cf. Cornut. 31, Diod. 3.62.6–7: Demeter); but for Philodemus, Dionysus is the son of Semele who is born trice: first of Semele, then of Zeus' thigh, and then of Rhea again (ἀνεβίω). Cf. Cic. *Nat. deor.* 3.58 Selene is Dionysus' mother (Nonn. *Dion.* 44.191–5 identifies Selene with Persephone).

The torches at the night-time ravings are also mentioned (*Ba.* 146, 306–9). The Bacchantes are similarly referred to in Euripides’ *Ion* as roaming in the night (*Ion* 718 νυκτιπόλοισιν ἄμασὺν Βάκχαις).⁵² And the Chorus says ὁ γὰρ ἄναξ ἄγρεύς (*Ba.* 1192) about Dionysus, which is undoubtedly a reference to the hunter Zagreus.⁵³ Perhaps there is even a connection between “the thunder of Zagreus” (Ζαγρέως βρονταί) and the son of Semele (*Ba.* 88–93):⁵⁴

νυποτ’ ἔχουσ’ ἐνώδινων λοχίαισι ἀνάγκαισι πταμένασιν
 Διὸς βροντᾶσιν
 νηδύος ἔκβλον μὲν τηρῦτέκεν. λιποῦσ’ αἰὼνα κεραυνίω
 πλαγαίῃ

Whom once his mother had within her in the inescapable pains of childbirth, when the thunder of Zeus flew and she thrust him premature from her womb, and she left her life at the stroke of the thunder and lightning.

And in another passage (*Ba.* 597–9):

ο δ’ αὐγάζη (τόνδε) ὑμέλασι ἐρὸν ἀμφὶ τάφον αὐ
 ἄνυπο τε κεραυνοβόλοισι ἔλιπε φλόγα Διὸς βροντᾶν

... around the sacred tomb of Semele
 the flame which once Zeus’s thunderbolt whirled thunder
 left.

Euripides already hints at this in *Hippolytos* (*Hipp.* 558–62):

βροντᾶν ἀο ἀμφιπέρι

⁵² Cf. Soph. *Ant.* 1150–1 περιπόλοισιν Θυίαισιν: cf. Heraclit. B 14: νυκτιπόλοισι, μάγοισι, βάκχοισι, λήναισι, μύσταισι κτλ. Cf. AP 9.524.14 and Plut. *Mor.* 389A (see n. 48): Dionysus Νυκτέλιος.

⁵³ Dionysus as hunter cf. Eur. *Ba.* 434, 1020, 1189, 1204, 1237 und 1271; cf. Aeschyl. *Eum.* 26: λαγῶδι κηνὶ Πενθεΐκαταρράψασμι ὄρον.

⁵⁴ There seems to be no difference of singular and plural, cf. Aristoph. *Nub.* 294 ἦσθου φωνῆσιν ἄμασιν καὶ βροντῆσιν μυκησαμένησιν θεοσέπτου; καὶ σέβομαι ἴγ’, ὦσιν πολυτίμητοι, καὶ βούλομαι ἰάντα ποπαρδεῖν ὑπὸς ὑτᾶσιν βροντάσιν.

τοκάδα τὰ διγόνοιο βάκχου υμφευσάμεα πότμω
φονίωϊκατηύνασεν.

To the flame-girt thunder
did she (Aphrodite) give as a bride her who brought forth
twice-born Bacchus,
and in a bloody doom did she lay her to rest.

Euripides, then, has equated the possibly Cretan god with the Theban son of Semele.⁵⁵ And when he says, in *Cretans*, that the initiates ritually performed the thunder, that could be intended as a representation of this violent birth. This could also be indicated by the “zig-zag symbols” on the above-mentioned tablets from Olbia, which have been interpreted as lightning.⁵⁶ Another possible parallel can be found on a golden plate from Thurioi, from about 350 B.C., where the dead man says to Persephone (A 1,4 Zuntz):⁵⁷

ἀλλάϊμείμοϊραῖέμασεικαὶἀστεροβλήταῖκεραυνῶϊ

But fate has conquered me, and the Lightning-thrower with
his lightning.

This also seems to mean the beginning of a man’s earthly life, through which his former divine existence is ended. If this beginning is linked to lightning, an analogy to Dionysus’ fate could be intended. Finally, one recalls the lightning which struck Scyles’ house, as he went through his initiation. Does this also have a deeper meaning?

⁵⁵ The point of comparison was probably the hunting in the night; before Euripides Zagreus is a subterranean deity, cf. Aeschyl. fr. 228 Ζαγρεῖῖτεῖ νῦνῖμοῖκαὶἵπολυξένωῖ(πατρι)ῖχαίρεινῖand Alcmaeon fr. 3 πότνιαῖΓῆ, Ζαγρεῖῖτεῖθεῶνῖπανυπέρτατεῖπάντων.

⁵⁶ Cf. West 1982: 19: “Or it might represent lightning (though this is usually represented in Greek art as stylized bundle of flames, with prongs at both ends); cf. Heraclit. B 64 τὰῖδεῖπάνταῖοἰακίζειῖκεραυνός.

⁵⁷ Instead of ἀστεροβλήταῖperhaps ἀστεροπήτα (cf. στεροπηγερέταῖin Il. 16,298); cf. Il. 15,117 εἰπερῖμοῖκαὶἵμοῖραῖΔιὸςῖπληγέντιῖκεραυνῶῖκεῖσθαι. Zuntz 1971: 316 gives a literal interpretation: “Those buried with these particular tablets had been killed by lightning.”

Even without this very doubtful interpretation of a difficult passage, it is obvious that Euripides links the mysteries of the Cretan Zeus with the Dionysiac mysteries. From these Cretan rites we find out no more than the names of the gods: Zeus of Ida, Zagreus, Rhea and the Kouretes. It seems to me impossible to conclude *a posteriori* that there was a mystery cult on Crete, which is described by Firmicius Maternus nearly 900 years later (*Err. prof. rel.* 6,1–5). We can only see that Euripides presents the Cretan cult in the style of the Dionysus-mysteries. It is possible that this literary syncretism is the dramatist's own work. The Orphic atmosphere of vegetarianism and ritual purity which are connected with this cult-transfer could, however, indicate that Euripides is here following a source attributed to Orpheus,⁵⁸ in which the Cretan cult was represented as a Dionysiac initiation, although without any mention of a dismemberment myth.⁵⁹

The observations about the *Cretans* fragment can also be applied to the *Bacchae*. Just as the poet there represented the Cretan cult as a Dionysiac initiation, so here he shows the Bacchic cult of the women as an initiation, into which he imports Cretan elements, at least in the form of Zeus of Ida, Rhea and the Kouretes. To describe the Bacchic Oreibasia as a mystery-cult was much easier, because both were intended for the same god. However, if one seeks to find out about the actual cult, there are not simply two “seemingly” different forms of the cult, which the poet links. The Bacchic *Oreibasia* of the women and the initiation into the mysteries of Dionysus are two different forms of worship of the god. The dramatist has linked them both superficially on the literary level, without intending thereby to give an exact picture of the reality of the cultic ritual. He has described the cult of the women as an initiation in the Parodos, he has stylised it as a secret cult, whose rites are performed in the dark of night, and he has presented the stranger into whom Dionysus transforms himself in the course of the play as a priest, who travels around, performing initiations and

⁵⁸ Perhaps Onomacritus of Athens (at the beginning of 5th c. B.C.): he wrote about Τελεταί (Suid s.v. = OF Test. 186).

⁵⁹ Cf. Diod. 5.77.3: Crete is regarded as a very ancient homeland of initiations and mysteries, so it could be important to show that the Dionysus-mysteries are Cretan; cf. Diod. 5.64.4: Orpheus is initiated by the Daktyloi of Ida.

purifications.⁶⁰ No other character in the play demonstrates Euripides' syncretism so clearly as this one: such a priest belongs to the world of the mysteries (τελεταί), but not to the cult of the women who go into the mountains. However, the poet has only adopted isolated elements from the mysteries into his depiction of the women's cult. There are other elements which he has omitted. Thus, it is certain that the main purpose of the Dionysus mysteries consisted of giving hope of a better life to come.⁶¹ This aspect of the mysteries has absolutely no place in Euripides' play. There is not a single passage that offers even the slightest comfort which this hope could have given rise to in view of the murder of Pentheus and the further fate of Cadmus and Agaue. For this reason alone, it seems pointless to link Pentheus' fate to a mystic initiation.⁶² It is impossible to prove that his dismemberment has any connection to the initiation that was performed in classical times. For it is questionable whether the Orphic myth of the dismemberment of the god already played a part in his mysteries in the 5th c. B.C., and whether Euripides was familiar with the myth at all. Pentheus' disguise as a Bacchant is adequately explained by the god's cynicism, which forces his opponent into exactly the cult which he

⁶⁰ Cf. Plato *Resp.* 365a with the description of the Orphic begging priests, cf. Theoph. *Char.* 16,11 καὶ τελεσθησόμενος ἄπρὸς ἄποὺς Ὀρφεοτελεστῶν κατὰ ἤμην ἄπορεύεσθαι μετὰ ἡσυχναικῶς - ἐὰν ἔ μὴ σχολάζῃ ἡ γυνή, μετὰ ἡσυχίᾳ τῆς - καὶ τῶν ἀπαιδίων; the name "Orpheotelestes" also in Plut. *Apophtheg. Lac.* 244E (see note 61).

⁶¹ This is clear from the evidence of the Golden plates. Cf. Plut. *Cons. ad ux.* 10, 611D: καὶ ἡμῶν ἄλλων ἀκούεις, οἷα πείθουσι ἄπολλοὺς λέγοντες ὥσ' οὐδὲν οὐδαμῆ ἀπὸ διαλυθέντι κακὸν οὐδὲ λυπηρόν ἔστιν, οἷδ' ὅτι κωλύει ἄπιστεῖν ὅτι πατριος ἀλόγος καὶ ἀμιστικὰ σύμβολα τῶν περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον ὀργιασμῶν, ἃ σύνισμεν ἀλλήλοισι οἷα κοινωνοῦντες and Plut. *Apophtheg. Lac.* 244E about the Orpheotelestes Philippos who promises ὅτι ὡς παρ' αὐτῶν ἡσθέντες μετὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ βίον τελευτήν ἡ ὕδαμονοῦσιν.

⁶² It is not convincing to interpretate the scene inside the palace (*Ba.* 615–37) as "negation of the desired ritual process," as Seaford 1981: 256–8: he reads in 630 the transmitted text φῶς (Diggle 1994: 318 after Jacobs: φάσμι): but why should Pentheus make an attack on the light with his sword?

rejects.⁶³ It is not necessary to see in this a reference to ritual cross-dressing, especially as the evidence is insufficient.⁶⁴ And the dismemberment reflects, as a perverted act, the actual rite of the dismemberment of wild animals by the Bacchantes, at least on the mythic level, but not a ritual re-enactment of the death and resurrection of the god.⁶⁵

My initial question cannot be answered with a clear yes or no. Euripides has combined different cult forms on a literary level; the ritual *Oreibasia* of the women, which can be historically proved, at least for Thebes and Delphi, is at the center of his depiction. He has linked this cult with other forms of Dionysus worship, including, in a prominent position, the mystery cult of the god. Therefore the *Bacchae* can only be read as evidence of religious history to a very limited extent; for it is not the dramatist's intention to give an accurate picture of contemporary cults and rites. A final comparison may serve to convey clearly how difficult such a reading is: anyone trying to reconstruct the reality of the Christian Eucharist from Wagner's *Parsifal* would hardly believe his eyes and ears if he then experienced a Protestant church service on a Sunday morning. R. Seaford and many others would be equally astonished, if they were really to see the mystical activities of the women on Kithairon.

⁶³ *pace* Seaford 1981: 258: "Dionysos' insistence on the disguise is only fleetingly motivated," and 259: "This elaborate attention is, no less than the disguise itself, undemanded by the story."

⁶⁴ It is doubtful that ritual transvestism took place in the Dionysus-mysteries; the term νεβρίζειν in Ps. Dem. 18.259 (s. Harpokration s.v.) does not provide convincing proof, especially since Glaukothea seems to perform the initiation in the cult of Dionysus-Sabazius for women only.

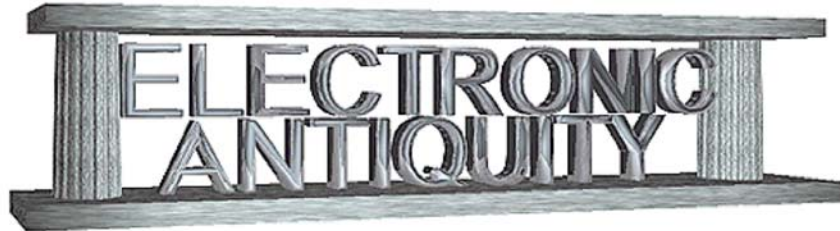
⁶⁵ Cf. Seaford 1981: 261 with interpretation of *Ba.* 860–1 Διόνυσσον, ὃς πέφυκεν ἐν τέλει θεὸς δεινότητος, ἀνθρώποισι δ' ἠπιώτατος "Dionysos is for mankind in general ἠπιώτατος, but for the initiands in the ritual of initiation (ἐν τέλει) δεινότητος, because they will undergo the terrors of a ritual death." (cf. Seaford 1996: 217; see my interpretation of the verses in note 3); and Seaford 1981: 267: "And yet there is a pathetic hint of joyful rebirth, not only in the mother's recomposition of the body, but in the passage in which Dionysos predicts Pentheus' triumphal return 963-70)."

WORKS CITED

- Boardman, J. et al., eds. 1981-. *Lexicon Iconographicum mythologiae classicae* (=LIMC).
- Bérard, C., and C. Bron, eds. 1984. *La cité des images. Religion et société en Grèce antique*, Paris. (trans. by D. Lyons, 1989. *A city of image: iconography and society in Ancient Greece*) Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bron, C. 1987. "Porteurs de thyrses ou bacchants." In C. Bérard et al. ed.s, *Images et sociétés en Grèce ancienne*. Paris. pp. 145-53.
- Diggle, J., ed. 1994. *Euripidis fabulae*. Vol. 3. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Friedrich, R. 1996. "Everything to do with Dionysos? Ritualism, the Dionysiac, and the tragic." In M.S. Silk, ed., *Tragedy and the tragic. Greek theatre and beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 257-83.
- _____, 2000. "Dionysos among the dons. The new ritualism in R. Seaford's commentary on the Bacchae." *Arion* 7:115-52.
- Frontisi-Ducroux, F. 1991. "Le dieu-masque. Une figure du Dionysos d'Athènes." Paris & Rome: La Découverte & Ecole française de Rome.
- Graf, F. 1974. *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens in vorhellenistischer Zeit*. Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 23. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Henrichs, A. 1969. "Die Mänaden von Milet." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 4:223-41.
- _____, 1978. "Greek maenadism from Olympias to Messalina." *Harvard studies in classical philology* 82:121-60.
- _____, 1979. "Greek and Roman glimpses of Dionysos." In C. Houser, ed., *Dionysos and his circle. Ancient through modern*. Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum. pp. 1-11.
- _____, 1982. "Changing Dionysiac identities." In B.F. Meyer and E.P. Sanders, ed.s. *Jewish and Christian self-definition*. Vol. 3. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. pp. 137-60.
- _____, 1984. "Male intruders among the maenads. The so-called male celebrants." In H.D. Evjen, ed., *Mnema: Classical studies in memory of Karl K. Hulley*. Chico: Scholar's Press. pp. 69-91.

- _____, 1990. "Between country and city. Cultic dimensions of Dionysos in Athens and Attica." In M. Griffith and D.J. Mastronarde, ed.s, *Cabinet of the Muses: essays on Classical and comparative literature in honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer*. Atlanta: Scholar's Press. pp. 255–77.
- _____, 1994. "Der rasende Gott. Zur Psychologie des Dionysos und des Dionysischen in Mythos und Literatur." *Antike und Abendland* 40:31–58.
- Holzhausen, J. 2003 *Euripides Politikos. Recht und Rache in 'Orestes' und 'Bakchen'*. Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 185, München, Leipzig: Saur.
- Jacoby, F., ed. 1961–9. *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (= FrGH), Berlin, Leiden.
- Kern, O., ed. 1900. *Die Inschriften von Magnesia am Maeander*. Berlin: W. Spemann.
- Leinieks, V. 1996. *The city of Dionysos. A study of Euripides' Bakchai*. Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 88. Stuttgart & Leipzig: Teubner.
- Mastronarde, D.J., ed. 1994. *Euripides, Phoenissae*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Merkelbach R. 1972. "Milesische Bakchen." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 9:77–83.
- _____, 1988. *Die Hirten des Dionysos*. Stuttgart: Teubner.
- Obbink, D. 1993. "Dionysos poured out. Ancient and modern theories of sacrifice and culture formation." In T.H. Carpenter and C. Faraone, ed.s, *Masks of Dionysus*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 65–86.
- Peirce, S. 1998. "Visual language and concepts of cult on the 'Lenaia vases'." *Classical Antiquity* 17:59–95.
- Schlesier, R. 1998. "Die Seele im Thiasos. Zu Euripides, Bacchae 75." In J. Holzhausen, ed., *ψυχή - Seele - anima. Festschrift für K. Alt*. Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 109. Stuttgart: Teubner. pp. 37–72.
- Seaford, R. 1981. "Dionysiac drama and the dionysiac mysteries." *Classical Quarterly* 31:252–75.
- _____, 1994. *Reciprocity and ritual. Homer and tragedy in the developing city-state*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- _____, ed. 1996a. *Euripides' Bacchae*. Warminster: Aris & Phillips.

- _____, 1996b. "Something to do with Dionysos. Tragedy and the Dionysiac." In M.S. Silk, ed., *Tragedy and the tragic. Greek theatre and beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 284–94.
- Snell, B., ed. 1986. *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta (=TrGF)*. Vol. 1. 2d ed. Edited by R. Kannicht. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Sokolowski, F., ed. 1955. *Lois sacrées de l'Asie mineure (=LSAM)*. Paris: E. de Boccard.
- _____, ed. 1969. *Lois sacrées des cités grecques (=LSCG)*. Paris: E. de Boccard.
- Versnel, H.S. 1990. *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion. Vol. 1: Ter Unus. Isis. Dionysos. Hermes. Three studies in henotheism*. Leiden: Brill.
- West, M.L. 1982. "The Orphics of Olbia" *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 45:17–29.
- _____, 1983. *The Orphic poems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zuntz, G. 1971. *Persephone*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.



INITIATIONS AND MYSTERIES IN APULEIUS' METAMORPHOSES

Sarolta A. Takács, Rutgers University

stakacs@rci.rutgers.edu

Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, also known as *The Golden Ass*, is the only extant Latin novel that survives in its entirety. The goal of this paper is to discuss the concept of *initiation ritual* in relation to Apuleius' description of his main protagonist's multiple initiations into the cult of Isis and Osiris. The first part of this paper will deal with Lucius' metamorphosis into an ass, a metamorphosis that brought about a life changing experience. The novel's main character is turned into an asocial being, an animal shaped human being that had human feelings and thoughts but was perceived and treated as an animal. The paper's second segment will focus on Lucius' initiations into the cult of Isis and Osiris after regaining his human form as they are described in the last book of the novel, the so-called Isis Book. It is only after these religious initiations that Lucius re-entered society.

The actual title of Apuleius' novel is *11 Books of Metamorphoses – transformations* – a title that very much echoes Ovid's poetic creation of the same name, *Metamorphoses*. In the elegiac poet's creation, beings, divine or human, transform into something "other;" in the case of Zeus, into a man in order to test a man's hospitality; in the case of the nymph Daphne, whom Apollo pursued, into a laurel tree; in the case of the bloodthirsty Lycaon, into a wolf. As has been pointed out, while in each story there is a radical change in category, from god to man, from divine being to tree, or from human being to animal, there nevertheless remains a continuity of identity: Zeus is still Zeus, Daphne is Daphne, and Lycaon is Lycaon – they just

look different.¹ While each one of the protagonists changed his or her outward appearance, the core of their being, the inside, remained unchanged.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are stories (myths) that speak of boundary breakdowns and category changes that, at the same time, also explore liminal situations. At the core of these breakdowns and changes lies an understanding of social and natural organizations. As accepted norms, they remain unchanged. One can move in and out of these organizations and structures while one explores, or is forced to explore, who and what one is, or where one belongs. At the end of any explorative process, however, one returns to the normative, a category or an organization, that provides self-definition. In that lies safety and stability. "[E]fforts to establish harsh moral codes and rigid boundaries are futile because the greater the effort to "keep nature and life in place," the more powerful the forces that dissolve the distinctions between them."² Ovid, as scholars have pointed out, indirectly but pointedly criticized Augustus' policies that aimed at such rigid moral code enforcements.³ Leaving potential political meaning aside, it can also be argued that while Ovid's entertaining stories emphasize the emergence of "the other," they also highlight the importance of keeping social and natural distinctions intact. It does not pay off to move outside one's boundary, and one is better off staying within what is socially and naturally delineated.

Like its poetic predecessor, Apuleius' prose *Metamorphoses* focuses on the liminal and on the breakdown of boundaries. The leading story is that of Lucius, whose interest in magic backfired and left him in the form of an ass. Untrained in magic skills, he misunderstood and misapplied a formula. Inside the ass-shape, however, remained the cognizant and thinking (human) Lucius, who had to endure the plight of an ass until the goddess Isis appeared to him and revealed how he was to shed his asinine exterior. Apuleius' masterpiece is filled with literary references, intertextual plays, with social commentaries and philosophical explorations, some more obvious than others. Jack Winkler noted that "misunderstanding a story is Apuleius' favorite comic subject and its varieties the most significant set of jokes in the novel."⁴ What Winkler does not mention, however, is that a misunderstanding of facts does not necessarily lead to an incorrect

¹ Olmsted 1996: 168.

² Olmsted 1996: 171.

³ See Olmsted 1996: n. 19 for bibliographical references on this topic.

⁴ Winkler 1985: 27.

conclusion. Things (animal, vegetable, and mineral) are what they are, but our perception of them depends on questions, premises, and interpretations. The former affords stability, the latter flux. This dichotomy permeates the whole novel.

When the human Lucius and his host Milo discuss whether higher powers and divine intervention exist or not, Lucius reports that a Chaldean at Corinth⁵ “is causing disturbance with his remarkable responses. For a small fee he makes public the secret decrees of the fates (2.11).”⁶ While this soothsayer apparently gives good and sound advice (when to get married, when to travel, etc.), he creates “disturbance,” for his predictions upset the established order, in other words, what had been accepted as reality. Certainly, any attempt to predict the future is mere speculation, but the very act of inquiring about what is to come gives the comforting illusion of safety and control. Roman law dealt harshly with those who claimed to foresee future events that disturbed the socio-political status quo, especially those that threatened the emperor. In retrospect, the Chaldean’s prediction that Lucius’ “fame would blossom considerably” and that his journey will be “the subject of a lengthy story, an unbelievable tale spread over several books,”⁷ is true within and outside the novel; i.e., within the reality of the novel and, outside of it, the biographical reality of the author. Lucius Apuleius was a famous orator and Platonic philosopher (outside the story) and the Lucius-turned-ass story is told in 11 books (inside the novel).

What we deemed “true” just now, however, the fictional character Milo undermines. He pointed out to his guest Lucius that prophesying was a business, but that the Chaldean, whom he knew by name, exhibited no business sense. While the Chaldean was involved in telling his Odyssean travel story to a friend, he lost a rich customer who tired of waiting. And worse, he could not even predict a propitious time for his own travel! In general, the more vague the prediction, the more room there is for interpretation, and thus the chances of accuracy increase. This Corinthian prophet failed by attempting to predict an exact time, which of course, he could hardly have done, except by chance. Depending on chance does not provide stability, precisely what an astrologer, diviner or prophet is asked to impart.

⁵ Chaldaeans were known as prophets.

⁶ *Met.* 2.12: “*Chaldeus quidam hospes miris totam civitatem responses turbulenta<t> et arc[h]ana fatorum stipibus emerendis edicit in vulgum...*”

⁷ *Met.* 2.12: “*historiam magnam et incredundam fabulam et libros...*”

But if one were to seek stability, where would one have to look? Does stability lie in the recognition of the fact that human life is a continuous set of hits and misses? That some misfortune might actually turn out to be a watershed moment that is the starting point of something positive? Whatever the change, we will remain at the core the same person. In terms of the metamorphosis under consideration here, the shedding of human form and the transformation into an ass is Lucius' punishment for his curiosity, since he overstepped his boundaries. Having observed Milo's wife, a witch, Lucius thought he knew how to change himself into an owl and then back again into a human. He was eager to shed his human shape. In the second book Apuleius introduces the story of the hunter Actaeon who chanced upon the bathing Diana in a forest. This was a liminal space, outside the city, the organized and the safe, where potential danger lurked. In this perilous location, Actaeon unknowingly overstepped a boundary when he saw the virgin goddess of the hunt naked. Divine punishment came swiftly; Actaeon was turned into a stag, only to be ripped apart by his own hounds.

Lucius confused perception with knowledge. He overstepped a boundary as well in arrogantly thinking he could shape shift without any formal training in magic. Though he was in the right area, Thessaly, the *locus classicus* for witches and black magic, he lacked skills and knowledge of the appropriate formula and action. He had simply observed the witch uttering a spell and rubbing an ointment on herself that turned her into an owl and then into a human again. The story of Lucius and that of Actaeon correlate and yet remain distinct. Both chance upon the power that can bring about change in a space outside civilization, outside what is safe, and both are punished for their trespass by being turned into an animal. Apuleius introduces an ekphrasis of an intricate marble sculpture that represents Actaeon's metamorphosis into a stag. His description embodies the perfect myth of overstepping a boundary while also foreshadowing Lucius' own transformation into an animal. It also encapsulates what "metamorphosis" is all about: the shifting from one category or state into another while, at the very moment of the shift, the original as well as the end form coexist.

[2.4] Atria longe pulcherrima columnis quadrifariam per singulos angulos stantibus attolerabant statuas, palmaris deae facies, quae pinnis explicitis sine gressu pilae volubilis instabile vestigium plantis roscidis detinentes nec ut maneat inhaerent<es> etiam volare creduntur. Ecce lapis Parius in

Dianam factus tenet libratam totius loci medietatem, signum perfecte luculentum, veste reflatum, procurso vegetum, introeuntibus obvium et maiestate numinis venerabile; canes utrimqueseclus deae latera muniunt, qui canes et ipsi lapis errant; Hi<s> oculi minantur, aures rigent, nares hiant, ora saeviunt, et sicunde de proximo latratus ingruerit, eum putabis de faucibus lapidis exire, et, in quo summum specimen operae fabrilis egregius ille signifex prodidit, sublatis canibus in pectus arduis pedes imi resistunt, currunt priores. pone tergum deae saxum insurgit in speluncae modum muscis et herbis et foliis et virgulis et alicubi pampinis et arbusculis alibi de lapide florentibus. splendet intus umbra signi de nitore lapidis. sub extrema saxi margine poma et uvae faberrime politae dependent, quas ars aemula naturae veritati similes explicuit. putes ad cibum inde quaedam, cum mustulentus autumnus maturum colorem adflaverit, posse decerpi, et, si fonte<m>, qui deae vestigio discurrens in lenem vibratur undam, pronus aspexeris, credes illos ut rure pendentes racemos inter cetera veritatis nec agitationis officio carere. inter medias frondes lapidis Actaeon simulacrum curioso optutu in deam [sum] proiectus iam in cervum ferinus et in saxo simul et in fronte loturam Dianam opperiens visitur. [2.5] Dum haec identidem rimabundus eximie delector, “tua sunt,” ait Byrrena “cuncta quae vides,...

Pillars stood at each corner, supporting statues representing the goddess Victory. In these representations, her wings were **outspread but motionless**, and her dewy feet stood on tiptoe on the slippery surface of a revolving sphere, momentarily **joined** to it but giving the **impression of imminent flight**. ... Hounds ... escorted the goddess (Diana) on both flanks. Their eyes were threatening, their ears picked up, their nostrils flaring, their maws savage. If barking sounded loudly from anywhere near at hand, you would think that it issued from those mouths of marble. But the highest feat of craftsmanship achieved by that genius of a sculptor was that the hounds were rearing breast-high, and their hind legs were **braking** while their forelegs were in **rapid motion**. ... Apples and grapes hung from the lower

edge of the rock; their highly artistic finish, depicted with a skill rivaling nature's, made them **lifelike** ... If you bent low and gazed into the water which skirted the goddess' feet as it lapped into gentle waves, you would think that the bunches of grapes hanging from the rock possessed the faculty of movement as well as other lifelike qualities. In the middle of the foliage a statue of Actaeon was visible, fashioned in marble and reflected in the water; ... he was already **animal-like**, on the point of becoming a stag as he waited for Diana to take her bath. ... (2.5) As I repeatedly ran my eye over this scene with intense delight, Byrrhena (Lucius' aunt) remarked: "All this which you see will be yours."⁸

The passage is filled with easily identifiable contrasts and opposites on a verbal, as well as a thematic, level: outspread wings :: motionless, joined :: imminent flight, braking :: rapid motion, and life like :: animal-like; god :: human; nature :: reproduction; to see :: to be seen; Lucius' present is set against his future reality, which reverberates in Actaeon's transformation but is still unknown to the first-time reader, despite Byrrhena's remark: "All this which you see will be yours." Lucius takes in the scene with intense delight (*eximie delector*); the scene, nevertheless, with all its bucolic beauty, depicts hounds in a heightened state of attack, who will tear curious Actaeon (*Actaeon curioso*) apart. Of course, to take delight is exactly what Apuleius instructs us, the reader, to do in the very beginning of his novel (*lector intende: laetaberis*). Like Actaeon, Lucius is curious and his curiosity led him astray into unsafe, liminal space. Lucius stressed in the beginning of this adventure that he was "not curious but the type who likes to know about everything, or at least about most things."⁹ And, just as Actaeon, the uninvited viewer, was dealt with fiercely by Diana and changed into a stag, Lucius, in a stupor (3.22: *in stupore*), dabbling in magic, is changed into the shape of an ass. Thus, the stage is set for adventures and learning experiences. It is in this "other" state (as a human with the body of an ass) that Lucius learned that above all he wanted to be human! He had to reach the ultimate point, though, where he simply wanted nothing more than death, for he could no longer endure being a maltreated animal with a human mind. It is at this moment that the goddess Isis entered his

⁸ Translation Walsh 1994.

⁹ 1.2: "*non quidem curiosum, sed qui velim scire vel cuncta vel certe plurima...*"

life. Lucius will be returned to his human form, become an initiate into the cult of Isis and Osiris, and lead a successful professional life.

The last book of the novel, Book 11, is all about initiation. Lucius moves across two boundaries or conditions: that of animal to human, and then, from an uninitiated to an initiated state. We could say that in the first state he was an asocial being, to whom the social rules of human society did not apply. Although the narrative as entertainment continuously introduces the ass to human situations, this does not make the ass a social being. Lucius, the ass, had to endure being a lowly, despised animal, which no human understands. He was utterly the Other. Even in the Egyptian pantheon this was the case for the ass. Seth, the ass-shaped god, was the deadly adversary of Osiris and Isis, the life-giver. Seth murdered his brother Osiris and chopped him up into pieces, which he scattered across Egypt. Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris, lamented her husband's death and sought the pieces.¹⁰ She found all but one, the phallus, and mended the pieces together, completing the body with an artificial organ. Isis then had intercourse with her dead, mended husband-brother and conceived a son, Horus, who, like his father, had to fight Seth. Osiris was a god who, although lifeless, had procreative force. This inversion is quite common in fertility myths. Fecundity resides in the opposite – that which seems most barren.

What does Apuleius' focus on initiation mean? Merkelbach suggested that all ancient novels are to be decoded as mystery initiations. Lucius' struggle was from the beginning meant to culminate in Isiac worship, and has the quality of propaganda. All the deities and affairs related throughout the piece point to Isis in one of her multiple forms or expressions. In matter of fact, Lucius Apuleius the author was an Isiac and as such must have been interested in converting others. Since the cult of Isis prepared the world for Christianity, worshippers of the henotheistic Isis must have done the same. This explanatory model ignores the fact that conversion was not something pagan cults pursued. The pagan worldview was polytheistic and open, and allowed the coexistence of gods and their respective worship. There was not one true God, no dogmas and thus no need to subject oneself to a single entity or an ideological system.

In his 1995 book, Münstermann asked in a tone that seems incredulous: "How could Apuleius bring his philosophical conviction

¹⁰ Her tears were thought to have created the life-giving Nile.

modeled after Plato in accordance with his *Isisglauben*¹¹?” Even if Apuleius had been interested in, or even initiated into, the cult of Isis, it would not have interfered with his interest in Platonic philosophy. Apuleius states in a different work that he participated with great zeal in many cults, rites, and ceremonies.¹² Münstermann’s question reflects a long-held scholarly error that the cult of Isis attracted only members of the demi-monde, the degenerates of Roman society. This would make it impossible for a rational thinker like the *philosophus Platonicus* Apuleius to have been an initiate. Unfortunately, old explanatory models die too slowly! The fact is that in the lifetime of Apuleius the cult had been officially accepted and linked to the imperial household, the *domus Augusta*, for almost a century. Further, the reigns of Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius, beginning and end markers of Apuleius’ life, saw particular intensification of interest in Egypt and its gods. It is in the description of the final initiation (Book 11. 27) that Lucius Apuleius reveals himself and leaves the reader to wonder whether what has been told so far as a fiction was actually true.¹³ This is simply another transformation, maybe the best one so far – the *auctor* being the *actor*, the *actor* being the *auctor*.

Griffiths proposes that toward the end of the book which deals with Lucius’ initiation there is “the bestowal of *salus* [well-being], a deliverance both physical and spiritual, on the asinine Lucius through the grace and

¹¹Münstermann 1995: 130: "Wie [kann] Apuleius seine in erklärter Anlehnung an Platon formulierte philosophische Überzeugung mit dem Isisglauben vereinbar[en]?"

¹²*Apol.* 554: “*multiuiga sacra et plurimos ritus et varias cerimonias studio veri et officio erga deos dedici.*”

¹³ A good discussion on history and fiction in Book 11 is Riess 2001: 362-365. In 1989, F. Coarelli discovered a dwelling complex in the vicinity of the North African cooperation in Ostia. Two water pipes were found there with the inscription: “Lucius Apuleius Marcellus” and the base of an equestrian statue with a dedication honoring the consul Quintus Asinius Marcellus. The complex included a *mithraeum* with depictions of the seven cosmic spheres, which very much coincides with Apuleius’ description of the cosmos in his philosophical writings (Riess 1992: 338). Apuleius named the priest who initiated his protagonist Lucius into the cult of Osiris Asinius Marcellus. As often happens in this novel, reality and fiction intersect. The Asinii Marcelli were a prominent Roman family in the second century CE and the author of the novel shares the same first name as his main protagonist, Lucius. The archaeological find moves the narrative fiction into autobiographical reality. These kinds of intersections (fiction/reality or perception/knowledge) compose the novel’s narrative dynamic.

loving mercy of Isis.”¹⁴ I agree, however, with Schlam that the *Metamorphoses* is not an account of a growing religious consciousness, not a work of religious confession.¹⁵ Sandy also showed successfully that Isis' intervention in Book Eleven is “the moral complement of the first three books rather than the narrative safety-valve analogous to the contrived religious conclusions of some of the picaresque romances.”¹⁶ Further, in his assessment “Book 11 has redeeming qualities of its own. It firmly anchors Lucius' restless obsession to experience the supernatural in Isis' *portus Quietis*. ... [the goddess] led him out of the hopeless labyrinth.”¹⁷

I will now focus on this detailed description of how Isis led Lucius out of this labyrinth. The ass, destined to have intercourse with a female criminal in an amphitheater, decides to escape his captors. In a state of emotional upheaval and fearing for his well-being (*de salute ipsa sollicitus*),¹⁸ Lucius galloped six miles at utmost speed to Cenchreae, a Corinthian colony on the Saronic gulf, known for its harbor that granted safest refuge for ships, and which now granted a safe haven for the escapee. There, Lucius the ass collapsed on the beach and sweet sleep came over him (*dulcis somnus*). The tone at the end of the tenth book is set: a safe place and sweet sleep clue the reader into the strong possibility of Lucius' deliverance from the ass' shape.

Safety and calm, however, is replaced with opposites at the onset of Book Eleven. It starts with the ass' sudden terror-stricken awakening (*experrectus pavore*) and his perception of the full moon, in all its light, appearing through the waves of the sea (*subito video praemicantis lunae candore nimio completum orbem commodum marinis emergentem fluctibus*). Lucius seems to experience photism, a hallucinatory or pseudo-hallucinatory luminous phenomenon, known as the prelude to intense religious experiences. Lucius the ass was aware that he was to acquire the silent secrets of the shadowy night (*opacae noctis silentiosa secreta*) from “the supreme goddess who wields her power with exceeding majesty” and “that human affairs were controlled wholly by her providence (*summatem deam praecipua maiestate pollere resque prorsus humanas ipsius regi providential*).” Exalted and eager, Lucius jumped into the sea to purify himself (*alacer exurgo meque protinus purificandi*

¹⁴ Griffiths 1978: 153.

¹⁵ Schlam 1978: 124.

¹⁶ Sandy 1978: 124.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 137. See also Shumate 1996: 285-328.

¹⁸ *Met.* 10.35.

studio marino lavacro). He submerged his head seven times beneath the waves – a number especially apt for religious rites (*praecipue religionibus aptissimum*).

Thus purified, Lucius began to pray to the all-powerful goddess (*deam praepotentem*), queen of heaven (*regina caeli*), amidst cries and lamentations. His prayer was traditional; if one is not sure who the deity is, then try to cover all bases, and ask for whatever help is needed. Although Lucius addressed the moon, he also uttered: “you appear as Ceres, bountiful and primeval bearer of crops, or celestial Venus, or the sister of Phoebus, or ... the horrid Proserpine (*siue tu Ceres alma frugum parens originalis, seu tu caelestis Uenus, seu Phoebi soror, seu ... horrenda Proserpina*), and toward the end “but by whatever name or rite or image it is right to invoke you (*quoquo nomine, quoquo ritu, quaque facie te fas est invocare*)” indicating that he is already thinking of Isis¹⁹. Lucius’ request is:

[11.2] sit satis laborum, sit satis periculorum. Depelle quadripedis diram faciem, redde me conspectui meorum, redde me meo Lucio. Ac si quo offensum numen inexorabili me saevitia premit, mori saltem liceat, si non licet vivere.

Let this be enough toils and enough dangers; rid me of this dire, four-footed form. Restore me to the sight of my family; restore me to my Lucius. But if I have offended some divinity who continues to oppress me with implacable savagery, at least allow me to die, since I cannot continue to live.

Tested and having reached his breaking point – he would rather die than continue to live – Lucius was ready to be himself again and join his family. He was more than ready to re-enter society. After this, sleep enveloped and overcame Lucius. And, in his sleep, Isis appeared. Apuleius’ ekphrasis runs over two paragraphs (11.3-4) before the goddess revealed herself in an aretology, the only one of Isis we have in Latin:

[11.5] rerum naturae parens, elementorum omnium domina, saeculorum progenies initialis ... et qui nascentis dei Solis inchoantibus inlustrantur radiis Aethiopes utrique priscaque

¹⁹ Griffiths 1978: 115-118 for discussion of the identification of Selene with Demeter, the designation of the moon as the eye of Artemis, as Proserpina/Hekate, and its resemblance to Aphrodite, also noted in Plut. *Amat.* 19, 764D.

doctrina pollentes Aegyptii caerimoniis me properii
percolentes appellant vero nomine reginam Isidem.

I am the progenitor of nature, mistress of all elements, first-born of generations ... the peoples on whom the rising sun shines its rays, both Aethiopians and the Aegyptians who gain strength by ancient doctrine, worship me with the appropriate ceremonies, call me by my right name, queen Isis.

Then, Lucius receives exact instructions how he is to shed his animal skin (11.5-6). He is to eat roses held by one of Isis' priests at the procession of the *navigium Isidis*, the festival that opened the sailing season in March.

You are to await this rite with an untroubled and reverent mind (11.5). ... What you must carefully remember and keep ever locked deep in your heart is that the remaining course of your life until the moment of your last breath is pledged to me, for it is only right that all your future days should be devoted to me, to the one whose kindness has restored you to the company of men. Your future life will be blessed, and under my protection will bring you fame; and when you have lived out your life's span and you journey to the realm of the dead, even there ... you will constantly adore me, for I shall be gracious to you ... (11.6, [Walsh 1994](#))

After Isis' prophecy, Lucius the ass woke up. "With mingled emotions of fear and joy I arose, very much in sweat, utterly amazed by so clear presence of the powerful goddess (*pavore et gaudio ac dein sudore nimio permixtus exurgo summeque miratus deae potentis tam claram praesentiam* ...11.7). Lucius then washed himself with seawater and noted that nature is joyfully awakening to a new season. Nature's awakening, the coming of the spring, is set parallel to that of the ass' imminent transformation, Lucius' return to human society. At this point, still in a highly sensate state, his emotions are mixed: inwardly, he feels fear and joy; outside, he perspires. Once returned to human shape, he fell silent feeling only joy (11.14). Despite his inability to speak, unlike the speechless ass-formed Lucius of the previous books, this Lucius *IS* human inside and out!

The human Lucius will go through three initiation rites in the cult of Isis and Osiris, but none of Apuleius' descriptions offers the same emotional detail as the metamorphosis from ass to human. The often cited Reginald Witt stated that “[f]rom the pages of Apuleius we can gain much invaluable knowledge of the main features of Isiac initiation as it was practiced in the imperial age (*Isis in the Ancient World*, 1997.158).” Indeed, the text offers “invaluable knowledge” but none about the mystery. The knowledge we gain is about public actions such as 1) the procession of the setting out of a model ship to inaugurate the opening of the sailing season on March 5 (the *navigium Isidis*) and 2) the subsequent ceremony in the temple of Isis. We learn that Isiacs wore white dresses,²⁰ women wore the headdress and men had clean shaven heads.²¹ Women, crowned with flowers, led the procession,²² initiates without special cultic duties formed the middle, and various priests, each carrying a specific symbol of the cult²³, closed the procession train. After the launching of the ship, the chief priests entered the inner sanctuary of the temple and set up the “living statues.” A scribe standing before the entrance summoned the *pastophori* and then recited, from a book, formulaic prayers for the well-being of the emperor, the state as a whole, and seafarers. Then in Greek (one assumes

²⁰ *amicimina* or *linteramina candida*.

²¹ *Met.* 11.10: “*illae limpido tegmine crines madidos obuolutae, hi capillum derasi funditus uertice praenitentes.*”

²² *Met.* 11.9: “*inter has oblectationes laudicras popularium, quae passim uagabantur, iam sospitatricis deae peculiaris pompa moliebatur: mulieres candido splendentes amicimine, uario laetanes gestamine, uerno florentes coronamine, quae de gremio per uiam, quae sacer incedebat comitatus, solum sternebant flosculis (...).*”

²³ From Apuleius' account (*Met.* 11.10-1) we can deduce that a cultic association had at least five *antistetes*, who in the hierarchy were placed below the *sacerdos*. These five carried various insignia of Isis in a procession; namely, 1) a cup-shaped lamp (*lucerna consimilis cymbium*), 2) a portable altar (*altaria*), 3) a palm tree with golden leaves and a *caduceus* (*palma auro foliata, Mercuriale caduceum*), 4) a model of a stretched out left hand (*manus sinistra porrecta palmula*) and a golden vessel in the shape of a nipple (*aureum uasculum in modum papillae*), and 4) a golden winnowing-basket (*aurea uannus*). Whether the person wearing the mask of Anubis or the three men carrying 1) a statue of a cow on his shoulders (*bos in erectum leuata statum (...) quod residens umeris suis*), 2) a roomy chest containing secrets (*cista secretorum capax*), and 3) the venerable effigy of the highest divinity (*summi numinis uneranda effigies*) were also called *antistetes* we do not know. It certainly is possible. It is clear, however, that the *sacerdos* held the highest cultic position. In his right hand he carried a rattle (*sistrum*) and a garland (*corona*).

that previously the scribe spoke Latin), he announced the launching of the ships (11.17). The crowd then brought boughs, branches and garlands, and after kissing the feet of a silver statue of Isis attached to the temple-steps, they went home (11.17).

We are also offered a description of the morning opening ceremony of a temple of Isis (11.20) and learn that “the act of initiation itself was performed as a rite of voluntary death and of salvation attained by prayer (11.21).” There was a preparatory period when Lucius took up quarters in the temple precinct and had visions of the goddess every night. Once a person was deemed ready, we learn, s/he was instructed after the morning ceremony and informed which preparations were necessary. The books, which contained this information, seemed to have been written in hieroglyphs (11.22). The person to be initiated had to bathe and then was sprinkled with water by a priest so as to render him/her “purified.” A ten-day period followed during which no meat could be eaten or wine could be drunk. Then, clad in a new linen garment, the initiate was led into the inner sanctuary. Lucius reports:

[11.23] Accessi confinium mortis et calcato Proserpinae limine
per omnia vectus elementa remeavi, nocte media vidi solem
candido coruscantem lumine, deos inferos et deos superos
accessi coram et adoravi de proximo

I approached the confines of death and trod the threshold of Proserpina, and returning I journeyed through all elements. In the middle of the night I saw the sun gleaming with bright brilliance. I stood in the presence of the gods below and the gods above, and worshipped them from close at hand.

Lucius went through two additional initiations, the last into the mysteries of Osiris. As with the first initiation, there was a ten-day period of abstinence and a nocturnal ceremony. After the third initiation, Lucius, his head shaved, becomes a *pastophoros* in the most ancient college founded at the time of Sulla, a college that was attached to the temple of Isis in the *campus Martius*.

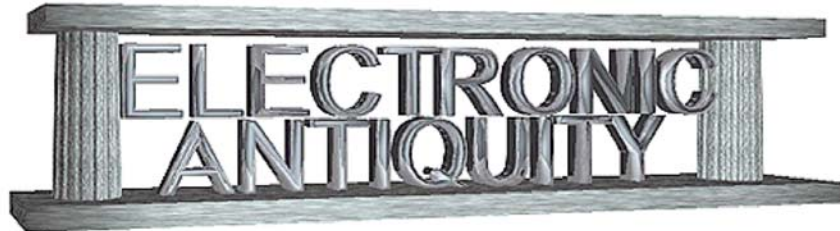
As Isis had promised to Lucius when she appeared to him for the first time (11.6), his life as a devotee was blessed and he would become famous. The novel ends with a final overlap of fiction and reality. The author Lucius Apuleius was indeed famous and on many accounts blessed. The inscriptions from Ostia also confirm an actual link

between the author and the cult of Isis. He was an initiate.²⁴ But what exactly did Apuleius tell us about the mysteries of Isis and Osiris? Nothing more than what an uninitiated one would know: there was a ritual death and rebirth; at the moment of initiation, all senses were heightened and extraordinary things were perceived; and the divine and the human world collapsed into one. In the case of Lucius the former ass or Lucius Apuleius the author, there was “a journey through all elements, a catching sight of the sun at the dead of night, and ultimately being with gods of the dead (below) and the living (above).” Ultimately, with the proper preparation set forth by the cult, anybody could learn or perceive the secret, the *mysterion*. More significant than the fact that there was a cultic secret is that people agreed that there was one, which served as separator between those who knew and those who did not. There were the in-group of initiates and the out-group of the uninitiated. Spinning this a bit further, it is possible that we, the outsiders, know this cult’s secret whether intuitively or accidentally acquired, but because we are the uninitiated ones, we could have no way of knowing that we know this. This, I would argue, is what Apuleius tries to explain playfully throughout the novel. The continuous interplay of the known and unknown, the perceived and mis-perceived, gives the novel its multivalent narrative dynamic. While Apuleius entertains his reader, he also accurately and specifically describes the physical and psychological experiences that go hand in hand with initiation. What he leaves unexplained is the exact initiation sequence and the initiation rituals themselves. In this way the boundary between the initiate and the uninitiated remains forever intact. And the mystery surrounding Isis and Osiris remains unknown.

²⁴ [Riess 2001](#): 339-340.

WORKS CITED

- Griffiths, J.G. 1978. "Isis in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius." In B.L. Hijmans, Jr. and R.T. van der Paardt, eds., *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass*. Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis.
- Münstermann, H. 1995. *Apuleius: Metamorphosen literarische Vorlagen*. Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner.
- Olmsted, W. 1996. "On the Margins of Otherness: Metamorphosis and Identity in Homer, Ovid, Sidney, and Milton." *New Literary History* 27 (2): 167-184.
- Riess, W. 2001. *Apuleius und die Räuber*. Stuttgart: F. Steiner.
- Sandy, G.N. "Book 11: Ballast or Anchor." In B.L. Hijmans, Jr. and R.T. van der Paardt, eds., *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass*. Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis.
- Schlam, C. 1978. "The *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius." In B.L. Hijmans, Jr. and R.T. van der Paardt, eds., *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass*. Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis.
- Shumate, N. 1996. *Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius' Metamorphoses*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Walsh, P.G. 1994. *Apuleius: The Golden Ass: Translated With Introduction and Explanatory Notes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Winkler, J.J. 1985. *Auctor and Actor. A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' The Golden Ass*. Berkeley: University of California Press.



WHAT DID MYSTERIES MEAN TO ANCIENT GREEKS?

Nikolay P. Grintser, Russian State Univ. for the Humanities, Moscow
grintser@mtu-net.ru

When we try to perceive the cultural meaning of the terms and notions relevant for an ancient civilization, we cannot ignore any detail within the entire, sometimes peculiar, range of their possible connotations. This is true for the particular words in which these ancient notions are expressed, and for the strange, even funny ancient interpretations of these words, which are not in line with their original etymological meaning. We should not be purists; we should try, if possible, to look for and to reconstruct some reasons for the existence of such unusual interpretations. This is even more necessary when we deal with the phenomenon of Greek mysteries: as the reality they revealed was made secret and hardly accessible already in antiquity, how can we ignore any extant piece of evidence? Pursuing this quite trivial assumption, I will try to analyze the very term *mysteria*, taking into account each and every classical comment on the word in question.

The general meaning of Greek μυστήρια, “mysteries, initiations” and words of the same family, like μύστης, “initiate”, or μυστηρικός, “pertaining to the mysteries” seems to be quite obvious and agreed upon among most scholars. It is derived from the verb μύω meaning “to keep eyes or mouth shut.”¹ This verb is reconstructed on the Indo-European level as **mus-* “sich schliessen, von der Lippen und den Augen”² with no direct parallels outside Greek, or just **mu-*. In the

¹ Chantraine 1968-1970: 728; Frisk 1960-1972 (II): 276.

² Pokorny 1959: 752.

latter case the meaning can be reconstructed only as “undeutlich reden, unartikuliert murmeln, den Mund geschlossen halten oder schliessen.” This has no connotation of “eyes”, but we have a large number of additional, mainly, onomatopoeic examples both in Greek – μῦμῦα imitating sobbing sounds in Aristophanes’ *Knights* 10, μῦἀλαλεῖν “to mutter” by Hipponax 124 West,³ μυκάομαι, “to low, bellow,” properly of oxen – and outside Greek, in Latin *mugio*, German *mugen*, Russian *myčat’* “to bellow” – properly of cows, Latvian *maut* “to bellow.”⁴ Thus, with Greek μυστήρια we have the first problem, although it is small and surmountable: the word itself must have a somewhat ambiguous sense of “things either hardly seen or hardly spoken about.” Indo-European parallels speak for the latter meaning, but the realities of Greek language and culture strongly support the former. The most convincing evidence may be the dichotomy between the two classes of initiates in the mysteries. It is well known that the Eleusinian rituals offered two levels of initiation: those who had passed the intermediary rites acquired the title of μύσται, while those who completed the last and higher level of initiation received the full knowledge of ἐπόπται. As the latter term presumes the sense of “those who look upon, see,” we have every reason to assume that the former is also linked with the idea of “viewing,” but in this case presupposes not the “full view” and means something like “those who can hardly see.” This dichotomy, together with the notion of “things shown,” δεικνύμενα, as an important part of Eleusinian rites, encourages a number of scholars, [Karl Kerényi \(1967\)](#) more than others, to understand the process of *myesis*⁵ as an experience of “seeing the unseen.” Literary descriptions of mystic experience may also be used to support such interpretation. Sophocles in his *Triptolemus* praised the Eleusinian initiates in this way: “Three times blessed are those mortals who have *seen* these rites and then descended in Hades, for there life is only for them, and all others experience everything bad” (ὥς τρισόλβιοιὰ κείνοιφροτῶν, οἷα ταῦταδδερχθέντες τέληἀμόλωσ’ ἐςἌιδου·ἀποῖσδεὰ γὰρἀμόνοιςἀκεῖἄζῆνἄστι, τοῖςδἄλλοισιἄπάντ’ ἔχεινἄκακά – *TGF* fr. 837). The same idea of sacred vision that secures happiness in the afterlife is attested also by Pindar: “Blessed is the one who went under

³ This is the manuscript reading, corrected by Meineke (according to Hesychius’ gloss) into μοιμύλλειν, the latter reading being accepted, with slight corrections, by M. West.

⁴ [Pokorny 1959: 752](#).

⁵ that is, “initiation,” a word like the corresponding verb, μύεω “to initiate”, being a later formation following the semantics of μυστήρια and μύστης.

the earth after *having seen* these [sacred things] (ὄλβιος ἔσστις εἰδὼν κείνῃ Ἴσ' ὑπὸ ἐχθρόν' – fr. 137,1 Snell-Maehler). Later on, one can remember Apuleius' words in the *Metamorphoses* saying that during his initiation into the cult of Isis he “saw the brilliance of sun shining in the middle of the night” (*nocte media vidi solem candido coruscantem lumine* – *Metamorphoses* 11, 23). The number of examples presupposing the sacred importance of *seeing* while participating in mysteries can be easily enlarged.

No less numerous are the instances where the idea of “speaking the unspoken” is much more prominent than that of “seeing the unseen.” Maybe the fact that the contents of Eleusinian rites should not be revealed under penalty of death is the most notable characteristic of these rituals which are considered the mysteries par excellence. There is no need at all to recall the famous names charged with such a blasphemy: sometimes one gets the impression that any prominent citizen of Athens had experienced it at least once, but it is worth mentioning that the epithet ἀπόρρητα ἄρρητα, “unspoken,” became nearly formulaic in application to mysteries. Eleusinian mysteries are called [ἄ]ρρητος ἐτελετήσῃ already in the fifth century inscription from the Eleusinian agora (IG I³ 953), and we have the phrase “unspoken mysteries”, μυστηρίων...ἀπορρήτων, in Euripides' *Rhesus* 943 (ὄργι'...ἄρρητ', “unspoken orgies” being a definition for Bacchic rites in *Bacchae* 470-472.) Ultimately, such a description gradually becomes an alternative way of referring to mysteries: see Herodian's explanation of the name of Athena's festival of *arrhephoria*: “*arrhephoria* is a festival praising Athena, and named from the expression “to carry” (φέρειν) the unspoken (ἄρρητα), that is, “to carry mysteries” (ἄρρηφορία ἐορτή ἐπιτελουμένη τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς ἐπὶ ἀετὸς ἄρρητα ἐκαίε μυστήρια εἰσφέρειν) (*On orthography* III 2.479). Hence, the idea of mysteries as “things not to be spoken about” got an additional dimension. It is well known that, apart from “things shown”, τὰ ἐδεικνύμενα, and “things practiced”, τὰ ἐδρώμενα, mysteries contained a revelation of the sacred things said, τὰ ἐλεγόμενα, and the latter could not be properly understood by those not initiated. That is why sometimes mysteries were understood as a sort of ἀλληγορία, “hidden-saying,” that is, an indirect naming of sacred, “mysterious” things. Thus mystery rites are described in Demetrius' *On style* 101: “This is why mysteries are revealed in allegories, to inspire the shuddering and awe associated with darkness and night. In fact allegory

is not unlike darkness and night.”⁶ (διδοὶ καὶ τὰ μυστήρια ἐν ἄλληγορίαισι λέγεται πρὸς ἕκπληξιν καὶ φρικὴν, ὡς περὶ ἐν ἴσκότῳ καὶ νυκτί. ἔοικε ἰδέει καὶ ἡ ἄλληγορία ἰτὸ ἴσκότῳ καὶ τῇ νυκτί.) It is quite suggestive, with respect to this, that Philo Judaeus writes “the initiates have their ears purified” (μύστα ἰκεκαθαμένοι τὰ ὦτα, *De cherubim* 48), meaning that the sacred knowledge is opened to those who do listen. The list of relevant examples may be broadened considerably. It is no wonder, therefore, that μυστήρια as indirect, allegorical significations were compared to another kind of authoritative and enigmatic word, now designated by the term μῦθος, and that those two words seem to be associated also on the level of inner form and etymology. Plotinus speaks about “mysteries and myths that are speaking in riddles about the gods,” (τὰ μυστήρια καὶ οἱ μῦθοι οἱ περὶ θεῶν ἀνίττονται – V.1) and Eusebius thinks “mysteries resonate in harmony with the ancient mythical stories about the gods” (μυστήρια σύμφωνά τοῖς τῶν προτέρων μυθικοῖς διηγήμασι – *Praeparatio evangelica* XV 1, 2). It is interesting, by the way, that partly because of such associations, some modern scholars think it plausible to derive μῦθος, which has no satisfactory etymology so far, from the same onomatopoeic μῦ which is taken to be the root of μύω and μυστήρια.⁷

Whatever the etymological grounds may be, it is quite clear that both possible connotations of μύω, i.e. of “shutting” either “eyes” or “mouth,” turn out to be equally relevant for ancient reflections on the cultural and religious meaning of mysteries, and that they can peacefully coexist as two interdependent and complimentary interpretations. From the point of view of cultural studies, this should not be taken as a sort of “contamination” which sometimes bothers the partisans of a strictly “scientific” approach, which we may define as one which looks for a

⁶ translated by Doreen C. Innes

⁷ Frisk 1960-1972 (II): 265. Chantraine, however, vehemently opposes such a hypothesis, arguing that this association contradicts the semantics of μῦθος (Chantraine 1968-1970: 719). In my view, there is no conflict here: the initial meaning of μῦθος as “authoritative, significant word or speech” can easily produce a deviation into “inscrutability, mystery” presumed by μύω. The same semantic development is pursued, for instance, by G. Nagy (1990: 148-9, 426-29) in his analysis of the semantic link between ἀἴνος “authoritative speech” and ἀινύμα “riddle”. Cf. the passage from Plotinus (*Enneades* V 1, 7) quoted immediately above where both “mysteries” and “myths” are said to “talk in riddles” (ἀνίττονται). Cf. also Nagy 1996: 119-133, especially 129, on the specific meaning of μῦθος.

single solution. I wonder if it was this wide range of connotations that drove Burkert to a questionable conclusion that “the connection of *mysteria* with *myo*, “to shut one’s eyes or lips” may be just a popular etymology.”⁸ “Popular etymology” is, after all, the reflection of popular beliefs and therefore could tell us a lot about the actual meaning of terms and notions we explore.⁹ If this is the case, perhaps we don’t have to stop with these two familiar interpretations of the word μυστήρια, but can go beyond them to include other ways Greeks explained the inner sense of this mysterious concept.

We find an almost all-embracing list of possible etymologies for μυστήρια in Clement of Alexandria: Καίτοι δοκεῖ τὰ ὄργια καὶ τὰ μυστήρια δεῖν ἀτυμολογεῖν, τὰ μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς ὀργῆς τῆς Διὸς καὶ τῆς πρὸς Δία γεγενημένης, τὰ δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ μύσου τοῦ συμβεβηκότος περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον· εἰ δὲ καὶ ἀπὸ Μυοῦντός τινος Ἀττικοῦ, ὃν ἐν κυνηγίᾳ διαφθάρηεν· Ἀπολλόδωρος λέγει, οὐ φθόνος ὑμῶν δεδοξάσθαι τὰ μυστήρια ἐπιτυμβίῳ τιμῇ. πάρεστιν δὲ καὶ ἄλλως μυθήριά σοι νοεῖν, ἀντιστοιχοῦντων τῶν γραμμάτων, τὰ μυστήρια. θηρεύουσι γάρ, εἰς καὶ ἄλλοι ὠπινές, ἀτὰρ δὴ καὶ οἱ αἰμῦθοι οἱ τοιοῖδε Θρακῶν τοὺς βαρβαρικωτάτους, Φρυγῶν τοὺς ἀνοητοτάτους, Ἑλλήνων τοὺς δεισιδάμονας. “It seems necessary to me to tell the etymologies of orgies and mysteries. The former is called so because of the anger (ὄργη) of Demeter against Zeus, whereas the latter is named because of uncleanness (μύσος) of things happening in connection with Dionysos; and if one associates the name with a certain Myon from Attica, whom Apollodorus says perished in a dog’s hunt, we have good reason to see in mysteries certain honors to the dead. It is possible to think, with letters changed, that it means “preservation of myths,” as myths (μῦθοι) are preserved (θηρεύω), the most barbarous ones by Thracians, the silliest ones by Phrygians, and the superstitious ones by Greeks, and some others by the others” (*Stromata* 2, 13). Apart from an already perceived connection with *myths*, and a common way of inventing an aetiological story of a certain Myon, one should pay attention to the association of mysteries with “uncleanness” (μύσος), thus making them, by negative association, a sort of “purification” or “cleansing.” It also reveals, of

⁸ Burkert 1987: 137.

⁹ It is worth noting here that ancient etymology, unlike the modern discipline, tended to reveal the multiplicity of meanings of a given word (see Lallot 1991, Herbermann 1991). It is quite suggestive also that the idea of “multiple” or “contaminational” etymology becomes more and more popular among contemporary scholars (see Toporov 1960; Georgiev 1982).

course, an important characteristic of mysteries, as in antiquity they were also viewed as a kind of cathartic expiation.

Another way of interpreting the term in question was to connect it with the idea of “satiation” or “quest for knowledge” – the latter being expressed by the Greek verb μῶμαι. This is how μυστήρια were etymologized by the Roman philosopher and rhetorician of the first century A.D., Lucius Annaeus Cornutus: “*mysia* is “satiation;” it is plausible that *mysteria* are named because of that, and from the fact that Demeter is also named Mysia by some people, or [they are called so] because of the “quest for knowledge” which is necessary to understand their difficult symbolism.” (μυσιᾶν τερόῦ ἐστὶ κεκορηθῆναι· πιθανὸν γὰρ ἔντεϋθεν ἀνώμασθαι ἀτὰρ ἀμυστήρια, ὅθεν ἀκαὶ ἀμυσία ἀπαρά αὐτῶν ἡ Δημήτηρ, ... ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀμῶσεως δεῖσθαι τὰ ἀσξύμβλητόν τι ἔχοντα – *On the Nature of the Gods* 57.2-5).

It seems that all the connotations of mysteries mentioned to this point – that of the “unseen”, “unspoken”, “purifying” or “searching for knowledge” rituals – turn out to be relevant or at least suggestive in the light of what mysteries meant for ancient Greeks. If that is true for four interpretations, why should we ignore the remaining fifth one, although it is, perhaps, the most funny and challenging of all? I mean the words of Aristotle, said *en passant* in the *Rhetoric* while discussing some types of ambiguity. Aristotle says, “One case is to say something by homonymy, that is, to say that a mouse (μῦς) is very important, as it is the cause of the most honorable rites, for the most honorable rites are mysteries” (ἐνὰ ἕτῳ παρὰ τὴν ὁμωνυμίαν, τὸ φάναι σπουδαῖον ἵναι μῦν, φ’ οὗ γ’ ἐστὶν ἡ ἀτιμιωτάτη ἀπασῶν ἀτελετή· ἀτὰρ γὰρ ἀμυστήρια ἀπασῶν ἀτιμιωτάτη ἀτελετή – *Rhetoric* 1401a13-15). Most commentaries just stress the world-play, μῦς-μυστήρια, but give no consideration of the possible reasons for it. Ancient scholiasts even thought it necessary to argue against Aristotle: “Mysteries are not named from the word for “mouse”, but from the verb μῶ, “to learn” (οὐκ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀμῦς ἀ ἐπέων ἀνομάσθη, ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀμῶ, τὸ ἀμῶσθαι), thus following the above-mentioned etymology of Cornutus and starting the long sequence of commentators who over the centuries took this passage to be a mere joke. After all, homonymy is just homonymy, and nothing more. Not for Greeks, and not for Aristotle, I think: one can recall the seriousness of his numerous etymologies, which are sometimes very close to the type Plato practiced in the *Cratylus*.¹⁰ This example is immediately followed

¹⁰ cf., for instance, Aristotelic explanation of the word “science” as “something that sets the soul” (ἡ ἐπιστήμη ἀκεῖν ἵναι ὅτι τὴν ψυχὴν ἐνεργεῖ – *Problemata*

in the text of *Rhetoric* by another one: one calls the dog a heavenly creature, bearing in mind that Pindar called Pan “the dog of the Great Goddess” (ὦέ μάκαρ, ὄνέ τεέ μ γάλασέ θεοῦέ κύναέ παντοδαπόνέ καλέουσιν ἘΟλύμπιοι – fr. 96 Snell-Maehler). Pindar, at least, must have taken this epithet seriously, and we know other instances of praising dogs in antiquity (most of all, the famous oath of Socrates, although its origin and meaning is still a point of debate). So I will dare to treat this example with some attention, the more so as it is not the only occurrence of mice being associated with mysteries.

Another one is found in Athenaeus, who tells us that Dionysius I of Sicily, to whom other strange etymologies thought to be used in his tragedies were attributed, used the word μυστήρια to refer to “mouse-holes, because the mouse guards them” (Διονύσιον ... τὰς ἐτῶν ἐμυζῶν ἐκδύσεισιν ἐμυστήρια ἐκάλει, ὅτι ἐτοῦς ἐμυζέτηρεῖε- *Deipnosophistae* III 54, 11). And in Photius’ *Bibliotheca*, the Byzantine patriarch reports that “Iamblichus distinguishes three kinds of magic: that of grasshoppers, of lions and of mice, and after the latter mysteries were called, as the magic of mice was the first among all” (καί διεξέρχεται ἐὸ ἐλάμβλιχος ἐμαγικῆς ἴδη, μάγον ἐἀκρίδων ἐκαί μάγον ἐλεόντων ἐκαί μάγον ἐμυζῶν· ἐξ ἐοῦ ἐ καλεῖσθαι ἐκαί τὰ ἐμυστήρια ἐἀπὸ ἐτῶν ἐμυζῶν (πρώτην ἐγάρ ἐῖναι ἐτὴν ἐ τῶν ἐμυζῶν ἐμαγικὴν ἐ- *Bibl.* 75b22.) Certainly, these two can be taken as just funny and crazy sayings, and they are often treated as such.¹¹ But can something serious be perceived in this peculiar association?

In order to answer this possibly quite superfluous question, one needs to investigate briefly the role of mice in popular Greek mythological and religious beliefs. The most famous figure in this context is, of course, Apollo the Mouse, Apollo Smintheus. This epithet is attested for Apollo already by Homer (*Iliad* 1, 39)¹² and then by the Orphics (34, 4 Kern), Strabo (13.1.48 and 64), Hesychius (s.v. σμίνθα), Aelian (*NA* 12.5), et al. According to scholia, mice were devastating the fields in Chryse in Asia Minor; Apollo punished them, and acquired this

956b40), which follows exactly the etymology of *Cratylus* (437a), or the interpretation of “nature” (φύσις) as “the rise of everything that grows” (ἡ ἐτῶν ἐ φυσόμεῶν ἐγένεσις – *Metaphysics* 1014b 16-17). In the latter case Aristotle ascribes length to the brief vowel u in the root of φύσις, and this lengthening presumably reflects the very semantics of “growth”. The argument here is in perfect accordance with the Platonic theory of “sound symbolism.”

¹¹ Significantly, Photius’ passage is usually not included in Iamblichus’ collection of fragments.

¹² and maybe even earlier in Mycenaean tablets: see [Baumbach 1971: 180](#).

title in commemoration of his deed. Cults of Apollo Smintheus existed in Asia Minor, mainly in the Troad, but also at Lesbos, Chios, Rhodes and other sites. He was represented with mice on numerous coins from Asia Minor, and a famous statue, made by Scopas and erected in Apollo's temple Smintheion in Chryse, depicted the god standing with his foot placed on top of a mouse (Strabo 13.1.48). It is worth noting that Apollo was worshipped in this cult as the protector of crops from the mice, and it is also suggestive for our future purposes that this function and eponym was shared with him (as many other functions, too) by Dionysus. Apollonius the Sophist, who compiled the *Lexicon Homericum* in the first or early second century A.D., mentions in his work that “the epithet Smintheus, according to Aristarchus, comes from Smynthe, a Trojan city. But Apion derives it from mice that are also called *smynthioi*, and at Rhodes there is a festival called *smynthia*, because Apollo and Dionysus extinguished there the mice who were destroying the crops in the vineyards” (Σμινθεῦ ἐπίθετον Ἀπόλλωνος, κατὰ τὸν Ἀρίσταρχον ἀπὸ πόλεως Τρωικῆς Σμίνθης καλουμένης. ὁὗ δὲ Ἀπίων ἀπὸ τῶν μυῶν, οἳ σμίνθιοι καλοῦνται· καὶ ἐν Ῥόδῳ σμίνθια ἑορτή, ὅτι ὠτῶν ὠμῶν ὠποτὲ λυμαινομένων τὸν ὠκαρπὸν ὠτῶν ὠμπελώνων ὠπόλλων καὶ ὠδίωνυσοσῶδι ἐφθειραν ὠτούσῶ μύσας – Apollonius, *Lexicon Homericum*.¹³

The cult of Apollo Smintheus in Chryse was also connected with a sort of totemistic myth in which mice played the crucial role. According to Strabo, the following legend existed about Trojans: “After Teucres left Crete, there was an oracle saying that they would find a new homeland there where *the earth-born* would attack them. And when they came, the story goes, in the region of Amaxiton, a great number of field mice burst forth, wishing to eat all the leather they had on their arms and utensils. And then they settled there” (ἐκ τῆς Κρήτης ἀφικόμενοι τῶν Τεύκροις ... χρησμός ἦν, αὐτόθι ποιήσασθαι τὴν ἄγονήν ὅπου ἂν οἰῶ γηγενεῖς αὐτοῖς ἀπιθῶνται ὠσιν ἦναι· δὲ τοῦτ' αὐτοῖς ἀφασίω περὶ ὠμαξιτόν ὠνύκτωρ ὠράπολυν ἀπλήθος ὠρουραίων ὠμῶν ὠξανθησαν ὠδιαφαγεῖν ὠσα ὠκύτινα ὠτῶν ὠεὶ ὠπλων καὶ ὠχρηστηρίων ὠτούσῶ δὲ αὐτόθι ὠεῖναι – Strabo 13.1.48) The epithet “earth-born” (γηγενεῖς) applied to mice seems also quite suggestive. Being dangerous for crops, mice are at the same time closely linked with earth; they are, as the crops, “fruits of the earth.”

¹³ On the joint cult of Apollo and Dionysus Sminthei at Rhodes, see [Morelli 1959: 41-42, 162-164](#); [Detienne 2001: 147-158](#).

Association with Apollo¹⁴ provides a reason for the beliefs that mice have some magical, most of all prophetic, capacities.¹⁵ Aelian called them “the most prophetic animals” (ἡσανθ’ ἄραίμαντικώτατοι τῶν ἰκτινῶν καὶ μύες – *Varied Histories* 1.11), and Pliny agreed that they are “animals that one shouldn’t ignore, even in public prodigies” (*haut spernendum in ostentis etiam publicis animal* – *Natural History* 8.221), relying also on the authority of Persian sorcerers who thought mice to be “an animal most adequate for religious practices (*animal religionum capacissimum* – 30.19). Aelian also tells about one physiological peculiarity that makes mice a perfect object for a soothsayer’s attention: their liver becomes bigger or smaller in exact accordance with the cycles of the moon (*Nature of Animals* 2.56). Foreshadowing my final conclusions, I would like to draw attention to the fact that in antiquity the moon was associated with Artemis, Hecate and Persephone, and afterwards, certainly, with Isis. And the moon-goddess became quite an important figure in the ideology of mysteries.¹⁶

Since mice “physically” reflected the passage of time, it is no wonder that they themselves could predict changes of weather and seasons. Mainly, they were believed to show the approach of winter storms and heavy rains. Mouse cries are the sign for a severe winter (Aelian, *Nature of Animals* 7.8); they cease to gather in the fields before rainy weather (Theophrastus fr. 174.7); and the shrieking and dancing of mice predict the season of storms:

ἀλλὰ γὰρ οὐδὲ μύες, τετριγότες εἴ ποτε ἡμᾶλλον ἢ
 εὐδίοι ἐσκίρτησαν εἰκότα ὄρχηθμοῖσιν,
 ἄσκεπτοι ἐγένοντο παλαιότεροις ἀνθρώποις,
 καὶ μύεσσι μέρια ποσσὶ στιβάδα στρωφῶντες
 κοίτης ἰμείρονται, ὅτ’ ὄμβροθ σήματα φαίνει.

Mice, too, as signs of storms, whenever with louder
 squeaking than their wont they gamboled and seemed to

¹⁴ Again, as in the case with the epithet “earth-born”, we have here the mechanics typical for mythological consciousness. The fact that mice are opposed to Apollo doesn’t exclude the possibility for them to share in his functions. Actually, in mythology, negative links presuppose positive ones.

¹⁵ This fact is thoroughly investigated in Vladimir Toporov’s path-breaking article (1977), who connects mice with the other servants and companions of Apollo partly because of their prophetic powers.

¹⁶ The most obvious example is Lucius praying to Isis-Moon in the 11th book of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*.

dance in fair weather, were not unmarked by the weather-seers of old...Mice in the daytime toss straw and are fain to build a nest when Zeus shows signs of rain.¹⁷

Aratus, *Phaenomena* 1131-1141.

“Shrieking” (τρίζω) and “dancing” (ὄρχηθμός) of mice are the signs of their unnatural and thus prophetic behavior. To give one more example, one can quote Theophrastus saying that “shrieking and dancing mice signify the stormy season” (fr. 6.41). These “dancing choruses” (χοροί) of mice are sometimes described as very akin to some ecstatic processions of Bacchantes and Corybants. For instance, in the scholia to the Aratus passage quoted above, mice are said “to dance and spring into the air” (σκιρτάω) – exactly the same phraseology is applied to Bacchae in Aristophanes’ *Ploutos* 761 and *Wasps* 1305. On the other hand, the verb τρίζω, designating the strange “creaking” sound produced by mice, is constantly used in Greece, from Homer (*Iliad* 23.101; *Odyssey* 24. 5, 9) on, in the descriptions of the voices of the dead, or ghosts (ψυχάι). Being associated with earth (γηγενεῖς – Strabo 13.1.48, quoted above), mice might also be included in rites connected with honoring the dead. Ovid, for instance, described the Roman festival *Feralia*, often thought to be parallel to Greek *Anthesteria*, in these words:

Ecce anus in mediis residens annosa puellis
sacra facit Tacitae vix tamen ipsa tacet,
et digitis tria tura tribus sub limine ponit,
qua brevis occultum mus sibi fecit iter.

And then an elderly woman, sitting among the girls,
makes offerings to the Mute Goddess, not being silent herself.
She takes three pieces of incense with three fingers and puts
them under the porch, where a mouse made a secret passage for
itself (*Fasti* 2.571-574).

In relation to our topic, we certainly can’t ignore the “Mute Goddess” serving as a symbol for the secret rites connected with the dead, reminding us about the “unsaid” content of ancient mysteries.¹⁸

¹⁷ Transl. by G.R. Mair

¹⁸ In Roman tradition *Tacita*, the “Mute Goddess,” was equated with the goddess of the earth and the dead (she was the central figure of another Roman festival, *Larentalia*, also celebrating the dead). Hence her Greek counterparts should have been Demeter and Persephone, main heroines of the Eleusinian mysteries.

The magical power of mice was also reflected in the role they played in ancient medicine. In particular, they were believed to cure blindness and bad sight. Pliny and Marcellus Empiricus advise, as treatment for diseases of the eye, that a blind new-born mouse be placed over the eyes of the sick person. It is interesting, by the way, that the same belief is attested throughout the centuries all over the Balkans – e.g. in Serbia, Romania etc. (Toporov 1977: 58). The idea of healing is also reflected in another animal close to the mouse – a blind rat who was the sacred animal of Asclepius.¹⁹ So it seems that mice were associated in ritual both with being “mute”, as in Ovid, and being “blind” in popular medicine – again, a notable hint for our search.²⁰

Speaking about popular beliefs, one should also take into consideration the idea of mice being one of the most, if not the most, sexual animals, famous for numerous progenies. Theophrastus describes mice as “giving multiple birth” (πολύγονον ζῷον), Aelian supports this view (*Nature of animals* 12.10) quoting as an example several poetic passages, including a description of a lustful woman by a comic Epicrates (IV century B.C.):

τελέωσῃ ἐμ’ ὑπῆλθενῆ κατάρατος μαστροπόσῃ
 ἐπομνύουσα τὰν Κόραν τὰν Ἄρτεμινῆ
 τὰν Φερρέφατταν ὡσὶ ἀμαλῖς, ὡς παρθένος,
 ὡς πῶλος ἀδμήης· ἦσῃ ἄρ’ ἦν μυωνίαῃ
 At the end this wretched procuress approached me, swearing
 the names of Kore,
 Artemis and Pherrephatta, like a heifer, like a girl, like a
 foal-maiden: such was this mouse-hole.

Here two points must be stressed: first, the fact that the girl compared with a mouse is addressing maiden-goddesses, and especially Kore-

In the context of Vladimir Toporov’s arguments for the connection of mice with Muses (see note 11 above) Ovid’s evidence is also valuable, as *Tacita* was also one of the Muses, and specifically esteemed in Rome as such (see Plutarch *Numa* 8.6)

¹⁹ Regarding the blind rat, and the connection between Asclepius, Apollo Smintheus, on the one hand, and Indic Rudra and Ganesh (with a blind rat and a mouse, respectively, as their sacred animals) on the other, see an old but still relevant work of H. Gregoire (1949).

²⁰ As for the use of *mus caecus*, “blind mouse,” in medicine, cf. also the recipes contained in the poetic treatise by Quintus Serenus (II-III centuries A.D), *Liber medicinalis* 46, 1, 879.

Persephone (Pherrephatta is her constant and dangerous epithet), and the word *μῶνία* which in Greek meant both mouse-hole and female genitals. Hence, here we have a complex play on the interdependent notions of mice, sexuality and, through Persephone-Pherrephatta, the world of death.

If we sum up the whole range of connotations, it turns out that mice were associated in antiquity with crops (which they damage), earth, the underworld, magic and prophecy (in particular, predicting weather changes relevant for agriculture), blindness (being blind and healing blindness), extreme sexuality and abundant progeny. It is striking how this complex of associations reminds us of the religious beliefs relevant for fertility rituals and cults of the dead, and as a continuation of them, with mysteries as such. Some remote links of mice with Dionysus and Persephone also speak in favor of such a connection. We have also direct iconographic evidence relating mice to Demeter, in the form of coins on which they are present together. There is, for instance, a number of coins from Metapontum in Italy, dated to the end of the classical / beginning of Hellenistic times.²¹ On these the head of Demeter is depicted on the front side, and a stack, or ear, of barley and a mouse on the reverse. A silver stater from Metapontum illustrates this type (see image).²² It is well-known that a stack of barley was a sacred symbol of the Eleusinian mysteries, where it was shown to the initiates as the apotheosis of the ritual. It is worth noting in this context also a rare, strange and yet unidentified epithet of Demeter *Mysia* which is loosely explained as “cleaning,” since it is connected with the words of *μῶς* type (see Cornutus, *On the Nature of the Gods* 57.2-5, quoted above); morphologically, however, with all probability it might signify “mouse-goddess” as well.²³

²¹ Metapontum was one of the earliest Greek colonies in the so-called Magna Graecia, founded, according to legend, either by Nestor or by Epeius, the creator of the Trojan horse.

²² Image used by kind permission of the British Museum, *BM* no. 122; [Poole 1963: 254](#); [Johnston 1990: 12, 67-68](#).

²³ As mouse, or more precisely “a mouse-path” was associated with the ritual, dedicated to the “Mute Goddess” (see note 14 above), sacred silence of Demeter in the context of Persephone myth and Eleusinian ceremonies (see [Kerenyi 1967: 51](#)) could be seen as a possible parallel.



If Demeter and, respectively, Kore and Dionysus were associated with mice, Eleusis might serve as a possible focus for all indirect parallels we were contemplating. Greek mysteries, and Eleusinian mysteries, above all, were mainly about “gift of grain” on the one hand and salvation from death on the other. The mouse could be an appropriate symbol, as it combined in itself both of those ideas, with all their positive and negative connotations.

This general symbolism is also supported by a range of comparative evidence I will briefly enumerate. In Hittite ritual texts (KUB XXVII 67), an “Old Woman” (Sumerogram SAL ŠU.GI) saves a

person from death by attaching a piece of tin, or copper (a symbol of death), to a mouse which is sent as a sort of replacement to the underworld.²⁴ In Asia Minor, mice were connected with the highest female deity already as early as in the culture of Čatal-Hüyük (VII-VI millennium B.C.) where votive figures of mice were discovered in the tombs of higher priestesses. It is worth mentioning that such votive mice were also found in the Greek acropolis of Argos in Larissa in the eastern Peloponnese. The same connection is true for the mythological traditions of Slavic and Germanic people.²⁵ It is worth noting that mice were also important cult animals in Egyptian religion, where their votive figures are also often found in graves. They were one of the sacred animals of Hor, and naturally were ritual opponents of the sacred cats of the goddess Bast (Bastet). In some versions of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, we find mention of a goddess with a mouse-head who symbolizes the kingdom of death.²⁶ This is also quite understandable in light of the association of mice with death in the mythology and folklore of various peoples, both Indo-European and not.²⁷

Of course, all this is no more than a bunch of indirect and highly hypothetical data. I am far from supposing that Greek μυστήρια were actually derived from μῦς “mouse.” But the associations are there: and if all other connotations of the *mu*-stem turn out to reflect different aspects of the Greek experience of mysteries, perhaps it is worth bearing in mind that Aristotelian “homonymy” might also hint at something more real than mere word-play.²⁸ Just to finish with one more provocative example. Everybody now agrees upon the Eleusinian “background” for Aristophanes’ *Frogs*,²⁹ but the problem of frogs being its main chorus

²⁴ see Gamkrelidze., Ivanov 1984: 531; again, it can be looked upon as a parallel to Roman *Feralia* (see notes 14, 18 above).

²⁵ These people called the Milky Way the “Mouse Way”, and identified it as the road to the underworld (Vasmer 1986-1987 (III) :27)

²⁶ Toporov 1977: 78.

²⁷ Jobs 1962: 1131-1132; Mify 1991 (II): 190.

²⁸ Still, if we remember the etymological problems J. Pokorny has with reconstructing **mu(s)* – the stem for “shutting lips or eyes” on the Indo-European level – with no problems at all with **mus-* stem for “mouse”, one could wonder whether this “homonymy” could have been actual even then?

²⁹ For the most recent and exhaustive analysis of Aristophanes’ allusions to the ideology and ritual practice of mysteries see Bowie 1993, Lada-Richards 1999.

(and correspondingly, the title of the play) still remains kind of a riddle.³⁰ But if we bear in mind that the *Batrachomyomachia* could have been written in the first half of the fifth century BC., that is, not long before the *Frogs* appeared on stage, we can see it in a new light.³¹ If *mystai* in comedy could be somehow associated with “mice”, then two half-choruses of “frogs and mice” would make a perfect comic effect and, moreover, an effect very typical for Aristophanes. His humor is always multi-dimensional, simultaneously relying on real, ritual and literary allusions. In that case, Eleusinian mysteries, on the one hand, and a mock pseudo-Homeric poem, on the other, gives a perfect background for such an interplay. And note another significant point: Aristophanes never in his comedy refers directly to the $\mu\sigma\tau\alpha\iota - \mu\tilde{\upsilon}\varsigma$ consonance! Knowing his love of any possible word-play, how can we explain that if not by his wish to avoid direct mention of the real details of the ritual in order to keep off the charges of blasphemy? And if such a guess has some truth in it, might there have been then a tiny animal in the $\kappa\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\eta$ of the Eleusinian mysteries?

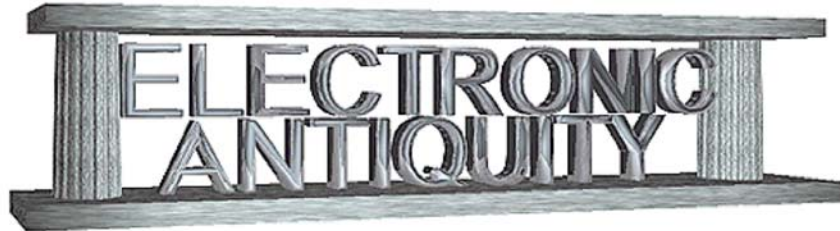
³⁰ Of course, the existence of the temple and cult of Dionysus Limnaios, “Dionysus the Marshy”, in Athens gives a solution, but only a partial one. See details of the discussion in [Dover 1994: 56](#).

³¹ It is well-known that Plutarch (*De Herodoti malignitate* 873F3-4) and the Suda lexicon ascribed this mock poem to Pigres from Halicarnassus who lived in the time of Xerxes. Some editors accepted this dating (Evelyn-White 1982: xli); however, now scholars tend to look at *Batrachomyomachy* as a Hellenistic poem ([Wölke 1978: 63](#), [Most 1993: 27-40](#)). The same view is expressed by M. West, who thinks the poem, nevertheless, belongs to a very ancient Eastern tradition of “animal epics” ([West 2003: 229](#)).

WORKS CITED

- Baumbach, L. 1971. "The Mycenaean Greek Vocabulary II" *Glotta*. Bd. 49.
- Bowie, A. 1993. *Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burkert, W. 1987. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Chantraine, P. 1968-1970. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Detienne, M. 2001. "Forgetting Delphi: Between Apollo and Dionysos." *Classical Philology* 96 (2): 147-158.
- Dover, K. 1993. *Aristophanes' Frogs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Evelyn-White, H.G. 1982. *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homeric*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Frisk, H. 1960-1972. *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Bd. I-III. Heidelberg: C. Winter.
- Gamkrelidze, Ivanov. 1984. *Indoeuropéjskij jazyk i indoeuropejitsy*. V. III. Tbilisi: Tbilisi University.
- Georgiev, V. 1982. "Kontamination als ein Prinzip der Etymologieforschung." *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Sprachforschung*. 95.
- Gregoire, H. 1949. *Asklépios, Apollon Smintheus et Rudra. Études sur le dieu à la taupe et le dieu au rat dans la Grèce et land l'Inde*. Bruxelles: Mém. Acad. Roy. de Belgique. Cl. d. lettres. 2. sér. 45.
- Jobes, G. 1962. *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols*. New York: Scarecrow Press.
- Johnston, A. 1990. *The Coinage of Metapontum Part 3*. New York: American Numismatic Society.
- Herbermann, C.P. 1991. "Antike Etymologie." In P. Schmitter, (ed.), *Sprachtheorien der abendländischen Antike*, vol. 2. Tübingen: G. Narr.
- Kerenyi, K. 1967. *Eleusis: An Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*. New York: Bollingen Foundation.
- Lada-Richards, I. 1999. *Imitating Dionysus: Ritual and Theater in Aristophanes' Frogs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lallot, J. 1991. "ETUMOLOGIA: L'étymologie en Grèce ancienne d'Homère aux grammariens alexandrins." in W. von Wartburg, J.-P. Chambon, and G. Lüdi (ed.s), *Discours étymologiques*:

- actes du colloque international*. Tübingen: M. Niemeyer. pp. 135-148.
- Mify. *Mify narodov mira. Entsiklopedija*. V.I-II. Moscow, 1991.
- Morelli, D. 1959. *I culti in Rodi*. Pisa: Goliardica.
- Most, G.W. 1993. "Die Batrachomyomachia als ernste Parodie." In W. Ax and R. Gleis (ed.s), *Literaturparodie in Antike und Mittelalter*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier. pp. 27-40.
- Nagy, G. 1990. *Pindar's Homer. The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Nagy, G. 1996. *Homeric Questions*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Pokorny, J. 1959. *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Bern: Francke.
- Poole, R.S. 1963. *A Catalogue of Greek Coins: Italy*. Bologna: Arnaldo Forni.
- Toporov, V.N. 1960. O nekotoryh teoreticheskikh printsipah etimologii // *Voprosy jazykoznanija*. #3. Moscow.
- Toporov, V.N. 1977. μοῦσα "Muzy": soobrazhenija ob imeni i predystorii obraza // *Slavjanskoje i balkanskoje jazykoznanije. Antichnaja balkanistika i balkanskoje jazykoznanije*. Moscow.
- Vasmer, M. *Etimologičeskij slovar' russkogo jazyka*. V. I-IV. Moscow, 1986-1987 (Enhanced Russian version of M. Vasmer, *Russisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Heidelberg, 1950-1958).
- West, M.L. 2003. *Homeric Hymns. Homeric Apocrypha. Lives of Homer*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wölke, H. 1978. *Untersuchungen zur Batrachomyomachie*. Meisenheim am Glan: Hain.



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

Wyatt MacGaffey, Haverford College
wmacgaff@haverford.edu

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 1968: 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.

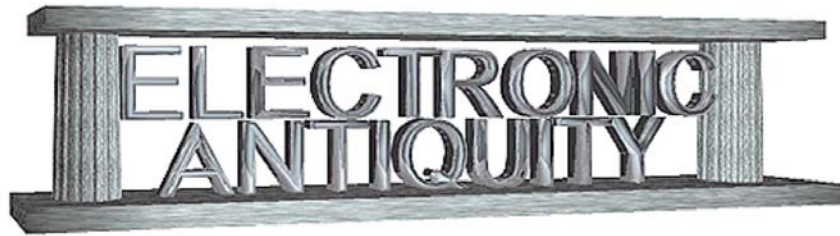
changes, as does your experience of its isolation from an outer world.”⁶¹
It is precisely such individuals in ancient Greece whose experiences were most likely to be recorded for other and later intellectuals to argue about.

⁶¹ [Luhmann 1989: 181.](#)

WORKS CITED

- Bernstein, R.J. 1983. *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bradley, P. 1956. *Democracy in America, by Alexis de Tocqueville*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Brück, J. 2001. "Monuments, power and personhood in the British Neolithic." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7 (4): 649-58.
- Burkert, W. 1987. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Carrithers, M., S. Collins and S. Lukes, ed.s. 1985. *The Category of the Person: anthropology, philosophy, history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Heusch, L. 1982. *The Drunken King*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Gell, A. 1998. *Art and Agency: an anthropological theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Goody, J. 1977. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goody, J. and I.P. Watt. 1963. "The consequences of literacy." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 6: 304-45.
- Janzen, J.M. 1983. *Lemba, 1650-1930*. New York: Garland.
- Kopytoff, I. 1971. "Ancestors as elders in Africa." *Africa* 41 (2): 129-42.
- LaFontaine, J.S. 1985. *Initiation: Ritual drama and secret knowledge across the world*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin.
- La Fontaine, J.S. 1977. "The power of rights." *Man* 12: 421-37.
- Latour, B. 2001. "Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain" – being a sort of sermon on the hesitations of religious speech." *Res* 39 (Spring 2001): 215-34.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1962. *La Pensée sauvage*. Paris: Plon.
- Luhrmann, T.M. 1989. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- MacGaffey, W. 1975. "Oral tradition in Central Africa." *Journal of African History* 7 (3): 417-26.
- _____, 1986. *Religion and Society in Central Africa*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

- _____, 2000a. "The cultural tradition of the African rainforests."
In J. Pemberton III, ed. *Insight and Artistry in African Divination*.
Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- _____, 2000b. *Kongo Political Culture: the conceptual challenge
of the particular*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Masolo, D.A. 1994. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Mauss, M. 1968. *Sociologie et anthropologie*. Paris: Presses
Universitaires de France.
- Meyer, M.W. 1987. *The Ancient Mysteries*. Philadelphia: University
of Pennsylvania Press.
- Pritchett, J. 2001. *The Lunda-Ndembu: Style, change and social
transformation*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Rapport, N. and J. Overing. 2000. *Social and Cultural Anthropology:
The key concepts*. London: Routledge.
- Redfield, J. 1991. "Classics and anthropology." *Arion*, 3rd series, 1, 2
(Spring 1991), 5-23.
- Snell, B. 1960. *The Discovery of the Mind*. New York: Harper.
- Strathern, M. 1988. *The Gender of the Gift*. Berkeley: California
University Press.
- Turner, V.W. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell
University Press.
- _____, 1969. *The Ritual Process*. London: Routledge.
- _____, 1975. *Revelation and Divination*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell
University Press.
- Van Wing, J. 1959. *Études bakongo*. Brussels: Desclée de Brouwer.



**AFRICAN AND CLASSICAL SECRECY AND DISCLOSURE:
THE KAGURU OF EAST AFRICA AND THE ANCIENT
GREEKS**

T.O. Beidelman, New York University¹

For Nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has
anything been secret, but that it should come to light.
Mark 4:22

A mystery is good for nothing if it remains always a
mystery.

Lord Fawn in Anthony Trollope's *Phineas Finn*

Two topics unite the conference from which the essays here derive. One is the possible benefit of intellectual exchange between classical scholars and cultural anthropologists who have worked in Africa. The second is study of the mystery cults of the ancient Mediterranean classical world. The assumption that anthropology or sociology might contribute to classicist's understanding of ancient societies goes back to the mid-nineteenth century. During the decades when anthropology and sociology had their start, Greek and Latin classics were familiar to most scholars, and classical examples were frequently cited by early social scientists including Lewis Henry Morgan,

¹ I declined attending the actual conference at Emory University from which the essays for this symposium are taken. I have avoided flying after the terrorist attack in Manhattan in 2001, which I witnessed. I did, however, agree to contribute a paper to this volume.

Henry Maine, Numa Fustel de Coulanges, Marcel Mauss, Louis Gernet, Max Weber, Karl Marx and many others. The long history of these interdisciplinary ties is charted in numerous essays.² More recently some classicists, especially those from France and Britain, have drawn on anthropology to analyze their materials.³ Most interesting of all, a few classical scholars and anthropologists have shown continuities between ancient and contemporary Mediterranean societies, presenting relatively recent ethnographies to provide insights about everyday life which complement ancient studies.⁴ This is an approach that archaeologists have long found useful.

I am an anthropologist who worked in Africa but who has periodically shown acquaintance with classical Greek culture.⁵ I propose to write mainly about one African society but hope to indicate some of the ways that my approach might illuminate issues of interest to classicists. That illumination rests not on any substantive connections between my African materials and the classical world but on the ways my approach as an anthropologist might suggest useful analytical approaches for classicists. My African material does not directly relate to the stated theme of the conference, the mystery cults. This is a topic about which I know little. My material does relate to ideas and practices associated with secrecy and initiation and these topics do have considerable connection to the study of the mysteries.

I begin with a brief descriptive, ethnographic account of secrecy among the Kaguru of East Africa. I then briefly consider some features of secrecy in classical Greece, taking examples from Homeric times to classical Athens. I do this because I assume that there is a general ethos of Greek culture that remains strikingly similar in some respects over

² The following essays are representative examples of this long and at times difficult exchange: [Dodds 1951](#), [Finley 1974](#), [Humphreys 1978](#), [Kluckhohn 1961](#), [Lloyd 1978, 1979](#), [Loraux 2000](#), [Marett 1966](#), [Redfield 1991](#). More pertinent to my essay are the book by my former teacher, the great sociologist Alvin Gouldner (1969) and my subsequent essay inspired by this (1989).

³ For example, [Gouldner 1979](#), [Beidelman 1989](#).

⁴ See [Campbell 1964](#), [Finley 1963](#), [Pitt-Rivers 1977](#), [Walcot 1970](#).

⁵ My own interest in classics, especially ancient Greece, was promoted by my being an Africanist. The famous Nigerian Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, proposed parallels between the thinking of certain African societies and ancient Greece (see [Soyinka 1976](#), cf. [Armstrong 1976](#), [Bishop 1999](#), [Senanu 1980](#)). As he noted, societies that display beliefs in oracles, polytheism, divination, divine kings, slavery and ritual drama offer many parallels for consideration.

time and place. I conclude by suggesting how an anthropological approach may illuminate materials from classical Greece.

The Kaguru

The Kaguru are a matrilineal, Bantu language-speaking people living in east-central Tanzania, east Africa. When I did my fieldwork (1957-66) they numbered about one hundred thousand. They lived in small villages centered around matrilineal kin groups, where cooperation and conformity were needed to ensure survival in a world of poverty and frequent famine. Since I have elsewhere published extensively on Kaguru life and culture, I do not here provide more background.⁶

In the introduction to his brilliant sociological analysis of secrecy, Simmel points out that all societies are constituted around interpersonal relations which are gauged by the information social actors construct about persons.⁷ This information is crucial for Kaguru, whose everyday lives center on innumerable interactions between kin and neighbors. Such relations depend on both the information one discloses about oneself and others, but also upon what is concealed or what is divulged against a person's wishes. As Simmel repeatedly notes, what is secret and hidden is the other side of what is revealed, willingly or otherwise. For Kaguru, then, management of such personal information is essential to their affairs. Indeed, it is essential to the construction and maintenance of social personhood itself, a personhood produced by what one's actions and appearances disclose about oneself.⁸

Kaguru have secrets, information that they do not want known about themselves. They also know that things that cannot be readily spoken or openly acknowledged, things they treat as secret even though in fact most of these things are known to many. In some ways these unvoiced but known matters are far more important than are those things truly hidden and unknown. Sometimes it is even difficult to distinguish clearly between what is secret and what is only unspoken or unshown. Besides the secrets of self, those of individual people, there are secrets that define membership in groups, for example, the knowledge that empowers elders and the ignorance that defines the young as irresponsible and weak. Likewise, there are things thought to separate

⁶ see bibliographies [Beidelman 1971](#), 198, [1997](#).

⁷ [Simmel 1950](#): 307.

⁸ see [Mauss 1979](#), [Allen 1985](#), [Beidelman 1997](#):10.

men from women, things men or women supposedly cannot readily know or fully grasp about their different but complementary natures. In all these cases, what young and old and men and women know and do not know is less clear-cut than first appears. Most Kaguru know more than they may publicly acknowledge.⁹

The critical areas of Kaguru secrecy relate to those ways that Kaguru are problematically linked to one another, to the ways that these social ties produce tension and ambiguity due to the conflicts between competing demands in allegiances and motives. These ties center around sexuality and the kinship and affinity which stem from it. Marriage produces kin groups which control and consume resources, especially food, and which provide the means and rules for exerting force, even violence. Ultimately control of sexuality and control of resources (land and labor) amount to the same thing, since social ties provide avenues to resources and resources in turn facilitate extending and supporting kinship and other social relationships... or threaten them as people compete and quarrel over goods.

Traditional Kaguru social relations center around kinship and marriage. These relations may seem obvious, but Kaguru veil the particulars of kinship and sexuality in a kind of secrecy. For example, Kaguru rarely use traditional personal names (often derived from the dead) in public address, and they don't always address one another in terms of their most obvious kin relations. To do so would specify or prioritize some relations that in many ways are more valuable when kept sufficiently vague to allow a fluid range of alternate choices in commitment. Such vagary may also be seen as polite because it prevents exclusion of the far larger number of neighbors and kin who are less close. For example, more people are called "parent," "sibling," and "offspring" than are actually one's immediate kin. Close relations are, of course, not actually secret but are often treated as best not clearly indicated in everyday speech. For example, Kaguru refer to kin mainly in

⁹ In the most famous of all African novels, *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe describes the secret *egwugwu* masquerades of the Ibo of Nigeria where the ancestral spirits appear in villages while hidden under masks and rushes. He relates that the women and children who are said to be terrified of these figures may sometimes recognize local village men beneath the disguises. Even so, they never acknowledge that they know. When an ancestral mask is torn off by a no-longer-believing Christian convert, everyone works to conceal the revelation. The Ibo have to work to maintain a secret that is actually known (Achebe 1962: 77-83, 164-179).

terms of their father's clan but almost never mention their own (their mother's) matrilineal clan, even though such ties are often said to be primary. Mentioning one's matrilineal kin ties is sometimes seen as blatant and unseemly reference to a person's sexuality, for one's clan affiliation is at the heart of rules about marriage and incest. Therefore, such affiliations are mentioned when necessary but more often glossed by more general kin terms. Furthermore, matri-clan relations are unquestionable, whereas ties to fathers and collateral kin are negotiated in terms of varying payments of bridewealth and claims to residency.

A few examples illustrate how Kaguru conceal their social sexuality and kinship. When in public one should never acknowledge the existence of one's sexuality in the presence of parents or siblings, kin whose sexuality poses particularly intense problems in competing loyalties within close kin groups. References to sexuality are thought to undermine the authority and solidarity essential within matrilineage. No references to sex are made before parents, including one's parent's beds or certain body parts. The conventional way for a parent to disown a child is to speak publicly about his or her own sexuality to the child, thereby proclaiming that they are no longer related, so that such symbolic incest taboos are no longer relevant. The unspoken is spoken. Similar restrictions in speech exist between affines, even though it is obvious that what links groups of affines is the fact that two of their kin are married to one another and therefore must be having sexual relations. This was strikingly demonstrated to me at a Kaguru beer party. I saw one man speak to another and then be assaulted by him. When I asked a bystander what had happened, I was told that the speaker had been struck because he called the other man "brother-in-law" or "affine." I remarked that they were indeed brothers-in-law and so I wondered why this should be wrong. The fight had taken place because the man should have called the other "brother" or "kinsman". To use the affinal term was tantamount to announcing that "I fuck your sister," which abused the man who was confronted incestuously with his own sister's sexuality. The sexuality of such a woman is a matter of profound sensitivity to both men: one man depends on his sister for his matrilineal heirs, while the other, as a husband, produces those heirs. Moreover he wants to set the loyalty of both the offspring and the mother (his wife) over their loyalty to the uncle, the sister's brother and matrilineal elder. Both men have deep but conflicting interests in the same woman's sexuality even though one is banned from uttering any word or action suggesting sex and therefore

incest (witchcraft). Such conflicts over authority and loyalty preoccupy Kaguru, but should not be openly spoken.¹⁰

Another example of the Kaguru regard for personal sexuality as something to be concealed comes from a court hearing in which a woman was seeking divorce from her husband. Frustrated, she finally began proclaiming a litany of sexual inadequacies on the part of her husband, amid the gasps and guffaws of the male spectators and officials. Earlier it was not clear that the court would grant the woman a divorce. Now the contested divorce was quickly granted, with the acknowledgment that no man could live with a woman who had so shamed him in front of others. Among Kaguru general bawdiness is considered fun, but not public and explicit disclosure about others' personal sexuality. Such matters should remain unspoken and secret.

Kaguru consider that one's material resources should remain secret. It is true that at the public payment of bridewealth the amounts involved are announced on the part of the two families, in the one case to show proudly how much they can provide for a kinsman to marry, and in the other to show proudly how much their woman is worth. Yet this involves only the wealth they are willing to acknowledge and involves the pooled resources of many households of kin. The actual wealth of any one person or any one household is never made clear. The resources of any particular household are matters of the utmost secrecy. For such reasons, no outsider Kaguru is allowed close to the food storage areas within any house and no outsider should allude to this or to how much food may be there. (It is also in the food storage area or under beds where personal wealth is hidden.) Nor should one ask anyone how much livestock he or she possesses and livestock are often secretly loaned out to various kin and friends so as to conceal one's actual holdings. Nor should one openly number another's children or even point at them. For related reasons, Kaguru nearly always consume their meals in public. Unless they are very ill, Kaguru eat sitting outside their houses, often joining their neighbors to eat, men with other men, women with other women and children. To eat indoors is to imply hoarding food and an unwillingness to share or worse, that one is eating forbidden food such as human flesh (one is a witch). What resources one actually possesses may be a secret, but Kaguru repeatedly try to give the impression that they

¹⁰ See [Beidelman 1956](#): Chapters 10 and 11. Kaguru secretiveness about biological facts is surpassed by the Chagga, also of Tanzania, who traditionally deny that adult men defecate ([Moore 1976](#)) and take pains to conceal this.

would not withhold food from hungry neighbors during times of hardship, even though, of course, this must be done. Kaguru folklore is filled with allusion to concerns and fears centered around selfish kin and neighbors unwilling to share resources, especially food, during times of need.¹¹ This secrecy around food reflects the anxieties held among people who are supposed to share as good kin and neighbors yet who acknowledge legitimate self-interest on the part of those who need to look out for themselves and those closest to them if they are to survive during difficult times. These are realities that go against the ethos of kin and neighborly solidarity and sharing.

The exchange of information and the display of social personhood are neatly illustrated by the Kaguru view of social space. The bush, the wild uncultivated area far from settlements, is associated with libidinous, selfish, anti-social desires and activities, with witchcraft, adultery, with the dangerous dead, and with magic and medicines. It is a sphere of power and disorder. The interior of Kaguru dwellings is also associated with much that is hidden such as one's actual wealth, one's real sexuality and any other secrets. The primary areas of Kaguru social life are the open space at the center of any settlement and the area in front of the door into a house. In these places people sit and visit, where ceremonies such as marriages and funerals are arranged and where rites of passage are feasted and danced. These are the public stages on which Kaguru act out their public pictures of their personhoods, where they present what they want their neighbors to see them to be. The village square and the front doorway area are the antitheses of the hidden spheres of the outlying wilderness and the hidden interior home, areas dangerous with hidden and secret possibilities.

The most secret areas of Kaguru life are both profoundly hidden and yet subjects of constant gossip and innuendo. These often involve witchcraft and sorcery. All Kaguru believe that some if not all others are capable of using supernatural powers to harm one. While Kaguru sometimes say that the reasons for this are inexplicable, they credit such evil and secret activities mainly to anti-social motives such as jealousy, envy, greed and spite. Consequently, Kaguru try to hide much about themselves so that others are not hostile to them. This is the ill-will felt because some enjoy benefits that others do not, whether this be food, wealth, health, children, sexual favors or political power. Of course, these condemned, forbidden negative feelings are actually felt at some

¹¹ Beidelman 1986: chapters 10 and 11, 1997: 83.

time by every Kaguru who consequently also fears these same feelings in others. Kaguru witches are described as inversions of all that makes Kaguru proper social beings. Witches are said to lack all constraint in their sexual desires and to have voracious appetites for food.¹² In short, witches are like wild beasts. Their activities are secret, occurring often at night and in the bush where witches consort with wild animals. Suspicions of witchcraft are rife among Kaguru, but they are only rarely mentioned publicly except by innuendo. In addition to witchcraft, some Kaguru are thought to possess special knowledge and powers of magic, sorcery and supernatural foresight (divination).¹³ Such powers are always thought to be secret in that those lacking such powers do not know exactly what such powers are or how they may be acquired and used. Some say that such powers are inherited in the blood; others associate them with unnatural familiarity with wild animals. Others say that such powers are acquired by deep familiarity with things of the wilderness. Still others say that such powers are learned from ethnic outsiders hostile to Kaguru. It is acknowledged that such powers may be used to combat witchcraft though they may also relate to witchcraft itself and therefore are so dangerous that people should avoid speaking openly about them, either for fear that this will label them as too knowledgeable, dangerous and untrustworthy or that such speech will bring on the ill will of those who do possess such powers.

The sources of life and death are secret for Kaguru. Pregnancy and birth are dangerous topics which cannot be discussed freely. Children in particular are shielded from mention of pregnancy and birth, and newborn children are mentioned publicly only in a guarded way.¹⁴ The dead are only guardedly mentioned. The dead and newborn are closely connected since the dead are the source of the newborn and often jealously take them back from the living, especially if the living speak too much or too enthusiastically about the newborn or if the living forget to propitiate the dead by naming newborn after them. The newly dead are born into the land of the dead and the newborn die from the land of the dead and arrive in the world of the living. One of the first rules of etiquette I was taught by the Kaguru was not to mention the newborn or the newly dead. Their names and presence were secreted from strangers and from supernaturally vulnerable young people, and though the

¹² see [Beidelman 1986](#): Chapters 9 and 11.

¹³ [Beidelman 1997](#):87.

¹⁴ cf. [Beidelman 1997](#): 92.

newborn might have names of dead kin (among their multiple names), such names were not freely spoken.

Kaguru believe that men and women are defined by their very different experiences and understandings. This is confirmed by the fact that Kaguru men and women do have different social goals. Their advantages and weaknesses are defined by their different positions within matrilineal kinship, polygynous households and other social rules and configurations. Kaguru men and women experience different social worlds in that they share meals apart, often sit separately at social gatherings and rituals, and often toil apart in different work parties doing different kinds of tasks. Above all, their very natures are described as profoundly different. Kaguru men are defined as socially orderly and restrained and therefore more fit for public debate and conducting ceremonies. In contrast, women are defined as more emotional and disorderly in both acts and speech, as associated with the wilderness and bush and contaminated by menstruation and therefore fit for more confined domestic and informal activities. Women are even associated with the destructive and uncontrollable yet tasty aspects of wild pigs, men being hunters and wild women their prey.¹⁵ Yet it is also through matrilineality, through women, that Kaguru men are primarily grounded in their claims to land and the voices of the dead who are buried in that land. These matrilineal ties, like motherhood itself, are profound and non-negotiable, not required to be frequently voiced in public, whereas paternity is arbitrated by public payments and adjudication. These powerful differences are underscored by initiation at puberty whereby Kaguru children, defined as socially irresponsible, ignorant minors, are transformed into jurally responsible, marriageable adults (men and women) supposedly now eligible to be given the secret social knowledge of adults.

Kaguru practice both male and female initiation of adolescents. At each set of ceremonies members of the opposite sex are rigorously excluded. Kaguru boys are secluded in the bush and taught ethnic tradition, history, sexual behavior and other lore by elder men.¹⁶ Kaguru

¹⁵ See [Beidelman 1997](#): see also comparable material on the Kaguru's matrilineal neighbors, the Ngulu ([Beidelman 1964](#)). I mention this cultural feature because it uncannily parallels Athenian beliefs about women and pigs in the rituals of Thesmophoria, a topic I discuss later; cf. [Golden 1988](#).

¹⁶ Nietzsche rightly observed that moral and cosmological beliefs are best taught combined with strong associations with sexuality and the emotions, a point

girls are secluded inside houses and taught such lore by elder women. Much of the ritual involves pain and harassment by which, Kaguru believe, adolescents better learn. Initiates therefore earn their knowledge through privation and suffering.¹⁷ The replication of Kaguru legend, history and oral literature reinforces the authority of the elders and maintains the continuity of Kaguru culture.¹⁸ The initiates are taught songs, riddles and legends, many relating to how men and women should or should not interact with one another. Sometimes arcane language is used, though more often concepts are expressed through the imagery of everyday life which is given new and dramatic significance as these words and symbols are unpacked with new, previously hidden meanings.¹⁹

Much of this instruction is very bawdy, expressing matters in ways that Kaguru would never ordinarily speak. Each group is instructed as though the knowledge and rituals they are taught are unknown to the other gender. Yet when I interviewed Kaguru men and women, separately, each group related nearly the same songs, rituals and other information. The initiates are sworn to secrecy, warned especially not to divulge ritual secrets to outsiders and uninitiated young people. Of course, all adult Kaguru know such information and Kaguru ethnic identity is largely defined and glorified by this common body of lore and rituals.

Kaguru say that adolescent initiation is the most important and guarded feature of their culture. Yet even the uninitiated know many aspects of Kaguru symbolic and ritual life. Young people are exposed to some of this by the songs and rituals that initiating Kaguru display outside the initiation houses and at the public celebrations held in the centers of Kaguru villages when the initiates are welcomed home as adults.

Kaguru young people begin the process of learning about sexuality and adulthood early on. As children they are told riddles, songs and stories by elders at night around the hearth. These often contain the

confirmed by ethnographic research and by instances from classical Greek literature (though rejected by Plato (cf. O'Flaherty 1978).

¹⁷ cf. Schilder 1950; Morinis 1985.

¹⁸ cf. Rieff 1970:170.

¹⁹ Beidelman 1997 8, Chapter 7; cf. Precourt 1975; Niederer 1990. The unpacking of meaning in words and gestures resembles the unpacking of meaning in psychoanalysis and has similar powerful implications for initiates' awareness (Rieff 1979 79)

same symbols later elaborated upon at initiation. In this way the young learn how to think analytically about Kaguru social life and customs,²⁰ even though they are forbidden from asking adults to explain or elaborate on these often opaque stories and lore. Many of these stories contain subversive and critical insights into Kaguru social life, insights that are seen as best not openly expressed but essential to be known. Kaguru children know much about sexuality and given the close quarters of Kaguru village life, with its constant gossip, and the children's everyday tasks of tending domestic animals, they know much about interpersonal conflict and suspicion and the nature of sexuality and the body. Yet however much scattered information children may glean about sexuality and other adult activities and feelings, they are forbidden from discussing such matters or asking questions until initiation. In a way, such knowledge is secret because it is unexplained and unspoken, and children are defined as minors because they have no right to speak of such things whether they know something about them or not. Initiation confers the right to ask and speak about such matters but then in ways modulated by the etiquette and rules only adults are thought (or hoped) to apply. Initiation is therefore not just about learning secrets but learning how to speak and act about them. Such restraint may not always work, but it makes more sense with adults than children because children cannot be held jurally responsible for their actions or speech in the way that adults may be, since adults may be subject to fines and other serious punishments not visited on children.

In addition to the traditional advantages conferred by age and gender, today some Kaguru hold advantages over others on account of their acquisition of modern knowledge learned through literacy and contact with town, commerce, school and government. Kaguru consider such knowledge a resource to be exploited and guarded much like that knowledge traditionally held by elders. Despite a national government which now urges the educated to share knowledge with others, such information is often fetishized and secreted by many elite,²¹ much as traditional knowledge is protected by elders, and men and women still claim to withhold their sexual secrets from one another.

I have so far only briefly mentioned how secret, hidden knowledge is sometimes revealed during insult and verbal abuse. Yet there is one category of Kaguru who may legitimately voice that which

²⁰ see [Beidelman 1963, 1979, 1986, 1997](#), cf. [Beuchat 1965](#).

²¹ cf. [Bledsoe and Pobey 1986](#).

ordinarily should not be spoken or acted or gestured. These are Kaguru whom anthropologists describe as “joking relations.”²² These may be Kaguru from clans who own clan-lands adjoining one another, or Kaguru who are children of one’s father’s sisters and children of one’s mother’s brothers.²³ All such persons stand in ambivalent, even somewhat hostile relations. The owning clans may run into conflict over claims to territory. The cousins I mentioned are those who most strongly contend one’s rights of inheritance. Your mother’s brothers’ children contest your own matrilineal claims against those whom they make as their father’s children. (Your mother’s brother is their father.) Your father’s sisters’ children contest your claims as a father’s child against their own claims as matrilineal heirs. (Your father is their mother’s brother). Kaguru explain that such kin are inevitable competitors or even enemies because of these conflicts over allegiance and inheritance. Such “joking kin” can speak negatively about relatives in ways that others may not, and may safely expose themselves to negative supernatural forces avoided by a dead person’s matrilineal relatives. They may barge into private situations and may seize property or damage goods without incurring punishment. In short, they can speak about matters that are usually secret or unspoken and enter spaces and seize property that are ordinarily sequestered. For example, such joking kin take charge of burials and funerals, situations of considerable ritual pollution and supernatural danger. They are the major speakers at funerals where disputed inheritance is discussed and where suspicious deaths from possible witchcraft may be examined in terms of who would gain from such a death. These joking kin are not inhibited by the usual concerns about maintaining harmony within a matrilineage. They are free, even obliged, to speak out about unspoken grudges, unfulfilled obligations, disloyalty and suspected witchcraft. Ordinary kin would not dare. Joking kin are allowed, even sometimes required, to be transgressive troublemakers. They cross the boundaries of sexuality, death and property that problematize yet define much social life.

The Ancient Greeks.

Classical Greek culture and society have certain enduring features from Homeric to Athenian times, a few so enduring that some

²² see [Beidelman 1986](#): Chapter 8.

²³ cf. [Beidelman 1966, 1985](#): 127-134.

characteristics found in contemporary Greeks (and other Mediterranean) societies seem hold-overs from long ago.²⁴ Most prominent of these features are intense concern about personal and family honor and shame, concern about gender and gender separation, and conspicuous, competitive public display of status, often in order to defeat or denigrate the claims of those whose status is nearest to one's own. As Nietzsche long ago observed, classical Greeks formed a "contest society,"²⁵ what I describe as an "agonistic society."²⁶ Greek culture, like many others in the Mediterranean world, revolved around a set of insoluble quandaries. One quandary is that its members are intensely competitive in terms of achieving and maintaining personal and kin prestige, yet are able to earn such prestige only from those of their competitors least willing to concede this, those nearest them in status. Furthermore, to maintain such honor they must constantly put it at public risk. As a result Greeks are intent to conceal damaging information about themselves while they are keen to learn such information about those against whom they compete. All men who aspire to high status must assert their standing in the public arena, a scene of intense struggle and risk for status. For these complex, interrelated reasons Greeks, especially older males, are preoccupied with control, revelation and concealment of information about themselves and those closely tied to them, such as offspring and women. The Homeric literature neatly illustrates this. The Homeric world, while reflecting ideas and a way of life no longer wholly pursued in classical Athens, was "the womb of everything Hellenic."²⁷ It provided a "recital of tribal identity" comparable to the hoary traditions repeatedly invoked at initiations by Kaguru.²⁸ Even Plato's attacks on Homer derive from Plato's recognition of Homer's power as a "servant of convention" who provided a core of social education.²⁹ Indeed, it was Homer's powerful attachment of emotions to morality that Nietzsche praised and which disturbed Plato.³⁰

Here are two brief examples of revelation and secrecy from the Homeric material. The aristocratic warriors in the *Iliad* must recite their

²⁴ Pitt-Rivers 197: 1-17, 71-112; Walcot 1970: 57-119; Campbell 1964: 78-102; Williams 1993: 220-221

²⁵ 1959: 35-38; cf. Gouldner 1965: 11-13, 41-132

²⁶ Beidelman 1989.

²⁷ Nietzsche 1959: 33.

²⁸ Havelock 1963: 119, 152

²⁹ For Homer in Plato's discussions of education, see *Republic* 377d-401d; 599a-601a; Bloom 1968: 426-436.

³⁰ Helm 1976: 22-23

status, honors and pedigree before combat to ensure that they are risking their honor only against opponents of comparable or greater merit. Hector's slaughter of Patroklos, deceptively clad in Achilles' armor, generates a complex sequence of emotional problems over honor complicated by the conflated identities requiring both reidentification and revenge. In the *Odyssey*, clever Odysseus, so often willing to lie and deceive, feels compelled to divulge his real name to the Cyclops whom he has bested, even though this creates further dangers for him from Cyclops' divine kin, Poseidon. Odysseus must disclose his previously concealed identity if he is to gain any prestige from defeating the Cyclops because an anonymous and unproclaimed victory would not count.³¹

Another quandary posed in classic Greek society involves the terms of gender. Male domination was intensely associated with male honor and the perpetuation of the patrifamily, which ultimately depended on women, on both their honor and virtue and on their mysterious fertility. Greek women were ordinarily excluded from many arenas of civic life, yet their adherence to the system was vital to making it work. Repeatedly women asserted their own value and importance, voiced criticism of their subordination, and at times threatened to subvert the system, most prominently in periodic civic rituals such as Thesmophoria and Dionysian festivals (real and imagined). Women's complex, subordinate yet essential roles were manifest in myth and drama and most powerfully of all in the rituals associated with fertility as associated with Demeter and to a lesser extent with other goddesses. While the Greek Greater Mystery cult at Eleusis has received considerable attention, it cannot be properly understood outside its relation to the "Lesser Mysteries" and associated drama and myth. In some of these rituals the ceremonies were often dominated or even exclusively celebrated by women.

This quandary over gender was manifest especially in the ways personhood was defined by the roles and rights of men and women. Classical Athens provided numerous examples of the ways such personhood was asserted and contested. The public ceremonies of the city allowed the city to demonstrate its solidarity but also allowed competing individuals and their families to assert their status. Sponsorship of games, ceremonies, buildings and feasting allowed ambitious and proud aristocratic men to shine in public. Such contended

³¹ [Beidelman 1989](#).

forms of honor were not seen as disruptive, because they were grounded in civic benefit. Such honors for having provided public good had to be put at constant competitive risk to be sustained. Parallel to this public arena of civic life, every aristocratic house held an area where men could dine and drink and compete in hospitality and wit. Yet a house also held a secluded area where women were secreted, a place where female honor and shame were guarded against those outside. A house thus contained both a solid semi-public male space and a private female space concealing personal realities and complex domestic affairs. The contrast and interplay between male public honor and status and the messy realities of the hidden domestic and personal lives of women and men provided powerful contrasting themes for Greek literature, especially classical tragedy and comedy. Aristophanes' *Wasps* sharply illuminates these tensions between the public square and the domestic household,³² while his *Ladies' Day* illuminates the clash of gender interests and the parallels between Demetrian and Dionysian civic rituals that allowed for limited female transgression where women said and did what was otherwise forbidden or unspeakable.³³ Comedies and tragedies often centered on the problematical situation of women who in some ways stood outside of public life but whose occasional ritual obligations or emotions drove them into public view. In ordinary civic life the necessary rectitude of women preserved household honor, but the theater and some other civic rituals disclosed the tensions of gender where women no longer supported the men but instead subverted male authority and dignity. Yet ultimately Greek male domination and order were reasserted by uniting conflicting groups through making references to the threat of ethnic outsiders. We should recall the complex gamut of allusions to gender, ethnicity and animality publicly displayed on the Parthenon friezes proclaiming such fissions and fusions of identities for all to see.

Greek women were an especially powerful critical element in the orchestration of public speech and silence. Pericles' famous funeral address recommended that Athenian women remain reticent, even in mourning their heroic dead. Yet it was Greek women who traditionally portrayed the honorable memory of their dead men. Later Athenian leaders seeking civic solidarity tried to muffle this extravagant mourning by the women, as it seemed to threaten the male solidarity of civic life as

³² Crane 1997.

³³ Broderick 1997

well as provide a means for aristocratic households to out-do one another. Despite men's attempts at curbing women, secreting them from public view and silencing their proclamations of self, some of the most prominent and dramatic of Attic public ceremonies involved women, sometimes even to the exclusion of men, who were not allowed to witness all that the women did. Women's powerful and ambivalent roles were embodied in their prominent roles in both weddings and funerals, which were often symbolically conflated.³⁴ These were especially concentrated in the symbolic role of Persephone (Kore) whose marriage to Hades (ruler of death) was also tied to her relation to fertility and wealth (Hades was also named Plouton, wealth).³⁵ Weddings and funerals were associated with unveiling and veiling, disclosure and concealment, much as women were associated with both.³⁶ Greek women were therefore powerfully problematical and pivotal; they were not, as Detienne argues, "marginal."³⁷

These forms of liminality, of roles and activities embodying problematized moral behavior, lay at the heart of much classical Greek thinking and feeling about secrecy and the dramatic and dangerous possibilities of disclosure. This liminality took many forms: that which could not be readily spoken or that which could be spoken or done only on ritual occasions involving obscenity, role-transgression and reversal, and the blurring of social boundaries. These arenas included the Mystery cults, but also the broader range of associated activities including theater, civic rituals and festivals. Not surprisingly, common themes connecting all these were women in general, the compromised or threatened gender of men who were challenged by these women, and the rituals and activities associated with birth and death (Demeter, the mother, and Persephone, the maiden). Women also at times figured in prophecy and spirit possession and oracles (by Dionysos and by Apollo), and less directly in the problem associated with maintaining or breaking social or cosmological boundaries (often facilitated by Hermes or Dionysos).

Goddesses, especially Demeter (the Grain-Mother), Persephone (the Maiden or Kore) and Athena (the Virgin revealer of skills), figured prominently in the myths and rituals sometimes associated with concealment and secrecy. Yet the liminality of gender was reflected in

³⁴ Rehm 1994; Loraux 1998: 15-28; Blundell 1995: 162.

³⁵ Nilsson 1961: 24-26

³⁶ Rehm 1994.

³⁷ Detienne 1986: 131.

some male figures as well. Two stand out as especially suggestive. Hermes epitomized Greek notions of liminality. He was a patron of merchants, traders, heralds, messengers, craftsmen and thieves. More important, he was the mediator between the spheres of the living and that of the dead, associated with weddings and funerals, and his obscene half-form with an erect phallus, the herm, marked important boundaries. In many ways his position resembled that of the joking-kin among the Kaguru. His cleverness and deception were tied to both his role as keeper of secrets but also as mediator of information, including both desired information (crafts) and that which was more problematical (secrets and both phallic obscenity and restraint).³⁸ Kermode and Partridge both aptly remark on the English words *hermeneutics*, *hermetic*, and *hermit* being derived from complex attributes of concealment and disclosure associated with this Greek divinity. It is Hermes too who helped facilitate Persephone's return to Demeter, so important to the mysteries, and which served to conflate death and rebirth, funerals and weddings.³⁹

Greek prophets and diviners were often male. In the case of Tiresias and some other seers the ability to know and disclose secrets was related to problematic sexual knowledge and identity, an almost hermaphroditic spanning of boundaries revealing the deep connection for Greeks (and this pertains to many African cultures as well, including the Kaguru) between gender, sexuality and power.⁴⁰

The Greater Mysteries centered around Eleusis and ceremonially linked that city with Athens; it was part of a far wider complex of ritual and ceremonies.⁴¹ The rituals in turn sometimes related to festival occasions inspired by Dionysos and thus had roots common to the classic theater. Theater and masking, problematic and transgressive role-playing, Dionysiac features, extended civic awareness into a broader arena where things ordinarily socially forbidden and concealed were repeatedly manifested. Dionysos' festivals were connected to the theater but also to drunkenness, undisciplined emotion and violent expression. Dionysos was a stranger, revered yet not entirely Greek, a liminal divinity who was

³⁸ Brown 1990: 12-18, 22-27, 33-34; Rhode 1925: 542; Rosen 1991: 113, 120-121, 125; Kerényi 1986 Winkler 1990.

³⁹ I have long been struck by the uncanny parallels between Hermes and the West African Yoruba divinity Eshu-Elegba, patron of markets, deceit, divination and mischief.

⁴⁰ Delcourt 1961: 36-43; Loraux 1995: 211-226.

⁴¹ cf. Kerényi 1967; Burkert 1987; Mylonos 1961; Simon 1982: 17-37; Nilsson 1961: 42-64; Parke 1977: 55-72; Beard 1989: 114-119.

even associated with ambiguous male sexual behavior and with women (maenads) behaving aggressively like men, ferociously like animals in the wilderness, behavior secreted from men who should avoid maenads at their own peril.⁴² The Athenian dramatic stage itself was part of a segregated arena of masking, Dionysiac behavior, masks both concealing and revealing identities, portraying the unreal or a form of superior reality, not ordinarily considered bearable or fit to be witnessed, behavior expressing what ordinarily was secret and unrevealed.⁴³

Respectable women who were excluded from much of public, civic affairs enjoyed access to many festivals and indeed dominated or exclusively controlled some.⁴⁴ At such rites women often indulged in expressive acts, speech and drunkenness not otherwise ever allowed in public. These women transgressed and destabilized boundaries between genders. In such behavior an aggressive, subversive side of women ordinarily hidden was revealed and flaunted.⁴⁵

Most striking in such rites and even in some theatrical tragedy and comedy was the presence of obscenity, the exposure of what should ordinarily be hidden – unspoken, not done and not seen. Such obscenity displayed crucial transgressive sexual associations tied closely to Greek concern with fertility and an assertion of life's overwhelming continuity and strength. The Greater Mysteries at Eleusis were linked to the Lesser Mysteries held in Athens somewhat earlier in the year. The Thesmophoria, or Lesser Mysteries, emphasized obscene female speech and actions and the fierce exclusion of all men. At these festivities obscene dolls were fashioned in the shapes of male and female genitals and were associated with sexual aggression. Women were often associated with piglets related to obscenity as well as fertility.⁴⁶ These themes emphasized women's undisputed power as mothers, as unfathomable (secret) fertile beings whose capacities to provide men with offspring gave them a power and dangerousness that challenged men's public order.⁴⁷

⁴² Detienne 1989.

⁴³ Cassidy 1991; Goldhill 1987: 75-76; Kraemer 1979: 77-78; Peirce 1993: 237, 259-260; Segal 1978; Seaford 1981: 257; 1993: 121-125; Schleier 1993: 90; 1995: 124-125, 135; Simon 1983: 32-33; Clay 1982; Detienne 1986: 77-78; 1989; Nilsson 1969: 62-63; 1964: 91, 108-109.

⁴⁴ Johansen 1975

⁴⁵ Versnel 1992; Carson 1990: 135-137; Simms 1998: 122

⁴⁶ Olender 1990; Golden 1988; Detienne 1986; Keuls 1985: 349-379, 353-357.

⁴⁷ Foley 1994: 112-118; Kraemer 1979: 57

The cult of Demeter was central to both the Greater and Lesser Mysteries. All these ceremonies referred to a myth in which obscenity played a pivotal role. The goddess Demeter (the Mother) was mourning and distraught because she had been deprived of her daughter Persephone (Kore, the maiden) who had been kidnapped into the subterranean sphere of death where she was later wed to its god, Hades. Beside herself, Demeter had angrily endangered all life on earth by cutting off the spring and its fertile bounty. Lost in gloom, she sat disconsolate until she was distracted and moved to life-affirming laughter by the verbal sexual obscenity of her attendant Iambe and by the gestural sexual obscenity of her attendant Baubo. These servants said, did and showed what ordinarily should not be said, done or shown. Laughter provided the vital empowering tonic to Demeter who then took new heart to regain her daughter from Hades (with Hermes as the concerned gods' emissary).⁴⁸ With the Maiden returned, Demeter restored fertility to the earth. Before Demeter arranged her daughter's "rebirth" from death's realm, she had been frustrated when she tried to manage a rebirth of a mortal, Demophoon, into immortality in repayment to her mortal protectress at Eleusis, the boy's mother. (The ignorant interference of the boy's mother prevented this). This lesser incident in the myth parallels the later rebirth of Persephone and further underscores the myth's pervasive theme of life's transitions and the conflation of death and fertility. Before she laughed, Demeter had resembled a Dionysian maenad thrown into a spasm of masculine violence and wildness hostile to what was life-giving and creative.⁴⁹ Like actions in some Greek theater, such obscenity revealed what could not otherwise be shown or said.⁵⁰ Such obscenity made secret and disturbing features about feeling and the body no longer hidden and secret but "doorless" (*athyra*) in that obscenity transgressed conventional boundaries. Such breaking of boundaries was often the special Dionysian domain of women. Like the divinities Demeter and Persephone (and like Kaguru joking-kin), such sexual medial figures linked the hidden world of the dead and fertility with the world of the living using blatant exposure of unnerving realities of sexuality and violence. Like the transitions of marriage and death, both profound and sometimes violent, as with

⁴⁸ cf. Henderson 1975: 2-8, 13-18; Olender 1990; Zeitlin 1981; 1982; Winkler 1990: 193-194, 205-208; Foley 1994: 65-97; Golden 1988; Parke 1977: 82-88; Detienne 1986.

⁴⁹ Schleier 1993: 103.

⁵⁰ cf. Clay 1982: 281-296.

Persephone, the Mysteries involved both veiling (concealment) and unveiling (disclosure) of what under other circumstances would be hidden or revealed. It is in this sense that Redfield has viewed Greek marriage as more than a *rite de passage*; for him it is a central Greek symbolic cosmological encapsulation of profound domains of generative power.⁵¹ It also played on Greek women's associations with the concealing yet yielding fertile earth.⁵²

The Eleusinian Mysteries were the most famous and prominent of a wide range of Greek rituals and festivals involving mystery and secrecy but also with implication of fertility and conceptual transformations.⁵³ These were said to be secret since those who had been initiated were forbidden to discuss what had occurred, even with fellow initiates. Yet we know that the general features of the rites were not difficult to learn, being open to both men and women and even to slaves and non-Greeks so that at any time thousands of adults in Greece and even elsewhere had been initiated and therefore must have known them.⁵⁴ Rohde was right to observe long ago that there was no real secret.⁵⁵ We know that the Mysteries involved many of the symbols and ideas common to other festivals associated with Demeter and her daughter. We also know that the Eleusinian Mysteries were tied to ancient legends and that the site of the shrine at Eleusis incorporated sacred space embodied in rocks and caves which had long been revered even before the Mysteries, presumably on account of powers associated with the earth itself.⁵⁶ Such ideas must have been more basic than any mystery. The first parts of the Eleusinian Mysteries were open to the view of everyone along the processional route and near the shrine. Demeter and Persephone were the main revered figures, and their significance was well known to all Greeks. Many of the rites must already have been familiar to everyone, since they resembled the popular civic festival of Thesmophoria; pigs were sacrificed, and obscenity, abuse and joking often surrounded the celebrants.⁵⁷ All of the themes of Eleusis therefore

⁵¹ Redfield 1990:115.

⁵² Loraux 2000: 83-94

⁵³ Rahner's long study associating these and other Greek beliefs and practices to Christianity is grotesquely misconceived but fascinating (1971).

⁵⁴ Rohde 1925: 221-222; Blundell 1995:161; Parke 1977: 55-72; Mylonos 1961: 224

⁵⁵ Rohde 1925: 222.

⁵⁶ Dietrich 1986: 35, 70.

⁵⁷ Mylonos 1961: 201, 256; Henderson 1975: 16.

resonated in myriad Greek experience. In later times some masculinization of the festival was attempted by also featuring Triptolemos, a male favorite of Demeter credited with giving men the art of cultivating grain and believed by some to be one of the judges of the dead. Yet Triptolemos' role in the cult never surpasses the formidable power of its female figures, Demeter and Persephone, and therefore this seems a weak accretion to the myth and rituals.

We know then that the Mysteries were not to be spoken about (*arrheta*, close-mouthed), though this hardly means that they were ineffable, as Burkert claims.⁵⁸ The word mystery itself derives from muster (close-mouthed).⁵⁹ We know that a few Greeks were actually prosecuted for insulting the Mysteries, but this seems to refer to parodying the rites, not actually revealing what surely was common knowledge.⁶⁰ Referring to such taboos, Bremmer cites Strabo (10.30) who described some sacred matters as secret because they are too holy to be brought into the open.⁶¹ As social theory this is unhelpful. In fact, Strabo argued that secrecy itself is what induces a sense of reverence, for the divine eludes perception by the senses. I know of no way that the sacred can be fathomed except through the senses, but mystification of that fact is typical of the religious obfuscation that characterizes most belief in the supernatural. As William Robertson Smith wrote over a century ago, religious concepts must be “wrapped in the husk of a material embodiment” and “a ritual must also remain materialistic, even if its materialism is disguised under the cloak of mysticism.”⁶² Strabo's view of matters seems to parallel that of the Kaguru: what is secret and sacred is not readily spoken, but it may be well-known. Otherwise such injunctions would not be necessary. Something is not hidden because it is a mystery, but rather not speaking of something mystifies it.

⁵⁸ Bremmer 1995: 72-28; Burkert 1985: 228-229, 240-246, 276-277, 285-286; 1987: 7-8, 69, 90-91.

⁵⁹ Partridge 1958: 423-424.

⁶⁰ Martin 1987: 60-61.

⁶¹ Bremmer 1987: 60-61.

⁶² Smith 1894: 437, 439

Conclusions

The idea of secrecy relates to what is hidden, to what is separated from everyday life.⁶³ Yet secrets are myriad in their meanings and significance, so that generalizations about them are tricky.⁶⁴

Secrets are inevitable in all social relations: they are products of complex social interactions and strategies. Without holding secrets and yet also without gaining knowledge of them, people will find social affairs become difficult to manage.⁶⁵ The fact that secrets are concealed leads to the fact that they almost always are eventually disclosed.⁶⁶ To know of a secret is usually to feel a need to learn it. Yet revealing information need not put an end to a sense of mystery or even secrecy. Kermode has shown how reticence and concealment often enhance the force of narrative, and the seeming impenetrability of texts may generate a seductive aura.⁶⁷ In the case of many religious rites and symbols, the very act of concealment and the associated ado convey a sense of power and excitement. Indeed, obfuscation often seems an integral part of many secreted materials (this is especially the case with religious exegesis).⁶⁸ Yet disclosure often simply reveals more levels of concealment.⁶⁹ The archaic language of some religious material, especially secret knowledge, adds to its hiddenness and mystery.⁷⁰ Finally, secrecy can create solidarity among those who share it, as well as exclusion of those unfit to know it, or at the least unfit to show publicly that they know it. It can also provide a sense of social continuity by strongly asserting that social memory is sufficiently sequestered that it is protected and secluded from tampering.⁷¹ It can even be employed as a social resource by a person or group whereby claims to superior merit or power may be made.⁷²

Following the lead of Mauss, Bellman provides one of the best recent accounts of secrecy for an African society and repeatedly shows

⁶³ Partridge 1958: 600.

⁶⁴ Goffman 1959: 141-143

⁶⁵ Bonanich 1976

⁶⁶ Simmel 1950: 329-334; Bok 1982: 16; Nedelman 1993: 3-6, 11-12

⁶⁷ Kermode 1988: 155-156.

⁶⁸ Bole 1987: 3. It is probably this that make many religious scholars' accounts of secrets of little value (Wolfson 1999)

⁶⁹ Kelber 1988: 1; Moore 1976: 368.

⁷⁰ Brandt 1980.

⁷¹ Kelber 1988: 5-7.

⁷² Luhmann 1989: 146

that the secret is defined not by its content but by the social procedures by which it is concealed or revealed.⁷³ Except for Middleton's helpful study (1987), Bellman's work (1981, 1984) is the only really detailed African ethnographic account of secrets.

I draw several points from this comparative exercise. First, true secrets may well exist, but many notions (if not most) that are termed "secret" are actually unspoken but commonly known, especially in the case of earlier societies. Second, social activities, whether they are rituals or customary, everyday behavior, make sense only in terms of broader social beliefs, values, and activities. They are what Mauss termed "total social phenomena." The meanings of symbols and acts make sense in terms of their relations to a wide range of ordinary habits.⁷⁴ One example of such exegesis in recent classical studies illustrates this approach. Pierce tries to consider sacrifice (*thysia*) in all its complex meanings by reviewing all the contexts of its use.⁷⁵ In the case of the Mysteries, what are sometimes presented as special and dramatic situations are actually not as extraordinary as some assert. Indeed, if they were not embedded in the symbols and experiences of everyday life, they would not have the appeal and force that they command. It is in a narration and analysis of the underlying themes in everyday affairs, in the quotidian, and the tensions and problems embodied in them, that we are most likely to find the keys to understanding these more dramatic concerns. Teasing out these underlying cultural features of a society will illuminate these seemingly more special and prominent occasions.

The African Kaguru and the ancient Greeks appear as far apart socially, culturally and historically as any two societies. Yet repeatedly they reveal some striking similarities of concern and cultural themes. Secrecy, gender and the irreconcilable tensions of social life as they are found in dividing households set in communities also emphasizing unity have much in common wherever they are found. The Eleusinian Mysteries may have changed over the centuries. Yet the various cults and festivals tied to gender, fertility, marriage and death, and the tensions between households and communities involved with all of these social practices, form common threads which united all the phases of society in which the Mysteries were held. This is because such cults and festivals were so deeply concerned with kinship and domesticity, the sectors of

⁷³ Bellman 1984: 16-17, 144; cf. Urban 1998: 210.

⁷⁴ Mauss 1979: 10; Wittgenstein n.d. 3; Nieder 1990.

⁷⁵ Pierce 1993.

152 Electronic Antiquity 12.1

social life which all along provide the glue for such societies' survival. In this, at least, the African and earlier Greek materials illuminate one another.

WORKS CITED⁷⁶

- Achebe, C. 1962 *Things Fall Apart* (1958). London: Heinemann.
- Allen, J. 1985. "The Category of the Person: A Reading of Mauss' Last Essay." In M. Carrithers, S. Collins and S. Lukes, ed.s, *The Category of the Person*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Armstrong, R.P. 1976. "Tragedy Greek and Yoruba: A Cross-Cultural Perspective." *Research in African Literatures* 7:23-43.
- Beard, C. 1989. "Festivals and Mysteries." In C. Berard, C. Brom et al., ed.s, *A City of Images*. Trans. by D. Lyons. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Pp. 109-120
- Beidelman, T.O. 1963. "Some Kaguru Riddles." *Man* 63: 158-166.
- _____, 1964. "Pig (*Ngulwe*): An Essay on Ngulu Sexual Symbolism and Ceremony." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 20: 359-392.
- _____, 1966. "*Utani*: Some Kaguru Notions of Death, Sexuality and Affinity." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 22: 354-380.
- _____, 1971. *The Kaguru. A Matrilineal People of East Africa*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; reprinted 1983, Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.
- _____, 1979. "Kaguru Oral Literature: Discussion" *Anthropos* 74: 497-529.
- _____, 1986. *Moral Imagination in Kaguru Modes of Thought*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; reprinted 1993, Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- _____, 1989. "Agonistic Exchange: Homeric Reciprocity and the Heritage of Simmel and Mauss." *Cultural Anthropology* 4: 26-59.
- _____, 1993. "Secrecy and Society: The Paradox of Knowing and the Knowing of Paradox." in M. Nooter, ed., *Secrecy: African Arts of Concealment and Ambiguity*. New York: Museum of African Art. Pp. 41-47.
- _____, 1997. *The Cool Knife. Imagery of Gender, Sexuality, and Moral Education in Kaguru Initiation Ritual*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Bellman, B.L. 1981. "The Paradox of Secrecy." *Human Studies* 4:1-24.

⁷⁶ In the case of the Greek material I have cited a wide range of publications to indicate that the issues I mention have been of wide and long concern to scholars. This does not signify my agreement with the sources. For example, I find little to praise in the works of Detienne, Loraux, Burkert and Keuls.

- _____, 1984. *The Language of Secrecy: Symbols and Metaphors in Poro Ritual*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Beuchat, P.D. 1965 [1957]. "Riddles in Bantu." In A. Dundes, ed., *The Study of Folklore*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall. Pp. 183-305
- Bishop, N. 1993. "A Nigerian Version of a Greek Classic: Soyinka's Transformation of The *Bacchae*." In J. Gibbs and B. Lindfors, ed.s, *Research on Wole Soyinka*. Trenton: Africa World Press. Pp. 115-125.
- Bledsoe, C.H. and K.M. Pobey. 1986. "Arabic Literacy and Secrecy among the Mende of Sierra Leone." *Man* 21 (n.s.): 202-226.
- Bloom, A. 1968. *The Republic of Plato*. New York: Basic Books.
- Blundell, S. 1995. *Women in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bobrick, E. 1997. "The Tyranny of Roles: Playacting and Privilege in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousae*." In G.W. Dobrov, ed., *The City as Comedy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Pp. 177-197
- Bok, S. 1982. *Secrecy: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Bolle, K. W. 1987. "Secrecy in Religion." In K.W. Bolle, ed., *Secrecy in Religion*. Leiden: E.J. Brill. Pp. 1-24.
- Bonacich, P. 1976. "Secrecy and Solidarity." *Sociometry* 39: 200-208.
- Brandt, E. A. 1980. "On Secrecy and the Control of Knowledge: Taos Pueblo." In S.K. Tefft, ed., *Secrecy*. New York: Human Sciences Press. Pp. 123-146.
- Bremmer, J.N. 1995. "Religious Secrets and Secrecy in Classical Greece." In H.G. Kippenberg and G.G. Stroumsa, ed.s, *Secrecy and Concealment. Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, E.J. Brill, Leiden. Pp. 61-78.
- Brown, N. O. 1990 [1947]. *Hermes the Thief*. Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Press.
- Burkert, W. 1985. *Greek Religion*. Trans. by J. Raffan. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- _____, 1987. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Campbell, J.K. 1964. *Honour, Family and Patronage*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Carson, A. 1990. "Putting Her in Her Place: Women, Dirt, and Desire." In Halperin et al., pp. 135-169.

- Cassidy, W. 1991. "Dionysos, Ecstasy, and the Forbidden." *Historical Reflections* 17: 24-44.
- Clay, D. 1982. "Unspeakable Words in Greek Tragedy." *American Journal of Philology* 103: 278-298.
- Crane, G. 1997. "Oikos and Agora. Mapping the Polis in Aristophanes' *Wasps*." In G.W. Dobrov, ed., *The City as Comedy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Pp. 198-229.
- Delcourt, M. 1961 [1958]. *Hermaphrodite*. London: Studio Books (1961); Paris: Presses universitaires de France (1958).
- Detienne, M. 1986. "The Violence of Wellborn Ladies: Women in the Thesmophoria." In M. Detienne and J.P. Vernant, ed.s, *The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks*. Trans. by P. Wissing. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1986); Paris: Gallimard (1979). Pp. 129-147
- _____, 1989 *Dionysos at Large*. Trans. by A. Goldhammer. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Dietrich, B.C. 1986. *Tradition in Greek Religion*. New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Dodds, E.R. 1951. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Finley, M.I. 1962 [1954]. *The World of Odysseus*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- _____, 1975 [1972]. "Anthropology and the Classics." pp 102-119 in *The Uses and Abuses of History*, Viking, New York.
- Foley, H., ed. 1994. *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Golden, M. 1988. "Male Chauvinists and Pigs." *Echos du Monde Classique* 32: 1-12.
- Goldhill, S. 1987. "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology." *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107: 58-76.
- Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Gouldner, A. W. 1965. *Enter Plato. Classical Greece and the Origins of Social Theory*. New York: Basic Book.
- Halperin, D.M., J.J. Winkler and F.I. Zeitlin, ed.s. *Before Sexuality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Havelock, E. 1963. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Helm, R. M. 1975. "Plato in the Thought of Nietzsche and Augustine." In J.C. O'Flaherty, T.F. Sellner and R.M. Helm, ed.s,

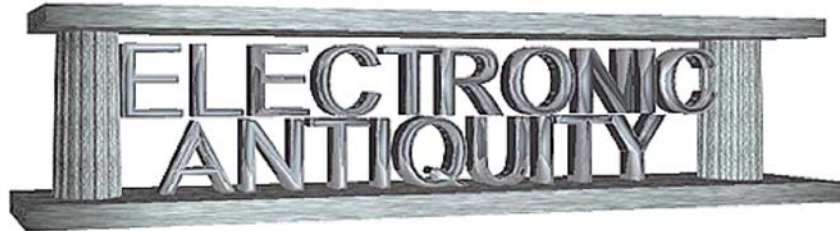
- Studies in Nietzsche and the Classic Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. pp. 16-32.
- Henderson, J. 1975. *The Maculate Muse; Obscene Language in Attic Comedy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Humphreys, S.C. 1978. *Anthropology and the Greeks*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Johansen, J.P. 1975. "The Thesmophoria as a Women's Festival." *Temenos* 11: 78-87.
- Kelbert, W.H. 1988. "Narrative and Disclosure: Mechanisms of Concealing, Revealing, and Reveiling." *Semeia* 43: 1-20.
- Kerényi, C. 1967. *Eleusis*. Bollingen Series 65.4. New York: Pantheon.
- _____, 1986 *Hermes. Guide of Souls*. Trans. by M. Stein. Dallas: Spring Publications.
- Kermode, F. 1979. *The Genesis of Secrecy. On the Interpretation Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- _____, 1988. "Anteriority, Authority and Secrecy: A General Comment." *Semeia* 43: 155-167.
- Keuls, E.C. 1985. *The Reign of the Phallus*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Kluckhohn, C. 1961. *Anthropology and the Classics*. Providence: Brown University Press.
- Kraemer, R.S. 1979. "Ecstasy and Possession: The Attraction of Women to the Cult of Dionysos." *Harvard Theological Review* 72: 55-80.
- Lloyd, G.E. 1978. "Classicists and Their Kin." *Times Literary Supplement* (October 27): 1266.
- _____, 1979 *Magic, Reason and Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Loraux, N. 1995. *The Experiences of Tiresias*. Trans. by P. Wissing. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- _____, 1998 *Mothers in Mourning*. Trans. by C. Pache. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- _____, 2000 *Born of the Earth*. Transl. by S. Stewart. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Luhrman, T.M. 1989. "The Magic of Secrecy." *Ethos* 17: 131-165.
- Marett, R.R. (ed.) 1966 [1908]. *Anthropology and the Classics*. New York: Barnes and Noble.
- Martin, L. H. 1987. *Hellenistic Religions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____, 1995. "Secrecy in Hellenistic Religious Communities." In H.G. Kippenberg and G.G. Stroumsa, ed.s, *Secrecy and*

- Concealment. Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*. Leiden: E.J. Brill. Pp. 101-121.
- Mauss, M. 1979. "A Category of the Human: The Notion of Person, the Notion of Self." In M. Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*. Trans. by B. Brewster. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Pp. 57-94.
- Middleton, J. 1987. "The Notion of Secrecy in Lugbara Religious Thought." In K.W. Bolle, ed., *Secrecy in Religion*, E.J. Brill, Leiden. Pp. 25-43.
- Mikalson, J.D. 1983. *Athenian Popular Religion*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Moore, S.F. 1976. "The Secret of the Men: A Fiction of Chagga Initiation and the Relation to the Logic of Chagga Symbolism." *Africa* 46: 357-370.
- Morinis, A. 1985. "The Ritual Experience of Pain and the Transformation of Consciousness in Ordeals of Initiation." *Ethos* 13: 150-174.
- Mylonos, G.E. 1961. *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nedelmann, B. 1995. "Geheimhaltung, Verheimlichung, Geheimnis – soziologische Vorüberlegung." In H.G. Kippenberg and G.G. Stroumsa, ed.s, *Secrecy and Concealment. Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*. Leiden: E.J. Brill. Pp. 1-16.
- Niederer, A. 1990. "Compartmentalizes ritualizes au quotidien." *Ethnologia Europaea* 20: 151-160.
- Nietzsche, F. 1959. "From Homer's Contest (1872)." In W. Kaufmann, trans. and ed., *The Portable Nietzsche*. New York: Viking Penguin. Pp. 32-39.
- Nilsson, M.P. 1961. [1940] *Greek Folk Religion*. New York: Harper Torchbook.
- _____, 1964. *A History of Greek Religion*, revised edition (1953). New York: Norton.
- O'Flaherty, J.C. 1976. "Socrates in Haman's Socratic Memorabilia and Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy." In J.C. O'Flaherty, T.F. Sellner and R.M. Helm, eds., *Studies in Nietzsche and the Classical Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Pp. 114-143.
- Olender, M. 1990. "Aspects of Baubo: Ancient Texts and Contexts." In Halperin et al., pp. 83-113.

- Parke, H.W. 1977. *Festivals of the Athenians*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Partridge, E. 1958. *Origins. A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Peirce, S. 1993. "Death, Revelry, and Thysia." *Classical Antiquity* 12: 219-260.
- Pitt-Rivers, J. 1977. *The Fate of Shechem or the Politics of Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Precourt, W. 1975. "Initiation Ceremonies and Secret Societies as Educational Institutions." In R.W. Brislin, S. Bochner and W.J. Lonner, ed.s, *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Learning*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications. Pp. 131-150.
- Rahner, H. 1971. *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*. Trans. by B. Battershaw. New York: Biblio and Tannen.
- Redfield, J. 1990. "From Sex to Politics: The Rites of Artemis Triklaria and Dionysos Aisymnetes at Patras." In Halperin et al., pp. 115-134.
- _____, 1991 "Classics and Anthropology." *Arion* third series 1, No. 2: 5-23.
- Rehm, R. 1994. *Marriage and Death*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rieff, P. 1977. *Freud: The Mind of a Moralist*, third edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rohde, E. 1972 [1893] *Psyche*. Trans. by W.B. Hillis. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press.
- Rosen, S. 1991. "Suspicion, Deception, and Concealment." *Arion* third series 1, No. 2: 112-127.
- Schilder, P. 1959. *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Schlesier, R. 1993. "Mixtures of Masks: Maenads as Tragic Models." In T.H. Carpenter and C.A. Faraone, ed.s. *Masks of Dionysus*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Pp. 89-114.
- _____, 1995. "Maskierte Text, Religiöse Anspielung und Verheimlichung in der griechischen Tragödie." In G. Kippenberg and G.G. Stroumsa, ed.s, *Secrecy and Concealment. Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*. Leiden: E.J. Brill. Pp. 123-138.
- Seaford, R. 1981. "Dionysiac Drama and the Dionysiac Mysteries." *Classical Quarterly* 31: 252-275.
- _____, 1993 "Dionysos as Destroyer of the Household: Homer, Tragedy and the Polis." In Carpenter and Faraone, pp. 135-146.

- Segal, C. 1978. "The Menace of Dionysos: Sex Roles and Reversals in Euripides' *Bacchae*." *Arethusa* 11: 185-202.
- Senanu, K.E. 1980. "The Exigencies of Adaptation: The Case of Soyinka's *Bacchae*." In J. Gibbs, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*. Washington D.C.: Three Continents Press. Pp. 108-115.
- Simmel, G. 1950 [1908]. "The Secret and the Secret Society." In K.H. Wolf, trans. and ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe: Free Press. Pp. 305-376.
- Simms, R.R. 1998. "Mourning and Community at the Athenian Adonia." *The Classical Journal* 93: 121-141.
- Simon, E. 1983. *Festivals of Attica: an archaeological commentary*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Smith, W.R. 1894 [1889] *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, second edition. London: J.S. Black.
- Soyinka, W. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Urban, H.B. 1998. "The Torment of Secrecy: Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Esoteric Traditions." *History of Religions* 37: 209-248.
- Versnel, H.S. 1992. "The Festival for Bona Dea and the Thesmophoria." *Greece and Rome* 39: 31-55.
- Walcot, P. 1970. *Greek Peasants, Ancient and Modern*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Warren, C. and B. Laslett. 1980. "Privacy and Secrecy: A Conceptual Comparison." In S.K. Tefft, ed., *Secrecy*. New York: Human Sciences Press. Pp. 25-34.
- Williams, B. 1993. *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Winkler, J.J. 1989. "Phallos Politikos: Representing the Body in Athens." *Differences* 2 (Spring): 29-45.
- _____, 1990 "The Laughter of the Oppressed: Demeter and the Gardens of Adonis." In Halperin et al., pp. 188-209.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1972. *Lectures and Conversations on aesthetics, psychology, and religious belief, Compiled from notes taken by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees and James Taylor*, C. Barrett, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wolfson, E.R. 1999. "Introduction." In E.R. Wolfson, ed., *Rending the Veil. Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, New York University Annual Conference in Comparative Religions. New York: Seven Bridges Press. Pp. 1-10.

- Zeitlin, F.I. 1981. "Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousae*." In H.P. Foley, ed., *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*. New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers. Pp. 169-217.
- _____, 1982. "Cultic Models of the Female: Rites of Dionysus and Demeter." *Arethusa* 15: 129-157.



GEOMETRY AND GRAMMAR OF MYSTERY: ANCIENT MYSTERY RELIGIONS AND WEST AFRICAN SECRET SOCIETIES

William P. Murphy, Northwestern University
wmurphy@northwestern.edu

Introduction

Mystery is the “known unknown.”¹ This is a short definition but rich in analytical possibilities. It evokes wonder – intellectual as well as religious – at the social fact of knowing and not knowing at the same time. It raises the puzzle of trying to understand a cultural and social world in which one function of what is known is to communicate a sense of what is not known. What is known is the presence of a mystery in the world. What is not known is the full content of the mystery.

Mystery is not a natural fact. It is a social and cultural phenomenon. The “idea of mystery...does not come” to human beings “as given” by nature; human beings have “forged this idea as well as its contrary.”² Mystery is constructed from the meanings a society assigns to the “known unknown.” These meanings are often institutionalized

¹ The philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan links his definition of mystery as the ‘known unknown’ to a cognitive theory of the “unrestricted openness of our intelligence and reasonableness” (Lonergan 1970:546-549). In this sense of the unrestricted questioning of the human spirit, Lonergan (1970:546) conceives human beings as “by nature oriented into mystery.” In contrast, the analysis in this essay adds further conceptualizations of mystery as an indexical order of meanings, a social construction, and a political resource.

² Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 26.

through social practices of secrecy, which constitute something as mysterious by setting it apart through purposive concealment. In religion, secret rituals are especially important in creating the aura of being “set apart” from everyday life. The doctrinal content of religious “mystery” includes particular beliefs about the power and presence of deities (or other supernatural forces) in the world, but the aura of this power and presence is enacted in secret rituals, where the social fact of mysterious powers is produced, and the source of those powers alluded to.

An illuminating historical case of the relationship between mystery and secrecy are the mystery religions of Ancient Greek and Rome. Secrecy was a constitutive element in these institutions, as Burkert emphasizes in his classic overview of mystery religions: “secrecy was a necessary attribute.”³ Secrecy, however, is not a sufficient criterion for categorizing mystery religions because not all secret cults in classical Greek and Rome were mystery religions (Burkert 1987:7). Secrecy, nevertheless, was a fundamental institutional feature of all mystery religions. The presence of “mystery” was revealed in secret rituals, and this ritual dimension is expressed in the etymology of the Greek words referring to these religious institutions – *mysteria*, *myein*, *myesis* – which conveys the idea of ‘initiation’.⁴ The idea of initiate is connoted by the idea of “the closing of the lips or eyes” which derives from the semantics of the “word mystery (*mysterion* in Greek)” which “derives from the Greek verb, *myein*, ‘to close’.”⁵ The “initiate, or *mystes* (plural, *mystai*) into the *mysterion* was required to keep his or her lips closed and not divulge the secret that was revealed at the private ceremony. “Vows of silence were meant to ensure that the initiate would keep the holy secret from being revealed to outsiders.”⁶ For comparative purposes, it is useful to note that West African secret societies are constituted by similar norms of silence – codified, for example, among the Kpelle of Liberia, in the phrase *ífa mo* (‘you should not speak it’).⁷ Mystery and secrecy are mutually constituted in these social practices of initiation and silence: what is concealed from outsiders and revealed to initiates is the mystery, and noticeable silence about those mysteries in the social life of the village, paradoxically, evokes their presence.

Burkert’s definition of his study of the ancient mysteries as “a

³ Burkert 1987: 7.

⁴ Burkert 1987: 7.

⁵ Meyer 1987: 4

⁶ Meyer 1987: 4

⁷ Bellman 1975: 15-16.

comparative phenomenology of ancient mysteries”⁸ is expanded here by integrating a phenomenology of secrecy with a geometry of secrecy. The latter topic concerns the relational properties constitutive of secrecy practices in mystery religions. The most general relational property, for example, is the dialectic of form and content, which implies that the content of secrecy is not as consequential as the social relationships and cultural meanings constituted by the fact of secrecy.

Focusing on form rather than content became definitional for the discipline of sociology at the turn of the 20th century, as conceptualized by Georg Simmel, whose classic 1908 essay on secrecy became an exemplar of this distinction.⁹ For Simmel, what was sociologically important about secrecy practices is not the exotic content of the secret but the particular forms of social and cultural relations created by the fact of secrecy, such as knowing and not knowing, inclusion and exclusion, domination and subordination, and the visible and invisible. His approach resembles a geometrical method insofar as the analysis formalizes relational properties in cultural content and social action of secrecy in different empirical cases. “A parallel [to social life] is found in the fact that the same geometric forms may be observed in the most heterogeneous materials and that the same material occurs in the most heterogeneous spatial forms.”¹⁰

A geometrical method provides a heuristic for discovering general patterns in the historical and ethnographic material of ancient mystery religions and West African secret societies.¹¹ Ancient mystery

⁸ Burkert 1987: 4.

⁹ The French founder of modern sociology, Emile Durkheim, also emphasized social form over the material content of human behavior, as defining the special methodology of sociology.

¹⁰ Simmel 1971: 26.

¹¹ Scholarly caveats arise when efforts are made to compare apparently disparate social and historical phenomena, such as Ancient mystery religions and West African secret societies. As an anthropologist with expertise on West African cultures and societies, I lack the mastery of source material possessed by scholars of classical historiography and archeology. Nevertheless, crossing disciplinary boundaries in this way can also be intellectually productive because – to borrow a quote the sociologist Weber when he ventured into studies of Ancient Judaism – the scholarly outsider using some of the same source data as the expert insider may “emphasize some things [issues] differently than usual” and ask different questions (Weber 1952:425). The hope of such interdisciplinary excursions is to suggest some new hypotheses that might lead

religions, for example, are typically organized around rituals, and initiations into those rituals. Secrecy, which is an important constituent in most of these rituals, creates an opposition between one who knows and one who does not know. This opposition provides the foundation for social hierarchy as well as reciprocity, a formula that Simmel emphasizes in his study of secrecy: “the relationship between the one who has the secret and another who does not” and “the reciprocal relations between those who share it [the secret] in common.”¹²

These relations are a source of many fundamental questions concerning religious mystery. Who possess special knowledge of a mystery, who are initiated into this knowledge, who are left out of this knowledge and initiation, and what political and economic advantages accrue to those with privileged knowledge? The relationship between social hierarchy and privileged knowledge is exemplified by the patriarchal dimensions of the mystery religions, a dimension emphasized by Bultmann: the “community was organized on a hierarchical pattern, the priest or mystagogue being the father of the community.”¹³ This insight signals the problem of unraveling the relationship between an ideology of patriarchy and the privileged control of ritual secrets and knowledge of mystery. It also implies a broader social theory of knowledge concerned with the relations of social hierarchy, social control, and power to differential access to knowledge.

Social status, moreover, is justified by claims of knowing something about a mystery – including, knowing that there is a mystery – and knowing how to initiate others into the mystery. Such claims, in turn, are made meaningful and palpable through the authoritative control of the rituals and symbols of the religion. Mystery is a cultural performance and communicative practice through which the social fact and control of the “unknown” is made present. The meaning in those performances and practices has a grammar, in Wittgenstein’s sense of a sequence of utterances (and nonverbal signs) as moves of meaning in communication. Studying the grammar of mystery follows a phenomenological style of bringing “words [and concepts] back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”¹⁴

Together Wittgenstein’s grammatical method and Simmel’s

to both general theoretical insights and new insights into particular historical and ethnographic cases.

¹² Simmel 1950: 345.

¹³ Bultmann 1956: 157.

¹⁴ Wittgenstein 1958: 48.

geometrical method provide an integrated analytical toolkit for examining the key question of this essay: how is the institution of mystery constituted by the geometrical forms of secrecy, and produced by the grammar of communicating the meanings of the “known unknown.”

Secrecy and Mystery as Sociological Types

Various kinds of comparative analysis are characteristic of the scholarly literature on ancient mystery religions: for example, Burkert’s study of the “traits of identity maintained through continuous tradition [about a thousand years]...in studying the ancient mystery cults”;¹⁵ Meyer’s discussion of the origin of ancient mystery religions in “agrarian festivals” and the idea of a “cycle of nature related directly to human life”;¹⁶ and Burkert’s concern for the “similarities between Christian worship and the mysteries.”¹⁷ Bultmann shares Burkert’s concern with similarities, but as a method for identifying differences. The mystery religions – and other Hellenistic religious forms of Greek paganism -- are useful for comparison because only “by paying attention to what Christianity has in common with these other movements shall we be able to discern its difference from them.”¹⁸ Such comparisons clarify, moreover, the syncretism between Christian mysticism and the mystery religions.¹⁹

Other ethnographic and historical cases of secrecy in religious practices add to the cross-cultural range of comparison. One obstacle to a broader comparative institutional analysis linking secrecy and mystery, however, is the disciplinary boundaries generated by particular academic vocabularies. Social institutions labeled in particular ways by disciplinary conventions can obscure commonalities and patterns among institutions designated by very different names. For example, a scholar adopting a broader comparative view of “Ancient Mystery Religions,” for example, could argue that these institutions might just as easily be called “ancient secret societies” or “ancient secret cults” to mark the centrality of secrecy in these institutions. In the scholarly literature, they are sometimes designated in these terms: “their rites and ceremonies

¹⁵ Burkert 1987: 4.

¹⁶ Meyer 1987: 6-7.

¹⁷ Burkert 1987: 3.

¹⁸ Bultmann 1956: 11; cf. Bolle 1987.

¹⁹ Bultman 1956: 156-195.

were, partly at least, held in secret, a fact which tended to make them secret societies.”²⁰

Alternatively, “West African secret societies” could legitimately be called “West African mystery religions,” to highlight the importance of a cosmology of “mystery” constituted by the secrecy practices of these institutions. The idea of “mystery,” in fact, is an important religious notion in West African secret societies – encoded in terms and symbols communicating the meanings of ‘wonder,’ ‘awe,’ and ‘marvelous.’²¹ The semiotics of secrecy entails an aesthetics of mystery and wonder, an equation characteristic of religious practice generally.

One way to avoid the analytical shortcomings of disciplinary boundaries is to formulate the problem of secrecy (as well as mystery) as a sociological “type,” a construct which summarizes variables or structural principles defining the institutional features of that sociological phenomena. The goal of such a formulation is to stimulate generalizations about secrecy in religion that mutually illuminate similarities and differences in various cases. The technique of type analysis was made central to social science methodology in the foundational work of Weber who, like his contemporary, Simmel, sought to define and create, at the turn of the 20th century, the new discipline of sociology (or, social sciences, more broadly).²² The method logically specifies a set of institutional features as variables in an abstract model. The model, in turn, provides a heuristic or guide for examining, testing, and generalizing these features in historical and ethnographic reality.²³ Secrecy in religious life, for example, can be generalized by treating secrecy as a type of social behavior found in many social contexts. A comparative analysis of such types, as with any sociological comparative analysis, considers “contextual differences” – among historical and ethnographic cases – but strives to identify “underlying regularities.”²⁴

The underlying regularities examined in this essay are based on Simmel’s analysis of secrecy, and the variables are defined in terms of the dialectical relations he formalizes. For example, one institutional variable of a secret society is inclusion, namely, members are included in the group because they are taught the secret. Another variable is exclusion, namely, outsiders to the secret society are excluded because

²⁰ Bultmann 1956: 157.

²¹ Murphy 1998.

²² Weber 1978: 19 ff.

²³ see Stinchcombe 1968: 43-47.

²⁴ Evans 1995: 29.

they do not know the secret. There is also a structure of inclusion and exclusion within the secret society in which those who know the deepest secrets are separated from those who know only some of the secrets, such as new initiates. The two variables of inclusion and exclusion can thus be treated as paired variables defining a structural principle in this sociological type.

In Simmel's formulation, the "social geometry" of secret societies is specified by dialectical variables, e.g., inclusion/exclusion, concealment/revelation, and domination/subordination. These dialectical relations, in turn, define structural principles within a particular "ideal type" that provides a method for examining, in Weber's conceptualization, the "combinations, mixtures, adaptations, or modifications" of such structural principles in particular empirical cases.²⁵ This method also leads to questions about the causal factors producing changes over time in particular sociopolitical structures, which is the topic addressed in the next section.²⁶

Religion and Political Change

Secret societies, like the mystery religions, may serve the goals of central authorities in a community – whether governmental or otherwise. Alternatively, secret societies may be seen as a danger to community authorities. "Two basic types of secret societies exist: those that support the existing political leadership or, at least, are politically neutral, and those that oppose the existing political status quo."²⁷ The historical question concerns what causal factors lead to one type or the other, as well as how one type may change into the other: e.g., from supporting community authorities to opposing them. There is always the fear that a secret society, "might not one day use its energies for undesirable purposes, although they were gathered for legitimate ones."²⁸

²⁵ Weber 1978: 954.

²⁶ The problem of method points to the challenge of theorizing the various dimensions of ritual practice, by addressing the complexities of ritual as "a vehicle of history-in-the-making" -- i.e., as a cultural mechanism of "social reproduction, cultural continuity, and political authority" as well as a means for "experimental practice," "subversive poetics," and creative "transformative action" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993:xxix).

²⁷ Tefft 1980: 15.

²⁸ Simmel 1950: 376.

The rise of secrecy associations, whether religious or otherwise, is often a consequence of political and social forms of repression. Heightened political repression leads to a proliferation of secrecy practices and secret societies. Simmel's theory of secrecy emphasizes this causal relationship: "In general, the secret society emerges everywhere ...as the protection of both the defensive and the offensive in their struggle against the overwhelming pressure of central powers – by no means of political powers only, but also of the church, as well as of school classes and families."²⁹ Central authorities often believe that "secret societies threaten it" and the "secret society...appears dangerous by virtue of its mere secrecy."³⁰ Such authorities are less afraid of the esoteric ritual secrets of the secret society than the use of the secret society for political purposes. Secret ritual activity can easily turn into secret political planning. The operation of secret societies at different political levels, moreover, shapes the dialectic of acceptance and repression. For West African secret societies, for example, what is seen as a legitimate mechanism of local-level chieftaincy government³¹ can be seen also as a threat and danger to the national government.³²

The history of the mystery religions indicate how intricately the rise and fall of religious practice is linked to the sociopolitical changes in society. In general, the mystery religions flourished during the Hellenistic period because "people were seeking new and more satisfying religious experiences."³³ Before and during this period the Olympian gods which were "linked to that of the Greek polis" were transformed into gods "unworthy of the worship and devotion of thoughtful Greek people" both because of political changes in which the Greek polis was not the center of the political world and of philosophical criticism of Greek religion.³⁴ Although "the Olympian pantheon maintained itself as a religious and cultural force in the Hellenistic world...the hearts of many were turning away from Zeus and the Olympians during this period, and many searched at home and abroad for gods that would satisfy more fully their religious longings."³⁵

²⁹ Simmel 1950: 347.

³⁰ Simmel 1950: 375-376.

³¹ e.g., Eisenstadt 1959:213-214; see also Weber 1978:905.

³² see Hojbjerg 2007.

³³ Meyer 1987: 3.

³⁴ Meyer 1987: 3.

³⁵ Meyer 1987: 3.

In addition, at specific historical periods, the mystery religions flourished because they were intricately woven with government functions. One of the best cases is the Eleusian mysteries devoted to the goddess Demeter, goddess of agricultural fertility and life. Eleusian mysteries, for a time, were an important religious support for “political power in the Greek world,” demonstrated by “her [Demeter] veneration by political confederations and ruling families.”³⁶ “During the ‘rule’ of Pericles the Athenians also started to use the Eleusian Mysteries for political aims by stressing their civilizing function;” soon “the Mysteries gradually started to serve as an important means of self-identification for the Athenian citizen.”³⁷ When a secret society, like the Eleusian Mystery, becomes an important legitimating support for the government, the government becomes vulnerable to challenge through attacks on the secret beliefs and practices that contribute to its legitimacy. The “expansion of its [political function] made the Mysteries vulnerable to attacks from enemies of Athens.”³⁸

The history of the mystery religions is both a story of community and government acceptance as well as community repression and rejection. Repression was common at the height of the Roman Empire when the mystery religions were experiencing more persecution. Many cases fill the history books. In 186 B.C., there was an accusation against the mysteries of Bacchus involving “a huge conspiracy...to overthrow the existing *res publica*.”³⁹ The danger felt by the government at the time led to “repression...so cruel and radical, with some 6,000 executions at the time.”⁴⁰ The difference between esoteric ritual secrets and secret political planning is demonstrated by a case in Sicily of a leader in the mysteries of the Syrian Goddess, “who became the leader of the slave revolt that lasted from 136 to 132 B.C.” Again, “the repression was absolutely relentless.”⁴¹ (Burkert 1987:53)

The force of the new Christian religious movement also began to drive the mysteries underground and contributed to their ultimate extinction. Augustine summed up this change by proclaiming “triumphantly that Christianity had swept like a blazing fire” through the empire. Finally, the end came with “the imperial decrees of 391/392

³⁶ Bremmer 1995: 69.

³⁷ Bremmer 1995: 74, 78

³⁸ Bremmer 1995: 78

³⁹ Burkert 1987: 52.

⁴⁰ Burkert 1987: 52.

⁴¹ Burkert 1987: 53.

A.D. prohibiting all pagan cults and with the forceful destruction of the sanctuaries”; “the mysteries simply and suddenly disappeared.”⁴²

The fundamental dialectic of community acceptance and rejection in the history of secret societies is illustrated by the historical patterns of the mystery religions. Burkert’s summary of the causal link of society and religion in the history of the mystery religions can be generalized for all religions: “They were not self-sufficient sects; they were intimately bound to the social system that was to pass away.”⁴³ No religion is self-sufficient and separated from the social system. All religions become weaker or stronger -- or extinct -- depending on the way they are bound up with the sociopolitical system. This is one important historical lesson of the mystery religions.

Geometry of Secrecy

Another important lesson concerns structure rather than history. Simmel’s geometrical analysis shifted analytical attention from knowledge content per se to questions of forms of power and social hierarchy in the use of secrecy. In my own research on West African secret societies,⁴⁴ for example, the theoretical shift from content to form provided a better analytical angle for understanding structural relationships between men and women, elders and youth, high-ranking versus low-ranking kin groups, local-level versus national-level government as these relationships were constituted by secret knowledge in religious practices as well as in everyday life, e.g., secrets of the household.⁴⁵

A key premise of a formal analysis is the institutional significance of attitudes and social relations over knowledge content. A fragmentary comment by Aristotle on mystery religions illustrates the

⁴² Burkert 1987: 53.

⁴³ Burkert 1987: 53.

⁴⁴ Murphy 1980.

⁴⁵For penetrating analyzes of secrecy institutions in this area of West Africa, see Ferme 2000, on household secrets and other cultural logics of secrecy among the Mende of Sierra Leone; Hojbjerg 2007, on local secrecy and nation-state politics among the Loma of Guinea; and also the special issue of the journal “Mande Studies,” 2000, Vol. 2, which focuses on Mande secrecy institutions in West Africa). For a cross-cultural comparative overview of ritual and secrecy, see La Fontaine (1985).

sociological salience of this distinction. He “concludes that initiates into the mysteries do not learn anything,” rather they “are put in a certain state of mind.”⁴⁶ This relationship between initiation and attitude formation is often emphasized in scholarship on the ancient mysteries, which are often defined not in terms of doctrinal content but in terms of a “change of mind” achieved through secret initiation rituals: “Mysteries are initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal, secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred.”⁴⁷ The change of mind is related to a change in social relations for the initiate. For West Africa, one researcher among the Kpelle of Liberia notes this significance in his comment on secret society initiations: “the primary character of the initiation seems to be concerned with an attitude rather than with information.”⁴⁸ This attitude includes deference to the knowledge of the elders, which provides an ideological resource for controlling youth.⁴⁹

In contrast to outsider fascination with the exotic content of secrets, Simmel stresses that the secret might be quite banal, and, therefore, attention should focus on the sociopolitical and economic formations built on the fact of secrecy. The ritual content of initiations in secret societies exemplifies this principle. For example, in both West African secret societies and ancient mystery religions, one of the main secrets often concerns the details of the ritual of initiation itself. And these details, for all their religious significance, are not as exotic as the outsider may think. The mystery religions exhibit this same pattern. The secret in the Elusian mysteries is surrounded by a suspenseful ritual drama in which the secret is finally revealed: “the great, admirable, most perfect...secret” revealed “in silence” was “a reaped ear of grain.”⁵⁰ Of course, this content of the secret points to the substantive issue of agricultural productivity and the gods protecting that productivity. But it also underscores Simmel’s principle that the exotic secret is not as consequential as the social structure created by the fact of secrecy. “In comparison with other associations, it here is the passion of secrecy...which gives the group-form, depending on it, a significance that is far superior to the significance of content.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Meyer 1987: 12.

⁴⁷ Burkert 1987: 11.

⁴⁸ Welmers 1949: 241.

⁴⁹ Murphy 1980.

⁵⁰ Burkert 1987: 91.

⁵¹ Simmel 1950: 363.

Grammar of Mystery

Secrecy is socially produced not simply by concealment, but by communicating the presence of something concealed. Mystery, likewise, is produced not by what is “unknown,” but by communicating the social fact of the “unknown.” These communicative practices imply that both secrecy and mystery are “already in plain view,” to borrow Wittgenstein’s phrase for the linguistic constitution of social realities.⁵² Paradoxically, what is most hidden and mysterious in human affairs is incessantly talked about, and made public through this talk. Nothing “is concealed” and “nothing is hidden” because all the experiences engaging human beings – including the mysteries of religion -- are mediated and constituted by communicative practices, if only through a semiotics and aesthetics of allusion.⁵³

Secrecy is the institutional means for creating mystery in social life because it produces an intensified, imaginative awareness of “the unknown.” Secrecy manipulates the human sensibility that views “everything mysterious” as “something important and essential” – and, thereby, intensifies the social need “to pay attention to it [the mystery] with an emphasis that is not usually accorded to patent reality.”⁵⁴ An illuminating analogy of mystery and public attention is Foucault’s analysis of sex and discourse – i.e., the mystery of sex (both licit and illicit) produces an “incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more.”⁵⁵ The prudishness and sexual repression in some institutional domains of modern societies – e.g., religion, education, government – generates its opposite: “never more attention manifested and verbalized.” Such attention, moreover, is channeled by “centers of power,” which stimulate verbalization through public practices of social controlling what is purposively hidden from public scrutiny.⁵⁶ Analogously, in this dialectical logic, religious mysteries become worthy of attention because authoritative talk and privileged claims to knowledge make public the “unknowable” and “unsayable.”

⁵² Wittgenstein 1958: 42.

⁵³ Wittgenstein 1958: 128.

⁵⁴ Simmel 1950: 333.

⁵⁵ Foucault 1990: 18

⁵⁶ Foucault 1990 [1978]: 49.

The theology (as well as anthropology and history) of mystery reflects a “grammar” of language usage.⁵⁷ Mystery is generated by a sequence of utterances (and nonverbal signs) used to communicate the presence of the “known unknown,” and the significance of that presence. The social reality of mystery emerges through this reflexivity of meaning. And the methodological task is to pay attention, not just to the signs of mystery but to further meaningful moves in the sequence, such as the responses referring to and commenting on the signs of mystery.

The grammar of mystery is also a speech economy for communicating mystery because some individuals or groups claim more interpretive authority than others for defining mystery in the community. This relationship between authority and mystery is dramatically summed up by Dostoevsky in the words of the Grand Inquisitor of *The Brothers Karamazov*: “So we have before us a mystery which we cannot comprehend. And precisely because it is a mystery we have the right to preach it, to teach the people that what matters is...the riddle, the secret, the mystery to which they have to bow.”⁵⁸

Identifying the “riddle, the secret, the mystery” is a semiotic process. What is visible (or audible) becomes a sign of mysterious invisible forces. Ancient mystery religions provide useful case material for addressing this fundamental problem of religion, namely, understanding the role of invisible, mysterious forces in the social world. Religion can be defined by this necessary, but not sufficient attribute: “invisible forces purposely operating behind empirical events.”⁵⁹ Mystery adds the further dimension of an awareness of the presence of these forces combined with an inability to fathom their nature. Mystery, like secrecy, is built on a dialectic of the visible and invisible (or the revealed and concealed), which has a geometrical form of social worlds encapsulated by other worlds. Simmel’s sociology was preoccupied with clarifying such geometries of social form: the “secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former.”⁶⁰

The semiotics of mystery, however, follows a logic by which one world, the manifest world, points to (i.e., indexes) a second, invisible world. And the grammar of mystery is structured by authoritative responses that interpret those indexes. History and ethnography provide

⁵⁷ Wittgenstein 1958: 11ff, 43 ff.

⁵⁸ quoted in Benjamin 1968: 124.

⁵⁹ Kolakowski 1982: 16.

⁶⁰ Simmel 1950: 330.

rich documentation of the indexes marking the presence of mystery in a community. Among the Gola of West Africa, for example, “the mist and strange sounds which emanate from a certain mountain may be explained as the smoke fires and speech of a village of *djina* [spirits] who live within the mountain.”⁶¹ Making sense of such indexes within a community, however, is an authoritative practice of interpreting the mysterious forces behind events. It is also an aesthetic practice in which the wonder and mystery of those invisible forces – and the “unknown” that they represent – is interpreted as an aesthetics of power. Secrecy and the sublime converge in this aesthetics of mysterious power.⁶²

Mystery is socially controlled by managing the words, signs, and symbols of secret ritual practices in which the presence and nature of the mystery is both concealed and revealed by those in authority. Practices of concealment and revelation differentiate the sociopolitical world into those who control knowledge of the “known unknown” and those dependent on that privileged knowledge. Such differentiation generates a set of reciprocal relations – such as, the exclusion of outsiders, the stratification as well as the solidarity of insiders – which are the constituent elements of institutional secrecy. These formal elements comprise a geometrical structure of reciprocal social and cultural relations, an ontological image that clarifies the nature of institutions as built up by relational properties.⁶³ Both the geometry and grammar of this institutional form of mystery are instantiated in the sequence of meanings in communicative practice.

Ethnographic Interlude: Scenes of Mystery

This essay shifts the analytical terrain from the phenomenology of the ancient mystery religions, as in Burkert’s project,⁶⁴ to the phenomenology of mystery, as constituted by secrecy practices. The challenge is to understand the social accomplishment of mystery as performed, represented, and described. In the examples below, I illustrate this notion of accomplishing mystery in reference to particular institutional forms -- such as the Catholic church in the first example – and to particular institutional practices.

⁶¹ d’Azevedo 1962:25; see Butler 2006, on the materialization of magic.

⁶² Murphy 1998; see Nooter 1993, on secrecy and African art.

⁶³ Simmel 1971: 26.

⁶⁴ Burkert 1987: 4.

The first example is simple, but premised on a profound question: how is a child taught mystery? Like a lot of Irish Catholic children in the Boston area I was taught by Catholic nuns in elementary school. I remember how the nuns would often draw our attention to the mysterious significance of events. Something would happen in the community or in the world and the nuns would interpret it for us, bestowing it with the religious significance of mysterious and divine forces at play. Chance encounters and serendipitous events would be placed in a framework of the workings of mysterious forces. The sound of a fire engine siren passing the school might be interpreted as a reason for divine intervention. A human tragedy meant some mysterious purpose.

What I learned was an everyday hermeneutics of mystery (in addition to the usual dose of a hermeneutics of guilt, which is logically related to mystery). Our Catholic lives included, of course, the mysteries of formal rituals, such as the Eucharist. We learned that bread and wine possessed another mysterious meaning. The nuns spent a lot of time explaining the meaning of these ritual mysteries. But they seemed to have a special genius for evoking the everyday workings of mystery, which was generated out of the same cultural logic as the formal rituals and mysteries of the Catholic faith. Mystery was not set aside for Sunday worship. Mystery was an important part of understanding everyday events, and part of the everyday discourse explaining those events.

One was taught a special kind of noticing and attentiveness to signs, and the meaning of mystery in those signs. For a Catholic school child, mystery had a grammar: objects, qualities, and events were signs, and signs were communicated in a sequence in which latter signs referred to and explained previous ones. First, something happens. It has a meaning, but the meaning is unclear until it is explained with other signs. A nun would explain that the event had meaning (i.e., it is an index), and that the meaning involves a mystery of divine presence and action. Thus, the grammar of mystery as signs reflexively referring to other signs was embedded in an institutional context of a religion taught to children through the interpretive authority of those who claimed knowledge of the workings of mystery in everyday life.

In the above example, the analytical emphasis on institutional learning is not intended to minimize the human experience of mystery, as Kolakowski eloquently describes it in the conclusion to his study of the great mystical texts of different religions: “behind the cultural and psychological variety, the astonishing persistence of certain basic

themes...suggests that we have here to do with a rare human experience which is nevertheless as universal as love and fear.”⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the emphasis here is to foreground the experience of mystery as institutionalized, as given shape and meaning by the social structure of a community, as evoked in everyday discourse and embedded in social interaction. Institutional analysis means that even common experiences, such as love and fear, take a social form. Society assigns whom we can love (and whom we should hate), and defines who and what to fear (who is an enemy). Such analysis demands close attention to how something is learned – how is love, fear, or mystery learned in a society? Wittgenstein emphasizes this principle in his later work:⁶⁶ namely, to understand a concept we should examine how it is learned – in what institutional contexts and through what social conventions? This methodology was followed in the above example of a Catholic child learning mystery.

The three examples below shift to scenes from my anthropological fieldwork in West Africa, but the analytical orientation is the same: attempting to locate this human experience of mystery within particular institutional contexts, which not only shape the experience but constitute it. The secret societies in this fieldwork belong to a cluster of ethnic groups spread throughout the countries of Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Sierra Leone often known as the “Poro cluster,” a designation using the presence of the Poro secret society, in which all boys and young men are initiated, as a diagnostic trait of these ethnic groups. The importance of the Poro society – and the female secret society counterpart, called “Sande,” as well as numerous subsidiary secret societies – has led one political scientist to argue that the political systems in this West African region are best typologized by highlighting the political role of secret societies in the community.⁶⁷

For the first example, imagine you are in this West African rainforest zone, where communities interpret the rainforest as an icon of what can be heard but not seen, what can be sensed but not fully understood, and what is felt as present but hidden. The rainforest is a spiritual resource of mystery and secret society activity, in addition to serving as a natural resource for human sustenance. The workings of mystery in the rainforest, however, is socially created and

⁶⁵ Kolakowski 1982: 100.

⁶⁶ Wittgenstein 1958.

⁶⁷ Eisenstadt 1959: 213.

institutionalized within particular social organizations, as the examples below testify.

One of these organizations is the men's witch-driving society among the Kpelle of Liberia. This is a secret association of men whose task is to protect the village from witches. One day this secret society announced through the village that in the evening they would perform a ritual of cleansing the town of witches. The announcement was also a warning that all the women and uninitiated males had to stay inside their houses while this ritual was performed. So like other non-members I went into the house where I was staying and closed the shutters in my room and waited. What was unseen was, nevertheless, heard. The evening was filled with many sounds, especially beautiful were the initial sounds of a beautiful, high-pitched voice calling out a forested hill next to the village. The first call was far away, then a second call sounded closer, and a third call closer still, as if this singer and his group were proceeding to the village. There was a final call right outside the village, followed by the loud noises of what sounds like people rushing into and around the village, stomping the ground, and shouting with agitation. These noises, I was told, represent the men of the witch-driving society fighting with and driving out the witches from the village.

This scene of secrecy raises important questions about the relationship between the visual and the auditory in secrecy practices -- namely, what cannot be seen can be heard, and what is heard is intended to communicate the presence of secret activity and mysterious forces. There is a special aura of wonder and fear evoked by hearing but not seeing the activity. And those controlling the secret ritual have an interest in communicating the message that they are trafficking with extraordinary forces. The use of sound to index mystery is a performativity of power and authority, as well as knowledge.

In the next scene, imagine you are in the same rainforest but this time the sounds from the forest are heard daily, early in the morning around dawn and in the evening around dusk. It sounds like feet pounding in unison in a dance rhythm as well as voices in song, but these sounds are coming from the rainforest so you cannot see anything. What every adult in the village knows but does not talk about openly or freely is that the women's secret society -- called "Sande" -- has initiated girls and young women. The new initiates are living and learning in a sacred grove in the forest not far from the village. Sounds of singing and dancing sounds

rising from the rainforest every morning and evening mark the presence of this secret initiation.

Silence in the village about sacred and secret goings on in the rainforest adds an aura of mystery to what is heard but not seen, heard but not talked about. In this case, there is a daily mystery, when one arises in the morning, and for me, while I took my bath outside in the bath fence at dusk. These indexes are also reminders of the mysterious powers associated with the Sande society – powers, for example, to harm men (as well as women) who break Sande “law.” The aesthetic of mystery -- a fear and awe associated with the beautiful sounds arising from the rainforest – is also mixed with the normativity of mystery – i.e., with rules, regulations, and punishments in themselves fearful because of this aesthetic.

Let's imagine a final scene. In the previous two scenes, there was an aesthetic of sounds which evoked the presence of mystery in the community. In this scene, there is an aesthetic of the visual, specifically the adornment of the Sande initiates when they finish their initiation period, leave the sacred grove, and ritually return to the village with a ‘coming-out ceremony.’⁶⁸ The new initiates enter the village as new persons (symbolized also by having new names), mature persons with new knowledge and powers. The mystery of this new identity is represented by the special adornment and demeanor of the girls. The fresh initiates are wearing special clothes, often white wrap-around style dresses, and their demeanor has changed, heads and eyes are lowered in a solemn manner, and walking is very measured, almost as if they are learning a new way to walk as new persons. This style of walking is an index of their new mature, and mysterious, identity.

One of the most noticeable aspects of adornment is the white clay (collected in river banks) smeared on their bodies and faces. Whiteness has multiple meaning related to feminine beauty in Sande cosmology.⁶⁹ But it is also a mark of the presence of the mystery, the mystery of secret knowledge and powers gained through initiation in the hidden, sacred grove of the rainforest. White clay marks the female initiates as belonging to a powerful secret association, as being a person protected by those powers, and even dangerous when nonmembers

⁶⁸ The initiation period for Sande initiates was traditionally three years, but modern life, e.g., Western schooling, has produced an adaptation to much shorter periods, such as during the two or three months of school vacation.

⁶⁹ Boone 1986: 21-23.

transgress the social boundaries established by the association to protect the new lives of their initiates in society.

The significance of white clay also points to the relationship between the sublime world of mystery and the prosaic world of law. The white clay marks the young new initiates as belonging to the Sande secret society, and are thus protected by the special powers that the society possess, including magical powers to cause harm, especially in the case of men who trespass Sande restrictions. But even in everyday life, the mysterious power backing Sande regulations are signified by white clay. The Sande society, for example, “may declare...that a certain grove of fruit trees is under its law,” and signify this restriction by putting a “daub of [white] paint on each trunk” as “a warning that the tree is not to be touched.”⁷⁰ The white clay signifies the presence of mysterious powers that could harm those who transgress the Sande law about fruit trees. The concrete and everyday phenomenological world of white clay and fruit trees are filled with the meanings of mystery – as well as the punitive meanings associated with transgressions against mysterious powers.

The adornment of white clay on the faces and bodies of young Sande initiates illustrates a key dialectic of mystery: invisible powers must be alluded to in public and even performed to evoke their presence. One dictionary definition underscores this link between public drama and mystery: mystery is “any affair, thing, or person that presents features or qualities so obscure as to arouse curiosity or speculation.” Adornment is one important means of publicly dramatizing mystery, and thereby arousing curiosity and speculation. Mystery is like adornment in the art of flirtation. Adornment hints at what is concealed (as well as unsaid), and at what is mysterious because hidden but glimpsed.

This function of adornment is analyzed in all its dialectical nuances in Simmel’s famous excursus on adornment in his essay on secrecy. On the one hand, Simmel identifies secrecy as a form of adornment: “the secret operates as an adorning possession and value of the personality.”⁷¹ Secrecy paradoxically operates with the logic of adornment, which is “to lead the eyes of others upon the adorned.”⁷² On the other hand, adornment is, conversely, a form of secrecy – i.e., a

⁷⁰ Boone 1986: 21.

⁷¹ Simmel 1950: 337.

⁷² Simmel 1950: 338.

concealing as well as revealing. What “recedes before the consciousness of others and is hidden from them” through adornment “is to be emphasized in their consciousness.”⁷³ People wear clothes not only to be modest but to allude to immodesty. Likewise, in religious contexts, people adorn themselves – e.g., Sande young women daubed with white clay -- not to hide the mystery of their power and knowledge (and its supernatural source) but to draw attention to the presence of that mystery.

Conclusion and Theoretical Implications

The indexes of mystery in a community, like white clay, constitute a system of meanings, all centered on the social object called “mystery.” The meanings are communicated through signs that are dynamically and spatially connected to what is pointed to in a context, e.g., a footprint signifying the presence of an animal, a weathervane signifying the direction of the wind, or white clay marking a young woman as possessing new secret power and knowledge. This logic of indexical signs is relevant to understanding how mystery is communicated because an index, as Peirce emphasized, focuses the attention – e.g., a rap at the door – and can even startle us.⁷⁴ We know that something happened (e.g., a loud noise: a thunderbolt?) but we do not know precisely what it was. Mystery operates with this same logic of something happening – or, some object or quality made manifest -- but we do not know fully its meaning. The meaning becomes clearer, of course, when someone explains what happened, and explains how what happened is an index of invisible powers. The system of meanings about mystery communicated through such a logic can be characterized as an indexical order of mystery.⁷⁵

Mystery is an indexical order also because indexes are part of institutions – or, more technically, the meanings they communicate constitute the reality of the institution. An institution is a set of social positions as well as the norms and beliefs regulating social relations between those positions, which cluster around a particular functional need of the society, e.g. the family. An indexical order is the set of signs which communicate in specific contexts the meaning of those social

⁷³ Simmel 1950: 337.

⁷⁴ Pierce 1985: 13-14.

⁷⁵ For a technical elaboration of the notion of “indexical order” within semiotic theory, see Silverstein 2003.

relations and regulations. The West African Sande society, for example, is an indexical order. It is a religious institution manifested (socially accomplished) through the indexical signs, which communicate the meanings defining the norms and beliefs about secrecy and mystery pertaining to female identity and power – as well as defining the authoritative and subordinate positions created by those norms. Daily sounds from the rainforest index the presence of this mystery and power, and other related indexes – e.g., white clay – communicate additional meanings about this presence, producing together a system of meanings. Such indexes draw attention to the “invisible forces purposely operating behind empirical events,” to use Kolakowski’s characterization of religion.⁷⁶ Indexes of mystery startle -- evoking wonder (and even fear) – and provide the basis for an institution based on wonder and fear.

The indexical order, in addition, overlaps with a symbolic order insofar as an index pointing to a mystery in a particular context may also be sign with conventional meanings (a symbol) about mystery. White clay is both a symbol and an index. It is a symbol of specific Sande ideas about mystery, but it is also an index, in the contextual use of the symbol, marking the presence of mystery in that moment and space.

The different techniques developed in this essay for analyzing mystery as an institutional form and communicative practice – such as, geometrical and grammatical methods as well as indexical analysis – were also directed to broader questions about mystery as framed by a theory of secrecy, as well as questions about secrecy as framed by a theory of the sacred. The implications of these theoretical questions are many and varied, but one major implication will be outlined in this final section.

This essay has attempted to understand mystery through the relations between secrecy and the sacred, which entail another central relationship in social theory between the individual and society. Both categories of the “sacred” and “secret” have etymological roots in the semantics of being “set apart,” and this logic of separation implies a theory of the relationship of the individual to society. For Durkheim, this etymology serves to define the idea of the sacred as what is “set apart,” e.g., the sacred is set apart from the “profane” world of everyday life, and the individual becomes the “sacred” in the social form of a being set apart in freedom and responsibility.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Kolakowski 1982: 16.

⁷⁷ Durkheim 1995 [1912]:44, 273-275, 426-427.

Simmel's theory of secrecy addresses similar Durkheimian questions relating the logic of separation (and connection) to individuation. Secrecy as a setting apart "is a first-rate element of individuation" in two senses: "social conditions of strong personal differentiation permit and require secrecy in a high degree; and, conversely, the secret embodies and intensifies such differentiation."⁷⁸ A notion of the "secrets of the self" (e.g., self-differentiation from society) in Simmel's theory of secrecy and individuation has roots in the Kantian notion of individual freedom. Secret societies are a social space of individual freedom (as well as constraint): every "secret society contains a measure of freedom, which the structure of the society largely does not have."⁷⁹ In an Enlightenment sense, individual autonomy can be defined as the "secrets of the self" combined with the individual's free use of reason in the public sphere.

The ancient mystery religions are an important chapter in this philosophical history of secrecy as a cultural resource of individuality and freedom. In one genealogy of individuation in Western philosophy, the mystery religions are subsumed within Platonic notions of the self, reason, and responsibility, and incorporated into the history of philosophical thought. Derrida's argument about this genealogy, builds on Patocka's notion that "mystery or secrecy" is constitutive of "a psyche or of an individual and responsible self"...because it is through mystery and secrecy "that the soul separates itself in recalling itself to itself, and so it becomes individualized, interiorized, becomes its very invisibility."⁸⁰ Through this separation, the "history of the responsible self is built upon the heritage and patrimony of secrecy," beginning with the ancient mystery religions but never reaching an end.⁸¹ The invisibility of the cave in the secret rituals of the mystery religions is the precursor to the invisibility of the self in individual thought and responsibility.⁸² Ancient mystery religions provide sociocultural material *bonnes à penser*, good for reflecting on the hermeneutics of the self as well as the hermeneutics of the social control of subjectivity.

This philosophical story of mystery, secrecy, individuality, and freedom can be recounted in more formal terms using Simmel's geometrical method of analyzing the interrelated, dialectical relations –

⁷⁸ Simmel 1950: 334-335.

⁷⁹ Simmel 1950: 360.

⁸⁰ Derrida 1995: 15.

⁸¹ Derrida 1995: 7.

⁸² Derrida 1995: 15.

e.g., freedom/constraint, and individual/society (as well as revelation/concealment, inclusion/exclusion, and domination/subordination) -- constituting the social institutions of secrecy and mystery. It can also be formulated in more phenomenological terms: namely, a grammar of sequences of signs about mystery in the communicative practices of social life, and a grammar of a politics of authoritative interpretations in this sequence. At both analytical levels of geometry and grammar, ancient mystery religions reveals the depth of a fundamental puzzle in human social life: the relationship between mystery and the sacred practice of secrecy. Mystery, as we learn from Greek etymology, conveys the idea of being initiated into a reality that is a mystery because it is secret, and holy because it is separated from and closed off – e.g., through vows of silence – from noninitiates or outsiders. What is set aside as a mystery, however, is a constant presence in social life insofar as hints, allusions, performances, processions, and representations index the mysterious reality hidden behind ordinary events.

Finally, mystery is a big topic, and like other big topics in the study of human social life, it seems to require a capital letter: “Mystery.” It is like other big topics, such as Power, Change, Faith, Oppression, Work, Passion, Authority, Beauty, Violence, Love, Prestige, which are often given capital letters in social science, making them grand, abstract entities. But the anthropologist typically tries to bring such dignified topics down to earth, making them more “homely,” by taking “the capital letters off them” – by approaching “more abstract analyses [of such big topics] from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters.”⁸³ This essay has tried to do both, linking abstraction and detailed acquaintance with concrete social life, especially the everyday language and logic of mystery. It developed a theoretical model of the relations constituting mystery and secrecy, but it also identified those abstract relations and the grand topic of “Mystery” in local, institutional contexts, such as coming-out ceremonies with young women wearing white clay, or fruit trees daubed with white paint – or a reaped ear of grain in Elusian mystery rituals – as well as leaders of the women’s secret society using their mysterious powers to punish men who transgress the boundaries of female privilege and protection. The hope is that the abstract model provides insights into the relations and regularities constituting the institutional forms discovered in the

⁸³ [Geertz 1973: 21.](#)

comparative material on mystery and secrecy, and insights into the grammar of the communicative practices producing those forms.

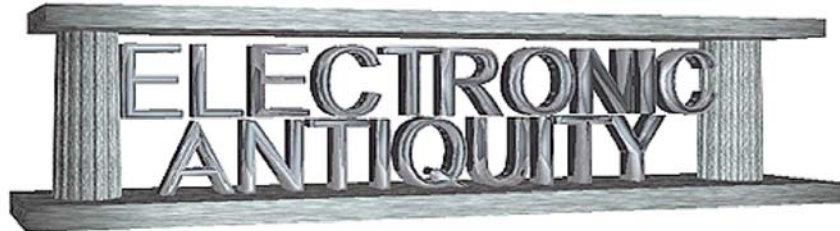
Acknowledgements: I thank Professor Sandra Blakely for convening a conference that enabled participants to cross disciplinary boundaries and ask broader questions about their own particular historical and ethnographic bailiwicks. I thank too my friends, Soulemayne Bachir Diagne and Kenneth Vaux, professors of religion and theology, respectively, for reminding me daily of the transcendent.

WORKS CITED

- Bellman, B.L. 1975. *Village of Curers and Assassins: On the Production of Fala Kpelle Cosmological Categories*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Benjamin, W. 1968. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Boole, K.W. 1987. "Secrecy in Religion." In K.W. Bolle, ed., *Secrecy in Religions*. Leiden: E. J. Brill. Pp. 1-24.
- Boone, S.A. 1986. *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bremmer, J.N. 1995. "Religious Secrets and Secrecy in Classical Greece." In H. G. Kippenberg and G. G. Stroumsa, eds. *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*. Leiden: E. J. Brill. Pp. 61-78.
- Bultmann, R.K. 1956. *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*. New York: Meridian Books.
- Burkert, W. 1987. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Butler, N. 2006. "The materialization of magic: Islamic talisman in West Africa." In B. Nicolini, ed., *Studies in Witchcraft, Magic, War, and Peace in Africa: 19th and 20th Centuries*. Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press. Pp. 259- 272
- Comaroff, J. and J. Comaroff. 1993. "Introduction." In J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, eds., *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago. Pp. xi-xxxvii.
- d'Azevedo, W.L. 1962. "Uses of the Past in Gola Discourse." *The Journal of African History*. Vol. 3 (1): 11-34.
- Derrida, J. 1995. *The Gift of Death*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Durkheim, E. 1995 [1912]. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Eisenstadt, S. N. 1959. "Primitive Political Systems: A Preliminary Comparative Analysis." *American Anthropologist* 61:200-220.
- Evans, P. 1995. *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ferne, M. 2000. *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. 1990. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage Books.

- Geertz, C. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books. Pp. 3-30.
- Hojbjerg, C.K. 2007. *Resisting State Iconoclasm among the Loma of Guinea*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Kolakowski, L. 1982. *Religion: if there is no God: on God, the Devil, sin, and other worries of the so-called Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Oxford University.
- La Fontaine, J. 1985. *Initiation: Ritual Drama and Secret Knowledge across the World*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.
- Lonergan, B.J. F. 1970. *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- Meyer, M.W. 1987. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Murphy, W.P. 1998. "The Sublime Dance of Mende Politics: An African Aesthetic of Charismatic Power." *American Ethnologist* 25(4):563-582.
- _____, 1980. "Secret Knowledge as Property and Power in Kpelle Society: Elders Versus Youth." *Africa* 50:193-207.
- Nooter, M.H. 1993. *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals*. New York: The Museum of African Art.
- Peirce, C.S. 1985. "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs." In R.E. Innis, ed., *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. Pp. 4-23.
- Silverstein, M. 2003. "Indexical Order and the Dialectics of Sociolinguistic Life." *Language and Communication* 23 (3-4):193-229.
- Simmel, G. 1950. "The Secret and the Secret Society." In K.H. Wolff, ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Free Press. Pp. 305-376.
- _____, 1970. "The Problem of Sociology." In D.N. Levine, ed., *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 23-35.
- Stinchcombe, A.L. 1968. *Constructing Social Theories*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tefft, S.K., ed. 1980. *Secrecy: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New York: Human Sciences Press.
- Weber, Max. 1952 [1921]. *Ancient Judaism*. H. H. Gerth and D. Martindale, trans. and eds. New York: Free Press.

- _____, 1978. *Economy and Society*. 2 Volumes. Berkeley: University of California.
- Welters, W. E. 1949. "Secret Medicines, Magic, and Rites of the Kpelle Tribe in Liberia." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 5:208-243.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.



GOING BY THE TREES: DEATH AND REGENERATION IN GEORGIA'S HAUNTED LANDSCAPES

Mark Auslander, Brandeis University
mausland@brandeis.edu

Several years ago, I took a walk in the woods with a friend, an African American man in his fifties whom I will call “James.” We had been seeking traces of an old slave cemetery, in which James had good reason to believe some of his ancestors were buried. Deep in the forest, he pointed out an old, gnarled oak that he was convinced marked the outer boundary of the graveyard. Finding this aged landmark was a relief, but a few minutes later, as we started back down the path, James paused, and commented on the tree in different, more somber tones:

That tree'll talk to you if stand out here in the dark. You'll hear that Negro crying out to you, man. Can't you hear?...Shoot. Look at that tree man. That's an ugly tree. You never see limbs like that nowadays. That tree was bred for it. They just threw the rope up and pulled it up. Like this here, they just bring 'em here, hang em and throw 'em down in that pit. Shoot. You think that tree don't know? Look at them limbs here. You don't see limbs growing down like that. There been some dead folk here.

The same tree that moments earlier had positively revealed to him one set of buried secrets, about an honored slave cemetery, becomes a dark, ominous figure, hinting at nocturnal lynching parties.

A few weeks later, I found myself in conversation with another friend, a man in his eighties whom I will call “Daniel.” He recalled a moment nearly eight decades earlier, when he was a six-year-old African

American boy in a small Georgia community. On a bridge on the edge of town, while running an errand Saturday evening for his mother, he found himself surrounded by scores of hooded men robed in white, some atop white draped horses, all carrying flaming torches. He remembered his mother's frequent admonition: if you run from the Klan, you will die, they will shoot you down. Daniel froze, not even breathing. "I knew that moment I was dead, I was dead." But then a vaguely familiar voice from one of the masked figures, cackled, "Best get your black ass home, boy!" He ran home and held his mother all night long. "All my life," he says, "I've looked into the face of every white man in this county, in the store, at work, on the street. I ask myself, 'Is this him? Is this the man who saved my life and who left me half dead inside for years?' He haunts me still."

These episodes are stark reminders that for many, the landscapes of Georgia, like many others across the nation, remain "haunted" ones, stalked by the remembered specters of racial violence, oppression and hatred. As Martha, an elderly woman in Macon once told me, "every tree has a story." These stories are often layered, ambivalently, with oscillating associations of profound belonging and horrific exclusion. The same tree that might summon up nostalgic memories of root-working or important moments in family history may also, moments later, trigger recollections of slavery, Klan rallies, or lynching. A face glimpsed in a store might one moment look benevolent, the next moment sinister.

For those influenced by the intellectual traditions of psychoanalysis, to speak of a person or a landscape as "haunted" is to imply that they are caught up in unresolved contradictions, in enduring traumas that cannot be neatly classified as belonging to the "past." There are, to be sure, degrees of haunting. Some communities, families, and persons were vastly more traumatized than others, and some remain significantly more vulnerable to racial violence than others. Yet I would argue that the peculiar intimacy of systematic racialized violence in America, so often perpetrated by neighbor against neighbor, has rendered all of us, to some extent, "haunted," all stalked by the specters of the nation's under-acknowledged histories of terror within.

Several commentators have recently argued that lynchings, especially in the American South, were often organized around the logic of ritual sacrifice and expiation; overtly or implicitly, the killers sought communion through the blood of the offered scapegoat. I would also like us to consider the possibility that the varied efforts underway across the

nation to confront this long repressed legacy of domestic terrorism are in some respects also organized in terms comparable to those of the ancient Mysteries, esoteric ritual efforts to move back and forth across the boundaries of life and death, the visible and the invisible, the human and the non-human, in the hope of regenerating personal and collective vitality. These efforts range from storytelling in churches to community activism in local cemeteries, from museum exhibitions of old lynching photographs to new artistic work, from revived blues songs to new musical performances. Many of these initiatives, as it happens, revolve around trees, and the “strange fruit” they continue to bear.

Later I will return to artist Kevin Sipp’s extraordinary sculptural meditation on the legacies of lynching, a transformed bottle tree from which hang the spirits of the victims of lynching (figure 1, below). Yet, as I gaze at this haunting installation, I am reminded of another Georgia African American artist’s strange encounter with a tree of death and life. The vernacular artist Winfred Rembert recounts in detail his story of surviving an attempted lynching in South Georgia three decades ago. At this center of his complex spoken narrative, repeatedly represented in painted leather artwork, is a scene of a mysterious, beautiful grove. After overpowering a sheriff who was beating him in a jail cell, he fled and was recaptured by the state police. The police locked him in the trunk of a car and drove him through the night until daybreak. He recalls that as the trunk was open he saw a beautiful forested glade beside a quiet pond. At the center of the meadow were six trees; and from each tree hung a noose. “I knew this was the place, where so many others had been taken. Finally, it was my turn.” Mr. Rembert was stripped naked and hung upside down by his feet from the central noose. The sheriff he had beaten (and whose gun he had stolen) approached him with a knife, grabbed his penis and held the knife against his scrotum. Like so many victims of lynching, Mr. Rembert knew, he was about to be castrated before being hanged and burned, his remains then dumped into the beautiful lake. “Right then, I knew I was an animal, just a hog, all trussed up. He was gonna’ cut me up and slaughter me.”

But at that moment another person stepped forward. “All I could see of this man was his wingtip shoes. And he told the sheriff to stop right there. “You’ve made a right mess of it. Just cut that nigger down. We’ll make an example of him.” As in Daniel’s story, Winfred never saw the face of his ambiguous savior; he was cut down, sentenced to twenty-seven years on a chain gang. After his sentence was commuted he moved north and began, in time, to paint images of life in South Georgia on

leatherworked backgrounds. Among the most common motifs in his work are trees and wingtip shoes.

There have been considerable arguments among scholars and critics about the literal veracity of Mr. Rembert's story, which, like those of any good storyteller, changes a bit in interesting ways each time he recounts it. I've been struck by the passion of some of the denunciations he's engendered, even (especially) among those deeply committed to historical truth-telling about lynching in America. A close colleague, who also works on narratives of lynching, told his students that the story just sounded too composed, too perfect to be true, and that they should just ignore it.

These critiques are understandable yet in a sense, I would suggest, they miss the point: in our post-Holocaust world, there are three vital genres of narrative: fiction, non-fiction, and witnessing. Witnessing as a narrative form has its own kinds of truth, which cannot be easily disentangled from the poetics of ritual action. In some respects, Winfred's story, as he has shaped and reshaped it in his marvelous renditions, is one of the oldest stories of all: he was a man, then he was an animal. "I was just a hog." And then, he was a man again. He was, for all intents and purposes, dead, in a secret place (a place that at some level he always known about, yet hoped never to see.) And then he was reborn. Are these not the classic progressions of Mystery? Note the transformation of human into animal and back into human, the cyclical passage back and forth between life and death, between darkness and light, and final the attainment of prophetic vision. The motif of being enclosed within the car trunk and then released repeats itself in his stories of his many subsequent trials inside the sweat box in the state penitentiary. Again and again, he had to dance when the white prison guards said to him, "dance, nigger, dance." As punishment, he was confined to the small box, too small to stand up or lie down in. "It got to the point", he recalls, "that I'd just walk back over to the sweat box and demand to be let back in. "Finally, one day the warden said, no, I'm not gonna let you back in there. It doesn't do you no good." At that moment, Winfred recalls, "the walls of my prison just fell away. They couldn't do nothin' to me no more." Out of these repeated symbolic enactments of death and sacrifice, new life and new vision are gained and made concrete in his paintings.

Lynching as Sacrifice: White and African American Imagery

I wish to emphasize that the sacrificial logic of many of these stories of lynching is not solely a poetic interpolation of the victims. Sociologist Orlando Patterson has persuasively argued that lynchings in America comprised a horrific form of sacrificial violence perpetrated against African Americans, and to a lesser extent, against Jews, by the white majority.¹ The polluted body of the Other is horrifically violated and ritually killed, so that the sins of the killers may be expiated and the collective body of the sacrificers might be regenerated. Patterson notes that as in sacrificial rites elsewhere, lynchings in many instances were centered upon acts of literal or symbolic cannibalism: fingers, knuckles, cooked pieces of liver and heart were sold or kept as keepsakes. The smell of the burning of living victims was at times compared by white witnesses to a “barbecue,” and many perpetrators and audience members reported leaving the scene of a lynching “hungry.”

In this regard, the hundreds of thousand of lynching photographic postcards sold throughout the United States initially reproduced this sacrificial vignette and offered the thousands (perhaps millions?) of whites who obtained these images a measure of the perverse imputed grace of the original sacrificial act. Even the composition of the photographs at times recalls the scenario of sacrifice. Consider the now famous photographs of the 1920 killings of three young African American circus workers by a crowd of five thousand persons in downtown Duluth, Minnesota. These images of the lynched Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie are among the most haunting in the published collection of lynching photographs, *Without Sanctuary*.² Two youths, their shirts stripped off, are trussed from either side of a lamp-post. A third young victim lies prone at their feet. An exultant white crowd surrounds them. The parallels in composition to classic images of the Crucifixion almost defy understanding; even the ribs of one youth are visible, a dark shadow at their base. At some unconscious level, did the photographer understand that he was complicit in another Calvary?

To be sure, African American artists and poets have long noted parallels between lynching and Golgotha. In Gwendolyn Brooks’ words,

¹ Patterson 1998.

² Allen *et al.* 2000.

“The lariat lynch-wish I deplored/The loveliest lynchee was our Lord.”³
A number of anti-lynching editorial cartoons of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depicted the face of Christ superimposed over that of the lynching victim. Winfred Rembert’s most famous work, a lynching triptych now displayed in the Yale Museum of Art, centers on a line of three trees, from which hang African American men. At the base of a fourth tree, a mother figure, a latter day Mary, weeps and pleads for her son’s life.

Trees and Memory in Afro-Atlantic Worlds

Yet for all of this pervasive Christological imagery, Other dynamics inform African American understandings of trees and related landscape sites associated with death and loss. To tease out these dynamics, I turn to conversations I have had in a specific rural Georgia community an hour’s drive from Atlanta, conversations in which speakers routinely link trees, cemeteries, kinship and labor. As we shall see, there are striking gendered differences in the arboreal imagery used by speakers. For women, cemetery trees tend to be potent signifiers of family continuity and regeneration. Men, in contrast, tend towards more ambivalent representations, emphasizing trees’ redemptive and violent associations.

A number of these conversations have occurred within the four-acre town cemetery, divided between historically “white” and “black” sections. Like many Georgia graveyards, this cemetery has long been a political flash-point. Since the mid 1960s, a wealthy all-white foundation has cared for the white half of the graveyard, drawing on public funds covertly funneled to it by the white-majority city council. The city government has tended to ignore the historically African American two acres of the cemetery, which contain many graves dating back to the 1840s and 1850s, when nearly all of the town’s African American residents were held in slavery. For decades, the white cemetery’s lawns have been neatly mowed, its marble headstones carefully mapped and lovingly restored. In contrast, the adjacent African American sections became densely overgrown, with many plots inaccessible to living family members.

In 1990, disaster struck the oldest section of the African American cemetery. An unscrupulous pulpwood dealer “cleared” the pine forest

³ [Wright 2001](#): 467.

that had grown up over this one-acre site. Backhoes buried, displaced or fractured scores of headstones, and disturbed hundreds of graves.

As I have listened to African American residents try to characterize the nearly indescribable pain this episode caused them and their families, I've been struck by subtle yet persistent differences in women's and men's accounts. One middle-age African American woman, whose father's grave had been destroyed, was confined to bed for three weeks, an experience she later likened to "going to my deathbed." Nowadays, she speaks of driving to work each morning past the nearly empty meadow of the old cemetery, in a wistful tone: "I guess I just miss the trees. I used to know those trees, you know."

While participating in a restoration and documentation projects in this cemetery, I often heard women speak in similar terms about the absence of the trees. I recall, in particular, a conversation with an African American woman in her seventies, Mrs. Anna Neumann, the community's informal authority on the cemetery. She led a group of us through the grassy field, punctuated by occasional shattered headstones and unmarked patches of sunken ground. As well as she could, she recalled for us the location of the destroyed gravesites: "My aunt, Altheria, she's right here. Over there, that's the plot of our neighbor family, old Mr. Jim Benton and Miss Sadie, you remember, I told you all about them." But then Mrs. Neumann stopped in mid-sentence, her arm half raised, and said softly, "I can't, I just can't remember where they're buried. I used to be going by the trees, you know, I went by the trees."

For Mrs. Neumann, trees evoke proper family remembrance and continuity, signaling productive linkages to ascendant generations. Cemetery trees, in particular, remind her of her mother, mother's sisters, grandmothers and great-aunts, the women who taught her how to "go by the trees" in finding gravesites. Like many other women in the community, she often refers to respected, deceased female relatives as people who "really knew the trees," meaning either that they were root-workers (traditional healers) or that they could find their way to gravesites by reading the landscape.

In this connection, it is striking that at a recent "Family Day Celebration" at the local black Methodist church, the program featured a cover drawn by one of Anna's cousins, Laura. The cover depicted a large oak tree containing fourteen branches springing from a common root, each branch bearing the name of one of the fourteen African American families of the town, who are all inter-related through multiple bonds of affinity and filiation. Anna approvingly told me in church as she stared

intensely at the cover: "That tree says it all. We're all just tied up together here. Can't go talking about one family's roots without running into another branch of some other family!"

In contrast, men's references to trees in comparable contexts tend to deploy more traumatic imagery of violation and dismemberment. William Arnold, an African American man in his sixties, recalled the 1990 clear-cut:

That morning, when I saw all the trees gone, and the earth torn open like that, it was as if we were back there, you know. Everything we got, the houses, the cars, all that 'progress,' doesn't mean anything. Can you tell me what's changed, since those days, you tell me? You think it matters if they don't have manacles and whips and aren't selling families apart anymore? Right now, right now, every tree that's gone, that 's every black family in town, with a hole in its heart.

Suggestively, men sometimes relate the problem of cemetery trees to fraught memories of their fathers. Consider the case of Alan Teller, a local politician in his sixties who has long agitated for the restoration of the black cemetery. He has maintained that as much as possible, trees in the more recent parts of the black cemetery should be pruned or taken down. "It is terrible the old trees were mowed down in the old section, I know that as well as well as anyone, but now we just need to clear things out, open things up.... Let's clear out all these trees and brush...so these plots can all be out in the light, for every family. Why, you can't even get to my father's grave this way."

One day, as he and I worked together to clear foliage from his father's and grandfather's graves, Alan spoke explicitly of his father, who died twenty years earlier at the age of ninety-two:

He never told me anything about our family history, no matter how hard I tried. Proud man, would never say a single word about slavery. That's what we 'came up from,' you know, that's how they thought then. Except right before he died, he told me something, for the first and only time. He told that his father, my grandfather, had been born and grew up in slavery just here in this county, and that he and his full brother Robert came off the old Nelson place. But my

grandfather hated old man Nelson so he took the name Teller. But Robert kept the name Nelson. So all these Nelsons buried here (gesturing the adjacent graves) they are all my cousins. But I only found that out from my father at the end.

Looking into the thick patch of trees that still covered this section of the cemetery, Alan softly murmured, "So many secrets, you know, so many secrets."

A little later, I once again heard references to fathers and dark secrets at the site of a cemetery, this time from James Lawrence, with whom this paper began. As I've mentioned, James had taken me on a long hike through forested land owned by the county, to show me a heavily wooded site that he believes is a slave cemetery. He's convinced his mother's ancestors, held in slavery on the old Thompson plantation, are buried in unmarked graves under "these old trees." The old plantation is an especially fraught site for James, as he is a direct descendant of the white master, Dr. John Thompson, who had several children by one of his slave mistresses.

During the hike, James spoke positively of the forest trees, explaining that the trees had guided him to this spot a year earlier, when he had searched on horseback for this long-lost graveyard. "Look at those," he said to me as he pointed to two large sycamores, "I look at trees when I see 'em like that." "Why is it important to look at trees?" I asked. He explained, "'Cause that's a different age tree, that's a different age tree. You know, I'm looking at the terrain. Whenever you see things, you know how you see things? You see a chimney out there, they leave a big old tree out there." Finally, we came to a large, gnarled oak, with long twisted limbs radiating out from several interconnected trunks: "See that tree? Its different from anything," said James. This tree, he explained triumphantly, had "told" him that he'd finally found the lost cemetery.

But a few minutes later, after we had emerged from the deep cemetery grove, James began to berate this same old oak, in the terms quoted above. Still staring at the tree, James began to speak of his difficult relationship with his late father, a conservative businessman and politician, who, like Alan's father, had always refused to speak of "old-time" family history, especially "going back to slavery times." Thinking on this, and still looking at the great oak, James reflected on his own deep confusion, a year earlier, when he first learned there was a cemetery on "Thompson" land:

I thought to myself, amazing, this here was our property, it belonged to us Thompsons. But then when I came out here, and looked at all this deep in the woods, I realized, wait, you're a fool, this wasn't our property. We was the property. (laughs) I got myself confused with him!

The "him" in this statement is his ancestor, Dr. Thompson, the white master who fathered James' enslaved great grandfather. The old tree, both admired and feared, seems to be imbued with the complex presence of both the black and the white father figure, a composite entity that is simultaneously an impediment to proper family memory and a disturbing link to remembered traumas of the past.

I recently returned to Alan Teller's house. He once again reflected on his father's refusal to talk about the family's time in slavery, a period that holds increasing fascination for Alan. "My father was a great man, a great man in so many respects, but why did he have to deny all that history, all our history?" At that moment, Alan's wife Elizabeth gently interrupted him. "They were just protecting us, that's the way it was." She told me a vivid childhood memory, of walking in downtown Atlanta with her mother in the 1940s:

We passed a beautiful little park, with a fence around it. With green grass and a beautiful tree in the middle, with a bench right there under the shade. I said, "momma, let's go sit under that tree, please, momma." And she said no, no, I don't like that, I don't like those people, and we need the exercise, let's keep walking. She never ever told me about segregation, can you believe that? She was angry deep down, I know now, but she never showed it. We just had to figure out the rules on our own. You know, somehow, looking at that tree, right then, I just knew it, I understood. But my mother never said anything, and neither did I. That's the way it was.

Elizabeth paused, and smiled at me. "But I still think of that tree, sometimes, how beautiful it was."

At the time, I was puzzled by the elegiac, almost nostalgic, tone in which Elizabeth told me this story of an early glimpse into the strange world of Jim Crow. Why, I wondered, did she conclude this tale with a

fond memory of the forbidden tree? And why is this tree, such a potent sign of exclusion and oppression, remembered with such a wistful smile?

It is hard not to think of Genesis and of its fenced off garden, centered on a tree of knowledge that is forever associated with exclusion and life after the Fall. Yet Elizabeth remembers this tree with affection, suffused as it is with her mother's strength and the precious, ephemeral qualities of childhood remembrance. Like her mother, the tree bequeathed her the knowledge that made her the person that she is, a black woman proud of her people's history.

At one level, Elizabeth's remembered tree seems profoundly different from her husband's trees, the trees that deny him access to his father's gravesite. It surely seems a far cry from James' phantasmagoric vision of the lynching tree, or from the logged trees in the cemetery that, for William, left "a hole in the heart" of every black family.

Yet all these trees have much in common. For both men and women, trees are evocative sites of what DuBois termed "double consciousness."⁴ Staring at the gnarled oak, James recalls that he initially thought of himself as the owner of "the property" on which he stood, only to realize that his people "were the property." Elizabeth remembers the tree in the city park as catalyzing her coming to consciousness of segregation. In DuBois' sense, the tree causes her to glimpse "life beyond the veil." Significantly, in all these cases, the tree image evokes the figure of a same-sex parent, a parent who exemplifies the era and consciousness of Jim Crow, with whom, paradoxically, the child simultaneously identifies and is distanced from.

Why should trees be so "good to think with" about the paradoxical predicament of seeing oneself simultaneously within and outside of mainstream society, of being like and unlike a muted parent? In part, this is due to trees' general capacity, long noted by anthropologists, to dramatize or encapsulate paradox. Human-like in appearance, yet manifestly neither human nor animal, they lend themselves to meditations on the fluid boundaries between human and non-human, self and non-self, the conventional world and the world beyond. Beginning as seeds and growing to much greater sizes and ages than human mortals, massive trees may evoke the mysteries of the passage of generations as well as psychosocial ruptures across familial histories.⁵

⁴ DuBois 1996.

⁵ Feeley-Harnik 1991; Rival 1998.

Beyond this, the tree's capacity to exemplify the core paradox of double consciousness for African Americans may in part be related to the reproductive cycle and double structure of these special plants. The sedentary tree may grow to triumphant heights far from where its seed originated, and the visible branch system above ground is mirrored by a hidden root system below. Hence the polyvalent appropriateness of Alex Haley's 1977 title, *Roots*. In the wake of a long history of traumatic mobility – spanning the Middle Passage, the forced rupture of enslaved families, and the Great Migration – trees are permanently rooted to the earth. Faced by a mainstream society that has long denied the depth and breadth of African American historical presence, the “roots” metaphor evokes an enduring, hidden reality under-the-surface. The tree thus functions as a complex switch-point between that which is visible to the wider (white) world and the special status of life on the “other side” of the color bar. (One thinks of the famous image of the chokecherry tree beaten into the back of Sethe in Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*; in one sense the tree is invisible to Sethe and visible only to the white girl Amy, but in a deeper sense the tree's significance can only be grasped in light of African American historical experience.)

This dense arboreal imagery is only deepened by a long history of transformed African symbolic forms in the New World, ranging from bottle trees to funerary saplings.⁶ In many African societies, trees are understood as residences of the spirits of the dead. As many central African BaKongo put it, the forest is the village of the dead and the trees are their houses. None of my Georgia informants have ever stated things quite this way but the underlying sense that the dead are co-present with trees is, in many respects, taken for granted. Consider, for instance, the visceral horror expressed by older African American women at the thought of chopping down any cemetery trees, even sick or dying trees. Or recall James' assertion that the gnarled oak will “talk to you” at night, conveying the cries of the black men who died hanging from its twisted branches, brutally killed on the very land that they had so long worked by white men who were, secretly, their own kin.

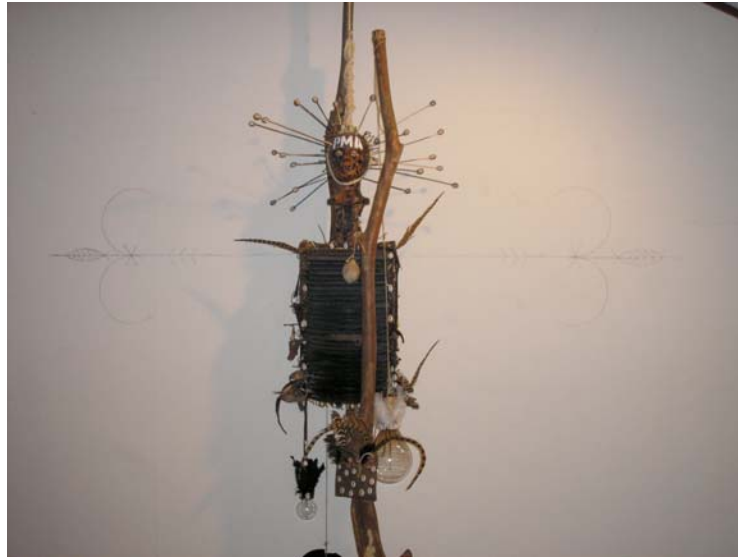
At their best, then, trees evoke uncorrupted domains, of secret knowledge of history and genealogy, of long-term ritual symbolism linked to the wider Afro-Atlantic world, of the non-alienated capacity to work one's own piece of land, and of a hidden, truer self. Yet, these alternate forms of selfhood bound up with trees are extraordinarily

⁶ Thompson 1983; Vlach 1990; Gomez 1998.

fragile and vulnerable; the tree can easily be transmuted into a signifier of the dismembered self, deprived of the capacity to produce oneself through one's own free labor.



Keven Sipp. "We are the Children of Strange Fruit Spirits," 2000.



Kevin Sipp. "Strange Fruit Hanging From the Tree of Life: Meditation on G. Bruno (From Strange Fruit Series)," 2003.

Consider, for example, sculptor Keven Sipp's striking recent piece, "We are the Children of Strange Fruit Spirits." The piece incorporates an upright forked tree branch, from which the artist has hung multiple burned out light bulbs, encased in various materials. Belts of cowrie shells circle the tree's trunk. From a speaker incorporated into the sculpted tree multiple versions of Abel Meerpool's song "Strange Fruit" reverberate. The song alternates with a poem by the artist that gives voice to the reborn spirits of lynched persons, who now run in gangs. Unable to trust, unable to find a way home, their troubled souls linger between worlds, caught in cycles of self-destructive violence.



Kevin Sipp. "Strange Fruit," Upper Detail.



Kevin Sipp. "Strange Fruit," Lower Detail.

None of these trees, ultimately, stands alone. Collectively, they inhabit and help constitute a shared psychic terrain, an enduring landscape that still bears the traces of slavery and its ambiguous legacies.

Towards Regeneration: Ritual Inversion in Contemporary Anti-Lynching Activism

How, amidst these haunted landscapes of long under-acknowledged trauma, do persons and communities begin to reconstitute themselves, to move beyond cycles of denial, anguish and retribution? Artistic initiatives such as Kevin Sipp's that grapple physically with the legacies of pain embedded in tree forms are highly suggestive: iconic representations of loss and liminality, composed of the media of terror, they hold the promise of new homes, new sanctuary, new covenants.

Present-day activists from Duluth, Minnesota, commemorating the 1920 killings of the three young African American men, have recently been facing challenges posed by the enduring power of the nightmarish images of the murder victims. At first, they planned to commemorate the 1920 event through an image of a lamppost, to be used on posters and T-shirts. Yet, to some, the icon seemed too much like the old photographs; even the stark lines of the curved lamppost conjured up the traces of the desecrated bodies. A local artist finally hit upon an ingenious solution: the new image depicts the silhouetted figures of the three young men, standing straight and tall, backlit by the glow of a distant light source. In a subtle fashion, the street-lamp has been transformed from an instrument of terror to something else: the light of historical truth, perhaps, or even the ultimate promise of redemption. Images surely haunt us. Yet they also, in quiet ways, may help to heal us.

Rituals of inversion have also been developed by a community organization in Georgia. "The Moore's Ford Memorial Committee" (MFMC), a group formed in the mid-1990s to publicize and commemorate the killing in July 1946 of four young African Americans, including one returning serviceman, near Monroe, Georgia. Since its founding the MFMC has demonstrated a remarkable ability to bring together varied constituencies, across lines of race and class, to work on projects of memorialization and social justice. As an anthropologist who studies ritual I've been especially fascinated by the work the MFMC has done in cleaning and restoring the cemeteries in which the victims of the Moore's Ford killings had been buried in unmarked graves. Community attempts to mark the graves with permanent markers were repeatedly sabotaged by Klan members. In James Allen's memorable phrase, even in death the victims were "without sanctuary."

In this context, the work of restoring cemeteries strikes me as especially important. One night in the summer of 1946 a group of men

gathered to commit an unspeakable crime, riddling the bodies of their young victims with hundreds of bullet holes. Now, on successive weekends, a group of people from varied backgrounds gathered to participate in the hard, physical labor of restoring hallowed ground. In a quiet fashion they sought to honor that which had been dishonored, to sanctify those long denied sanctuary. In the words of one MFMC activist, “sweat-producing labor is soul-cleansing labor.” If the bodies of the dead had been physically “dis-membered” by the murderers, then the modern cemetery work sought to “re-member” those who were lost, and by extension to “re-member” or reconstitute a shattered community. Since time immemorial, rituals marking cycles of death and the regeneration of life have bound together villages, communities and nations. It is moving and fascinating to watch such ritual practices emerging at this historical juncture, across the country at the grass roots level, as diverse persons and families seek new ways to meet on common ground.

In certain respects, recent exhibition projects of lynching photographs can be said to be informed by comparable logics of ritual inversion. In 2000-01, as Emory and Atlanta communities debated the wisdom of mounting such an exhibition here in Atlanta, a young woman rose to speak. She had been of two minds about the show, she acknowledged. She knew that these images, many of them photographic postcards, had been sent through the mail in part to sow terror in the hearts of African Americans who might glimpse them. There was always the risk that displaying these pictures might again inflict pain and fear on some viewers. Yet, she mused, doesn't this exhibition offer us the opportunity to re-direct these images, to circulate them along different trajectory, to mark them, in effect, “return to sender”?

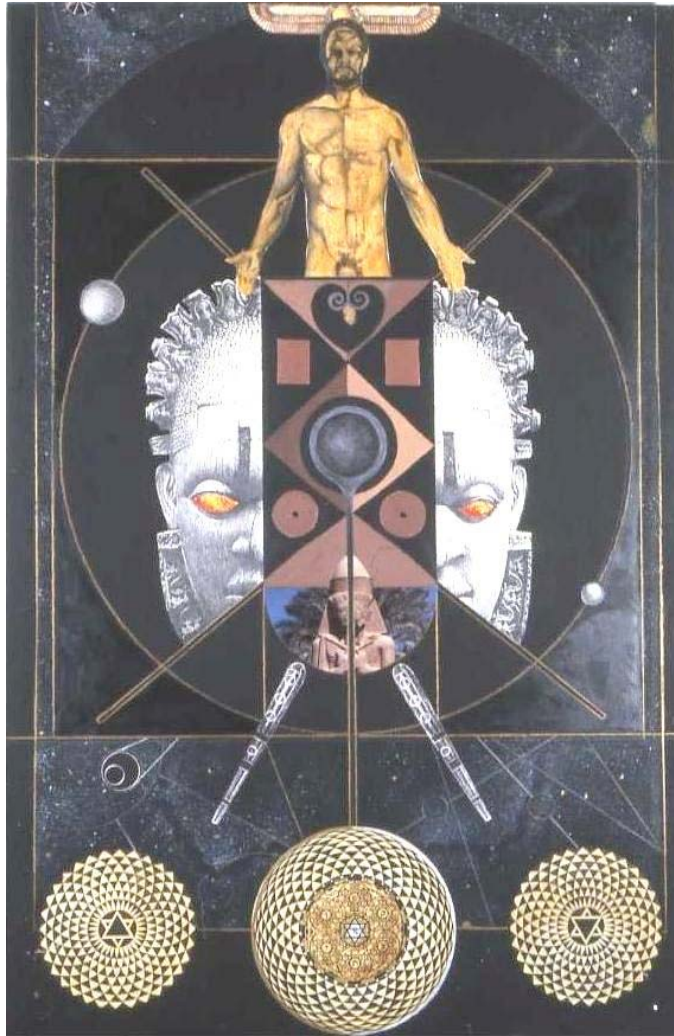
The following October a group of us held a modest memorial ritual of our own, following a workshop we had organized on lynching in downtown Atlanta. Activists and scholars from around the nation gathered on a Sunday morning by the banks of the Appalachee River, at the little crossing known as “Moore's Ford,” where George and Mae Murray Dorsey and Roger and Dorothy Malcolm were killed on July 25, 1946 by a group of white men, none of whom were ever prosecuted. One at a time, members of the memorial committee and students from the college where I teach quietly read the names of the four hundred and eighty-eight persons known to have been lynched in Georgia. Each name was precious, and yet there was a special poignancy to a phrase that recurred again and again, “Unknown Negro...Unknown Negro.”

Lynching snuffed out thousands of lives before their time, and even erased, in some instances, the identities of the dead for all time.

James Lawrence, who grew up hearing whispered stories of the Moore's Ford killings, was at church that morning and couldn't make it to the memorial service. But he heard about it from some mutual friends and has talked about it a few times since. As an "old time civil rights activist," he says he's lately been close to giving up on the current generation of young people. But gazing at photographs of the students at the ceremony he allows that there might be some hope after all. Remarking at the racial mix in the photographs, of African American, Latino, White and Asian students, he jokes, "you've got a regular U.N. there. Who knows what they'll get up to?"

A few days later, James and I took another walk in the woods. Once more, we passed that old oak. Thinking of our earlier conversation, I asked him if he found this sight disturbing. He shook his head, puzzled: "Hey, it's just a tree." Freud, I suspect, would be pleased: sometimes a tree is only a tree. Of course, many might argue that in the shadow of America's violent history against its own citizens of color, a single workshop, a single memorial service, or a single exhibition of photographs won't change anything fundamentally. Aren't these just symbols, images, ephemeral traces of light and shadow?

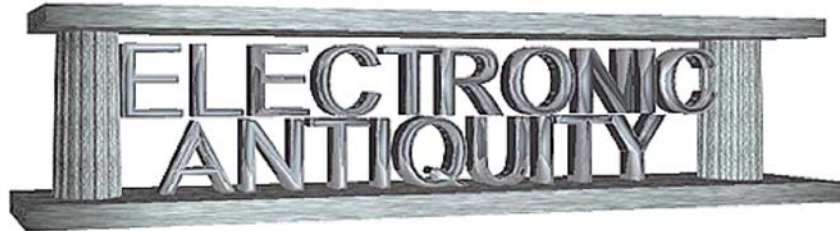
Yet when traversing haunted landscapes, light and shadow are, sometimes, the only things we have to work with. James took considerable comfort, the following spring, from the thought that the exhibition of lynching photographs would open in Atlanta, capital of the "New South," on May 1st, of all days. Mayday. Once an ancient rite of mystery, celebrating the land's regeneration on the day of spring's return, now dedicated internationally to the dignity of labor and to our common humanity. What better day to bring some old images of dark times out into the light, and stamp them, once and for all, "returned to sender"?



Keven Sipp. "Mystery School," 1996.

WORKS CITED

- Allen, J. et al. 2000. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers
- DuBois, W.E.B. 1996. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Feeley-Harnik, Gillian. 1991. *A Green Estate: Regaining Independence in Madagascar*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Gomez, Michael A. 1998. *Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Haley, A. 1997. *Roots*. New York: Dell.
- Morrison, T. 1987. *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Plume.
- Patterson, O. 1998. *Rituals of Blood: The Consequences of Slavery Across Two Centuries*. Washington, D.C.: Civitas Books.
- Rival, L., ed. 1998. *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism*. New York: Berg.
- Thompson, R.F. 1983. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Vlach, J.M. 1990 *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Wright, R. et al. 2001. *Black Voices: An Anthropology of African American Literature*. New York: Signet Classic.



Going by the Trees: A Response to Auslander

Peter Bing, Emory University

pbing@emory.edu

For a Classical scholar, Mark Auslander's paper "Going by the Trees" inspires strange emotions: On first reading I was filled with wonder and barely suppressed envy at the very different circumstances under which a contemporary anthropologist operates—above all, at his access to living, breathing human beings from all strata of society. The thought of being on a first name basis with your informant, of going on a hike with him, helping him clear foliage from family graves, is positively mind-boggling. Anyone wishing to look into ancient tree-lore, by contrast, finds himself stuck at the far end of a temporal chasm spanning thousands of years, trying to piece together fragments of speech that happen for whatever reason to have made it across the divide, endeavoring to tease nuance out of languages no one can speak, and constrained to do so through the medium of books, the end-product of that very process (that *dubious* process) which formed the starting point for many of the reflections at the heart of this paper, the pulping of trees. For classicists, all hikes we can take with our subjects, any foliage we can clear from their graves, are mere metaphors. Our choice of informants, moreover, is severely limited: The voices that reach us across the divide are overwhelmingly male, educated, upper class—if we hope to recoup even the dim echo of *other* voices we must read against the grain. Still, the very distance and otherness of ancient Greece and Rome can open a space for productive questions. As often, the meaning may lie in the difference. However, since I am responding to a living, breathing scholar, I will at least adopt the anthropologist's prerogative and refer to our author by his first name.

“Trees are good to think with,” Mark tells us in reference to modern-day Georgia. And that holds good for ancient times as well. Among his female informants Mark found that trees could embody a sense of “profound belonging”, “family continuity and regeneration”. Unfortunately, ancient authors do not ask women what they think about trees—or much else for that matter. But a similar view appears prominently in the mainstream ideology of Athens and Rome. For these communities trees were potent emblems of civic identity and survival. At Athens, for instance, there was the sacred olive atop the acropolis, gift of the goddess Athena herself in token of her love for the city. Herodotus illuminates the tree’s significance against the backdrop of the Persian invasion when, in the year 480 B.C., the Persians sacked the city and burned its temples:

"On the Acropolis", he says, "there is a spot which is sacred to Erechtheus the earth-born [ancestral king of Athens], and within it is an olive-tree and a spring of salt water. According to the local legend they were put there by Poseidon and Athene, when they contended for possession of the land, as tokens of their claim to it. Now [the Persians] destroyed this olive by fire together with the rest of the sanctuary; nevertheless on the very next day, when the Athenians, who were ordered by the [Persian] king to offer the sacrifice, went up to that sacred place, they saw that a new shoot eighteen inches long had sprung from the stump. They told the king of this." (Hdt.8.55. Another source, Pausanias 1.27.2, says the new shoot was 4 feet long!)

This story, with its reference to the autochthonous, ancestral king Erechtheus, is clearly meant to convey the unbroken regenerative power of Athens. And one may plausibly surmise that it emerged in response to the catastrophic destruction of the community, a miracle-tale that helped undergird the work of “re-membering”, not unlike some of the narratives Mark describes of how “communities reconstitute themselves”. It even employs that three-fold narrative rhythm of life—death—and rebirth, which Mark calls “the classic progressions of Mystery”. But more of that anon.

The Romans likewise saw the health of their state embodied in a tree, the miraculous cornel-tree on the Palatine. Plutarch tells how Romulus, the city’s founder, threw a javelin all the way from the

Aventine. It stuck so fast in the ground that no one was able to pull it out. Instead, the wood sprouted roots and grew into a tree, which came to be considered one of the most sacred objects in Rome. According to Plutarch, “whenever the tree appeared to a passerby to be drooping, he set up a hue and cry which was echoed by the people in the street, and soon a crowd might be seen running helter-skelter from all sides with buckets of water, as if they were hastening to put out a fire” (thus Frazer’s paraphrase of Plutarch’s *Life of Romulus* 20, at *Golden Bough* part I vol.2, p.10).¹ This account, which Plutarch narrates with the droll objectivity of an outsider, vividly communicates that urgent sense on the part of the Romans that their civic well-being was bound up with the health of a tree.

Mark observes further how in the African American context trees function as symbols of enduring stability in a inconstant world, and of hidden steadfastness, secret knowledge—particularly situated in their roots. These, too, strike a familiar chord for readers of Classical literature, for in the *Odyssey* we find the famous token of the bed, the final test of Odysseus’ identity before Penelope acknowledges his return (23.177-204). Penelope bids the maid Eurykleia move out of the bedchamber that very bed that Odysseus himself had once built for them. The hero responds with angry disbelief since this bed has a peculiar feature, a secret shared only with Penelope and with one serving woman: Odysseus had anchored this bed to the ground by fashioning one of its posts out of a tree-trunk still rooted in the earth. Its removal would imply that the couple’s most intimate secret, the physical embodiment of their marriage bond, had been profaned. Odysseus’ reaction proves to Penelope that her husband has truly returned, as the bed’s continued fixity shows Odysseus that his marriage is intact.

In other ways, however, Greek and Roman tree-lore exhibits striking differences. Trees were commonly thought to be animated, in much the same way as Mark’s friend James describes when he says “That tree’ll talk to you if you stand out here in the dark. You’ll hear that Negro crying out to you man.” But in Classical antiquity, the animating spirit of the tree was typically gendered female.² The spirits were

¹ Tacitus (*Annals* 13.58) also tells of the sacred fig tree in the Roman forum: “The fig-tree, which 830 years earlier had sheltered the babies Romulus and Remus, suffered in this year. Its shoots died and its trunk withered. This was regarded as a portent. But it revived, with fresh shoots.”

² As Prof. R. Hörschele suggests to me (*per litteras*), basically all Greek and Latin tree names are feminine in gender. Further, in ancient tales of

Nymphs, such as hamadryads, coeval with their trees (cf. *H.H. Aphr.* 264-272). Trees, moreover, are particularly associated with the worship of *goddesses* in our literary and artistic sources.³ Against the backdrop of the very common link between trees and spirits of the dead in other parts of the world, the rarity with which that association occurs in the Classical world is striking.⁴

The typical narrative setting for encounters with animate trees is thus *not* a cemetery - for these were not the carefully fenced in enclosures we think of from our own environment; tombs lined the highway just beyond the city gates, forming a crowded, dusty *necropolis*, a city of the dead. Rather, their setting is the sacred grove of a goddess. And here we find numerous cautionary tales recounting the horrific punishments suffered by those who cut down trees.⁵ In Classical lore, the trees retaliate, and they have gods (and sacred laws) to back them up!

Another interesting difference concerns hanging. In Classical sources, hanging is regarded as unmanly and is a mode of death associated especially with women (that, for instance, is already how Penelope's maids die at *Odyssey* 22.461-472)⁶—something about which I will have more to say in a moment. Yet it is the African-American *men*

transformation, such as those recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, it is mainly women who are turned into trees. Christian Zgoll, in his book *Phänomenologie der Metamorphose: Verwandlungen und Verwandtes in der augusteischen Dichtung* (Tübingen 2004) observes (p. 57) that the only males changed into trees are, in one way or another, effeminate: Attis (castrated), Ampelos (beloved of Dionysus), Kyparissos (beloved of Apollo), the Messapian youths (competitors with nymphs in a dance contest), an Apulian youth (imitating the dance of nymphs at *Ov. Met.* 14.517-26), and Philemon (an old man who functions quasi as a house-wife).

³ Burkert 1985: 86, section II 5.1.

⁴ I am not denying the association of trees with death in the ancient sources. Already at *Iliad* 6.146-8 for instance, Glaukos compares humankind to the generations of leaves scattered on the ground by the wind and growing again from the tree in spring. This idea may be echoed in ancient mystery initiates' custom of burying *lamellae* – inscribed sheets of gold in the shape of a leaf – in their tombs. See also the connection of trees with the hanging of females in Classical sources, discussed below.

⁵ cf. Henrichs 1979.

⁶ cf. Loraux 1987: 9-10: "It...turns out – but is it just chance? – that hanging is a woman's way of death: Jocasta, Phaedra, Leda, Antigone ended in this way, while outside tragedy there were deaths of innumerable young girls who hanged themselves".

in Mark's study who have more violent associations with trees. I suspect that one reason for this is because *they* formed the main targets of lynching. The victims' gender entails a whole web of culture-specific associations.⁷ Here, it invites what Mark calls the "pervasive Christological imagery" associated with lynching. For crucifixion—a form of execution especially favored by the Romans, but going back to ancient Near Eastern practices - was generally inflicted on men, preeminently on Jesus, the Christian messiah. Due to the enduring influence of Christianity, the tale of Jesus' crucifixion has survived the precarious passage across the divide separating us from Classical Antiquity, remaining *the* critical event in Christianity's self-narrative. Such rare continuity does not occur without adaptation, however: the cross is understood in new ways under different circumstances and in changing conceptual frameworks. Many African Americans, then, when looking through the filter of their religion, see Christ's cross embodied in the lynching tree, a new Golgotha in each lynching site. The tree thus helps situate these viewers within a tradition reaching across time, one in which an ancient event invests a modern-day occurrence with meaning. At the same time, the present-day world also decisively shapes the understanding of the past. For here the cross (a man-made artifact fashioned of wood) is transformed, re-naturalized as tree—returned to its roots, so to speak - and thus endowed with a range of new meanings reflecting traditions of the African American community: the tree's status as a living organism that may be thought of as animated; its ability to absorb what goes into the earth around it; the span of its life embracing multiple generations, which makes it an ideal witness; its rootedness to a particular spot, etc.

Trees and their wood have always lent themselves to such cultural adaptation. And it is worth pointing out that we find a comparable, if opposite, transformation—not cross into tree, but tree into cross - already in Medieval times, in Jacopo da Varagine's "Invention of

⁷ This is also true for the hanging of women in ancient sources. There, as Loraux points out (*ibid.*), the instrument of death is not always "the customary rope", but rather "those adornments with which they decked themselves and which were also the emblems of their sex, as Antigone strangled herself with her knotted veil. Veils, belts, headbands - all these instruments of seduction were death traps for those who wore them, as the suppliant Danaids explained to King Pelasgus [*Suppl.*455-66]." Hanging, moreover, "closes forever the too open bodies of women, hanging is almost latent in feminine physiology".

the Holy Cross" from his 13th century *Legenda Aurea*:⁸ Here we learn that when Adam died, his son Seth planted a shoot from the Tree of Knowledge on his father's tomb. In time this grew into a mighty tree, which King Solomon particularly admired. Consequently, the king resolved to use it in the construction of his temple. But somehow, try as they might, his workmen were unable to cut it in such a way as to make it fit into the structure. Instead, they used it to build a bridge. Soon after, the Queen of Sheba visited and, upon seeing the bridge, dropped to her knees in adoration before it, prophesying to the king that a man would one day be hanged upon this wood, whose death would mean the end of



Piero della Francesca, Legend of the True Cross: Adoration of the Sacred Piece of Wood (c. 1450-1465). Post-restoration. S. Francesco, Arezzo. Photo courtesy of Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali/Art Resource, NY.

⁸ For the Invention of the Cross, cf. [Ryan and Ripperger 1941](#): 269-76. Memorably, the tale forms the basis for Piero della Francesca's great mid-15th century cycle of frescoes in the church of San Francesco in Arezzo.

the kingdom of the Jews. Naturally, King Solomon was alarmed and, hoping to prevent the prophecy from coming true, ordered the bridge dismantled and buried. Miraculously, however, a spring sprang up at the burial place, and later—just at the time of Christ's passion - the wood spontaneously floated to its surface, was discovered, and served as the material from which the cross was made. Here Christianity's relationship to Judaism—its shared origin as well as its new identity—is figured in the metamorphosis of the Old-Testament's Tree of Knowledge into the instrument of Jesus' death. Moreover, the wood from the tree becomes the battleground revealing the true heir to the legacy of Adam, for this wood somehow resists its inclusion in the structure of Judaism's greatest shrine, the temple of Solomon. At most, it can serve as a bridge—between Judaism and Christianity, one might say -, though it ultimately signify's the former's downfall.

Returning to our Classical sources now, and crucifixion aside, when it comes to hanging we are struck by how the typical victim was female. Countless Classical myths relate the death of heroines. One such is the tale of Erigone, daughter of Ikarios. It was to Ikarios that Dionysus first gave the gift of wine. A generous man, he shared the new beverage with his neighbors, who quickly became drunk and, unaccustomed as they were to alcohol, thought Ikarios had poisoned them. Therefore they killed him. Upon finding his corpse, his daughter Erigone hanged herself from a tree in grief. “When the Athenians afterwards were struck by a plague, the Delphic oracle advised them to hang up figures and masks in the trees and to put their children in swings in honor of Erigone.”⁹ The dreadful hanging was thus commemorated and redeemed by a “Swinging” festival, the Attic *Aiora*.

With its substitution of harmless “child's play” for the deadly act of hanging, this charming ritual represents precisely the sort of “inversion ritual” Mark speaks of. But here, as typically in Greek religion, the unspeakable act that the rite commemorates lies safely in the mists of a remote past, the process of confronting it is already complete, its symbolic transformation already accomplished. What I find fascinating in Mark's account, where the unspeakable acts belong to our immediate past, is that he allows us to observe those rituals emerging.

I close by returning to the question of the Mysteries. Mark claims that modern attempts to confront the legacy of lynching are organized according to the logic of mystery rites. In discussing Winfred

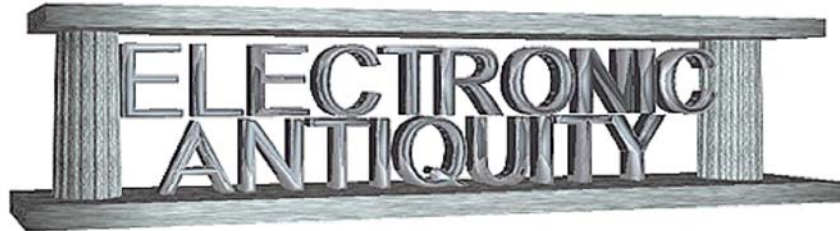
⁹ [Simon 1983](#): 99.

Rembert's account of surviving an attempted lynching, Mark characterizes it as a "narrative form", namely witnessing. Winfred's story, he says, "as he has shaped and reshaped it in his marvelous renditions, is one of the oldest stories of all...He was for all intents and purposes dead...And then he was reborn. Are these not the classic progressions of Mystery?" (p.5). Any similarity with mystery religion lies, as Mark's own terms reveal, *in the narrative structure*. But this structure of life, death, and rebirth, is common to a whole range of rituals. In particular, the broad categories of New Year's festivals and those of initiation have, as H. S. Versnel has lucidly shown, "a firmly related ritual and social function and follow, in essence, identical basic patterns: the old situation has to be taken leave of (symbol of death, fall, farewell: the *séparation*); there is a period of transition between old and new (sojourn in death, underworld, labyrinth, flood, foreign countries, a monster's belly: the *marge*); the new situation is accepted (rebirth, resurrection, reinvestiture, return and reintegration: the *agrégation*)."¹⁰ That pattern is common to literature as well, with no necessary link to ritual, much less to mystery ritual. What is interesting, however, is that Mark finds it useful to think of the present day attempts to deal with the heritage of lynching in terms of mystery ritual. One wonders whether this is the investigative scholar speaking here, responding to the veil of silence he has discovered, or the committed activist, persuaded by the allure of partially disclosed symbols to place his own hope in the power of the unseen.

¹⁰ [Versnel 1990](#): 64.

WORKS CITED

- Burkert, W. 1985. *Greek Religion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Loraux, N. 1987. *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Henrichs, A. 1979. "Thou Shalt Not Kill A Tree. Greek, Manichaean and Indian Tales." *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 16: 85-108.
- Ryan, G. and H. Ripperger. 1941 [1969] *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*. Vol. I London: Longman, Greens and Co. (1941); New York: Arno Press (1969).
- Simon, E. 1983. *Festivals of Attica: an Archaeological Commentary*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Versnel, H.S. 1990. "What's Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander." In L. Edmunds, ed., *Approaches to Greek Myth*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pp. 23-90.



Surveying the Mysteries: Epistemological Reflections on Multidisciplinary Inquiry

Mark Risjord, Department of Philosophy, Emory University
mrjsjor@emory.edu

Introduction

Any aspect of the social world that is secret, occluded, or covert presents epistemological challenges. Even in the best of circumstances, access to a society's secrets can be a matter of luck. One has to gain the trust of the right interlocutors, arrive at the right time in a ritual cycle, be of the right gender or age, and so on. Understanding ancient mysteries is even more challenging. Not only were they kept secret by their participants, the waves of time have effaced them. Is the assembly of these fragments hopeless? Is this field nothing but speculative mud, or is there some epistemological dry ground on which we can build?

The strategy explored in this volume is to bring the methods and theories of several disciplines to bear on the mysteries of the classical world. Perhaps if we can draw on contemporary ethnography, archeological investigation, literary interpretation, as well as philosophical, philological, and semantic analyses, we can penetrate the patina of time and secrecy. But why should the multiplication of disciplines help? Could it not just as easily produce an unintelligible cacophony? Our epistemic optimism is based on the notion that different perspectives on a single phenomenon can produce a better understanding. The metaphor of "triangulation," adopted from surveying, is appropriate here. When one wants to know the distance to a far shore or mountain top, one takes a bearing on the inaccessible object from two positions and calculates the height of the resulting triangle. The triangulation metaphor is familiar in the behavioral and health sciences, where the

epistemology of multi-method research has been theorized. The object of this essay will be to examine some of the possible benefits and dangers of multidisciplinary triangulation of the ancient mysteries.

The Prospects of Triangulation

D.T. Campbell is often credited with originating the concept of triangulation in his methodological writing in social psychology.¹ Social scientists have been willing to use whatever methods and theories come to hand, partly because of the sheer complexity of social phenomena. As a result, triangulation has become widespread. It is important to distinguish at the outset between *methodological* triangulation and *theoretical* triangulation. As the names suggest, methodological triangulation is the use of more than one analytical technique in a single inquiry, while theoretical triangulation brings more than one conceptual framework to bear on the evidence.

Methodological triangulation supports a single hypothesis with several kinds of evidence gathered and analyzed with different methodologies. For example, Holzhausen's essay uses both a literary and historical analysis to address the question of whether Euripides' *Bacche* is evidence about the Dionysian mysteries. It may seem obvious that such a question would require both literary and historical analytical techniques. After all, the inquiry will require an understanding of the play with all of its tropes and devices as well as an understanding of the other historical evidence about the Dionysian mysteries. This is triangulation because the methods are distinct, and both are necessary to advance the inquiry. In general, methodological triangulation has three possible benefits. Multiple methods brought to bear on a single hypothesis may serve to *confirm* it to a higher degree than is possible with one method alone. Also, multiple methods may provide a more *complete* understanding than is possible with one method. Finally, the results of one method can suggest new questions that may be answered with the other method, something I have elsewhere dubbed "abductive inspiration."²

The benefits of methodological triangulation in the studies of the mysteries are fairly obvious. Without stopping to name the method, scholars have long been triangulating the mysteries. One has to because

¹ Campbell and Fiske 1959.

² Risjord *et al* 2001: 6-7.

there is such a wide array of evidence and all of it is fragmentary. There are etymologies, myths, plays, novels, philosophical treatises, artwork, and ritual objects. This multi-disciplinary conference has expanded the sources to include contemporary ethnography and the study of ancient architecture. Each of these kinds of evidence requires its own analytical techniques. The pieces of evidence need to be understood in context, and the different analytical techniques have different ways of contextualizing the evidence. Consider, for example, our understanding of Greek words and concepts. Philosophical analysis helps understand a concept by analyzing its dialectical role and the historical development of the philosophical views of which it is a part. This method emphasizes arguments and theories, and discounts literary context and figurative usage. A remark like Aristotle's about the homonymy of μῦς and μυστήριον may thus be tossed aside as mere word play. Enter Nikolay Grinster with a linguist's tool kit. The connotations of a word can be gleaned from its context of use. Pulling together a variety of contexts of use with historical and mythological evidence, Grinster is able to make a case for a deep connection between mice and mysteries. This linguistic analysis sheds light on Aristotle in a way that philosophical analysis never could. Moreover, it is consonant with a philosophical understanding of the text. Methodological triangulation thus allows us to distill meaning from these fragments by putting them into different contexts and subjecting them to different analytical techniques.

Theoretical triangulation is the use of more than one theory to understand a single phenomenon. An older view of theories took them to be nothing more than ways of organizing data. Philosophers of science now understand observation to be heavily dependent on theory. There could be no phenomenon without some prior conceptualization. A theory tells us what the phenomenon *is*, and hence it provides grounds for discriminating genuine from spurious evidence. As a result, theories can mislead as well as inform. There can be evidence that one theory treats as mere noise, while a different conceptualization would find a place for it in a larger system. The second theory might, of course, supplant the first, but it need not if the theories are consistent and they answer different kinds of questions about the data. In the social sciences and humanities we tend to be promiscuous with our theories. The hope is that different ways of conceptualizing the evidence might provide both a more accurate and a more complete understanding.

In MacGaffey's essay, he sets out to "construct a set of vantage points" from which we may speculate about the participants experience

of the mysteries. These vantage points are built on the high ground of anthropological theory. MacGaffey sees in Burkert's work an application of Turner's distinction between *communitas* and *societas*.³ *Societas* is a structured set of social relationships, while *communitas* is an unstructured and egalitarian connection among people. *Communitas* arises in liminal situations where social relationships are intentionally or unintentionally broken down. Initiation rituals often exploit the power of *communitas*, and Burkert's final analysis of the mystery experience invokes the powerful experience of fellow-feeling among initiates freed from their social roles. This theoretical model clearly presupposes the conception of a person as autonomous. The person must exist independently of the social roles, if she is to be able to free herself from them and experience *communitas*. MacGaffey contrasts this individualistic conception of the person with a model that regards the person as constituted (in large part) by social relationships. Applied to his own fieldwork, this model understands the liminal experiences of initiation rituals as reiterating and reinforcing the social relationships that are temporarily broken down.

MacGaffey's theoretical triangulation permits us to think about the mysteries in terms of structure and liminality without reifying the participant as an autonomous individual who chooses to be initiated. This means that the question of how the individuals experienced the mysteries must change. There may be no single experience shared by the individuals, hence it makes no sense to ask about *the* extraordinary experience. Rather, the participants' experiences were probably influenced by the range of motivations and expectations with which they approached the initiation. Theoretical triangulation here does more than give us a more complete understanding. It changes our understanding of the phenomenon, and thereby changes the kinds of question we can ask about it.

The Perils of Triangulation

Reading the vast literature in the social and health sciences that self-consciously uses triangulation, one might get the impression that it is a method that always yields positive results. This is a danger sign to the methodologically minded. A method that cannot show a hypothesis to be false cannot show it to be true either. While proponents write

³ Burkert 1987; Turner 1969: 96-97;131-165.

optimistically, methodological triangulation can undermine a hypothesis just as easily as it can support it. Indeed, the contributions to this conference are full of critical uses of triangulation. Triangulation is used critically when evidence gathered and analyzed by several methods make a thesis less likely than it was when supported by one sort of evidence alone. Study of the mysteries certainly provides the opportunity for this sort of criticism. In this conference, anthropologists and classicists are exploring the same theses with different bodies of evidence and analytical devices. If this combination is to be successful, then there ought to be some older views of the mysteries that are rejected or modified. These will be theses held by classicists and defended using their textual methods. The thesis will be rejected by the combination of anthropological evidence and a different reading of the text. Perhaps Grinster's discussion of Aristotle's homonymy and Holzhausen's discussion of the *Bacchae* fall into this category.

Methodological triangulation thus can undermine as well as support hypotheses, but this raises a difficulty for its application. Why should classicists be convinced by anthropological argument? One can imagine a classicist arguing that her thesis is supported by well-established interpretive methods. The anthropologist's results may conflict with the thesis, but these methods were designed to interpret the speech and action of living subjects, not pull together different aspects of a text into a coherent interpretation. Anthropological arguments, the classicist might conclude, should carry no weight in classics. The argument may seem like special pleading, but it cannot be discounted so lightly. Methods have strengths and weaknesses that need to be considered when we evaluate their results. My suggestion for resolving this problem is that investigators pay very close attention to the questions they are asking and answering. Inquiry, whether textual, ethnographic, or linguistic, is a matter of asking questions. Theses and interpretations are answers to these questions, and there is a deep relationship between the questions asked and the methods used to answer them.⁴ Where the classicist and the anthropologist are asking the same questions, they are bound by the logic of their question to weigh the relevant answers, regardless of discipline from which they arise.

The other side of this coin is too often missed: where inquirers are answering different questions, their answers need not conflict. Unfortunately, inquirers are not always as clear about their questions as

⁴ see [Risjord 2000](#): ch.s 4 and 5.

they could be. The result is the familiar sort of rancorous dispute where the participants eternally argue past one another. This is another lesson for would-be triangulators of method. The multiplication of evidential sources and analytical tools is not an intrinsic epistemic good. There must be some reason to think that the sources and methods are relevant to the inquiry. I have suggested that questions provide the link between the evidence and analysis on one hand and the goals of the inquiry on the other. A piece of evidence and its associated method are relevant to an inquiry if they are necessary to answer the questions that constitute the inquiry. Close attention to the questions thus cuts both ways. It tells us when we need to attend to the evidence and methods provided by another discipline, and it tells us when methodological triangulation is going to be useless.

A final source of difficulty for triangulation is the consistency of the methods or theories used. The inconsistencies for which we must be alert are not going to be obvious and superficial. If two theories are direct competitors—answering the same questions with conflicting theses—then no competent investigator is going to try to use both at the same time. Rather, the conflicts will run deep, and only be exposed by a careful analysis of the theory's (or method's) presuppositions. Here one thinks again of MacGaffey's theoretical triangulation. Turner's distinction between *societas* and *communitas* presupposed an individualistic and autonomous conception of the person. MacGaffey's own fieldwork was best interpreted by a concept of the person that treated persons as locations in a social space. These conceptions of the person stand in conflict, and unless the conflict is resolved, the two conceptual schemes cannot together yield anything but confusion. MacGaffey is, of course, quite aware of the possible conflict here. He is careful to insist that his distributed or relational model treats the person as both individual and social. As he says, the "Kongolese make a distinction between ordered 'society' and the 'autonomous' individual, much as Americans do, but attach opposite moral values to it." I am arguing that this is a crucial turn in his argument. Without it, he would not be triangulating with theories, but using one theory to argue against the other.

Methods have presuppositions, and these presuppositions can conflict just as they do in theories. For example, Grinster pulls together folk etymologies with etymologies done by contemporary scholars. The former gives us some evidence about how the participants in the mysteries might have conceptualized mice and mysteries. This

presupposes that the meanings of the different words are related in the minds of real people. A scholarly etymology, however, does not aim to discover meaning as it was in the minds of historical agents. These etymologies presuppose that the meaning of the words can be found in their context of use (in this case textual use), and that something unified can be said about a word's meaning as it is used in different texts. The authors may have lived centuries apart, or in different parts of the ancient world. There is a *prima facie* conflict between thinking of meaning as embodied in the mind of an individual and thinking of meaning as embodied in texts. While Grinster does not comment on this potential conflict, I think it can be resolved. What this shows is that we need to be very careful drawing conclusions from Grinster's evidence: we cannot move immediately from historical etymologies to conclusions about how the participants thought about or experienced the mysteries.

Conclusion

Methodological and theoretical triangulation thus hold promise for the study of the ancient mysteries. Indeed, once the process has been named and brought to light, it is hard to see how any progress could be made without amalgamating the methods and theories of several fields. Yet, we should not open the alchemist's book lightly. The upshot of the foregoing ruminations is that successful triangulation depends on a careful analysis of one's own inquiry. We need to be clear about the questions asked and what will count as a relevant answer. This will make it possible to decide whether and how the results of another discipline bear on one's own line of investigation. We also must attend to the presuppositions of our questions, methods, and theories. Inconsistencies need to be resolved, and doing so often leads to better questions, clearer methods, and more subtle theories. Our epistemic optimism about multidisciplinary research is warranted, just as long as we approach it reflectively.

WORKS CITED

- Burkert, W. 1987. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Campbell, D. T. and Fiske, D. W. 1959. "Convergent and Discriminant Validation by the Multitrait-Multimethod Matrix." *Psychological Bulletin* 56 (2): 81-105.
- Risjord, M., M. Moloney and S. Dunbar. 2001. "Methodological Triangulation in Nursing Research," *Philosophy of Social Science*, 31 (1): 40-59.
- Risjord, M. 2000. *Woodcutters and Witchcraft*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Turner, V. 1969. *The Ritual Process*. London: Routledge.