



Demythification in Certain Primitive Cultures: Cultural Fact and Socioreligious Integration

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[Translated from the
Italian by *Robert D. Pelton*]

DEMYTHICIZATION
INCERTAIN
PRIMITIVE
CULTURES:
CULTURAL FACT
AND
SOCIORELIGIOUS
INTEGRATION

I

The present discussion of *demythicization*, which deals with the exegesis of New Testament texts and their religious basis in the Old Testament and which ranges across widely diverse dimensions, offers to anthropological-religious research certain terminological and conceptual tools which are useful when applied to the elucidation of some ethnoreligious problems, the definition and solution of which have been imprecise and unsatisfying. In Bultmann's work the term "demythicization" singles out particular critical and exegetical procedures on an intellectual, speculative level which penetrate a decomposition of the narrative elements of texts and tend to reveal the most profound human and existential significance underlying a myth. The contribution made by New Testament criticism to religious-anthropological methodology is chiefly terminological, insofar as the term "demythicization" itself succeeds in representing adequately the internal dynamics of certain institutionalized ritual procedures. In primitive cultures these work to transform the context of specific sacred narrations in a liberating, existential direction, in the sense that a transformation

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of the context implies an acquisition of a consciousness of reality and a liberation from a certain prior level of mythical representation. It is obvious that, once this new value of the term is accepted, it is removed from its original frame of reference and applied to quite different phenomena, which do not belong to an exegetical, speculative realm, but are located in the cultural, historical, and traditional reality of human groups.

II

The facts which we will examine here concern male initiations in certain ethnological areas, from which particularly illustrative and typical examples are taken from specific groups in Australia and Melanesia. It should be stressed, however, that the type of analysis attempted here can be extended to other areas, to Africa, for instance, where one finds the devouring monster in mythology and in initiation rituals, as well as a mythology of ancestors and spirits of the dead who rape those undergoing initiation.¹

In a preliminary, approximate definition one can say that many initiations in these areas present a mythical-ritual model which can be described along these lines: In one phase of the ritual, which according to current ethnological terminology can be described as the "unveiling of the *sacra*," the elders, as initiators, perform for the persons undergoing initiation a dissolution and a nullification of mythical and psychological forms which have so far shaped the relationship of the child and the noninitiated boy with the representation of Power (e.g., supreme being, ancestors of totemic type, *dema*, cultural heroes) and which continue to shape this relationship for that part of the group still excluded from initiation temporarily (prepubescent males and those awaiting initiation) or institutionally (women). This procedure of unveiling can be carried out by putting the candidate in contact with certain sacred and taboo objects (e.g., bull-roarers) and communicating to him the mythical and traditional values connected to them, thus liberating him from the fictitious and deceptive representations which the candidate knew in the preinitiation period. This occurs principally in Australia. Or it may be carried out by submitting the candidate to a mimetic-ritual type of fiction, during which he becomes aware of the formally fictitious and substantially symbolic value of sacred elements (*tamberan*, *malangan*, masks, sounds of special instruments) which he had identified with a devouring monster. Thus,

¹ As in the case of the Sara of Chad (see R. Jaulin, *La mort sara* [Paris, 1967]).

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he adheres, after initiation, to a new existential and mythical reality underlying the forms within which the myth had thus far been communicated to him. This happens principally in Melanesia.

At the outset, to avoid misinterpretations, it must be underlined that, when the terms "pubescent" and "prepubescent" are used in relation to the initiatory rite, I do not intend to propose an erroneous identification of this rite and the ceremonies which denote the passage from the prepubescent age to puberty and which are in some cases held separately from the initiation rites. The terms have been used for methodological convenience, in view also of the frequent temporal coincidence of the two rites. However, the rite of puberty belongs to the life cycle and has almost always a private character, whereas the rite of initiation is characterized by a strong social content, and this typological diversity is, in any event, presupposed here.

III

In 1904, B. Spencer and F. J. Gillen published a rich series of examples of the demythicizing procedures of northern tribes of central Australia.² Among the Unmatjera, after the young initiate has undergone his bloody operation, his father shows him a *churinga* (the bull-roarer which the child in prepubescence knew only through its terrifying noise), and tells him: "This is your *churinga* . . . which your *kurnah* [i.e., the spirit which entered his mother and gave him his physical and spiritual origin] had in *alcheringa* [the dream age; the age of ancestors]. . . . Do not go near the women when you are carrying it. If you do, you will lose your *churinga*, and your brother will kill you."³ For the Kaitish, Atnatu is a mythical, primordial being, a black-faced giant without an anus (thus his name). Self-created in remotest times, prior even to the dream age, he ascended to his own sky, a sky different from the visible one, and brought into being the ancestors of the Kaitish, who were generated by his sons after their expulsion from the sky. He invented the *churinga* and the initiation rites when, in the mythical age, he killed men in order to devour them and brought them to the sky, where, disgusted by the flavor of human flesh, he restored them to life. Now the double mythical level (one relating to that part of the group consisting of women and non-initiated prepubescents, the other to initiated males) is evident if

² B. Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (London, 1904).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 342 ff.

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it is kept in mind that the women and children, on hearing the noise of the bull-roarer, believe it to come from a terrifying spirit called "Tumana," which is the name given to two primordial men, born from the first *churinga*, who, in trying to imitate the creation of Atnatu, launched a *churinga* into the sky. Failing in their enterprise, in the end they were devoured by two hounds. The initiated elders, on the other hand, reveal to the candidates the substantially benevolent reality of Atnatu, who listens with pleasure to the bull-roarers and himself celebrates the initiations of those men who, murdered and then revived by him, remained with him in the sky.⁴

For the Anula, the liberation of demythification occurs after the ceremony of subincision, when the bull-roarer (*mura-mura*) is shown to the youth. They are informed that it is taboo (*kurta-kurta*) and must not be shown to women and children since these must continue to believe, when they hear its sound, that it is the voice of the spirit Gnabaia, arriving to devour the candidates for initiation.⁵ For the Urabunna, the women and the noninitiated believe that the sound (*chimbali*, the taboo term used by women and prepubescents) is the voice of the spirit Witurna, who rapes the children, extracts their viscera, then supplies them with new organs and restores the candidates, thus transformed, to the group. The novice is told not to allow the women and children to see the bull-roarer and, furthermore, that violating this order will cause his mother and sisters to be turned into stones.⁶ The Warramunga designate the bull-roarer unveiled to the initiates by the name *murto-murto*. It was made for the first time by a mythical man of the dream age (*wingara*), but the women believe that its sound is the voice of a spirit also called Murto-murto.⁷ The Binbinga reveal to the candidates that the bull-roarer (*watamura*) was invented by two men of the wild hound totem, who also founded the practice of circumcision. Women and children, however, believe that its sound is produced by Katajalina, a terrifying being who lives in an ant heap and devours those who undergo initiation, though he later revives them.⁸ In the Wongaibon tribe, the sound of the bull-roarer is, for women and prepubescents, the voice of Thuremlin, who cuts the neophytes into pieces and revives them through the extraction of a tooth.⁹

⁴ Ibid., pp. 347, 499-500.

⁵ Ibid., p. 373.

⁷ Ibid., p. 500.

⁶ Ibid., p. 498.

⁸ Ibid., p. 501.

⁹ A. D. L. P. Cameron, "Notes on Some Tribes of New South Wales," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (1885): 357 ff.

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In the examples just mentioned, the sources give us documentation in a condensed form which lacks information regarding the precise character of the demythicizing moment. That moment seems reduced to the unveiling of the bull-roarer to the candidate, who becomes aware of its sacred reality and of the mythical background and substitutes the new social-religious framework thus obtained for that of his childhood. However, there exists more detailed documentation which, although indirect and partially distorted by the linguistic transcription, reveals to us a real and proper ritual phase of destruction of a mythical representation (infantile and female) and the substitution of a new mythical-existential dimension in the place of the one destroyed.

In 1896, R. H. Mathews brought to light a pubescent initiation ritual of the Wiradthuri in the Australian state of New South Wales.¹⁰ In the Bora rite, the demythicizing attitude, instead of being understood and symbolically represented in certain sequences and ceremonial acts, is explicitly declared. The Wiradthuri myth dealing with the origin of initiations reveals a conflict between the figure of Baiame, represented as a beneficent being (or perhaps, more exactly, as an ancestor and a cultural founder), and that of Daramulun, who has a negative, terrifying, malicious character.¹¹

Now in Mathew's essay Daramulun (Dhuramulan) is a mighty giant who inspires terror and whose voice is like a distant rumble of thunder. The pubescents of the tribe were, in primeval times, consigned to him, and in a forest hermitage he taught the traditions and customs of the community. The boys who returned, initiated, from seclusion were always lacking one of the upper incisors as a sign of the rite practiced upon them. Daramulun reported to Baiame (who is here presented as leader and protector of the group) that once the neophytes were brought to the forest, he killed, dismembered, and burnt them and then recreated them in new bodies made from their ashes and extracted one of their

¹⁰ R. H. Mathews, "The Burbung of the Wiradthuri Tribes," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 25 (1896): 295-318. In the same journal, Mathews also discussed analogous structures in the Bora initiation ("The Bora, or Initiation Ceremonies of the Kamilaroi Tribe," Part I, 24 [1895]: 411-27, and Part II, 25 [1896]: 318-39).

¹¹ It is remarkable that Daramulun appears, on the contrary, as the supremely good being to some other Australian groups, for instance, to the Yuin. The problem that results from this conflicting mythology—that is, whether or not the opposition of Baiame and Daramulun has historical origins and reflects a tribal conflict—has already been examined by R. Pettazzoni, *L'Essere Celeste nelle credenze dei popoli primitivi* (Bologna, 1922), pp. 2-6 ff.

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incisors. Since many boys who were sent to Daramulun did not return, Baiame wanted to ascertain their destiny and therefore interrogated one of the returned boys. Through his persistence he learned that the story told by Daramulun was false. The monster, in fact, never murdered and revived the boys undergoing initiation, but some of them he approached and, while pulling out an incisor, like a cannibal he devoured them. In rage, Baiame destroyed Daramulun, but placed his voice in all the trees of the forest, obtaining later from the wood of one of them a bull-roarer (*mudthega*), which is the voice of Daramulun. Baiame determined that, in the future, the Wiradthuri would always be obliged to provide for the initiation of the pubescent boys through the revelation of the bull-roarer without, however, sharing knowledge of this reality with the women and prepubescents, who were to continue to believe that Daramulun still comes to the group, takes the young candidates to the forest, devours them, and then revives them.

In the Wiradthuri initiation ceremony (*Burbung*) which corresponds to this sacred narrative, during the night preceding the unveiling of the bull-roarer, these are sounded in the sacred territory, and women, children, and candidates all believe it to be the voice of Daramulun, who is expected to arrive the next morning.¹² During the central moment of the ceremony, while the novices are gripped by a strong expectation of Daramulun's arrival, "at a determined sign the custodians take away the head-covering of the candidates while the principal headman, showing the elders with their churingas, says: 'Here he is! This is Daramulun!'"¹³ Shortly afterward, the elders explain the mythical story of Daramulun and of his death as the real origin of the bull-roarer, and the initiated are ordered to keep it secret.

A parallel instance in which the demythicizing intervention is explicit and declared occurs among the Arunta (Aranda), for whom the *luringa* (the intense humming produced by the turning of the bull-roarer) is believed by women and children to be the voice of Twanyirika (Tuanjiraka). The Arunta (and also the Kaitish) imagine Twanyirika as a monstrous being, living in a special rock which he leaves during the initiations of the young in order to take them to the woods, where he murders and revives them. To the female and infantile imagination, he is a monster who walks with a limp, carrying his leg over his own shoulder.¹⁴ During the rite

¹² R. H. Mathews, "The Burbung of the Wiradthuri Tribes," pp. 307 ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

¹⁴ Spencer and Gillen (n. 2 above), p. 343.

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of initiation, as soon as the incision has been made, the eldest brother of the novice approaches him with a bundle of *churingas* and tells him: "This is Twanyirika about whom you have heard before. In reality it is only the *churingas* that will help to heal you [i.e., from the wound of the incision]. Care for them well, otherwise you and your *mia*, *ungaraitcha*, and *quitia* [mothers and sisters by blood or tribal relationship] will be killed. See that they do not ever leave your sight. See that your *mia*, *ungaraitcha*, and *quitia* do not ever see them. Obey your elder brother who will go with you. Do not eat forbidden food."¹⁵

The same formula in a more ample version appears in C. von Strehlow's report of his research among the Arunta. While presenting the bull-roarers (*nankara*) to the candidates, the initiators say:

We have always told you that your pains are caused by Tuanjiraka, but you must abandon belief in Tuanjiraka and understand that Tuanjiraka is only that (which you have just seen). We have told this story of the bull-roarer to you, children and women, and we have identified it with Tuanjiraka. Just as we did so, also you shall tell the story of Tuanjiraka to the children so that they shall not know that there is no Tuanjiraka at all. If this were known, we would be stricken from the earth, and it would be known all over the world that we had died. . . . Therefore keep the *churinga* secret and continue to tell the children about Tuanjiraka. You have now become men, just like your ancestors. Keep this explanation for yourselves alone!¹⁶

IV

If in these examples of Australian practices the combination of the moment of demythicization and that of the revelation of the bull-roarer is a constant (although the bull-roarer does presuppose a complex mythology in which, along with other themes, the theme of the devouring monster recurs), ethnological evidence gathered from Melanesia gives a more complex and variable picture. In it, the sacred narrative about the devouring monster is primary. This monster is able to effect, through his devouring, a radical transformation of the candidate, who thus acquires a new status. Ritual expedients of various kinds correspond to this narration: the sounds of flutes and of water drums, which are identified with the monster's voice; bull-roarers; masks that represent the monster; huts and tunnels in the shape of the monster so that the fictitious devouring of the candidate can be acted out; etc. In this cultural

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

¹⁶ C. von Strehlow, *Die Aranda und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral Australien*, 4 vols. (Frankfurt, 1913), 4:25 ff.

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area the ethnological reports also refer, sometimes indirectly and sometimes explicitly, to a ritual technique of transformation of attitude in specific mythical contexts which are released from the dimension in which they existed in the preinitiation stage and will continue to exist in the female part of the group. This technique, furthermore, unveils the real, existentially valid values present beneath the feminine-infantile form of the myth.

To limit ourselves to a few examples from New Guinea, we can see that for the Bakaua (on the northern coast of the Huon Gulf) and for the Jabim (in the Fischhafen area), the term *balum* has a polyvalent significance. It means: (a) the cult of a supernatural and mysterious being, who has provoked geological catastrophes, is identified with the *dema* ancestor of the group, and, for the women and children, is represented as a terrible monster, from whom one can be ransomed only through the offering of fattened pigs; (b) the bull-roarer which produces the voice of the *dema* monster; (c) the crowd of spirit-ghosts (*revenants*) of those who died long ago; (d) the pubescent initiation rite itself. The *balum* rite, including circumcision, calls for the women and children to abandon the village in which a special hut (*lum*) is erected for the candidates. (The Jabim build it in the forest.) In the hut, teacher-initiators use leaves and palm roots to build, around a central pillar, a likeness of the devouring monster, whose jaws are represented by the curtains on which the face is painted. The candidates are pushed into the hut and "devoured" by the monster having been commanded to keep the secret.¹⁷

Among the Jatmul, who live along the central course of the Sepik River,¹⁸ the devouring monster is represented by a barrier, the entrance of which is made in the shape of a greatly enlarged cayman's jaw. During the night, the myth of the monster's devouring children is symbolized by means of masks and dances. The following morning the adolescents undergoing initiation retreat, together with their guardian-masters, through the barrier to the special hut prepared for the period of segregation. Here, after the circumcision, the secrets related to the sound of the bull-roarer, the flutes, and the water drums are revealed to them. In A. C. Haddon's essay on the Kiwai¹⁹ he informs us that the same de-

¹⁷ See R. Neuhauss, *Deutsch-Neu-Guinea*, 3 vols. (London, 1911), 2:402 ff.; O. Schellong, "Das Balumfest der Gegend Fischhafen," *Internationale Archiv für Ethnographie* 2 (suppl.) (1889):158; H. I. Hogbin, "Religion in New Guinea," *Oceania* 18 (1947-48):130-33.

¹⁸ See G. Bateson, *Naven* (Cambridge, 1936).

¹⁹ A. C. Haddon, *Head Hunters, Black, White and Brown* (London, 1901), pp. 104 ff.

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mythicizing dialectic is present in the area of the Fly River, where the bull-roarer (*burumamaru*), whose mythology is connected with the growth of yams (the name meaning "mother of the yams," from *buruma*, a variety of yam, and *mamaru*, "mother"), is unveiled to the youths in its real function during the period when the yams are uprooted and is used during the initiation. It seems that the women and the noninitiated avoid it since, when it is used, both of these groups are obliged to leave the village.

For the Monumbo from Potsdamhafen, Murup is the devouring monster who lived in the forest in primeval times and is not to be approached by women or by noninitiated children. If they come near him, they run the risk of being devoured alive. Murup is also the masks representing the monster and the long flutes whose sound announces the presence of the *dema* to the women. Masks and flutes are kept in the house of the men and are shown during the initiation ceremony.²⁰ Among the Purari tribes, those undergoing initiation are introduced into the Kaiaimunu, the devouring monster built in the back room of the men's house (*ravi*) and are lifted up, at certain times, together with the likeness of the monster.²¹ Among the Wogo from the area of the Sepik River, the young men are initiated into the *tamberan* cult in four different stages, while the women and children simply believe that sounds of the flutes are the voices of supernatural beings (*nibek*), and that candidates are devoured by a *nibek*.²²

M. Mead has singled out the same distinctive elements among the Arapesh, a mountain tribe, for whom the *tamberan* is the supernatural object reserved for men. It is the male "genius" which women and the noninitiated may hear but not see and which reveals himself to them through the sound of flutes, whistles, and water drums. In the ritual of male initiation there is a sequence which is called "being devoured by the monster" or "being devoured by the cassowary," at the end of which the boy knows that the *tamberan*, as imagined in the mythical, infantile-female representation, does not exist at all. The cassowary, which was supposed to devour the boys, is only a masked man with the feathers of a cassowary around his eyes and a sack covered with shells and containing two bones of a cassowary around his neck. The *tamberan* is only the sound of the flutes, the rolling of the drums, and the set

²⁰ F. Vormann, "Die Initiationsfeier der Jünglinge bei den Monumbo-Papua," *Anthropology*, vol. 5 (1926).

²¹ According to P. Wirz, *Nova Guinea* 16 (1924): 68 ff., 80.

²² See M. R. Allen, *Male Cults and Secret Initiations in Melanesia* (Melbourne, 1967), p. 63.

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of traditional narratives relating to it.²³ Haddon reports²⁴ culturally analogous behavior for the natives of the Murray Islands (in the Torres Strait west of the Gulf of Papua). The name under which the culture hero is known to the women and the noninitiated is Malu, a name of the *au-ne* type (i.e., "great" or "general") whereas the same hero is revealed to initiates as Boami, which is the *zogo-ne* (i.e., the "sacred" term) or the *gumik-ne* (i.e., the "secret" term).

The theme of demythification, some outstanding New Guinean examples of which we have given, is also found in other areas of Melanesia, but we will limit ourselves to one exemplary case. One year after the first initiation rite (*wapi*), the natives of North Bougainville, a matrilinear group, prepare carved masks (*urar*) and from a distance show them to the women, while men sound the bull-roarers. The women are supposed to know that the figures so exhibited are supernatural beings, whose voice is represented by the sounds of the bull-roarers and who have come to devour the novices.²⁵

V

From the ethnological evidence here summarized, there emerge at once two questions which do not concern the core of the problem, as we shall see, but which, even though they lack a clear solution, do represent an interesting preliminary aspect of the psychosocial level of the problem. First, we must recognize that we are dealing with a series of ritual acts, conducted by elders on candidates for initiation or by the latter themselves during the stages of ceremonial training, which can be classified as conscious fiction of a mimetic type. Mimetic fiction ("make-believe") is enacted by groups of initiators disguising themselves according to the forms in which, traditionally, the totemic beings, the *dema*, or the ancestors are imagined by the noninitiated and continue to be imagined by the women. These acts, carried out to liberate those undergoing initiation from the level of mythical, infantile-female perception, sometimes appear to be performed by the candidates for initiation themselves. Thus, they do not assist passively as the adults stage the drama, but, like actors, dramatize the scene of

²³ M. Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (London, 1935), p. 73.

²⁴ A. C. Haddon, p. 46.

²⁵ See B. Blackwood, "Report on Fieldwork in Buka and Bougainville," *Oceania* 2 (1931):199-220; and *Both Sides of Buka Passage* (Oxford, 1935), pp. 17-271; also M. R. Allen, pp. 80-83.

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their being devoured by the monster. In some cases this theatrical terminology (stage, actor, role, etc.) seems perfectly faithful to the actual situations. A. Howitt, for instance, relates that, in New South Wales, during the initiation, a man acts out, like a real actor, the death and the revival related to the myth of Darumulun.²⁶ Similarly, the scene of death and resurrection is enacted by initiatory actors in front of the novices in the *nanga* rite of the Fiji.²⁷

Thus, we can single out a significant moment of theatrical behavior within an initiation complex which, as a whole, is eminently socioreligious. But, whereas a consciousness of action seems clear enough in the behavior of the initiators, who know that they are "acting" in mythical, "nonreal" forms even though they have no strictly theatrical intention (the fiction, therefore, having a pedagogical, liberating aim, not one of theatrical entertainment), this presumption is certainly less valid in regard to a consciousness of fiction on the part of the candidates. According to some well-documented cases, these young people seem to remain, until the final revelation of the contents of the myth, in ignorance of the double level of it; consequently they are involved in acting which is not consciously fictitious, and believe themselves to be truly on the verge of being devoured by the monster. On the other hand, there are also frequent instances in which the candidates are aware of the unreality of the devouring and of similar transforming events. But whether they are conscious of the fiction or not, the young do possess a sense of the symbolic values—death-transforming resurrection, total integration into the adult group, acquisition of the tribal and religious patrimony—which underlie an initiatory passage through the jaws of a devouring monster or similar acts. Thus, the rite implies, in many cases, a consciousness of fiction only with regard to the material and mimetic procedures through which the initiation takes place, but at the same time implies also an awareness of the function and the symbolic meanings of these revelatory procedures, which adequately express the real passage from the infantile-female condition to the fullness of tribal life.²⁸

²⁶ A. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South East Australia* (London, 1904), pp. 554 ff.

²⁷ L. Fison, "The Nanga or Sacred Stone Enclosure of Wainamala, Fiji," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (1885):14–30.

²⁸ This last point, concerning the way in which the reality of the symbolic meanings modifies the weight of the term "conscious fiction," is drawn from observations based on direct experience of primitive initiations and passed on to the author by the ethnologist V. Maconi.

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A second problem proposed by the texts concerns the socio-psychological dynamics of the women and children. This problem presents itself clearly in the evidence we have examined, but the research thus far carried out is insufficient and the hypotheses too contradictory to resolve it. The current sociological thesis which states—in a simplistic reduction—that all these cultural attitudes have the aim of consolidating and institutionalizing adult male aggressiveness, subjugation of the women, and the noninitiated (who are equivalent to women), does not exclude in women a certain sense of “knowing that it is not true” or “pretending to continue to believe.” From interpretations concerning Australian data advanced by P. M. Kaberry,²⁹ it seems that women, who have their own rich and separate socioreligious life, often know the true nature of the bull-roarer, and sometimes make illicit use of it after having been admitted to the knowledge of certain secret rituals (in the area studied by Kaberry) when they have reached an advanced age and have therefore lost the identifying characteristics of femininity.³⁰ As for the socioreligious aspects of the *churinga*, the psychological attitude of the women in Australia, like that of the men, expresses itself more as respect for realities which concern kinship relations, education, religion, magic, sex, political and social organization, economy, and art (which belong, institutionally, to the male sphere) than as terror of the unknown, whose real dimensions are, in fact, often known.³¹

In New Guinea, on the other hand, Mead (after confirming that women, at least up to a very advanced age, ignore the real nature of the *tamberan*) describes a female psychological reaction which excludes the terror component and which seems even more positive than the one mentioned by Kaberry. Arapesh women are obliged to leave the village to avoid violating the taboo of the *tamberan* brought there by the men. However, “there is no feeling that they have been excluded, that they are in any way inferior creatures whom the men have banished from a festive scene. It is only that this is something that would not be safe for them, something that concerns the growth and strength of men and boys, but which would be dangerous for women and children. Their men are careful of them, they protect them diligently.”³² The psychological attitude of the prepubescents and the noninitiated appears funda-

²⁹ P. M. Kaberry, *Aboriginal Women Sacred and Profane* (Philadelphia, 1939).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 227 ff.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 231 ff.

³² M. Mead (n. 23 above), p. 66.

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mentally different, above all when they have reached or passed full adolescence. (A combination of reasons, including economic ones, may in fact compel the deferral of the rite of initiation until after pubescence.) It seems certain that the fear-terror-repulsion component, surely present because of the bloody aspects of the ritual and the myths of devouring, is strongly tempered for them by the desire for initiation and by the attraction of the rite itself as the unique way of entering the adult group and as the means of escaping the insult and ridicule by which social censorship is inflicted, especially by women, on the noninitiated who have passed the age of puberty.³³

VI

The socioreligious paradigm, whose outlines we can now recognize, is susceptible to certain interpretations which begin with an inadequate analysis of the phenomena which we have termed demythicization and, after various methodological choices, arrive at a definition which deviates from the values and objectives of the pubescent initiations and, more generally, from the religious forms of primitive cultures themselves. Among such inadequate interpretations are those of such first-rate researchers as B. Spencer and F. J. Gillen. Their synthesis of the data which they collected from the tribes of north central Australia is inclined to consider the objectives of the initiatory revelations to the adolescents to be exclusively moral and to exclude any relationship between the moral imperatives commanded by the initiation and the mythical figures represented in it. Figures such as Twanyirika and Katajalina "are only bogeys destined to terrorize the women and children and to keep them in a fitting state of subjugation,"³⁴ whereas other figures such as Tumana, Murtumurtu, and Atnatu, although their existence is confirmed in the rite (and one cannot therefore talk of them as "bogeys"), never assume the characteristics of founders or avengers of moral demands. In the extreme tone of such interpretive positions, which, more or less modulated, circulate in all the later research, one can recognize the tendency, perhaps unconscious, to discern in primitive initiatory contexts the structure of a universalistic ethical dictate, according to a kind of postenlightenment perspective, ripped from its mythical, irra-

³³ For examples of such censorship, see Spencer and Gillen (n. 2 above). For an analogous case in a different ethnological area, see M. Vergiat, *Les rites secrets des primitifs de l'Oubangui* (Paris, 1936), p. 90.

³⁴ Spencer and Gillen (n. 2 above), p. 502.

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tional roots (from its *corposità* in the language of Vico), and thus rendered communicable and comprehensible to the Western mind.

Thus, in 1921, R. H. Lowie assumed, in regard to the socio-religious complex which he was examining, a characteristic stance of incomprehension and formulated a judgment of disconcerting superficiality about it.

I must briefly deal with a subject of apparent triviality but of the utmost ethnographic interest. In the sketch of Australian initiation rites mention was made of the bull-roarer. . . . The care taken to prevent the uninitiated from learning that this simple device lies at the bottom of the weird sounds heard by them is ludicrous; it appears as though the essence of all mysteries centers in the production of the whirring noise, as if all the pother and pain of a protracted ritual came to a climax from the native point of view when the boys were told how to make a little slat boom through the air.³⁵

There is also reason to believe that, even before Lowie, A. van Gennep did not understand anything of the demythicizing dialectics of pubescent initiatory revelations. In fact, he thought that "the central act [of the initiation] in North America and Australia [is] the event of revealing to the novices that the ogres [*croquemitaines*] of their infancy are simply *sacra*, bull-roarers in Australia and masks in America."³⁶ He so words his thought that the term "*sacra*" and the accompanying "simply" would refer to the banality of "simple" cultural objects, which are not understood in their rich and complex underlying meaning.

By 1935, the interpretive line previously taken by these scholars had consolidated itself methodologically in the research of M. Mead, which, within the framework of a sociological reduction of religious phenomena, reworks the theme so that its wider and polemically more destructive consequence is to eliminate totally religious values from the structure of pubescent initiation. According to Mead, the initiatory revelations among the Arapesh consist only in making the boy face the nonreality of the mythical representation in which he had thus far believed, since the *tamberan* and the devouring monster do not exist really. "To a boy, growing up among the Arapesh means finding out that there is no Santa Claus, having it acknowledged that one is old enough to know that all this fanfare and ruffle of drums is a pantomime."³⁷ The essence of the pubescent initiatory experience would be located, then, in its function of creating an equilibrium between the male and the female-infantile sections of the group. "In many

³⁵ R. H. Lowie, *Primitive Society* (London, 1921), p. 297.

³⁶ A. van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (Paris, 1909), p. 114.

³⁷ M. Mead (n. 23 above), p. 73.

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parts of New Guinea, the *tamberan* cult is a way of maintaining the authority of the older men over the women and children; it is a system directed against the women and children, designed to keep them in their ignominious places and punish them if they try to emerge. . . . Secrecy, age and sex-hostility, fear and hazing, have shaped its formal pattern."³⁸ (Mead sees a variant of this New Guinean pattern among the Arapesh, who moderate or ignore the sexual dualism and the consequent reciprocal aggressiveness of the two moities.) Stripped of all mythical and religious values, and among the Arapesh even of its significance as institutionalized aggressiveness, the initiation, from its original function as a "ceremony . . . representative of a jealous male society grudgingly admitting younger males, now too old to be kept out,"³⁹ has ended as a magical and ethical rite (that is, one meant to stimulate the growth of pubic hair and to ascertain the sexual purity of the young candidates, as well as to impose certain norms of behavior and the punishments for violating them).

To complete this profile of the anthropological research most pertinent to this theme, it should be said that the most recent position of J. Guiart,⁴⁰ although probing deeply into the aspects of the initiatory fact, does not seem to move very far from a passive and very risky acceptance of the sociological schematization of its historical-religious dimension. For Guiart, there is no doubt that in the Australian area, underlying the revelation of the bull-roarer there is a twofold teaching which concerns both the tribal myths and the norms for conduct (e.g., to obey the elders, to conduct the division of the hunting catch fairly, to leave in peace at least the women of forbidden grades, etc.).⁴¹ And there is no doubt that in the initiations there takes place a transmission, in stages, from the elders to the youth, of the traditional communal knowledge in which the whole of male society shares and which the women possess at least partially.⁴² Nevertheless, "in this progression by stages all is not religious. Can one speak, for example, about a cult of the bull-roarer when the rite consists in showing the absence of reality behind the myth?"⁴³ And, with regard to New Guinea, he asks still more explicitly: "How can one describe as a religious phenomenon that which can be considered only a

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁰ J. Guiart, *Les religions de l'Océanie* (Paris, 1962).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 126-27.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 130-31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

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means of cohesion of male society? The notion of 'credence,' without which one could not have a 'cult' in spite of the frequent use of this term in such a context, applies here (excepting the children) to only a small part of the adult female population. The concept corresponding to the concrete attitude of the greater part of the members of the group is that of an 'imposture,' the staging and revelation of which are both organized and collective."⁴⁴

VII

According to Mead and, at least partially, to Guiart, within the initiatory dynamic there occurs a process of psychosocial liberation of the pubescent from a condition of emotional and mythical irrationality to a condition of ethical-existential rationality. The process may be described as the abandonment of a religious *Weltanschauung* to which myths such as the ogre, Santa Claus, and bogey refer. Therefore it is a "secularization" or "desacralization" of the *Sitz-im-Leben*, since through a liberating drama the candidate becomes aware of an "imposture," in which in the infantile-female stage he had had faith, and accedes to a series of traditional, ethical values which can no longer be qualified as religious. The initiation presents itself in this schematization as a fundamentally secularizing and rationalizing event which has its own sociopsychological, liberating teleology and which inevitably presupposes an implicit judgment of negative value on the preceding "religious," "mythical," or "infantile-female" stage (not to speak of the fact that the whole theory is based on a particular understanding of the term "religion," which is being identified with the term "cult"). The entire structure of mystification would, therefore, have a uniquely or at least a prevalently social aim, destined to protect the mechanism of male domination of the females and thus to serve as a sort of cultural and nontheoretical anticipation of the *religio instrumentum regni*!

Certain observations began to cut the ground from under these interpretive positions.⁴⁵ Jensen connected his analysis to his thesis on the passage of religious facts from the phase of "intuition" to that of "utilization." He recognized behind the demythicizing behavior a more complex socioreligious attitude, which excluded a too facile sociological solution. A sacral act, he thought, can be born only out of collective religiosity, and its conservation in the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴⁵ See A. E. Jensen, *Beschneidung und Reifezeremonien bei Naturvölker* (Stuttgart, 1933).

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form of a "deception" or a "fiction" which seeks to promote the authority of the group cannot be other than the final product of a historical evolution in which the "intuitive" value of the act has been segregated and dissolved in a secondary utilization.⁴⁶ Here we find ourselves facing certain facts which, though appearing as conscious fiction in the present cultural situation, are certainly rooted in a primordial reality to which the initiation returns the person undergoing it.⁴⁷ But Jensen, above all, wanted to analyze the particular psychological behavior of the group toward the initiation structure, stressing that the fiction of "believing" can be represented, on the one hand, as that of parents who "create" Santa Claus (*Weihnachtsmann*) and, on the other, as a case of composite emotionality, a state of polyvalent feeling which differs from the conscious creation of a fiction and instead encourages a mode of "acting as if it were true" or of "playing the role."

Jensen's thesis, which to be understood in its fullness must be seen in the wider interpretive framework of the Frankfurt school, transfers the theme to the level of an inquiry into the ludic value of the religious fact, that is, into the subject of religion as play, as a spiritual and social reality which must also be assessed according to the different parameters of the notion of "play." Thus J. Huizinga,⁴⁸ accepting the suggestions of Jensen, does not pose himself the problem of ascertaining what is really behind the demythicizing behavior of the initiation. For him awareness of untruthfulness and "acting the part" are the epiphenomena of a ludic disposition which links up, in some cases, with a cultural pattern and its mythical-religious expressions.⁴⁹ Thus Jensen and Huizinga overcome in their separate ways that mistaken identification of initiatory ritual fiction with deception or imposture which is present in the conclusions of Mead and which reappears in the work of Guiart.

Although his work is limited by its preoccupation with psychological patterns and by some of its Jungian language and ideas, J. Cazeneuve has greatly clarified the issue in the chapter, "L'initiation et les actes archétypiques," in his book, *Les rites et la condition*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁴⁷ Here we have, essentially, a hypothesis concerning the decadence of cultural institutions, against which Spencer and Gillen (n. 2 above), with a rather different polemical intention, had previously stated their opinion of the terrifying mythical figures of Australian initiations: "There does not seem to be any valid evidence to justify the hypothesis that the present ideas [of them] are, in this regard, the result of degradation" (p. 502).

⁴⁸ See J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston, 1938).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46 ff.

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*humaine d'après des documents ethnographiques.*⁵⁰ He discovers that "through the revelation of the 'sacra,' often substituted for demonic forces, initiation is, in effect, one of the rituals in which religious life expresses itself with great clarity as a product of sublimation. For the religious man the destructive numinous power is nothing more than a deception. The true supernatural power is, at this point, that power that guarantees the human order into which he himself is inserted through initiation, and in which he participates so deeply that he can touch its symbols. The uninitiated, on the contrary, remain deceived."⁵¹ Through the agency of the initiatory consecration the numinous ceases to be a cause of anguish, Cazeneuve continues, and identifies itself with the foundation of the "human condition," incarnated by the ancestors. Thus there is achieved a synthesis of supernatural power and natural order valid only for the initiated; those who have not been integrated into the human condition, that is, women and children, cannot know numinous forces other than those of a distressing sort. As a result of the initiation, the supernatural power changes its aspect as it addresses itself to the initiated or to the uninitiated. For the latter, it has a demonic character and, as if it must be shown in opposition to human order, it presents itself in the form of a devouring monster. For the initiated, it is the *churinga*, seen in its oneness with faith in the ancestors and with the initiated themselves.⁵²

VIII

The notion and the term "demythification," in the particular means applicable to this research, help one to understand how, within the initiatory framework, a process of differentiation with regard to mythical-religious forms takes place, but this process cannot be seen as a loss of religious significance, that is, as a rationalization, an ethicization, a secularization. Thus we are led back from the more general consideration of the function of initiation (at least for those areas which have interested us) to reconfirm the deeply mythical, religious nature of the themes which reveal themselves in initiatory behavior and, at the same time, to challenge radically the thesis of its exclusive secular-ethical value.

⁵⁰ J. Cazeneuve, *Les rites et la condition humaine* (Paris, 1958), pp. 324-64.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

⁵² See J. Soustelle, "L'homme et le surnaturel," *Encyclopédie française Larousse*, vol. 7 (Paris, 1936); G. Roheim, *The Riddle of the Sphinx*, trans. B. Money-Kyrle (London, 1934); T. Reik, *Ritual Psycho-analytic Studies* (London, 1931).

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a) The differentiation of the mythical-religious forms in the cultures mentioned appears to be articulated in more complex structures than those which emerge from the general conclusions reached by earlier researchers. The part of the group which effectively undergoes the process of differentiation, and, thus, gains a knowledge of the demythicized contents of sacred narratives, is made up only of males, prepubescent, and previously uninitiated adolescents, who, however, find themselves aggregated to women on a social level which we have called "infantile-female." This unification of prepubescent and women is a circumstance which complicates the analysis, because it refers solely to the manner in which a certain mythical structure is perceived and spoken of; however it is completely useless when considering the diverse reactions with which the two sections of the group (i.e., male prepubescent and women) respond to that structure. In fact, the male prepubescent, in their understanding of the demythicized contents of the myth, are subject to a growth in their grasp of certain values, a growth which may correspond to their physiological growth. Therefore in the infantile-female section there is necessarily a bivalent situation which can be represented as shown in figure 1. Here we can see clearly, in relation to initiation, the separation of women from the male uninitiated, who, in the infantile-female section, are the only ones to accede to the new condition of initiated adults. As mentioned above (n. 5), this also explains the divergence of the psychological reactions of the uninitiated males from that of the women. To this problem, especially with regard to the position of women, we shall return later.

b) The mythical-religious model, proposed by the initiated elders to the infantile-female section and traditionally accepted by it, is structured as a communication of certain symbols and sacred narratives which are transmitted in a fictitious and partial form, whose real and total revelation is made to the initiated, while the women continue to accept the fictitious form. The process

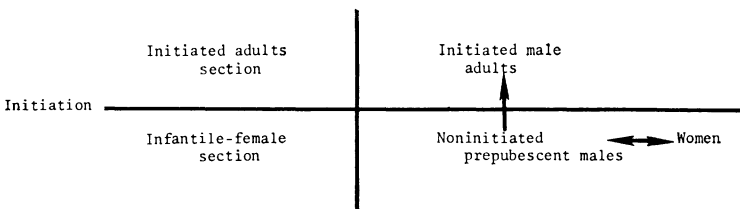


FIG. 1

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of demythification, in relation to the elements of the mythical-religious framework accepted by prepubescents and women, operates, therefore, as the liberation of those elements from the fictitious and aberrant forms by which they had been transmitted and determines, even psychologically, a new relation of the pubescents to the framework previously perceived in a distorted fashion.

Therefore, if one desires to resort to the terms "nullification" and "destruction" of a certain mythical model, terms implicit in the work of Mead and Guiart, their possible applicability must be recognized, but on grounds quite different from those used in the essays of these two scholars. In fact, the event of initiation nullifies and destroys for the initiands, not the mythical forms, but the categories in which the forms had been perceived on the infantile-female level. When, for instance, the pubescents of the Warra-munga come, through the initiatory revelation, to the consciousness that *murtu-murtu* is the bull-roarer, they are released from the specifically falsifying imagery in which the message had been transmitted and which had made them believe in the spirit *Murtu-murtu* as a devourer of children. Sometimes the destructive aspect of the demythifying process seems to be more complex, in the sense that the initiators do not induce the candidates to identify a specific reality behind the symbols which they already know in an inadequate form, but reveal to them a new mythical dimension, different from, yet related to, that which they had thus far known. There are several cases in which the destructive moment of demythification substitutes for certain mythical themes known to the women and children new themes unknown to them. For example, among the Kaitish the theme of *Atnatu* is substituted for the infantile-female belief in *Tumana*; among the *Urabunna*, the taboo theme of *chimbaviri* is substituted for belief in *Katajalina*; among the *Wiradhturi* the myth of *Baiame* is substituted for belief in *Daramulun*; and, in *Melanesia*, the theme of *Bomai* is substituted for belief in *Malu*.

The aspect of these phenomena which merits greatest stress is that the destructive moment of demythification necessarily presupposes a previous socioreligious consolidation of a mythical structure of a dualistic type (i.e., a fictitious form for the women and children and a real form for the initiated). This presents complex problems for analysis. One has the impression of facing an "unpairing" of the representations of power (*dema*, ancestors, cultural heroes, supreme beings, totemic beings, etc.), insofar as the same power is perceived in its ultimate, existentially valid

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reality by male initiates, and in its terrifying, negative, and destructive aspect by the women and children. In the cases of both the bull-roarer and the *tamberan* (to refer to the most obvious examples of the Australian and Melanesian areas), the representation of power which, in different forms, lies behind these two symbolic complexes is grasped in its life-giving, existential meaning by the initiated and in its terrifying, negative meaning (being devoured by the *tamberan* or terrorized by the bull-roarer) by the women and the uninitiated males. The dynamics of this "unpairing" are still more striking in the cases where it is expressed as opposition between two mythical narratives in which one, the "real" one, is revealed to the initiated, while the "fictitious" one is communicated to the women and the uninitiated (e.g., the opposition between Daramulun and Baiame among the Kaitish). These observations serve to show that the terms "fictitious" and "false" refer, not to the presumed nonreality of the mythical forms transmitted to children and women, but only to a distortion of the elements of which they are composed and which correspond to the mythical "reality" as revealed in the initiation.

Moreover, this unpaired representation of power must be connected to the very framework of the initiatory processes themselves, in which, insistently, there emerges the theme of individual transformation in terms of death and resurrection and of liberation from a state of confusion and chaos.⁵³ The infantile-female (negative) representation of power comes, substantially, to correspond to the condition which has to be overturned and vanquished through the initiatory training, while the initiatory, male (positive) representation of Power symbolizes a realized redemption and the socioreligious integration achieved within the group. One level is that of the chaos-confusion-violence which precedes culture and is identified with nature; the other level is that of the culture which is revealed as a gift which comes from mythical, heroic, divine persons (see, e.g., the mythology of Daramulun, where the passage from one level to another is particularly evident). This phenomenon of "unpairing" which shows itself in the initiatory process can be represented as shown in figure 2.

c) Although a demythicizing process does exist within the initiation and, in its crucial moment, does imply a nullification of the mythical dimension of prepubescence, it also makes accessible the real value of the myth as a unique way of representing the

⁵³ On this theme, see M. Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth*, trans. Willard Trask (New York, 1958).

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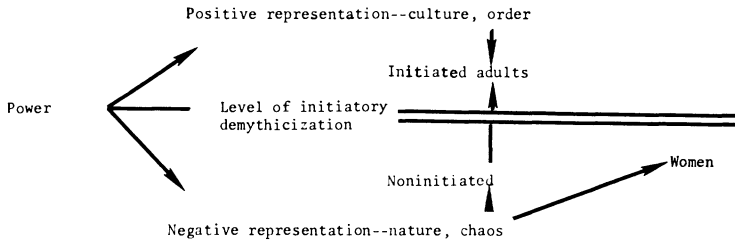


FIG. 2

world and of inserting man into an organic *Weltbild*. The error which is evident in the critically reviewed interpretations of the initiatory revelations is that they have spoken without considering sufficiently the structure of the revealed reality. The prevailing tendency to emphasize "that which is being destroyed," that is, the infantile-female perception of the mythical message, has insisted that the pubescent learns, at a certain moment of the initiation, essentially the terrifying noise which he had always heard and the series of mythical elements which he had connected with this noise find, *quite simply*, their explanation in a material object, the bull-roarer; or that, in Melanesia, the pubescent discovers, in effect, that the sound of the flutes or the drums and the theme of the devouring monster are, *quite simply*, connected to material instruments or to the "fiction" of a passage through a tunnel or some apparatus representing the monster.

The strength of such an argument depends on the value judgment represented by the expressions "simple" or "simply." It is a sort of blindness to the polyvalent reality which emerges from the initiatory revelation. The bull-roarer, as it is revealed, is not "simply" an instrument which makes a humming sound, but a symbol, bearing a mythical-existential vision, which inserts the Australian man into a dense network of relationships with the reality of his origins (the dream age) as well as with present reality (e.g., relationships with totemic ancestors and their various descendants, with the prey of the hunt, with the ancestral paths, with other members of the group, with the kinship grades, etc.). Thus, the revelation of the *churinga* transforms the pubescent totally, not in a magical or an automatic way, but because it is the climax (or, in some rituals, the preliminary) of a complex series of revelations which make the candidate responsible in and toward the group, which impose upon him ethical, social norms of behavior, and which make him "the future custodian of the sacred mythol-

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ogy.”⁵⁴ The same observations can be made in regard to the revelation of the flutes, of the *tamberan*, the *balum*, the drums, etc., within the Melanesian region, where the accent on the ritual of devouring does not imply the unmasking of a supposed “mystification,” but the transforming sequence which achieves the overthrow of the infantile world and the insertion of the novice into the order of culture, with its complex themes dealing with the sacrifices at the foundation of the culture and fecundating power of the ancestors.⁵⁵

d) The most delicate point of the analysis concerns, therefore, the permanence of the mythical-religious values grasped in the revelation of “reality,” that is, of the demythicized sacred narrations. To hypothesize the nullification of these mythical-religious meanings implies that, after the initiation, the *Sitz-im-Leben* retains no mythical-religious aspect at all because a consciousness and a responsibility of purely ethical character has been created. The evidence renders this thesis unacceptable. More subtly, it has been observed (by Mead and Guiart, for example) that after the initiation the mythical perception remains (as documented by the great wealth of traditional mythology), but one cannot speak any longer of “religion” since the very element that denotes for scholars like Guiart the religious fact is missing, that is, cult based on belief. Now, without turning this discussion to the controversy over the definition of religion, it seems that in the behavioral attitudes of the groups examined there exist all the elements necessary to consider the moment of initiation a religious event. Thus, in some cases, the neophyte acquires, together with a code of ethical character, certain ritual techniques (in Australia, for instance, he learns how to achieve contact with the ancestors through the dream tracks and through the use of the *churinga*) and, above all, in each case he makes contact with a fundamental reality which in its mythical configuration nourishes the very sources of life. If by “religion” we always understand a relationship of devotional dependence on and creaturely awareness of a personal Power (God or gods), according to a typical Western schematization, we are clearly using a criterion which is not valid. But it is possible to recognize religious values in the cultures examined here if we consider that religious experience may also be

⁵⁴ A. P. Elkin, *Australian Aborigines* (Sydney, 1954), p. 171.

⁵⁵ Thus it is symptomatic that, among the Kai of New Guinea, the bull-roarers and the hut built in the forest to represent the devouring monster are called *ngosa*, which means “ancestor” and “grandfather” (C. Keysser, after Neuhaus [n. 17 above]), 3:33 ff. Analogous cases, of course, could be pointed out.

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the mythologically expressed consciousness of the solidarity of the human group with the most fundamental reality, as it is discovered in initiation.

In this sense, the theory of the nonreligiosity of the initiatory event, based as it is on an erroneous identification of cult and religion, or, more precisely, on an understanding of the entire religious phenomenon through only one of its aspects, the cultic, does not seem acceptable. Moreover, if one tried to base this theory on the fact that the elements communicated in initiation are merely, or prevalently, mythical, and on the principle that mythical forms are not religious forms, one becomes involved in another misinterpretation, because mythical representation is at the very root of religious experience. In this regard, it would be most useful for ethnoreligious analysis to recall what A. Brelich has acutely observed: "Mythology gradually reveals that it is not reducible to extra-religious factors, and is today generally considered to exist on the same level as other fundamental forms of religion, if not even as the ultimate source of these forms."⁵⁶

e) Now, on the basis of all these observations, the demythification moment can be seen again as an integration of the uninitiated males into the adult male section of the group, both in matrilineal and patrilineal society, according to a traditional arrangement which, at first sight, confirms the opinion that this section has exclusive possession of the patrimony of all values which constitute the proper *Weltbild* of the group. This exclusive possession also involves in this case the basic themes of sexual dualism and sexual antagonism,⁵⁷ themes which reemerge with all their importance when we examine the relations between initiated males and uninitiated children and women.

R. H. Lowie, in reference to the greater part of Australia and many areas of Melanesia and New Guinea, points out "a strong tendency to separate the sexes, sometimes even at meals and most emphatically on ceremonial occasions."⁵⁸ Ruth Benedict, picking up a motif which recurs in many other writings, observed: "In Australia . . . adulthood means participation in an exclusively male cult whose fundamental trait is the exclusion of women. Any woman is put to death if she so much as hears the sound of the

⁵⁶ A. Brelich, *Gli Eroi Greci* (Rome, 1958), pp. 23 ff.

⁵⁷ "Sexual dualism" and "sex grouping" in the terminology of R. Firth; see *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 20 (1963): 863-86; "sex dichotomy" in the terminology of R. H. Lowie; *Geschlechtsantagonismus* and *sexuelle Bipolarität* in the terminology of H. Baumann.

⁵⁸ Lowie (n. 35 above), p. 187.

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bull-roarer at the ceremonies, and she must never know of the rites. Puberty ceremonies are elaborate and symbolic repudiations of the bonds with the female sex; the men are symbolically made self-sufficient and the wholly responsible element of the community."⁵⁹ But does this analysis, which is in its outline fundamentally true, allow us to represent the women (and prepubescent children associated with them) as living in a real condition of exclusion and profanity, a condition expressing itself further in terror of the male framework of culture?

First, it should be made clear that the hypothesis concerning the biological origin of sexual grouping as well as sexual dualism (a hypothesis repeated by Firth, who bases sex grouping, like age grouping, on physiological differences) must be reexamined in the light of a different and provocative way of reading and interpreting the facts on the basis of research in the field of sexual sociology done by Mead and Schelsky.⁶⁰ Schelsky stresses that, against the picture of a divergence of male and female social functions based on a natural biological distinction, it is possible to propose a picture of cultural processes which begins with a biological division of the sexes, reworks it socially, and makes it absolute by all manner of taboos so as to forbid any further variation from the model created. Mead considers the standardization of sexual character and forms of behavior as a social superstructure, which can be understood better as part of a certain cultural context than as a manifestation of the biological difference of the sexes.

In the specific case that interests us here, although the choice of the historical method of research makes it impossible to delve deeper into the research concerning biological patterns without leaving the field of history, it is possible to point out the influence of concurrent factors of culture and economy (e.g., the dynamics of the division of labor; female specialization in the techniques of cultivation in some areas of Melanesia; reservation to the males of fundamental hunting techniques, necessary for survival, in Australia, etc.) on the consolidation of the exclusive male possession of socioreligious traditions which interest the whole group. This consolidation seems to depend on cultural processes rather than on a biological "given." The social structures based on sexual dualism would determine, therefore, the defense and the maintenance of an authority which, in the whole group, comes to belong

⁵⁹ R. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston, 1934), p. 26.

⁶⁰ M. Mead, *Male and Female* (New York, 1949); H. Schelsky, *Soziologie der Sexualität* (Hamburg, 1956).

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only to adult males, who automatically provide for its defense by means of secrets and taboos which hide the mythical-existential core of the initiatory fact and, furthermore, by means of the distorted communication of this core to the female-infantile section. Through this reinterpretation one can understand the meaning of some Western mythical representations (*Befana*, Santa Claus, ogres, werewolves, etc.) to which the ethnological descriptions apply, in the sense that these myths operate as expedients which guarantee, through the evocation of menacing beings (ogres, the Black Man, werewolves) or of figures administering retributory justice by rewards or punishments (*Befana*, Santa Claus), in the Western world the structure of ethical-familial (paternal or maternal) authority, which the child cannot yet accept consciously or attribute to religious or secular ethical norms.

However, with regard to women, the appeal to such Western myths does not evoke a real analogy and is clearly without value. In the first place, as we have already mentioned (n. 5), the woman is not exclusively in a condition of terror; indeed, very often she is only in a condition of simulated terror, as Jensen shows. But beyond that, she has her own mythical-ritual avenue—female initiations—to freedom from the infantile world.⁶¹ According to some particularly interesting ethnological research (e.g., Kaberry on Australia and Malinowski on some areas of Melanesia), she possesses her own polyvalent mythical-religious world, together with her own proper consciousness of being in the world and of belonging to the *Weltbild* of the entire group.

Moreover, in the societies here examined, a conflict between male and female structures has not yet emerged. Rather, the state of male-female balance, culturally achieved, is traditionally accepted as an immutable reality, as a good which must be defended, as an order of culture which has been redeemed from the disorder of nature. Therefore the reactions of female “terror,” when and where they appear, point more directly to the recognition of the exclusive dominion of the males over the goods of the group, the enjoyment of which belongs to the whole people. The consequence is that fleeing the presence of the *tamberan*, avoiding the sight or the touch of the *churinga*, and teaching children to observe the taboos seem more positively directed to the protection of cultural structures and of the indirect benefits of the people’s goods, which, by means of the structures, also come to the women and the chil-

⁶¹ See Eliade (n. 53 above), pp. 92 ff.

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dren, than to the assertion, through the expedients of flight and terror, of an aggressive domination by the males. The violation of the taboos would provoke, in the final analysis, a collapse of well-being and security, a return to the chaos which precedes initiatory liberation and which expresses itself in the ancestral memory of evil and destruction. It is in this way that we may fully understand the warning which Arunta initiators give to the neophytes: "If this should happen [i.e., if you, the initiates, reveal to the women and children what has taken place], we shall all be stricken from the earth, and it will be known all over the world that we have died."