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# Violence and the Sacred

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 Chapter Four

## The Origins of Myth and Ritual

 IN THE STUDY OF PRIMITIVE RELIGION two theories have long held sway. The older attributes the origins of ritual to myth, seeking in the mythological construct either some real event grounded in historical fact or a specific belief that gave birth to ritualistic practices. The more recent theory reverses the procedure, attributing to ritual not only the origin of myth but also the origin of the gods, and—in Greece—of tragedy and other cultural forms as well. Hubert and Mauss belong to the latter school of thought. In sacrifice they see the genesis of the gods: “The repetition of these ceremonies in which, either by custom or for any other reason, an identical victim reappears at regular intervals, ends by creating a sort of personality. The accumulation of past sacrifices thus culminates in the creation of a god, while the individual rite preserves its secondary effects.”<sup>1</sup>

Sacrifice is here visualized as engendering religion. This means, of course, that we cannot expect to learn anything about the origin of sacrifice itself from Hubert and Mauss; for when a phenomenon is used to explain other phenomena, it can generally be assumed that no explanation of the explanatory phenomenon will be forthcoming. The latter becomes a kind of unformulated dogma to be accepted on pure faith. Whatever makes other things clear does not need, apparently, to be made clear itself.

Hubert and Mauss have nothing to say about the origins of sacrificial practice and very little about its nature and function, even though their discussion is entitled *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*. As we have already seen, the notion that sacrifice serves primarily to bring us into contact with the “gods” makes little sense. For even if the gods are imaged forth at the conclusion of a long series of sacrifices, what are we to make of the preliminary rounds? What were the sacrificers thinking about at a time when they did not yet possess gods with

<sup>1</sup> Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, p. 81.

whom to "communicate"? Why—for whom—were those rites performed under the vast celestial void? The passion that prompts modern anthropologists to shift all blame onto the "gods" must not lead us astray. Sacrifice deals with humankind, and it is in human terms that we must attempt to comprehend it.

Hubert and Mauss's failure to come to grips with the origin and function of sacrifice makes their accurate description of its operation even more remarkable. One cannot attribute this accuracy to some a priori concept, for sacrifice still awaits its proper interpretation.

The resemblances among the rites practiced in disparate cultures are striking, and the variations from one culture to another are never sufficient to disguise the basic similarities. Hubert and Mauss can thus feel justified in describing the sacrificial process outside the context of any specific culture, as if it were some kind of technique. And a technique it truly is; but does this technique, as these two authors contend, have no real object and serve no function in the social process? How can an institution that is ultimately judged fantastical and imaginary manifest such remarkable similarities from culture to culture? It is no longer a question of appealing to "diffusionist" theories—they had already been discredited, and with good reason, at the time Hubert and Mauss were writing.

The more one reflects on these structural similarities, the more one is tempted to qualify them as not merely surprising, but downright miraculous. And while admiring the descriptive powers of Hubert and Mauss, one cannot help wishing they shared that irrepressible inquisitiveness that characterized some of their predecessors. Yet it was undoubtedly necessary to set aside a great many problems in order to schematize certain forms of analysis—and that is precisely what these two authors did. Undoubtedly a provisional limiting of the field of study serves to bring into relief certain areas that had previously been neglected and misunderstood.

In scientific research, as in warfare, it is always prudent—for the sake of morale—to represent strategic retreats in a positive light. All the same, workers in the field must take care not to mistake these retreats for glorious victories. In all the social sciences today the tendencies apparent in the work of Hubert and Mauss seem to have swept the field. It is no longer a question of relating ritual to myth or even myth to ritual. Such procedures invariably produced a circular train of argument, from which the only means of escape seemed to lie in designing some arbitrary point of departure. It is good that this futile mode of thought has been abandoned. Another positive development is the recognition that if a solution to the problem exists, it exists at the center of the circle, not on the periphery. What is decidedly not good

is the conclusion that either this center is totally inaccessible or there is no center at all.

Such pessimistic suppositions, based on past failures, purport to be transcendent but are in fact questions of philosophy and temperament. Past failures prove nothing outside their own context. It is foolhardy to condemn the search for a real origin simply because the search has not been successful so far. Antimetaphysical speculation is, after all, another form of metaphysics. At any moment a new theory may arise that will provide a satisfactory—that is, a scientific—answer to the question of the origins, nature, and function not only of sacrifice but also of religion in general.

It is not enough to declare certain problems null and void, after a cursory and purely "symbolic" investigation, in order to lay claim to a scientific approach. Science is not a refuge for philosophic skepticism, a pose of sage resignation. All great discoveries begin with a sense of curiosity that is today often dismissed as childish and a faith in the resources of language, even the most commonplace language, that is often condemned as naive. When the *mil admirari* of those bourgeois dandys caricatured by Stendhal passes for the last word in understanding, we have just cause for alarm. The relative failure of Frazer, Freud, or Robertson Smith is no reason to regard their insistence on getting to the bottom of things as foolish or outdated. To assert that there is nothing to be gained by seeking out the function and origin of ritual is to say that the language of religion is destined to remain forever a dead letter, a kind of gibberish—cleverly codified perhaps, but devoid of any real meaning.

From time to time a voice is heard calling our attention to the very strangeness of institutions such as sacrifice and attempting to satisfy our deep need to find a firm basis in reality for these institutions. Adolphe Jensen, for one, managed to reopen the great inquiries of the past—and it is perhaps for that very reason that his work has received so little notice from contemporary scholars. Jensen writes:

Man must have been subjected to some particularly overwhelming experiences to have been led to introduce such cruel practices into his life. What could have been the reasons?

What could have persuaded men to kill their fellow-beings—not in the wanton, amoral manner of barbarians succumbing to their instincts, but as a reflex of the awakened consciousness of the creator of cultural forms, seeking to comprehend the innermost nature of the world and to transmit this knowledge to future generations by means of dramatic representations? . . . Mythological thought always returns to what happened *initially*, to the act of creation, justly assuming that this occurrence sheds the brightest, most revealing light on a given subject. . . .

If murder plays such a decisive role in the sacrificial rite, this means that it must have played a particularly important part in the initial impulse.<sup>2</sup>

I do not deny the utility of recent descriptive contributions. But I believe the time has come for us to ask ourselves, once again, whether something of vital importance did indeed take place *initially*. We must return to the traditional questions, reframing them in terms of the rigorous methodology of our own times.

Once we have determined the underlying principle of our search, we should consider the a priori conditions that any theory must fulfill to command our scrutiny. If sacrifice has a real origin, the memory of which myths keep alive in one way and rituals commemorate in another, then it seems clear that we are dealing with an event that initially made a very strong impression. Very strong, but not unforgettable—for in the end it is forgotten. But this impression, although subject to later modification, lives on in the religious observances and perhaps in all the cultural manifestations of the society. There is no need to postulate some form of individual or collective subconscious to account for its survival.

The extraordinary number of commemorative rites that have to do with killing leads us to imagine that the original event must have been a murder. Freud, in *Totem and Taboo*, lucidly perceived this necessity. And the remarkable similarities among the sacrificial rites of various localities suggest that the murder was always of the same general type. This does not mean that the murder was a single historical event or that it belongs exclusively to prehistory. Although the event looks exceptional from the perspective of any given society, it seems quite commonplace in a broad, comparative context.

The sacrificial crisis and the surrogate-victim mechanism fulfill all the conditions required of a satisfactory hypothesis.

But, it may be protested, if such an event had actually taken place, science would already have discovered it. This assertion fails to take into account an extraordinary 'deficiency' of modern science. The presence of a religious element at the source of all human societies is indubitable; yet, of all social institutions, religion is the only one to which science has been unable to attribute a genuine objective, a real function. I contend that the objective of ritual is the proper reenactment of the surrogate-victim mechanism; its function is to perpetuate or renew the effects of this mechanism; that is, to keep violence *outside* the community.

**I** BEGAN BY REMARKING on the cathartic function of sacrifice, and went on to define the sacrificial crisis as the loss of this function, as well as of all cultural distinctions. If the unanimous violence directed against the surrogate victim succeeds in bringing this crisis to an end, clearly this violence must be at the origin of a new sacrificial system. If the surrogate victim can interrupt the destructuring process, it must be at the origin of structure. We shall see further on whether it is possible to verify this assertion with regard to those rites and regulations that are essential to a cultural order—festivals, rites of passage, proscriptions against incest, etc. At present we have good reason to believe that the violence directed against the surrogate victim might well be radically generative in that, by putting an end to the vicious and destructive cycle of violence, it simultaneously initiates another and constructive cycle, that of the sacrificial rite—which protects the community from that same violence and allows culture to flourish.

If this is true, the generative violence constitutes at least the indirect origin of all those things that men hold most dear and that they strive most ardently to preserve. This notion is affirmed, though in a veiled and transfigured manner, by the many etiological myths that deal with the murder of one mythological character by other mythological characters. That event is conceived as the origin of the cultural order; the dead divinity becomes the source not only of sacred rites but also of matrimonial regulations and proscriptions of every kind; in short, of all those cultural forms that give man his unique humanity.

In some cases the mythological characters are said to grant men whatever they need to live in society; in other cases they deny them these same benefits. In either case men manage to obtain what they require, sometimes by theft or trickery, but not before one of the mythological characters has been isolated from the others and subjected to some unusual accident or misfortune. This accident may be fatal; sometimes it is merely ludicrous. We must recognize in it a mask of the collective violence that terminates the crisis. Sometimes the central figure breaks away from the group and flees, taking with him the object in dispute. Generally he is overtaken and put to death; occasionally he is merely wounded or beaten. Sometimes it is he who demands to be beaten, and at each blow extraordinary benefits accrue, giving rise to a fertility and an abundance that assures the harmonious functioning of the cultural order.

The mythical narrative sometimes takes the form of a contest or game, a quasi-sportive or pugilistic event that evokes the rivalries inherent in the sacrificial crisis. Behind all these themes one can detect

<sup>2</sup> Adolphe E. Jensen, *Mythes et cultes chez les peuples primitifs* (Paris, 1954), pp. 206-7.

the outline of reciprocal violence, gradually transformed into a unanimous act. It is certainly astonishing that all human activities, and even the course of nature itself, are subordinated to this metamorphosis of violence taking place at the heart of the community. When relationships between men are troubled, when men cease to cooperate among themselves and to come to terms with one another, there is no human enterprise that does not suffer. Even the success of the hunt, of fishing expeditions, of food gathering is put in question. Therefore, the benefits attributed to the generative violence extend beyond mankind to nature itself. The act of collective murder is seen as the source of all abundance; the principle of procreation is attributed to it, and all those plants that are useful to man; everything beneficial and nutritive is said to take root in the body of the primordial victim.

Even Hubert and Mauss cite facts that should serve to bring socially aware investigators into direct contact with social realities. Side by side with myths in which the element of generative mob action is barely discernible, there exist others in which its presence is explicitly acknowledged. Such transparent myths are by no means confined to those cultures we Western humanists might be tempted to qualify as primitive or crude. Hubert and Mauss offer an exemplary specimen from Greece: "At Troezen, in the peribolos of the temple of Hippolytos, the death of the foreign goddesses Damia and Auxesia was commemorated by an annual festival, the *litbobolia*. According to tradition, the two virgin goddesses from Crete were stoned to death in the course of an uprising. These foreigners represent *the* foreigner, the passerby who often plays a role in the harvest festivals; and the lapidation is a sacrificial rite."<sup>3</sup>

Associated with the Oedipus myth are rites, like those involving the pharmakos, whose true significance becomes clear in the light of the above comments. The city of Athens prudently kept on hand a number of unfortunate souls, whom it maintained at public expense, for appointed times as well as in certain emergencies. Whenever some calamity threatened—plague, famine, foreign invasion, or internal dissension—there was always a pharmakos at the disposal of the community.

The complete explanation of the Oedipus myth—that is, the determining of the precise function of the surrogate victim—permits us to understand the aim of the sacrificers. They are striving to produce a replica, as faithful as possible in every detail, of a previous crisis that was resolved by means of a spontaneously unanimous victimization. All the dangers, real and imaginary, that threaten the community are sub-

sumed in the most terrible danger that can confront a society: the sacrificial crisis. The rite is therefore a repetition of the original, spontaneous "lynching" that restored order in the community by reestablishing around the figure of the surrogate victim, that sentiment of social accord that had been destroyed in the onslaught of reciprocal violence. Like Oedipus, the victim is considered a polluted object, whose living presence contaminates everything that comes in contact with it and whose death purges the community of its ills—as the subsequent restoration of public tranquillity clearly testifies. That is why the pharmakos was paraded about the city. He was used as a kind of sponge to sop up impurities, and afterward he was expelled from the community or killed in a ceremony that involved the entire populace.

If my thesis is correct, the pharmakos, like Oedipus himself, has a dual connotation. On the one hand he is a woebegone figure, an object of scorn who is also weighed down with guilt; a butt for all sorts of gibes, insults, and of course, outbursts of violence. On the other hand, we find him surrounded by a quasi-religious aura of veneration; he has become a sort of cult object. This duality reflects the metamorphosis the ritual victim is designed to effect; the victim draws to itself all the violence infecting the original victim and through its own death transforms this baneful violence into beneficial violence, into harmony and abundance.

It is not surprising that the word *pharmakon* in classical Greek means both poison and the antidote for poison, both sickness and cure—in short, any substance capable of perpetrating a very good or very bad action, according to the circumstances and the dosage. The *pharmakon* is thus a magic drug or volatile elixir, whose administration had best be left by ordinary men in the hands of those who enjoy special knowledge and exceptional powers—priests, magicians, shamans, doctors, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

The comparison of Oedipus and the pharmakos is not meant to imply that we accept the views of certain scholars (most notably the early-twentieth-century Cambridge Ritualists) who have proposed a purely ritualistic interpretation of tragedy. It is evident that the Oedipus myth is intimately associated with rites analogous to those involving the pharmakos, but we must take care not to confuse the myth and ritual, on the one hand, with the essentially antimythical and antiritualistic inspiration of the drama on the other. The Cambridge Ritualists and their disciples have based their interpretation of the role of the pharmakos on the idea that seasonal change—the "death" and "resurrection" of nature—constitutes the original model for the rite, its deep-

<sup>3</sup> Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Chapter 11, pp. 296-97.

seated meaning. In fact, there is nothing in nature that could encourage or even suggest such an atrocious sort of ritual killing as the death of the pharmakos. In my opinion, the sole possible model remains the sacrificial crisis and its resolution. Nature enters the picture later, when the ritualistic mind succeeds in detecting certain similarities between nature's rhythms and the community's alternating pattern of order and disorder. The *modus operandi* of violence—sometimes reciprocal and pernicious, sometimes unanimous and beneficial—is then taken as the model for the entire universe.

To portray tragedy as a repetition and an adaptation of the seasonal rites, a sort of *sacre du printemps*, is surely to strip it of those very elements that mark it as tragedy. This remains true even if it is correct ultimately to confer on tragedy a quasi-ritualistic value in Western culture. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists center their interpretation on seasonal and agricultural connotations that do play an important role in many festivals but that are ultimately derived, like all other connotations, from the victimization mechanism. The connection between the drama and the major mythological themes is undeniable, but in order to grasp its full significance we must transcend the approach that limits itself to thematic analysis and renounce those prejudices that might lead us to portray the "scapegoat" purely as a product of blind superstition, a nonfunctional device bereft of any operative value. In the scapegoat theme we should recognize the very real metamorphosis of reciprocal violence into restraining violence through the agency of unanimity. This unique mechanism structures all cultural values even as it conceals itself behind them; it is associated even more fundamentally with the double-edged images of myths and rituals. Sophocles "appends" nothing to the scapegoat theme; its "broader meaning" is not simply tacked on, nor has the tragic poet on his own initiative turned Oedipus into a "reflection of the human condition." Scapegoat effects are more deeply rooted in the human condition than we are willing to admit.<sup>5</sup>

My hypothesis is becoming at once broader and more precise. It should permit us to see through certain previously impenetrable reli-

<sup>5</sup> A number of French scholars have detected in the Oedipus of both myth and tragedy a pharmakos and a "scapegoat." According to Marie Delcourt, the institution of the scapegoat explains the fate of the infant Oedipus, abandoned by his parents: "Oedipus is offered as a scapegoat by a father called *Laius*, that is to say *Publius*, the representative of the people." The murder by exposure of weak or ill-formed infants was extremely widespread and is certainly associated with the concept of the surrogate victim—that is, with the unanimous basis of all sacrificial rites. It is the indication of that unanimity among the general populace that Marie Delcourt has touched upon here (*Légendes et cultes de héros en Grèce* [Paris, 1942], p. 102. Cf. also her *Oedipe et la légende du conquérant* [Paris, 1944]).

gious acts, such as the execution of the pharmakos, and to discern their perfectly intelligible aims. As we will soon discover, this same hypothesis pertains not only to rites as a general category, but also to their most minute details. Hitherto I have examined only those sacrifices that involve human victims. The link between the rite and the functioning of violent unanimity is especially apparent when the original victim also happens to have been a human being. In such instances, the effort at imitation is easy to discern.

We should now ask ourselves whether animal sacrifices, too, cannot be defined as the mimesis of an initial collective murder. In my first chapter I suggested that there was no essential difference between human and animal sacrifice. If this is true, the origin of all sacrifices must be the same. The celebrated Judaic scapegoat and all animal rites of the same type lend strong support to my hypothesis. But there is surely no harm in pausing a moment longer to examine a "classical" case of animal sacrifice in order to demonstrate, if possible, its direct connection with the execution of a surrogate victim. If it can be shown that the sacrificial rites are indeed striving to reproduce the mechanism of violent unanimity and that the surrogate victim is indeed the key to all these rites, considerable new light will be shed on the matter of animal sacrifice.

Let us turn our attention to one of those rare societies in which sacrifice survives to this day as a living institution and whose customs have been diligently recorded by a trained ethnologist. In *Divinity and Experience*, Godfrey Lienhardt describes in detail several sacrificial ceremonies that he witnessed among the Dinka. I will summarize the general substance of his descriptions, taking care to emphasize those points that seem especially significant.

The insistent rhythm of choral incantations gradually captures the attention of a crowd of bystanders who at first appeared scattered and self-absorbed. Participants begin to brandish weapons in mock warfare. A few isolated individuals strike out at others, but without any real hostility. In these preparatory stages violence is, therefore, already present in a ritual form, but it is still manifestly reciprocal; the ritualistic imitation deals first with the sacrificial crisis itself, with the chaotic antecedents to the unanimous resolution. From time to time somebody detaches himself from the group to beat the cow or calf that has been

More recently, Jean-Pierre Vernant has taken up these ideas and exploits some of their possibilities in his thematic analysis of *Oedipus the King*: "Divine ruler and pharmakos: these are the two faces of Oedipus. It is this duality that accounts for his enigmatic aspect, that unites in him, like an ambiguous phrase, two inverse images superimposed one upon the other. To this inversion in Oedipus's nature Sophocles appends a broader meaning: the hero as a reflection of the human condition" (Vernant, "Ambiguïté et renversement," p. 1271).

ried to a nearby stake, or to hurl insults at it. There is nothing static or stilled about the performance; it succeeds in giving shape to a collective impulse that gradually triumphs over the forces of dispersion and discord by bringing corporate violence to bear on a ritual victim. In this rite the metamorphosis of reciprocal violence into unilateral violence is explicitly and dramatically reenacted. And it seems to me that the same can be seen to hold true for an infinite number of rites if one keeps a sharp eye out for signs (often, admittedly, fragmentary and elusive) that reveal the functioning of this particular metamorphosis. In the often-cited example of the Greek Bouphonia, the participants make a point of quarreling among themselves before turning their attention to the designated victim. All the mock battles that generally take place prior to sacrificial ceremonies and all the ritual dances whose formal symmetry is reflected in a perpetual confrontation between the performers lend themselves to an interpretation in which the performances are seen as imitative responses to a sacrificial crisis.

In the Dinka sacrifice it seems that the paroxysm takes place not at the death of the victim, but in the course of the ritual curses pronounced before its death. One gets the impression that these curses are in themselves able to destroy the victim; that it is, as in tragedy, for all practical purposes killed by words. And these words, even if they are not firmly fixed by custom, are fundamentally identical to the accusations hurled by Tiresias against Oedipus. The actual execution sometimes consists of a veritable stampede of the entire group directed against the victim. In this case, it is the victim's genitals that are singled out. The same is true of the pharmakos who is whipped on his sexual organs with herbaceous plants. There is thus some reason to believe that the animal victim is a stand-in for an original victim accused, like Oedipus, of patricide, incest, or of some other sexual transgression that signifies the violent abolition of distinctions—the major cause of cultural disintegration. The means of dispatching the victim may vary depending on the nature of the crime; but the death sentence itself remains invariable. The ritualistic mentality imagines that this death will result in benefits too great to be ascribed to a simple punitive measure. These benefits must be real. But the ritualistic mentality does not understand why they have accrued; the only explanations it can offer are mythic. However, this same mentality has a good notion of how these benefits are obtained, and it tries unceasingly to repeat the fruitful process.

The scorn, hostility, and cruelty displayed toward the animal prior to the ritualistic slaughter are replaced upon its death by a show of ritualistic veneration. In bearing away into death the scourge of reciprocal violence, the victim has performed its assigned function.

Henceforth the victim will incarnate violence in both its guises, beneficial and baneful; that is, it will personify the All-Powerful who rules from on high. Having been so flagrantly abused, it is only reasonable that the victim should be greatly honored—just as it was reasonable to banish Oedipus when he seemed the bearer of ill fortune and reasonable to honor him when his departure assured the community's well-being. That adopting the former attitude assures the latter result seems to confirm the rationality of the plan, despite its contradictory appearance.

Lienhardt himself defines the victim as a scapegoat who becomes the receptacle of human passions. We are dealing here with an animal pharmakos, a calf or cow that assumes, not some vague and ill-defined sins, but the very real (though often hidden) hostilities that *all the members of the community feel for one another*. Our portrayal of sacrifice as an imitation and reenactment of spontaneous collective violence in no way conflicts with the definition I proposed in Chapter 1. In fact, spontaneous violence contains an element of appeasement that can also be found in ritual sacrifice, though in diluted form. In the original event, it is unleashed violence that is checked and at the same time partially appeased; in the ritual reenactment, it is the more or less latent aggressions that are dealt with.

The community is both attracted and repelled by its own origins. It feels the constant need to reexperience them, albeit in veiled and transfigured form. By means of rites the community manages to cajole and somewhat subdue the forces of destruction. But the true nature and real function of these forces will always elude its grasp, precisely because the source of the evil is the community itself. The only way in which the ritualistic imagination can succeed in its self-appointed task—a task both painstaking and elusive—is by allowing violence a certain amount of free play, *as in the original instance*, but not too much; that is, by exercising its memory of the collective expulsion on carefully designated objects and within a rigorous framework.

In societies where sacrifice is still a living institution it displays the cathartic function I attributed to it in my first chapter. The catharsis is performed in a structural setting so strikingly similar to that of unanimous violence that one can only conclude that it is a deliberate, if not an entirely exact, imitation of unanimous violence.



ANY THESIS THAT MAINTAINS that ritual is the imitation and reenactment of spontaneous, unanimous violence may well seem fanciful, even fantastic, as long as one considers a few isolated rites. But when one widens the scope of the inquiry, supporting evidence appears at every turn. Seen from a broad perspective, certain

mythological and ritualistic analogies, previous overlooked, leap into view. Even a cursory examination reveals that the theme of unanimity recurs with extraordinary frequency in all aspects of religious life, in rituals, and in myths. It recurs in cultures so far apart, in forms so disparate, and in texts so diverse in nature that it is impossible to explain it away through some diffusionist theory.

As noted above, the Dinka sacrificial execution often takes the form of a stampede of young men, who trample the beast down and crush him by their sheer mass. When the animal is too large to be killed in this way, he is slaughtered in a more conventional manner; but a simulated stampede is still performed as a prelude to the slaughter. The sacrificial ceremony requires a show of collective participation, if only in purely symbolic form. This association of the collectivity with the killing of the sacrificial victim is found in numerous instances—notably in the Dionysiac *sparagmos*, which I will discuss later on.<sup>6</sup> All the participants, without exception, are required to take part in the death scene. The same is true for the Arabian camel sacrifice described in Robertson Smith's *Religion of the Semites*, and for a good many other sacrificial rituals.

It is a unanimous group that Odysseus and his companions plunge the red-hot stake into the Cyclops' eye. It is as a unanimous group that the gods of some of the generative myths conspire and bring about the death of one of their divine colleagues. In Hindu mythology the same motif recurs. The *Yadjour-Veda* speaks of a sacrificial ceremony in which a god, Soma, is to be put to death by the other gods. Mithra at first refuses to join his divine companions in the act, but he is finally persuaded to do so by the argument that the sacrifice will be totally ineffective if not performed by all. This myth offers a prescription for the correct performance of a sacrifice. Unanimity is a formal requirement; the abstention of a single participant renders the sacrifice even worse than useless—it makes it dangerous.

In the story of the murder of Hanuwele, mythological heroine of the Ceram Islanders, the sacrificers stamp on her grave in a manner that emphatically underlines the unanimous and collective character of the enterprise. The signs of unanimity displayed in some local myth can reappear in identical form in a ritual performed by some other community. For example, the Ngadju-Dayaks of Borneo first sacrifice slaves, then perform a burial rite that involves all the participants' stamping on the graves. In fact, the Ngadju-Dayaks demand total participation in all their sacrificial rites. The long drawn out agony of the

slaves' execution yields nothing to psychological explanations. What counts is the communal gesture of unanimity; therefore, all the participants in the sacrifice are required to strike the victim before its death. The ritualistic structure of the ceremony is strictly regulated and reflects the hierarchical distinctions that govern the cultural order. Animal sacrifices are performed in the same manner.<sup>7</sup>

Even in a society such as the Kaingang, wracked by reciprocal violence, the demand for unanimity reappears in bastard form: "The murderers never wanted to act alone. They insisted on the collaboration of the members of the group. To demand that the final blow be delivered by someone else is the usual practice at Kaingang murders."<sup>8</sup> There is no question of denying the psychological significance of such accounts; quite the contrary. In the absence of any collective structuralization, our only recourse is the psychological interpretation. No ritual context is available; evil violence runs wild.



THE FUNCTION OF SACRIFICE, as defined in Chapter I, not only allows for but requires a surrogate victim—in other words, violent unanimity. In ritual sacrifice the victim, when actually put to death, diverts violence from its forbidden objectives within the community. But for whom, precisely, is this victim substituted? Heretofore we could only conceive of this substitution in terms of individual psychological mechanisms, which clearly do not provide an adequate picture of the process. If there were no surrogate victim to transform the sacrifice from an essentially private concern into one involving the whole community, we would be obliged to regard the victim as a substitute for particular individuals who have somehow provoked the sacrificer's anger. If the transfer is purely personal, as it is in psychoanalysis, then sacrifice cannot be a true social institution involving the entire community. But sacrifice, as we know, is essentially a communal institution. "Individualization" marks a later, decadent stage in its evolution, a development contrary to its original spirit.

To understand how and why sacrifice functions as it does, we should consider the proposition that the ritual victim is never substituted for some particular member of the community or even for the community as a whole: *it is always substituted for the surrogate victim*. As this victim itself serves as a substitute for all the members of the community, the sacrificial substitution does indeed play the role that we

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Chapter 5, p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> H. Shärer, "Die Bedeutung des Menschenopfers im Dagakischen Toren Kult," *Mitteilungen der deutschen Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde* 10 (1940). Cited by Jensen, *Mythes et cultes chez les peuples primitifs*, p. 198.

<sup>8</sup> Jules Henry, *Jungle People* (New York, 1964), p. 123.

have attributed to it, protecting all the members of the community from their respective violence—but always through the intermediary of the surrogate victim.

This observation should clear me of any suspicion of “psychologizing” while eliminating a serious objection to basing the present theory on sacrificial substitution. If the entire community were not already subsumed under a single head, that of the surrogate victim, it would be impossible to attribute to the sacrificial substitution the significance we have claimed for it, impossible to establish a social basis for the institution.

The original act of violence is unique and spontaneous. Ritual sacrifices, however, are multiple, endlessly repeated. All those aspects of the original act that had escaped man’s control—the choice of time and place, the selection of the victim—are now premeditated and fixed by custom. The ritual process aims at removing all element of chance and seeks to extract from the original violence some technique of cathartic appeasement. The diluted force of the sacrificial ritual cannot be attributed to imperfections in its imitative technique. After all, the rite is designed to function during periods of relative calm; as we have seen, its role is not curative, but preventive. If it were more “effective” than it in fact is—if it did not limit itself to appropriate sacrificial victims but instead, like the original act of violence, vented its force on a participating member of the community—then it would lose all effectiveness, for it would bring to pass the very thing it was supposed to prevent: a relapse into the sacrificial crisis. The sacrificial process is as fully adapted to its normal function as collective murder is to its abnormal and normative function. There is every reason to believe that the minor catharsis of the sacrificial act is derived from that major catharsis circumscribed by collective murder.

Ritual sacrifice is founded on a double substitution. The first, which passes unperceived, is the substitution of one member of the community for all, brought about through the operation of the surrogate victim. The second, the only truly “ritualistic” substitution, is superimposed on the first. It is the substitution of a victim belonging to a predetermined sacrificial category for the original victim. The surrogate victim comes from inside the community, and the ritual victim must come from outside; otherwise the community might find it difficult to unite against it.

How, it may be asked, does the second substitution graft itself onto the first? How does the original violence succeed in imposing a centrifugal force on the rite? In short, how does the sacrificial technique operate? I will attempt to return to these questions, but at this point I wish to draw attention to the essentially mimetic character of sacrifice

with regard to the original, generative act of violence. Thanks to this mimetic aspect we can understand how the sacrificial process can exist and function, without being obliged to attribute to the ritualistic mind a manipulative ability or a clairvoyance that it most certainly does not possess.

It is entirely possible to regard the sacrificial rite as a commemoration of a real event without reducing it to the triviality of one of our own national holidays; or, for that matter, without ascribing it to some neurotic compulsion, as psychoanalysts are wont to do. A trace of very real violence persists in the rite, and there is no doubt that the rite succeeds at least partially because of its grim associations, its lingering fascination; but its essential orientation is peaceful. Even the most violent rites are specifically designed to abolish violence. To see these rites as expressions of man’s pathological morbidity is to miss the point.

It goes without saying that the rite has its violent aspects, but these always involve a *lesser* violence, proffered as a bulwark against a far more virulent violence. Moreover, the rite aims at the most profound state of peace known to any community: the peace that follows the sacrificial crisis and results from the unanimous accord generated by the surrogate victim. To banish the evil emanations that accumbulate within the community and to recapture the freshness of this original experience are one and the same task. Whether order reigns supreme or whether its reign is already challenged, the same model, the same plan of action is invariably proposed. It is the plan, associated with the victorious resolution of all communal crises, that involves violence against the surrogate victim.



**WE ARE EVOLVING A THEORY** of myth and ritual—in short, of religion as a whole. Up to this point the analyses of the crucial role attributed to the surrogate victim and to unanimous violence may have appeared too summary, too incomplete for this theory to seem much more than a working hypothesis. At this stage of our exposition we can hardly hope to have banished all the reader’s doubts. A thesis that attributes a *real* origin to religion demands the abandonment of too many currently accepted ideas and the rethinking of too many fundamental concepts to be readily accepted, especially when it is not susceptible to direct verification. If ritual imitation no longer recalls precisely what it is imitating, if the secret of the primordial event has been allowed to slip from its memory, then the rite involves a form of delusion that has never subsequently been understood.

No single rite will reproduce, point for point, the operations my hypothesis proposes as the origin of all rites. A delusion concerning its own factual basis—not the absence of that basis—is characteristic of



religion. And the source of this delusion is none other than the surrogate victim; or rather, the fact, which remains unperceived, that the surrogate victim is arbitrarily chosen. The ritualistic mind strives to reproduce the operation of violent unanimity without understanding its mimetic nature. If my hypothesis is correct, no single religious form will suffice to illuminate the whole picture, but a multiplicity of examples will cast light on its various aspects until everything gradually becomes clear and certainty prevails.

In order to verify my hypothesis, then, it must be applied to many different forms of ritual and myth, as far apart in content, history, and geography as possible. If it is correct, the complex rites will provide the most striking confirmation. The more complex a system, the more numerous will be the elements it strives to reproduce in the operation analyzed above. As most of these elements are, in principle, already in our possession, the most difficult problems should resolve themselves of their own accord. The scattered fragments of the system should cohere, and the unintelligible become intelligible.

The sacred monarchies of continental Africa have long resisted all attempts at analysis. In discussing the complexity of their structures, scholars have had recourse to such adjectives as "strange" and "aberrant." In an era when it was still believed possible to classify all rituals under more or less logical headings, the African rites were generally grouped under the rubric "Exceptions."

In one important group, situated between Egypt and Swaziland, the king is required to commit an act of incest, either real or symbolic, on certain solemn occasions—notably, at his enthronement or in the course of the periodic rites of renewal. Among the king's possible partners are virtually all the women formally forbidden him by matrimonial regulations: mother, sisters, daughters, nieces, cousins, etc. Sometimes the parentage is real, sometimes classificatory. In societies where the incestuous act is no longer actually consummated—if, indeed, it ever was—a symbolism of incest persists. As Luc de Heusch has pointed out, the important role played by the queen mother in these societies can only be understood in the context of ritual incest.<sup>9</sup> In order to understand royal incest we must take care not to wrench it from its context, as is too often done by writers captivated by its sensational aspects. This rite forms part of an overall ritualistic procedure that prescribes the other transgressions the king must commit before he takes office. For example, he must eat certain forbidden foods, and commit certain acts of violence. In some instances, he is literally bathed in blood and fed concoctions whose ingredients

<sup>9</sup> Luc de Heusch, *Essai sur le symbolisme de l'inceste royal en Afrique* (Brussels, 1958).

(bloody offal and refuse of all kinds) indicate their evil character. In some societies the whole enthronement ceremony takes place in an atmosphere of blood-stained confusion. It is not a question, then, of one particular forbidden act or of one act being particularly forbidden. On occasion the king is required to commit all the forbidden acts that are imaginable and possible for him to commit. The encyclopedic character of the transgressions, as well as the eclectic nature of the incestuous act, betray who it is that the king is supposed to incarnate: the paragon of transgressors, the man who holds nothing sacred and who fearlessly assumes every form of hubris.

We are not dealing here with royal peccadilloes in the class, let us say, of Louis XIV's mistresses—objects of amused forbearance, perhaps, but accorded no official position by the community. The African peoples close their eyes to nothing; in fact, they keep them wide open, and incest, in their judgment, often constitutes the *sine qua non* of accession to the throne. That is not to say that such infractions are no longer considered reprehensible when committed by a king. On the contrary, it is because of their ability to remain reprehensible that these infractions are selected. These acts bestow on the king a particularly potent form of pollution, which is repeatedly alluded to in the symbolic imagery of the ceremonies: "Among the Bushongs, for example, where rats are regarded as *nyec* (disgusting) and held as taboo, the king is formally presented at his coronation with a basket full of these rodents."<sup>10</sup> The theme of the leper-king is sometimes associated with this same ceremony; the new king is proclaimed the descendant and heir of a royal leper who was the first to occupy the throne.<sup>11</sup>

The cultures that practice royal incest sometimes offer an interpretation of it that cannot be taken seriously. It is asserted that the king chooses a wife from among his close relatives in order to preserve the purity of the royal blood. This explanation will not do. Clearly the incest, as well as the other "forbidden" acts, are designed to make the king the very incarnation of impurity. It is because of this impurity that the king, in the course of the enthronement and renewal ceremonies, is subjected to the ritualistic insults and abuse of his people. A hostile crowd denounces the misconduct of this miscreant, who is as yet nothing more than a criminal and a social outcast. In some instances the royal army stages a mock attack on the king's personal bodyguard and even on the king himself.

If one chooses to make a criminal of one's king and requires him to violate the most sacred laws, in particular the laws of exogamy, it

<sup>10</sup> J. Vansina, "Initiation Rite of the Bushong," *Africa* 25 (1955): 149-50. Quoted by Laura Makarius, "Du roi magique au roi divin," *Annales* 25, no. 3 (1970): 677.

<sup>11</sup> Makarius, "Du roi magique au roi divin," p. 670.

cannot be for the pleasure of "pardoning" him or of displaying one's generosity of spirit. On the contrary: all this takes place because punishment of the severest sort seems to be in order, and the needful insults and hostilities find their outlet in sacrificial ceremonies in which the king plays the chief role—the role of the original victim. I have insisted on the need to view royal incest in its proper ritual context. This context is not limited to the act itself; it appears also to include the real or symbolic sacrifice of the monarch. And the sacrifice of the king is clearly a punishment for his transgressions. The idea that the king is sacrificed because he has lost his strength or virility is as fanciful as the theory that royal incest preserves the purity of the family strain. Both theories are tardy afterthoughts, designed to supply an ideological basis for the rites. Few ethnologists take them seriously, and ethnological evidence offers good reason to doubt them. In Ruanda, for example, the king and the queen mother—clearly an incestuous couple—must periodically submit to a sacrificial rite that can only be regarded as a symbolic punishment for incest: "The royal pair appeared in public, bound like captives condemned to death. A bull and a cow, their substitutes, were clubbed to the ground and slaughtered. The king then mounted the flanks of the bull and some of the bull's blood was poured over him so as to carry the symbolic resemblance between the two as far as possible."<sup>12</sup>

It should now be clear what scenario the king is acting out and what place incest occupies in the plot. This scenario is very like the Oedipus myth—not by reason of historical affiliation, but because the mythic and ritualistic imaginations are using the same model in both cases. Behind the pageantry of the African monarchies lurks the specter of the sacrificial crisis, suddenly resolved by the unanimity arising from the generative act of violence. Each African king is a new Oedipus, obliged to play out his own myth from beginning to end, because ritualistic theory sees in this enactment the means of renewing and perpetuating a cultural order that is constantly on the brink of destruction. As in the case of Oedipus, there was a charge of incest associated with the original act of mob violence and serving as its justification, an accusation seemingly confirmed by the effective results of the collective action. The king is thus required to do *what he was originally accused of* and to do it not to public acclaim, but to the angry protests that accompanied the *original* accusation. In principle the charge of incest will at each successive enthronement give rise to the same indignation, the same collective violence that on the original occasion ac-

companied the slaughter that allayed the universal rage and led to the triumphant advent of the cultural order.

The relationship between royal incest and a prior accusation of incest is often confirmed by an etiological myth. H. J. Krige and J. D. Krige report such a myth among the Lovedu.<sup>13</sup> Incest presides over the birth of society; it is the bearer of peace and abundance to mankind. But incest is neither a first cause nor an essential condition. Although it may initially appear to offer justification for the act of sacrifice, on a deeper level it is the act of sacrifice that justifies the incest. The king reigns only by virtue of his future death; he is no more and no less than a victim awaiting sacrifice, a condemned man about to be executed. The sacrifice itself is not the first, but a ritualized form of the *original* outburst of violent unanimity.

Although the king is required to eat disgusting concoctions and commit all sorts of violent crimes, there is no reason to associate his performance with the avant-garde theater or to see him as a sort of anthero of the contemporary counterculture. The spirit behind these rites has nothing in common with such modern phenomena. Rather than welcome the powers of evil with open arms, the rites seek to exorcise them. The king must show himself "worthy" of his punishment—fully as worthy as the original outcast from whom the ceremony derives. It is important to cultivate the future victim's supposed potential for evil, to transform him into a monster of iniquity—not for esthetic reasons, but to enable him to polarize, to literally draw to himself, all the infectious strains in the community and transform them into sources of peace and fecundity. The principle of this metamorphosis has its source in the sacrifice of the monarch and subsequently pervades his entire existence on earth. The investiture hymn of the Mossis (Ouagadougous) expresses with classic concision a dynamic formula for salvation that only my hypothesis of the surrogate victim can render intelligible:

You are a turd,  
You are a heap of refuse,  
You have come to kill us,  
You have come to save us.<sup>14</sup>

The king has a genuine function identical to that of any sacrificial victim. He is the catalyst who converts sterile, infectious violence into positive cultural values. The monarchy might be compared to the factories that convert household refuse into fertilizer. In both cases the

<sup>13</sup> H. J. Krige and J. D. Krige, "The Lovedu of Transvaal," in *African Worlds* (London, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> T. Theuvs, "Naïre et mourir dans le rituel Luba," *Zaire* 14, 2/3 (Brussels) (1960):172. Quoted by Makarius, "Du roi magique au roi divin," p. 685.

<sup>12</sup> Luc de Heusch, "Aspects de la sacralité du pouvoir en Afrique," in *Le Pouvoir et le sacré* (Brussels, 1962). Cited in L. de Lagger, *Le Ruanda ancien* (Nannur, 1939), pp. 209–16.

resulting products are too potent to be applied at full strength; they must be used with moderation and caution and on occasion be mixed with neutral agents. The king "fertilizes" a farmer's field from a safe distance; if he passes too close the surface will be singed; if he walks on it, a blight will ensue.

The parallelism between the Oedipus myth and these African observances is striking. There is no theme in the myth or the tragedy that does not find an echo here. In certain cases the regulations relating to incest seem to reflect the double motif of infanticide and parricide, as in the formal edict that forever separates the king from his son. In other societies one can detect reflections of the other double motifs of the myth. Like the son of Laius, the king of the Nyoros has "two little mothers", and the chief of the Jukuns has two mistresses, whom Luc de Heusch compares to the Nyoro pair.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Moro-Naba*, film by J. Rouch and D. Zahan. Produced by Comité du film ethnographique de l'I.F.A.N. Cited by Makarius, "Du roi magique au roi divin," p. 683. This parallelism is undoubtedly rooted in the presence of a sacred monarchy of the African type in archaic Greece. Yet no matter how legitimate and even necessary this historical hypothesis may be, it does not really serve to explain the Oedipus myth. In order to explain the relationship between the myth, ritual, and tragedy, as well as its parallelism with the African observances, we must have perceived the real mechanism that hides behind all these cultural accretions—in particular the sacred monarchy, which can, by no means be considered the irreducible element in the analysis. We must grasp the role of the surrogate victim, that is, the conclusion of a crisis of reciprocal violence, brought about through unanimous accord directed or redirected against a victim. In "Ambiguïté et renversement," (pp. 1271-72), Jean-Pierre Vernant has brought together many mythological and ritualistic details that forcefully suggest the inadequacy of certain fashionable psychological assumptions and the obstacles they present to a true appreciation of the "scapegoat" role and associated phenomena:

The polarity between the king and the scapegoat (a polarity the tragedy situates at the very heart of the figure of Oedipus) was hardly invented by Sophocles. It is ingrained in the religious practices and social theories of the Greeks. The poet has lent it new meaning, however, in making it the symbol of man's fundamental ambiguity. If Sophocles chose the *tyrannos-pharmakos* to illustrate what we have called the "reversal" theme, it was because these two opposing figures appear symmetrical and to some degree interchangeable. Each regards itself as an *individual* responsible for the *collective* salvation of the group. In the works of Homer and Hesiod it is the king, an offspring of Zeus, who is responsible for the fertility of the soil, the herds, and the women. As long as he shows himself irreproachable (*amimion*) in the dispensing of justice, his people prosper; but if he falters, the whole community pays the penalty for the failing of this one individual. The gods then visit misfortune on all—*imios* and *lomos*, "famine" and "plague." The men kill each other, the women cease to bear children, the earth remains sterile and the flocks and herds no longer reproduce. When such a divine calamity descends on a people their natural recourse is to sacrifice their king. For if the king is responsible for the community's fertility and this fertility ceases, that indicates that the power invested in him as sovereign has somehow become inverted; his justice turns to crime, his integrity to corruption, and the best (*aristos*) seems to be replaced by the worst (*kakistos*). The legends of Lycurgus, Athamas, and Oinoclus therefore involve, as a means of putting the *lomos* to rout, the lapidation of the king,

Behind the Athenian pharmakos, behind the Oedipus myth, there is real violence at work, reciprocal violence brought to an end by the unanimous slaughter of the surrogate victim. In almost every case the enthronement or renewal rituals—and in some cases the actual, definitive death of the monarch—are accompanied by mock combats between two factions. These ritual confrontations, sometimes enlisting the participation of the whole community, recall the chaos and factionalism whose only cure lies in the surrogate victim. And if this violent treatment of a surrogate victim serves as a model everywhere, it is because it has actually proved effective in restoring peace and unity. Only the social utility of this collective violence can account for a politicoritualistic scheme that consists not only of constantly repeating the process but also of making the surrogate victim the sole arbitrator of all conflicts, proclaiming it a veritable incarnation of absolute sovereignty.

In many cases succession to the throne entails a ritual battle between father and son or between sons. Luc de Heusch offers a description of such a struggle: "The death of the king triggers a war of succession, a war whose ritualistic character can hardly be underestimated. The princes reputedly employ their most potent magic medicines to eliminate their fraternal rivals. At the core of this royal magic contest in Nkole appears the old theme of *enemy brothers*. Factions congregate around the various claimants, and the surviving brother is accorded the throne." As we remarked earlier, in a conflict whose course is no longer strictly regulated by a predetermined model, the ritualistic ele-

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his ritual murder, or the sacrifice of his son. But there are also instances where a member of the community is delegated to assume the role of the unworthy king, the antsovereign. The king then unloads on this inverted image of himself all his negative attributes. We now have the true pharmakos: the king's double, but in reverse. He is similar to those mock kings who are crowned at carnival time, when everything is set topsy-turvy and social hierarchies turned upside down; when sexual prohibitions are lifted, and their permitted, when servants take the place of their masters and women exchange clothing with men; when, in short, the throne is yielded only to the basest, ugliest, most ridiculous and criminal of beings. But once the carnival is over the anti-king is expelled from the community or put to death, and his disappearance puts an end to all the disorder that his person served to symbolize for the community and also to purge for it.

Vernant's observations on Oedipus and the African monarchies are equally applicable to many other cases, for they ultimately concern the ritualistic response to the presence of violence. Once we recognize the role of unanimity in the operation of the surrogate victim, it becomes clear that in these instances we are not dealing with gratuitous elaborations of superstition. That is why Sophocles' version should not be looked upon as something entirely new that adds a further dimension to the myth but as a reduction, the partial demolishing of its mythological meanings, both in regard to modern psychology and sociology and in regard to other ancient myths. The poet lends no "new meaning" to the royal scapegoat, he simply draws nearer the universal source of meanings.

ments disintegrate into actual events and it becomes impossible to distinguish history from ritual. This confusion is in itself revealing. A rite retains its vitality only as long as it serves to channel political and social conflicts of unquestionable reality in a specific direction. On the other hand, it remains a rite only as long as it manages to restrict the confictual modes of expression to rigorously determined forms.



**WHEREVER WE POSSESS DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS** of specific renewal rites, we observe that they, too, follow the general pattern of the sacrificial crisis, incorporating its original violence. These rites are to royalty as a whole what the microcosm is to the macrocosm. The royal rites of Incwala, in Swaziland, have received particularly careful attention.<sup>16</sup>

As the rites begin the king retires to his sacred enclosure, where he imbibes various noxious potions and commits incest with a tribal sister. These actions are intended to augment the king's *sikwane*, a term whose literal translation is "to be like a savage beast." Although this attribute is not the exclusive property of the king, it serves to set him apart from his subjects. The king's *sikwane* is always superior to anyone else's, even that of his bravest warrior.

During this preparatory period the people intone a hymn, the *síméno*, which expresses their hatred of the king and their desire to see him expelled from the community. From time to time the monarch, more "savage-beastly" than ever, puts in an appearance. His nudity and the black paint with which he has decorated his body serve as a symbol of defiance. There then takes place a mock battle between the people and the royal clan in which the very person of the king is at stake. Fortified in their turn with magic potions, and swollen with *sikwane*—though to a lesser extent than their chief—the armed warriors encircle the sacred enclosure and endeavor, as it seems, to take possession of the king, who is protected by his entourage.

In the course of the rites (presented here in abridged form), a symbolic execution of the king also occurs. With a touch of his wand the royal incarnation of violence transfers his own *sikwane* to a cow, thus transforming the animal into a "raging bull," which is then put to death. As in the Dinka sacrifices, the warriors hurl themselves *all together* and *without weapons* onto the beast, belaboring it with their fists.

<sup>16</sup> T. O. Beidelman, "Swazi Royal Ritual," *Africa* 36 (1966):373-405; P. A. W. Cook, "The Incwala Ceremony of the Swazi," *Bantu Studies* 4 (1930):205-10; M. Gluckman, *Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa* (Manchester, 1954); H. Kuper, "A Ritual Kingship among the Swazi," *Africa* 14 (1944):230-56; H. Kuper, *The Swazi: A South African Kingdom* (New York, 1964); E. Norbeck, "African Rituals of Conflict," *American Anthropologist* 65 (1963):1254-79.

During the ceremony the distance between the king, his entourage, the warriors, and the rest of his subjects is temporarily effaced. This loss of differences has nothing to do with "fraternization." Rather, it is the result of the violence that engulfs all the participants. T. O. Beidelman defines this portion of the rites as a *dissolving of distinctions*.<sup>17</sup> Victor Turner describes the Incwala as a play of kingship, in the Shakespearean sense of the expression.

The ceremony unleashes an increasing exaltation, a dynamism that draws its energy from the very forces it puts in play; forces that initially seem to claim the king as their victim but from which he eventually emerges as the absolute ruler. At first almost sacrificed himself, the king then presides at rites which show him to be the sacrificer *par excellence*. There is nothing surprising about this duality; it simply confirms the role we attributed to the surrogate victim, its ability to master all violence. Even when he is a victim, the king remains the final arbiter of the contest and can intervene at any point. He plays all the roles, and no form of violence, no matter how extreme or eccentric, is foreign to him.

At the height of the battle between the warriors and the king, the king withdraws once more to his enclosure. He reemerges armed with a gourd, which he hurls at the shields of his assailants. After this attack, the groups disband. H. Kuper's native informants told him that in time of war, any warrior struck by the royal gourd would forfeit his life. In the light of this information, the anthropologist suggests that we look upon the warrior whom the king singles out to be struck by the gourd as a sort of national scapegoat. This amounts to seeing him as a *double* for the king, a man who symbolically dies in his place, as the cow had done earlier in the ceremony.

The Incwala rites begin at the end of an old year and close at the beginning of a new year. A relationship exists between the crisis commemorated by the rites and the end of a temporal cycle. The rites follow certain natural rhythms, but these rhythms can scarcely be regarded as a prime factor in the ceremonies even if they occasionally seem to overshadow the violence. For it is the violence whose very presence establishes the essential function of all myths and rituals: to disguise, to divert, and to banish disorder from the community. At the close of the ceremonies a great bonfire is lit, and on it are consumed all the pollutions accumulated in the course of the rites and in the course of the past year. A symbolism of cleansing and purification pervades all the important stages of the ceremony.

<sup>17</sup> Beidelman, "Swazi Royal Ritual," p. 391, n. 1.



TO BE PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD royal incest must be perceived as part of a ritual pattern that is identical with the monarchy itself. The king must be looked upon as a future sacrificial object; that is, as the replacement for the surrogate victim. Incest, then, plays a relatively minor role in the proceedings. Its purpose is to augment the effectiveness of the sacrifice. And although the sacrifice, directly linked as it is to spontaneous collective violence, is perfectly intelligible without reference to incest, the incest is unintelligible without reference to sacrifice.

To be sure, the sacrificial element can disappear completely, while the incest or incest symbolism persists. This does not mean, however, that the sacrifice is subsidiary to the incest or that the incest can be considered without reference to the sacrifice. Rather, the participants have moved so far from the origin of events that they now regard their own rites from the same general perspective as Western observers (one is almost tempted to say "Western voyeurs"). The incest persists owing to its *very strangeness*. In the collapse of ritual—which in one sense is not really a collapse, since it prolongs and reinforces the original delusion—incest alone survives; it alone is remembered when all else has been forgotten. The African monarchy has now been reduced to a tourist attraction. In addition, modern ethnology has almost invariably isolated institutional incest from its context; it consistently fails to appreciate its meaning because it insists on viewing incest as an autonomous event, something so remarkable that it should have a significance all its own, without reference to the surrounding phenomena. Psychoanalysts perpetuate this error; one might say they are its chief perpetrators.

It is by means of incest that the king assumes the mantle of royalty, but the act itself is "royal" only in its demanding the death of those who commit it, in its harkening back to the original victim. This becomes apparent when we turn to a rather remarkable exception in the midst of those societies that prescribe royal incest; namely, a society in which the practice is formally and absolutely forbidden. One might suppose that such a refusal simply entails a reversion to the general rule that prohibits incest. But matters are not that simple. The practice is not merely rejected and forbidden as it would be in most societies, but these measures are accompanied by extraordinary precautions. The monarch's entourage undertakes to remove all his close relatives from his presence, and he is forced to imbibe, not fortifying potions, but debilitating ones. All of which means, of course, that an aura of incest surrounds the throne, an aura no less strong than those in

the neighboring monarchies where royal incest is obligatory.<sup>18</sup> These special precautionary measures are justified solely by the king's dangerous vulnerability to this particular transgression. Thus, it might be said that the basic criterion of royalty remains the same. Even in a society that formally excludes incest, the king replaces an original victim who is believed to have violated the rules of exogamy. It is as the heir and successor of this victim that the king is considered particularly susceptible to incest. The copy is assumed to have all the qualities of the original.

The general rule proscribing the practice of incest is here reaffirmed, but in such a peculiar manner that we can only regard it as an exception to the exception and classify it with the cultures that practice royal incest. The essential question is this: Why is the repetition of an incestuous act—invariably traced back to some original banished transgressor, some founding father or mythic hero of the community—regarded as salubrious by one society and noxious by its neighbor? A contradiction of this kind among communities whose religious outlooks, with the exception of their treatment of incest, are so very similar, seems to defy all efforts at rational inquiry.

The distribution of a religious theme such as royal incest throughout a cultural milieu of a certain range and variety suggests that "influences," in the traditional sense of the word, are at work. The incest theme cannot be "original" to each of these cultures; that much seems clear. Does this mean that my general hypothesis no longer applies?

I maintain that the original act of violence is the matrix of all ritual and mythological significations. Strictly speaking, this is only true of an act whose violence is absolute, so to speak: perfect, completely spontaneous, extreme. Between this instance of complete originality and the mechanical repetition of rites at the other end of the scale, we can assume the existence of an infinite number of intermediary forms.

<sup>18</sup> "The Nioika impose continence on their chief for the rest of his life. He is obliged to send away all the women of his household, wear a penis sheath at all times, and take sedative drugs. Among the Njumbas of Kasai, the 'chief wife' (the first wife of the chief) is required to take medications that produce not only sterility but a complete suppression of the menstrual cycle. The excessive character of these customs can be readily explained in terms of the conflict between a tradition of royal incest and the desire to allow no breach of the exogamic prohibition. The Pendes, in fact, regard any hint of royal incest with great severity, and they dismissed a chieftain from his position because he had once, as a warrior, treated his sister for an abdominal abscess: 'You have seen the nakedness of your sister; you are no longer fit to be our chief' (Makarius, "Du roi magique au roi divin," p. 671). On the Pendes, see L. Sousberger, "Etrus penins ou gaines de chasteté chez les ba-Pende," *Africa* 24 (1954), and "Structures de parenté et alliance d'après les formules Pende," *Mémoires de l'Académie royale des sciences coloniales belges* 4, no. 1 (1951).

The fact that certain religious and cultural themes pervade a vast area does not exclude the possibility that truly spontaneous collective violence, working through one of the intermediary forms and endowed with real (if limited) creative powers on the mythic and religious level, might occur in many places. This would explain the many variants of the same myth, the same cults, from locality to locality, and also the claim made by various places to be the birthplace of the same god.

It should be noted, however, that even though the myths and rituals are susceptible to infinite variation in detail, they all revolve around a few major themes, one of which is incest. As soon as a community begins to regard an isolated individual as responsible for a sacrificial crisis—that is, responsible for the disintegration of distinctions within the community—it follows that this same individual is accused of violating society's most fundamental rules, the rules of kinship. In short, the individual is considered essentially "incestuous" in nature. The theme of the incestuous outcast is not universal, but it is found in many widely scattered cultural areas. The fact that the theme turns up spontaneously in so many different places is not incompatible with the notion of cultural diffusion within a broad geographical expanse.

The surrogate-victim hypothesis offers a means of traversing the vast theoretical terrain between the passivity and excessively rigid continuity of the diffusionist theories, on the one hand, and the equally rigid discontinuity of modern formalism, on the other. While not excluding borrowings from other cultures, my hypothesis confers on these borrowed elements a large degree of autonomy within their new setting. This accounts for the strange contradiction of the strict requirement and the formal prohibition of royal incest existing side by side in neighboring societies. In each instance we can see the same incest theme, but reinterpreted in terms of local experience.

The ritualistic imagination strives to repeat the original generative process. The unanimity that regulates, pacifies, and reconciles supplants the opposite situation, displacing the paroxysm of violence that divides, destroys, and levels. The transition from disruptive violence to order and peace is almost instantaneous. The two different faces of the primordial experience are juxtaposed; unanimity is attained in the course of a brief and terrifying meeting of opposites. All sacrificial rites, then, reproduce certain forms of violence and appropriate certain associations that seem more suitable to the sacrificial crisis itself than to its cure. Incest is an example. In societies where it is an accepted practice, royal incest is regarded as a means of salvation and, in consequence, an institution to be carefully preserved. Such a reaction is perfectly intelligible.

The primary—in fact, the sole—purpose of the rite is to prevent the return of the sacrificial crisis. Incest is a product of this crisis, and even when it is attributed to the surrogate victim it still signifies the crisis; it retains a sinister connotation. We can understand, therefore, that the ritualistic mind might refuse to consider incest as a contribution to the community's salvation even in its association with the surrogate victim. It might persist in regarding incest, even when committed by the representative and heir of the original victim, as the ultimate act of evil, capable of plunging the community into a highly contagious form of violence.

Incest, then, is simply another aspect of the affliction that the rites are designed to prevent. But they attempt to prevent it by means of a cure that is intimately associated with the most virulent form of the affliction. The ritualistic mind thus finds itself obliged to separate what cannot be separated, and the solution must ultimately be an arbitrary one. The ritualistic mind is perhaps more willing than we are to admit that good and evil are simply two aspects of the same reality, but eventually it must distinguish between them; even in the ritualistic framework, where there are fewer differences than in any other area of human culture, a distinction between the two must be apparent. The purpose of the rite is to consolidate this difference, newly restored after the terrible undifferentiation of the crisis. There is nothing arbitrary or imaginary about the difference between violence and nonviolence, but men always treat it as a difference within a process that is violent from beginning to end. That is how the rite is made possible. The rite selects a certain form of violence as "good," as necessary to the unity of the community, and sets up in opposition to it another sort of violence that is deemed "bad," because it is affiliated to violent reciprocity. In the same way the rite can designate certain forms of incest as "good"—for example, royal incest—and others as "bad." It can equally well decide that all forms of incest are "bad," and refuse to admit even royal incest among those actions which, if not actually sacrificial in character, are still capable of contributing to the sacrificial powers of the monarch.

Given the fundamental importance to mankind of the transformation of bad violence into good and the equally fundamental inability of men to solve the mystery of this transformation, it is not surprising that men are doomed to ritual; nor is it surprising that the resulting rites assume forms that are both highly analogous and highly diverse.

That the ritualistic imagination can confront royal incest and derive two diametrically opposed solutions from it demonstrates both the arbitrary and the fundamental character of the difference between good (that is, sacrificial) and bad violence. In each culture, the inverse

solution can be felt behind each chosen solution. In societies where it is accepted and even an obligatory practice, incest, even royal incest, still retains a sinister connotation; it invites punishment and justifies the death of the king. But in societies where it is forbidden, incest has a certain beneficial quality, in that the king is perceived as having a special predilection for incest, and nothing closely associated to the king can be completely bad since the king brings unity and salvation to the community.

Although incest may have contradictory associations, it is not simply a pawn on a structural chessboard, to be moved about at will. Nor can it be added or subtracted from the cultural picture simply to satisfy the whims of intellectual fashion. We must take care that a formal structuralist approach does not strip it completely of its dramatic impact; nor must we permit psychoanalysis to pass it off as the meaning of meanings.



IT IS IN THE DOMAIN of general anthropology that orthodox Freudianism is most vulnerable. There is no formal psychoanalytical explanation of royal incest, not even of the Oedipus myth; no explanation of the interesting similarities between the Oedipus myth and the African monarchies. With brilliant intuition, Freud pointed the way toward patricide and incest, but his disciples failed to follow his lead. Instead of conceding the impotence of psychoanalysis in dealing with the subject, most scholars, even those hostile to psychoanalysis, tacitly acknowledge its privilege to deal with anything remotely concerned with incest. Nobody can approach the question of royal incest without saluting the stately ghost of Freud. Yet psychoanalysis has never said, and never can say, anything decisive on the subject of royal incest, anything that could add substantially to our understanding or, for that matter, approach the Master at his best.

The almost total absence of the incest motif in late-nineteenth-century Western culture led Freud to conclude that all human society is warped by a universal desire, universally suppressed, to commit maternal incest. The presence of incest in the mythology and rituals of primitive peoples seemed to Freud an irrefutable proof of his hypothesis. But psychoanalysis has never managed to explain why the absence of incest in one culture has exactly the same significance as the presence of incest in another. There is no doubt that Freud's hypothesis was mistaken; but he often had good reasons for being wrong, whereas those who denounce his errors often have the wrong reasons for being right.

Freud perceived that the incest and patricide motifs of the Oedipus myth concealed something essential to the understanding of all aspects

of culture. The cultural context in which he functioned led him to believe that the crimes attributed to the surrogate victim were indeed the hidden desires of all men, the secret source of human conduct. Some of the cultural phenomena of the period could be at least partially explained in terms of the absence of patricidal or incestuous manifestations. Psychoanalysis could not claim equal success, as limited as this success might be, in its approach to myths and religion. When patricide and incest are openly displayed, it is hard to see what it is they are hiding—some still better hidden instance of incest or patricide, perhaps? Even if one concedes such a theory, it in no way serves to explain the other themes of the myth, or even incest itself when it appears in a real form within a ritualistic framework.<sup>19</sup>

Until some other approach succeeds where psychoanalysis has failed, the claims of psychoanalysis will continue to influence us. However, once the Freudian interpretation of mythological and ritual incest has been replaced by another explanation, at once very close to and very far removed from the Freudian viewpoint, many thematic aspects of the issue will suddenly become clear, and we will have good cause to believe that Freud's theory has finally had its day.

In the African monarchies as in the Oedipus myth, incest—maternal or otherwise—is not primary matter, absolute and irreducible. It is an allusion that can readily be translated into other terms. The same is true of patricide, or any of the crimes, perversions, and monstrosities with which mythology abounds. All these motifs, and others as well, serve to conceal and disguise rather than reveal the violent elimination of differences. It is this particular violence that is the suppressed matter of the myths; not suppressed desire, but terror, terror of absolute violence. And who would deny that far stronger than desire, in fact

<sup>19</sup> The most favorable situation for psychoanalytic theories of this sort would be the total absence of incest and patricide from the entire corpus of mythology and ritual. However, psychoanalysis could also adjust to its constant presence, to a continual intrusion of incest and patricide motifs. The truth lies between these extremes. Patricide figures in mythology and ritual, but hardly more than any other type of criminal activity; the same applies to incest. Among the different kinds of incest, maternal incest will at most play the role of *primus inter pares*, unless it is replaced by the incestuous relationship with a sister or some other relative, but never so fully or so systematically that one can attribute it merely to a reflex of the "unconscious."

A statistical survey has been made dealing with violence between relations in myths of the "Oedipus type." These myths were drawn from some fifty selected cultures, more or less evenly distributed within the six broad cultural regions defined by Murdock. Clyde Kluckhohn sums up the results: "One can make a good case for 'antagonism against close relatives—usually of the same sex' as a prominent motif, and a fair case for physical violence against such relatives. But neither patricide nor Ragnan's regicide motifs will stand up literally without a great deal of farfetched interpretation" ("Recurrent Themes in Myths and Mythmaking," pp. 53–54).

the only force that can snuff out desire, is that nameless but irresistible terror?

Widespread patricide and incest signify the final stages of the sacrificial crisis. Limited to a single individual, patricide and incest shift the whole burden of the crisis onto a surrogate victim. The hidden basis of myths is not sexual; it cannot be, for that motif is openly revealed. Nonetheless, sexuality is important insofar as it stimulates violence and provides occasions for it to vent its force. Like other natural phenomena, sexuality is a real presence in myths. In fact, it plays a more important role in them than does nature itself, but a role that is not truly decisive. Sexuality becomes almost completely explicit in the incest motif. There it is associated with a purely individual violence, one, however, that still masks the collective violence. This violence would surely wipe out the community were it not for the religious delusion that the surrogate victim provides.

The theory that mythological themes serve to express man's fear of natural phenomena has in the twentieth century given way to the idea that these same themes conceal man's fear of the purely sexual and "incestuous" nature of his desires. The two theories are themselves mythic; like the other theories we have discussed, they function within the context of myth and help to perpetuate the delusions of myth. However, the two theories should not be put on the same footing. Freud is less "mythic" than his predecessors; sex is more involved in human violence than are thunder and earthquakes, closer to the hidden sources of mythic elaboration. "Naked" or "pure" sexuality is directly connected to violence. It is the final veil shielding violence from sight; at the same time it is the beginning of violence's revelation. Historically, these two aspects of sexuality often dominate in turn; periods of "sexual liberation" often precede some violent outburst. This is true even in the chronological sequence of Freud's own work. The dynamism of this work tends to transcend the initial pansexualism to engage itself in the ambiguous enterprise of *Totem and Taboo* or the radical concept of the "death wish." We can thus look on Freud's work as a step toward the revelation of something far more profound than the theory of suppressed desires, a theory whose inadequacy he may have dimly perceived; toward, in fact, the absolute violence still concealed by a certain delusion, the nature of which remains in the broad sense "sacrificial."