

T 39

NCAD
Fine Art
Thesis

RITUAL

Submitted by
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ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Bowl with a birth-scene...found over a body at a burial site.
2. Prehistoric rock drawing of a woman giving birth -- almost certainly an example of sympathetic magic (Sha'ib Samma in the Yemen).
3. Drawing by John White, "The Flyer", an Algonquin shaman.
4. John White, "The village of Secoton", showing in the foreground the posts which encircle the sacred ground.
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INTRODUCTION

Primitive man is engaged in constant dialogue with everything that surrounds him. Everything, whether animate or inanimate, has its own invisible force which must be recognised and given due respect. Everyone of these forces is either helpful or harmful: in order to encourage the former and to appease the latter, he engages in various rituals and magical ceremonies. The magic in these ceremonies is very often described as sympathetic magic. What I want to look at in this thesis is the application of magic through various forms of ritual, to tribal life; its importance in primitive society and the day to day life of the community. For instance, in a tribe which is entirely dependent on hunting for its food supply, the role of magic is to guarantee the hunter success. The magician believes that he can produce any desired effect simply by imitating it. If the image of an animal is pierced with arrows, the image is killed, therefore the real animal will also be killed.

But ritual is not only a beautiful, and, perhaps by modern standards, an illogical way of coming to terms with the forces that exist beyond man's control; it is also one of the main factors in the organisation of village life. There are rituals about marriage, divorce, childbirth, fertility and even inheritance. There are ceremonies which can be performed to alleviate almost any crisis or social conflict, and all of these are essential in maintaining an order, and a certain harmony within the community. In his book *The Ritual Process*, V. Turner

says - "In the social sciences generally, it is, I think, becoming widely recognised that religious beliefs and practices are something more than 'grotesque' reflections or expressions of economic, social and political relationships: rather are they coming to be seen as decisive keys to the understanding of how people think and feel about those relationships, and about the natural and social environments in which they operate."¹

What I find most fascinating is that in the application of magic, the ritual, the performance, is generally the most important thing - not the result. Each ritual is so symbolic, and rich in meaning, that, even where the outcome is negative, I am sure the performers must take strength from it - their awareness of the situation must be sharpened, clarified by this dramatisation of it.

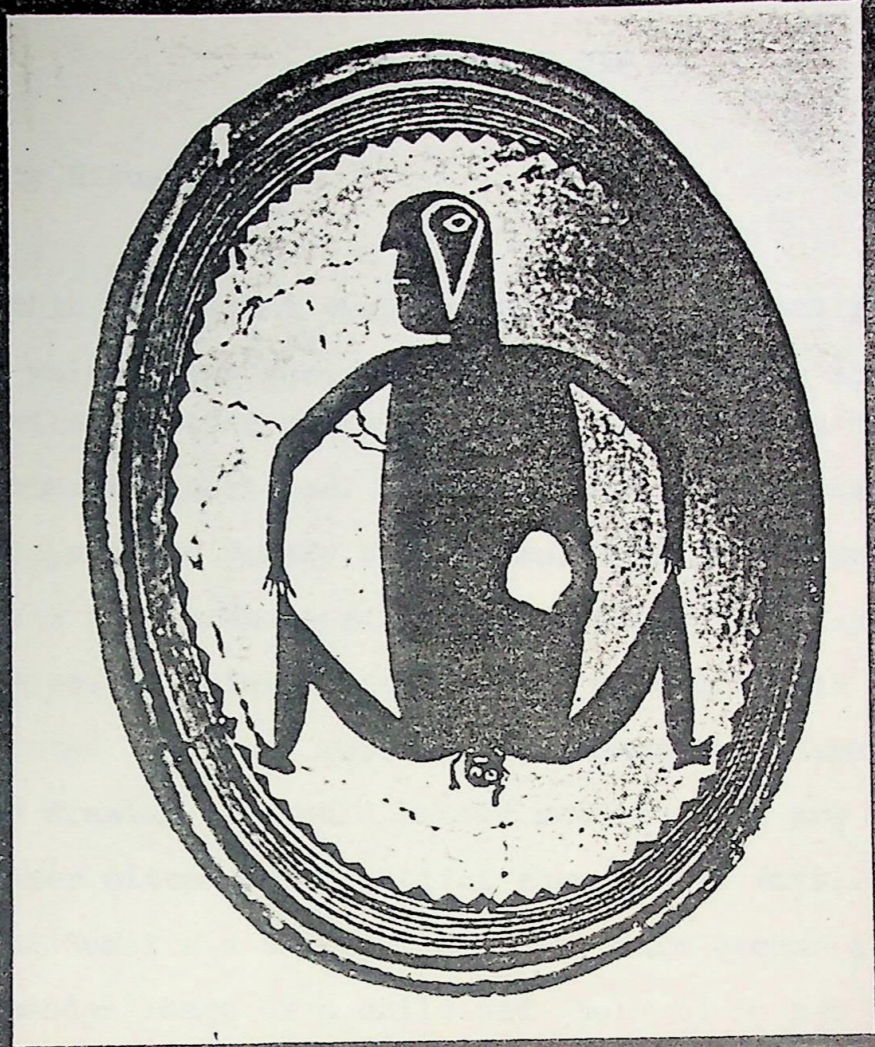
Ultimately, in this thesis, I want to try to share my excitement about ritual and about the interrelationships between man, his community and his environment. There is an abundance of examples to select from - and various different examinations the ritual element itself. Mostly I will be discussing either North American Indian or African ritual; this is rather to add clarity because of any lack of available material.

My interest in ritual is heightened by the fact that in my work I also am concerned with environment. I am trying to relate my sculpture to it in a very direct way, trying to avoid conflict. Because I am using natural materials (collected materials) I am obviously influenced by the seasons, fertility, and by those same invisible forces that primitive man recognises and respects.

Although my ritual is entirely personal, and has no social or political context, it is related to native ritual processes in that it deals with a newly awakened awareness of emotion and environment. There are one or two other contemporary artists who use ritual and performance, and, without dealing in depth with "conceptual art" I would like to include these in this thesis in an attempt to show the importance of ritual as a form of communication - even in modern society.

In 1954 Monica Wilson, who did intensive field research into the religion of the Nyakyusa people of Tanzania, wrote - "Rituals reveal values at their deepest level... men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalised and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed. I see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies".²

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SECTION ONE

Fertility Rituals.

Within any tribal society the ritual element plays a large part in maintaining social order and in ensuring the continuance and survival of that society. Fertility rituals are therefore of the utmost importance. Whether they are to ensure an abundant food supply or to remedy barrenness, they have been of primary importance from prehistoric times. Some of the earliest rock drawings are of animals coupling and of childbirth - prehistoric man believed that by representing something, through mime or dance or drawing, it would become actual. In the Golden Bough J.G. Frazer cites some beautiful examples of this... "among the Bataks of Sumatra a barren woman who would become a mother, will make a wooden image of a child and hold it in her lap, believing that this will lead to the fulfilment of her wish. In the Babar Archipelago, when a woman desires to have a child, she invites a man who is himself the father of a large family to pray on her behalf to Upulero, the spirit of the sun. A doll is made of red cotton, which the woman clasps in her arms, as if she would suckle it. Then the father of many children takes a fowl and holds it by the legs to the woman's head and says 'O Upulero, make use of the fowl; let it fall, let descend a child, I beseech you, I entreat you, let a child fall and descend into my hands and on my lap'. Then he asks the woman "has the child come?" and she answers 'Yes, it is sucking already.' After that the man holds the fowl on the husband's head and mumbles some form of words. Lastly, the bird is killed and laid, together with some betel, on the domestic place of sacrifice. When the ceremony is over,



Birth Trilogy, Feminist Art Program Performance Group, performed by the group at Womanhouse. The first section of this piece, "The Birth Passage," is particularly useful in helping women come into contact with their own energy. It can be done with any number of women (as long as there are at least six) and is done in a long line, with everyone pushing at once. (Photos: Lloyd Hamrol)



word goes about the village that the woman has been brought to bed, and her friends come and congratulate her."

This ritual not only uses mime -- the pretence that a child has already been born in order to ensure that a child really will be born -- but also makes use of prayer and sacrifice to strengthen the whole ceremony. The adoption laws in some tribes make use of the same rite: an imitation of childbirth. If you pretend to give birth to a boy, or even a grown man, then by tribal law he becomes your son: "...among the Bosnian Turks, a woman will take a boy whom she intends to adopt and push or pull him through her clothes; ever afterwards he is regarded as her very son, and inherits the whole property of his adoptive parents".³

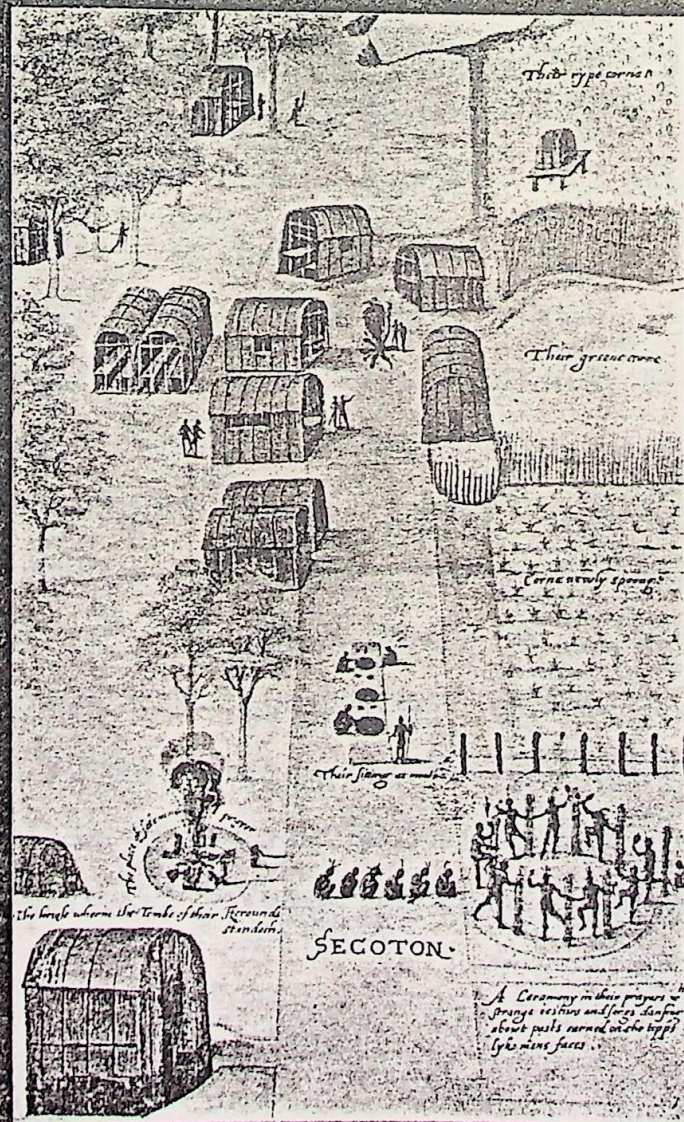
In the barren regions of Central Australia, the maintenance of the food supply is a constant necessity. The art of sympathetic magic is systematically put into practice in this area more than any other. The tribes are divided into a number of totem clans -- each clan takes its name from the totem (which can be an animal, or a bird, a plant, or even, in Eskimo totemism, a force of nature, or an inanimate object) and identifies with it. Where the totem is the main food supply of the tribe, each clan must multiply their totem by means of magical ceremonies, for the good of the whole community. Once more, imitative magic is used. "Thus, among the Warramunga the headman of the white cockatoo totem seeks to multiply white cockatoos by holding an effigy of the bird and mimicking its harsh cry. Among the Arunta the men of the witchetty grub totem perform ceremonies for multiplying the grub which the other men of the tribe use as food. One of the ceremonies is a pantomime representing the fully grown insect in the act of

emerging from the chrysalis. A long narrow structure of branches is set up to imitate the chrysalis case of the grub. In this structure a number of men, who have the grub for their totem, sit and sing of the creature in its various stages. Then they shuffle out of it in a squatting posture, and as they do they sing of the insect emerging from the chrysalis. This is supposed to multiply the number of grubs. Again, in order to multiply emus, which are an important article of food, the men of the emu totem paint on the ground the sacred design of their totem, especially the parts of the emu which they like best to eat, namely, the fat and the eggs. Round this painting the men sit and sing. Afterwards performers, wearing head-dresses to represent the long neck and the small head of the emu, mimic the appearance of the bird as it stands aimlessly peering about it in all directions.

The Indians of British Columbia live largely on the fish which abound in their seas and rivers. If the fish do not come in due season, the Indians are hungry, a Nootka wizard will make an image of a swimming fish and put it into the water in the direction from which the fish generally appear. This ceremony accompanied by a prayer to the fish to come, will cause them to arrive at once".⁴

The acute difference between the tribal ritual of hunting and the blood sports which still exist today is obvious. When primitive man kills it is out of necessity and he maintains a great deal of respect for the hunted animal: especially where the animal is his totem and is looked upon as his ancestor. Anthropologist Robin Ridington asks, "What is the buffalo to Plains Indians? He is a source of food. What else, what do they live in? Tipis. What are they made of? Buffalo hide. What do they sleep under?

The flyer.



This is the place

Their great house

Corn newly sown

Their strong men

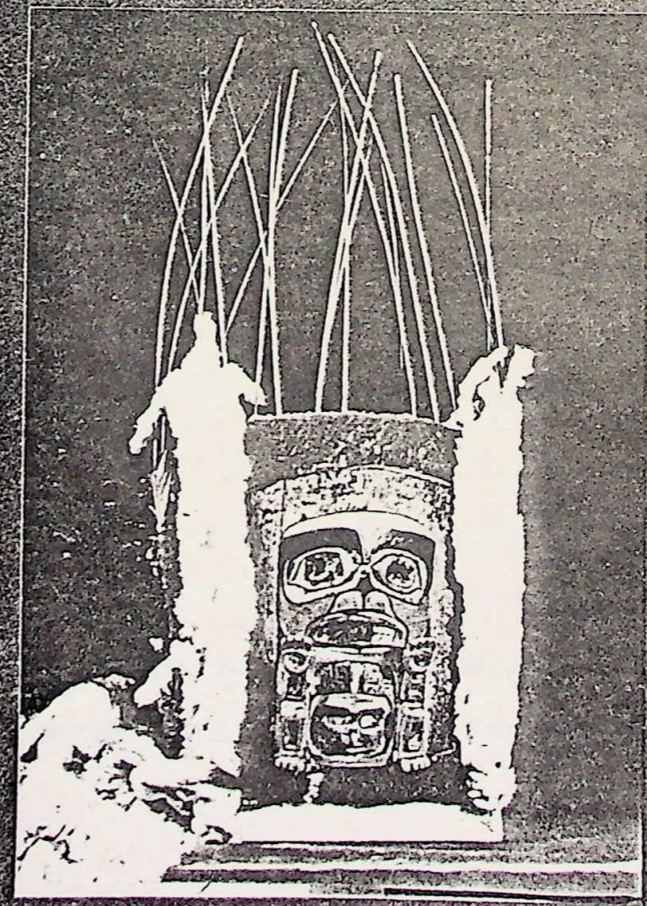
The house where the tribe of these Secotons dwell

SECOTON.

A Ceremony in their prayer or prayer, which is done, and for about pasts round with the top of their faces.

Buffalo robes. (The buffalo is like the cow to the Indians. The buffalo gives them everything. Like Ghandi said, the cow is the poem of pity. It's the same with the buffalo.) The buffalo is the symbol of the gift, the essence of the gift. Indians are hunters, they live by killing animals, but killing does not mean the same thing to an Indian as it does to a white man. To him it is a touching, a mutual giving and receiving. For the Beaver Indians the moose is the same symbol. When you kill an animal, you transform him; and you can only kill an animal who has consented, who has given to you. You give him a gift, and he gives you one. Whenever you hear 'kill' in an Indian, remember, touch, accept the gift". The buffalo was meat to the Indian, but also a fertility symbol, a hunting symbol: it could also relate directly to the sun. It was this awareness of the relationships between phenomena that built up the Indian belief in unity: the more specific the ritual, the finer the selection of its components will be. The power of the pantomime will be strengthened if the performer wears certain parts of the animal he is representing.⁵

Thus, in John White's painting of an Algonquin medicine-man, "The Flyer", the shaman has a dried bird attached to his head and an otterskin bag with magic charms at his belt. He is acting out the myth of the bird which carries messages between the earth people and the manitous (spirit beings). This dance is very free and yet it is structured, pre-defined by the myth. Dancing, he becomes the bird and rises from the earth to the world of manitous -- he will return with messages for the people. The dance was most likely a round dance, like the ceremonial posts around the sacred ground. It is the sacred circle, the symbol of unity. The shaman is the mediator between his people and the many manitous which



surround them. He realises the myth, the ritual, and it is through this dialogue that harmony and unity are achieved. Even here, where the ritual and the myth are one and the same, there is no division between the pretence and the reality: the shaman acts out the part of the bird, therefore he becomes the bird.

"Symbolising the relationship between, myth, and natural phenomena involved staging and pantomime. An extraordinary manifestation of this, a sort of symbiosis of the relationship, is seen in the transformation masks of the Northwest Coast. The human aspect subsumed the animal by the pulling of a string, as the inner mask is revealed. In the Indian universe it was often easy to slip from the human into the animal guise, and then return, for humans to impersonate the buffalo or the deer, and to become closer to animal spirits by wearing their hides, or thrusting them forward as a decorative standard, as in the Hupa deer dance of northern California.

In line with this interdependence of design, fabrication and the need for drama are the sympathetic magical associations of charms and fetishes and shaman's dolls. Magic and the occult were not extraordinary but ordinary to many Indians. The shaman was there, and his art helped to make the visions and guardian spirits visible, dredging them up from beyond sight into consciousness for protective or expiatory purposes. Presence made art a fulcrum between what exists and what might be imagined to exist".⁶

Ritual was so much a part of daily life in most tribal societies that with each season there were different myths to be enacted and different ceremonies to be performed.

In the Algonquin villages, on a given night in Spring, young naked women walked silently around the farmland, expressing the

fertility of nature which they are summoning to help them.

The magic virtue of a pregnant woman to communicate fertility is known to Austrian and Bavarian peasants, who think that if you give the first fruit of a tree to a woman with child to eat, the tree will bring forth abundantly. The Greeks and Romans sacrificed pregnant victims to the goddesses of the corn and of the earth in order that the earth might teem and the corn swell in the ear. A fruitful woman will make plants fruitful, by example, by the essence of her state of fertility; and a barren woman makes barren land (often, if she is found to be barren, a woman is divorced). Of course, this must work both ways: if a person can influence plants homoeopathically then the plant must also be able to extend its influence.⁷

In the East Indian islands of Saparoea, Haroekoe, and Noessa Laut, when a fisherman is about to set a trap for fish in the sea, he looks out for a tree, of which the fruit has been much pecked at by birds. From such a tree, he cuts a stout branch and makes of it the principle in his fish-trap: for he believes that just as the tree lured many birds to its fruit, so the branch will lure many fish to the trap.⁸

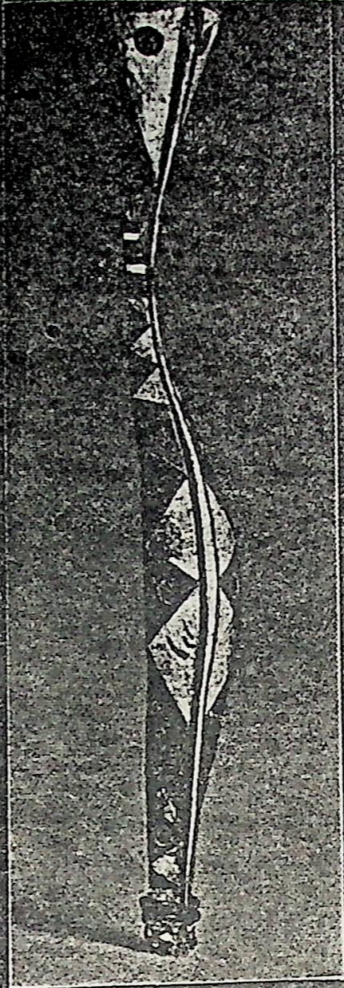
For the Mexicans, maize was the most important crop -- it had many spirits but was basically the Maize God, Cinteotl. In Mircea Eliade's Patterns in Comparative Religion, there is a detailed account of the maize rites of the Aztecs: "As soon as the plant began to germinate, they went to the field to find the god of the maize -- a shoot which they brought back to the house and offered food, exactly as they would to a god. In the evening, it was brought to the temple of Chicomecoatl, goddess of sustenance, where a group of young girls were gathered. The girls were of three different ages, very young, adolescent, and grown up -- symbolising, no doubt, the stages in the life of the maize...three months later,



when the crop was ripe, a girl, representing the goddess of the new maize, Xilonen, was beheaded, this sacrifice opened the door to using the new maize profanely, for food, which seems to suggest that it was in the nature of an offering of the first fruits. Sixty days later, at the conclusion of the harvest, there was another sacrifice. A woman representing the goddess Toci, 'our mother' (the goddess of the maize gathered for using), was beheaded and immediately afterwards skinned. One priest arrayed himself in the skin, while a piece taken from the thigh was carried to the temple of Cinteotl, god of the maize, where another participant made himself a mask out of it. For several weeks, this person was looked upon as a woman in childbirth -- for what this rite probably meant was that Toci, once dead, was reborn in her son, the dried maize, the grain that would provide the winter's food".⁹

Here it is interesting that not only is the woman who represents Toci beheaded but she is also skinned -- and her skin is used as a garment and as a mask, so that symbolically she is still alive. It forms a bridge between Toci, the gathered maize, and her son who is to be born, and in whom she will be reborn, as dried maize which will last throughout the winter.

The belief that the spirit of a thing or a person can live on through some part of them, even though they are actually dead, is seen also among some tribes of the Australian aborigines. If a woman gives birth to a stillborn child, she believes that by eating the body the spirit will live on and be reborn as her next child. Everything, from a stillborn child to sun, thunder, sticks and stones, has its own invisible power, and this power can always be tapped, trapped, or captured and used as protection, as an added strength. The Algonquin word "manitou" means an

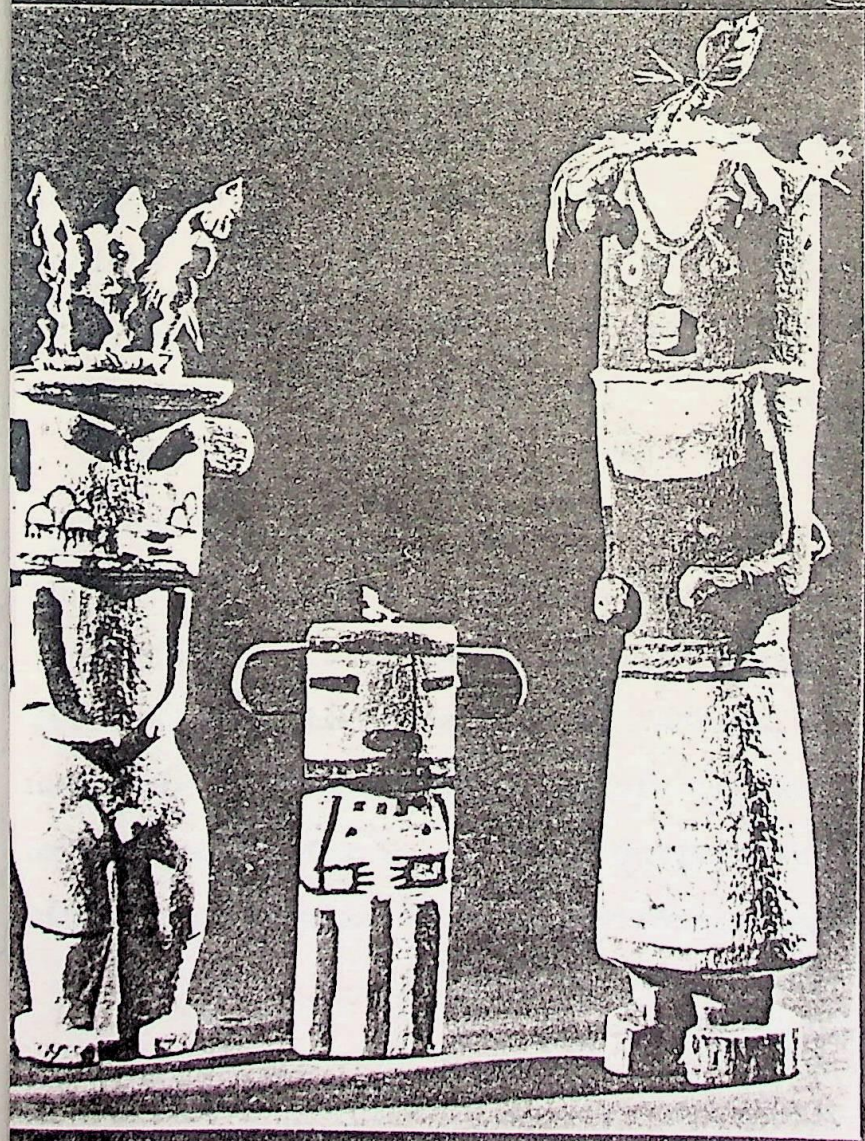


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impersonal power just as "mana" does among the Melanesians. R.H. Codrington says that mana "works to affect everything that is beyond the ordinary power of men, outside the common processes of nature.

If a man has been successful in fighting it has not been his natural strength of arm, quickness of eye, or readiness of resource that has won success; he has certainly got the 'mana' of a spirit of or some deceased warrior to empower him, conveyed in an amulet of stone around his neck or a tuft of leaves at his belt, in a tooth hung upon a finger of his bow hand, or in the form of words with which he brings supernatural assistance to his side. If a man's pigs multiply, and his gardens are productive, it is not because he is industrious and looks after his property, but because of the stones full of 'mana' for pigs and yams that he possesses. Of course a yam naturally grows when planted, that is well known: but it will not be very large unless 'mana' comes into play. A canoe will not be swift unless 'mana' can be brought to bear upon it; a net will not catch many fish, nor an arrow inflict mortal wound".¹⁰

Among the Hopi Indians of the Southwest, the continuous round of ceremonies is conceived of as a direct aid to their economic activities. The religion centres around the need for rain. The role of the clan in both ceremonial and economic aspects of pueblo life is very important. "Each clan includes not only its living members but also a large number of 'kachinas', metamorphosed spirits of the clan's deceased members. These do not represent specific individuals but rather a generalised class of clan ancestors. Once a year during the Hopi winter, the kachinas return to and participate, through personification by masked dancers, in elaborate rites, in which the Hopis plead with them to use their

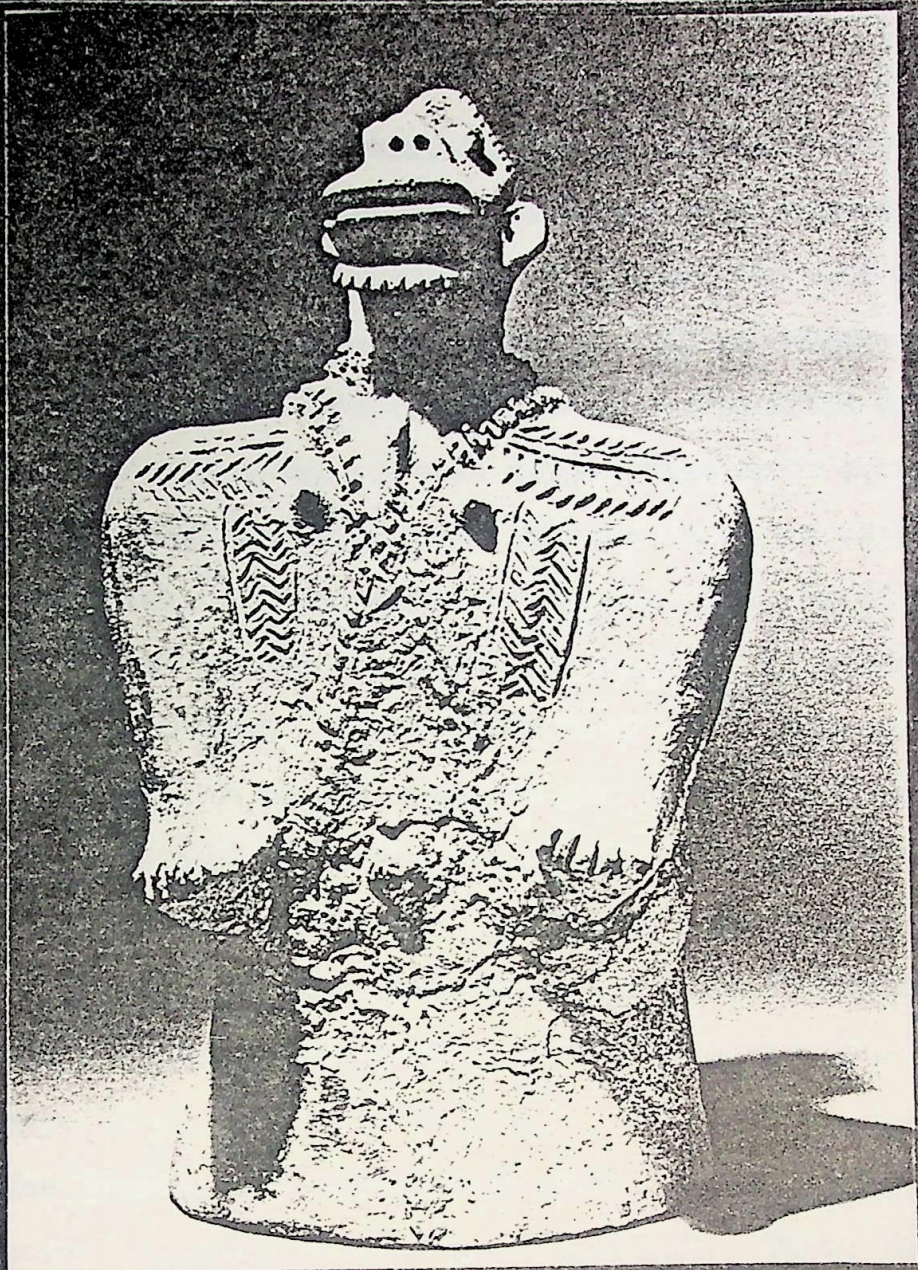


supernatural power and their influence with the gods to bring rain and other benefits to the living. In this manner, then, the clans, by reason of their kinship with the dead, provide a bridge to the world of the supernaturals, both to establish and to maintain the harmony with the universe and all it contains that is so necessary, in Hopi belief, to successful living".¹¹

The intimate relationship between the Hopis, their dead and death itself is really beautiful: the natural and the supernatural coexist and find unity within the ceremonies and dances of the Indians.

In Sacred Circles, Coe explains that "Not only men and animals, but plants, stones, mountains and storms, astral bodies, clouds, sky and underground have spirits which may be evil or beneficent to human beings...personified as kachinas, who came into our world trailing the tatters of everything historical or legendary in the Hopi past.(Their pictures are found in the Zuni and the Rio Grande pueblos; they carry implements like the most ancient ones found in ruins; they chant in languages older than anyone knows; and) their customs, though they are prescribed by ancient ritual, still show the effect of a modern store, for a felt hat may be the basis for the god's head-dress, and the priest who serves the underground altar often appears in overalls".¹²

The Pueblo Indian has a great deal of respect for his environment: all his gods are local gods. The Hopi gods live in the San Francisco peaks and those of the Zuni on Corn Mountain: the myths have been handed down from generation to generation. Rituals and interpretations of those myths are performed in the underground 'kivas' and therefore retain their mystery: it is only possible for us to stand outside the continuing dialogue between the Indian and his environment and to admire it from a



respectful distance.

Victor Turner, however, lived for a time among the African Ndembu people: he filled his notebooks with data of kinship, village life, tribal structure and ritual; and his accounts of some of these events are fascinating. It is interesting that many sociologists and anthropologists think of rituals as being an extension of the myth, or vice versa ("the myth exists on the conceptual level and the ritual on the level of action"¹³); whereas Turner, without recourse to any myth, takes the ritual back to its source in the Ndembu language. He describes the ceremonies in detail, then breaks down the native word for each ritual symbol, or each section of the rite, until he finds its original meaning. For, as he says himself, "it is one thing to observe people performing the stylised gestures and singing the cryptic songs of ritual performances and quite another to reach an adequate understanding of what the movements and words mean to them".¹⁴

The Ndembu word for ritual is "chidika": this also means "a special engagement" or "an obligation". These people, like the Hopis and most of the other societies that I've mentioned, believe strongly in the ancestral shades and are under an obligation to show them due respect. If this obligation is not met by a person, or a group of people, then some crisis will sooner or later befall him and a ritual to re-establish a good relationship with the shades must be performed. The "Isoma" ritual belongs to a class of rituals, recognised by the Ndembu as "women's rituals" or "rituals of procreation". The Ndembu are a matrilinear society, therefore a woman finds a constant conflict between her matrikin and her husband. The word "Isoma" means literally "to slip out of place". The Isoma ritual becomes necessary if a woman has had

a series of miscarriages: "the unborn child is thought to 'slip out' before its time has come to be born".

The afflicting shade in Isoma is always the spirit of a dead female relative -- the Ndembu believe that it is because the woman has become too close to her husband, the man's side, in her marriage so that the dead matrikin have impaired her fertility. A balanced relationship between the marriage and the matrilineage must be restored so that the woman will become fruitful.

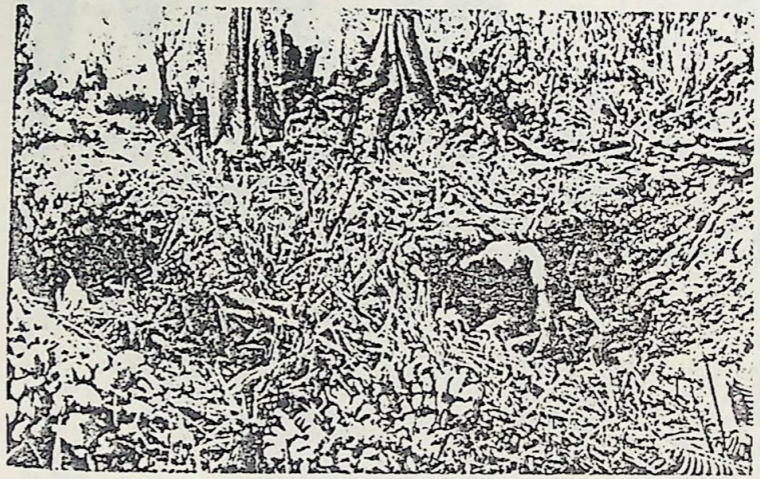
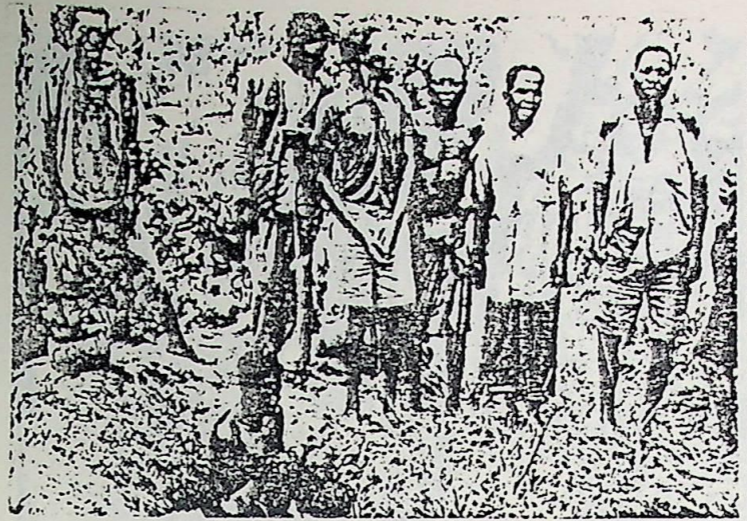
"At Isoma they behead a red cock. This stands for the 'chisaku' or misfortune through which people die, it must go away ('chisaku chafwang'a antu, chifumi'). The 'chisaku' is death, which must not happen to the woman patient; it is sickness ('musong'u') which must not come to her; it is suffering ('ku-kabakana), and this suffering is from the grudge ('chitela') of a witch ('muloji'). A person who curses another with death has a 'chisaku'. The 'chisaku' is spoken at the source of a river. If someone passes there and steps on it ('ku-dyata') or crosses over it (ku-badkyika'), bad luck ('malwa') or lack of success ('ku-halwa') will go with her wherever she goes. She has gotten at that place, the stream source, and she must be treated ('ku-uka') there. The shade of 'Isoma' has come out as a result of that curse, and comes like 'Muweng'i'.¹⁵

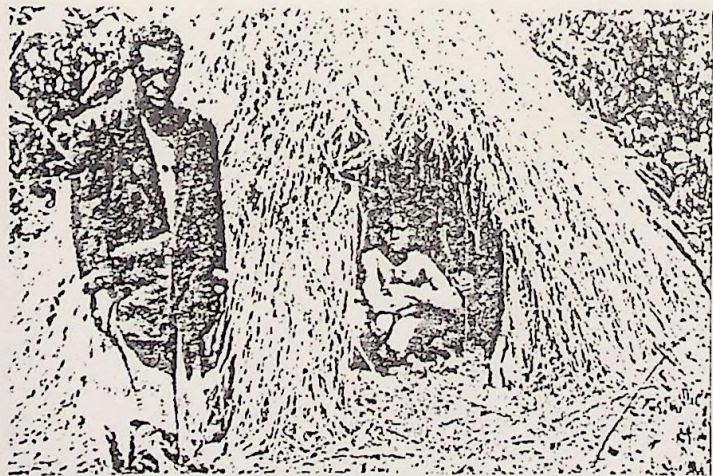
It is interesting that the ritual is not only directed at the afflicting shade, but also at any person who might bear a grudge against the unfortunate woman. It is that person, that witch, 'muloji', who speaks the curse which waken the shade that brings 'Isoma' to the woman. 'Isoma' means simultaneously "the patient's undesirable state and the ritual to cure it". The Ndembu feel that anything hidden is dangerous and therefore by naming it you are halfway to curing it: "to embody the invisible action of

witches and shades in a visible or tangible symbol is a big step towards remedying it":¹⁶ the ritual itself is filled with symbolism and ambiguity.

The rites must begin at the burrow of either an ant-bear or a giant rat, both of which animals block their burrows after excavating them, just as the shade has blocked the woman's fertility. The doctor-adepts must open the blocked entrances, symbolically giving her back her fertility. The burrow must be near the source of the stream where the curse was uttered. Medicines are collected and a seclusion hut is prepared for the patient after the ceremony. The first medicine comes from a hardwood tree (hardness=health and strength), the second from a mulendi tree, which has a slippery surface from which climbers might fall, like the children who slipped out prematurely, to help the affliction slip away from the patient. At the entrance to the tunnel and four foot along it, the grass is tied in two knots which are then removed and holes dug to about six foot depth (symbolising wombs and tombs). Then the adepts tunnel towards each other until the tunnels are large enough for a person to pass through (A circle of trees is bent and broken to enclose the sacred area). The burrow entrance is called "hot", for death; and the other entrance is called "cold", for life and health. Both the patient and her husband are naked -- like newborn infants and corpses. She enters the cool hole, clasping a young white pullet to her left breast, as if to suckle it (the white pullet signifying strength and procreative capacity). A red cock, signifying the mystical misfortune, the suffering, is trussed and laid beside the man who stands at the entrance to the hot 'ikela', or magic hole.

Both husband and wife move several times, the husband at first following the patient, and then side by side, through the tunnel





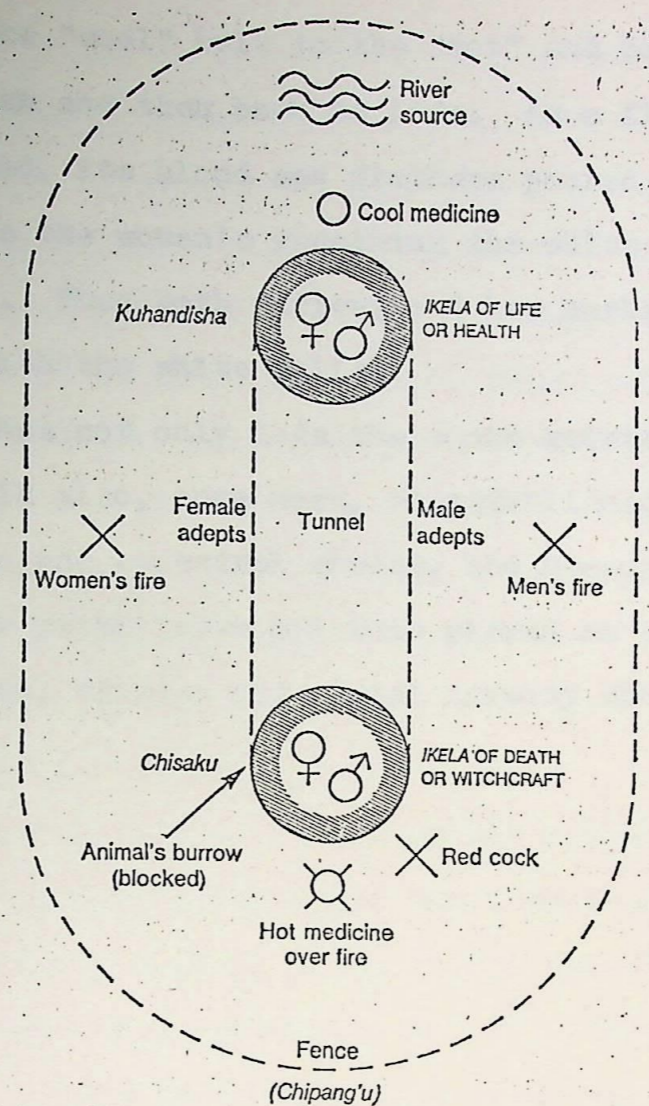


Diagram of the spatial symbolism of the *Isoma* ritual

from the "cool" hole to the "hot" and back again, as if from life to death and then back to life. As a final act, the red cock is beheaded, its blood and feathers poured into the hot 'ikela' to balance the woman's receiving the white pullet at the start of the ritual. Then both patient and her husband retire to the seclusion hut, with the white pullet.

Thus not only does the woman retrieve her fertility, but social order is also, once more, re-established. Due respect has been paid to the ancestral shades, and because both the woman's husband and her matrilinear kin have played an equally large part in the ceremony, balance and social harmony should once more exist between them.

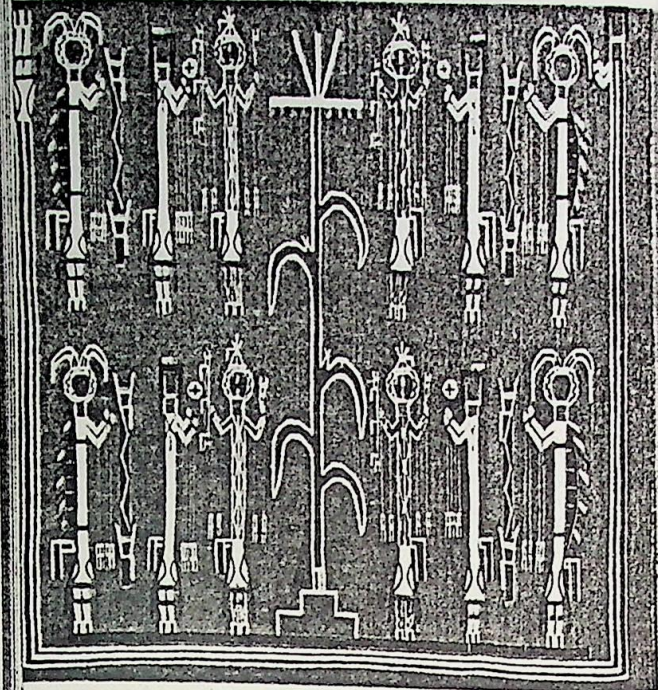
From these examples, it becomes apparent that the concept of impersonal power is one of the most widespread: it is at the base of all primitive beliefs and rituals. It is the recognition of human uncertainty and an explanation for anything that is unexpected and uncontrollable. It is in essence an attempt to rationalise the uncertainties and irregularities of human existence. It is a completely amoral power and accounts equally for good and evil. It may be the power of the ancestor-spirit, or the 'chisaku' of the Ndembu, or simply a force of nature: but, whether it is helpful or harmful, it must be respected equally in order to maintain the harmony between man and his environment. It is this awareness of relationships, the social and economic life

of the village relating directly to the environment, that is the foundation of primitive man's belief in unity: "the traditional assertion of attunement with his creator and his environment -- one interdependent upon the other".¹⁷ Therefore, primitive man is in constant dialogue with his surroundings and this is the essence of ritual: a dialogue which achieves mutual respect and mutual understanding. Whether the ceremony is a celebration of nature, or a plea to the spirits to be gentle, it is still a striving towards unity. Each tribe recognises its dependence upon natural forces and all of their rites, whether for deer hunting, bean planting, or reaping the harvest, are a declaration of that dependence, and of hope and trust.

Through ritual the invisible actions of spirits or natural phenomena are embodied and can then be dealt with more effectively. The power of a plant or an animal spirit can be harnessed to give the ritual greater meaning and the performer added strength. The more specific the ritual, the finer the selection of its components will be (as can be seen from the symbolic associations that exist between the places, animals and plants used, and the actual ritual in 'Isoma'). "The expression of the mythic power of an animal and the actual use of parts of that animal go hand in hand".¹⁸ My opinion is that the importance of ritual lies, not in the ceremony itself but, in the fact that it expresses the need for universal harmony, a demand for mutual respect and understanding between man and his environment. Ritual not only heightens an awareness of mutuality but must also ambiguously create an acceptance of man's frailty and his dependence on forces beyond him. Ritual is the natural expression of man's relationship to his social and natural environment: through it, his role is defined and constantly re-established. This must surely

create a strong sense of order, and of structure, with which to face any crisis or conflict situation.

Whether ritual can offer any physical solution to a problem is dubious; but I have no doubt that the amount of energy expended in the performance of any rite is such that the participants must gain considerable psychological benefit from it. And that, after all, is of primary importance for the well-being of every community.



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SECTION TWO

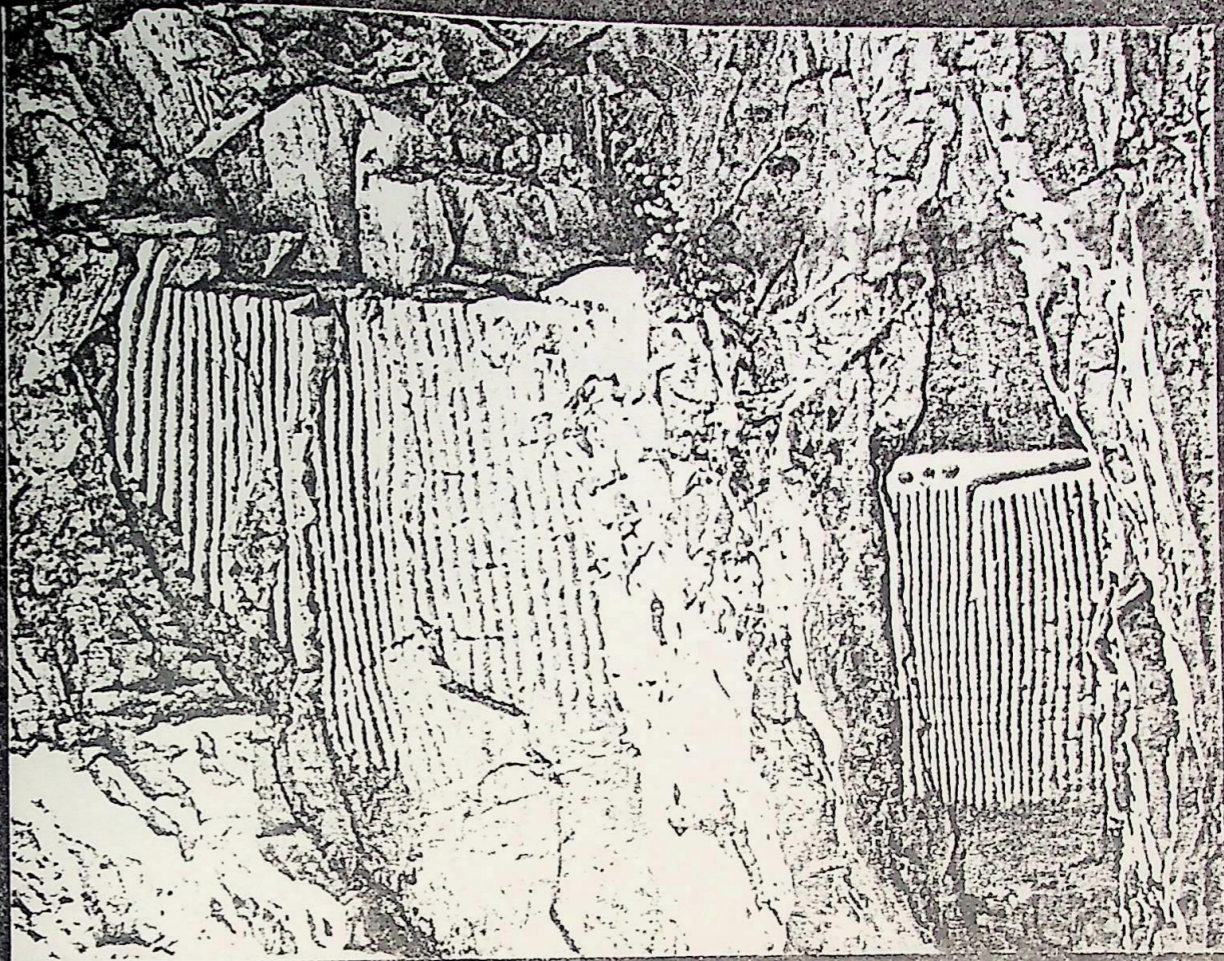
The Importance of Ritual Within the Community.

Religious patterns of behaviour centre, as we have seen, around the uncertainties of living, and are particularly evident at times of crises -- both individual, such as birth, marriage or death, and crises which affect the whole community, such as drought or food shortage. It has been suggested that, through ritual and religious practice, man expresses those things which are of greatest importance to him. Thus, among the totemic tribes of Australia, the totem is usually the main food source: whether it is an animal or a plant, it is the duty of the head of each clan to perform various rituals in order that the totem will multiply and provide food for the whole community. Among the Pueblo Indians both religion and ceremony centre around the seasonal cultivation of the crops on which the Indians depend. For the Plains Indian, the buffalo played an equally large part in economic and ritual activity. So we see that primitive man hopes to reinforce his economic activities through ritual; accompanying rituals are of equal importance to hunting or agricultural activities. The sacred and the profanely banal co-exist and become totally integrated in an effort by man to maintain the fruitful life of the community as a whole.

Because rituals are nearly always concerned with the well-being of the community, and the continuance of the tribe, a certain emphasis must be put on fertility: both of the land, and of the tribe's members. Australian totemism provides an excellent example of the relationship between the fertility of lands and animals, which are the totems, and that of the tribe. If an abundance of a species of totem animal or plant is found

in a particular place, it is called a "totem centre" and is held sacred. Here, the souls of the ancestors, which usually reside in the totem, are given due respect and the multiplication rituals are performed. It is also believed that a woman may conceive a child while passing the totem centre: the ancestor spirit, which has entered her as a child, will always be related to the particular totem of that centre and will return to it at death. In light of all this evidence, it is now obvious that the continuance and survival of both tribe and individual are inextricably bound up with both the food source and with the sacred places at which the rituals are performed.

While some rituals are purely personal, such as the curing of an individual's sickness, and have no communal significance, there are many others which not only help the individual through a crisis, but which, at the same time, are an expression of social solidarity. One such ceremony is "The Girl's Puberty Rite of the Chiricahua Apaches": "When a girl experiences her first menstruation her transition from girlhood to womanhood is celebrated by a rite of passage -- a 'little ceremony'. These individual ceremonies occur irregularly but the longer and more elaborate Puberty Rite occurs once a year -- and is performed for any girl who has already experienced the onset of puberty and the 'little ceremony'. The purpose of the ceremony (which includes songs and prayers that symbolically bring the girl through a long and successful life) is twofold: to ensure long life, happiness, and good health to the girls on their entrance to young womanhood, and to bring similar blessings to the community as a whole. Finally, the ceremony provides the people who attend it with an eagerly awaited social occasion, at which they may feast, sing, engage in social dancing and courtship, and renew old friendships".¹



It is evident that rituals and ceremonies contribute largely to social participation and social solidarity: members of the community become united in emotional activity. Through rites of passage the individual's place in the social structure is being constantly re-defined and his identity, as an active member of the society, is secured.

Another function of ritual is the preservation of knowledge. Many dramas and ceremonies symbolically re-enact specific events that are important economically and culturally, such as food production. Among horticultural peoples, such as the Hopi and Zuni Indians, the ceremonial round may emphasise the steps necessary to make a successful crop. Hunting people often dramatise the movements of the hunted animal. In the multiplication rituals, the heads of the totem clans enact the birth procedures of the totem animal or insect. Navajo ceremonies symbolically re-enact the myths of creation. Although such dramas emphasise traditional methods and discourage innovation, they nevertheless insure that culturally valued techniques will not be lost with passing time.

Where religion itself involves a complex body of both myth and ritual, participation in the dramatisation and expression of it will bring about a complete unity and group identity. This is the case among the Arunta aboriginal peoples of the witchetty grub totem. Their dramatisation of the grub emerging from its chrysalis is not only a beautifully structured fertility rite, but also a statement of group identity and its relationship to a specific part of the entire universe.

Among the Hopi Indians, totemism is less complex, it is merely a way of distinguishing one clan from another. Each clan is named after a particular plant, animal or even an inanimate



object. Such nominal totem clans are not dependent upon their totem for food: some others will not harm or kill their totem. Each clan possesses certain rights in shrines, ceremonial objects, and kivas or ceremonial chambers. It also has the exclusive right to perform certain ceremonies, in return for rights to cultivate lands near the village. Thus, the Snake Clan owns the Snake Dance, an important summer ceremony designed to bring rain to the growing crops. The Snake Fraternity and many members of the Snake Clan perform this ceremony, under the leadership of the clan head, who acts as chief priest. Here the clan functions as an integral part of the whole social organisation, playing a principal role in the religious life of the people, and at the same time constantly re-establishing its own identity and individuality through the rituals and ceremonies that are that religion.

The clan, then, plays a large part in maintaining social control. Many of the rituals performed are secret, sacred mysteries, and are performed with great respect for the universal harmonies. Each ritual underlines the relationship between the clan and the society, and society and the universe. The Hopi have an intimate relationship with their environment and its spirit beings, and with death. Each clan includes not only its living members but also a number of "kachinas", spirits of dead ancestors, who participate in the ceremonies, each of which is seen as a direct aid to the Hopis' economic activities (It is interesting to note that while the Hopi men perform the ceremonies, it is the women who represent the universe on pottery and in weaving and beadwork. There is an equally sensitive, but less dramatic, dialogue with the world).

The Hopis, like the African Baganda and many other primitive



societies, achieve through their beliefs in ghosts and reincarnation "a cyclic social continuity that links the society of the living to both the dead and those who are yet to be born".²

Rituals are sometimes used to reinforce various aspects of culture, and as a means of expressing group solidarity. At other times, rituals provide an explanation through dramatisation of myths for the structure of the universe. Whatever purpose they serve and whatever their function in society, their performers, the religious practitioners are of equal importance to that culture's rituals.

In any society, there is nearly always a person, or persons, who, by virtue of special training, personality trait, or both, is regarded as more skilled than others in contacting and influencing the supernatural world. It is to these people that a social group or an individual will turn in times of crisis. Religious practitioners, full-time or part-time, are found universally and are called variously shamans, priests, magicians, or sorcerers.

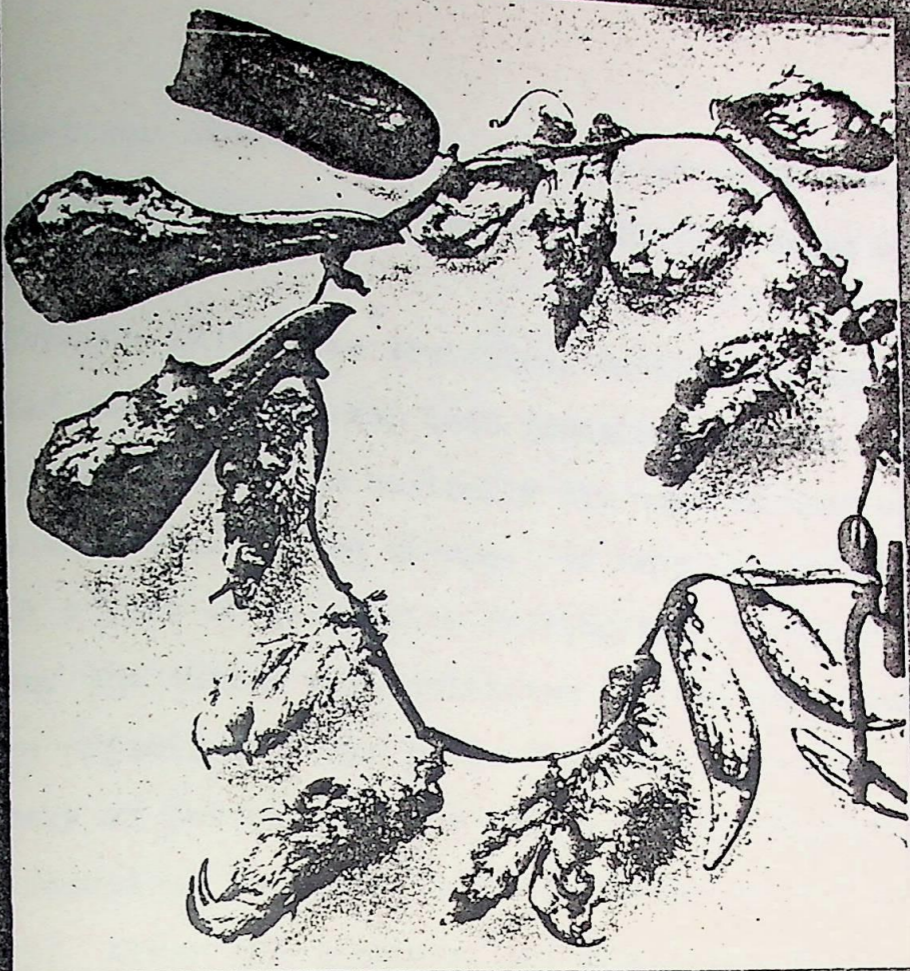
The term "shaman", in general, refers to a person who serves society as a part-time religious practitioner. Often, as among the Eskimos, the shaman appears to be emotionally unstable, subject to fits, frenzies, and self-hypnosis. This is also true among the Algonquin Indians. In North American Indian Mythology, C.A. Burland says, "the Algonquin tribes believed that human contact with unseen powers came through specially selected individuals. These shamans, or medicine-men, were usually marked out in childhood by some unusual psychological features. They might experience visions, suffer epileptic fits, show homosexual tendencies, dress in women's clothes, or go away alone for long periods of time".³ Such people were shown great respect because it was thought that they were facing difficulties sent by the spirit world, to which

it was assumed they were closer than were ordinary men. The shamans are intermediaries between the people and the spirits: they heal the sick, find lost property, smell out evil magic, and forecast the weather. Once a man is seen to have shamanistic powers he is usually sent to study under a great shaman where he learns to control those powers and to manipulate them to best advantage. It is thought that a shaman can not only cure disease but also invoke supernatural power to cause it. Therefore, he is regarded with respect and with fear.

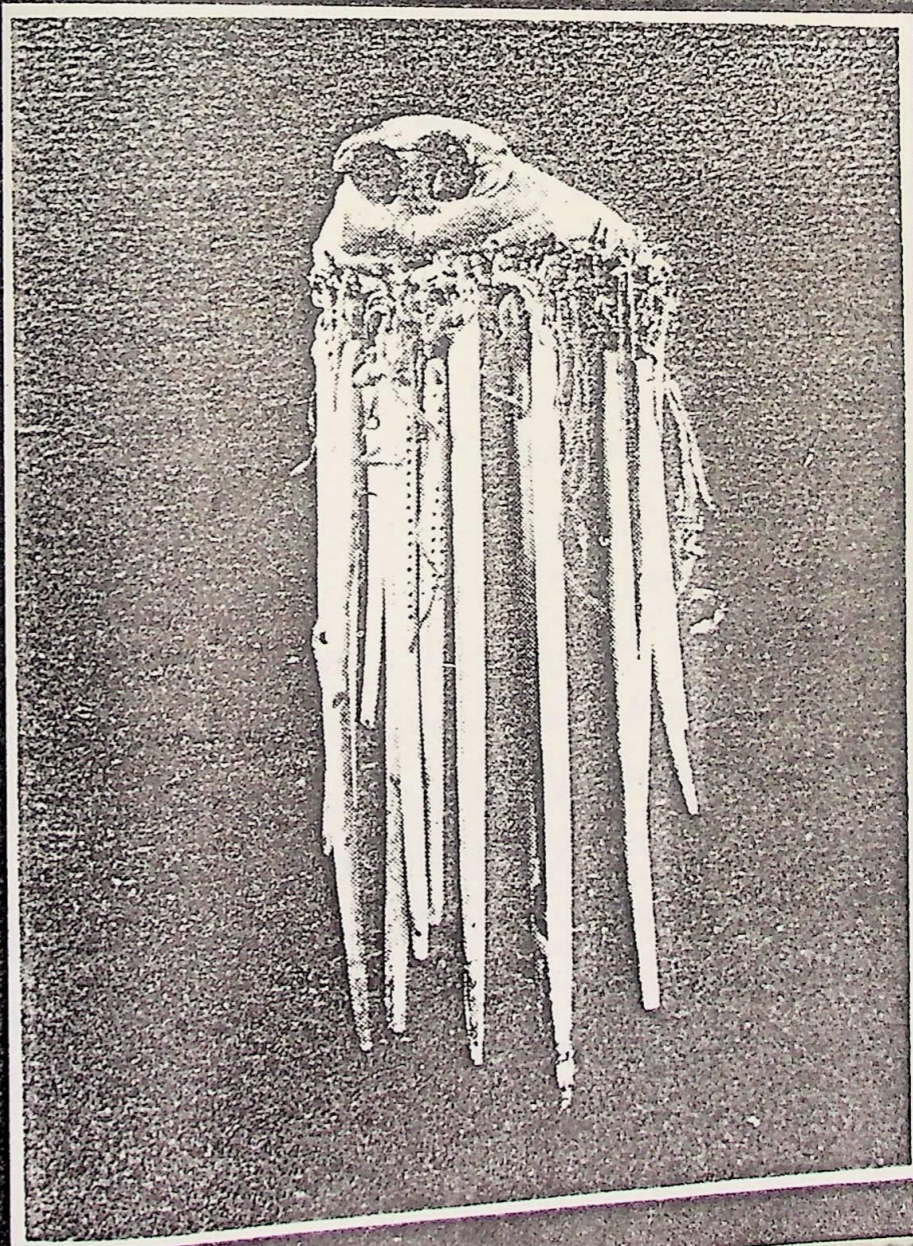
Because disease is thought to result from the loss of the soul, a person who believes that he is the object of sorcery becomes convinced that he is doomed according to the most solemn traditions of his group. His friends and relatives share this certainty. From then on the community withdraws. Standing aloof from the accursed, it treats him not only as though he were already dead, but as though he were a source of danger to the entire remaining group.⁴ All his social and family ties are severed, he is excluded from all the functions and activities through which he experienced self-awareness and, most terrifyingly, he is regarded as dead with the attendant sacred rites performed which will dispatch him to the realm of the shades. It is unlikely that a man finding himself in such a situation could overcome the effects of sheer terror. There is, however, an example of an Australian aborigine brought to the Darwin Hospital in 1956, apparently dying of this type of sorcery. He was placed in an oxygen tent and fed intravenously and soon recovered: believing the white man's magic to be stronger than the curse!⁵

Belief in magic, in the applied power of a shaman or a sorcerer, is necessary if that magic is to be effective; and this applies whether the magic is used as curse or cure. Despite the

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fact that the shaman is in a position of great power and social status, he is unlikely to become a chief, because of his unstable nature.

Shamans among some societies, such as the Apaches, perform in a far more controlled, less frenzied, manner. His role and function in society is basically the same as that of the Eskimo or the Algonquin Indian shaman: to help an individual, if asked, through a time of particular difficulty. In order to cure a disease, the shaman may administer certain medicinal herbs, suck foreign objects from the patient's body, or simply sing and pray intensely or perform other ritual actions. His actions are, in fact, identical to those of the faith-healer in our present society. After the ceremony, the shaman may impose certain food restrictions on the patient, or give him an amulet to be worn for further protection. So we see that the Apache shaman acts in a deliberate and methodical way to achieve the same end as the Eskimo shaman does through frenzy and trance. In general, the shaman functions in small, private ceremonies for the individual; sometimes, however, he may officiate at a ceremony for a whole village, or at a public occasion, such as the Apache "Girl's Puberty Rite", which I have already discussed above. In these ceremonies, the shaman's role is more like that of the priest, who is, ordinarily, in charge of the group's activities.

The priest, unlike the shaman, is a full-time religious practitioner. He is trained for his role in society and uses that training in his rituals and performances. He is most often in charge of an already established calendar of rituals. Whereas the shaman exists mainly within a society that is not highly developed, economically or religiously, which thus requires only a part-time religious practitioner, the priest occurs within a

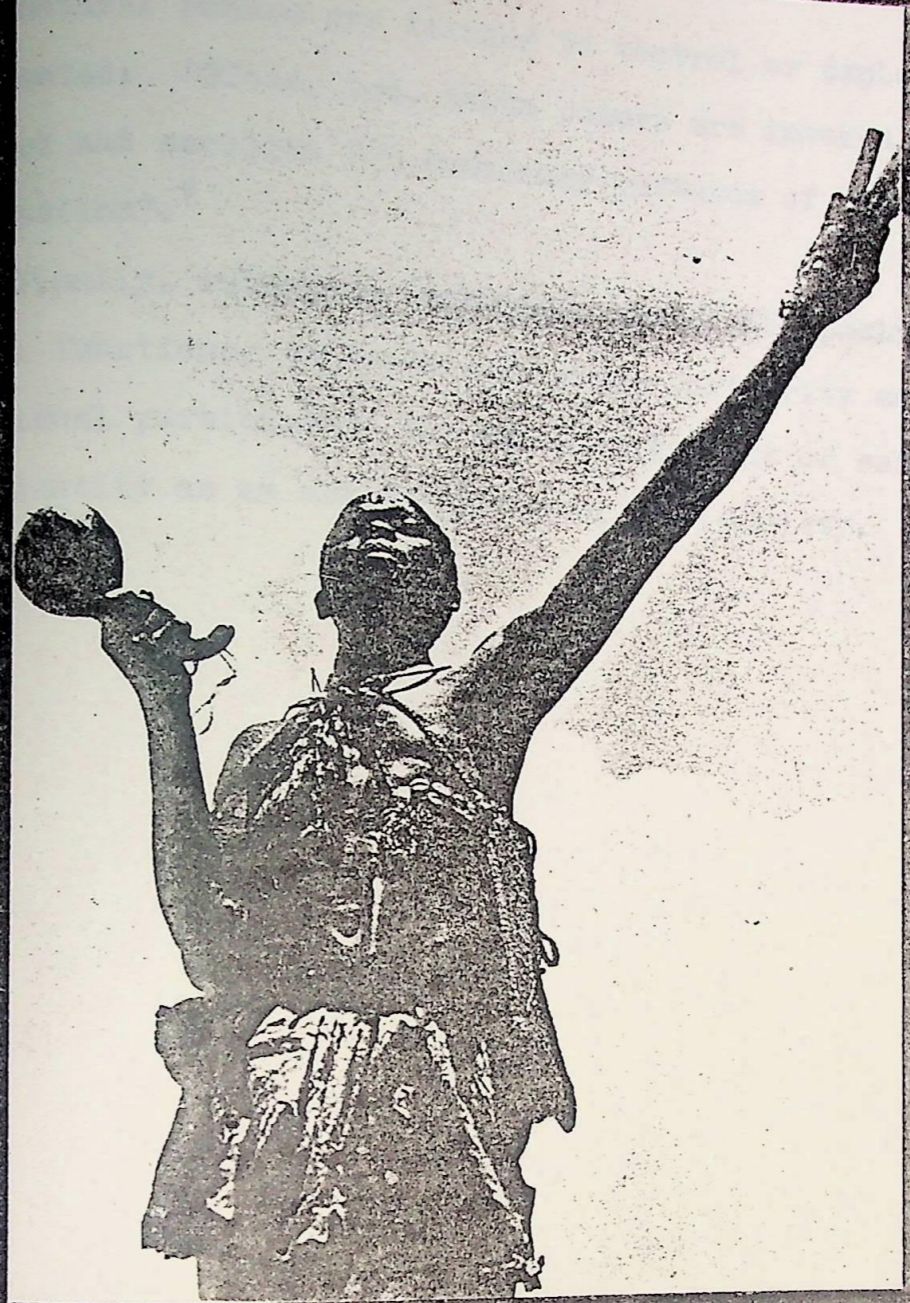
more highly developed religious organisation. His society is often divided into various clan groups and religious fraternities, such as is found in Hopi and Zuni Pueblo Indian societies.

"The behaviour of Zuni priests, though in many ways not unlike that of shamans, is the result of long and careful training and apprenticeship in kiva and curing, society rituals. In the main, this behaviour is marked by sobriety, reverence, and respect, and involves the careful and exact performance of long and complex rituals and the recitation and singing of painstakingly memorised prayers and sacred songs".⁶

Thus, the priest derives his special powers and influence with the supernatural world through membership of an organised cult, and not often from a personal visitation by a supernatural being.

Universally, some individuals are believed to be closer to the supernatural world than others. On the one hand, there are shamans and, on the other, there are the priests. Both fulfill the function in society of performing those rituals and ceremonies that make up the religion of their people.

The function of religion and its associated rituals, is basically to allay anxieties and fears and to form a bridge between man, the natural world, and the supernatural world. Usually, too, it provides an explanation of the universe, as it is known by members of the society, and provides an ordered account of man's place within it. Ritual defines and secures man's relationship with his environment, plants, animals, and natural forces.



Supernatural powers are invoked to control or explain the unexpected: "Often, too, these powers are invoked to provide support and sanction for customary patterns of behaviour and social interaction".⁷

Finally, religious occasions, especially public ceremonies, are social functions, statements of group solidarity and, for the individual participant, the re-establishment of self-awareness and identity as an active member of that society.

SECTION THREE

Levels of Contact Between Primitive Ritual and Contemporary Art.

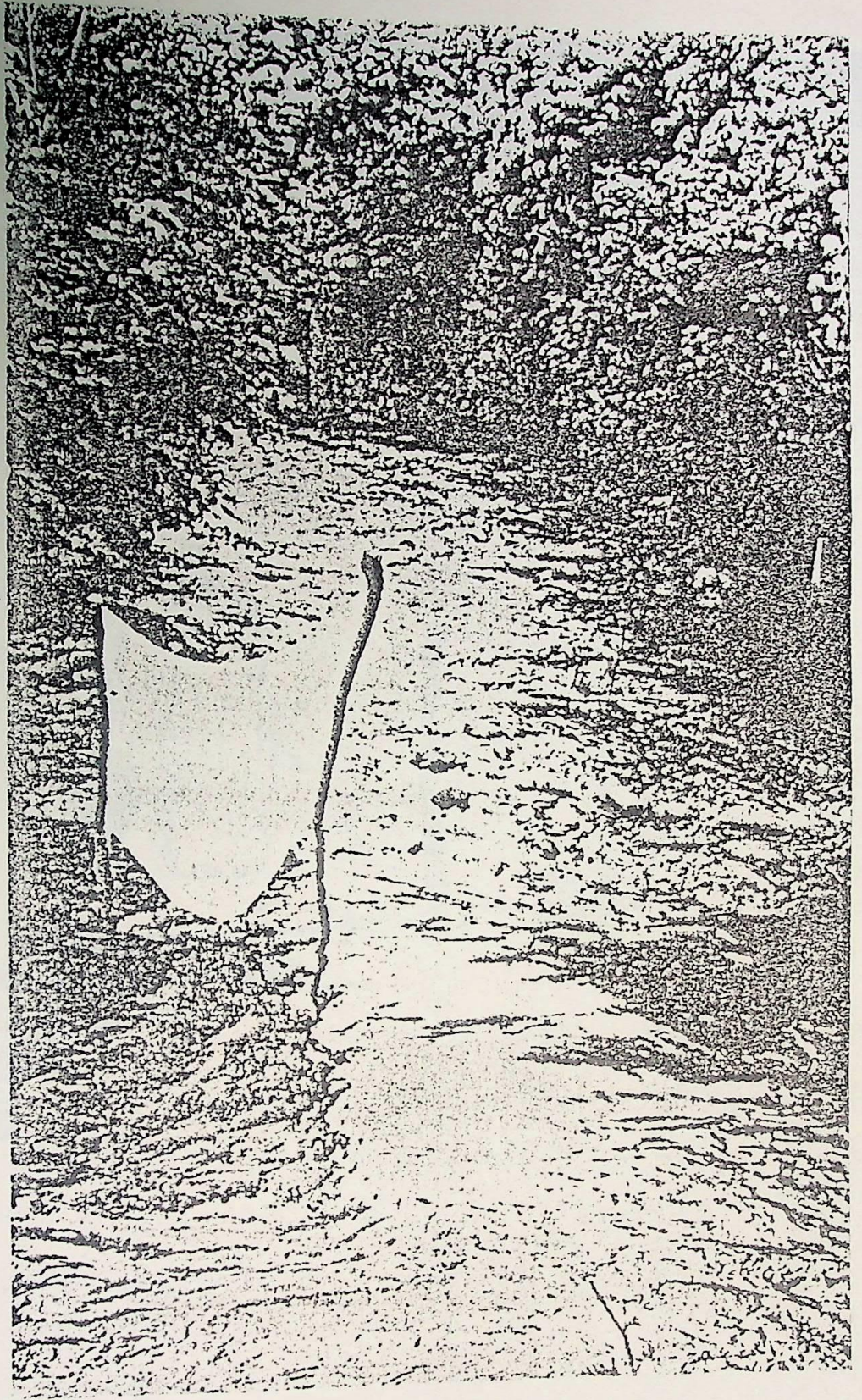
In modern society, roles and rituals are almost impossible to define because the social structure is so much more complex than that of a tribal society. However, I would like to talk briefly about some modern artists, because there is a level of contact between modern performance art, and primitive ritual.

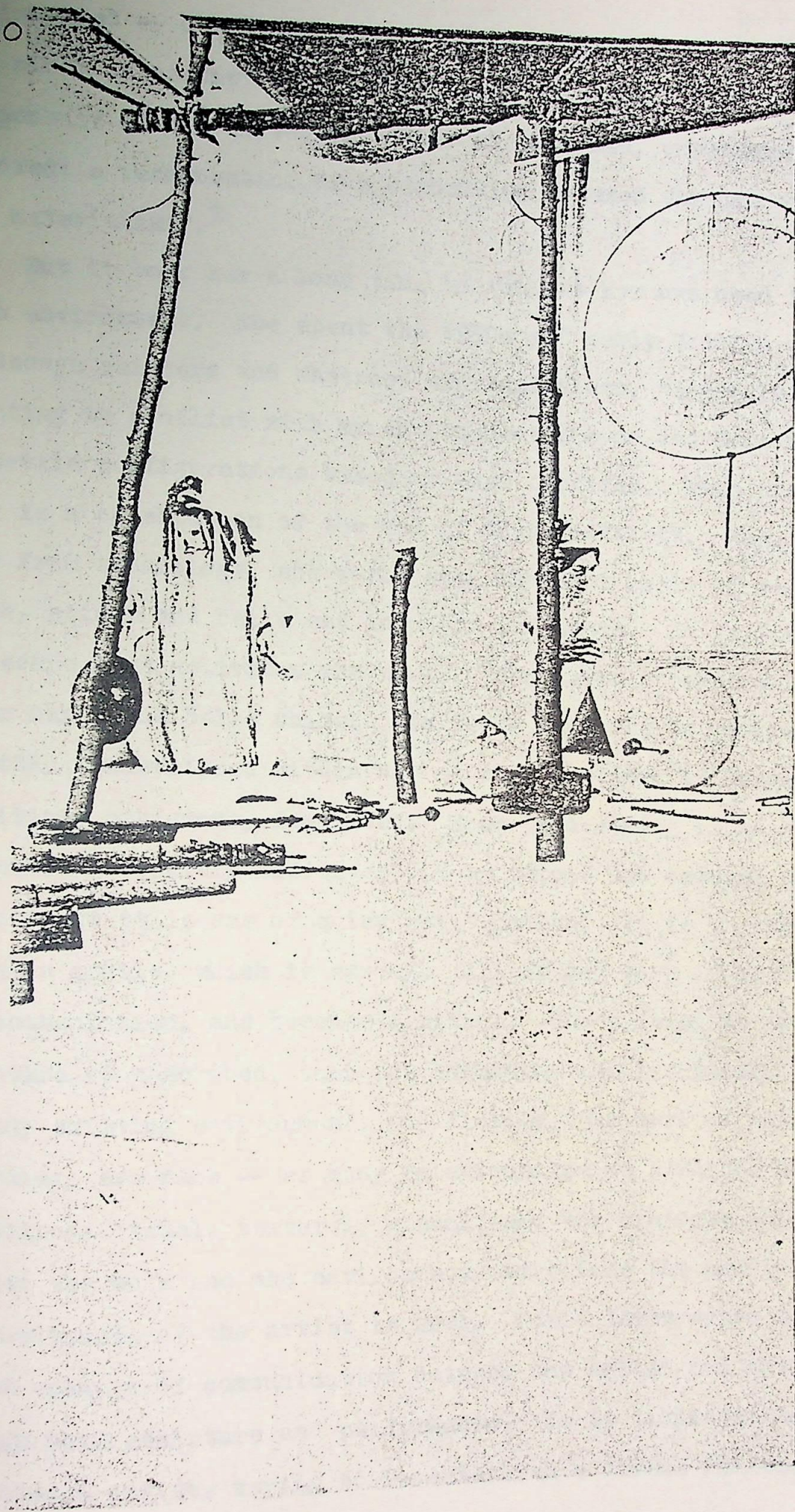
With the exception of the designer, the artist's role in society is not defined. He is seldom regarded as an important member of the community and is, in fact, more likely to be seen as a threat because it is in the nature of our art to question existing social values. "By regarding the hysteric or artistic innovator as abnormal, we accord ourselves the luxury of believing that they do not concern us, and that they do not put into question by mere fact of their existence, an accepted social, moral, and intellectual order".¹

Among some modern artists there is an obvious move towards natural materials and towards environment. This is not a total rejection of technology or of society as it stands, but a change of emphasis, a re-awakening of awareness in nature and a recognition of the need for ecology. It is an urgent need to re-establish contact with the universe and with the natural order; a statement of concern for mankind.

Because man has become alienated from his natural surroundings, primarily through materialism, the balance has been impaired: and, somehow, the relationship between man and the natural world must be restored.

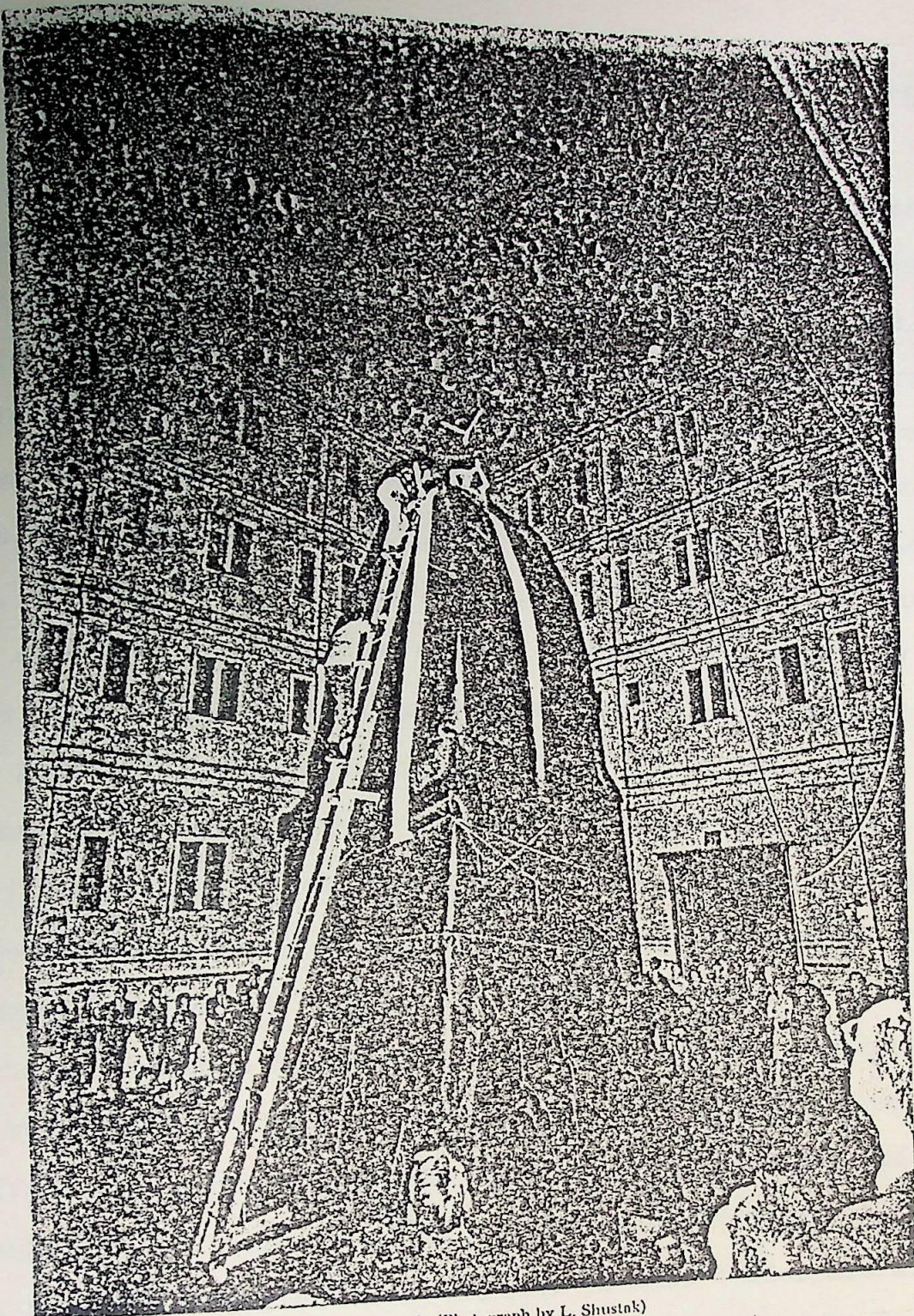
Marie Yates, talking about her work, says: "The primary concerns of my work are receptivity and integration and the





medium used -- our landscape, a coherence of ecology, cosmology, and mind; an assumption of an attitude of awareness to the basic components of our universe, mostly disregarded, unremembered, and ignored; a reconnecting of a connection severed through neglect and materialism".²

But it took her a long time to realise her own need to work with environment. She spent the 1950s and early Sixties with landscape painters and abstract expressionists, "doggedly painting in conflict with my environment (Devon and Cornwall), geometric configurations based on that conflict. This present work is a celebration of the end of that conflict". Now, getting away from technology, she works with the most basic of materials: cloth, sticks and bells set into the landscape. It is often the landscape that activates the work: wind gives it movement and water makes the bells chime. She feels that she is working with something undeveloped within her -- that the work is "accessible, intuitive, ambiguous, feminine". Even just seeing it in photograph, I find it incredibly exciting: it is simple and natural and my response to it is one of quiet anticipation. It is a statement which is gentle, which is strong. All of her work is accompanied by documentation, and becomes a ritual. The setting up of a sculpture is described, then the location, the landscape, the already existing environment, and finally, the sort of day it is. Recordings are made -- as many relationships as possible are recognised: tonal, textural, visual; and the dialogue which occurs between the work and the environment underlines the acute responsiveness of the artist to both. Marie Yates seems to be a good example of communication between the artist and environment, through both sculpture and performance. It is exhilarating to find modern artists trying to re-establish a direct relationship

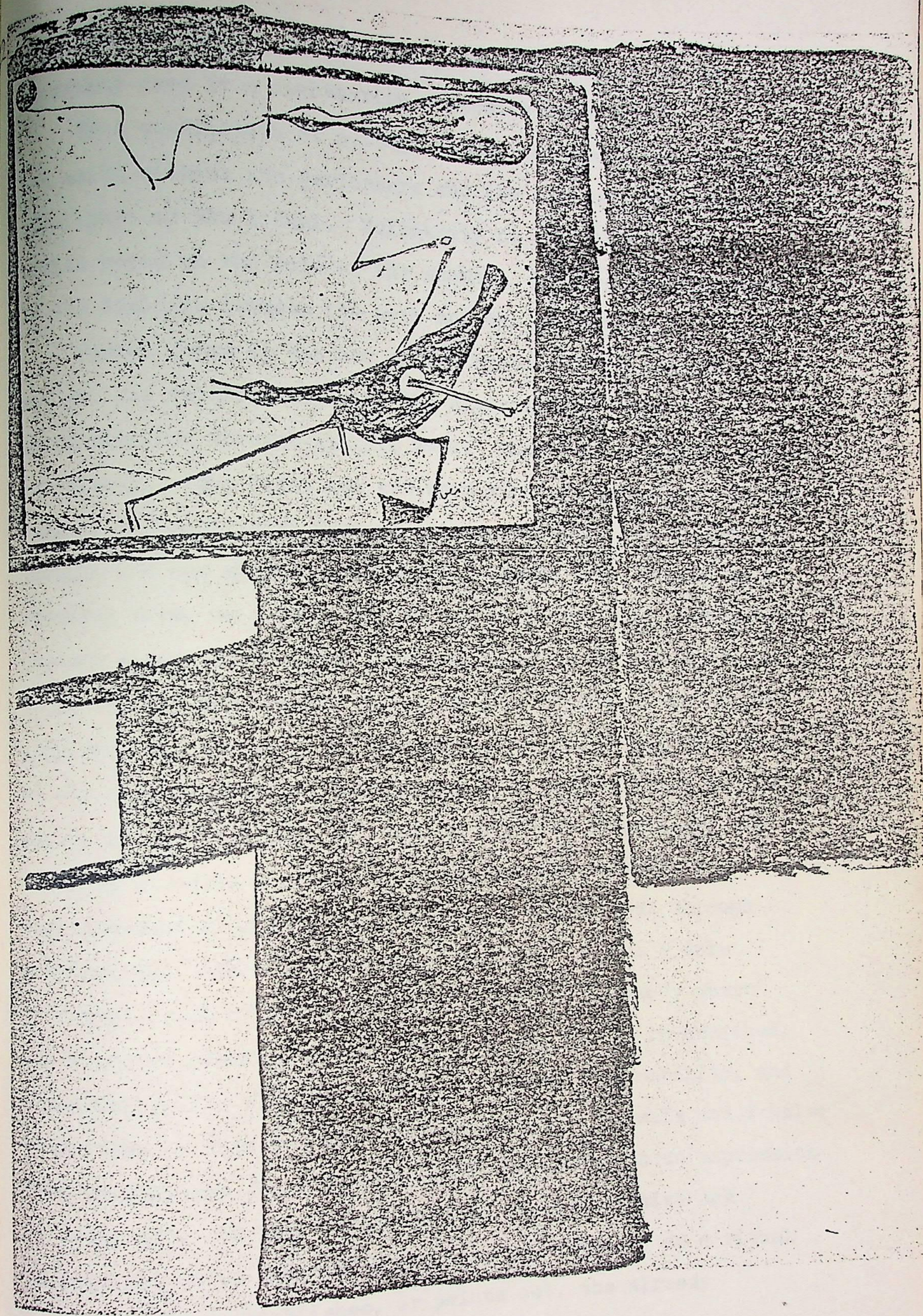


113 Allan Kaprow, *Happening*, New York, 1962 (Photograph by L. Shustak)

with nature and even coming to terms with an apparently alien urban environment.

In his book on Dadaism, Hans Richter describes a happening by Alan Kaprow: "The 'Happening' took place in the enormous courtyard of a sky scraper, the Mills Hotel in the Village. This is the biggest 'flophouse' in the world, with twelve hundred little rooms for the poorest of the poor, who still have to pay 50 cents a night. In the middle of the courtyard, this immense chasm, Alan Kaprow had built a high scaffold about five storeys high, covered in black paper, cardboard and sacks. Two ladders gave access to the platform on top. High in the air, many floors above this scaffold, hung an immense dome, also covered in black.

About two hundred spectators lined the walls of this dream prison -- we were given brooms and the 'audience' began to sweep the ground, which was covered in newspapers and other litter. When all was clean, black scraps of charred paper showered down out of the sky to the accompaniment of wailing sirens and someone blowing a trumpet...we noticed a cyclist who was very slowly riding round and round and round the giant scaffold and who continued to do so all evening. An Ophelia in white began to dance, with a transistor radio held to her ear, round the scaffold that now looked like a sacrificial altar. After several circuits, she climbed up the ladder (she had pretty legs) to the platform five storeys up. Fearful noise of sirens. She was immediately followed by two photographers. Up above, Ophelia was photographed in provocative poses; only her legs were visible from below. Deluges of paper, thunder effects, howlings and screechings, and the dome began to sink slowly until it had covered Ophelia, photographers, cardboard boxes and motor-tyre. The sacrifice was at an end. A Ritual! It was a composition



using space, colour, and movement, and the setting of the happening gave it a nightmarish obsessive quality".³

This combination of acting, sound, ceremony, and colour could not exist without its performers and the audience who become a vital part of the ritual. Solidarity is established and the artist takes on the role of the shaman: leading the onlookers in the dialogue between the work and the environment.

Joseph Beuys is another artist whose work is concerned with man and his relationship with the environment. Three basic principles run through all his work: widening, unifying, and energising. "The first two are both strategy principles in the face of the positivist Western materialism that has shaped our thought and our social structures".⁴ Beuys uses drawing as a thinking form, as a language, "a way to reach areas unattainable through speech or abstract thinking alone". Through his work, he is seeking the organic whole, that is so much a part of the primitive way of life, and the freedom to see through the rigidity of the divided spectrum constructed by a society based on the values of materialistic science and advanced technology. He does not advocate a rejection of science and technology, but suggests that it should be possible for man to move through materialism, with all that he has learned, towards a more spiritual level of consciousness: a level of harmony where awareness of energies and invisible forces can be re-awakened. Essentially, his work is to do with change, with mobility, and polarities -- warm and cold, active and passive, male and female: "The androgynous state appears again and again, as an expression of totality". He uses hermaphroditic figures, active and passive elements, body and soul, life and death -- as a ritual process that re-establishes, or points out, the already

existing relationships between man and matter.

All of these artists and many more have recognised the need to change the existing social values by which we now live, and to restore a natural, integrated balance.

I cannot think of a better way to express that need than through ritual -- through performance.

Ritual is, after all, the most complete and timeless of art-forms that exist.

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