Sex, Incest, and Death: 
Initiation Rites Reconsidered

by James L. Brain

An attempt will be made here to show why initiation and/or puberty rites occur in so many societies and why they take the shape they do. To do this I shall use concepts derived from social and physical anthropology and from psychoanalysis. I shall try to show both what causes societies to develop rites and what effects these rites have.

The study of initiation rites fascinated early anthropologists like Frazer, and their apparently bizarre and often bloody features served to instill a sense of comforting superiority in the breasts of scholars in the technologically developed countries. Perhaps the pendulum swung back toward a greater sense of human universality with Van Gennep's emphasis on rites of passage as characteristic of all societies, though it could hardly be denied that these rites "tend to reach their maximal expression in small-scale, relatively stable, and cyclical societies" (Turner 1973:1). However, attempts to establish universal human laws became unfashionable in anthropology (see, e.g., Beattie 1964:44-47 and Nadel 1957:189-90), and, except for a few people like Murdock (1945), following Malinowski, it was left to the psychologists to continue to attempt to discern some order in the apparent chaos of variation in cultural patterns (e.g., Ellis 1941; Roheim 1950; Reik 1931, 1951, 1963; Bettelheim 1954; Whiting, Kluckhohn, and Anthony 1957). These attempts have generally evoked scorn among anthropologists for three reasons. Two of these seem justifiable to me; the other does not. First, like Freud and Durkheim, some latter-day psychologists have persisted in seeing a precise equivalence between the behavior of modern primitive peoples, such as the Australians, and that of early humans, despite the fact that it is generally accepted that all humans are of the same antiquity. Secondly, some psychoanalysts have persisted in equating infantile Western behavior with that of "savages" (as Douglas 1966:115-21 and La Fontaine 1972:185, for instance, have noted). What seems quite unjustifiable is the argument that psychology "turns its face away from society, and back towards the individual" (Douglas 1966:115). It seems to me that if we fail to consider society as a sum of individuals we are in the very danger of reifying it denounced by Beattie (1964:56-64). If, despite all kinds of exceptions, we find similar patterns of behavior in societies totally separate geographically, linguistically, and ethnically, then we have essentially two alternatives. The first is to postulate that these patterns arose at such an early period of human existence that either they are genetically transmitted or they were diffused from the aboriginal human group. The second is to postulate that particular ecological and environmental circumstances generate particular cultural responses. A possible third alternative would be a combination of the two.

Fox (1975:275) has recently attacked social anthropologists for failing to understand the importance of primate studies and developments in physical anthropology. He denounces an obsession with behaviorist notions that has resulted, he claims, in a denial that there is any connection between nature and culture. The reality we should grasp, he suggests, is that "the potential for culture lies in the biology of the species. Man has the kinds of cultures and societies he has because he is the kind of species he is." It is not very long since we have generally accepted the idea that the ability to acquire language and speech is a genetically inherited trait. At a recent conference on the origins and evolution of language, Chomsky observed that we should think of language as part of the human physiological makeup in the same way as eyes and ears. Fox (p. 276) goes much further in a manner with which I find myself largely in agreement. If one were able to rear children in total isolation from all cultural influences (impossible of course, but a useful model), not only would they develop,

---

1 I am indebted to Jean La Fontaine for reading and commenting on the paper, and I have incorporated some of her suggestions.

2 I here use the term to embrace psychoanalysts.

James L. Brain is Professor of Anthropology at the State University of New York College at New Paltz (New Paltz, N.Y. 12561, U.S.A.). Born in 1925, he was educated at the University of London (postgraduate diploma, 1963) and at Syracuse University (Ph.D., 1968). He has been a community development officer in Tanzania and Uganda (1951-63), a lecturer at Syracuse University (1963-67), and a visiting professor at Vassar College (1976-77). His research interests are belief systems and sex roles. Among his publications are The Basic Structure of Swahili (Syracuse: Program of East African Studies, 1965); "Matrilineal Descent and Marital Stability: A Tanzanian Case" (Journal of Asian and African Studies 4(2)); "Kingu: A Myth of Origin from Eastern Tanzania" (Anthropos 66); "Ancestors as Elders: Further Thoughts" (Africa 43(2)); and "Women. Beyond the Second Class: Women on Rural Settlement Schemes in Tanzania," in Women in Africa, edited by N. Harkin and E. Bay (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

The present paper, submitted in final form 8 IX 76, was sent for comment to 50 scholars. The responses are printed below and are followed by a reply by the author.
after a few generations, a totally new language conforming to the general laws of linguistics, but they

would eventually produce a society that would be likely to have laws about property, its inheritance and exchange; rules about incest and marriage; customs of taboo and avoidance; methods of settling disputes with a minimum of bloodshed; beliefs about the supernatural and practices relating to it; a system of social status and methods of indicating it; initiation rituals for young men; courtship practices including the adornment of females; systems of symbolic body adornment generally; certain activities set aside for men from which women were excluded; gambling of some kind; a tool and weapon making industry; myths and legends; dancing; adultery; homicide; kinship groups; schizophrenia; psychoses and neuroses and various practitioners to take advantage of or cure these (depending on how these are viewed).

While one might well disagree with Fox on particular points (and I find his blatantly sexist points offensive), there is no doubt in my mind that in general he is quite correct. Why the enormous variation in human cultures, then? Fox's answer (p. 54) is, "To put it paradoxically: man's greatest instinct is the instinct to learn. It is therefore natural for man to be unnatural..."

What I think it is necessary for us to grasp is that one genetically acquired trait is the need to set up norms of conduct, to institutionalize behavior—a trait which undoubtedly was adaptive in terms of group survival. Hamburg (1963:311-12) notes that "we may find useful guidance in the principle that individuals seek and find gratifying those situations which have been advantageous in the survival of the species." If we carry this idea further—if we see the human mind as part of the human physical makeup and as such subject to the pressures of evolutionary adaptation (and it must be realized that these pressures may be generated by the social as well as the physical environment), so that we recognize that "man's cognitive matrix represents his supreme adaptive mechanism" (d'Aquili 1972:8)—then we arrive at the conclusion arrived at by Lévi-Strauss, who suggests that the causes of ritual activity "can be sought only in the organism, which is the exclusive concern of biology, or in the intellect, which is the sole way offered to psychology, and to anthropology as well" (Lévi-Strauss 1963:71). In a study of "the biopsychological determinants of culture," d'Aquili (1972:9) discusses the development, within the "cognitive matrix," of conceptualization and the ability of concepts to condense and symbolize whole categories; he attributes to Lévi-Strauss the notion that "ordering and categorization of the world is a universal, primary, and spontaneous human function that underlies cultural institutions, ritual and magic, as well as modern science."

I would suggest that initiation rites cannot be considered in isolation, but must be viewed as part of a general human concern with categorization, with order and disorder—with anxiety because of an inability to impose order and, arising out of this, the attribution of danger and/or power to persons and things that are not readily put into the categories of a particular culture. They thus fall into the anomalous position of being marginal or liminal, and potentially polluting. This is an idea developed by Van Gennep (1960[1908]); Turner (1962, 1973); Beidelman (1964, 1966, 1972); and Douglas (1966). Douglas (1966:5) draws our attention to concepts of dirt as being cultural, but essentially concerned with disorder: "Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death."

It seems odd that Douglas has on the one hand shown us how universal many ideas about pollution are, yet on the other asks what makes "primitive cultures pollution-prone [while]... ours is not." Surely, it must be obvious to an anthropologist who is a Catholic that a state of sin and a state of grace are basically exactly like the concepts of pollution and purity? And is not the Host stored in the tabernacle imbued with mana? And while it is true that superficially there does appear to be a qualitative difference between the world view of "small-scale, relatively stable, and cyclical societies" (Turner 1973:1) and our own complex heterogeneous societies, we cannot deny the same complexity to Hindus in India, Muslims everywhere, and Hasidim in Brooklyn, groups that participate in the world culture yet remain obsessed with ideas about pollution. As Douglas herself points out (pp. 29-35), our own ideas about dirt are believed to be based in objective reality coming out of Pasteur's discoveries, but in fact are largely derived from our own symbolic system of categorization. Even to many rational humanists in Western society, marginal things and things often appear threatening because of our inability to fit them neatly into a conceptual framework. In our case (perhaps in every case), the danger remains latent unless it impinges on the social structure as it is perceived within the institutionalized framework of norms. Thus, at times the following may be seen as highly threatening (or at the very least embarrassing or amusing as being "out of place"): prostitutes, homosexuals (male and female), transvestites, the insane, drunks, the deformed, lepers, bluelockets, and sometimes university students. It is worth reflecting, too, that we tend to find comic those things which do not "fit" and which in less safe circumstances might prove threatening because they are out of place (or time). For English people this is well illustrated in Christmas pantomime, with a female "Principal Boy" and the male and grotesque caricature of an older woman.

In considering initiation rites, then, it seems that we are dealing with a human problem which societies attempt to resolve with varying degrees of success. The problem is the metamorphosis of children into adults—the change from an asexual to a sexual role, or, more accurately, the transition from a world in which sexually oriented activities may occur but are not perceived as such (or, although quite explicit, are not threatening) to the adult world. The rites, then, are "ceremonial markers of passage from one social stage to another, serving functionally to ease the transition" (Norbeck, Walker, and Cohen 1964:478). This conception, derived from Van Gennep, would no doubt satisfy Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, but it only takes as understood the fact that adults and children are different and that therefore the rites serve a useful function. It does not examine the nature of the differences between adults and children and why the transition from one state to the other is often seen as dangerous.

It is possible that part of the problem lies in aspects of human knowledge peculiar to the species and deriving from the uniqueness of the human mammal. These only become important with the acquisition of language and of speech. So far as we know, only we humans are aware of our own mortality—knowledge that we constantly suppress or joke about to cover our terror. Allied to our knowledge of death is our understanding of life. "Man is the only animal who stands abashed in front of death or sexual union. He may be more or less abashed, but in either case his reaction differs from that of other animals" (Bataille 1962:50). It is plain enough why death should be terrifying. A recent interesting suggestion by a psychoanaylist is that awareness of mortality becomes a reality to a child much earlier than most people assume and that this awareness is what leads to our aggressive natures, in an impulse of self-preservation (Rochlin 1973). What is not so

---

4 I am here accepting the idea that apes such as chimpanzees do possess language, i.e., the ability to think in symbolic ways, even though its range is limited. They do not possess speech, and therefore their perceptions of past, present, and future are necessarily limited.

5 And perhaps also to our obsession with the creation of children, lineages, and works of art. Rank's interesting suggestion is that beliefs about immortality represent human attempts to master the terror of birth and death and in this way grasp "the seemingly
It can hardly be fortuitous that most, if not all, cultures have euphemisms for copulation and for the sexual organs, for urination and for defecation. Douglas quotes Naipaul as observing that Indian Hindus, a people otherwise extremely conscious of pollution, think nothing of defecating in public (p. 124); this, she thinks, denies the universality of obsession with privacy in defecation. In my view, this is not the case at all: there can be "public-privacy" (Marshall 1971:44), analogous to the concept of personal inviolable space when standing in public, only breached for intimacy or for attack (and cf. the "sleep-crawling" tradition of Polynesian courtship that Marshall reports). What I do think need linking together are sex, feaces, death, and incest. Douglas cites Wilson as noting that the Nyakyusa make a direct equivalence between the filth of feaces and the decaying body—death (p. 177). I have already mentioned the awareness of mortality that characterizes humans and colors so much of our thinking. The Nyakyusa are explicit that "the corpse is filth, it is excrement . . ." (Wilson 1957:51). In our sheltered world we rarely have contact with death, rarely if ever with the horrifying reality of putrescent decomposition, the onset of which is so rapid in the tropical environment which probably formed the site of humanity's origins. We should also note the near universality of the theme of incest in stories, myths, and legends. Freud noted that Rank, in his Das Inzestmotiv in Dichtung und Sage, "reaches the remarkable conclusion that the selection of subject matter, particularly in dramatic poetry, is limited chiefly by the range of the Oedipus complex" (Freed 1931:8). Recent examples which spring to mind are Nabokov's Lolita and Ada, Piers P. Read's The Professor's Daughter, and De Sica's film The Garden of the Finzi-Continis. At a more traditional level we see the numerous Kaguru stories published by Beidelman, especially those dealt with in his significantly titled "The Filth of Incest: A Text and Commentaries on Kaguru Notions of Sexuality: Alimentation and Aggression" (1972).

To return to the necessity for anal cleansing: Regardless whether toilet-training be strict or not, ultimately the child has to learn to bring its excretory processes under control. This is customarily initiated by the mother, who commonly would insist the idea that feaces and urine are dirty. It is hard not to extend that notion to the sex organs, more particularly since this occurs at a period when the child is most interested in and concerned with oral-anal matters. (I hasten to add that I am not equating primitive mentality with infant mentality.) Douglas attacks the "assumption that the problems which rituals are intended to solve are personal psychological problems" (p. 117). Rather, she urges us to realize that "the analysis of ritual symbolism cannot begin until we recognize ritual as an attempt to create and maintain a particular culture . . ." (p. 128). I cannot see why these two points have to be mutually exclusive. I totally accept the second; I cannot see why, if particular problems are common to all individuals, they should not form the basis for commonly held beliefs, fears, and anxieties, and hence rituals concerned with alleviating these. Will this not have the effect of maintaining a particular culture? The notion that I am putting forward could be said to be a Malinowskian one as opposed to Douglas's Durkheimian position. Once more I reiterate: the two positions do not have to be mutually exclusive.

To summarize, then, some form of rite of passage between the asexual world of childhood and the sexual world of adult-

---

7 One could probably say with confidence that when sexual intercourse does take place in public it is for a ritual purpose to generate power (e.g., Cory 1955). It is interesting, too, to note that in our sexually permissive society, which allows pornographic films, these are overwhelmingly considered far more threatening than films of violence.

8 A recent newspaper report tells of "an ape boy" apparently brought up by a troop of "monkeys" in Burundi. Although he is extremely destructive and tries to kill any small animals, he has learned to walk upright and wear clothing. It is interesting that although seven years of age he is said to urinate and defecate without control (Observer Magazine, March 23, 1976).

9 Roheim (1950:4) notes Kluckhohn's criticism of psychoanalysis in that the Navajo are extremely relaxed about excretion in small children, but observes: "Whatever the mother may do or not do, the child on account of its own oral aggressions (Melanie Klein, Bergler etc.) will project mother (and later the father) as a cannibal demon."
hood is extremely common. This transition is usually seen as
dramatic and dangerous in nature, largely because of a human
need to establish order and to categorize. Inability to fit any
person or thing into cultural categories makes it anomalous,
dangerous, and perhaps polluting. The transition from child-
hood to adulthood is perceived as being especially important
because of human fears about death and sexuality and anxiety
about the human prohibition on incest, which is the foundation
of all human societies. It was Freud who drew our attention
to the stresses within the human family, stresses based on both
incestuous desires and conflicts over authority. His notion was
also that our lives are dominated by twin urges: to die and to
engage in sexual activity. I would reinterpret this that we fear
death and sexuality and try to exercise them by bringing them
under control.10 Death we fear because of its inevitable reality.
We also equate death and corruption with human excrement,
a connection which proves to be very anxiety-provoking in
that we link excrement inevitably with sexual activity. De Sade
is quoted as telling us that "there is no better way to
know death than to equate it with some licentious image"
(Bataille 1962:11). Human sexuality we fear because of the
strength of our erotic urges compared to the fragility of the
social structures we have erected to order our lives as humans.
Submission to our erotic urges to the full cannot but bring
about the destruction of the reality of society we have created.
Therefore they must be brought under control. (That there
might be adaptive reasons for controlling sexuality beyond
those considered here I shall deal with later.)

To what extent initiation rites are consciously planned to
achieve this end is hard to say; it is also difficult to account for
the absence of such rites in some societies and the great varia-
tion in their character. In spite of this, it still seems justifiable
to me to examine common features discernible in a very large
number of cases as being indicative of common anxieties. Van
gennep (1960[1908]:70-71) went to some pains to distinguish
social and physical puberty, and one of the studies I shall
consider—that of Whiting, Kluckhohn, and Anthony (1957)—
is criticized by Norbeck, Walker, and Cohen (1962) for failing
to take this into account. Our ethnographic evidence is often
weak; all one can say is that where such rites occur long before
physical puberty (and sometimes long after) then it seems
probable that the society in question (like our own?) has other
means of dealing with the transition to adulthood.

Let us now look at some of the theories advanced about
the nature and purpose of the rites.

Van Gennep is undoubtedly correctly regarded as having
demonstrated to us the importance of all kinds of rites of
passage, and particularly those concerned with life crises;
probably most important among these are the rites concerned
with the transition to adulthood. He urges us to distinguish
between physical and social puberty, as I have noted. While
it would be absurd to regard, for instance, the circumcision
of infants as a puberty rite in either a physical or a social sense,
we must consider that the underlying psychological intent may
be partially the same: i.e., a ritual castration. If the rites occur
before actual puberty, but at an age not far removed from it,
then we should not be incorrect in seeing them, as Kimball
(1960:ix) points out, as "primarily rites of separation from an
asexual world, followed by rites of incorporation into a sexual
world."

A highly controversial attempt was made by Bettelheim
(1954) to seek the underlying psychological reasons for initia-
tion rites. The controversy, from the anthropological view-
point, comes partly from his assumption that "the problems
which rituals are intended to solve are personal psychological
problems" (Douglas 1966:117). As I have already noted, I
cannot accept this argument. Bettelheim's other sin—equating
the mentality of primitive peoples with that of children and
neurotics—I have already condemned. What remains, how-
ever, is very important and follows the general argument
common to psychoanalysis which has come to be generally
accepted about many other areas of human behavior: that the
disturbed person is merely the normal person exaggerated,
that the manifest problems of the disturbed are the latent
problems of the normal. If we regard initiation rites solely as
a means of providing order and categorization, then there is
nothing more to be said: they do so. What this leaves un-
explained is why they take the particular forms they do.

Bettelheim (1954:15) after noting the anthropological
explanations based on separating the young from the old,
bringing in a new group, and instructing tribal lore, writes: "It is
by no means certain whether that which the Western observer
regards as means may not be in reality the end; while what he
accepts as the end may be a more or less fortuitous consequence
or elaboration of the means." He considers that current psycho-
analytic theory has been too much concerned with castration
anxiety and Oedipal conflict and has not considered enough
the earlier emotional experiences and attachment to the
mother.11 Even more important, he considers, is the ambiva-
lenge of both boys and girls toward prescribed adult roles.12
As he studied, he tells us, he became aware of the "promise
that one sex feels envy in regard to the sexual organs and functions
of the other." The concern of children is not merely that
enunciated by Freud (1962 [1905]:61), who observed: "The
assumption that all human beings have the same (male) form
of genital is the first of the many remarkable and momentous
sexual theories of children"—in other words, penis envy by
the female child and contempt by the male for the female for
lacking a penis. Bettelheim is convinced, justifiably I think,
that while penis envy and castration anxiety are real, so too is
"vagina envy" by males. Clearly, Bettelheim is drawing on and
expanding the ideas of Freud, who was very insistent on the
lack of clarity about and ambivalence toward sexual roles in
both males and females, taking the view that "it is not until
puberty that the sharp distinction is established between the
masculine and feminine characters" (p. 85). Freud also wrote,
in a 1915 footnote to his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality
(1962 [1905]:86), a comment that lends support to Mead's ideas
about sex roles and that one supposes has not been noted by
some of the feminist anti-Freudians: "...observation shows
that in human beings pure masculinity or femininity is not to
be found either in a psychological or a biological sense. Every
individual on the contrary displays a mixture of the character
traits belonging to his own and the opposite sex."

It would also seem that Bettelheim is drawing on Rank's
fascinating study, The Trauma of Birth (1929). Rank, a pupil
and colleague of Freud's, postulates that physical passage of
the human infant through the birth canal with its large but soft
head is so agonizing and traumatic that the experience leaves
psychological scars which explain many of our apparently
illogical beliefs and provide the foundation for many of our
myths which involve monster women. This forceful and painful
ejection from the womb, he suggests, brings about, on the one
hand, an urgent desire to return and a fascination with womb
substitutes and, on the other, a horror of the mother and of
passages, tunnels, caves, and so on. "The woman," he suggests
(p. 189), "is in a position, through a complete reproduction of
the primal situation, namely, through actual repetition of
pregnancy and parturition, to procure for herself the most far-
reaching approach to the primal graces: . . ."; the man,
on the other hand, cannot do this, so he struggles to create
"cultural and artistic productions," and thus we find women

---

10 It is interesting that monks and nuns totally eschew sex and claim to have conquered mortality.
11 Chodorow (1974:43–66) takes a similar view in considering the development of different male and female personalities.
12 Mead's (1930:81–98) material on the Manus gives a good illustration of this.
culturally undervalued. It is hardly fortuitous that many initiation rites take the form of a ritual rebirth, and, to support Bettelheim's theory of vagina envy, we often find that the rebirth is by man rather than woman: in other words, the ceremony reenacts pregnancy and birth, but this time controlled by males. This is a point which we might consider in furtherance of Van Gennep's three-part rite of passage: do the three parts not symbolize, in ritual form, impregnation, gestation, and parturition?

Bettelheim's theories were based on the clinical observation of a group of disturbed American adolescents kept in a mental hospital. In effect, they invented the idea of some kind of rites at puberty, including circumcision and clitoridectomy. The girls were quite explicit in stating that something should be done to make boys bleed from their genitals in a manner analogous to menstruation (p. 31). Boys were fascinated and repelled by menstruation; many desired to have either a vagina or both penis and vagina. At Halloween girls dressed as boys, often adding "guns, fishing poles, swords, daggers, and other masculine implements or penis-like tools," whereas boys dressed as women with simulated breasts and pillows to imitate pregnancy (pp. 33-40). One boy saw himself as both male and female and personified by an androgynous clown. One cannot but be struck by the similarities to public rituals such as carnivals or the enormous popular interest in surgical operations to change, or affirm, someone's sexual identity. Many of the boys wished to cut off the girls' breasts and vaginas in envy and hatred of them. One is reminded how horrifyingly frequently such acts by men actually take place in wartime situations, carried out by men of "civilized" cultures (see Brownmiller 1975).

The impulse to circumcise, Bettelheim found, was instigated by the females, but acquiesced in by the males.18 Partly he sees this as acceptance, by both males and females, of the idea of making men bleed; partly, he says, it is because "by the circumcision the glans penis is freed ... [and] ... a new penis is born which looks like a phallicus in erection ... " (p. 39). Thus, considering "primitive" cultures and the prevalence of circumcision (or, of course, symbolic circumcision implied by mutilations of the head, such as that of the Nuer), he points out that "such apparent readiness of the initiates to submit to mutilation suggests the relative unimportance of pain as compared with the overwhelming importance of (1) the ritual's sacred meaning; (2) the degree to which they originate in and (3) satisfy conscious or unconscious desires" (p. 93). Thus Bettelheim is rejecting that circumcision is solely a form of castration by the father (and his generation), and, he writes (p. 25), "we have been far too engrossed with what seems to be destruction (damage to the genitals) and have overlooked the more hidden fascination with pregnancy and birth."

This suggestion receives some confirmation from the expressed ideas of widely separated peoples: the Gisu of Uganda and the Wogo of New Guinea. Among the Gisu, La Fontaine (1972:173) tells us, "men and women compare childbirth explicitly with circumcision: in the comparison both sexes emphasize the pain that must be endured and the fact that it makes full adults of the immature." Men explain, too, that circumcision is superior to childbirth in that it involves voluntary submission to pain and bleeding as compared to the involuntary pain and bleeding of childbirth (expressing, in other words, the difference between achieved and ascribed status, where achievement confers superiority).

Among the Wogo there are numerous examples of male envy of females. There are mythological spirit monsters impersonated by masked dancers. Both male and female spirits are impersonated by males only, and the female spirit gives birth (Hogbin 1970:63). Far more dramatic, however, is the activity which gives the title of Hogbin's monograph: The Island of Menstruating Men. The belief is that dangerous blood builds up in the bodies of both men and women, blood that is highly polluting and must be removed. For women this takes place naturally through menstruation, for men by a ritual self-mutilation, conducted periodically, in which the penis is slashed with a crayfish or crab claw when standing in the sea.14 A woman's menstrual blood can kill others, but not herself; a man's is believed to be so dangerous that it can kill others and the man himself if it is allowed to drip on his thighs or touch his hands. The implication is plain, as with the Gisu: men are superior to women. Not only, as with the Gisu, is the act voluntarily inflicted by the males, but the resultant blood is held to be more lethal than menstrual blood.

A brief summary of Luguru initiation rites will make clear how vivid is their demonstration of male envy of female childbearing. At her first menstruation a girl is confined in a hut belonging to her maternal uncle.16 She is only allowed a very short bed. It is hoped that when she has her debut, some years later, she will be pale, fat, and physically helpless. She emerges semi-nude, carried on the shoulders of her husband-to-be's brother, her eyes closed, covered in oil, shimmery and shaking, one hand holding a fly-switch. It is plain that the incarceration in a fetal position in a womb belonging to a male simulates pregnancy; her debut naked and helpless and struggling doubtless simulates birth—but from a man. Boys go through a similar rite, but are only secluded for a few days (subclan heads assuming office are treated in the same way). The cause of the rites in psychological terms in both cases appears to be the same: to satisfy male envy of female capabilities while demonstrating their superiority and to transfer children through the anomalous, and hence dangerous, period of adolescence, when the person cannot be readily classified as child or adult.

Let us now turn to another examination of initiation rites that has been very influential and that takes its ideas from both psychology and anthropology (understandably, in that its major author, Whiting, is both social psychologist and anthropologist). In "The Function of Male Initiation Ceremonies" (1957), Whiting, Kluckhohn, and Anthony attempt a quantitative analysis of 56 societies representing 45 of the 60 culture areas designated by Murdock. To do this, they make use of the Human Relations Area Files. The intention of the HRFA is laudable and precisely in accord with Whiting et al.'s attempt to quantify data and get away from speculation. Unfortunately, the reality of the files, as anyone who has tried to use them must know, makes any such quest dubious. In spite of immensely complex cross-referencing, one finds that the materials used vary from rigorously objective ethnographies to reports by missionaries and traders, and one is left with both severe omissions and grave doubts as to the accuracy of some of the data. Norbeck, Walker, and Cohen (1962) attack both the accuracy of the files and Whiting et al.'s interpretation of the data. Their own conclusions, however, advance us little beyond Van Gennep. Their sole effort to explain the harshness of some rites lies in suggesting that, where physical toughness is necessary to survival, there one will find harsh rites. This seems to me like saying that primitive peoples have the rites and we do not. At least Whiting and his colleagues had the courage to attempt an

---

18 The first biblical account of circumcision (Exod. 5:24-26) has Ziporah circumcising Moses' son, as noted by Reit (1951:104-5). Reit also speculates (pp. 229-51) that the account of Jacob's wrestling with an angel is really an account of the struggle between the son and a father who is placated by the son's circumcision.

19 Fox (1967:171) makes the very acute observation that the claim of a man for his sister's children "constitutes the ultimate realization of the incestuous desires of the brothers, realized, it is true, only in fantasy"—a far cry from his later suggestion that the incest prohibition is genetically acquired (1975:276).
explanation of causes rather than just effects; and even if Norbeck et al. are correct in their criticism of particular points, the fact remains that Whiting et al.'s theory seems to hold water in a large number of cases. Stated briefly, the hypothesis is (p. 364):

Societies which have sleeping arrangements in which the mother and baby share the same bed for at least a year to the exclusion of the father, and societies which have a taboo restricting the mother's sexual behavior for at least a year after childbirth will be more likely to have a ceremony of transition from boyhood to manhood than those societies where these conditions do not occur (or occur for briefer periods).

Clearly, this explanation is based on the concept of Oedipal conflict, resentment of the father by the son in infancy remaining latent until adolescence, when physical maturity might lead to actual revolt against the father. The authors note, however, that "no assumption is being made that the envy is exclusively sexual in character . . . and . . . we do not propose, as most psychoanalysts do, that Oedipal rivalry is universal, but rather we claim it as a variable which may be strong or weak depending upon specific relationships between father, mother, and son" (p. 361). An interesting sidelight on the Oedipal conflict comes from Fox (1967) when he suggests that if, instead of reading Freud's primal-horde theory as a single momentous historical event, we see a revolt of younger-generation males against older for a many times repeated phenomenon in the sort of time depth we now accord to human development, then it provides a foundation for the Oedipus conflict in antagonism not so much toward the actual father as toward all fathers. Such an explanation would add substance to Jung's (1922) image as a fantasized subjective perception of parents; it would also lead to a reconsideration of Hocart's (1937) well-argued attack on the extension of kinship terms. If we accept that instead of saying that a father's brothers and patrilateral parallel cousins are called by the same term as "father," the actuality is that the father is called by the same term as all the men in a certain category, then we see that the antagonism toward the father may be not merely an expression of sexual envy, but a particular form of a generalized hostility based on competition for power.

We should also remember when thinking of the Oedipal conflict that it is a two-way street. From the sexual viewpoint we should note Roheim's (1950:429) remark that "the adult tends to regard the child as a sex object or (and) as a rival in the sense of his own unresolved Oedipal trends." Thus the antagonism is not solely from son to father, but from father to son, a point which possibly explains the cruelty sometimes displayed by fathers toward sons; it is probably indicative both of a degree of potential competition for the favors of the mother and for authority in a manner dictated by the particular social structure and of the other variable of which Whiting writes: the postpartum taboo on sex and exclusive mother-child sleeping arrangements. In seeking the causes of the rites, one should not discount the feedback effect that such mutual envy might produce. A further extension of the two-way-street argument lies in the nature of the authoritarian personality. There is little doubt that the desired form of personality in most kin-based societies is, by modern Western middle-class standards, an authoritarian in nature. Obviously, this is a gross oversimplification, but we should remember Bernstein's (1964:60-61) work on restricted codes of speech and his observation that all small-language cultures are restricted in nature, in itself an indication of societies based on authoritarian principles. This is a point which is elaborated by Douglas (1970:22-26), who shows how a restricted code tends to uphold the rigid social structure. Studies of the authoritarian personality emphasize not merely the demands for obedience by those in authority, but also the pleasure taken by inferiors in acquiescing in being disciplined (Adorno et al. 1950:371-76). Thus, to Bettelheim's point that circum-

cision and similar rites may be "not necessarily only or mainly imposed by the adult on the young . . . but . . . to a large degree . . . may gratify the desires of youth" (p. 42), we can now add the idea that in those societies in which a high degree of respect is demanded, the imposition of painful mutilations may serve to uphold the internalized concept of a rigid social structure, reinforced by a restricted speech code, of which a classificationary kinship system may be the outward and visible sign.

A final point before leaving Whiting—one which reinforces the idea that the Oedipal conflict is given added severity by exclusive mother-child sleeping arrangements and a long postpartum taboo on sex and suggests that this potential hostility is of enormous human antiquity and is a result of behavior which had survival value for the species—is as follows: There is no doubt that humans have lived by gathering and hunting for at least half a million years (Homo erectus); if we consider the australopithecine human ancestors as humans, this period can be extended to about three million years. While one does not want to fall into the error of Freud and Durkheim in assuming that the culture of the Australians precisely represents an example of early human culture, at the same time when one looks at the Bushmen of the Kalahari one must recognize that the environmental constraints of this kind of life impose certain requirements which cannot be altered in behavioral terms. Unless one has available the soft foods associated with relatively sophisticated agriculture, then if the human infant is to survive it is essential that it be breast-fed for at least 18 months, and preferably for three to four years. It is possible that a very harsh life and adequate but restricted diet may reduce fertility in women to the extent that as long as breast-feeding continues, conception is highly improbable (see Frisch and McArthur 1974:49-51 and Kolata 1974:932-34), but this is a risk. If intercourse takes place and conception ensues, the supply of milk will cease, or at the very least only be available for the earlier child until the birth of the next, and thus the child will die. Whereas in the hominoids other than humans oestrum will not occur until lactation ceases and therefore the infant is relatively safe, in the human case the mother is capable of being sexually receptive within a few weeks at most after birth. Thus, in the gathering-hunting stage of human development it was (and is) vital for the survival of the species that sex not be resumed for at least 18 months after parturition, and preferably much longer, even though both male and female urgently desired intercourse to take place. As a result, severe Oedipal rivalry—both child to father and father to child—is almost inevitable in human societies, and particularly in those societies where the supply of adequate weaning foods is limited by the environment and/or the available technology.

If we combine this important fact with the one suggested earlier—the need to clean the anal area after defecation—then there is no mystery about what initially appears extraordinary: human ambivalence and fears about sexuality. If we now feed in the other factors, this becomes even more obvious: human awareness of mortality; the potential linking of excrement with putrescent bodily decomposition; the linking of sex and its organs with excrement and hence death; the traumatic experience of birth made inevitable by the development of the human brain size; the envy of one sex by the other for its capacities, going along with the establishment in each child of its sexual identity; the human intellectual need to categorize and its converse, the sense of danger where categorization is impossible; and finally, weaving all these together into one powerful web, the human potential, through the medium of language, for condensing all these into symbols. As Turner (1962:79) has pointed out, there are manifest, latent, and unconscious symbols. His own studies of initiation rites and Richards' classic study Chisungu (1956) make this abundantly clear, and I shall not consider the symbolic linguistic aspect in detail other than to note that it is the human ability to generate
symbolism, working both consciously and unconsciously on the physical factors I have enumerated, which gives the whole subject its overwhelming emotional importance.

While holding to the caveat previously mentioned, it is still useful to look at the situation of the Kalahari Bushmen, who seem to have lived in their present environment for at least 11,000 years (Kolata 1974-932), to see whether their culture supports Whiting et al.’s hypothesis. The ethnographic accounts vary somewhat, but provide some interesting evidence. According to Kolata (p. 934), “Howell finds that the average length of time between giving birth for a nomadic !Kung woman is four years.” The same is reported of the G/wi by Silberman (1965:79), who states that a child is breast-fed for four years, the wife need not conceive, and the husband must abstain from sex for this period. Schapera (1930:16), using secondary sources, notes that breast-feeding goes on for four years, but says that sex is resumed soon after birth and that this is why there is so much infanticide; but Kolata (p. 434) quotes Howell, who actually lived with the !Kung, as noting that “!Kung population size remains stable because there are so few children born.” These statements would seem to imply an exclusive mother-child relationship, which should produce father-son and son-father antagonism and hence harsh initiation rites. Schapera writes that in the boys’ rites they are “roughly handled and half-starved” and frightened by a variety of mythical (and female) monsters and finally have incisions made between their eyebrows (pp. 112-14). Even more interestingly, he notes that several early and reliable observers claimed that a boy actually had one of his testicles cut out (p. 71)—surely the nearest that any human group has come to actual castration of the sons by the fathers.

I should like finally to consider another theory about initiation rites, based on Whiting et al.’s hypothesis, but attempting to set up a similar theory for girls’ initiation rites. Brown (1963) has tried to show that “female initiation rites will occur in those societies in which the young girl continues to reside in the home of the mother after marriage.” The purpose of the rites appears to be an announcement of status change both to the initiate and to those around her, made necessary because she spends her adult life in the same setting as her childhood” (p. 841). One can raise the easy criticism that in many matrilineal societies the matrilocality only lasts until a child is born and weaned, when the “delayed right of bride removal” takes place. Her theory, however, is totally demolished by Driver (1969), who points out that only 19 of 198 Native American societies had matrilocal residence, but all had girls’ puberty rites. Although the hypothesis that matrilocality necessarily generates female rites cannot be sustained, Brown does have some interesting comments to make on the effects of the rites, and it is to these that I now direct my attention.

Richards (1956) attempts an interpretation of the rite based on “expressed purposes” and “deduced purposes” and, using concepts based on Radcliffe-Brown and Durkheim, suggests that the intention may be to express norms, to intensify common sentiments, to promote group consciousness, or to serve as “expressions of hostilities which have to be represed in daily life, or as symbolic compensations for the unpleasant roles which society may assign to an individual or a group” (pp. 118-19). What she is referring to is the clowner of aggressive males by the older women during the rites. While one can readily see this as an expression of hostility by females toward males because of unpleasant roles, the compensating effect is very thin. Richards raises the suggestion which Brown followed up, as we have seen, fruitlessly, that “there is a connection between matrilineity and girls’ initiation ceremonies”; her other suggestion in the same passage is, however, extremely significant. Returning to the hostility theme, she notes (p. 160, emphasis mine) that “there may be a connection between the lack of open hostility between the sexes and an unconscious feeling of guilt at robbing the man of his children, which is expressed in fears on the part of the woman that the men will leave them, and on the part of the men that their wives will not respect them unless taught to do so by the Chisungu.” Rosaldo (1974:26) has written very pertinently of the fact that, whereas male initiation ceremonies usually involve a major achievement which proves the manhood of the initiate, female ones usually “appear to be more a celebration of natural biological developments than a ‘proof’ of femininity or a challenge to past tides.” One could challenge this with accounts of clitoriectomy among the Igbo, Masai, and Kikuyu and the bullying of the Chisungu, but her point is good. I suggest that it needs expansion and that Richards’ statement is the key: the effect, if not the intention, of women’s initiation rites is to reinforce the relative status of males and females. Douglas attempts to establish as a general rule the hypothesis that “when male dominance is accepted as the central principle of social organization and applied without inhibition and with full rights of physical coercion, beliefs in sex pollution are not likely to be highly developed” (p. 142). Her example is the Walbiri of Australia, who are even permitted to kill their wives. Perhaps if one can go that far she may be right, but surely the principle of complete male supremacy is firmly held in, for instance, Arab or Somali society, yet women are regarded as highly polluting. I like her point: I would prefer it to be put in another way vis-a-vis initiation rites as follows: We shall probably find long, painful, or harsh initiation rites for women in those societies in which there is a possibility that women for economic reasons might achieve a position of dominance. The Luguru form a good example. I have described the immensely long ritual rebirth by men which results in girls’ beginning their married life in a condition of physical and psychological weakness. Why should men, as Brown observes, “put women in their places” and compel them to accept an inferior role in the circumstances of the Luguru? The answer is plain enough: (a) children belong to the women; (b) women have rights in land equal to those of men; and (c) women traditionally chose and could depose the head of the subclan, the autonomous land-holding unit.

Thus for girls I would list the causes of the rites as:

1. The need to effect the metamorphosis from asexual child to sexual woman to avoid the symbolic danger of anomalousness, with its perceived power.
2. The need to establish sexual identity and the attempted resolution of each sex’s envy of the other.
3. To clarify and ease the transition from one to the other.
4. To correct any tendency that women might have toward achieving a position of dominance.
5. To clarify male and female roles.
6. To uphold the authority of older women over younger women and to uphold the subservience of all women to all men, often using the concept of male ancestors as the source of authority.
7. To give instruction in sexual conduct and tribal lore.

I further suggest that girls’ rites are commonly less rigorous than boys’ because in most societies girls are usually married at puberty, while still physically and psychologically immature; it is thus relatively easy to establish a condition in which it is highly unlikely that they will challenge those in authority; particularly is this true where “defloration of the bride is the
demonstration of men’s control over women and over the reproductive capabilities that give them value” (La Fontaine 1972:179). In a separate paper, I shall consider the role of physical coercion in greater detail.

For boys I see the causes of the rites as:
1. The need to effect the metamorphosis from an asexual to a sexual role, remembering the terrifying/disgusting conscious and unconscious equivalences made between sex, excrement, death, and incest.
2. The need of males to satisfy their unconscious envy of females.
3. The need of the fathers’ generation to express their hostility toward the sons.

The effects seem to be:
1. To clarify status and ease the transition between that of child and that of adult.
2. To emphasize male superiority and dominance over women.
3. To emphasize the authority of older men over younger men and at the same time to curb any tendency of the young to rebel. This also enhances the power and authority of the ancestors from whom the older generation derives its power and authority.
4. To prevent adultery before initiation, in that it is usually a serious offence and with the cultural value placed on the rite it would be unthinkable for an adult woman to give sexual favors to an uninitiated boy (who might in fact be her peer in age).
5. To emphasize prescribed roles and inculcate tribal lore and values.
6. To give formal instruction in sexual conduct.

Disciplining both boys and girls with a painful reminder of where authority lies is a common theme. Rohelim (1929:189) suggests that “on the female side, initiation also appears as a sort of castration in so far as defloration, an attack upon the genital organ, evokes similar unconscious attitudes in the female as the idea of castration does in the male.” One might add: how much more is this true where clitoridectomy and/or infibulation are practiced. He also notes the prevalence of head-shaving and hair-cutting, but assumes this only to be symbolic of a surrender of the person. Herschman’s (1974) study of the significance of hair-grooming and cutting to Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab indicates his view that, not only does the head represent the genitals, but cutting the hair in a ritual manner symbolizes castration, a theme examined by Leach (1958) in reference to the work of Berg. Derett (1973) discusses the sexual significance of women’s hair as revealed in Paul’s controversial epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11:2-16). He does not mention the idea of castration directly, but makes an illuminating reference to the male-phallic-authority significance of the head, reinterpreting Paul’s words as “I want you to understand that Christ is every man’s head; while the husband is his wife’s head, and God is Christ’s head” (p. 102).

Given our terror of overt sexuality, one can understand the threatening nature of long male hair, particularly of the “Afro” style, to the authoritarian person. It is interesting that in the triumph of authoritarianism—the army—the recruit is always given a ritual and very often humiliating short haircut to indicate his submission to control by those in loco patri.

In summary, I have attempted to show that cause and effect in initiation rites are intertwined. Structural-functionalism explanations are satisfying to explain the effects of the rites; the causes of them are only to be sought in unconscious psychological processes of thought, which have a feedback effect through the immensely complex medium of human language and response to symbols. Further work on the part of the limbic system in human thought and its control of emotional responses without cortical control may lead us to a better understanding of these processes. There is no one explanation of the causes or the effects, and because one is right there is no automatic assignment of wrong to another. Virginia Woolf puts it well (1954:159-60):

... all this claiming of superiority and imparting of inferiority belongs to the private school stage of human existence where there are “sides” and it is necessary for one side to beat another side, and of the utmost importance to walk up to a platform and receive from the hands of the headmaster a highly ornamental pot. As people mature, they cease to believe in sides or in headmasters or in highly ornamental pots.

**Comments**

**by C. Fred Blake**
**Department of Anthropology, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822, U.S.A. 4 xii 76**

Brain’s discussion of symbolic associations is most interesting; however, his synthesis of the social psychology and ecology of puberty rites is problematic. Following psychoanalytically oriented scholars, Brain contends that the sexual mutilation in puberty rites is in part “caused” by the classificatory fathers’ need to inflict pain on the sons, who, for ecological reasons, have occupied for a long period the nurturant attention of the mothers and are now in a position to threaten the power of the older men. I would raise the following points:

1. In accounts such as Meggitt’s (1965) *Desert People*, it is difficult to imagine the classificatory fathers as motivated by conscious or unconscious hostility toward their sons. On the contrary, there is little but sympathy from the fathers. The circumciser, who is not a “father” but a potential “wife-giver,” operates under the pain of death should his cut be untrue. The initiates’ blood is mingled with the blood of older agnates the same day, and the initiates are told that the same blade was used in the past to cut the fathers. This seems less a result of “Oedipal rivalry” and more a demonstration of primary trust and identification between at least fathers and sons. In fact, the relationship between fathers and sons is far more affective throughout life than is suggested in the concept of “authoritarian personality.” Furthermore, to the extent that Brain minimizes the independence of the paternal authorities he emports the Oedipal rivalry of any analytical meaning.

2. If fathers are motivated by hostility toward sons, why is the hostility between mothers and daughters not listed among the “causes” of female rites, especially given Brain’s unsupported assumption that the nursing mother may have the same urgent desire for sex as her husband? Perhaps Brain’s assumption is inaccurate; perhaps the nurturing mother’s libido is not the erotic equal of her husband’s. Aside from the conventional wisdom, it is difficult to appreciate what in particular Brain is claiming for the social psychology of female rites. If male rivalry is expressed in various mutilations, certainly female rivalry is expressed in mutilations of the clitoris and the feet (footbinding), and these bloody rites include the symbolic associations of terror, sex, dirt, and death which Brain lists for male rites but not for female ones. As with the example of Australian circumcision, greater consideration must be given to the particular dynamics of family and marriage in which these rites occur.

3. Brain makes no cross-cultural distinction in the character of the conjugal bond. The role of the erotic component in the context of the family is culturally variable. In many societies the father has a variety of outlets for his erotic impulse even when his wife is not preoccupied with a child. Oedipal rivalry

---

17 Harris (1974:5) notes: “I shall show that even the most bizarre-seeming beliefs and practices turn out on closer inspection to be based on ordinary, banal, one might say ‘vulgar’ conditions, needs, and activities.”
makes more sense in societies such as ours, where the sexual bond is the primary focus of the family and there is a cor-
responding lack of basic trust and identity between generations.

4. Brain argues that one of the "effects" of the rites is to curb any tendency of the young to rebel, but what evidence is there for rebellious tendencies among adolescents in primitive societies? Brain's analysis of "cause and effect" obfuscates ritual as symbolic interaction in which motives are located in the social structure and thus the potential for achievement, rather than the curbing of rebellion, is constituted in the severity of the passage. The irony is that while Brain imposes some psychoanalytic notions on primitive peoples and risks separating them from their own cultural experiences, he does not account for rites or the absence of rites among complex or Western cultures, where the theory was conceived.

by MYRA BLUEBOND-LANGNER

Camden College of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers University, Camden, N.J. 08102, U.S.A. 10 xii 76

There are many points that one can take issue with in this article—from its lack of empirical evidence to its logical inconsistencies. As an anthropologist who has done research in the area of death and dying and has an interest in psychological anthropology, I restrict my comments to these areas.

Brain gives three reasons studies like his have been rejected. In many ways he overlooks what is the most obvious reason: that their proponents have a penchant for making generalizations covering thousands of years of history and a multitude of cultures on the basis of a few examples torn out of context. This is apparent in Brain's handling of the death material. For example, in support of his claim for a universal relation between death and feces he offers only Wilson's remarks (in Douglas 1966) on the odor of corpses among the Nyakyusa. It is curious that one finds no mention of this association among the Dinka or Ndembu, the other two examples discussed by Douglas.

Throughout the article Brain speaks of the need to link phenomena like sex, feces, death, and incest without ever explaining the nature of the linkage. He uses the notion as if it were just the mathematical concept of equality—a transitive relation. This relation in mathematical terms is expressed "if $a = b$ and $b = c$, then $a = c$." This theorem cannot be applied to psychological and cultural phenomena. To give an obvious example from American culture, brides $(a)$ are associated with the color white $(b)$, and so are hospitals $(c)$, but the conclusion $a = c$ is false. The point is that this sort of logic does not apply to psychological and symbolic associations. Sex may be associated with excrement, excrement with death, and also sex with death, but each of these associations must be established empirically and independently for particular cultures as well as cross-culturally.

Brain's handling of psychological universals is also problematic. He finds universals (e.g., fear of sex and death) only by overlooking real and important differences. For example, "abashedness" in face of sexual relations is said to be universal. Yet, how various the expression of this universal feeling turns out to be! In some cultures it is a desire to have sexual relations in private (and that of course varies from being alone in a room to being with others who are paying civil inattention); in others it is modesty about exposure of the adult sexual organs, and in still another it is a man's covering his genitals in the presence of his parents-in-law. Has Brain really described a specific emotion or attitude which all men share? Different behaviors in different cultures are taken to demonstrate a psychological universal. Is it true that because sexual intercourse is embarrassing when performed in public it is also embarrassing in private? Can we infer from the mere fact that in a given culture people have sexual relations in private that sexual relations are a source of embarrassment? Do we not also need some information about cultural beliefs about sex in order to draw this inference? Further, can we make the leap from observing that a man covers his genitals in the presence of his parents-in-law to the conclusion that he is generally embarrassed by public exposure of his genitals and from this to the thesis that sexual relations are a source of embarrassment to him?

The notion of a universal fear of death suffers from the same sorts of problems. Do those who believe in an afterlife necessarily fear death, or is it only a certain sort of death that they fear (in a state of sin, for example)? What of cultures in which a warrior's death is something to be sought? Again, it is not death itself, but only death in a certain way (here a cowardly one) that is feared. My own research with terminally ill patients (Bluebond-Langner 1976, 1977a, b) in this culture indicates that fear of pain and loss of self-control are more common than fear of death itself. Still more so is fear of dying alone. We cannot infer, from the universality of death ritual, a universal fear of death. A more modest conclusion is that death must be brought within the social order, whether it is seen as the end of all that has worth or as the gate to paradise.

Anthropology claims the status of a science in some sense of the term. Certainly one reason that psychological analyses of culture have been scorned is the totally freewheeling use of dubious psychological (in particular, psychoanalytic) notions. Any attempt to return to psychological anthropology (a move which I would support) should learn from the developments in these disciplines. It should build upon a more empirically grounded psychology than was previously the case. It should also select a psychology which allows room for culture as an independent variable. This brings to light still another reason for rejecting the sort of explanation Brain has given us: in it, culture is reduced to a set of coping mechanisms.

I sympathize with Brain's desire to move anthropology away from a sterile obsession with particulars, and with his use of psychological concepts. Both of these moves, however, must be made with a consciousness of the errors into which these approaches have fallen in the past. I am not convinced that Brain has identified or avoided these errors.

by SIMEON W. CHILUNGU

Department of Sociology, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya. 12 xii 76

Brain is to be commended for his efforts in reconsidering the causes and effects of initiation rites. His article brings to the surface many problems of causality in psychological phenomena. The questions of causality, correlation, and association are complex (Bunge 1959, Francis 1961, Blalock 1964). They become extremely complex when one talks of the causes of psychological phenomena, which, in most cases, are inferred or subjectively derived instead of directly measured.

While I find psychological mechanisms of adaptation easy as explanatory theories of human behavior, I do not believe, despite their logical consistency, that they always provide us with correct interpretations. Notions of projection, sublimation, reaction formation, substitution, denial, displacement, rationalization, anxiety release, and so forth can provide explanations not only for the behaviors of those being studied, but also for the theories of those doing the studies. For example, Freud's theoretical behavior can be explained in terms of his own concepts of adaptive mechanisms such as projection. Because of this double-edged applicability, psychological adaptive mechanisms are unreliable for the explanation of the salience of initiation rites; one never knows whether the psychological explanation is about the behavior of the researched or about that of the researcher. For this reason, I find it difficult to accept Freud's Oedipus complex, his penis envy, Rank's trauma of birth, Bettelheim's vagina envy, and Brain's sex-excrement-
death linkages. Psychoanalytic methods, by and large, utilize content analysis for the necessary interpretations, and anyone who has utilized content analysis knows that the process of interpretation manifests the psychocultural elements of the interpreter as well as those of the subject.

Further, I reject the Oedipus complex for a number of possible reasons. First, it is possible that this is a manifestation of Freud's own psychological problems. Second, it is possible that it is a problem found in nuclear-family-dominated societies and societies lacking extended relationships. Third, it is possible that it occurs in societies in which the infant's early interpersonal relationships are not diffused among many individuals. Finally, even if one were to accept the Oedipus complex as a psychological problem, one cannot assume that it is a hereditary trait which can be used in explaining the behavior of subsequent generations. In any case, the assumed worldwide prevalence of the Oedipus complex as a psychological phenomenon associated with the infant's initial interpersonal relationships has not been very clearly demonstrated.

The point that psychological traits are not hereditary can be used to debate the apparent validity of the universality of fear as an explanation of initiation rites from generation to generation all over the world. Even if fear were the necessary ingredient in the origins of some initiation rites, it would not necessarily be a factor in the perpetuation of these rites. For example, the origin of circumcision has different causes in different societies. These causes are not necessarily the same as the reasons for ritual continuity. None of the works cited by Brain makes this distinction, and none of them is qualified on the basis of its methodology to establish causal relationships between specific emotional states and pertinent ritual behavior. None of these studies focuses on the intent of the originators of initiation rites in different societies. None of them discusses longitudinally changes in or continuity in causes of initiation rites. What we read are merely speculations, which are subject to understanding or misunderstanding through psychological mechanisms of adaptation and hence have a very low degree of reliability.

For example, Brain apparently supports Hocart's 1937 argument that the use of one term by ego in reference to father, father's brother, and father's patrilateral parallel cousin is a particular form of a generalized hostility based on competition for power. This kinship terminology happens to be used by the Bukusu of western Kenya, where I was born and raised. I would not interpret the system in terms of hostility and competition for power. Instead, I would interpret it in terms of role expectations. Any one of these individuals is potentially ego's mother's husband should his real father die. Anyone who is called father is distinguished from mother's brother and mothers male cousins, who cannot become ego's mother's husband. One therefore finds a positive correlation between this system of kinship and the levirate.

Another example is the case of circumcision among the Bukusu. Mubuku, the founder of the Bukusu, had to prove his manhood by first killing a very much feared and poisonous snake, a demonstration of courage required of him by a neighboring group which had been practicing circumcision for years. Once he had done this, he was permitted to be circumcised. The causes and justification for circumcision today are not the same for all members. Some perpetuate the practice because it is their tradition. Others do so because men have to discard "the mother's suit to put on the father's suit"; i.e., their foreskin, with which they came from their mother's womb, has to be cut so that they will look like their fathers. Others do so for health reasons, still others because it is a means through which they release their stored-up anger and frustration (to judge from their behavior during the circumcision ceremonies). Looking at those who undergo initiation, one cannot ignore the causative aspects of the rewards they receive after circumcision. Freud and his followers would probably see the initiates as being masochistic! In general, however, if one is to apply a psychological explanation of the causes of circumcision, one needs first to realize the distinction between original and current practices. Second, one should not assume hereditary psychological causes. I would expect a similar cautious approach in seeking the causes of continuity of circumcision among the Bagiau, who are kin to the Bukusu. Any other psychological theory, such as menstruation envy or hostility towards women, is farfetched.

by VERA P. CORLHO
Avenida Agami 02, apto 112, CEP 04522 Indianapolis, São Paulo, Brazil. 6 xii 76

A busca de leis universais para a melhor compreensão dos ritos de iniciação é uma tentativa válida e altamente interessante. Mas podemos duvidar da validade da psicanálise como postura teórica para atingir este fim.

Freud foi um excelente observador da sociedade ocidental; suas conclusões foram em seguida aplicadas a povos primitivos, com sucesso maior ou menor. Os pergaminhos presentes no trabalho do antropólogo são os de exagerar a cultura que se propõe estudar apenas os fatos que já foram observados na nossa própria sociedade. Assim sendo, a entrada no mundo adulto é vista por Brain como sendo essencialmente um direito ao exercício da sexualidade. Podemos argumentar que, se este é um aspecto importante nos ritos de puberdade, há vários outros novos o’re vem preocupando somente agora a nossa sociedade e que, coincidentemente, somente agora vêem sendo descobertos e estudados em outras culturas. Como um exemplo típico, podemos citar o uso dos alucinógenos nos ritos de puberdade. Harner (1973 xi-xv) tem razão ao afirmar que Anthropologist are not free from ethnocentrism; too often, like explorers and missionaries, they have passed over the significance of some unidentified "noxious herbs" that the people they were visiting "claimed" to use to get into a trance state. Now that such drugs have come to our own contemporary culture we are more prepared to see the significance of their use elsewhere. One cannot help but wonder what other aspects of knowledge acquired in other times and places remain essentially invisible to us.

As afirmações de caráter geral adquiram maior validade quando se aplicam a um maior número de casos particulares. Não podemos concordar totalmente com Rank quando afirma que o homem "struggles to create cultural and artistic productions," and thus we find women culturally undervalued." Esta ideia não é aplicável a alguns grupos que conhecemos. Entre os Waurá ( Alto Xingu, Brasil), por exemplo, as mulheres são responsáveis pela fabricação de cerâmica, que é o principal produto de troca para o grupo. Na comunidade Kecha de Kuyo Chico, as mulheres não interferem diretamente nas assembleias, mas as decisões importantes só são tomadas pelos homens depois de ter consultado suas esposas em particular. Elas tomam, portanto, parte ativa, mas indiretamente nas decisões do grupo (Nunez del Prado 1973:28-29).

Creio que são numerosos os casos em que o ideal manifestado pelo grupo é o de que as mulheres tenham papel de submissão, embora isto nem sempre aconteça de facto. Este tipo de relação é bem expresso no proverbio popular brasileiro o dono da casa sou eu, mas quem manda é minha mulher.

Na sociedade ocidental, as reivindicações feministas estão na ordem do dia. Elas partem de observações válidas sobre o fato de as mulheres estarem realmente afastadas do processo de produção ou, no caso de participarem dele, serem vítimas de discriminações injustas. Seria isto válido para as sociedades primitivas? O papel da mulher entre grupos primitivos é de submissão em termos de ideal manifestado ou ele é assim realmente? Se se trata apenas de um ideal, podemos pensar que nem todas as conclusões de Brain sobre as funções dos ritos de iniciação são válidas.
The search for universal laws for a better comprehension of initiation rites is a valid and extremely interesting attempt, but I am not sure of the validity of psychoanalysis as a theoretical posture for attaining this objective.

Freud was an excellent observer of Western society; his conclusions were later applied to primitive peoples, with greater or less success. The danger is always present in the work of anthropologists in distinguishing in the culture they propose to study only the facts that have already been observed in our own society. This being the case, entrance into the adult world is seen by Brain as essentially acquiring the right to exercise sexuality. One can argue that, if this is an important aspect of puberty rites, there are several others that are preoccupying our society just now and that, coincidentally, are only now being “discovered” and studied in other cultures. An example is the use of hallucinogens in puberty rites. I agree with Harner (1973:xi-xv) that

Anthropologists are not free from ethnocentrism; too often, like explorers and missionaries, they have passed over the significance of some unidentified “noxious herb” that the people were visiting “claimed” to use to get into a trance state. Now that such drugs have come to our own contemporary culture we are more prepared to see the significance of their use elsewhere. One cannot help but wonder what other aspects of knowledge acquired in other times and places remain essentially invisible to us.

Statements of a general character acquire greater validity when applied to a greater number of individual cases. I cannot completely agree with Rank’s view that man “struggles to create ‘cultural and artistic productions,’ and thus we find women culturally undervalued.” This idea is not applicable to some groups I know. Among the Waurá (Upper Xingu, Brazil), for example, women are responsible for the fabrication of ceramics, the principal trade product of the group. In the Quecha community of Kuyo Chico (Peru), women do not directly participate in assemblies, but important decisions are taken by men only after privately consulting their wives. Consequently, women take an active, though indirect, part in the decisions of the group (Nuñez del Prado 1973:28–29).

I believe that in many cases women have a submissive role in the ideal manifested by the group even though this is not always the fact. This type of relation is well expressed in the popular Brazilian proverb “I am the head of the house, but the one who gives orders is my wife.”

In Western society, feminist vindications are the order of the day. They originate from valid observations about the fact that women are removed from the process of production or, where they participate in the process of production, are victims of discrimination. Would this be valid for primitive societies? Is the role of women among primitive groups submission in fact, or in terms of the ideal they manifest? If it is only a question of the ideal, I am led to believe that not all of Brain's conclusions on the functions of initiation rites are valid.

by TEKLA ĐÖMŰTÖR
Estűt: Lórán Tudományegyetem, Földtár Tanszék, Budapest V, Pesti Barnabás utca 1, Hungary. 30 xi 76

Brain has some first-class ideas. Still, I cannot accept the whole train of thought. He is quite right in pointing out that man is the only animal that shows such self-consciousness about sex and that very elaborate rituals have been created all over the world to mark this “rite de passage.” On the other hand, anal cleansing is not restricted to human beings; cats, for example (certainly prompted by the same biological necessity), do their utmost to clean themselves, which is not an easy task without hands. I think that all animals that live in restricted areas try to keep themselves and their habitats clean of excrement, whereas animals that wander large areas and are herbivorous do not bother about this problem. So what? Some mammals, while their young are too small to keep clean, even eat the excrement of the young to get rid of it. Therefore I think you have to eliminate the question of excrement from the argument. The problem remains why human beings surround sexuality with such a circle of prohibitions. On the other hand, given the trend toward being very outspoken about sex and even forming communities for what is called “Gruppensex” and performing sex openly, without any sort of initiation, the whole problem must be reconsidered. What was true 20 years ago is true no longer. Thus initiation rites are not “universals” and constant factors in all communities, but depend on the structure of the community. We are living in a period in which, in many countries, marriage seems to be easily dissolved and young people copulate in groups, openly. With the possibility of birth control, many aspects of human society that were taken for granted in 1900 are considered ridiculous by teenagers. I think that all the “mumbo jumbo” connected with sex has to do rather with the question of how many children can be raised by society. With birth control, I presume, most of it will automatically disappear.

by GEOFFREY GORER
Sunte House, Haywards Heath, Sussex RH16 1RZ, England. 12 xi 76

I am in sympathy with Brain’s attempt to relate widespread human activities to the species-specific development of Homo sapiens. I think he might have paid more attention to the phases of human childhood, in particular the years of latency which separate the sexuality of early childhood from the sexuality of adolescence. Further, under conditions of severe food-shortage or semi-starvation, the onset of menarche and the descent of the testicles are frequently delayed several years. In all simple societies, infant and child mortality is high and must have been very widespread in the hypothesized primate tropics. Consequently, I think initiation rites may ritualize parental anxiety that there may not be another generation of adults to succeed them; they may be envisaged as magical attempts to ensure a succeeding generation of complete adults in place of those spindly latency children, as well as expressing parent-child antagonism.

I doubt if all human beings wipe their anus after defecation. This has been ritualized by the great religions of Hinduism, Islam, and Modern Hygiene; but in pagan West Africa, 40 years ago, one could see people squatting low in the fields or by the wayside and looking round rather listlessly for leaves or a stone; and the same seems to have been true for 17th- and 18th-century England (see the definitions of "sirrreverence" in any historical dictionary).

by JEAN S. LA FONTAINE
London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton St., London WC2A 2AE, England. 25 xi 76

Brain has kindly referred to the interesting discussion of a draft of his paper that we had earlier this year, so he is aware of my views on this subject. While the imaginative boldness of his enterprise compels my admiration, I am not convinced that this approach is the right one. Part of the trouble lies in the identification of puberty rites with initiation and both with “problems” of sexuality. Puberty rites seek to promote and control the fertility of individuals who have reached physical maturity; initiation rites are, as Van Gennep (1909) pointed out, concerned with the transition from social childhood to social adulthood. They may be performed before or considerably after the physical changes which accompany maturation, but the initiates are transferred not individually but as a class from one stage to the next. I would consider that neither puberty rites nor initiation are primarily about sexuality; they
concern procreative powers and maturity respectively. The association of sexuality with adulthood is by no means universal, particularly when, as is not uncommon, a period of permitted licence precedes the assumption of adult status. On the other hand, parenthood is always part of the responsibility of full adulthood (Fortes 1962). The clear social division between the status of child and that of adult creates a break in the otherwise continuous process of maturation, so that the “problem” of the transfer of social status among individuals is a consequence of the social division. Where there is no such clear conceptual division, the status of individuals does not require redefinition, for there is no “problem.” To assume that where no initiation rites exist at puberty there are other mechanisms which bring sexuality under control is an admission that initiation rites are not explained as the only mechanisms controlling sexuality.

It is quite right to emphasise the difference between cause and effect, as too many anthropologists do not. There is, however, a further distinction which might clarify the issues still further: the distinction between cause (the analyst's view) and purpose (the actor's intentions). A flaw in Van Gennep’s analysis which has been perpetuated in many subsequent analyses is that he relates the tripartite structure he observed in the rites to the cause rather than to the purpose of the rites. Van Gennep can hardly be blamed for this, since he had little access to the interpretations of members of the societies he analysed, but modern anthropologists are more fortunate. We are told that the rites make “proper women” out of girls (Richards 1956) or men out of boys (La Fontaine 1971), so that it is clear that the purpose of the ritual is to effect a transfer from one status to the other. This lends additional support to my contention that the problem of transition to adulthood is a result of the social classification into immature and mature.

The biosocial and psychoanalytic interpretations do not add conviction to the conclusions. Face Fox (1975), I would contend that if biosocial anthropology can only tell us that what is common in social life is innate then it may be acceptable but is entirely uninteresting. As Needham points out in his critical introduction to Durkheim and Mauss’s *Primitive Classification* (1963), our problem is that similar social systems may have different classification systems and similar classifications appear in societies with different social systems. Since transition rituals appear an integral part of classification systems built up on a basic differentiation of status by sex and age, this is how we should approach them. There are many more problems of analysis than can be solved by an assertion that there is an evolved capacity in the human animal to initiate, as the quote Brain cites seems to suggest. Moreover, it is clearly not true that all societies initiate—the Ganda and other interlacustrine Bantu do not, nor do the Tallensi (to name but a few well-known examples). The evolutionist argument leaves us with the much more difficult problem of explaining why some societies have suppressed this generic tendency.

The apparent universality of certain features of society is, however, an illusion created by the identification of these features with drives and urges in a neo-Malinowskian manner which begs all the questions. Thus, having identified initiation rites as a mechanism for controlling the sex drive, it is possible to compare them with the mating behavior of primates, or, for that matter, other social animals such as gazelles. Fox himself has pointed out that every teenager knows what many anthropologists seem to have confused—that there is a difference between sex and marriage. And, one might add, between sex and parenthood.

Psychological and psychoanalytic explanations usually deal mainly with the symbolism of rites. Here I accept the views of Leach (1976:96), who states: “My general conclusion is that the hunches of psycho-analysts are probably quite often correct, but that the ‘theory’ by which they seek to justify their hunches is of such intellectual crudity and so lacking in sophistication that it has practically no value as a general tool for the analysis of ethnographic materials.” This is not to say that psychoanalytic interpretations may not be compatible with the symbolic analysis of ritual as carried out by anthropologists, but they offer no explanation of the ritual.

My own view, which I suggested to Brain, is that initiation rites present authority as a powerful force, indeed as the force, behind the ritual which transforms the individual. Thus the significance of the Luguru girl’s initiation in her maternal uncle’s hut is not only that he is male, but that he represents lineage authority in this matrilineal society. The legitimate subordination of young women and the power of the maternal uncle are clearly demonstrated in the emergence of the helpless, confused initiate Brain so vividly describes. It is here that the interesting contribution made by this article emerges: it links the classification of women as subordinate with a social system in which membership of the important social group is transferred through women; women hold property rights and exercise political rights (and, I suspect, provide most of the agricultural labour) as the prime cause of these severe rituals to which a girl is subjected at puberty. (She emerges to be married and thus transferred to the jurisdiction of other men.) Matriliny is shown not to be matriarchy. The symbolic themes of sex (life) and death, food and faces, lend power to the ritual by invoking natural powers in the service of social divisions; in an attempt to identify causes they are “matter out of place.”

*by Sidney Brooks Levy*

*Department of Anthropology, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11210, U.S.A. 5 XN 76*

Brain’s attempt to understand the causes and effects of initiation rites results in a structural-functional explanation of the effects of these rites and a psychoanalytic explanation of their causes. Although acknowledging that “there is no explanation of the causes or the effects,” I should like to direct my comments to the explanation of causes.

Few would deny the general importance of psychoanalytic theory to our understanding of human psychic development. Universal psychological processes cannot be utilized to explain social events, however, because social events (i.e., initiation rites), when ritualized, are transformed into public statements about a society’s core values and, over time, become causal in their own right. Cohen (1974:4) aptly notes that “for the majority of people it is the ritual that recreates certain psychic states in the minds of the participants, and not the other way around.” Psychological reductionism cannot explain why people categorize the way they do, because the very categories chosen are symbolic statements of cultural values.

I agree that initiation rites often function to mark the transformation from an asexual to a sexual being. I would add that such rites also symbolize a removal from family and subsequent incorporation into the community. These, however, are social transitions that do not reflect a biological time clock generally associated with psychological development. The broad range of variation in the biological development of individuals is subsumed under the more significant ritual statement about a society’s core values. Initiation rites often include categories of individuals spanning a wide age range. Such categories do not have a common psyche. The age which a society designates for initiation also varies so widely as to suggest the greater importance of the social meaning and, possibly, cause of the ritual. Some initiation rites are concluded in a short period of time, while others (Tiwi, for example) are prolonged for a ten-year period. If we argue that initiation rites are caused by universal psychological processes, then how can we incorporate the Tiwi case, where the period of liminality lasts well into biological and psychological adulthood? Pocock (1967:309) remarks, “We can imagine what would happen to the distinction between prepuberty and manhood in a given society if it were left to the biological process to produce men.”
My own research among the Lubavitcher Hassidim in Brooklyn, who lead a highly ritualized life with extreme emphasis on pollution-purity status and who have initiation rites for males, suggests that male initiation does not confer adult sexual status. Rather, these rites acknowledge a moving out of family into community as an adult in ritual and ceremonial matters. It represents a sociological transition far more than a psychosexual one. There are no similar rites for women. Because of psychological reasons, the time of marriage, a woman undergoes a ritual immersion and purification each lunar month at the conclusion of her menstrual bleeding throughout her reproductive life. I have suggested that she retains an anomalous position throughout life—potentially polluting to men and hence powerful—but anomalousness is not a psychological or biological state of being. It is a cultural category based on values that emanate from the sex/gender system of categorization.

To suggest, as Brain does, that psychological factors are causes of initiation rites and sociocultural factors are effects is to deny the important role that culture plays in sex/gender assignments—in their meanings and social expressions. Psychoanalytic theory relies heavily on assumed biological differences that transform into psychic differences and rarely considers the extent to which cultural emphasis on gender differences affects social structural patterns. Further investigation of these relationships will yield “explanations” of initiation rites.

by Demetrios Loukatos

108 Aréimitos, Paleo-Faliron, Athens, Greece. 6 1 77

Brain’s paper is interesting as much for the recapitulation of the theories of initiation rites advanced so far as for the remarks the author makes about each. The article also contains good information, useful for nonanthropologists as well, on what has been written so far about sex and incest and (less extensively) the very serious problem of death in relation to initiation rites. Brain, however, deals with many more subjects than are mentioned in the title and their importance to initiation rites. He attempts to discover the goal of these rites, starting from Van Gennep’s “rites de passage” and arriving at birth (the trauma of birth) and death (dead body/excrement). Furthermore, he points to the importance of language and speech and the urge for knowledge that distinguishes man from animals. His paper is oriented toward the interests of current anthropology: he reviews many of the questions concerning initiation rites among various social groups, and in so doing he uses many points of view from physical and social anthropology and from psychoanalysis. He respectfully compares contradictory opinions (the psychoanalysts’ and the anthropologists’, for example, and those of contemporary and earlier researchers). He accepts Freud’s fundamental conclusions, but also uses the more recent anthropological views of Van Gennep, Rank, Turner, Beattie, Douglas, Fox, and others.

Among the weaknesses one could note in Brain’s paper is some disorder in the matters examined. Some points are raised in passing and only reappear later; others are scattered. Further, he doesn’t satisfactorily develop (perhaps for lack of evidence) the suggested relation between excrement and the dead body and its role in initiation rites. Also, he supports the view that the male envies the female for her vagina, which is not persuasive in that he himself accepts the fact that menstruation is repellent to boys. As for the cruelties committed by soldiers at war on women, they can be attributed to sexual privation and hatred rather than envy of women for their different sexual organ.

Another, more general weakness is that the author does not refer to economic and geographical factors. The development of productive forces and relations, the difference between agricultural and pastoral societies, could explain many aspects of initiation rites. Also very instructive would be an examination of the development of society and family through polygamy and monogamy.

Brain is usually conciliatory in his approach to contradictory theories, and his inferences and remarks are made with discretion. He seems to adopt the proposition he states in closing: “because one [explanation] is right, there is no automatic assignment of wrong to another.”

by Nalini Natarajan

“Benmore,” Bishop Cotton Rd., Shillong 793001, Meghalaya, India. 3 XII 76

Brain’s interdisciplinary approach integrates concepts from social and physical anthropology and psychoanalysis which, beginning with 1922, spans 50 years. His assumptions are that human rites of passage are universal and that cultural variations among societies arise from geographical, ethnic, and linguistic differences. Logically and clearly, he attempts to show the causes of the occurrence of initiation rites in a number of primitive modern societies, the reason they take specific shapes, and the effects of these rites.

The main theme of the essay revolves around concepts drawn from the above three social sciences, among them dirt, pollution, excreta, corruption, rituals, culture, nature, speech, language, symbols, mythology, mortality, marginality, knowledge, life, penis envy, vagina envy, order, disorder, concern, and categorization. Important facts are the development of the ethos of every human society on the basis of consciousness, emotions, and gratifications, the varying nature and culture of every society, and the fragility of social structure. The anomaly of marginality and the resultant ambivalence are also illustrated.

A shorter introductory part would have made the essay more concise. Certain details, for instance, regarding cultural influences could have been trimmed. Also, in the discussion of themes relating to sex, an important process of its transformation—sublimation—needs to be mentioned. What knowledge of life is to the awareness of mortality, purity is to pollution. Sex has also given joy to both simpler and developed societies. Further, since a reference has been made to Freud’s hypothesis of there being no pure masculinity or femininity, a mention of the modern transsexuals would have been in order.

Preferential mating could have been cited in the elaboration of incest. The Pharaohs of Egypt married their own sisters; among the Muslims, the bint aam or paternal cousin was a preferential mate. Cross-cousin or uncle-niece marriages were preferred among certain Indian societies.

The painful ejection of the infant from the womb and its traumatic experience of birth formed an analogous theme in the verse of Saint Ramdas in the latter half of the 17th century in Maharashatra, India (Ramdas 1963).

A mention of syncretism arising out of contact would have added a new dimension to Brain’s multifactorial analysis of the linking of cause and effect with reference to initiation rites. The present rational and scientific approach to sex, incest, and death may also provide a more rounded answer as to why these rites take the shape they have taken.

by Dana Raphael

Human Lactation Center, 606 Sturges Highway, Westport, Conn. 06880, U.S.A. 13 1 77

Brain’s piece, a flight of fancy, uses popular Freudian theories to explain the cultural presence of initiation rites. Roheim’s psychological reductionism is brought up to date. Oedipal complexes, dirty anuses, penis envies, and fear of vaginas are mixed together with postpartum sex taboos to produce circumcision, clitoridectomy, and the like.
I should like to correct one error regarding breast-feeding. The maximum time a human infant can safely be exclusively breast-fed is somewhere between four and six months. After that, other foods must be introduced or the baby’s health begins to deteriorate. No child could survive on breast milk alone for three or four years. The assumption that the presence of breast-feeding means the absence of other food is a major error. It is a serious flaw in many HRAF studies which attempt to explain behavior from isolated cross-cultural categories.

Breast-feeding of three- or four-year-olds has minimal nutritional value, though it remains an important affection and comfort source. After six months or so, breast-feeding serves to supplement the child’s diet. Also, depending on the individual, the nutritional and health state of the mother, the number of times she breast-feeds, and other factors, it can function to inhibit ovulation and extend the interpregnancy period.

by Alice Schlegel
Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15260, U.S.A. 10 xi 76

Adolescent initiation ceremonies hold a seemingly endless fascination for investigators into the human condition, much more than equally species-specific rites of birth and death. Indeed, if we agree with Brain about the message of adolescent ceremonies, the symbolism and associated anxieties of birth and death are incorporated within it. In this provocative paper, Brain sees these ceremonies as attempts to cope with the anxieties of sex and death, as collective cultural responses to individual psychological needs. His chain of reasoning goes something like this: initiation ceremonies attempt to establish order in an anomalous situation, in this case the movement from asexual childhood to sexual adulthood; this transition is highly charged emotionally because of the anxiety-producing nature of sexuality, due both to the temptation of incest and to the proximity of the genitals to the anal region, with the allegedly universal association offees and death; and therefore, the rites exist not only to mark a social transition, but also as a symbolic expression of, and perhaps catharsis for, deep-seated anxieties.

The trouble with this causal explanation is that initiation ceremonies are not universal, whereas anxieties about sexuality and death very likely are. Not only are initiation ceremonies not universal, but presence or absence, and whether the ceremony is held for boys or girls or both, is patterned, being significantly correlated with world area and with level of socioeconomic complexity (Schlegel and Barry 1975). Foragers, whose social organization is presumably close to an evolutionarily ancestral model, are more likely to have ceremonies for girls than the painful male ceremonies Brain notes for !Kung. We intend to pursue the argument about the “causes” of adolescent ceremonies in future publications; at this point let me say that psychogenic explanations are as slippery as eels and require supportive data that are systematically collected. I do not deny the anxiety-reducing function of initiation ceremonies—all ritual behavior may well function to maintain psychological homeostasis; however, I suggest that we can look more fruitfully to organizational features of social groups and the symbolic content of adult sex roles to explain the regularities and diversities of initiation ceremonies.

Brain does make some very interesting suggestions which lend themselves to comparative investigation, in particular his hypothesis that harsh treatment during initiation is associated with dominance and authoritarianism. The subject of the initiate to genital operations or other pain has been coded for both sexes in our sample of 186 societies, so societies in which this treatment occurs could be compared for authoritarianism with societies in which it does not.

Brain raises the question of the almost universal privacy sought during sexual relations (if only by waiting until the room is darkened). He posits a “shame” hypothesis linking sex with incest, feces, and death. I propose that we look at human sexual practices in contrast to those of other mammals. What marks human intercourse is the generality of ventral-ventral contact, relatively long duration of contact, and lowering of awareness, in females as well as males, that accompanies heightened sexual arousal. All of these features would seem to make human couples more vulnerable than animal couples to danger, which can be avoided by seeking privacy. One consequence of these behaviors is to promote intimacy, making the sexual bond a highly charged relationship. I suggest that where sexual anxieties occur, they are more likely to be over infidelity or other loss of love object than over incest.

by Howard F. Stein
Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, Meharry Medical College, 1005 18th Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37208, U.S.A. 14 xi 76

In his ambitious essay, Brain “reconsiders” far more than initiation rites. His linkage of “sex, feces, death, and incest” is but the focus of an attempt to integrate the biological and the ecological, the evolutionary and the cultural, the symbolic and the ritual, and the psychoanalytic and the functionalist. With a welcome psychodynamic command of his data, he argues, following Beattie, contra Douglas, that culture must not be superorganically refied and must be understood in terms of individuals. Yet I miss the influential ancestral ghost of Sapiro, whose 1951 paper is surely apposite; likewise, La Barre’s summa anthropologicae on religion (1972), which has much to say about Brain’s subject, receives no mention. More broadly, it is interesting, though disquieting, to see us anthropologists (e.g., Fox, Brain) discovering what the psychoanalysts and “early” analytic anthropologists have known for decades: for instance, “primal murder” as a recurrent ontogenetic theme rather than a phylogenetic “event”; reciprocal father-son Oedipal and counter-Oedipal antagonism. Nevertheless, it is welcome to see anthropology attempting to ground itself in the insight of dynamic psychiatry and not wander off exclusively in what is in my opinion a misguided methodology of psychoanalysis-by-correlation and post hoc explanation (Whiting et al.). Brain’s speculation on the congruence of authoritarian personality, social structure, classificatory kinship, restricted language code, and the sado-masochistic intergenerational relationship is absolutely brilliant, as are his explication of Bettelheim and his interpretation of the female ritual rebirth among the Luguru. He further demonstrates the importance of multicausality, feedback between causes and consequences, and the Freudian principle of overdetermination.

Despite a veritable meteor shower of individual insights, the essay somehow leaves me dissatisfied, both with some details and overall. Brain disputes Douglas’s correlation between male dominance and the lack of elaboration of beliefs in sex pollution, nevertheless likes her point, and goes on to postulate a plausible hypothesis for severe female initiation rites, one which cannot in the wildest imagination be a Lévi-Straussian transformation of Douglas’s original. As a critical review of selected literature, the essay omits (at least) three recent struggles with the problems Brain is concerned with: Schwartzman (1974), DeVos (1975), and Parker (1976). It hops from reconsideration to reconsideration, and the one that concludes does not seem to be the one that, after many episodes, began. Brain concludes, quoting Virginia Woolf, that one cannot evaluate or choose sides, but his very essay disqualifies this newly introduced ideologic reframing. Surely it is not “All’s well that ends well.”

Brain offers three possible explanations to account for the universality of panhuman behavior patterns. I suggest a fourth: a species-specific biology in “the human animal” (La Barre) that is in part psychobiologically preadapted to an “average expectable environment” (Hartmann) and that has a built-in
“epigenetic” ground-plan (Erikson) which the human and natural environments can foster or cause to atrophy and truncate. While sociobiology and cultural ecology are currently fashionable explicationa that promise to redeem anthropology, I am more impressed by the Hallowell tradition that recognizes that the “behavioral environment” is “culturally constituted,” that even the world that “exists” is largely projective in nature. Fox, whom Brain cites, writes that “the potential for culture lies in the biology of the species” (1975:275). But what indeed is that elusive biology? Brain shows in a footnote that even the genetic-biological determinist is a crypto-Freudian. I would suggest that the “selective pressure” for initiation rites, the incest taboo, and severe sex training exists as much in the present as it did in the evolutionary past that is alleged to explain the present. The core of that persistence is ontogenetically recurrent “affective dissonance” (DeVos 1975) between dependency and sexuality and the subsequent Oedipal situation of antagonism in the child and reawakened conflict in the parental generation. Turner notwithstanding, I would suggest that rituals, among them rigorous rites of passage, are rife in all cultures. Beneath a bewildering diversity of content lies frequently a homology of underlying structure and conflict. Warner (1962) long ago established the functional equivalence between Murngin rites and the American Memorial Day cult of the dead. Walsh and Scandalis (1972) go so far as to suggest homology between “male initiation rites and modern warfare as related expressions of unconscious cross-generational aggression.” In a forthcoming essay on Jewish cultural history (Stein 1977), I explore “the binding of the son” as a paradigm that traces from ancient Semitic sacrifice of the first-born male to present Judaic symbolism—without the assistance of polygyny and postpartum exclusive sleeping rights. I might add to Brain’s list a further “cause” of male initiation rites: to place boys-become-men “in their place,” while giving them adult male status and prerogatives, at the same time confronting the Oedipal threat adults fear from their juniors-become-equals. One gains securely circumscribed initiative through rigorous submission to the culturally sacred, which is itself a mystification of the victory of the counter-Oedipal position. In American society, there is the slogan “The Marine Corps Builds Men”; so do Little League baseball, football, and warfare itself. As Walsh and Scandalis suggest, warfare may be a means by which the father generation ritually jeopardizes and offers the lives of its beloved sons for the good of society: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori. More generally, we might take Leach’s (1954) dictum that ritual makes explicit the social structure and say likewise that ritual makes explicit the culture’s affective structure and core conflicts.

This is not, however, to justify ritualization and call it necessarily adaptive: only tautologically can one argue that because a cultural group—or even the species—survives a given trait or trait-complex is adaptive. Anthropologists have gone to considerable pains to rationalize the most patently irrational. Until technology made world-destruction fantasies a potential reality, such culturally utilized defenses as projection, dissociation, and displacement as are present in witchcraft safeguarded the integrity of each ethnocentric entity that designated itself as The Human Beings. But ritualized collective panics and regressions (e.g., Nazism, the post-Pearl Harbor “relocation” of American Japanese, the Stallinit confessionals and purges, the McCarthyist defamation campaign, the Red Guard, etc.) should warn us against searching all rites of passage for adaptive potential. They might even cause us to reconsider the more benign issues of incest, severe sex training, and initiation rites (La Barre 1972:594; Connor 1976). Ritualization is one way of attempting to bring order to the chaos which eros, thanatos, and excreta arouse. Yet mastery through the magico-religious is at best fragile, tenuous, and self-deceptive, because it is accomplished not by strengthening the ego, but by alternate cycles of acting out and being overwhelmed by the superfego. Ritualization perpetuates the problems it purports to solve: anxiety, helplessness, conflict. Since the power it confers is ultimately a spurious one of shared self-deception, it must be continuously defended and reaffirmed because it is unconsciously recognized to be inadequate to the problem. Ritual-sacral security conveys only brief respite from anxiety through magical thinking and ego-suspended acting out. Reality, however, breaks through. Because the temporally bound anxiety requires continuous, even institutionalized, re-ritualization, the psychic apparatus which might develop ego-adaptive techniques is depleted. Adaptive potential is impoverished, not enhanced. In the name of security, the sacred perpetuates insecurity—and the infantilization and authoritarianism which Brain so well describes. That which protects us actually prevents us from considering alternate forms of protection. Ritualization offers security only in the short run, while preventing the very feedback necessary for long-run security to be acquired. Apotropaic rite never confronts the nameless terrors (e.g., sex, death, incest, excreta) it so deftly disguises while symbolizing. Brain cites with approval Hamburg’s (1963:311–12) statement that “individuals seek and find gratifying those situations which have been advantageous in the survival of the species.” If the species has survived to date it is surely not because of its inherent adaptive potential, but because the sacred traditions, great and small, of authoritarian, unambiguously categorized cultures have not possessed the Leslie Whitean secular technology to transform mythic narcissism into a Wagnerian immolation for the entire species. We have survived, perhaps, despite culture.

by W. D. Wilder

Department of Anthropology, University of Durham, Durham DH1 3TG, England. 7 XIII 76

Brain wants to know why rites of passage in human societies literally leave enduring marks on their members, the most frequent being some material alteration to the genitals. This is a question about the pornography of culture, a many-faceted topic commanding the attention of hundreds of serious and sometimes original scholars down the years. Their labours have yielded a vast and variegated literature on phallic worship, scatological rites, prenuptial and virginity rites, penis pins, bloody sacrifice, cannibalism, and much more (cf. Wilder 1973a, b). Brain contributes absolutely nothing to this honourable tradition. For example, Young (1965:1) very competently argued that “the degree of solidarity of a given social system determines the degree to which status transitions within it will be dramatized.” In Brain’s treatment the same proposition is blunted to read: “authoritarian, rigid” social systems produce “bizarre, harsh” initiations. Brain finds that initiation rites are merely the result of “common anxieties” built into the human condition. In other words, if they didn’t exist, we would have to invent them. I don’t see the point of such an argument.

The bit about anal cleansing proved an obstacle to me. Non-human mammals “clean” (stroke) the perineal region before defecation; stroking is the trigger for excretion and is indispensable for the survival of the young of lower mammals. Humans do not stroke by way of rehearsal for cleansing as we might expect (Montagu 1971:15–16). According to Brain, however, humans have something like this (anal cleansing), and they “inevitably” link excrement with sexual activity (which would include stroking of the genitals). Where are the connections? Becker (1973), in a sophisticated argument, clearly shows that decay and dirt (the anal) equate to female genitals, but not to sexual connection as such or to the male genitals. In fact, the child’s unconscious mind projects an opposition (not a “link”) between the anal and the genital —between the live penis (= movement, fullness, life) and the dead penis or feces (= inertia, emptiness, death).
Man’s genital hangup gets too much space in Brain’s paper. Truly, the human body is the locus of dirt and sexual activity, a dead thing even to the small child. To the child the body quickly seems strange and unaccountably repugnant: “it aches and bleeds and will decay and die” (Becker 1973:26). It is shit. Later in his life, however, the child gives over his body to others to handle or mutilate; he submits the body whole to Society, which “uses” it in standardized, public ways: “that way [the body] will no longer be a dangerous negation for him” (p. 46). This same argument is put by Slater (1963).

Genitals, fecal matter, and cadavers each represent pure animality, it is true, but that is all. “Today we realize that all the talk about blood and excrement, sex and guilt, is true not because of [as Brain contends] urges to patricide and incest and fears of actual physical castration, but because all these things reflect man’s horror of his own basic animal condition, a condition that he cannot—especially as a child—understand and a condition that—as an adult—he cannot accept” (Becker 1973:35, italics mine).

Initiation ceremonies are shown by psychoanalytic and ethnographic studies to be just what they seem: ceremonies to get individuals to come to terms with their bodies, to articulate their body awareness. Men and women must first of all cohabit with their own bodies. If they do not do this, then there is no society and no culture.

Reply
by James L. Brain
State University of New York College at New Paltz, New Paltz, N.Y. 12561, U.S.A. 1977

What man shall live and not see death?

Psalms 89:49

The criticisms of my article cover a large range. Were I only to respond to positive reinforcement, clearly I should give up anthropology immediately! However, I shall try to meet at least some of the arguments against the points I have raised.

Dömötör claims that we have to eliminate the question of excrement from the argument (no pun intended), since many animals are clean in their habits. Somewhat the same point is made by Gorer, who doubts whether all humans wipe the anus after defecation. Wilder treats us to a totally irrelevant discussion on the necessary stroking of the perineal region in lower mammals to trigger defecation. To Dömötör and Wilder my reply is that we are not discussing lower mammals or cats, but humans. Only humans actually need to clean the anus regularly because of their physical structure and gait. Can one show any other mammal which has the anus surrounded by flabby buttocks except when squatting? If a cat regularly tries to wipe itself, it must be suffering from a worm infestation that causes intolerable itching; the natural defecation of cats requires no wiping. An interesting point, however, is that cats are probably much more shy about defecation and hiding their feces than most mammals; they are also much more shy about copulation. Gorer may be correct for some people on some occasions, but (a) I do not believe regular failure to cleanse would be possible for humans without severe hygiene consequences and (b) and far more important, no other animal has to be taught to clean itself, and particularly not by a mother who has the whole range of human speech at her disposal to express disgust. Can these critics demonstrate any human society that does not consider human feces dirty and disgusting? Or can they deny the proximity of the anus to the genitals? The genitals are, of course, themselves used for excreting urine, also commonly considered dirty and polluting.

Gorer’s point about initiation rites being a manifestation and ritualization of parental anxiety in conditions of high mortality is a good one, and I would not totally exclude it as one of the many variables involved in this complex situation.

Dömötör suggests that the present fashion for group sex shows that it is not natural to be bashful about sex. I entirely disagree. In the first place, group sex is commonly performed as a rebellion against the norms of society in a self-conscious way; in the second, I very much doubt its actuality in significant numbers of the population.

Bluebond-Langner takes me severely to task and in doing so makes herself rather vulnerable to a counterattack. She claims to be an expert in the field of death. It may well be that the old are more immediately concerned with pain and the loss of self-confidence than with the fact of death per se, though I would suggest that this is an American cultural syndrome not connected with the terrors of our medical system and the lack of concern for the aged. In the case of all humans from an early age until extreme old age, however, I will steadfastly maintain that a knowledge of and fear of death color all our thinking in some way. I refer her to the source already quoted—Rochlin (1973)—and also to Feifel’s The Meaning of Death (1959), with particular emphasis on the chapter by C. W. Wahl, “The Fear of Death.” Has Bluebond-Langner ever lived in a situation of war or epidemic in which the latent possibility of death is suddenly made manifest? She asks about cultures where it is believed that a warrior who dies nobly will be rewarded. As a former member of the most elite regiment of the British army, in which death would certainly have been preferable to dishonor and death in heroic contexts was explicitly glorified, I can assure her that the fear of death is not at all decreased, only controlled. She quotes her own works, neither of which is yet published, so that it is not possible to assess her evidence. I also remind her once again of a fact of life in simple societies which for us is totally removed: the necessity to deal with a rapidly putrefying corpse, and the hideous realization that the person whom one loved has turned into the magnified equivalent of a piece of feces.

She also berates me for setting up equations such as “if a = b and b = c, then a = c” and cites the absurdity of this method the example that hospitals and brides in the United States are both associated with the color white, yet there is obviously no connection between them. It seems almost incredible that the similar significance of this symbolism should escape anyone, but to spell it out, white in both cases stands for purity.

Finally, I would suggest that she apply one of the most elementary rules of fieldwork: that a statement is not necessarily true because a number of people make it. To use a parallel: if one suggests to people in a society where there is institutionalized joking between groups that there might be a basis of hostility to the relationship, they ridicule the idea.

This criticism also applies to the interesting remarks of Chilungu. He denies the competition between a man’s generation and that of his father and explains the extension of the term for father to FB and FFBS as indicative of leviratic role expectations. Maybe, but is every member of one’s father’s clan at his generational level a potential husband for one’s mother? His contention that “the origin of circumcision has different causes in different societies” I find a good illustration of what Richards (1956:118–19) called the difference between “expressed purposes” and “deduced purposes.” Jews circumcise, and many explain the practice on hygienic grounds, but investigation will show that hygiene has nothing to do with it. Chilungu also denies the universality of the Oedipus situation and ascribes it either to Western society or to Freud’s imagination. I think that Whiting et al.’s study of male initiation rites makes very clear that an extended-family situation and possible polygyny make the hostility much more intense than in the Western conjugal family.

Chilungu also finds the idea of male envy of female procreativity farfetched, but can he find any more convincing hy-
prothesis than Bettelheim’s? Very substantial support for this has recently been given in an article by Dundes (1976:221–38) on the psychological significance of the bullroarer. I would add the drum as a symbol of male authority for similar reasons.

All I can say to Coelho is that feminists have never disputed that women possess power: the issue is authority.

Blake makes what at first appears to be a good point when he observes that among Moggitt’s Desert People there is far more sympathy and mutual trust between male generations than there is hostility and that the effect of circumcision is to enhance the solidarity between fathers and sons. If fathers are really so concerned about their sons, why allow the rite to take place at all? The answer is plain: because it has always been done; it is institutionalized. Thus, its expressed purpose today may be totally different from the original motivation. One is also reminded of the glee with which fathers in Western society hear about the harsh treatment their sons receive as army recruits, while overtly sympathizing with them.

Both Levy and La Fontaine adopt the classic social anthropological standpoint, to which I have no answer. I do not disagree with it entirely, but on the other hand continue to insist that it makes no effort to elucidate the “why” and only tells us about the “how.” We can only agree to differ.

For Stein I have only gratitude for an intensely interesting short article which has given me food for thought.

Loukatos claims that I am wrong about the envy and hatred of women expressed in the acts committed in war. I can only refer him to the work of Brownmiller already quoted, which documents this matter in hideous detail. His point about the different economic systems is an excellent one and brings me to the critique of Schlegel.

Her helpful and positive comments are most interesting, particularly the suggestion that there is a correlation between the level of socioeconomic complexity and the presence of the rites, which lends substantive backing to what one had intuitively suspected. I look forward to the further development of the paper prepared by her and Herbert Barry for the Society for Cross-Cultural Research in 1975.

She raises the point about the urge for privacy in human copulation and suggests that this may have been a defense mechanism of adaptive evolutionary value made necessary by the ventral-ventral position, the long duration of contact, and the lowered awareness. This may be so, but one could raise a counter evolutionary argument which would explain both the ventral-ventral position and the disgust for feces: that with the development of erect posture and striding gait and the concomitant development of the buttocks, there would be a problem with fecal matter which could bring about infection of the vaginal tract unless (a) adequate cleansing took place before intercourse and/or (b) a ventral-ventral position were adopted. There could well be a feedback situation here.

Another interesting observation by Schlegel is that anxiety about sex is more likely to be over infidelity or loss of the love object. I find this unlikely because it refers to the particular case rather than the general, which I would contend is the human condition.

The comment from Raphael arrived late; there is not much to say about her curt dismissal of my article as a “flight of fancy ... [which uses popular Freudian theories.” Even if she personally is opposed to psychoanalytic theory, one would hope that my final analysis of cause and effect in initiation rites might have something to offer. I direct her attention to the comments of Stein, though it seems probable that these too would not be acceptable to her.

Her point about breast-feeding is interesting. I do not think that it was claimed that infants received only breast milk for three or four years. It is highly unlikely that anyone in American culture would go on breast-feeding for more than six months, but it certainly takes place elsewhere. My point is that if the human infant were weaned completely at six months in the circumstances of gatherers or simple agriculturalists it would probably die. The tendency of those lacking in knowledge about nutrition is to give a child something that looks like milk, e.g., corn flour and water. If this is supplemented by even a small amount of milk there is a better chance of survival. The approximate 50% mortality rate before age four among children in these circumstances is evidence that their diet is far from perfect. Were they deprived totally of milk the rate might be higher.

References Cited


