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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Dec., 1996), pp. 703-715

Published by: [Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3034304>

Accessed: 19/03/2013 08:18

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rites of terror: emotion, metaphor and memory in Melanesian initiation cults

HARVEY WHITEHOUSE

The Queen's University of Belfast

Melanesian initiation cults frequently incorporate rites that instil a profound and lasting terror in the initiates. This article surveys several contemporary theories of these traumatic ordeals, and argues that these theories establish generalities only at the cost of adequate engagement with the cognitive and affective processes entailed in ritual performance. I propose a new approach, based on theories of 'flashbulb memory', which penetrates more deeply the religious experiences engendered in traumatic ritual, and also accounts for certain recurrent patterns of political association in initiation systems. 'Rites of terror' are here envisaged as part of a nexus of psychological and sociological processes, dubbed the 'imagistic mode of religiosity'.

Terror is an integral component of religious experience in many of the societies of Papua New Guinea. Following a hair-raising account of penis-bleeding among the Ilahita Arapesh, Tuzin observes that the whole ordeal 'is carefully and successfully designed to inspire maximum horror in its victims' (1980: 74). Barth describes how a Baktaman novice was so terrified by the ordeals of initiation that he defecated on the legs of his elders and had to be excluded from the group of boys being initiated (1975: 56). In his analysis of Orokaiva initiation Schwimmer (1973: 177) approvingly cites Chinnery & Beaver's (1915) claim that a function of the rites is to instil 'absolute and lasting terror in the candidates'. In his discussion of Bimin-Kuskusmin initiation, Poole likewise emphasizes the terror of novices, observing that 'the piercing of the nasal septa and the burning of forearms ... created the most trauma, producing overt signs of physical and/or psychological shock in six cases' (1982: 144). Examples could, of course, be multiplied. In this region terrifying ordeals are not confined to initiations; they may also be evident in such diverse contexts as mortuary rites (as in Schieffelin's [1976] description of the burning of Kaluli dancers), possession (as in Williams's [1928: 67] account of the injuries caused by supernaturally induced convulsions), and millenarian activity (as in Elbert & Monberg's [1965: 399-400] transcription of an account of the bloodbaths resulting from a 'cargo cult' on the island of Bellona). It would not be unduly fanciful to describe these sorts of practices as 'rites of terror'.

The principal dynamics of 'rites of terror' may be identified in the initiation system of the Orokaiva of northern Papua. Schwimmer (1973) divides these rites into several phases which do not necessarily occur in a fixed sequence. One phase entails the isolation of novices in a hut where, for several months

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(Iteanu 1990: 46), they observe a taboo on washing but are generally treated well. During a second phase, the novices, blinded by barkcloth hoods, are herded together in the village and brutally attacked by senior men who assume the guise of spirits (*embahi*). In the course of this ordeal, novices are gradually corralled onto a ceremonial platform. Then there follows a much longer period of seclusion. According to Iteanu, this second seclusion lasts for between three and seven years, during which time the novices must not be seen or heard beyond their place of confinement, on pain of death (1990: 47). During this period, novices learn to play sacred instruments (flutes and bullroarers).

Schwimmer's third phase concerns the *debut* of the novices, decked out in full dancing regalia. The novices enter the dancing ground in a dense phalanx, brandishing mock spears and stone clubs. A fourth phase involves the presentation of 'homicidal emblems' (*otohu*), at which time aged warriors recite the names of men they have killed in battle, before *otohu* are fastened to the foreheads of the novices. There is a final phase which is not included in Schwimmer's summary, but which Williams and Iteanu regard as indispensable. This phase entails, among other acts, the distribution of amassed wealth. Iteanu stresses the fact that novices are responsible for sharing out cuts of pork from a lofty platform, not unlike the one to which they were earlier driven by the *embahi*.

All ethnographers of the Orokaiva have stressed the terrifying nature of the *embahi* ceremony. The early accounts of Chinnery and Beaver (1915), further enriched by Williams (1930: 181-3), convey a sense of the real panic induced in the Orokaiva novices, and the anguish of parents who are witnesses to their suffering. Moreover, as Iteanu more recently observes, there is always a risk that some children may not survive the ordeal (1990: 46). Any thoroughgoing analysis of the ceremony clearly needs to take into account its traumatic and life-threatening character. I am going to examine critically several current approaches to the interpretation of this kind of ritual, arguing that the principal weakness of all of them is that they fail to show how the complex conceptual and emotional aspects of 'rites of terror' are interconnected. I shall then propose an alternative theory, linking the formation of affect-laden memories to the political dynamics of Melanesian initiation.

Current approaches to rites of terror

Bloch has recently used Orokaiva initiation to elucidate what he calls the 'irreducible structures of religious phenomena' (1992: 4). His starting point is that there is a universal recognition of the biological processes of birth, maturation, reproduction, physical deterioration and death which characterize the life-cycles of humans and many other species. Social groups, however, are not subject to this kind of process; they have a notional permanence, which is unaffected by the arrival and departure of particular members. In a Durkheimian spirit, Bloch argues that ritual provides a way of conceptualizing a timeless social order. Through the caricature and violent negation of biology and process, ritual affirms the transcendent authority of society, represented in the timeless order of the ancestral world.

According to Bloch, the *embahi* ceremony among the Orokaiva brings into focus an image of transcendental permanence through the symbolic destruction of earthly vitality. The hooded novices are like pigs, in so far as their persecution

by the *embahi* is construed as a hunt, and they are herded onto a platform associated with butchery. With some ingenuity, Bloch argues that pigs represent the biological aspects of humans. Being the only other species of large mammal indigenous to Papua New Guinea, pigs are especially similar to humans in their reproductive characteristics. They are also uniquely associated with humans by virtue of their integration into social life. They are referred to as 'children' and their deaths are mourned. Bloch maintains, therefore, that pigs represent the vital or bodily aspects of people.

The *embahi*, by contrast, are like birds. Bloch argues that the feathers, movements and vocalizations of the *embahi* have strong avian connotations. According to Bloch, the bird is symbolically the mirror image of the pig. Birds are linked with an immortal extraterrestrial existence beyond the village world of vigorous activity, birth and ageing. Avian imagery provides a way of conceptualizing the sacred or spiritual side of humanity, which is somehow the opposite of corporeal, transformative experience. In the *embahi* ceremony, the pig-like aspects of the novices are 'killed' by the bird-like ancestors. All that remains of the novices is their sacred, transcendental character. This is nurtured during the period of seclusion away from the vitality of village life, where (appropriately enough) the novices are said to 'grow feathers'.

The ritual could not end at this point, because the aim of initiation is not to 'kill' the novices, but to deliver them back into village life as changed persons. This is not simply a matter of recovering the vitality which was earlier beaten out of the novices by the *embahi*; it is a matter of conquering that vitality, of bringing it under transcendental control. This enables Bloch to account for the triumphant and militaristic tenor of the debut. The brandishing of spears and clubs, the conferral of *otohu*, and the climbing of the platform in the guise of hunters and butchers rather than prey, publicly declares the new role of initiates as killers rather than victims. They are reinstated in the village, the life cycle and the production process, but they are now more bird-like, more sacred than before. In keeping with Hertz's (1960: 77) image of the 'social being grafted upon the physical individual', transcendental authority is seen as penetrating more deeply into the fleshly, vital body of the initiate. This is a process which will continue through life until finally, at death, the corporeal shell is utterly consumed.

Bloch's re-analysis of Orokaiva initiation emphasizes certain ideological implications of ritual violence. According to this approach, the most important effect of the *embahi* ceremony is that the novices are symbolically killed or, more precisely, their vitality is negated so that they become purely transcendental beings. The jubilant return of the novices, which Bloch describes as 'rebounding violence' (1992: 6), is a way of conceptualizing and instituting a political order which is subject to ancestral authority.

A problem with Bloch's interpretation, as applied to the *embahi* ceremony or to Papua New Guinea initiation rites in general, is that it does not capture very much of the conscious experience of participants. According to Bloch, *embahi* violence is part of a bifurcation process, as cognitively simple as it is ideologically powerful. In the context of this irreducible core of religious thought, the terror of Orokaiva novices seems to be superfluous, a mere side-effect of the particular choreography which happens to be involved. One gains the impression that

an equally satisfactory result could be achieved in the *embahi* ceremony by symbolically killing the novices *without actually frightening them*. I will try to show that this is not the case. But, before we can understand the role of terror, it is first necessary to appreciate that many of the cognitive processes involved in Papua New Guinea initiation rites are themselves rather disconcerting, and may not fit very easily with the principle of 'rebounding violence'.

Bloch's hypotheses about the symbolic value of birds and pigs are not substantially derived from Orokaiva statements. This is wholly justifiable in principle, and would be true of any thorough interpretation of the symbolic value of these animals. Whatever understandings are cultivated through the use of porcine or avian imagery in Orokaiva initiation, they are not transmitted in language. Williams commented at length on the absence of exegetical commentary attaching to Orokaiva ritual (see, for instance, 1928: 175-6), and Schwimmer supports his observation that novices are not given verbal interpretations of initiatory symbolism (1973: 177). Even if they were, that would not be the end of the anthropological quest for meaning (see Gell 1980; Sperber 1975). In the case at hand virtually the entire burden of cultural transmission rests on the ritual acts themselves.

Bloch intuitively that the revelations of Orokaiva initiation are iconically codified. In his interpretation, the physical and behavioural characteristics of pigs are concrete metaphors for human characteristics. Thus, under certain circumstances, the killing of pigs would imply the destruction or negation of porcine qualities in the sacrificer, in a manner which parallels the symbolic killing of novices behaving like pigs. *Contra* Bloch, however, novices are not treated in a way that makes them like pigs in general, but in a way that specifically makes them like *wild* pigs. The 'hunting' of novices by numerous *embahi* connotes the collective wild pig drives for which the Orokaiva are renowned (Williams 1930: 45-7; Schwimmer 1973: 143). This technique of hunting frequently involves the members of several villages, who set light to the tall blade grass to drive wild pigs and other animals into the hands of their pursuers. The novices in initiation who are similarly herded and hunted do not, therefore, resemble domestic pigs, as Bloch assumes, but *wild* pigs. Domestic pigs are indeed anthropomorphically cognized by virtue of their integration into social life, but the case of wild pigs is rather different. If wild pigs are like people, then this has nothing to do with images of the village world of physical activity, maturation, death and so on; as Iteanu observes, it is because they are like alien and dangerous human enemies who, prior to pacification, were likewise killed and eaten if encountered in the forest (1990: 37). In so far as novices appreciate that their senior kinsmen are treating them like quarry and thus repudiating their former nurturant, protective roles, this is likely to stimulate confusion and strong emotion. What sense novices make of all this has never been comprehensively explored by ethnographers of the Orokaiva, but knowledge of other New Guinea religions encourages us to be wary of a simplistic understanding of iconicity.

Bloch's interpretations of porcine and avian imagery in Orokaiva initiation are generated by a highly original and ambitious theory, but this theory seems to bypass much of the intellectually challenging and emotionally stimulating aspects of religious experience. For example, if it is argued that the 'core' understandings cultivated in the *embahi* ceremony are fetched from everyday

knowledge, then it is hard to see how initiation might engender revelatory experiences. According to this theory, knowledge that one already possesses about pigs and birds is dramatically re-presented in ritual performance. If there is a sense of 'revelation' then it is presumably rooted in an appreciation of the hierarchical relationship between corporeal aspects of humans (their porcine qualities) and immortal ones (their avian qualities). This, in itself, is unlikely to be particularly surprising or impressive, since it is a pervasive aspect of discourse in religious communities everywhere, and not simply an outcome of ritual. This is affirmed by the way Bloch construes iconicity in initiation: that pigs reproduce, mature and die is known independently of ritual; but so too is the fact that birds do not seem to age and die, the fact that they move in spaces where human bodies cannot go, and so on. These attributes of species are known independently of ritual action and are re-presented rather than created by the *embahi* ceremony, at least according to my reading of Bloch.

Yet there is also a strand to Bloch's argument which seems to deny the iconicity of avian imagery, by suggesting that immortality is only 'thinkable' as a result of a binary logic in which images of the 'other world' are constructed out of contrasts with the perceptible, physical world. As Bloch puts it, this is a process by which 'a mirror-like alternative existence is set up' (1992: 20). A sense of the revelatory character of ritual is thereby rescued, but at a theoretical premium. The recourse to binary or digital codification makes it appear that the 'transcendental' emerges as an artefact of the ritual process, rather than of everyday experience. The idea that people's everyday perceptions of birds could imply a world outside biological process becomes theoretically burdensome rather than useful.

It seems to me, however, that these problems do not arise if iconicity is seen to operate in a way that conflicts with everyday attitudes and assumptions. It then becomes possible to explore the revelatory character of initiation rites without seeking refuge in digital operations which reduce religious conceptualisation to a very simple thought (for instance, that pigs are to birds what bodies are to spirits).

It is necessary to put the Orokaiva material on one side, for the moment, and examine initiation systems which have been more comprehensively studied. Some especially impressive work has been carried out by Barth among the Baktaman, a society in which the power of iconic codification, or of what Barth calls (following Bateson 1972) 'analogic' codification, lies in the cultivation of paradox, mystery, multivocality and secrecy.

Barth has shown that Baktaman initiators entertain ambivalent attitudes towards wild male pigs. On the one hand, wild pigs frequently damage gardens and are therefore inimical to the prosperity of crops and banned from initiation ritual. On the other hand, their ferocity and virility (not least the vital service they provide in impregnating domestic sows) exemplify desirable qualities in men. Barth (1975) describes how a group of novice warriors carried into battle the mandible of a wild male pig that they had just killed in the act of copulation. Following the success of this raid, the mandible was introduced to the male cult but an ambivalent attitude to wild boar persisted to the extent that the bones of other specimens were still debarred from the temples.

What Bloch has to say about pigs among the Orokaiva might equally be said about pigs among the Baktaman. In both environments, pigs are the only large mammals, both wild and domesticated animals are valued for their meat, and in behavioural and physiological terms their resemblances to human beings are much the same in both societies. There is, however, no reason to privilege the connexion between pigs and ideas of vitality or biological process. The attitudes of the Baktaman towards wild pigs, in the context of everyday life, focus primarily on their destructive habits:

Baktaman men seem to regard themselves as involved in a continuous war with the wild pigs; they spend hours in the men's houses describing their depredations in detail, discussing their habits and individual idiosyncrasies, speculating on their location and next move (Barth 1975: 39).

A novice confronted with a relic of this public enemy in the context of a fertility cult is likely to experience confusion, and a sense that wild pigs are not the kind of creatures one might suppose. As Barth puts it:

An aura of mystery and insight is created by dark hints that things are not what they appear. That ignorant assumptions are negated by guarded knowledge is the very stuff of mystery cult (1987: 33).

A clue to the meaning of the mandible is likely to be picked up by the novice in contemplating the aggressiveness and virility of wild male pigs. In addition to mulling over the paradoxical character of this revelation, the novice is likely to associate the mandible with other items of temple sacra: the bones of ancestors, and the blackened ceiling of the cult house which in turn connotes the blackened vine used to tie the novices together – an even more explicit image of male solidarity (Barth 1975: 67). Above all, the first encounter with the pig mandible will be associated with the tortures and privations of third degree initiation, which are among the most terrifying of all Baktaman rites. But here I am jumping ahead of myself.

It is not only in the Baktaman case that porcine imagery lends itself to the cultivation of ideas about masculinity and spirituality. Among the Iahita Arapesh, initiators use pig incisors to lacerate the glans penises of novices as part of an act of purification and sacralization. Here, it is an attack by a pig rather than by a bird which makes the novice more like an ancestor, and less like a worldly, polluting being (Tuzin 1980: 340–1). Tuzin claims that, at a later stage of initiation, Iahita Arapesh novices are ritually transformed into pigs, as a result of gorging on pork during the phase of liminality (1980: 344).

The point is that the analogic or iconic principle operates in New Guinea initiations in such a way as to confound everyday understandings, and to emphasize the multivocal and multivalent character of revelation. This process is resistant to expression in language, and certainly does not emerge out of a simple digital operation or a straightforward re-presentation of everyday understandings.

Where I part company with Barth over his approach to analogic codes is at the point where he turns to psychoanalysis to incorporate the affective quality of ritual symbolism and account for patterns of variation in time and space. Drawing on Noy's (1969; 1979) classification of the operations of primary process, Barth tries to identify the unconscious generative mechanisms which might produce incremental changes in the feelings, insights and performances entailed in initiations. It seems odd that Barth should wax Freudian, given the grounds

of his aversion to Lévi-Straussian structuralism. Some twenty years ago, he wrote:

One may be justifiably unhappy about a method where structures or patterns must be constructed merely with a view to make all the pieces fit together and without opportunity for falsification at any stage. The naive question of how much of these thoughts have actually been thought by the actors concerned can be raised ... but not resolved in such a structuralist framework (1975: 213).

A more recent quotation will show that Barth's views on the matter have not changed substantially. He writes:

I feel intuitively committed to an ideal of naturalism in the analytical operations I perform: that they should model or mirror significant, identifiable processes that can be shown to take place among the phenomena they seek to depict (1987: 8).

Nevertheless, Barth's appeals to Noy, and ultimately to Freud, seem to violate his empiricist instincts. For, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Whitehouse 1992b: 789-91), Barth's insistence on the unconscious nature of culture change is nowhere supported by evidence of such transformations. In fact, all the examples of culture change adduced in Barth's publications on the Baktaman are examples of consciously introduced changes.

The psychological effects of initiation ritual in New Guinea are far wider-reaching than any analysis of the cognitive processes entailed in analogic communication could encompass. Psychoanalytic theory, however, presents only one of a range of possible ways of understanding the emotional impact on novices. Another approach, one that has the advantage of seeking to establish the conscious experiences of participants, is suggested by social psychological studies of attitude-change among the victims of terrorism. Such an approach is elaborated by Tuzin in his analysis of Ilahita Arapesh initiation, and his conclusions are worth quoting at length:

Under certain conditions the victim of extreme terror, by virtue of what may be called coerced regression, experiences love and gratitude toward, and deep identification with, his persecutors. During the ordeal, of course, the novice's attitudes are at best highly labile; but immediately following it, the initiators drop their razors, spears, cudgels, or what have you, and comfort the boys with lavish displays of tender emotion. What resentment the latter may have been harbouring instantly dissipates, replaced by a palpable warmth and affection for the men who, moments before, had been seemingly bent on their destruction. As their confidence recovers itself, the novices become giddy with the realization that they have surmounted the ordeal. If there is an element of identification disclosed in this remarkable transformation – and I do not know what other interpretation to place on it – then the terror component may well be essential if the cult, and indeed the society itself, is to continue in its present form (1980: 77-8).

Tuzin's analysis is quite plausible and, unlike the theory of 'rebounding violence', goes a long way towards accounting for the terrifying nature of initiatory ordeals. But, as with Bloch's approach, the 'love-of-the-oppressor' paradigm does not take proper account of the multivocality and multivalence of religious imagery. The alternation between cruelty and kindness in Ilahita Arapesh rites would presumably have the same effect on the novices without the complex imagery of the male cult.

Williams would probably have sympathized with Tuzin's approach. The image which he held in mind, throughout his analysis of the *embahi* ceremony, was one of public school 'ragging' rather than terrorist violence, but he preceded Tuzin in stressing the way that novices come to identify with their oppressors

(Williams 1930: 197). In so doing, Williams sought to redress what he saw as an imbalance in Chinnery & Beaver's approach, which emphasized the educational value of terror. According to Chinnery & Beaver, *embahi* violence produced in the novices a 'receptive ... frame of mind' (1915: 77). This constitutes one of the earliest attempts to explain the use of terror in New Guinea initiation, but the line of reasoning it suggests has been among the most neglected.

Fears and flashbulbs

In seeking to bring the cognitive side of Orokaiva initiation rites, exemplified in Barth's theory of analogic codification, into harmony with the affective aspects of these rituals, and especially the terrifying nature of the *embahi* ceremony, I am inclined to return to Chinnery & Beaver's hypothesis. Contemporary anthropology has the advantage of being able to draw on the fruits of a greatly advanced psychological understanding of learning and memory. I am going to focus particular attention on the operations of so-called 'flashbulb memory' in which extreme emotions and cognitive shocks become intertwined.

Flashbulb memories are vivid recollections of inspirational, calamitous, or otherwise emotionally arousing events. Brown and Kulik (1982) argue that such memories are generated by a peculiar neural mechanism in which a specific range of details about the event (location, source, affect and aftermath) is simultaneously encoded. Numerous alternative explanations for the phenomenon, in both biological and psychological terms, have since been advanced.¹ In spite of Neisser's (1982) attempts to explain the canonical structure of such memories in terms of the conventions of story-telling, Winograd and Killinger (1983) show that the vividness and detail of flashbulb memories are not substantially affected by reminiscence. Thus, the fact that Baktaman and Orokaiva initiates do not converse about their experiences and interpretations of secret cult ritual should not affect the canonical structure of these memories.

Herdt, in his work on the Sambia of the New Guinea highland fringe, has used Brown's and Kulik's theory of flashbulb memory to understand the extraordinary experiences of revelation which mark the onset of shamanic powers, and which (as Herdt mentions in passing) may be triggered by the traumas of Sambia initiation (1989: 115). I have also invoked the concept of 'flashbulb memory' in connexion with the traumatic ordeals of millenarian ritual among the Baining (1995: 195, 206). An advantage of this theory is that it fits with people's intuitive impressions of how dramatic, frightening and surprising experiences seem to be 'printed' on the mind. There is no need to postulate processes inaccessible to consciousness. What we are dealing with here is a stock of very vivid, disturbing and perhaps enlightening memories which are consciously turned over in the minds of initiates for years to come, and indeed may accompany them to the grave. When a Baktaman novice first realizes that he is (in some sense) being made into a virile, aggressive pig – a warrior and a father – he is not only struck by the absurdity of his previous assumptions about pigs, but he associates this revelation with the terrifying and agonizing experience of being beaten with stones, whipped with nettles and dehydrated almost to the point of death. It is this combination of cognitive and emotional crises that produces the distinctive mnemonic effect. As Herdt points out, such memories

provide focal imagery for subsequent reflection (1989: 115), and this is how the 'fans of connotations of sacred symbols' (Barth 1987: 31) are elaborated. Initiation rites produce a patterned screen of representations and feelings against which later insights and revelations are projected.

The vividness and detail of people's memories of initiation rites are related in part to the surprising and unexpected nature of revelation and in part to the high level of emotional arousal. For instance, it is relevant that Baktaman esoteric knowledge is surprising to the novices, but the reversal of everyday assumptions about wild male pigs is not in itself sufficiently impressive and memorable to produce flashbulb clarity. Psychologists have shown that surprising events are remembered in greater detail if they are also emotionally arousing (see, for instance, Christiansen & Loftus 1991). Moreover, at least three studies suggest that the detail of flashbulb recall increases directly with intensity of emotion at encoding (see Christiansen 1992: 287). The longevity of such memories is also very striking, as has been demonstrated by victims' detailed and closely matching recollections of atrocities in concentration camps, forty years after these camps were closed down. There is also some evidence that recall of disturbing or traumatic experiences actually improves with time (Scrivner & Safer 1988), in contrast with other sorts of memories which may be subject to decay (Cohen 1989: 156-9).

These findings, although they seem intuitively plausible, are at odds with most early hypotheses about the relationship between emotion and memory. Studies based on the 'Yerkes-Dodson law', which represented the relationship between mental efficiency and level of arousal or stress as an inverted U-shaped curve, assumed that states of extreme fear impaired rather than improved cognitive processing. Nevertheless, following an extensive review of recent literature on the subject, Christiansen concludes:

the results from flashbulb studies and other studies of real-life events suggest that highly emotional or traumatic events are very well retained over time, especially with respect to detailed information directly associated with the traumatic event (1992: 288).

Memory, transmission and political association

Now, the *political* implications of initiatory traumas reside partly in the nature of episodic memory of which flashbulb memory is (in the context of initiation rites) an especially salient manifestation, and partly in the contrived circumstances of transmission. On the latter subject, I have elsewhere written at length (Whitehouse 1992*b*; 1994; 1995; 1996*b*) and I shall confine myself here to a summary of four main points.

First, the religious understandings cultivated in initiation ritual derive from collective performances, and can only be disseminated among neighbouring groups, or through the displacement of whole populations. As Barth has pointed out (1990), this helps to explain the fragmentary, localized character of many religious traditions founded around initiation rites. Secondly, the traumatic nature of these rites, and the secrecy surrounding them, generate intense solidarity among participants, as many writers have observed (for instance, Barth 1975: 223, 245, 251; Feil 1987: 231; Godelier 1991: 294; Lindenbaum 1984). Thirdly, this experience of solidarity may be related to the practice of 'sister-exchange'² and it is certainly linked to courage in war, as the foregoing

discussion of Orokaiva and Baktaman rites clearly demonstrates. Sister-exchange and warfare, meanwhile, are conducive to the autonomy of small local groups (Modjeska 1982).

All these factors encourage a highly fragmented political landscape composed of small, boundary-conscious ritual communities, standing in relations of hostility or rivalry. Internally, the emphasis is on cohesiveness and solidarity. If there is also an egalitarian ethos among adult males, this may be linked to the conditions of religious transmission, and in particular to the fact that revelations are not mediated by leaders. In the context of initiation, crucial insights are inferred by participants in a process subjectively experienced as personal inspiration. Nobody comes forward to impart the wisdom of the ancestors, for this wisdom is elusive to language. Religious instruction is therefore a matter of collective revelation, rather than a transaction between teacher and pupils (cf. Barth 1990). Admittedly, the authoritarian behaviour of initiators instantiates a striking imbalance of power (Tuzin 1980: 73-4), but once the metamorphosis of the novices is complete, the camaraderie engendered in their common experience of liminality is extended to their initiators. In a real sense initiators and novices undergo the experience together, and share its dramatic consequences (Tuzin 1980: 78). When it is over, they are closer than before, both in status and identity.

People undergo particular initiation rites once in a lifetime. They may participate in or witness such rites again, but never as objects of the performance. In these conditions of infrequent transmission, it is vital that the original impact of the experience endures in memory. An important quality of flashbulb memories is that they are unforgettable, vivid and haunting. Their potency is a concomitant of the uniqueness and emotionality of the situation which gave rise to them. The solidarity generated among initiates is lasting, but it is also difficult to generalize or extend. This is another factor contributing to the politically bounded character of initiation systems and it is best understood in terms of the mechanics of episodic memory. What is encoded is not a script (as in a liturgical sequence) or a habitual body practice (as in kneeling for prayer), but a set of very particular events, experiences and responses. In the case of flashbulb memory, these recollections are canonically structured and tied to the actual historical context in which the events occurred. What this means, among other things, is that actual persons inhabit these memories. This is very different from the memories that people have of highly repetitive rituals, involving schemas for general sequences of actions that might be performed by anybody and not a specific set of people (see Whitehouse 1995: 85-6). Thus, the political and religious community which initiation creates is fixed forever in the minds of novices. The bonds of solidarity once forged cannot easily be revoked or extended. They encompass those people who actually endured the terrifying experience together, and separate them forever from the rest of humanity.

Conclusion

Certain influential approaches to the interpretation of Melanesian religion do not do justice to the conscious experience of participants. The significance which Bloch attributes to porcine and avian imagery in Orokaiva initiation would, in the eyes of practitioners, be unrecognizable or (more likely) heretical.

This is not to say that the theory of 'rebounding violence' does not apply, merely that it excludes a great deal. It could not, even in principle, handle the most striking aspects of this experience from the viewpoints of participants, including the surprising reversal of everyday understandings and the terror induced by the *embahi*.³ The interpretations suggested by social psychology are better able to make sense of the affective aspects of initiation, but much of the complexity of cognitive processes is excluded. Tuzin's recourse to the 'love-of-the-oppressor' syndrome does not interlock with the symbolic richness of Arapesh rites. Novices would identify with their oppressors just as readily if they were simply abused, without being exposed to the complex imagery of the male cult. Barth's use of Freudian insights encompasses more of the ethnographic detail; like Bloch's and Tuzin's approaches, however, it produces an interpretation that fails to engage substantially with the conscious experience of participants. What is clearly required is a way of relating the lived experience of ritual performance, in conceptual and emotional terms, to wider political conditions in a manner that is both generalizable and empirically productive across a range of cultural traditions.

I have suggested that 'rites of terror' may be seen as part of a nexus of psychological and sociological processes, in which specific dimensions of concept-formation, feeling and remembering, are linked to the scale, structure and political ethos of social groups. This nexus is found in a wide variety of religious traditions and not merely in Melanesian initiation systems. In a fuller exploration of its dynamics, I have dubbed this concatenation of features the 'imagistic mode of religiosity' (Whitehouse 1995), a mode of 'being religious' that has been written about from many angles and endowed with many labels.⁴ It has long been appreciated that intense emotional states are a crucial element of the nexus, but (as in the sample of interpretations surveyed in this article) these states have not been related to the complex conceptual processes that are engendered in 'rites of terror' and other 'ecstatic' religious practices. An advantage of focusing on the integrity of emotion and conceptual complexity, via a close analysis of the workings of memory, is that it impels us deeper into the ethnography at the same time as it forces us to generalize.

NOTES

This is a revised version of a paper presented in 1993 at departmental seminars at the Universities of Oxford and Manchester and the Queen's University of Belfast. I should like to thank members of the anthropology departments at all three universities for their instructive criticisms. For reading and commenting at length on earlier drafts, my particular debt of thanks goes to Marcus Banks, Maurice Bloch, Bob Barnes, Simon Harrison and Howard Morphy.

¹ See, for instance, Wright & Gaskell (1992) and Whitehouse (1996a).

² The covariance of male initiatory cults and sister-exchange is observed by Godelier (e.g. 1991: 277), though I argue elsewhere that his explication of their relationship is not entirely satisfactory (Whitehouse 1992a: 110-11).

³ In talking about 'everyday understandings', I am not referring to a universal level of perception (which Bloch sees as being ritually inverted), but specifically to those ideas and attitudes that are culturally emphasized in non-ritual discourse, but then exposed as falsehoods in esoteric cosmology. A good example is the marsupial mouse (*airaram*) which, according to everyday Baktaman understandings, is categorized as 'disgusting vermin' but, in the context of the male cult, 'is elevated to a sacramental category all of its own: privileged food monopolized by the ancestor' (Barth 1975: 82).

⁴ For instance, 'dionysian', 'effervescent', 'charismatic', 'ecstatic', etc. – for a discussion of the history of these attempts to characterize the 'imagistic mode of religiosity', see Whitehouse 1995: 194-217.

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Rites de terreur: émotion, métaphore et mémoire dans les cultes d'initiation mélanésien

Résumé

Il n'est pas rare que les cultes d'initiation mélanésien comprennent des rites instillant chez les novices qui les subissent une terreur profonde et aux effets prolongés. Cet article passe en revue quelques théories actuelles concernant ces épreuves traumatisantes pour montrer que leurs conclusions généralisantes s'établissent aux dépens d'un engagement satisfaisant avec le procès cognitif et émotionnel impliqué dans la performance rituelle. L'auteur propose une théorie alternative basée sur les théories de la mémoire 'flashbulb', qui sont plus à même de pénétrer les expériences religieuses engendrées par les rites traumatisants, et de rendre compte du caractère récurrent de certaines formes d'association politique au sein des systèmes d'initiation. Pour l'auteur, les 'rites de terreur' font partie d'un nexus de processus psychologiques et sociologiques travesti en 'mode imagistique de religiosité'.

Department of Social Anthropology, Queens University, Belfast BT7 1NN