

Symbols (1970)—Douglas contended that universal patterns of purity-pollution symbolism existed and were based on reference to the human body. She argued her case from a Durkheimian perspective, suggesting that shared symbols “create a unity in experience” (1966:2) and that religious ideas about purity and pollution symbolized beliefs about social order. In the introduction to *Purity and Danger* she wrote:

I believe that some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order. For example, there are beliefs that each sex is a danger to the other through contact with sexual fluids. . . . Such patterns of sexual danger can be seen to express symmetry or hierarchy. It is implausible to interpret them as suggesting something about the actual relation of the sexes. I suggest that many ideas about sexual dangers are better interpreted as symbols of the relation between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which apply in the larger social system. . . . Sometimes bodily orifices seem to represent points of entry or exit to social units, or bodily perfection can symbolise an ideal theocracy. (1966:3–4)

Symbolic anthropology is concerned with studying the process by which people give meaning to their world and how this world is expressed in cultural symbols. Geertz wrote that “Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses” (1973:20). However, symbolic anthropologists have never specifically explained a methodology for “guessing at meaning.” Anthropologists who do not share Geertz’s views often believe that this is a fundamental flaw. Critics claim that the credibility of symbolic interpretation is based on the explanatory skills of the anthropologist and argue that such anthropology often seems closer to literary criticism than social science. In fact, much of the work that characterized the symbolic analyses of the 1970s and 1980s was incorporated into the postmodern movement of the 1990s. Today it is rare to see analytical work such as that conducted by Turner and Geertz. Rather than being concerned with what a symbol “means,” contemporary symbolic analyses are much more likely to be concerned with the postmodern issues of agency, power, and positioning.

31. External Boundaries

MARY DOUGLAS (1921–2007)

THE IDEA OF society is a powerful image. It is potent in its own right to control or to stir men to action. This image has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and

unstructured areas. For symbols of society any human experience of structures, margins or boundaries is ready to hand.¹

Van Gennep shows how thresholds symbolise beginnings of new statuses. Why does the bridegroom carry his bride over the lintel? Because the

From *Purity and Danger* (1966)

¹ Trained in structural functionalism by Evans-Pritchard at Oxford, Mary Douglas was influenced by Durkheim’s notions of society and social cohesion. Durkheim argued that religion was essentially a model of society that served to promote social cohesion (see essay 5); Douglas believes that shared symbols promote social solidarity and provide

mechanisms for social control. She opens this article with a powerful image of society as a coherently organized whole. Her comment that human experiences of structures or boundaries can serve as symbols of society hints at one of her fundamental ideas—that the human body is a symbol of society.

step, the beam and the door posts make a frame which is the necessary everyday condition of entering a house. The homely experience of going through a door is able to express so many kinds of entrance. So also are cross roads and arches, new seasons, new clothes and the rest. No experience is too lowly to be taken up in ritual and given a lofty meaning. The more personal and intimate the source of ritual symbolism, the more telling its message. The more the symbol is drawn from the common fund of human experience, the more wide and certain its reception.²

The structure of living organisms is better able to reflect complex social forms than door posts and lintels. So we find that the rituals of sacrifice specify what kind of animal shall be used, young or old, male, female or neutered, and that these rules signify various aspects of the situation which calls for sacrifice. The way the animal is to be slaughtered is also laid down. The Dinka cut the beast longitudinally through the sexual organs if the sacrifice is intended to undo an incest; in half across the middle for celebrating a truce; they suffocate it for some occasions and trample it to death for others. Even more direct is the symbolism worked upon the human body. The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a

symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.³

It is easy to see that the body of a sacrificial ox is being used as a diagram of a social situation. But when we try to interpret rituals of the human body in the same way the psychological tradition turns its face away from society, back towards the individual. Public rituals may express public concerns when they use inanimate door posts or animal sacrifices: but public rituals enacted on the human body are taken to express personal and private concerns. There is no possible justification for this shift of interpretation just because the rituals work upon human flesh. As far as I know the case has never been methodically stated. Its protagonists merely proceed from unchallenged assumptions, which arise from the strong similarity between certain ritual forms and the behavior of psychopathic individuals. The assumption is that in some sense primitive cultures correspond to infantile stages in the development of the human psyche. Consequently such rites are interpreted as if they express the same preoccupations which fill the mind of psychopaths or infants.⁴

Let me take two modern attempts to use primitive cultures to buttress psychological insights. Both stem from a long line of similar discussions, and both are misleading because the relation between culture and individual psyche are not made clear.

Bettelheim's *Symbolic Wounds* is mainly an interpretation of circumcision and initiation rites. The author tries to use the set rituals of Australians and Africans to throw light on psychological

² Douglas, interested in discovering universals of symbolism, suggests that the most potent symbols are found in the realm of the mundane. Because the form of the human body may be the most common human experience, her analysis centers on the body and its products.

³ Douglas treats the symbolism of blood, breast milk, and other products of the human body as symbols of society. Ultimately, this argument is based on the organic analogy, a nineteenth-century model of society generally associated with Spencer. But whereas Spencer argued by direct analogy—telegraph wires are the nerves of society, for instance—Douglas' argument is symbolic—society is not a

body, but it can be symbolically represented by a body. In the next essay, on Ndembu symbolism, Victor Turner makes a similar point.

⁴ Douglas here criticizes psychological interpretations of symbolism, particularly psychoanalytic interpretations, which have tended to treat non-Western peoples as child-like or mentally ill. One line of psychoanalytic thought equates the trancing of shamans or other religious specialists in primitive societies with the acts of psychiatric patients in Western hospitals. See, for example, Kroeber's "Psychotic Factors in Shamanism" (1940) or Devereux's "Shamans as Neurotics" (1961).

phenomena. He is particularly concerned to show that psychoanalysts have overemphasized girls' envy of the male sex and overlooked the importance of boys' envy of the female sex. The idea came to him originally in studying groups of schizophrenic children approaching adolescence. It seems very likely that the idea is sound and important. I am not at all claiming to criticize his insight into schizophrenia. But when he argues that rituals which are explicitly designed to produce genital bleeding in males are intended to express male envy of female reproductive processes, the anthropologist should protest that this is an inadequate interpretation of a public rite. It is inadequate because it is merely descriptive. What is being carved in human flesh is an image of society. And in the moiety- and section-divided tribes he cites, the Murngin and Arunta, it seems more likely that the public rites are concerned to create a symbol of the symmetry of the two halves of society.⁵

The other book is *Life Against Death*, in which Brown outlines an explicit comparison between the culture of "archaic man" and our own culture, in terms of the infantile and neurotic fantasies which they seem to express. Their common assumptions about primitive culture derive from Roheim (1925): primitive culture is autoplasmic, ours is alloplastic.⁶ The primitive seeks to achieve his desires by self-manipulation, performing surgical rites upon his own body to produce fertility in nature, subordination in women or hunting success. In modern culture we seek to achieve our desires by operating directly on the external envi-

ronment, with the impressive technical results that are the most obvious distinction between the two types of cultures. Bettelheim adopts this summing up of the differences between the ritual and the technical bias in civilization. But he supposes that the primitive culture is produced by inadequate, immature personalities, and even that the psychological shortcomings of the savage accounts for his feeble technical achievements:

If preliterate peoples had personality structures as complex as those of modern man, if their defenses were as elaborate and their consciences as refined and demanding; if the dynamic interplay between ego, superego and id were as intricate and if their egos were as well adapted to meet and change external reality—they would have developed societies equally complex, though probably different. Their societies have, however, remained small and relatively ineffective in coping with the external environment. It may be that one of the reasons for this is their tendency to try to solve problems by autoplasmic rather than alloplastic manipulation. (p. 87)

Let us assert again, as many anthropologists have before, that there are no grounds for supposing that primitive culture as such is the product of a primitive type of individual whose personality resembles that of infants or neurotics. And let us challenge the psychologists to express the syllogisms on which such a hypothesis might rest. Underlying the whole argument is the assumption that the problems which rituals are intended to solve are personal psychological problems. Bettelheim actually goes on to compare the

⁵ Bruno Bettelheim (1903–1990) was an Austrian student of Sigmund Freud who emigrated to the United States in 1939 and spent virtually his whole career at the University of Chicago. Bettelheim was best known for his work with emotionally disturbed children. He was also recognized for his psychoanalytic analysis of ethnographic material, particularly his 1955 work *Symbolic Wounds*.

⁶ Geza Roheim (1892–1953) was a Hungarian anthropologist. Early in his career he became a follower of Freud. Roheim spent several years conducting fieldwork in Australia, Africa, and Melanesia and was one of the leading proponents of the psychoanalytic analysis of ethnographic material. When Malinowski attacked Freud's

excursions into anthropology, Roheim was one of Freud's staunchest defenders. In his 1925 book *Australian Totemism*, he characterized primitive cultures as autoplasmic and Western society as alloplastic. These are medical terms. *Autoplasmic* refers to the surgical repair of defects with tissue from another part of the patient's body. *Alloplasty* is replacing a diseased or damaged body part with synthetic material. Using Bettelheim's example from *Symbolic Wounds* that Douglas cites in the paragraph above, Australian Aborigines are autoplasmic because a man performs a ritual subincision of his penis in order to simulate the flow of a woman's menstrual blood. Ritual use of a blood substitute, say a red vegetable dye, would be considered alloplastic.

primitive ritualist with the child who hits his own head when frustrated. This assumption underlies his whole book.

Brown makes the same assumption, but his reasoning is more subtle.⁷ He does not suppose that the culture's primitive condition is caused by individual personal traits: he allows very properly for the effect of cultural conditioning on the individual personality. But he proceeds to consider the total culture as if it, in its totality, could be compared to an infant or a retarded adult. The primitive culture resorts to bodily magic to achieve its desires. It is in a stage of cultural evolution comparable to that of infantile anal eroticism. Starting from the maxim: "Infantile sexuality is autoplasmic compensation for the loss of the Other; sublimation is alloplasmic compensation for loss of Self" (p. 170) he goes on to argue that "archaic" culture is directed to the same ends as infantile sexuality, that is, escape from the hard realities of loss, separation and death. Epigrams are, by their nature, obscure. This is another approach to primitive culture which I would like to see fully spelt out. Brown develops the theme only briefly, as follows:

Archaic man is preoccupied with the castration complex, the incest taboo and the desexualisation of the penis, that is, the transference of the genital impulses into that aim-inhibited libido which sustains the kinship systems in which archaic life is embedded. The low degree of sublimation, corresponding to the low level of technology, means by our previous definitions, a weaker ego, an ego which has not yet come to terms (by negation) with its own pregenital impulses. The result is that all the fantastic wishes of infantile narcissism express themselves in unsublimated form so that archaic man retains the magic body of infancy. (p. 298–9)

These fantasies suppose that the body itself could fulfill the infant's wish for unending, self-replenishing enjoyment. They are a flight from reality, a refusal to face loss, separation and death. The ego develops by sublimating these fantasies. It mortifies the body, denies the magic of excrement and to that extent faces reality. But sublimation substitutes another set of unreal aims and ends by providing the self with another kind of false escape from loss, separation and death. This is how I understand the argument to run. The more material that an elaborate technology imposes between ourselves and the satisfaction of our infantile desires, the more busily has sublimation been at work. But the converse seems questionable. Can we argue that the less the material basis of civilization is developed, the less sublimation has been at work? What precise analogy with infantile fantasy can be valid for a primitive culture based on a primitive technology? How does a low level of technology imply "an ego which has not yet come to terms (by negation) with its own pregenital impulses"? In what sense is one culture more sublimated than another?⁸

[We have omitted a 1,000-word discussion in which Douglas refutes the psychoanalytic interpretation of excremental magic using an example of what she considers to be Brown's bias in his discussion of a Winnebago Indian trickster myth. She also cites an ethnographic example of how body substances such as blood and spittle may be considered as both polluting or sacred substances. Douglas concludes her discussion of what she calls "body dirt" with a reference to the ritual use of royal corpses. We rejoin the text at the beginning of her discussion of why products of the body are symbols of danger and power.]

⁷ The Brown discussed here is the Oxford-educated American scholar Norman O. Brown (1913–2002), best known for his book *Life Against Death* (1959), a psychoanalytic reinterpretation of human history. Today, works such as *Life Against Death* and *Symbolic Wounds* are considered artifacts of a bygone era; even at the time of publication these works were never widely popular among American anthropologists. But Douglas is English, and Freudian theory was taken much more seriously by European anthropolo-

gists. When she wrote this book in 1966, she was attacking a view that was still popular among European scholars.

⁸ Douglas' central argument is that bodily substances are symbols of danger or power because they symbolize relations within a society. Consequently, she strongly argues against the psychoanalytic notion that the ritualized use of body refuse, such as excrement, is a psychiatric phenomenon based on infantile fantasies.

But now we are ready to broach the central question. Why should bodily refuse be a symbol of danger and of power? Why should sorcerers be thought to qualify for initiation by shedding blood or committing incest or anthropophagy?⁹ Why, when initiated, should their art consist largely of manipulating powers thought to inhere in the margins of the human body? Why should bodily margins be thought to be specially invested with power and danger?

First, we can rule out the idea that public rituals express common infantile fantasies. These erotic desires which it is said to be the infant's dream to satisfy within the body's bounds are presumably common to the human race. Consequently body symbolism is part of the common stock of symbols, deeply emotive because of the individual's experience. But rituals draw on this common stock of symbols selectively. Some develop here, others there. Psychological explanations cannot of their nature account for what is culturally distinctive.

Second, all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat. The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins. There is no reason to assume any primacy for the individual's attitude to his own bodily and emotional

experience, any more than for his cultural and social experience. This is the clue which explains the unevenness with which different aspects of the body are treated in the rituals of the world. In some, menstrual pollution is feared as a lethal danger; in others not at all. In some, death pollution is a daily preoccupation; in others not at all. In some, excreta is dangerous, in others it is only a joke. In India cooked food and saliva are pollution-prone, but Bushmen collect melon seeds from their mouths for later roasting and eating (Marshall-Thomas, p. 44).¹⁰

Each culture has its own special risks and problems. To which particular bodily margins its beliefs attribute power depends on what situation the body is mirroring. It seems that our deepest fears and desires take expression with a kind of witty aptness. To understand body pollution we should try to argue back from the known dangers of society to the known selection of bodily themes and try to recognize what appositeness¹¹ is there.

In pursuing a last-ditch reduction of all behavior to personal preoccupations of individuals with their own bodies the psychologists are merely sticking to their last.

The derisive remark was once made against psychoanalysis that the unconscious sees a penis in every convex object and a vagina or anus in every concave one. I find that this sentence well characterises the facts. (Ferenczi, *Sex in Psychoanalysis*, p. 227, quoted by Brown)¹²

It is the duty of every craftsman to stick to his last. The sociologists have the duty of meeting one kind of reductionism with their own. Just as

⁹ *Anthropophagy*: the eating of human flesh.

¹⁰ At the start of this essay, Douglas referred to the work of folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957), and his influence is evident in this passage. His best known work is *Rites of Passage* (1960 [1909]). Every rite of passage marking a person's change from one status to another, in his view, was outlined by the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation. During the transition phase one is in a liminal state, outside the margins of society, no longer one thing, but not yet another. Thus, separation from the group is necessary because, in the stage of transition, one may be ritually impure or dangerous. Douglas applies this

same principle to the human body. She writes that "all margins are dangerous" and that matter issuing from the body's orifices, because it has traversed the boundary of the body, may be dangerous. One of the classic discussions of liminal states in rites of passage is Victor Turner's "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," first published in 1964 and then revised in 1967, in which he referred to this essay by Douglas.

¹¹ *Appositeness*: suitability or pertinence.

¹² Sandor Ferenczi (1873–1933) was a professor of psychoanalysis and a colleague of Sigmund Freud.

it is true that everything symbolizes the body, so it is equally true (and all the more so for that reason) that the body symbolizes everything else. Out of this symbolism, which in fold upon fold of interior meaning leads back to the experience of the self with its body, the sociologist is justified in trying to work in the other direction to draw out some layers of insight about the self's experience in society.

If anal eroticism is expressed at the cultural level we are not entitled to expect a population of anal erotics. We must look around for whatever it is that has made appropriate any cultural analogy with anal eroticism. The procedure in a modest way is like Freud's analysis of jokes. Trying to find a connection between the verbal form and the amusement derived from it he laboriously reduced joke interpretation to a few general rules. No comedian script-writer could use the rules for inventing jokes, but they help us to see some connections between laughter, the unconscious, and the structure of stories. The analogy is fair for pollution is like an inverted form of humour. It is not a joke for it does not amuse. But the structure of its symbolism uses comparison and double meaning like the structure of a joke.¹³

Four kinds of social pollution seem worth distinguishing. The first is danger pressing on external boundaries; the second, danger from transgressing the internal lines of the system; the third, danger in the margins of the lines. The fourth is danger from internal contradiction, when some of the basic postulates are denied by other basic postulates, so that at certain points the system seems to be at war with itself. In this chapter I show how the symbolism of the body's boundaries is used in this kind of unfunny wit to express danger to community boundaries.¹⁴

The ritual life of the Coorgs (Srinivas) gives the impression of a people obsessed by the fear of dangerous impurities entering their system. They treat the body as if it were a beleaguered town,

every ingress and exit guarded for spies and traitors. Anything issuing from the body is never to be re-admitted, but strictly avoided. The most dangerous pollution is for anything which has once emerged gaining re-entry. A little myth, trivial by other standards, justifies so much of their behavior and system of thought that the ethnographer has to refer to it three or four times. A Goddess in every trial of strength or cunning defeated her two brothers. Since future precedence depended on the outcome of these contests, they decided to defeat her by a ruse. She was tricked into taking out of her mouth the betel that she was chewing to see if it was redder than theirs and into popping it back again. Once she had realized she had eaten something which had once been in her own mouth and was therefore defiled by saliva, though she wept and bewailed she accepted the full justice of her downfall. The mistake canceled all her previous victories, and her brothers' eternal precedence over her was established as of right.

The Coorgs have a place within the system of Hindoo castes. There is good reason to regard them as not exceptional or aberrant in Hindoo India (Dumont and Peacock). Therefore they conceive status in terms of purity and impurity as these ideas are applied throughout the regime of castes. The lowest castes are the most impure and it is they whose humble services enable the higher castes to be free of bodily impurities. They wash clothes, cut hair, dress corpses and so on. The whole system represents a body in which by the division of labour the head does the thinking and praying and the most despised parts carry away waste matter. Each sub-caste community in a local region is conscious of its relative standing in the scale of purity. Seen from ego's position the system of caste purity is structured upwards. Those above him are more pure. All the positions below him, be they ever so intricately distinguished in relation to one another, are to him

¹³ Douglas is referring to Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960 [1905]), which explored the relationship between dreams and jokes. In this book he outlined different types of jokes and the literary and psychological mechanisms that he believed made them amusing.

¹⁴ Using the example of an Indian caste called the Coorgs, Douglas shows that the four types of bodily purity-pollution practices she outlines are symbolic models of larger social relationships.

polluting. Thus for any ego within the system the threatening non-structure against which barriers must be erected lies below. The sad wit of pollution as it comments on bodily functions symbolizes descent in the caste structure by contact with faeces, blood and corpses.¹⁵

The Coorgs shared with other castes this fear of what is outside and below. But living in their mountain fastness they were also an isolated community, having only occasional and controllable contact with the world around. For them the model of the exits and entrances of the human body is a doubly apt symbolic focus of fears for their minority standing in the larger society. Here I am suggesting that when rituals express anxiety about the body's orifices the sociological counterpart of this anxiety is a care to protect the political and cultural unity of a minority group. The Israelites were always in their history a hard-pressed minority. In their beliefs all the bodily issues were polluting, blood, pus, excreta, semen, etc. The threatened boundaries of their body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity and purity of the physical body.

The Hindoo caste system, while embracing all minorities, embraces them each as a distinctive, cultural sub-unit. In any given locality, any sub-caste is likely to be a minority. The purer and higher its caste status, the more of a minority it must be. Therefore the revulsion from touching corpses and excreta does not merely express the order of caste in the system as a whole. The anxiety

about bodily margins expresses danger to group survival.¹⁶

That the sociological approach to caste pollution is much more convincing than a psychoanalytic approach is clear when we consider what the Indian's private attitudes to defecation are. In the ritual we know that to touch excrement is to be defiled and that the latrine cleaners stand in the lowest grade of the caste hierarchy. If this pollution rule expressed individual anxieties we would expect Hindoos to be controlled and secretive about the act of defecation. It comes as a considerable shock to read that slack disregard is their normal attitude, to such an extent that pavements, verandahs and public places are littered with faeces until the sweeper comes along.¹⁷

Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches—they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover. . . . These squatting figures—to the visitor, after a time, as eternal and emblematic as Rodin's Thinker—are never spoken of; they are never written about; they are not mentioned in novels or stories; they do not appear in feature films or documentaries. This might be regarded as part of a permissible prettifying intention. But the truth is that Indians do not see these squatters and might even with complete sincerity, deny that they exist. (Naipaul, chapter 3)

Rather than oral or anal eroticism it is more convincing to argue that caste pollution represents

¹⁵ In the caste system of India, the purest individuals are leaders and priests; those who are most polluted have tasks dealing with the disposal of human waste and refuse. This association of pollution with human refuse is an extension of body symbolism, a key metaphor in Hindu belief. In the Vedas (sacred Hindu texts), the creation of the world is described as the result of the gods sacrificing a divine being named Purusha. From Purusha's mouth came the priests, from his arms the warriors, from his thighs the merchants, and from his feet the laborers. In other words, the caste divisions were created by the division of Purusha's body. This Hindu myth is a poetic example of the body-society symbolism with which Douglas began the essay.

¹⁶ Douglas suggests that anxiety about one's minority status in a society is typically reflected in rituals concerning

what goes into their bodies and the disposal of what comes out, the Coorgs, living isolated in the mountains, controlled who came into their communities and who left. The care taken to avoid pollution to their physical bodies is a symbolic manifestation of their desire to protect their political and social integrity as well. Note here that Douglas is outlining a principle she believes is universal; the Coorgs are simply an example.

¹⁷ Douglas' comment that she was shocked to read that Indians defecate in public serves as a reminder that she is conducting cross-cultural comparative research in the tradition of Lévi-Strauss or Radcliffe-Brown. Though she does not make an issue of it as Harris does in essay 19 on the uses of cattle in India, her interpretations are based on her reading of ethnographic material rather than personal

the body's orifices. Just as Hindus must be careful about

field research

only what it claims to be. It is a symbolic system, based on the image of the body, whose primary concern is the ordering of a social hierarchy.

It is worth using the Indian example to ask why saliva and genital excretions are more pollution-worthy than tears. If I can reverently drink his tears, wrote Jean Genet, why not the so limpid drop on the end of his nose?¹⁸ To this we can reply: first that nasal secretions are not so limpid as tears. They are more like treacle than water. When a thick rheum oozes from the eye it is no more apt for poetry than nasal rheum.¹⁹ But admittedly clear, fast-running tears are the stuff of romantic poetry: they do not defile. This is partly because tears are naturally preempted by the symbolism of washing. Tears are like rivers of moving water. They purify, cleanse, bathe the eyes, so how can they pollute? But more significantly tears are not related to the bodily functions of digestion or procreation. Therefore their scope for symbolizing social relations and social processes is narrower. This is evident when we reflect on caste structure. Since place in the hierarchy of purity is biologically transmitted, sexual behavior is important for preserving the purity of caste. For this reason, in higher castes, boundary pollution focuses particularly on sexuality. The caste membership of an individual is determined by his mother, for though she may have married into a higher caste, her children take their caste from her. Therefore women are the gates of entry to the caste. Female purity is carefully guarded and a woman who is known to have had sexual intercourse with a man of lower caste is brutally punished. Male sexual purity does not carry this responsibility. Hence male promiscuity is a lighter matter. A mere ritual bath is enough to cleanse a man from sexual contact with a low caste woman. But his sexuality does not entirely escape the burden of worry which boundary

pollution attaches to the body. According to Hindoo belief a sacred quality inheres in semen, which should not be wasted. In a penetrating essay on female purity in India (1963) Yalman says:

While caste purity must be protected in women and men may be allowed much greater freedom, it is, of course, better for the men not to waste the sacred quality contained in their semen. It is well-known that they are exhorted not merely to avoid low-caste women, but all women (Carstairs 1956, 1957; Gough 1956). For the loss of semen is the loss of this potent stuff . . . it is best never to sleep with women at all.

Both male and female physiology lend themselves to the analogy with the vessel which must not pour away or dilute its vital fluids. Females are correctly seen as, literally, the entry by which the pure content may be adulterated. Males are treated as pores through which the precious stuff may ooze out and be lost, the whole system being thereby enfeebled.

A double moral standard is often applied to sexual offenses. In a patrilineal system of descent wives are the door of entry to the group. In this they hold a place analogous to that of sisters in the Hindoo caste. Through the adultery of a wife impure blood is introduced to the lineage. So the symbolism of the imperfect vessel appropriately weighs more heavily on the women than on the men.²⁰

If we treat ritual protection of bodily orifices as a symbol of social preoccupations about exits and entrances, the purity of cooked food becomes important. I quote a passage on the capacity of cooked food to be polluted and to carry pollution (in an unsigned review article on *Pure and Impure*, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, III, July 1959, p. 37).

When a man uses an object it becomes part of him, participates in him. Then, no doubt, this

¹⁸ Jean Genet (1910–1986) was a French novelist, playwright, and protégé of the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. Genet was best known for his plays. His works are contributions to the theater of the absurd, a form of drama in which the impossible routinely happens in order to make philosophical points.

¹⁹ *Limpid*: clear or transparent; *treacle*: molasses or syrup;

²⁰ Douglas says that rules of body purity and pollution are symbolic of a group's place in society as well as the preservation of that group. It follows that because caste membership is transmitted through women, the rules of sexual purity and pollution are more strict for women than for men. Just as sexual restrictions can be symbolic of anxiety about caste membership, the polluting qualities of menstrual blood, semen, or other body products can be symbolic of

appropriation is much closer in the case of food, and the point is that appropriation precedes absorption, as it accompanies the cooking. Cooking may be taken to imply a complete appropriation of the food by the household. It is almost as if, before being "internally absorbed" by the individual, food was, by cooking, collectively predigested. One cannot share the food prepared by people without sharing in their nature. This is one aspect of the situation. Another is that cooked food is extremely permeable to pollution.

This reads like a correct transliteration of Indian pollution symbolism regarding cooked food. But what is gained by proffering a descriptive account as if it were explanatory? In India the cooking process is seen as the beginning of ingestion, and therefore cooking is susceptible to pollution, in the same way as eating. But why is this complex found in India and in parts of Polynesia and in Judaism and other places, but not wherever humans sit down to eat? I suggest that food is not likely to be polluting at all unless the external boundaries of the social system are under pressure.²¹ We can go further to explain why the actual cooking of the food in India must be ritually pure. The purity of the castes is correlated with an elaborate hereditary division of labour between castes. The work performed by each caste carries a symbolic load: it says something about the relatively pure status of the caste in question. Some kinds of labour correspond with the excretory functions of the body, for example that of washermen, barbers, sweepers, as we have seen. Some professions are involved with bloodshed or alcoholic liquor, such as tanners, warriors, toddy tappers. So they are low in the scale of purity in so far as their occupations are at variance with Brahminic ideals. But the point at which food is

prepared for the table is the point at which the interrelation of the purity structure and the occupational structure needs to be set straight. For food is produced by the combined efforts of several castes of varying degrees of purity: the blacksmith, carpenter, ropemaker, the peasant. Before being admitted to the body some clear symbolic break is needed to express food's separation from necessary but impure contacts. The cooking process, entrusted to pure hands, provides this ritual break. Some such break we would expect to find whenever the production of food is in the hands of the relatively impure.

These are the general lines on which primitive rituals must be related to the social order and the culture in which they are found. The examples I have given are crude, intended to exemplify a broad objection to a certain current treatment of ritual themes. I add one more, even cruder, to underline my point. Much literature has been expended by psychologists on Yurok pollution ideas (Erikson, Posinsky). These North Californian Indians who lived by fishing for salmon in the Klamath River, would seem to have been obsessed by the behavior of liquids, if their pollution rules can be said to express an obsession. They are careful not to mix good water with bad, not to urinate into rivers, not to mix sea and fresh water, and so on. I insist that these rules cannot imply obsessional neuroses, and they cannot be interpreted unless the fluid formlessness of their highly competitive social life be taken into account (Dubois).

To sum up. There is unquestionably a relation between individual preoccupations and primitive ritual. But the relation is not the simple one which some psychoanalysts have assumed. Primitive ritual draws upon individual experience, of course. This is a truism. But it draws upon it so selectively that it cannot be said to be primarily

male and female purity is actually a second issue—not the preservation of a social group such as a caste, but the maintenance of gender boundaries.

²¹ Douglas refers to the prohibition of eating beef in India, the principles of mana and taboo in traditional Polynesian societies, and the dietary rules about kosher food in Judaism. She suggests that if a society or class feels the need to protect itself from outsiders or foreign influences,

this will be symbolized through rules of behavior and eating. For example, in Polynesia, commoners were forbidden to touch anything associated with the noble classes because these objects contained mana, a power that could harm them. According to Douglas, protecting the body from pollution by guarding the orifices, in this case restricting the diet, symbolizes the protection of traditional beliefs.

inspired by the need to solve individual problems common to the human race, still less explained by clinical research. Primitives are not trying to cure or prevent personal neuroses by their public rituals. Psychologists can tell us whether the public expression of individual anxieties is likely to solve personal problems or not. Certainly we must suppose that some interaction of the kind is probable. But that is not at issue. The analysis of ritual symbolism cannot begin until we recognize ritual as an attempt to create and maintain a particular culture, a particular set of assumptions by which experience is controlled.

Any culture is a series of related structures which comprise social forms, values, cosmology, the whole of knowledge and through which all experience is mediated. Certain cultural themes are expressed by rites of bodily manipulation. In this very general sense primitive culture can be said to be autoplasmic. But the objective of these rituals is not negative withdrawal from reality. The assertions they make are not usefully to be compared to the withdrawal of the infant into

thumb-sucking and masturbation. The rituals enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society. The rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body.²²

REFERENCES

- Bettelheim, B. 1955. *Symbolic Wounds*. Glencoe, IL.
 Brown, Norman O. 1959. *Life Against Death*. London.
 Dubois, Cora. 1936. "The Wealth Concept as an Integrative Factor in Tolowa-Tututni Culture." Chapter in *Essays in Anthropology, Presented to A. L. Kroeber*.
 Dumont, L. and Peacock, D. 1959. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. Vol. III.
 Marshall-Thomas, E. 1959. *The Harmless People*. New York.
 Naipaul, V. S. 1964. *An Area of Darkness*. London.
 Posinsky. 1956. *Psychiatric Quarterly* XXX, p. 598.
 Roheim, G. 1925. *Australian Totemism*.
 Yalman, N. 1963. "The Purity of Women in Ceylon and Southern India." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*

²² Douglas' conclusion reflects the strong influence of Durkheim on her work. Durkheim was concerned with demonstrating that society was a separate phenomenon from individual psychology and that social actions could not be reduced to the sum total of individual actions. In other words, he tried very hard to separate sociology from psychology. Douglas attempts to do the same thing. She insists that the rules of ritual and pollution are what Durkheim called *social facts*. They are not reducible to manifestations of individual psychology. Whatever effects

they may have on the individual, they reflect the ways society maintains its structure and solidarity. The essay is profoundly symbolic—a materialist's analysis of the caste system, for example, would have focused on the political and economic inequalities inherent in it, which Douglas ignores. With some modification we could imagine this essay appearing as a chapter in Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1965 [1912]). For example, in the last sentence of the paragraph above, she characterizes ritual as the attempt to create and maintain a particular culture.

32. Symbols in Ndembu Ritual

VICTOR TURNER (1920–1983)

AMONG THE NDEMBU of Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia), the importance of ritual in the lives of the villagers in 1952 was striking. Hardly a week passed in a small neighborhood without a

ritual drum being heard in one or another of its villages.

By "ritual" I mean prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological

From *The Forest of Symbols* (1967)