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Icons of the Person: Lacan's "Imago" in the Yemeni Male's Tribal Wedding¹

Abstract

Tribal ceremonies in North Yemen are analyzed as cultural performances in which ideal notions of the male person are constructed. It is claimed that the theme of the person is more widespread in rites of passage than has been generally assumed. Lacan's concept of the image and G. H. Mead's ideas on reflexivity are applied to the analysis of the Yemeni data, as an effort on the one hand to extend psychological theory beyond its original usage in Western society and on the other to explain why the person as a psychological construct would emerge in rites of passage.

Key words: Personhood — rites of passage — Lacan — Middle East

“When a man participates in a ritual he becomes in a way
a perfected version of himself” (RIESMAN 1977, 173)

INTRODUCTION

“PERFORMANCE” has been a key concept in folklore studies ever since Richard BAUMAN (1978) borrowed it from speech-act theory and applied it to the analysis of verbal art. My experience with the societies of the Arabian Peninsula and my study of Middle Eastern ethnographic literature has convinced me that the concept also provides the key to understanding the “constructedness” of culture. For example, Americans quickly learn that when giving greetings in Arab countries it does not suffice, as in our culture, to harbor intentions of friendliness, respect, and goodwill—one must construct these intentions into public communicative acts. For some time now I have been trying to connect, empirically and theoretically, the notion of performance as developed in folklore to the notion of personhood as developed in social psychology (CATON 1985, 1986; MEAD, 1934, 1964). This paper is a continuation of that effort, this time attempting to widen the problem by looking at initiation rituals—specifically weddings—and employing psychoanalytic (Lacanian) ideas that might be of use in explaining them. Let me begin by discussing the analysis of initiations and attempting to connect them analytically to the problem of personhood.

Arnold Van Gennep’s 1909 *Rites de Passage* delineated a nearly universal category of rituals, one that includes pregnancy and birth ceremonies, initiations, marriage celebrations, and funerals. He claimed that all such rituals deal with the passage of an individual or group from one “social situation” to another. What most intrigued later generations of anthropologists, however, was Van Gennep’s crucial observation that the individual or group passed through three phases during these rituals. In phase one the initiands are separated from the community; in phase two, when they are between social categories, they undergo or

perform transitional (also known as "liminal") rites of often fantastical nature (TURNER 1964, 1969); and in phase three they are reincorporated into the community via symbolic acts. This is an abstract schema, not necessarily adhered to strictly in each empirical case: "These three sub-categories are not developed to the same extent by all peoples or in every ceremonial pattern" (VAN GENNEP 1960, 11). Very few models rival Van Gennep's—Marcel MAUSS's *The Gift* (1967) comes immediately to mind—in its usefulness for analyzing an astonishing variety of societies.

The transition or liminal phase is almost always depicted by VAN GENNEP as taking place *outside* the person. "The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another (1960, 2-3) . . . from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another" (1960, 10). The very use of the metaphor "passage" to describe these rites suggests that the individual occupies particular locations between which he or she moves. Indeed, this notion, as VAN GENNEP was the first to emphasize (1960, 15-25), is crucial to understanding the symbolic activities present in these rites: passage through portals, across tribal boundaries, over sacrificed animals, through earthen tunnels, or, as in the ritual to be described for Yemeni tribesmen, through streets and valleys. In my view, Turner's particular contribution was to point out the obvious but too-often neglected fact that these passages take place *within* as well as outside the person. He or she is transformed by the ritual:

We are inclined, as sociologists, to reify our abstractions (it is indeed a device which helps us to understand many kinds of social interconnection) and to talk about persons "moving through structural positions in a hierarchical frame" and the like. Not so the Bemba and the Shilluk of the Sudan who see the status or condition embodied or incarnate, if you like, *in* the person. To "grow" a girl into a woman is to effect an ontological transformation; it is not merely to convey an unchanging substance from one position to another by a quasi-mechanical force. (TURNER 1967, 101-102; emphasis in the original)

The rites of passage among the Bemba or the Shilluk need not be exceptional cases, of course. Almost every investigator of passage rites acknowledges—if only tacitly—the psychological journey within the individual, while not necessarily claiming it for psychological analysis. Perhaps it is time to do so.

I believe that there is a certain cultural theme of the person that, if not universal, is at least much more common in rites of passage than has

been previously recognized. My aim in this article is not to test this hypothesis through a reanalysis of previous ethnographic studies; rather, I will present an ethnographic study of my own—an interpretation of a male wedding celebration among Yemeni tribesmen—and show how the theme of the person is relevant to it. In this way I hope to encourage interpretations of passage rites in other parts of the world along the same lines.

But this hypothesis raises a question to which this paper hopes to give at least a preliminary answer: if my claim is correct, that a cultural notion of the person is central to many, if not all, rites of passage, *why* is this theme so prevalent? The passage rites, I will argue, entail a structuring of psychological experience within the individual, a structuring that is critical to the emergence of the person in society. I want, in other words, to consider passage rites not only in cultural or symbolic terms (SCHNEIDER 1976; GEERTZ 1973), but in psychosocial terms as well (MEAD 1934, 1964; LACAN 1977a, 1977b, 1978), to see them as events that are critically connected to the construction of the person in the individual human being. To accomplish these dual ends—the cultural interpretation of passage rites in terms of the person and the explanation of this conjunction of theme and ritual in terms of a psychosocial analysis of passage rites in general—I have divided this paper into two parts, the first being a cultural interpretation of the male wedding ceremony of a Yemeni tribe and the second a theoretical explanation in light of Mead's and Lacan's theories of self-consciousness, the imago, and the body.

THE WEDDING

Folklorists of Yemeni society have long been fascinated by the country's wedding ceremony (e.g., CHELHOD 1973). One can readily understand why: vivid, richly symbolic, immensely public rituals, they are the main ceremonial event of the society, not excepting even its religious festivals. They are great fun to watch, and I try never to miss an opportunity to join these boisterous, joyous, sometimes querulous, and always clamorous affairs.

Great variations exist in the ceremony, between urban and nonurban, *sayyid* (descendant of the Prophet) and tribal, modern and traditional, male and female, northern and southern. As a result it is impossible within the confines of a single paper to speak of Yemeni wedding ceremonies either in general or *in toto*. Besides, I am most familiar with tribal wedding celebrations, particularly those for males in the eastern region of the country known as Khawlan aṭ-Ṭiyāl (when I was with the tribes, I was not permitted to participate in the female performances;

though concurrent with the male ones, they were invisible and almost inaudible to me).

The eastern, male, tribal wedding consists of a number of elaborate cultural performances that occur in a relatively fixed order:

- 1) Luncheon
- 2) Groom's *zaffah*
- 3) *Qāt* chew
- 4) Dinner
- 5) *Samrah*, or evening entertainment
- 6) *Rifd*, or gift-giving
- 7) Bride's *zaffah*
- 8) Consummation of marriage
- 9) Morning shooting match

The festivities usually last several days, building up to a crescendo on the night of consummation and then gradually subsiding. Prior to that night, a typical day runs its course through performances 1-5, with the *samrah* lasting until dawn prayers, after which the revelers sleep until noon and then start the ritual cycle (1-5) all over again. However, on the night when it is decided that the bride shall be brought to the groom's house for the consummation of the marriage, the *samrah* is interrupted by the gift-giving ceremony called the *rifd*, at which the assembled guests have the amounts of their contributions publicly disclosed and presented to the groom's family by the town crier (*dōshān*). The celebrants then resume the *samrah* until news of the bride's readiness to join the groom's household reaches the assembly, after which the men congregate outside the doorway while the women make preparations inside the house for the bride, who is to be conveyed in her own *zaffah* (procession). The *zaffah* usually takes place in the evening, with the marriage being consummated that night, though there is no public display in the form of a red cloth to signal the groom's virility and the bride's virginity. The next morning the groom takes part in a shooting match with his friends and relatives, a symbolic event deserving of a cultural interpretation beyond its obvious Freudian overtones, but which I cannot pursue in the confines of this paper.

Let me now turn to a cultural interpretation of the event known as the groom's *zaffah*, for herein lies my central concern: the complex performances that construct the male person.

THE GROOM'S ZAFFAH

The scene of the procession is for the most part the wadi flood plain (*sēlah* or *sāyilah*) lying below the village, which is usually perched on

a rocky outcrop. The flood plain is an important physical and symbolic space: it marks the entrance to the village from the outside world; it is the locale of several important ritual events (e.g., those associated with the pilgrimage to Mecca and the religious festivals held at the end of the month of Ramadan); it is where tribal disputes are mediated; and, as collector of the seasonal rains that irrigate the fields, it represents bounty and fertility (though it can also be destructive when in flood). The procession thus passes through a charged symbolic space, moving from center to periphery and back again, from profane to sacred and back again, from safety to danger and back again, and from the realm of social well-being to the world of natural bounty and back again. The sense of movement between the profane and sacred is reinforced by the route of the procession, with its point of origin and return being the groom's house and its destination being the main mosque overlooking the flood plain at another end of the village. I will have more to say about the mosque in a moment.

The arrangement and movement of the celebrants also possess symbolic import. To begin with, the *zaffah* takes the form of a rough line, at the front of which are two *muzayyins* with metal rods beating drums affixed to their waists (as far as I could tell, the most frequent drum beat is the pounding, gradually accelerating rhythm of the thrilling *bara^e* dance; see below). Directly behind the drummers are rows of tribesmen, usually not more than five abreast, who march hand-in-hand with rifles slung over their shoulders, breaking into the falsetto chants of impromptu *zāmil* poetic performances (see below) or whirling about in *bara^e* dances. Bringing up the rear of the procession is the groom, still wearing his ordinary tribal gear—though I have seen a few exceptions to this rule—accompanied on either side by close male kinsmen or friends who bear the *masharahs* (wedding bouquets; see below). He may be exuberant and joyful, but as soon as he enters the mosque and changes into his new clothing he assumes an earnest, almost grave, bearing that he will maintain for the rest of the celebration. Earlier he may fling himself into the dances or show off his marksmanship with the rest of the revelers, but after emerging from the mosque he moves in the procession as though modestly tugged in its wake; he is on the sidelines of the games being staged for his entertainment, an engrossed but inactive onlooker.

On the periphery of the procession are the adolescent males, setting off fireworks whose rapid explosions echo the staccato rhythms of the automatic rifles fired by the adults. At times the cacophony is so deafening one has to cover one's ears. A twelve- or thirteen-year-old youngster, the object of intense admiration by his younger and less accom-

plished colleagues, takes a string of firecrackers from his jacket, ignites the fuse, holds it unflinchingly at arm's length until the last possible moment before the final firecracker explodes, then nonchalantly tosses it into the air. The point of this sideshow of manliness is, of course, to discipline the body through perfect timing and control, and to exhibit nerve without betraying the least concern for danger, as though holding exploding firecrackers were as ordinary as fingering worry beads. This adolescent performance is also a parallel of the self-control that the adult males in the center of the procession demonstrate through their marksmanship at the rifle range. Through the pale blue smoke of the firecrackers and rifles can be seen the black-veiled forms of women standing on the rooftops, occasionally ululating for joy and tossing pieces of candy to the children below.

Entire social categories and their hierarchies are arrayed in this spectacle. In the center of the procession is a line of adult and mostly married men composing and chanting poetry, dancing, and shooting off their guns; in front are the servants playing music, which no tribesman could honorably perform; to the rear is the groom of liminal status since he is no longer a feckless child yet not quite a responsible adult; and in widening circles on the outside are to be found even less powerful social categories, such as the male children "playing" at being adult and the women who are the distant, though encouraging, audience of this spectacle.

Let us now take a closer look at the various cultural performances embedded within the procession.

Dancing

As noted, several men might start dancing the *bara*^c in the midst of the procession with their *jambiyyahs* (daggers) raised, the smooth and polished silvery blades flashing in the sun as their bodies lunge, sway, and turn to the servants' drum beats. The entire procession might halt temporarily to enjoy a full round of dancing and then re-form at the end to complete its progress to the mosque. Though I have on occasion joined these dances, I have never systematically analyzed them (see ADRA 1982). The following comments are thus impressionistic and speculative.

The dance begins slowly with the actors forming a straight line facing outwards towards the groom, who observes them intently but passively from the sidelines. The steps are initially performed in unison, and in some dances there is a clear leader (usually an older man) whose steps the younger men imitate, steps that may be slightly improvised but that everyone recognizes as part of a cultural style. The tempo of

the dance gradually accelerates over four distinct stages; because the steps can be somewhat intricate, the dancers require coordination, stamina, and grace.

In the final stage, which seemed to me to be also the longest, individuals begin to dance in smaller clusters, moving toward and around each other in quick, sinuous movements, the blades of their daggers coming perilously close to each other's noses. The tempo now becomes almost frenetic and the dancers begin to drop out as they find themselves unable to keep up with their partners, until finally only two are left. To me, at least, the pairing off of these two lone dancers with their daggers held upright in front of them as they twirled and lunged in feint/counter-feint gestures had distinctly martial overtones, as though they were mimicking a duel. Neither the dancers nor the audience described the *bara^c* to me in these terms (it was extremely difficult to get them to talk about dance movements in any case), but those I spoke to regarding my interpretation did not discount it either. In support of my interpretation, let me say that it is consistent with the meanings associated with *bālah* poetry: *bālah* performance too is agonistic, consisting of response and counter-response (in which the verse-line is like a weapon wielded between friendly opponents), and it ends up being dominated by one or two people. And while the excitement of the dance lies in the danger of mock combat being transformed into bloodshed, the moral lesson for the undeclared winners of the dance—as for the poetry—is to know how to keep one's self-control in the heat of the duel.

Not only does the dance allude to key virtues of tribal personhood such as courage, stamina, self-possession, and martial prowess, it also contains an obvious element of competition. It is not sufficient merely to participate in the dance to be a tribesman; one must also be prepared to engage in a contest of skill. The *bara^c* involves, after all, a process of elimination from which emerges an ideal or best dancer, and, as I will argue shortly, the ideal *gabīlī* (tribesman) as well.

Let us also not forget that these exemplars of tribal excellence are on display before the groom, who sits passively not too far away. They are doing the dance for his benefit as much as their own, and he is quietly, though intently, appreciating it. In other words, if they are icons of the ideal tribal person, they are, in relation to the groom, also indexes publicly pointing at him, as if to say that *he*, who is soon to be an adult, should strive to make himself over into the ideal they are now representing to him.

Poetry: The zāmil performance

It is customary for the guests in the wedding party to compose a

zāmīl poem in honor of the occasion, and then for the host group to respond with its own poem in the same genre. They chant the verse in a high tenor, almost a falsetto voice, which is not culturally interpreted as singing (*ghinā*)—only women and the lowly servants actually sing—but rather as a battle cry. This martial connotation of the poetic chant is congruent with the tribal ethos signalled, for example, by the rifles that everyone bears. One group of men chants the first line and the other alternates with them in delivering the second line, and in this fashion they march in the flood plain until they reach the mosque or decide to begin another poem.

Though extremely important to an appreciation of poetic form, the details of meter, rhyme, and alliteration cannot be discussed in full here (for a more complete discussion of the *zāmīl* genre, see CATON 1990). The following is the text of a wedding poem by one of the best practitioners of the art:

<p><i>lā šī zamālah y-al-garūn aṣ- ṣāmīlah gabḍ al-jamālah xēr min gabḍ al- falūs mā šī la-nā gēr al-farah f-il- manzalah w-al-ahda lāzīm minn-akum y- ahl al-arūs</i></p>	<p>If there is true companionship, O hardhorned (rams), gratitude is better than receipt of money. There's only celebration [joy] for us in the house. You must obey the oath, O people of the bride.</p>
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My first comments have to do with technique. A poem such as the one above is said to be composed of two lines, each line being divided into two hemistiches of equal or unequal length. The quantitative meter is of the type /- - - / common for this genre: two heavy syllables (where cv is considered a light syllable and any other syllable structure is heavy) followed by a light syllable and then another heavy one. The poem's rhyme scheme is ABAB, which is also typical for this genre. Noteworthy, too, is line-internal rhyme (in the sound /-ah/); this is not required in the genre, but a poem is considered superior if it incorporates line-internal rhyme as well as alliteration (of which there are some traces in the above poem, particularly in the first hemistich: the sounds š, z, and s).

Even this cursory examination of the poetic form shows how regular the sound-patterning is, a feature highly admired by tribal aficionados. One might go so far as to argue, as I have elsewhere (CATON 1990), that technical mastery of form (as indicated by regularity) evinces control over and creative use of the emotion that inspired the composition in

the first place. Such self-possession is considered by tribesmen a virtue of the mature and honorable person, whether male or female. Hence a poet through his formal mastery of the poetic idiom constructs himself as an honorable adult.

The interpretation of the lines depends upon a prior understanding of the key term *zamālah* (companionship), which has the connotation of goodwill. The poet, believing the assembly to possess the goodwill to carry the wedding plans through, proceeds to flatter that assembly with the honorific epithet “hard-horned (rams)” — an obvious metaphor of prowess — to remind them that they are honor-bound to pull the affair off without a hitch. The second part of the line “gratitude is better than receipt of money” is an allusion to the bride-wealth and the fact that the bride’s people should be thankful for getting a decent son-in-law, not just for the money he paid to marry their daughter. I do not know whether the poet is alluding in this poem to a specific disagreement between the groom’s and the bride’s people, but, since bride-wealth is often a bone of contention, he very well may be. Celebrants sometimes become anxious that the bride’s father will have a last-minute change of heart and threaten to cancel the ceremony unless he receives more money. Of course, the excuse the father (and for that matter the bride) gives for such a drastic action is that the honor of the family requires it.

The groom’s mazharah (bouquet) and his change into his wedding outfit

As was mentioned earlier, the groom’s wedding bouquets are on prominent display at the rear of the procession. While they may appear to have only decorative effect, they contain symbolic elements central to the themes of the wedding.

Almost invariably the bouquet will contain long sprigs of rue (*shadhāb*), which is admired for its redolence, vivid green coloring, and delicate yellow flowers. More important than this plant’s aesthetic qualities, however, is its reputed power in combatting misfortune and evil (perhaps this is the reason why the groom later dons the wreath of rue or sticks a sprig of it into the right side of his headdress). In some cases, I saw long branches of the acacia (*talḥ*) used in place of the rue. Whether rue or acacia, the branches are decorated with strings of *‘ubab* (an as yet unidentified fruit that has small, hard, dark red berries) as well as the larger colocynth (*ḥanḍal*) gourds, both of which are said to have medicinal powers and are therefore seen as healthful or beneficial. Other common ornaments are hard-boiled eggs and pieces of red paper impaled on the acacia branches. The eggs adhering to the branches may symbolize fertility, the cultural significance of which lies, of course, in the belief

that a man's honor and a woman's culturally interpreted role are fulfilled when the couple has many children, preferably males. The red paper may signal the blood of the virgin when she is penetrated by her husband, but this meaning also presupposes the honor of her family, since they are responsible for her chastity. The acacia branches may be iconic of male virility, but, given the fact that acacia is used in the construction of house rafters, they might have a secondary symbolic association for the couple as a metaphor for the strength and solidity of their marital home. Note that in the previous three sentences the qualifying "may" was used because of speculation on my part, for none of my consultants volunteered these interpretations.

Perhaps the most important element, displayed prominently at the center or top of the bouquet, is a photograph of the Haram Mosque in Mecca, the most sacred of shrines in Islam, which it is incumbent on every Muslim to visit at least once in his or her life. The inclusion of the picture is not, of course, surprising, for religion is supposed to guide the lives of all men and women, particularly in marriage. At the same time, like many of the other paraphernalia in the bouquet, the picture is said to bestow blessing upon the couple. May I suggest that the picture is also an index of the mosque at the end of the flood plain toward which the procession is slowly making its way and where the bridegroom will change into his wedding finery. The physical transformation involved in this change of clothes is symbolic of a metaphysical one: the groom shedding the carefreeness of his boyhood for the weightier responsibilities of adulthood. It is significant that this transformation occurs inside a mosque, and the place of his ritual transformation is made even more profound by an indexical association with the Haram Mosque in Mecca. Furthermore, through the association with the pilgrimage to Mecca, the wedding procession itself begins to take on the meaning of a pilgrimage.

Finally, an almost tragically ironic note, presumably unwittingly created by the celebrants: the entire bouquet stands in a clay pot or (more frequently these days) a Nido powdered-milk can. It is commonly assumed that Nido is better for infants than breast milk.

Being a Christian, I was not permitted into the mosque to observe the rituals pertaining to the groom's change of dress. I was only told that he prays with close family relatives, receives a few words of admonition from the Imam regarding his responsibilities, and then emerges in his new outfit into the bright light of the afternoon to the acclaim of his exuberant companions. More gun salutes and firecracker explosions follow him.

The groom is now dressed in his quintessentially tribal male garb.

His headdress is a square piece of cotton cloth, richly embroidered in colored thread, which is folded in half in the shape of a triangle, its apex hanging down the back or over a shoulder and the two ends wrapped firmly around his head. The wreath we previously mentioned may circle his brow, or, more frequently, a sprig of sweet basil may be tucked into the folds on the right side of his turban. He will have bought a new jacket for the wedding, Western-style with wide lapels, and a beautiful Pakistani shawl that is folded and draped over his left shoulder. The most desirable shawls are woven from thick wool and dyed bright pink, dark green, turquoise blue, chocolate brown, or another vivid color, with richly patterned floral and geometric motifs stitched in colored thread along the borders. On his shoulder rests a rifle, often the newest automatic Kalashnikoff, or perhaps an older "antique" model inherited from his father or grandfather. Attached to his leather belt is the Yemeni curved dagger (*jambiyyah*) with its distinctive gazelle-horn handle inlaid with old coins. Like the rifle, the dagger can be quite costly—up to several thousand dollars, depending on the material of the handle as well as the alloy and workmanship of the blade. Tied loosely around the waist and over the leather belt is a cotton sash whose ends fall over the right side. The groom's skirt or *magtab* is actually one long piece of cotton sewn into several pleats and reaching to about mid-calf. A nice pair of shoes or sandals completes the outfit.

Almost every feature of the groom's dress signals some meaning related to tribal identity. The distinctive wrap of the headdress indicates particular tribal affiliations. The sweet basil set at a jaunty angle is usually sported on Fridays, the holy day of the Muslim week, only by tribesmen on their way to or from the mosque. The rifle and dagger are not only symbolic of manhood, they are representative of a man's honor. It is appropriate that the bridegroom bear these weapons, for he is now assuming responsibility for protecting his wife, children, and lands. The workmanship and material of the scabbard, belt, and dagger are distinctive of tribal gear (as opposed to similar paraphernalia worn by the religious elite). Nor is the *magtab* without significance. It is quintessentially tribal, for the reason, as explained to me by one old-timer, that it is usually worn in battle: he added, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, that because of its short length a warrior could maneuver in it more quickly and agilely.

Clothed in his new finery, the groom rejoins the end of the procession as it leaves the mosque.

The shooting match

Like the poetic performances and the dances, the shooting match

may take place several times during the *zaffah* and recur on subsequent days of the celebration. In the course of the procession the men stop in a convenient spot facing the slopes of the nearby mountains and choose a target in the form of a tree, an oddly shaped or distinctly colored rock, or some man-made object left behind by a forgetful shepherd. The competitors then take turns shooting at the target while the groom observes quietly on the sidelines, not actively participating because of his still-liminal state.

Every guest at the wedding is expected to try his luck at target shooting—even I was handed a rifle. When I told my companions that I had never shot a gun in my life, they scoffed. Could this be true when I, as an American, came from a country with one of the most powerful armies on earth? Surely all Americans, like all Yemenis, know how to use a gun, and they pushed the gun back in my hands. Reluctantly agreeing, I lifted the rifle to my shoulder. Everyone was quietly expectant, their gaze fixed on the American who, undoubtedly an excellent shot, was bound to hit the target. I looked through the sight and to my horror saw women carrying water pots on their heads in the general direction I was expected to shoot the gun. Pleading nervousness, I laughingly explained that I was afraid I would hit one of the women. My companions laughed nervously too, thinking this a joke but not a very good one. Once again I reluctantly raised the rifle and took aim, hoping that by this time the women would be out of range. Suddenly someone pulled the rifle out of my hands and, with a voice betraying more than a little consternation, reassured me that I would have a chance to shoot some other time. Everyone, myself most of all, was secretly relieved though somewhat embarrassed.

This incident brought home to me the significance of the shooting match to the wedding celebration. It is more than simple entertainment, although it certainly is that as well. To demonstrate one's skill with a weapon is to construct for the audience one's social honor. Special guests at a wedding must be prepared to prove their mettle in this competition or they will not only lose face but embarrass their friends as well. No official winner is declared, nor are prizes awarded, but everyone knows who the best shots are and they receive the supreme accolade: the admiration of their colleagues.

YEMENI WEDDINGS' CONSTRUCTION OF THE PERSON

I originally attended the weddings in Khawlan for the enjoyment of their tribal poetry, but after a while I would go as much for the sheer richness and complexity of the ceremony itself, and particularly for the *zaffah*. After attending at least a dozen of these weddings, I began to notice

that no procession was thought to be complete without poetry, dancing, shooting, and prayer in the mosque. If one of these were missing, poetry for example, the guests seemed to be slightly sheepish, as if they had failed the bridegroom and the wedding had been a bust. Why, then, did the procession incorporate these four events? Was their inclusion arbitrary? Were they, with the exception of mosque prayer, only games played for entertainment? But their purpose could not be entirely frivolous for the simple reason that the performers seemed so earnestly competitive. Perhaps, then, they were symbolic acts in which honor was constructed, as I have been arguing in my analysis of the respective activities. This analysis is certainly plausible, but to hinge everything on the social construction of honor was somehow unsatisfying—my intuition told me that more than honor was at stake, more even than piety as in the case of mosque prayer. These were only pieces of a larger mosaic.

Let me now relate a conversation I had with a sheikh from Khawlan. I was trying to get his views on what it means to be a tribesman (*gabiḥi*), and thought it best to seek the answer not with an abstract question but with a concrete, hypothetical case. What would I have to teach my son in order for him to grow up to be a tribesman, I wondered out loud to the sheikh. "You should teach your son four things," he ventured. "How to use a rifle, the credo and rituals of Islam, how to dance, and how to compose poetry when asked to."

These are, as it were, competences that any tribesman must know in adult life. This answer requires further explication, but for the moment let us note that what is expressed here is a view of the person that accords with the very performances I have observed again and again at weddings. Could we not say that what is being constructed—indeed, perfected—in the competitive games of the *zaffah* is the male person of the Yemeni tribesman? The reason that these performances recur, that they are perceived as being integral to and necessary for the *zaffah*, and that the *zaffah* seems (to me at least) to form a kind of aesthetic-moral unity, is that all are pieces of a larger whole: the notion of personhood being constructed by the ceremony. Note too the connection between teaching a son the four competences mentioned by the sheikh and displaying perfected performances of them in the *zaffah*: the wedding thereby becomes a stage on which to display to the young, and especially to the groom, a representation of the adult person. I will develop this hypothesis further as the discussion proceeds; for now it is enough simply to mention it.

Further explication of the sheikh's remark is now in order. Two of the things that youngsters should learn would seem to be fairly trans-

parent: using a gun and being conversant with the credo and practices of Islam. Using a gun is, of course, a metonym for a whole array of aggressive and defensive postures that a man of honor must assume in everyday life, while piety is central to the tribal canon of the person (even though non-tribesmen—particularly the religious elite—would, for reasons of political self-interest, like to think and to have others believe otherwise). But what do we make of dancing and composing poetry?

What we have said of poetry does not do justice to its true role in social life. Poetry is used in war mediations to help persuade the opponent or mediator of the righteousness of one's position, as I have argued elsewhere (CATON 1990). It is also important in the ongoing dialogue of the tribe with the central state, made possible through the tape recorder and the market system (CATON 1990). Although the details of these interventions of poetry into the political lives of the tribesmen cannot concern us here, the sheikh's remark does show how poetry has become a kind of metonym for an array of *rhetorical* weapons that are connected with power. In other words, to be a poet is to be a man of power, where poetry is understood both in the sense of a specific set of aesthetic practices and the eloquence to be found in everyday speech. It is no wonder, then, that the sheikh admonishes me to teach my son poetry.

And what of dance? It is as ubiquitous as poetry, and is often an integral part of the performances of such poetic genres as the *balāh*, the *zāmil*, and others. There is dancing without poetry and poetry without dancing, but the two are simply not as separate and distinct as they have been in our culture since the Renaissance. Because dance is an essential aspect of the poetic performances composed and chanted at the dispute mediations, it can be seen to have political significance as well. If we think now of poetry-and-dance as connected media, we can see them as together constituting a metaphor for power as an essentially communicative act, to be contrasted with and complemented by power as a coercive force represented by the use and mastery of guns. Teaching my son the use of guns, then, is related to one aspect of power—physical force—whereas poetry and dance have to do with eloquence and discipline. All of these performances entail self-control, through which my son would evince one of the fundamental virtues of the tribal person.

Of course, there is no reason to assume that the sheikh's views of the person are definitive or complete. For example, he says nothing about the importance of raising a family and continuing the line of males, which we know to be important in the ideology of kinship. Yet this concept too is represented in the *zaffah* by various paraphernalia in

the groom's wedding bouquet, and is again impressed upon him inside the mosque in his conversation with the Imam. A clear difference exists, however, in the way this idea of the person and the others we have talked about get expressed at the wedding: the former is symbolized by an inert assemblage of objects or is mentioned in discourse; the latter is embodied by the tribesmen in dramatic performances. Moreover, as a result of gamesmanship in which the "best" are publicly recognized for their talent, these embodiments become *perfected* representations of one or the other virtues in question. The most accurate marksman, the wittiest poet, and the most agile and tireless dancer become perfected icons for the groom of the ideals connected with the tribal person.

Having argued that the *zaffah* is on a symbolic level the construction by the celebrants of the ideal male tribesman, can we connect this construction of the person with the presence of the groom and ask what, if anything, it does for *him*? According to my analysis à la Van Gennep, the groom is in a liminal stage during the *zaffah* (the subsequent rite of incorporation begins with the shooting match on the morning after the marriage's consummation), his liminality being signaled by the fact that he does not partake in the competitive performances and maintains a rigid comportment resembling that of a *samad* (statue) throughout the ceremonies.

If my above hypothesis is correct, can we somehow explain the connection between personhood and rites-of-passage?

JACQUES LACAN'S CONCEPT OF THE IMAGO AND RITES OF PASSAGE

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan developed a concept of the child's identification with his or her "imago" in the "mirror stage," a concept that I find useful in understanding the psychosocial dimensions of passage rites (LACAN 1977b). To avoid serious misunderstanding, let me first emphasize that by invoking this model I do not wish to suggest that tribesmen are "children." As I will argue, the imago recurs throughout life, not just childhood, though Lacan happened to work out the analysis most carefully in the earliest stage and it is this stage that has received most of the attention in psychoanalytic theory. By extending its use to adult settings, I in fact wish to contribute to the theory, not to diminish Yemeni culture.

Lacan claims that up to roughly eighteen months of age the infant has poor motor control, tends not to concentrate for very long on tasks, and is easily frustrated by its lack of physical coordination. At some point thereafter, however, the caregiver positions the infant in front of a mirror so that it can behold its reflection, and what the child sees is a gestalt—the total outline and form of its body—rather than the frag-

ments that are visible to it with its own unaided eyes. It then understands for the first time that this image represents its complete body. The child knows that it does not yet embody this gestalt concept of itself, where each limb is coordinated with the others in fluid movement, but it now avidly anticipates and works towards achieving that totality.

Some clarifications are in order. It is not necessary, of course, that the child literally confront its reflection in a mirror; in fact, it is more likely to first apprehend its gestalt image in the playful body movements of its peers or parents. It comprehends the actions of others, though, as a mirroring or miming of the movements it *ideally* should perform by itself, even if it is as yet too uncoordinated to do so. Furthermore, in the intersubjective approach of Lacan the imago is more than a simple reflection, since the child is, as it were, positioned by the caregiver in front of the mirror and thus taught to see itself in the perspective of the *other*. In other words, the child begins to identify with an image that the other has of it and holds up to it. The imago is thus an intersubjective image of self.

Lacan's analysis of the imago in the mirror stage could be reanalyzed according to a Peircean theory of signs in order to bring out the pragmatics of the construction of personhood and thereby come into alignment with the analysis in my essay. What the child sees in the mirror, its reflection, is none other than what Peirce called an icon (actually, a hypoicon), a simulacrum. Note, however, that the child holds this icon in its gaze and then understands, not that it and the imago are the same, but that the imago is a simulacrum of *itself*. Therefore, an analysis in terms of iconicity also entails an indexical relationship between the image and the child, for the child grasps the idea that the simulacrum is of its own body precisely because the mirror is contiguous to it and *points* back to the child as the "object" it stands for. That makes the imago, in Peirce's terms, an indexical icon. No matter how internalized the imago becomes as the child learns automatically to coordinate its bodily movements with the picture it has in its mind's eyes, the imago nevertheless retains its primordial indexical relationship to a social context.

Besides clarifying the nature of the pragmatic process entailed in the mirror stage, we might also clarify what seems to be downplayed in Lacan's analysis of the imago, namely that it emerges in a peculiar mode of thought called "self-consciousness." There is, of course, a tendency in Lacan to follow Freud in distinguishing unconscious from conscious thought, but within the realm of conscious thought itself not enough is made, in my view, of the distinction between consciousness on the one hand and *self*-consciousness on the other.

Here, the social psychology of George Herbert MEAD (1934, 1964) may help formulate the distinction more clearly. The Jamesian stream of consciousness entails the interpretation of the world, or the holding of attitudes toward it, for the purpose of acting or being in the world. Self-consciousness occurs in a momentary interruption of this stream of consciousness so that the ego might contemplate its own self as the object of its consciousness and ameliorate its action in the world. The Lacanian child, for example, thinks consciously when it reaches for a ball, fails to grasp it, and then reaches for it again. But if, after the mirror stage, the child can imagine and thus anticipate what its body must do in order to successfully grasp the ball, then it has achieved a level of self-consciousness that, through constant practice, may become so automatic as to be unconscious and at the same time aid the child in performing its actions with greater agility and speed.

The point is that when Lacan's child recognizes its reflection as the imago of its total body, it has crossed the boundary between consciousness and self-consciousness and in that move has acquired a sense of self. Like Lacan in his formulation of the imago in the mirror stage, Mead views self-consciousness as being dependent on an other, and his analysis of the other might be said to be even more socially informed than that of Lacan.

The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. (MEAD 1934, 138)

In brief, we might say that the imago is a part of self-consciousness.

If the child identified with its imago only in the so-called mirror stage, then the concept would have little bearing on our problem in this paper, but Lacan has suggested, if only fleetingly and incompletely, an extension of the concept to other moments in the individual's life history, including passage rites, and to societies other than modern, Western ones. In other words, the self is constituted in the individual not once and for all in the mirror stage but in countless such symbolic moments when he or she crosses the line from consciousness to self-consciousness and back again, thereby grasping imagos of the body and other aspects of the person that then become the grounding for future action in the world. It is a process of emergence through repetition, akin to what Lacan has called in another context (a discussion of the certainty achieved by Descartes in the formula *cogito ergo sum*) "ascesis," or an

attitude that must ceaselessly be reinstated from one real-world phenomenon or event to the next (LACAN 1978, 224).

Unfortunately, Lacan is frustratingly elliptical regarding the individual's identification with imagos beyond the mirror stage (except, of course, as it crops up again in the psychoanalytic process), a gap that perhaps this paper can help to rectify. In addition to the matter of looking beyond the mirror stage in the individual's life there is the problem of looking beyond Western societies in comprehending the constitution of the self. LACAN talks, for example, of “the imagos . . . whose veiled faces it is our privilege to see in outline in our daily experience and in the penumbra of symbolic efficacy” (1977b, 3), with a footnote referring to Lévi-Strauss, who compares shamanistic cure to psychoanalysis (LÉVI-STRAUSS 1967, 161–80). In another piece LACAN (1977a) again brings up the concept of the imago, this time in a discussion of violent representations of the body such as castration, evisceration, dismemberment, and so forth, which he says are

manifested in a series of social practices . . . from rites involving tattooing, incision, and circumcision in primitive societies to what, in advanced societies might be called the Procrustean arbitrariness of fashion, a relatively recent cultural innovation, in that it denies respect for the natural forms of the human body. (LACAN 1977a, 11)

Later in the same paper, after having shown that the imago is a kind of “ego ideal” (the ego having internalized normative notions communicated by the other), Lacan describes a supposedly tragic condition in Western societies where

what we are faced with, to employ the jargon that corresponds to our approaches to man's subjective needs, is the increasing absence of all those saturations of the superego and ego ideal that are realized in all kinds of organic forms in traditional societies, forms that extend from rituals of everyday intimacy to the periodical festivals in which the community manifests itself. (LACAN 1977a, 26)

One could go on piling passage on top of passage in which Lacan hints at an extension of the imago analysis to such cultural performances as passage rites, but the point is now to see how such an extension might be made to the case of Yemeni tribal male's wedding rituals.

In the spatial deployment of the groom viewing the performers' embodiments of the collective ideal self, we find a visual metaphor of the process of self-consciousness as Lacan and Mead describe it. There

is the distancing from the stream of consciousness (the everyday “I”) as represented by the groom’s position on the sidelines of the action, observing but not participating until after the marriage has been consummated. Though distant and somewhat removed from those conscious acts, the groom still has to recognize them for what they are: ideal representations of the self he is to assume in adult life. Second, this kind of thinking is dependent upon social *others* (the performers) who display to the groom imagos (indexical icons) of the person. And third, we note that the celebrants are playing games in which the ideal self is represented—the *bālah* poem is explicitly referred to as *la^cbah* (play), the dances and *zāmil* compositions are competitive, the target shooting has the aura of a contest—and of which the groom is a spectator.

Before his marriage the groom, still technically a child, participated only peripherally in these cultural performances, like the youngsters who play with the firecrackers (imitating real gunfire) or chant the refrain lines of the *bālah* poem and do not compose fresh verse (hence only echoing the war cry and not initiating it). In other words, the wedding is not the first time that the groom has become self-conscious of the imago he ought to act out in everyday life—to revert to Lacan’s formulation of ascesis in Descartes, the self emerges in countless acts of reflexive consciousness. As a boy, he has chanted in the chorus of the *bālah* given in honor of other grooms and has pondered the intricacies and potential dangers of poetic composition. He has practiced his dance steps in playful imitation of his elders and has of course received careful instruction from his father and brothers on how to use a gun. Certainly by this time he is a fully practicing Muslim. Is there anything special, then, about the self-consciousness of the young man who becomes a groom? Isn’t the wedding simply a confirmation—and yes, let us not forget that it is also a celebration—of the “me” he has already internalized?

What is different for the young man attending his own wedding is precisely that he is the groom, a part he has never played before and never will again. An initiate in a passage ritual is always unusual in this respect: he or she will only rarely repeat the performance. Even in multiple consecutive marriages there is usually the distinction between the first marriage, which is celebrated in full, and subsequent ones that are pale reflections of the initial rite and often perfunctorily marked, for the reason, I suspect, that the first marriage signifies the irrevocable end of something, usually understood as virginity or childhood. Therefore, a groom (or a bride) is self-conscious of the fact that this moment, this occasion of celebration, concerns his (or her) *own* becoming and leaving-taking, and that he (or she) possesses this moment uniquely. The self-

consciousness of the groom on the occasion of his wedding *is* special because it is more marked: he is the person toward which the icons of the self indexically point.

What is involved in the various games of the wedding celebration are symbolic gestures (the dance step, the poetic utterance, the steady arm and gaze of the marksman, the posture and attitude of prayer) that are significant precisely because they stand as the core imagos of the male tribal person shared by the other members of the tribal community. The sharedness itself has to be constituted, however, in public performances—it can never simply be taken for granted, and the groom, once he is reincorporated into the community by joining the competitive games, must *perfect* himself as a person in future weddings, in order that ideality becomes actuality in public deeds.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, let me simply recapitulate the basic argument. I have put forward a cultural interpretation of the Yemeni male tribal wedding as a construction of the person. In addition, I have suggested as a hypothesis, at this point highly tentative, that the theme of the person is more common in rites of passage than has been reported to date in the ethnographic literature.

I propose, furthermore, that there is a psychological connection between rites of passage and the emergence or construction of the person in them, a connection that can be explained by something like Lacan's notion of the imago as revised by a Peircean analysis of signs and a Meadean notion of self-consciousness. To be a person requires a reflexive act—a reflection upon the imagos of the self—necessarily carried out in communication with others. But that reflection, or what Mead calls self-consciousness, is experienced on a different plane or mode of thinking from the state of ordinary consciousness. It requires, in effect, that the ego temporarily step out of the stream of consciousness and take itself as the object of reflection, which can only be done with the help of others who communicate to the ego what that consciousness consists of. Turning now to the rite of passage, we can say that the liminal phase is experienced by the subject in a state of self-consciousness: that is, the subject must step out of the stream of everyday life through some mechanism of psychic distancing and then take his or her own person—which is really the imagos of personhood held up to the ego by fellow celebrants—as the object of reflection and eventual incorporation. To echo Paul Riesman once again, "he becomes in a way a perfected version of himself."

NOTE

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