

Women's Rites

EMERGING FROM THE CHRYSALIS

Studies in Rituals of Women's Initiation

by Bruce Lincoln

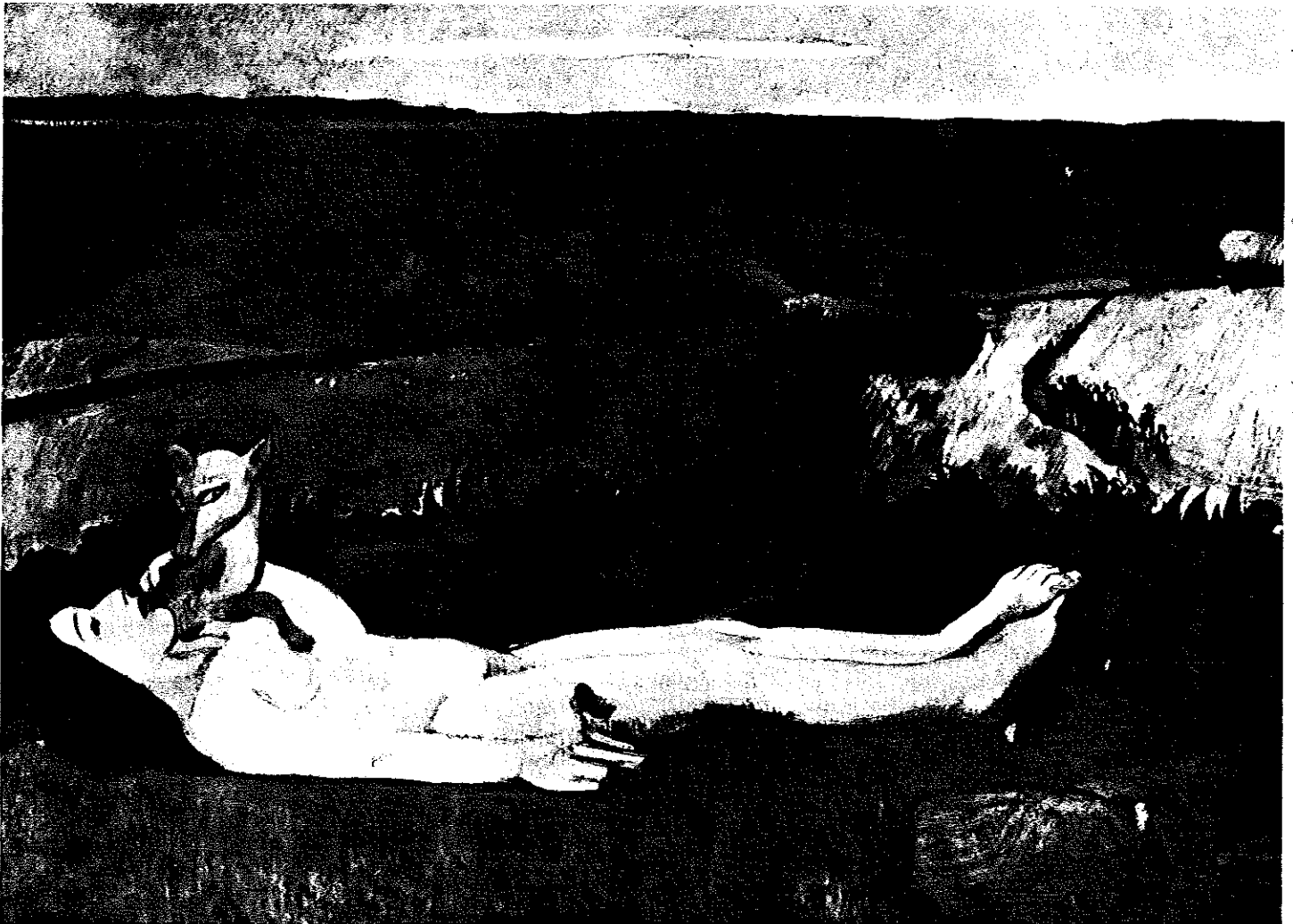
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DEMETER, the Greek goddess of fertility, and her daughter Persephone lived happily together, in a warm and fertile world, until Hades, who ruled the underworld, kidnapped Persephone and took her to his lair deep inside the Earth where he raped her and kept her as his concubine. Of course, Demeter was overcome with sadness, and the Earth turned cold and lifeless. Months passed before she learned of her daughter's whereabouts and descended to the underground to rescue her. When Hades heard her coming, he quickly convinced Perseph-

one to swallow a single pomegranate seed, sealing both Persephone's fate and the fate of the Earth (for anyone who eats the pomegranate, the fruit of the underworld, can never leave without returning). Demeter then had no choice but to strike a bargain with Hades: from that day on Persephone lived half of each year—the summer—above the ground with her mother and the other half—the winter—beneath, her life forever bound to the Earth's fertility cycles.

The hymn to Demeter perfectly illustrates Bruce Lin-



Paul Gauguin, *The Loss of Innocence*, 1890



Paul Gauguin, *Words of the Devil*, 1892

coln's view of women's initiation rites, for in his book, *Emerging From the Chrysalis*, Lincoln suggests that women's initiation ceremonies, unlike those for men, separate them from the sociopolitical arena and unite them with the regenerative cycles of the cosmos. If men's initiation ceremonies confer power and authority,

the strategy of women's initiation is to lead a woman's life (and, *a fortiori*, her attention) away from the sociopolitical arena, introducing her to the real or imagined splendors of the cosmos instead. To put it in different terms, women's initiation offers a religious compensation for a sociopolitical deprivation. Or to put it differently still, it is an opiate for an oppressed class.

All women, Lincoln says, have neither power nor hierarchical authority; they are not permitted to share in the public domain of offices and decision making. If women own resources, men will control them. If men leave home

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and become independent, women forever remain in the domestic sphere, dependent and without formal status. Women's initiation ceremonies are not revolutionary then, in Lincoln's view; they only make women ready and willing to pursue their allotted lives in the domestic domain. As women emerge from the ceremonial chrysalis, their "creativity occupies center stage: their role as bearer of young, raiser of crops, provider of food, sustainer of life." Furthermore, he believes, "Through a process of symbolic amplification, a woman's individual fertility is redefined in ever grander terms, ultimately merging with the idea of creativity in its broadest possible form: cosmic creativity."

In content the hymn to Demeter fits Lincoln's view of female initiation rites as it has all the elements of cosmic regeneration—seasonal variations, upheaval of the Earth, and play of the gods. But because it is doubtful whether there ever was a ritual attached to it, as Lincoln admits, the myth is an odd choice for one of the five anthropological samples Lincoln chooses to support his view of women's initiation ceremonies. (The others are case studies of the Navajo, a North American pastoral people; the Tiyyar caste, part of a complex, stratified peasant culture in South India; the Tukuna, a fishing and horticultural people of the Amazon; and the Tiv, a horticultural, patrilineal people of Nigeria.)

Lincoln also draws cosmic connections as he analyzes the ancient Tiv scarification ritual—the cutting of designs into women's skin. In this case there is indeed a ritual, but the cosmic connections are farfetched. Lincoln attaches an unconscious meaning to this ritual, interpreting the vertical line that runs from the navel to the throat as symbolic of a Tiv woman's relationship with the past, and the concentric circles, which are cut into the abdomen every three years, as a depiction of age sets or a reference to the future. At the time of puberty, when these markings are made, the girl is supposedly at the intersection of the past (the line) and the future (the circles). Lincoln relates all of this to the dominant symbol of the Tiv, the *Imborivungu*, or "owl-pipe," which stands for fertility of the land, since many representations of *Imborivungu* have markings similar to those on the abdomens of women. Thus, Lincoln concludes, the scarification markings ritualize the responsibility of Tiv women for the fertility of people and crops.

However, as Lincoln points out, the Tiv are unaware of any of these cosmic connections. For them, the markings are simply ornamentation. And even if they represent what Lincoln believes they do, the Tiv have long forgotten this, just as we have forgotten why we have lights on a Christmas tree. (A few people may know that this can be traced to the lighting of fires at the winter solstice, but the majority of Westerners are unaware of the custom's origin.) And although the interpretations or the ornamental traces of ritual may be left behind, the cosmic importance of those traces in Tiv perception has certainly been lost.

Although his illustrations are somewhat idiosyncratic, they are "varied" in geographical distribution and form, for he wants his five cases to stand both as independent illustrations of unique and culturally meaningful rituals, and as parts of a universal theme about rituals. In the beginning he prefers to "focus on the question of what

meanings attach to particular objects, gestures, images, or utterances within the context of one specific ritual and one specific culture." He scrutinizes the details of initiation rituals—the kinds of symbols used, the behavioral patterns, the participants' characteristics, the contexts of ceremonial activities—and he listens to what members of each culture have to say about the rituals.

However, the kind of cosmic interpretation that Lincoln favors depends on neither specific events nor their meanings. Ultimately, Lincoln turns to more universal themes: that women create by physical reproduction, nurture through mothering, and feed through their breasts. Lincoln uses these facts as metaphors and applies them to nature, the Earth, and the entire cosmos. Everywhere he makes comparative universalist claims, perceiving that all five rituals in all five cultures have the same goal: "the transformation of an immature female into an adult—and consequently they (all five rituals) share certain themes and together raise certain issues."

Lincoln believes in the power of rituals to infuse mundane lives with larger meaning, but he does not choose to look for that meaning in the individual psyche. Even though adolescent initiation rites mark the time when a girl's sexuality and earliest attachment to parents and siblings are about to change, Lincoln does not consider these intrapsychic transformations, nor the importance of rituals in the service of individual needs and drives. The young women who move through Lincoln's initiation ceremonies are not filled with sexual passions, nor with vague dreads and fears of leaving home and marrying. They dream of transformation and cosmic meaning, rather than the explosion of youthful energy, rebellion, and confusion that is a part of this time of life.

Lincoln's work, in other words, is not tuned to the individual psyche. Neither does it differentiate between the ethnologist's voice, the folk-cultural voice, the initiate's voice, and Lincoln's own interpretive voice. For instance, he does not distinguish his own language, which is often analytic, from the initiate's language, which is often simply a distorted reflection of empirical reality or a defense mechanism against illicit impulses and emotions.

LINCOLN BASES HIS GENERAL VIEW of female initiation rites on a view of women's "low status" in society: he sees women as everywhere oppressed, without status or office in the public domains of adult life, as subservient to men, and doomed to the drudgery of meaningless domestic tasks. The struggle between fighting and accepting this status, Lincoln asserts, produces the unique character of women's initiation rites. But *are* women everywhere oppressed by their lack of participation in the public domain, the world of formal offices and status? The degree to which this is true varies widely around the world, and the many indicators of female status and power are not straightforward at all. There are spheres of political participation, economic control, and personal identity; small rituals of everyday life; subtle signs of deference in interpersonal relations; and symbolic ideologies concerning women and their bodies. In most societies, including those with women's initiation ceremonies, women have higher or lower status in some domains but not in others.

Lincoln chooses to focus on the public sphere. But it is

not clear that the distinction between the status of men and women in public versus domestic domains is the most salient one. Status in the public sphere is usually viewed as more important and more indicative of *general* status. Nevertheless, the domestic domain is a source of power and influence, too. Lincoln's unidimensional view of low power and status for women does not accord with the ethnographic evidence.

Lincoln is correct in his larger claims of the ultimate and universal difference between men's and women's public status; however, sex differences are not the only force accounting for the difference in male and female ceremonies. There are many themes of sexual and social transitions common to ceremonies for men and women. In fact, when anthropologists Alice Schlegel, of the University of Arizona, and Herbert Barry, of the University of Pittsburgh, measured a series of attributes that characterize male and female initiation ceremonies, including the size and sex of the group, emphasis on seclusion, responsibility, or genital surgery, they found that most attributes are common to *both* male and female ceremonies. Only three of twenty-three such comparisons were different for the two sexes. And Schlegel and Barry reported that more societies (25 percent) have ceremonies for each sex than have them for only girls (21 percent) or only boys (9.2 percent).

Neither are initiation rites purely ceremonies that mark a change in life and sex-role differences; they also have important economic functions. For instance, Karen Paige and Jeffrey Paige, authors of *Politics and Reproductive Ritual*, found that when a father cannot back his efforts to arrange marriages with power from a strong, local group of his kin, he holds a menarche initiation ceremony partly to assert family authority and control. Fraternal interest groups lacking a powerful joint economic position are even more likely to perform such ceremonies, especially when they cannot make marriage payments to the wife's family. Although women's initiation ceremonies cannot be fully understood in terms of the economics of marriage negotiations, such crass matters are indeed a factor.

Lincoln's five case studies are in themselves insufficient to test his universal model. We are left with questions: How important are sex-role status differences in the meaning of rituals *relative* to such other factors as demography and warfare? How can we resolve the highly variable and complex appearance of women's initiation ceremonies around the world with women's presumably universal low public status? How should we distinguish the voice of the initiate from the interpreter's voice? Despite these questions though, Lincoln's focus on women's initiation rites is welcome, for these rites have received little attention compared to rituals of sacrifice, renewal, and male initiation. And his study is admirable in its rethinking of the French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep's classical interpretation of initiation rituals as ceremonies that change social status, whether the initiates are boys and girls turning into men and women, secular students into sacred priests, or the ignorant into those who know. Van Gennep interpreted initiations as magical transformations that confer social power. But Lincoln has made us aware that there may be a long-ignored class of initiations that confer cosmic, not social, power. □