

## The Distributed Person

### 7.1. *Mimesis and Sorcery*

I now turn to the anthropological theory of representational art, that is to say, the production, circulation, and practical use of indexes that have relevant prototypes, something that geometric patterns lack. Most Western art is of this type, and most of art-theory is about representation, in one way or another. I shall try to avoid, as far as possible, discussing Western art, tempting though it is to do so. Instead, this part of the argument pivots around the classically 'anthropological' themes of sorcery and image-worship.

The basic thesis of this work, to recapitulate, is that works of art, images, icons, and the like have to be treated, in the context of an *anthropological* theory, as person-like; that is, sources of, and targets for, social agency. In this context, image-worship has a central place, since nowhere are images more obviously treated as human persons than in the context of worship and ceremonies. In this chapter, I present a general theory of idolatry, a practice I by no means regard as more misguided than any other religious observance; and I am, I hope, capable of sustaining a sympathetic attitude towards religion in general, despite not being a religious person myself. 'Idolatry' has had a bad press since the rise to world domination of Christianity and Islam, which have both inherited the anti-imagistic strain of biblical Judaism. Christianity, encumbered with its Graeco-Roman inheritance, has had to struggle more actively with recrudescences of *de facto* 'pagan' idolatry, and has experienced cataclysmic episodes of iconoclasm; Islam has more consistently resisted the lure of image-directed forms of worship. Protestantism, the most dynamic branch of Christianity in the past few centuries, has hardly been less puritanical about idolatry than Islam, and the consciences of the Catholics have been often pricked on this account as well, so that the net result is today that 'idolatry' is a pejorative word, which anthropologists, especially ones who claim to empathize with the religious sentiments of others, are not supposed to use. But rather than resort to some vague or misleading circumlocution I prefer to call the practice of worshipping images by its true name, deeming it better to explain idolatry, rather than rechristen it—by showing that it emanates, not from stupidity or superstition, but from the same fund of sympathy which allows us to understand the human, non-artefactual, 'other' as a copresent being, endowed with awareness, intentions, and passions akin to our own.

Granted that idolatry may be so called, I still have to explain why a book ostensibly about 'art' has to devote so many pages to a topic which appears to belong to the study of religion rather than aesthetics. Those who object to my anti-aesthetics stance will regard as irrelevant the 'religious function' of images they prefer to see in a totally non-religious frame of reference, from the standpoint of aesthetic contemplation. An image viewed as a source of religious power, salvation, exaltation, is not appreciated for its 'beauty', but for quite different reasons, the proponents of 'aesthetic experiences' would argue. I regard this as fallacious on two grounds. First of all, I cannot tell between religious and aesthetic exaltation; art-lovers, it seems to me, actually do worship images in most of the relevant senses, and explain away their *de facto* idolatry by rationalizing it as aesthetic awe. Thus, to write about art at all is, in fact, to write about either religion, or the substitute for religion which those who have abandoned the outward forms of received religions content themselves with. The Protestant-Puritan heritage combined with a special form of art-theoretical casuistry have established a special form of bad faith about the 'power of images' in the contemporary Western world, as Freedberg (1989) has persuasively argued (see below). We have neutralized our idols by reclassifying them as art; but we perform obeisances before them every bit as deep as those of the most committed idolater before his wooden god—I specifically include myself in this description. Secondly, from the anthropological point of view, we have to recognize that the 'aesthetic attitude' is a specific historical product of the religious crisis of the Enlightenment and the rise of Western science, and that it has no applicability to civilizations which have not internalized the Enlightenment as we have. In India (which figures largely in the ensuing discussion) idolatry flourishes as a form of religiosity, and nobody in their right minds would try to drive a wedge between the beautiful form and religious function of venerated idols. In India aesthetics, as in the ancient world, is subsumed under the philosophy of religion, that is, moral philosophy, as a matter of course. Consequently, it is only from a very parochial (blinker) Western post-Enlightenment point of view that the separation between the beautiful and the holy, between religious experience and aesthetic experience, arises. Since this is so, the anthropologist writing about art inevitably contributes to the anthropology of religion, because the religious is—in some contexts, though not all—prior to the artistic.

Idols come in many varieties, but it is conventional to distinguish two polar types; (i) purely 'aniconic' idols, such as the *baitulia* (black meteoritic stones) worshipped in ancient Greece, versus (ii) 'iconic' idols, that is, indexes physically resembling a prototype, usually a human being, according to the formula  $[[\text{Prototype-A} \rightarrow [\text{Artist-A}]] \rightarrow \text{Index-P}]$ , where the prototype is the god, whose 'likeness' is mediated by the artist. However, before starting, it may be as well to clarify our reasons for not paying very much attention to this distinction. All idols, I think, are 'iconic'—including the so-called aniconic ones—whether

or not they look like some familiar object, such as a human body. An aniconic idol is a 'realistic' representation of a god who either has no form (anywhere), or has an 'arbitrary' form, in the particular 'body' he inhabits for the purposes of being worshipped by his mortal devotees, here below. A meteoritic stone is not a very, very, conventionalized or distorted 'portrait' of a god, who, elsewhere, looks like a human being. One need not imagine that worshippers of stones would 'prefer' to worship more realistic portrayals of their gods, but have to make do with unshaped stones for lack of any local stone-carvers of the necessary ability. For such worshippers, the meteoritic stone is an index of the god's spatio-temporal presence (and origins, in that the stone fell to earth from heaven). The stone is a 'representative' of the god, like an ambassador, rather than a visual icon. Just as an ambassador can represent his country in Moscow one year, and the following year in Washington, the stone represents the god at whatever spatial coordinates it happens to be; and it is movable. One such 'black stone' for instance, worshipped in Arabia as Cybele, was conveyed with great ceremony to Rome, where it was installed into a cavity within the idol of Magna Mater Idea, the goddess of members of the Imperial élite who favoured an 'internationalist' religious outlook (Dumézil 1980; on the significance of such transactions, see below). The ideas of 'representing' (like a picture) and 'representing' (like an ambassador) are distinct, but none the less linked. An ambassador is a spatio-temporally detached fragment of his nation, who travels abroad and with whom foreigners can speak, 'as if' they were speaking to his national government. Although ambassadors are real persons, they are also 'fictions', like pictures, and their embassies are fictional mini-states within the state; just as pictures show us landscapes and personages who are 'not really there'. Although the Chinese ambassador in London does not look like China, or the Chinese government or people, he does *have to be visible*, and he does *visibly represent* China on official occasions. He does not look like China, but in London, China looks like him.

One could not contrast a 'realistic' iconic ambassador to an 'unrealistic', aniconic ambassador, and no more, perhaps, should one contrast 'realistic' idols, to unrealistic, aniconic idols. Whatever the idol looks like, that, in context, is what the god looks like, so all idols are equally realistic, because the idol-form is the visual form of the god made present in the idol. The contrast is not between idols which resemble human beings to a greater or lesser degree, but between gods who in idol-form (visually) resemble human beings to a greater or lesser degree. Idols, in other words, are not depictions, not portraits, but (artefactual) *bodies*. The formula cited above then [[Prototype-A → [Artist-A]] → Index-P does not necessarily imply 'realistic' (i.e. anthropomorphic) depiction of the prototype by the artist in the form of the image. When such a formula is applied to portraiture, this implication exists, because there is a living model for the portrait, and fidelity to this living model is the social objective of portraiture. But in the context of idolatry, the agency involved is

religious. Where an idol is an artefact (rather than a natural object, such as a meteoritic stone), the nature of agency exerted by the prototype is to cause the artist to produce a *religiously stipulated* image according to the conventions for such images, which may be iconic/anthropomorphic or abstract and aniconic. In either case, the artist has to produce a 'faithful' rendition of the features of the accepted image of the body of the god, triggering 'recognition' of the god among his worshippers.

To assert that in the context of idolatry, the idol is not a 'depiction' of the god, but the body of the god in artefact-form is all very well, but I accept that any such assertion constitutes a paradox, and I must labour hard to dispel the puzzlement it must inevitably produce in the mind of any reasonable person. The mystery of the animation of idols, their genuine, if peculiar, personhood, has to be approached, like any difficult problem, via a series of incremental steps, not to mention detours through some unfamiliar territory. Rather than deal with idolatry in its most elaborated form, I shall introduce the subject by presenting an analysis of volt sorcery (*envoutement*)—the practice of inflicting harm on others via their images. This is a particularly pertinent case of agency mediated via representational indexes, and it has the advantage of removing the discussion, temporarily, from the sphere of 'religion proper', which involves the always problematic question of other-worldly entities such as gods. Volt sorcery takes place in this world and without the necessity for other-worldly divine or diabolic intervention, though it may be sought. As we will be able to observe, there is actually a smooth transition between this-worldly volt sorcery and religious image-worship orientated towards other-worldly beings. This will be explained in due course.

## 7.2. The Mimetic Faculty

Frazer, rather than Tylor, is the ancestral figure who presides over this discussion. Frazer, it will be recalled, distinguished two basic modes of 'magical' action; (i) contagious magic, the magic of contact, in which influence passes from one object to another, and (ii) sympathetic magic, which depends on shared properties, that is, if object A shares properties with object B, A has influence over B or vice versa. The Frazerian idea of 'imitative' sympathetic magic has had an enormous influence on aesthetics and the philosophy of art in the course of this century. Via Benjamin and Adorno, this influence seems set to continue; Taussig (1993) in a most exciting recent book, whose primary inspiration comes from Benjamin, has this to say about Frazer:

I am particularly taken by [Frazer's] proposition that the principle underlying the imitative component of sympathetic magic is that 'the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it'. (52) Leaving aside for the moment the thorny issue of how and with what success Frazer could put himself into the head of one of these magicians, and to what degree either the accuracy or usefulness of his

proposition depends on such a move, I want to dwell on *this notion of the copy, in magical practice, affecting the original to such a degree that the representation shares in or acquires the properties of the represented*. To me this is a disturbing notion, foreign and fascinating not because it so flagrantly contradicts the world about me but rather, that once posited, I suspect if not its presence, then intimations thereof, in the strangely familiar commonplace and unconscious habits of representation in the world about me. (Taussig 1993: 47–8)

Following Benjamin, Taussig bases his analysis of mimesis in the colonial milieu (of the Cuna Indians) on a supposed 'mimetic faculty'. Benjamin thought that the mimetic faculty, which in modern times has resulted in a world filled to overflowing with images and simulacra, so that nothing seems real any more, had its origin in a primitive compulsion to imitate, and thus gain access, to the world:

[Man's] gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role. (1933; cited in Taussig 1993: 19)

Taussig's book bears witness to the productivity of Frazer's idea mediated through Benjamin's surrealist imagination, but it is fair to say that the 'mimetic faculty' is only rather vaguely delineated. The fact that so much human behaviour is imitative does not necessarily imply the existence of a 'faculty' inherited from the distant past. Almost all learned behaviour could be described as imitative, in that it is based on the imitation of an internalized model. Mimesis, narrowly defined, involves the actual production of images (indexes) whose salient property is prototype, via resemblance to the original, and within this category artefacts, having visual resemblance to the originals, can be accorded a separate status.

What Frazer never explained is why the mutual resemblance of the image and the original should be a conduit for mutual influence or agency. He attributed it to a mistaken hypothesis, akin to a scientific theory, but grounded in error. The trouble is that if the practitioners of sympathetic magic could have seen their practices as Frazer saw them, they would never have engaged in them in the first place. By abstracting a generalizable 'principle' from the inchoate world of practice, Frazer guaranteed his eventual misunderstanding of the data he had at his disposal. Taussig, in his Benjaminesque reanalysis, argues that the basis of sympathetic magic is not a tragic misunderstanding of the nature of physical causality, but a consequence of epistemic awareness itself. To see (or to know) is to be sensuously filled with that which is perceived, yielding to it, mirroring it—and hence imitating it bodily (ibid. 45) (see above in 'Captivation', Sect. 5.2). But for the moment I will approach the sympathetic magic problem from a different direction.

Frazer's intellectualism treated magic as a form of mistaken causal thinking. Anti-Frazerians, ever since, have criticized Frazer for attributing 'causal'

intentions to behaviours which were symbolic or expressive (Beattie 1966). There is another approach, though, which can be adopted, which is not to condemn Frazer for having invoked causality at all (because magic is, after all, intended to cause things to happen) but to rethink the idea of 'cause'. Frazer's mistake was to impose a pseudo-scientific notion of physical cause and effect (encompassing the entire universe) on practices which depend on intentionality and purpose, which is precisely what is missing from scientific determinism. Magic is possible because *intentions cause events to happen in the vicinity of agents*, but this is a different species of causation from the kind of causation involved in the rising and setting of the sun, or the falling of Newton's apple etc. For instance: here before me is this boiled egg. What has caused this egg to be boiled? Clearly, there are two quite different answers to this—(i) because it was heated in a saucepan of water over a gas-flame, or (ii) because I, off my own bat, chose to bestir myself, take the egg from its box, fill the saucepan, light the gas, and boil the egg, because I wanted breakfast. From any practical point of view, type-(ii) 'causes' of eggs being boiled are infinitely more salient than type-(i) causes. If there were no breakfast-desiring agents like me about, there would be no hens' eggs (except in the South-East Asian jungle), no saucepans, no gas appliances, and the whole egg-boiling phenomenon would never transpire and never need to be physically explained. So, whatever the verdict of physics, the real *causal explanation* for why there are any boiled eggs is that I, and other breakfasters, *intend* that boiled eggs should exist.

There is nothing mystical involved in tracing the causation of events in one's vicinity to intentions or acts of willing or wishing performed by oneself or other agents in one's neighbourhood. That is how perfectly ordinary events do ordinarily happen—barring 'accidents', and who is ever to know that an accident has not been willed by somebody? Frazer's mistake was, so to speak, to imagine that magicians had some non-standard physical theory, whereas the truth is that 'magic' is what you have when you *do without* a physical theory on the grounds of its redundancy, relying on the idea, which is perfectly practicable, that the explanation of any given event (especially if socially salient) is that it is caused intentionally.

The causal arrow between desire and accomplishment reflects the practical fact that the more one desires something to happen, the more likely it is to happen (though it still may not). Magic registers and publicizes the strength of desire, increasing the (inductively supported) likelihood that the much-desired, emphatically expressed, outcome will transpire, as frequently happens with respect to those outcomes we loudly clamour for. 'All events happen because they are intended'—'I emphatically intend that X shall happen' *ergo* 'X shall come to pass'. This is not 'confused' physics, nor is it devoid of a basis in social experience, as Malinowski (1935) understood more clearly than any of his successors, with the possible exception of Tambiah (1985).



occult principles (or symbolic rituals) is quite misleading. There is nothing transcendental about the kind of causality involved in exuviae sorcery, though often sorcerers may enlist spiritual helpers in pursuing the objects of their hatred. Exuviae sorcery works (or seems likely to work) because of the intimate causal nexus between exuviae and the person responsible for them. These exuviae do not stand metonymically for the victim; they are physically detached fragments of the victim's 'distributed personhood'—that is, personhood distributed in the milieu, beyond the body-boundary.

The interest of exuviae sorcery, from our point of view, is that it forges a direct link between the index as an image of the prototype, and the index as a (detached) *part* of the prototype. We are not accustomed to think of images (such as portraits, etc.) as parts of persons, limbs, as it were. In terms of the semiotic theory of representation, nothing would be more erroneous than to imagine that the substance of a sign (the visible or audible sign 'dog') were part of any dog, or dogs in general. But with indexes it is not the same as with proper signs. Abduction from an index does characteristically involve positing a substantive part-whole (or part-part) relation. Smoke is a kind of 'part' of fire, for instance. A person's smile (the cheshire cat excepted) is a part of the friendly person it betokens. From this point of view, it is not senseless to suppose that Constable's picture of Salisbury cathedral is a part of Salisbury cathedral. It is, what we would call, a 'spin-off' of Salisbury cathedral.

#### 7.4. *The Epicurean Theory of 'Flying Simulacra' as Parts of the Body*

The convergence between images of things and parts of things can be approached from a philosophical angle. Yrjö Hirn (1900, cited by Frazer 1980 and discussed also by Taussig 1993: 51) made the suggestion that the magic of similarity and the magic of contact were really one and the same, because 'primitive' people anticipated, in their confusion, the philosophical doctrine of 'emanations'. Hirn writes:

For it is evident that a philosophical doctrine, if it fits in with the facts of primitive superstition, may be explanatory of those vague and latent notions which, without logical justification or systematic arrangement, lie in the mind of the magician and the idolater. Such a doctrine is presented to us in the familiar emanation-theories, according to which every image of a thing constitutes a concrete part of that thing itself. According to the clear and systematic statement of this doctrine given by the old Epicurean philosophers [*I will provide the relevant quotation from Lucretius below*] shadows, reflections in a mirror, visions, and even mental representations of distant objects, are all caused by thin membranes, which continually detach themselves from the surfaces of all bodies and move onwards in all directions through space. If there are such things as necessary misconceptions, this is certainly one. Such general facts of sensuous experience as reflection, shadow, and mirage will naturally appear as the result of a purely

material decortication—as in a transfer picture. How near at hand this theory may lie even to the modern mind appears from the curious fact that such a man as Balzac fell back on it when attempting to explain the newly invented Daguerrotype, that most marvellous of image-phenomena. (Hirn 1900: 293–4; cf. on photographs as indexes of the real presence of persons, Barthes 1981 cited and discussed in Freedberg 1989: ch. 15)

The doctrine of emanations comes directly from Epicurus, but the most famous, and for my purposes the most interesting, statement of the doctrine is provided by Lucretius, who writes:

I will attempt to lay before you a truth which most concerns . . . the existence of most things we call the idols [*simulacra*; in Greek, *eidola*] of things: these, like films peeled off from the surface of things, fly to and fro through the air . . . I say then that pictures of things and thin shapes are emitted from things off their surface, to which an image serves as a kind of film, or name it if you like a rind, because such image bears an appearance and form like to the thing whatever it is from whose body it is shed and wanders forth. This you may learn however dull of apprehension from what follows. [Many visible objects], . . . emit bodies some in a state of loose diffusion, like smoke which logs of oak, heat and fires emit; some of a closer and denser texture, like the gossamer coats which at times cicades doff in summer, and the films which calves at their birth cast from the surface of their body, as well as the vesture which the slippery serpent puts off among the thorns; for often we see the brambles enriched with their flying spoils: since these cases occur, a thin image likewise must be emitted from things off their surface. (*De Rerum Natura* 4: 26 ff. trans. Munro, pp. 44–5)

Lucretius attributes the flying simulacra of things to a kind of internal jostling within objects, which causes the minute bodies 'in the front rank' to be discharged from the surface and to fly outwards. The simulacra are physical things though, and we see objects because simulacra enter our eyes and we can *feel* them 'since a particular figure felt by the hands in the dark is known to be the same which is seen by the bright light of day, touch and sight must be excited by quite similar causes'. Lucretius discusses a number of optical phenomena, notably images reflected by mirrors, but most interesting, perhaps, is the way in which he consistently draws analogies between vision by means of 'idols' and other physical forms of diffusion into the ambience, particularly smell and smoke, as well as the shedding of skins, rinds, and films from the surfaces of things. I shall have occasion, later, to return to the conceptual linkage between smoke, smell, skins, and visual appearances, which Küchler has identified as key elements in the ideology associated with a particularly well-known Melanesian art form, the Malangan carvings from northern New Britain (see below, Sect. 9.2). For the moment, though, I am interested in Hirn's point that if 'appearances' of things are material parts of things, then the kind of leverage which one obtains over a person or thing by having access to their image is comparable, or really identical, to the leverage which can be obtained by having access to some physical part of them; especially if we introduce the

notion that persons may be 'distributed', i.e. all their 'parts' are not physically attached, but are distributed around the ambience, like the discarded 'gossamer coats of cicadas' in Lucretius' memorable instance, which are both images and parts of the living creature.

### 7.5. From Sorcery to the Cult of Images

I turn now to an ethnographic example which provides a bridge between volt sorcery, surely a discreditable practice, and the worship of images in the religious context. Volt sorcery provides a model for understanding the worship of images in general—indeed for 'objectification' in religious contexts generally. The material—and the idea—comes from Alain Babadzan's remarkable reanalysis of the religious practices of ancient Tahiti, and the deployment of images therein.

It may have been noticed that the victim of volt sorcery is involved in an involuntary process of *exchange*. This arises naturally from the fact that he appears twice in the formula, once as the contributor of something (his appearance) and once as the recipient of something (injuries matching those suffered by the volt, the index). He is an 'involuntary' agent; voluntary agency lies with the sorcerer—who may, of course, have been justifiably provoked.

The originality of Babadzan's account of Polynesian sorcery and idolatry arises from the subtle way in which he has observed both of these were variations on the well-known, but often tantalizing, explanation of the process of exchange provided by Ranapiri, the Maori intellectual, to Elsdon Best (cf. Mauss 1954; Sahlin 1974).

I will now speak of the *hau*, and the ceremony of *whangai hau*. That *hau* is not the *hau* (wind) that blows—not at all. I will carefully explain to you. Suppose that you possess a certain article, and that you give that article to me, without price. We make no bargain over it. Now, I give that article to a third person, who, after some time has elapsed, decides to make some return for it, and so he makes me a present of some article. Now, that article he gives me is the *hau* of the article I first received from you and then gave to him. The goods that I received for that item I must hand over to you. It would not be right for me to keep such goods for myself, whether they be desirable items or otherwise. I must hand them over to you, because they are a *hau* of the article you gave me . . .

I will explain something to you about the forest *hau*. The *mauri* was placed or implanted in the forest by the *tohunga*. It is the *mauri* that causes birds to be abundant in the forest, that they be slain and taken by man. These birds are the property of, belong to, the *mauri* . . . Hence it is said that offerings should be made to the *hau* of the forest. The *tohunga* (priests, adepts) eat the offering because the *mauri* is theirs: it was they who located it in the forest, who caused it to be. That is why some of the birds cooked at the sacred fire are set apart to be eaten by the priests only, in order that the *hau* of the forest-products, and the *mauri*, may return again to the forest—that is, to the *mauri*. (Best 1909: 439)

Babadzan explains that the exchange process described in Ranapiri's text involves three participants, the priests (*tohunga*), the '*hau* of the forest', and the hunters. The '*hau* of the forest' can be glossed as the 'principle of increase' in the forest; its fertility in other words. The priests make offerings of *mauri* to the *hau* of the forest. The *hau* of the forest responds by providing the hunters with birds to capture. A portion of these birds must be returned to the priests. The offering made by the priests and referred to as *mauri* are 'fertility stones'. The *mauri* forge the link between Ranapiri's famous text and our theme in this chapter, for *mauri* are *aniconic idols*. They are indexes, in other words: they are objectified repositories of the spirit (of increase) of the forest. They might just be special stones, but Best also tells us that sometimes they took the form of 'a hollow stone, in which hollow would be placed a lock of hair or some other item. These articles would be deposited at the base of a tree, or hidden in a hole, or by the side of a tree' (ibid. 438). Another form of *mauri* was created by immuring a (living) lizard within a hollow tree beside a bird-snaring site (ibid. 437). The significance of the *hollowness* of *mauri* idols will emerge in due course (below, Sect. 7.11).

Let us return to Babadzan's exposition of the ritual sequence, in which, in exchange for the birds they captured in the forest, Maori hunters were obliged to recompense the priests (*tohunga*) with a portion of the game they secured.

The magic stones and the birds the hunters capture are thus, ritually, one and the same thing, one and the same *toanga* (gift) that the priests 'give' to the hunters, via the intermediary agency of the forest. (Babadzan 1993: 64, my trans.)

In other words, the forest is *obliged* to give birds to the hunters, because its life, its capacity to manifest productivity and fertility, is not its own; it has been placed there by the priests. 'The *hau* of the forest, which meanwhile is, in Maori theory, the very principle of the productivity of the forest, is *thus considered as the passive agent in a transmission of which the priests are the prime movers*' (ibid., italics in original, my translation). But there is a paradox here. How can a forest, or anything else for that matter, be a 'passive agent'—in a sense, this is a contradiction in terms, as passivity is defined as the absence of agency, and vice versa. What is meant is that the forest is passive in relation to the priests, the prime movers, but not that it has no intrinsic agency at all. There can only be a *mauri* of the forest, a physical objectification of the productivity of the forest, because the forest is (potentially) productive in itself; it is this 'agency' which has been co-opted by the agency of the priests.

The fundamental similarity between the situation just described and volt sorcery will perhaps be beginning to show itself: the *mauri* (objectified fertility) created by the priests and buried in the forest is both a representation of the productivity of the forest (*ex ante*) and a cause of the forest being fertile (*ex post*). Because *ex ante* fertility can be represented—i.e. objectified in an index—it comes under the control of those who control the index, the priests. The

priests, in other words, make an index of the productivity of the forest and that makes the forest productive. They are rewarded by the hunters, who receive from the forest the fruit of its productivity, and who return it to the priests. The magic, so to speak, just *has* to work, because the index of productivity is caused by the productivity it causes; there is a perfect, but invisible, circularity. The objectification of the productivity of the forest differs from volt sorcery, of course, in one essential respect, namely, that the *mauri* represents the forest as prosperous and flourishing, whereas the volt represents the sorcery victim as injured, or even dead. But the mechanics are the same; the priests make the forest flourish by representing it as flourishing; on the other hand, the very same objectification could be used to injure and kill the forest, were it subjected to abuse. In fact, if enemies managed to find the *mauri* of the forest, they would destroy its effectiveness by reciting productivity-negating chants over it, bringing death to the owners, for now these same *mauri* would objectify misery, and cause it. This is the equivalent of sticking pins into a volt to injure the victim represented as injured.

What is most interesting of all to note, though, in this connection (Babadzan 1993: 61) is that *hau* (fertility-principle) objectified in the *mauri*, is also the word used to refer to the exuviae used by a sorcerer to ensorcell his victim (citing Tregear 1891: 52). We now see why hollow *mauri* had 'locks of hair' placed inside them. Babadzan suggests a most satisfactory explanation of the synonymy between sorcery exuviae and the principle of fertility: both involve *growth*. Exuviae are parts of the body which have grown and become separate; this particularly applies to hair and nail-clippings; indeed, where adults are concerned, these are the most obvious manifestations of growth that the human body provides; and even if hair remains uncut, it still falls out and separates itself. Exuviae represent 'growth' because they are, so to speak, continually 'harvested' from the living body. Just as we harvest our *hau*, whenever we have a haircut, so when the hunters enter the forest to 'harvest' the birds there, they are harvesting the exuviae (*hau*) of the forest.

Exuviae sorcery is possible because of the fact that as the body grows, it sheds its parts, and these become distributed around the ambience. Here one may recall the remarkable resonance between Lucretius' instancing the skins shed by snakes and cicadas as prototypical simulacra or 'idols'; for these are, precisely, exuviae produced by growth and distributed around. In fact, the Epicurean theory saw the generation of simulacra as a 'growth' process—the 'shedding' of ephemeral skins from all things induced by a kind of 'pushing' from within.

The *mauri*, in its guise as a fertility stone rather than as an item of human exuviae, objectifies the growth of the forest because it is, conceptually, something produced by that growth; it is the exuviae of the forest, which falls into the hands of the priests, who use it in the 'white' magic of prosperity-induction rather than the black magic of sorcery and dearth-induction.

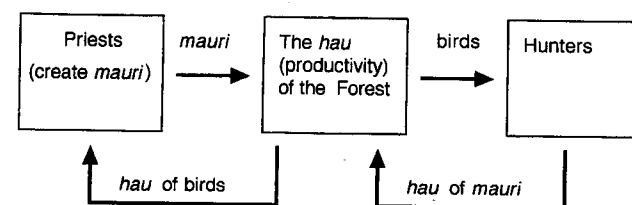


FIG. 7.5/1. The circularity of productive exchanges between index (*mauri*) and prototype (*hau*) after Babadzan 1993

Physically speaking, *mauri* fertility stones could take a variety of forms, as we have seen. Forest *mauri* were aniconic, but those used to promote the growth of sweet potatoes were carved as anthropomorphic images with open mouths, sometimes with their hands in a position suggesting the placing of food in the mouth. Ensuring that the people ate, they were shown eating—and they were of course fed themselves, with offerings of first-fruits and so on. Fig. 7.5/1 is a version of the figure Babadzan provides to summarize his general argument.

#### 7.6. Decortication and the Exchange of Indexes: Tahitian To'o

The Tahitian equivalent of the Maori *mauri* stone took a variety of forms also. The productivity of fisheries was controlled by a type of *ti'i* (*tiki* = 'image') called *puna*. These 'fish' stones were elongated, like fish, and certain examples have fish-like gill slits on them. There are descriptions of the rituals associated with *puna* which make it clear that their use was entirely analogous to *mauri*. For agricultural purposes, Babadzan convincingly argues, a different type of stone was used, carved with anthropomorphic features, like the anthropomorphic *mauri* buried in sweet-potato fields in New Zealand (ibid. 75–82). These growth stones were actually believed to grow, though only very slowly. Not much documentation that is relevant to agricultural rites in Tahiti has unfortunately survived, but it is safe to say that increase-rituals comparable to the much better documented Maori ones were practised there (ethnohistorically, Maori civilization and language have antecedents in the Society Islands, of which Tahiti is the most important). Perhaps the most important point to bear in mind is that the Tahitian word *tupu*, which basically means 'growth' also means, like *hau*, exuviae, usable for sorcery purposes. *Tupu* is the Tahitian equivalent of *hau*, in other words.

The interest of the Tahitian material discussed by Babadzan lies in a different direction than the mere replication of the Maori pattern of agricultural rites and the concepts of *hau*, *mauri*, etc. Maori society was effectively decentralized throughout, but in ancient Tahiti there was a proto-state with a centralized cult, the cult of Oro. Consequently, in relation to the Tahitian material, we are able, as it were, to pass from volt sorcery (a private affair) to public worship of the most majestic and awe-inspiring variety, involving the state god, the 'god of power', Oro.



FIG. 7.6/1. *Ti'i* in its benign form as a volcanic growth stone. Source: after Pierre volcanique 30 cm., Society Islands. Musée de l'Homme, Paris

Unlike *ti'i* images (see Fig. 7.6/1)—such as fish stones and anthropomorphic carvings, used in agriculture and sorcery—the objects at the centre of the Oro cult, and the cults of lesser gods, ancestors of important kin-groups, were not anthropomorphic, though they were (in a sense) representational, and they went by a different name, *to'o*. The word *to'o* means a 'prop' or staff or pillar. The *to'o* represent, mythologically, the pillar placed by the creator god to hold up the sky and preserve the *ao* (the world of light and of human life) from the encompassing powers of night, darkness, and divinity (the *po*). It is a moot point whether the *to'o* deserve to be considered representational (iconic) or non-representational (aniconic). As elongated billets of wood, slightly thicker at one end than at the other, they might be regarded as 'realistic representations' of pillars or props, which is what they are called. One could call them 'iconic' indexes of pillars, in that they refer to the mythological pillars which hold up the sky without actually being these pillars. On the other hand, they represent, aniconically, gods who have anthropomorphic attributes. Oro was not a pillar, as such. Rather, as the pillar which keeps heaven and earth apart—and thus connects them—the *to'o* is invested with the god's presence by virtue of contiguity rather than resemblance. Babadzan himself suggests that the *to'o* is formless because the god presides over the origination of everything that possesses form; as the giver of forms to all things, the god is himself formless. This deduction is well supported in the Tahitian creation chants (Henry 1928; cf. Gell 1993: 124 ff.). In this case, the *to'o* is again an iconic image, a formless image or formlessness, or all things *in statu nascendi*. Here, it seems to me that the supposed contrast between iconic and aniconic representation comprehensively breaks down. The *to'o* are wholly iconic and wholly aniconic at the same time. What is quite inarguable though is that they have a prototype, and that their prototype is the person of the god. They are also, like the humblest volt, open to manipulation by human beings. Through them, Oro himself, the mightiest being in the Tahitian universe, could be rendered a 'passive agent'

via representation, just like the forest *hau* in the previous example, or the passive victim of volt sorcery.

Pursuing this theme, we are able to discover that the primary ritual procedure in which the *to'o* were involved, was a ritual of *decortication*, of the controlled production of divine exuviae. Following Babadzan's analysis of the existing sources, I will now describe this ritual sequence.

The primary *to'o* were embodiments of Oro. The Tahitian political system revolved around asserting control over the *marae* (temples) of Oro; whoever controlled the *to'o*, controlled the country, and rival chiefs fought bitterly over them. The important *to'o* stood at the pinnacle, so to speak, of a polity of images, and social rank among human beings was strictly and precisely correlated with the 'rank' of the *to'o* (and lower down the scale, *ti'i*, 'sorcery idols') in their charge. Social rank and political power were given regular and formal expression at a ritual called *pa'iatua*, which, translated, means the 'wrapping of the gods' (*pa'i* = wrap up, tie, bundle). (On wrapping in general see Gell 1993.)

Only during this ritual were *to'o* revealed to view, and even then, only to the most important and ritually protected priests and chiefs; the sight of a *to'o* would instantly result in the death of a lesser person, so filled were they with *mana* (a quality called *ra'a* in Tahitian). To protect them from view, *to'o* were at all other times tightly wrapped in bindings of sennit cordage and tapa bark-cloth, sometimes with roughly delineated facial features and limbs woven onto the outside (Fig. 7.6/2). The more important ones were kept in special containers for storage and transport. The ritual of *pa'iatua* consisted of the assembly of all the images in a district at the *marae*, for the purpose of the renewal of their outer wrappings, especially the outer wrapping of the primary *to'o* of Oro.

I need not describe the ceremony in any detail. Essentially, it consisted of a procession of the gods into the *marae*, led by the main god (completely hidden in its ark), with the lesser ones following in order of precedence, followed (and protected) by 'sorcerers' bearing not *to'o*, but *ti'i*, sorcery images (Fig. 7.6/3). Lesser gods and *ti'i* 'sorcery' images, Ellis tells us (and there is a sole surviving example in the British Museum to back this up) were not in the aniconic 'pillar' style, but were hollow anthropomorphic images, with an internal cavity for holding sacred feathers and/or sorcery exuviae (Ellis 1831: i. 339). All would assemble in and around the *marae*, according to their station. In a separate sanctuary, well away from public view, the *to'o* would be divested of their wrappings, oiled, and laid out in the sun. There then ensued an important exchange sequence.

The most symbolically significant 'currency' of political authority in Tahiti took the form of the feathers, the most important being red ones. Wearing red feathers was a sumptuary privilege of the highest chiefs, the *maro ura* (red feather girdle) was synonymous with occupancy of the paramount chiefship.

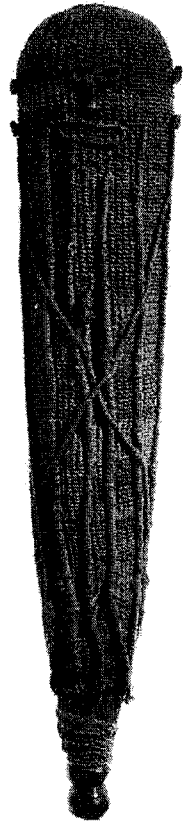


FIG. 7.6/2. *To'o* with Oro the god hidden from view and wrapped in bindings. Source: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, Z 6067

Feathers, needless to say, are the exuviae of birds, and birds have, everywhere in Polynesia (as so often elsewhere) heavenly associations. Red feathers are probably also associated with blood, another exuvial substance and index of life, growth, and reproductivity.<sup>1</sup> Oro was particularly associated with both feathers and redness. The primary act of homage to Oro was the presentation to him of red feathers, which would be woven into his sennit wrapping, attached to it by cords, or simply wrapped inside the covering.

<sup>1</sup> In Samoa the red feathers woven into the most prestigious fine mats forming chiefly dowries were associated with the hymeneal blood of the virgin *taupou*, the predestined reproducer of chiefly power.



FIG. 7.6/3. Sorcery *ti'i* with hollow back for feathers/exuviae. Source: The British Museum, London, MM029679

When all were seated, the high priest opened the ark and took out the dreaded image, and as he uncovered it upon the mat, the others all uncovered theirs in unison . . . The minor gods then exposed, with their wrappers folded under them, remained in the hands of their owners, facing the '*ava'a*' ready for presentation to the tutelar god [i.e. Oro] . . . When the image of the tutelar god was revealed from the profusion of red and yellow feathers lying upon its many coverings . . . Then followed the presentation of the minor gods by their owners in their proper turns, with offerings of new *ura* [red feather] amulets and loose feathers, which were given through the high priest to the tutelar god in exchange for some in his possession [i.e. which had just been unwrapped from the sennit wrapper of Oro]. This act was called *taritoara'a-atua* (the god's exchange) and was supposed to add new power from the greater god to the lesser ones. The fishermen's gods were presented last because they were from the sea. (Henry 1928: 166–7)

Babadzan provides the following schema of the feather exchange: new, non-sacred feathers passed from the lesser priests to the priests of the primary *to'o* (the 'main' Oro) and the feathers which had previously been in contact with the primary *to'o* were passed back to the inferior *to'o*. In this way a portion of the sanctity of the primary *to'o* was distributed to the assembly of lesser *to'o* in exchange for a tribute paid in the form of new feathers, a 'natural' product, as it were, potentially embodying power and fertility, but not yet able to generate it. Only feathers which, as Babadzan notes, had been intimately in contact with the primary image of Oro *for some time*, had this generative property (1993: 116). The feathers had to live and die with the god, quite literally, because it seems that to become divine exuviae, the primary god has to 'die' and scatter exuviae back into the world. This, Babadzan thinks, is the significance of the sequence as a whole, that is to say the unwrapping of the gods followed by wrapping them up again. Unwrapping brings the god into the world, wrapping him up again sends the god back to the nether world, the *po*. But because the god has died but left something behind (his feathers, his exuviae *tupu*) the power of the god is also left behind—in the hands of the chiefs and the priests of Oro. This inference is based on the fact that the Tahitian mortuary ritual for high chiefs involved the drying of the corpse in the sun, on a platform, followed by wrapping (binding) and decoration with red feathers. This was to keep the mighty dead under control, safely dead, and incapable, because of the massive bindings of bark-cloth enveloping them, from harming the living. Such treatment (wrapping and decoration with feathers) was reserved for corpses of powerful chiefs and for the *to'o*, so the implication is that the *to'o*, at the conclusion of the *pa'iatua* ceremony, is being treated as a 'powerful corpse'. The binding up of the *to'o* places Oro in the 'patient' position.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Related to this idea of 'binding' the god is the practice, which was common in antiquity, of restraining the images of the gods in temples with chains and manacles, to prevent them from escaping and transferring their protection to rival cities (cf. Freedberg 1989: 74–5).

The cult of the gods in the form of *to'o* and the accompanying feather exchanges can be seen as a kind of vastly magnified exercise in volt sorcery. Ostensibly, Oro rules the universe, but in practice his intervention in human affairs is controlled by the chiefs and priests, via indexes which are his parts, his exuviae, and the binding of the primary index of his person, the *to'o*. It will be recalled that the ancient Greek sorcerers wrote on the little lead plates representing their victims, the words 'I bind, I bind'. In the cult of the *to'o* we find this 'binding' of the god literally enacted, but the implications are the same. The prototype of an index is bound to the index by resemblance, and is thus subjected to control. The *to'o* were themselves tightly bound, and their power diffused into these bindings, especially the feathers, which then became the currency of political control.

This idea can perhaps be given a more general statement, so as to apply to all religious art. The great monuments that we have erected to God, the great basilicas and cathedrals, are indexes from which we abduct God's agency over the world, and over his mortal subjects, who have striven and laboured to please him, and have left these massive shells (or skins) in their wake, within which the faithful gather to worship the ultimate author of all this magnificence. Such, at any rate, is the orthodox view of religious magnificence, which represents basilicas and cathedrals as 'offerings' to God, who is all-powerful. However, it must also be recognized, first of all, that God is not really powerful at all unless his power is apparent in this-worldly indexes (behavioural ones, or, in the present case, material ones). The basic Miltonic paradox that God is at risk from his own creation, simply by having distributed himself in manifold forms (including Satan), applies to such material indexes of God's greatness in the following way. Humanity has a lien on God because his objectification is in their hands. Even if God is the ultimate author of his resemblance in the form of magnificent structures and works of art, it remains the case that, at a critical point in the sequence of causes, instruments, and results, human agency is essential. Since, in this world, God's presence is inherent in these works of human agency, he is bound to human purposes, the this-worldly prosperity and other-worldly salvation of his ostensible servants, rather than to purposes entirely his own. His agency is enmeshed in ours, by virtue of our capacity to make (and be) his simulacrum. With respect to our god, we are in just the same position as the Maori *tohunga* with respect to the *hau* of the forest.

Of course, the fact that we have trapped God inside his likenesses does not make all religious activity sorcery, as such. The homage paid to God in the basilica is not destructive or malignant, but it does make him the 'passive agent' of essentially human designs, just as the homage paid to the *to'o* made Oro the passive agent of the chiefs and high priests. I have no doubt that Christian theologians would have no difficulty in refuting such an imputation in a manner convincing, at least, to themselves, but the logic of the situation seems to me

inescapable. The papal title 'Pontifex Maximus' (JVLIVS II PONTIFEX MAXIMVS blazoned over the apostle of St Peter's in Rome) attributes to the Pope the power to build bridges between earth and heaven. The analogy between the papal 'bridge' between earth and heaven, and the Tahitian *to'o*—the staff or prop which keeps heaven and earth apart (but also in communication)—seems too remarkable to pass without comment. And in St Peter's one can certainly detect the clear implication that God is the exchange-partner of his more important subjects such as Julius II if not the mass of his worshippers of low estate. St Peter's is the bridge; but the point is that the making of the bridge has been attributed unambiguously to the Pope, Julius II, his predecessors and successors. He, in exchange terms, is the primary donor, the holder of the *kitoum*, the 'unencumbered valuable' (Munn; see below, Sect. 9.3) which is sent out to find its match, the valuable which can be measured against it and returned for it. St Peter's, as a gift-object and an index of human agency, elicits a responsive counter-gift, which, paradoxically, is St Peter's itself, invested with divine power now available to mankind, like the feathers which, given to Oro, return from Oro as his embodiments.

However, let us not delay too long over such analogies, which may be regarded as unconvincing, or even offensive. I now want to turn to the worship of anthropomorphic images, among which neither the *to'o* nor St Peter's may be counted, at least, not at first glance.<sup>3</sup> The literature of idol-worship is, in the main, profoundly unsympathetic to this practice; it is almost as if learning to read and write disqualifies one from engaging in this practice with any enthusiasm. This rather supports the notion that there is a 'great divide' between the essentially non-sensuous mode of literate thinking and the sensuous, participatory mode of pre-literate thinking. However, there has been a reaction against the theory of the 'great divide' in recent years (Parry 1985) and there certainly exist numerous literate image-worshippers in the world today, and ancient, literate, civilizations whose religious practices centre on the paying of homage to images, such as Hinduism. The idea that only the uneducated or 'primitive' worship idols of stone, wood, and metal fashioned to resemble the human form, is a consequence of the convergence between anti-imagistic forms of religiosity (such as Judaism, Islam, and certain forms of Christian sectarianism and Protestantism) and the rise of a more generalized religious scepticism, which has ancient antecedents. Indeed, wherever religion exists, it is probable that scepticism also exists, whether or not this is expressed in public. Certainly, anthropologists have encountered innumerable examples of scepticism concerning the efficacy of rites among the illiterate and uneducated, so this cannot be attributed to literacy or the rise of 'science' alone.

<sup>3</sup> But cf. Wittkower on anthropomorphic elements in Renaissance theories of architectural proportion, Ackerman on Bernini's piazza, etc.

### 7.7. Darshan: Witnessing as Agency

Questions of the cultural foundations of belief and scepticism need not detain us, but it is still enormously difficult for Westerners and non-believers to empathize with idol-worshippers because of the bombardment with anti-idolatrous propaganda which we have experienced from the very moment we became conscious of such things. Perhaps the most insight-provoking accounts of image-worship belong to the literature of Hinduism, because followers of this religion are among the least self-conscious in showing devotion to images. A convenient introduction to the copious literature on image-worship in India has been provided by Diana Eck (1985). Worshipping images is obtaining *darshan* from the god, a particular type of blessing conveyed through the eyes. *Darshan* is something given by the god, a mode of the god's agency in the world, and the worshipper is a patient (the Recipient-P, in terms of our scheme). Living human beings can give *darshan*, as well as gods; a guru gives *darshan* when he or she makes an appearance before a gathering of disciples (see Babb 1987), and the same is true of an important politician appearing before an assembly of supporters, who have come to see, as much as to hear, their leader. *Darshan* is a gift or an offering, made by the superior to the inferior, and it consists of the 'gift of appearance' imagined as a material transfer of some blessing.

It seems to me that *darshan* is essentially similar to the other mode in which divine blessing/personhood is distributed in India: the distribution of sacred food, *prasad*, which is consumed by the god's devotees (of course, there are Christian parallels to this as well). *Prasad* is often conceptualized as the 'food leavings' (*jutha*) of the god, in a manner absolutely analogous to the exuviae used in sorcery. According to Eck, the conceptualization of *darshan* is closely allied to the role allotted in the Hindu tradition to the eye as an organ of interpersonal transactions.

*Darshan*, considered as a mode of divine agency is thus intimately connected to the concept of the evil eye. Divine idols, religious gurus, and politicians of renown transfer blessings via the steady and penetrating gaze with which they irradiate the assembly over which they preside. This is, so to speak, the positive 'white' aspect of evil-eye sorcery, which more imperfect beings transfer via their mean, envious, and ill-intentioned looks. To place oneself before the idol of the god, therefore, is to lay oneself open to the divine gaze and to internalize the divine image.

This is to examine the question from only one angle though; even in India, it takes an act of will on the part of the worshipper to worship the god, and the worshipper is also an agent with respect to the one being worshipped. The reception (as a patient) of *darshan* from the god is contingent on the transitive action of 'taking' (*darshan lena*) initiated by the recipient. Eck cites Stella Kramrisch's account of 'seeing' as transitive form of agency:

Seeing . . . is a going forth of the sight towards the object. Sight touches it and acquires its form. Touch is the ultimate connection by which the visible yields to being grasped. While the eye touches the object the vitality that pulsates in it is communicated . . . (Kramrisch 1976: 136)

These remarks of Kramrisch are informed by her knowledge of Sanskrit philosophical writings. Ancient Indian philosophers held views similar to those of the Platonists, that sight was an 'extromissive' sense, the eye sending out invisible beams or rays through the air, which touched the objects of sight at their surfaces. One philosopher, Caraka, argued that indeed we only have one sense, the sense of touch, of which sight, hearing, etc. are just more subtle forms (Sinha 1934). Other philosophers disagreed, but the consensus was none the less that seeing was, like touching, a form of contact. Epicurus' theory (see above), by contrast, is 'intromissive'; the *eidola* emanate from the object and enter the eye. But Lucretius shows that seeing was, even so, equated with touching by the Epicureans. The (gossamer, but physical) idols were touched at the surface of the eye, not at their own surfaces, via the eye-beams. I do not think that the Epicurean intromissive theory of vision by 'idols' had an Indian counterpart, so one could not attribute the prevalence of image-worship to its influence. But the alternative extromissive theory is, if anything, even more explanatory, because it forges a direct link between 'seeing' (*darshan*) and other types of physical interaction with the image, such as touching, anointing, and so on. These tactile forms of homage are very important elements in Hindu image-worship.

Certain Indian philosophers (Sinha 1934) made the analogy between seeing and the use of a stick by the blind, in order to ascertain the shape of external objects. This materialistic conception of seeing is reflected in Kramrisch's statement about *darshan*; seeing creates a physical bridge between one being and another. Hirn's basic insight that in relation to 'images' there really is no distinction between 'similarity' and 'contact' is fully brought into the open here, without the need to invoke the Epicurean parallel.

*Darshan* is thus very much of a two-way affair. The gaze directed by the god towards the worshipper confers his blessing; conversely, the worshipper reaches out and touches the god. The result is union with the god, a merging of consciousnesses according to the devotionalist interpretation. This brings back the issue of reciprocity and intersubjectivity in the relationship between the image (the index) and the recipient. It is clearly germane to the general thesis argued in these chapters that intersubjectivity between persons and indexes, particularly indexes which, like images of the gods, are human in form, should be possible. It cannot be denied that, from the point of view of the devotees worshipping the image of the god, the image of the god is a manifestation of a social Other, and that the god/devotee relationship is a social one, absolutely comparable to the relationship between the devotee and another human person. However, it is too easy just to accept this as an ethnographic, descriptive,

fact, without a deeper questioning of the cognitive basis of this relationship. For all that the devotee asserts, and truly believes, that a union of minds is achieved between mortal devotee and immortal divinity, the devotee none the less also lives in a world of ordinary objects, mere things devoid of imputed subjectivity, in which the distinction between human beings—possessed of human-being-like consciousness and agency—and inert ‘things’ is readily drawn. The devotee does *know* that the image of the god is only an image, not made of flesh and blood; and if, perchance, the image moves, or speaks, or seems to drink milk, that is a miracle, a remarkable occurrence because so unexpected. Devotion is enhanced by such manifestations, but it is admitted that the gods only vouchsafe miracles when faith in them has reached a low ebb, and needs to be buttressed by extraordinary happenings. True devotion is attainable, ideally, without miracles of this or any other kind.

The animacy and imputed subjectivity of the idol is not attained except by surmounting the stark difference between an inert image and a living being. How does this happen?

So far as the Hindu material is concerned, the key to the process of animation seems, initially at least, to depend on the logic of looking and being seen. Imagistic devotion is a visual act (as opposed to prayer, etc.) and it is accomplished entirely by looking. Specifically, it is accomplished by looking into the eyes of the god; union comes from eye contact, not the study of all the other details the image may show, which indicate the identity and attributes of the god and which add to the general effect without being devotionally essential. The eyes of the god, which gaze at the devotee, mirror the action of the devotee, who gazes at the god. Sometimes (as in Jain temples) the eyes of images are set with little mirrors, so that the devotee can see himself or herself reflected in the image’s eye in the act of looking. Even in the absence of actual mirrors, the image, so far as its ocular activity goes, reflects the action of the devotee (Fig. 7.7/1).

Animacy takes its origin from this ocular exchange, because, even if one does not take a mystical attitude towards images, one is none the less entitled to apply action verbs like ‘look’ (or ‘smile’, ‘gesticulate’, etc.) to them. A perfect sceptic can say, in fact is obliged to say, that an idol ‘looks’ in a particular direction; the remark would pass unnoticed because everybody accepts that the criterion for idols ‘looking’ is that their eyes should be open and pointed in a particular direction. The question is, what do idols see when they look? What the devotee sees is the idol looking at him or her, performing an act of looking, mirroring his or her own. It is not mysticism on the devotee’s part which results in the practical inference that the image ‘sees’ the devotee, because we only ever know what other persons are seeing by knowing what they are looking at. The sceptic would say ‘the idol is blind—it cannot see anything’, but even so, to be blind is to be unable to see what one looks at, which hardly banishes the residual animacy of images, since a disability implies a potential



Fig. 7.7/1. Santoshi Ma. Colour lithograph, B. G. Sharma. Source: Sharma Picture Publications, Bombay, c.1960



it is reported, as sometimes happens, that idols actually do 'come to life' in the sense of 'manifesting biological activity'. When particular statues bleed, or perspire, or move about, these are 'miracles'. But such happenings would not be miracles if the expectation was that all idols should behave in this way; in fact, they are generally expected not to. Idols may be animate without, in other words, being endowed with animal life or activity. In addition, there are automata, real or imaginary ones, which do really move, speak, and perform various human-like actions, but these are remarkable, not because they are alive, but because they are *not* alive, while maintaining the appearance of being so. It follows that 'ritual' animacy and the possession of 'life' in a biological sense are far from being the same thing.

Cognitive psychologists believe that the distinction between living things (biological organisms) and non-living things is one to which we are innately sensitive, and this is a finding which I do not need to contest. I have no doubt that worshippers, who address their prayers to stones, are perfectly capable of the category distinction between animals and plants (living things) and non-living things such as stones. The distinction between animacy and inanimacy that we require here cross-cuts the distinction between the living and non-living as 'natural kinds' (Boyer 1996: 86). The god who, at one moment, is manifested in a non-living thing, such as a stone or a statue, may be manifest in a living thing also, such as a possessed shaman, or a sacred goat or monkey. The worshippers, whose god appears in these contrasted forms, are perfectly cognizant of the difference between them. The imputation of 'animacy' to non-living things cannot, as Guthrie seems to suggest, rest on people making category mistakes about whether inanimate objects such as boulders are really biologically living things, such as bears.

### 7.8.1. Stocks and Stones

It seems that we must appeal to a different attribute from the possession of biological life to define 'animacy'. Should we say that the object is animate not because we attribute biological life to it, but subjectivity/intentionality, which is something quite different? As Boyer notes (1996: 92), 'the projection of human physical features [onto gods, spirits, etc.] in general results in a projection, tacit or otherwise, of intentional psychology, but a projection of intentional psychology does not generally entail a projection of any other human quality'. How can an entity possess 'intentional psychology', without being biologically alive? In this case, a worshipper who addresses prayers to a stone must believe, somehow, that the stone in question, though not a living thing, sees and hears as does the worshipper, thinks and reacts as he does, and moreover, has the power to plan and execute actions. It seems paradoxical to imagine that an admittedly non-living thing could possess these attributes. But not really, when one considers what heavy weather philosophers have

made of accounting for 'intentionality' even among ordinary, living, breathing, human beings.

The question as to the manner in which representational indexes—idols—can be apprehended as social others, as repositories of agency and sensibility, seems to raise the question of 'apparently irrational' beliefs and practices. It is surely irrational, or at least strange, to speak to, offer food to, dress and bathe a mere piece of sculpture, rather than a living breathing human being. And so it is: those who do these things are just as aware of the 'strangeness' of their behaviour as we are, but they also hold, which we do not, that the cult of the idol is religiously efficacious, and will result in beneficial consequences for themselves and the masters they serve in their capacity as priests. It is not that the priests cannot distinguish between stocks and stones and persons, rather, they hold that in certain contexts stocks and stones possess unusual, occult, properties; of which the religiously uninstructed would remain ignorant, and the instructed but sceptical, wrong-headedly incredulous. According to Boyer (1996), religious ideas, such as the 'intentional psychology' of fetishes and idols, survive and prosper as components of cultural systems *just because* they are odd and counter-intuitive.

The question that we need to consider is the nature of the unusual occult capacities which idols possess, according to believers. What we need to know is how idol-worshippers square the circle between 'what they know'—and what we know they know—about stocks and stones, and what they know about persons and their capacities as intentional agents. They cannot confuse the two, but it remains possible that persons have attributes which can be also possessed by stocks and stones without prejudice to their *categorical* difference from persons. That is to say 'social agents' can be drawn from categories which are as different as chalk and cheese (in fact, rather more different) because 'social agency' is not defined in terms of 'basic' biological attributes (such as inanimate thing vs. incarnate person) but is relational—it does not matter, in ascribing 'social agent' status, what a thing (or a person) 'is' in itself; what matters is where it stands in a network of social relations. All that may be necessary for stocks and stones to become 'social agents' in the sense that we require, is that there should be actual human persons/agents 'in the neighbourhood' of these inert objects, not that they should be biologically human persons themselves.

This is not as bizarre a claim as it sounds. We certainly do not have to postulate a particular 'mentality' (primitive, uncritical, gullible, etc.) to account for idolatry; the worship of images is compatible with an extreme degree of philosophical and critical acumen, as the example of textual Hinduism amply demonstrates, besides numerous treatises on 'theurgy' (the creation of gods) from classical antiquity (e.g. Proclus). Rather than approach the problem from an initial assumption of the essential stupidity of idol-worshippers, we should remind ourselves of the difficulties which assail (very clever) philosophers, when they seek to account for the 'agency', not of stocks and stones, but of human

beings themselves. If (Western) philosophers have a hard time pin-pointing exactly what makes the difference between human persons engaging in 'actions' and mere things obeying causal laws then we are in a better position to understand why some people appear to be (contextually) indifferent to this distinction.

The fact is that it remains a controversial philosophical problem to distinguish between 'actions' (stemming from agency) and 'happenings' resulting from material causation. What is the basis of the distinction we feel we must draw between a person performing the action of raising their arm (intentionally) and the same physical movement occurring involuntarily, say, as the result of some malfunctioning of the autonomous nervous system? In other words, there is a sense in which human beings are themselves 'stocks and stones'—only rather twitchy ones—and when human beings are asleep, insensible, or of course, dead, the resemblance becomes much closer. The 'philosophy of action' is devoted to devising and testing criteria for justifying the distinction that we intuitively make between our capacity to behave as person/agents and our simultaneous capacity to be, and behave as, things, or mere 'creatures' unendowed with full human agency.

I do not need to canvass, still less evaluate, all the theses which different philosophers have advanced in the search for a solution to this problem. My point is just that philosophers do detect a serious problem here; from which I think that we can reasonably infer that it is in fact awkward to differentiate between what people do 'as persons' and what people do 'as things'. And if philosophers (who know perfectly well that in the relevant senses persons and things are different) cannot always agree about 'just how' they differ, then the inverse proposition also holds; if pressed, we are not really very sure about 'just how' an idol is *not* a person—even though we are perfectly certain it isn't. We cannot rely on simple arguments like this: 'I am a person, I have a beating heart, a temperature of 98.4 degrees, etc. whereas this statue is stone-cold and has no heartbeat, *ergo*, it is not a person'. We could heat the statue to 98.4 degrees, give it a heart, etc. but it still would not qualify because it would only possess, after these modifications, attributes which human beings possess 'as things', not as persons/agents. Yet such are the arguments which are advanced against idolatry by sceptics:

Lala Lajpat Rai describes how the founder [of the Arya Samaj, a 'reformed' Hindu sect, opposed to the use of images] first got his insight into the wrongness of idolatry. He was set, as a lad of fourteen, to watch an image of the god Shiva, in a temple at night. He saw a mouse run over the god's body and the god remain motionless. The shock convinced him, Lajpat Rai wrote, that 'the image could not be Shiva himself, as was taught by the priesthood'. (Bevan 1940: 34)

Such an argument could have been convincing only to one who had already (no doubt as a result of Christian-Protestant ascendancy in British India) decided that idol-worship was backward and futile. Shiva's indifference to the

mouse could equally well have been interpreted as his superhuman asceticism manifesting itself—indeed comparable feats have been attempted by ascetics whose humanity is not in doubt. Some, for instance, are reputed to have induced birds to nest on their motionless bodies. Any such argument can cut both ways: if idols are not what they pretend to be, or are pretended to be, it is not because they are 'things'. Human beings are also 'things'. If an effigy possessed every single thing-attribute of a human being, it could still be 'just an effigy' and be unworthy of worship; conversely, an effigy could possess no identifiable thing-attribute of a human being and be worthy of devotion nevertheless.

Suppose we perform the thought experiment of gradually enriching an idol with more and more of the attributes of a 'genuine' living being. Temperature, heartbeat, mobility, the ability to utter words, to play tennis, to . . . well, you name it. Does the idol become more worship-able as a result? By no means: either, by this procedure, the idol becomes a common-or-garden human person, whom it would be senseless to worship, or the idol remains an idol but takes on the status of an automaton of extraordinary verisimilitude, worthy of exhibition and admiration in an establishment like Disneyland or Madame Tussaud's, but not of reverence or devotion. The criticism of idolatry on the grounds that idols are not 'alive' as human beings are (biologically) alive, or that idols are not realistic automata, but only statues, misses the point on both counts. The idol is worshipped because it is neither a person, nor a miraculous machine, but a god.

Whatever the attributes possessed by idols which render them religiously efficacious as a locus for person-to-person encounters with divinities, these attributes cannot be confirmed or disproved by physical tests such as the presence of a pulse, respiration, ingestion and elimination, the ability to move or speak, a natural distaste for mice, and so on. None of these attributes figures in philosophical attempts to distinguish between person/agents and mere things, machines, effigies, illusions, and so on. Currently, many philosophers agree that 'agency' implies the possession of a mind which 'intends' actions prior to performing them. 'Not moving' is an 'action' in this sense. 'Shiva (the god) did not move because he intended to stay still' is a perfectly reasonable interpretation for the scene witnessed by Dayananda, on the assumption that Shiva was, as the priests averred, present as a person/agent, in his image. He might have had various reasons for refraining from action; first (as just mentioned), because Shiva is the prototypical immobile ascetic, and secondly, because Shiva (who created the whole world) imbued stone, the material of his visible 'body' in this instance, with the property of absolute rigidity; Shiva was observing the 'rules' for stone objects, such as idols, which were of his own making, ultimately. Hindu theology, moreover, postulates that gods, such as Shiva, voluntarily 'sacrifice' their freedom of movement, imprisoning themselves in stone idols for the benefit of devotees.

This is the greatest grace of the Lord, that being free He becomes bound, being independent He becomes dependent for all His service on His devotee . . . In other forms the man belonged to God but behold the supreme sacrifice of Isvara [Vishnu] here the Almighty becomes the property of the devotee . . . He carries Him about, fans Him, feeds Him, plays with Him—yea, the Infinite has become finite, that the child soul may grasp, understand and love Him. (Pillai Lokacarya, cited in Eck 1985: 46, diacritics removed)

There are no a priori logico-philosophical grounds for rejecting the thesis that Shiva 'intended to stand still, and thus stood still, when the mouse ran over him' (and was an agent in so doing). Because there are no 'material tests' for the possession, or non-possession, of agency, there is nothing to prevent us from asserting, if we wish to, that the behaviour of a statue (standing still) occurs because the statue has a mind, intends to stand still, and does as a consequence of this prior intention stand still.

### 7.9. *External and Internal Conceptions of Agency*

How, in practice, do we attribute 'agency', 'intentional psychology'—the possession of a mind, consciousness, etc. to 'social others'? If we knew the answer to this question we might be in a better position to define precisely what subset of human-like attributes idols as 'social others' are believed to possess, given that they are probably not (on Boyer's argument) believed to possess all of these attributes. I think it is fair to say that our attribution of 'intentional psychology' to anything (a person, an animal, a computer, a car, or a stone idol) has two aspects to it, which at first glance seem to be rather distinct. The first of these one could call the 'external aspect' or the 'practical' aspect of agency-attribution. According to Wittgenstein, and a great many other subsequent philosophers, the possession of a mind is something we attribute to others, provisionally, on the basis of our intuition that their behaviour (e.g. their linguistic behaviour) follows some 'rule' which, in principle, we may reconstruct (Winch 1958). If I can get along with the other in the give-and-take of interaction, if our practical efforts to deal with one another work out, then the other is a producer of intelligible (meaningful) behaviour, and hence has a mind, intentions, volitions, etc. I cannot really tell, from the outside, whether the 'other' is a zombie or an automaton, who/which mimics the behaviour of an ordinary human being but does not have any of the 'inner experiences' we habitually associate with this behaviour. But this does not matter because the whole panoply of 'mind' is not a series of inner, private experiences at all, but is out there, in the public domain, as language, practices, routines, rules of the game, etc.; that is, 'forms of life'. Call this the 'externalist' theory of agency-attribution.

However compelling in the hands of behaviouristically inclined philosophers, the 'externalist' theory of agency has a weakness, namely, that it does

not immediately square with psychological investigations of the way in which children and ordinary people (not philosophers) seem to approach the same problem. It seems that ordinary human beings are 'natural dualists', inclined, more or less from day one, to believe in some kind of 'ghost in the machine' and to attribute the behaviour of social others to the *mental representations these others have 'in their heads'*. Behaviour is caused by factors which well up from within the person, thoughts, wishes, intentions, etc. Minds are hidden away inside people, rather than being manifested in between them, in the public space in which interaction takes place, as the externalist theory seems to be saying. The 'internalist' theory of mind, according to the cognitive psychologists, is a 'module'—a kind of theory (or principle of interpretation) with which we are born, along with the principle that there is a basic distinction between living things and non-living things. When Boyer speaks of 'intentional psychology' he is referring to this (putatively innate) module.

Many philosophers believe that the notion that genuine 'persons' are beings whose behaviour is caused by the mental representations that they have 'in their heads' is not just a truth of common sense, but is perfectly defensible philosophically, if formulated with due care (e.g. Fodor 1994). However, we do not need to consider the arguments for and against the 'mentalist' (i.e. internalist) position in the philosophy of mind in any detail. All that we need to be aware of is that these two routes towards 'agency'-attributions exist. Let us consider further some of the differences between them. For a start, they each begin with a rather different problem-definition. The externalist theory is not really about the 'psyche' or 'consciousness'; it is an account of intersubjectivity rather than subjectivity, and it explains how it is that intersubjectivity is quite possible, even in the absence of some telepathic means of entering another person's skull and having his thoughts, feeling his pains, and so on. Because the externalist theory is about intersubjectivity, it is popular with sociologists, many of whom are much more behaviouristic in their thinking than they realize or acknowledge. To cite a case in point, the leading social theorist of today, Pierre Bourdieu, acknowledges a debt to both Wittgenstein and to the (subtle) behaviourist learning-theorist, Hull. Bourdieu's invaluable concept of the 'habitus'—the sedimented residue of past social interaction which structures ongoing interaction—is not a transcription of common-sense mentalism or 'folk psychology', but is precisely a notion of mind externalized in routine, practices, that is, the prevailing 'form of life'. Sociologists have to be 'externalists' because culture and social institutions are external, interactive, processual, historical realities, not states of mind. Sociologists cannot be 'pure' mentalists because, apart from anything else, they are concerned with actions in the light of their *consequences*, and we are all too well aware that our actions rarely if ever have precisely the consequences we hoped or expected them to have. So a theory which only relates actions to (inner, prior) intentions, even if adequate psychologically, is sociologically inadequate.

Since this is a treatise on the sociology of art, there are good reasons why I, in particular, should pay attention to the externalist theory of agency. The simplest solution to the problem of idolatry is an 'external' one on the following lines: idols are 'social others' to the extent that, and because, they obey the social rules laid down for idols as co-present others (gods) in idol-form. Thus, according to Eck (1985: 48), a Hindu deity in idol-form is essentially an honoured 'guest' to whom the devotee pays homage in the form of nurture (offering food, fanning the flies away, etc.). The appropriate behaviour for 'guests' of extremely high status, is, in fact, to do more or less exactly what idols do: accept what is offered with imperturbable dignity and impassivity. Idols 'produce intelligible behaviour' which conforms to certain expectations.

Of course, idols do not apparently 'do' anything; they generally just stand there, being immobile. This seems like an odd form of 'intelligible' behaviour, but it is not; the Life Guards outside Whitehall barracks produce exactly this type of 'intelligible' immobility and apparent insensibility as a behaviour, and they are quintessentially 'social others' while they do so. When evil-minded tourists poke umbrellas at their horses, they do not suddenly behave 'out of character' and curse their tormentors: they preserve their icy indifference. They are playing the game, and it is a game we can readily participate in. They are like the Sepik warriors whom Harrison describes as aspiring, in totemic ritual performances, to emulate the impervious spirituality of totemic *sacra*, the ceremonial effigies of spirits which line the interior of their long-house (Harrison 1983: 118).

This 'Dionysian' aggrandisement of the self, reserved for a select few, is viewed not as a celebration of subjectivity but as the reverse: the depersonalisation of the actors into human equivalents of ritual objects, like the masks, statuary and other *sacra* which figure in the men's cult as embodiments of ritual potency. Men contextually suspend their 'normal' social identities but gain power, in the form of the impact which highly-charged symbolic objects have on the subjectivities of others.

However, I agree that such an externalist interpretation of agency-attribution to idols seems too simple by half. Although the Life Guards may preserve their stony demeanours when their horses get poked, none the less, we know, and they know we know, that they are silently thinking 'bugger off' or words to that effect. And that is why their self-control is so remarkable and admirable. It is all very well to say that an idol which stands immobile is producing intelligible idol-behaviour according to the accepted social rules, but unless there is something going on inside the idol which corresponds to the 'inner life, unspoken thoughts, etc.' which we attribute to Life Guards, or Sepik warriors, then does this behaviour 'count'? There are two answers to this kind of objection. First of all, although idols may not produce much visible behaviour, they may none the less be very 'active' invisibly, that is, most of their actions take place 'off-stage' as it were. They can be making the crops grow,

confounding traitors and plotters, or keeping the sun alight, or enjoying themselves in heaven, etc. And these actions (except perhaps the last) have visible consequences 'elsewhere', though not in any change in the bodily demeanour of the idol *per se*.

Secondly, an idol who does not respond actively (by moving or speaking) is none the less 'active' as a patient with respect to the agency of others. And this may be enough. Children's play with dolls can serve to illustrate this type of passive agency. Dolls, even those which open and close their eyes, emit cries, or even wet themselves, never produce any behaviour which is not directly under the control of the nurture-providing play-mother. The playing child knows this perfectly well, but that does not prevent them having the liveliest sensation that the doll is an alter ego and a significant social other. Doll play is so totally satisfying just because of this passivity; the doll does just whatever the child wants; submits to undressing and getting dressed again, sleeping, waking, and eating, and even, if necessary, being 'naughty' when the child is in the mood to inflict a smacking. The doll's 'thoughts' and inner life (which certainly are attributed to it while play is in progress) are a reflex of the child's own thoughts, which include the doll as a passive being whose thinking is done 'for it' just as dressing and undressing have to be done for it as well. The playing child thinks for her doll as well as doing everything else. We could interpret the thought-processes of idols along the same lines, that is, as something that devotees do for idols, which can none the less be attributed (in context) to them. Because idols (like dolls) are wholly 'passive' others, they exhibit 'passive agency', the kind of agency attributable to social others who or which, by definition, are only the *target* of agency, never the independent source. (The argument of this paragraph relates to the analysis of Hindu *darshan*, above, Sect. 7.7.)

However, I agree that neither of these responses quite measures up to the objection that idols, because of their behavioural ineffectuality, cannot be considered 'agents' in the full sense. There does seem to be a basic difference between the idol-like Life Guard whose mind seethes with unuttered curses, and the genuine idol whose dignified gaze betokens, for us, no such inner life. Whoever imagines that the idol is conscious, thinking, intentional, etc. is attributing 'mental states' to the idol which have implications, not just for the external relations between the idol and the devotee (and the form of life in which they co-participate), but for the 'inner structure' of the idol, that is, that it has something *inside* it 'which thinks' or 'with which it thinks'. The idol may not be biologically a 'living thing' but, if it has 'intentional psychology' attributed to it, then it has something like a spirit, a soul, an ego, lodged within it.

This is certainly true, ethnographically and psychologically, because of the innateness of the 'theory-of-mind module' which attributes intentionality to persons (and things as well, under certain circumstances) as a component of

what Schutz calls 'the natural attitude'. The problems which assail spontaneous mentalism are not to do with demonstrating its existence, but with pursuing its implications. Let us say that 'intentional psychology' (that which is attributed to idols according to the 'internalist' approach to agency) consists of something like a 'conscious self' as experienced in the 'first person singular'. This is 'the Mind's "I"' (Hofstadter and Dennett 1982). The trouble with this mysterious 'I' is not that anybody truly disbelieves in it, but that nothing in the world, no physically identifiable thing, really seems to correspond to it. The externalist theory of mind does not seem to give one any real reason for believing in this entity in which we all do, none the less, believe: and on the basis of such a belief, interpret and predict the social behaviour of others. The philosophical problem of mentalism (of intentionalism generally) is succinctly summed up by Dennett in the following passage:

*First*, the only psychology that could possibly succeed in explaining the complexities of human activity must posit internal representations. This premise has been deemed obvious by just about everyone except the radical behaviorists . . . Descartes doubted almost everything *but* this. For the British Empiricists, the internal representations were called ideas, sensations, impressions; more recently psychologists have talked of hypotheses, maps, schemas, images, propositions, engrams, neural signals, even holograms and whole innate theories. So the first premise is quite invulnerable, or at any rate it has an impressive mandate . . . But, *second*, nothing is intrinsically a representation of anything; something is a representation only *for* or *to* someone; any representation or system of representations thus requires at least one *user* or *interpreter* of the representation who is external to it. Any such interpreter must have a variety of psychological or intentional traits . . . it must be capable of a variety of *comprehension*, and must have beliefs and goals (so it can *use* the representation to *inform* itself and thus assist it in reaching its goals). Such an interpreter is then a sort of homunculus.

Therefore, psychology *without* homunculi is impossible. But psychology *with* homunculi is doomed to circularity or infinite regress, so psychology is impossible. (Dennett 1979: 119–22)

Dennett argues that this problem is surmountable, not by getting rid of homunculi, but by having lots and lots of them; 'stupid' single-task homunculi doing low-level tasks and relaying the results to more intelligent homunculi doing higher-level processing tasks. There is not any one 'mind' but a pandemonium of homunculi generating representations and selecting among those that have been generated those which are of use in fulfilling the organism's needs. My purpose in citing Dennett on homunculi, however, is not to introduce his brilliant, artificial-intelligence-based theory of mind, which seeks to break the deadlock between the various compelling reasons to accept some modified form of behaviourism, and the need to explain consciousness as we actually experience it as psychological subjects. Dennett, like all modern philosophers of mind, is writing about real human beings, not idols. The point that interests me is that Dennett is suggesting that in so far as we conceive

of human beings as intentional agents because they generate and respond to mental representations, then we are obliged to 'split' them (internally) into two; the one who 'has' the representations (perceptions, ideas, etc.) and the one who interprets them (see Dennett, *ibid.*, ch. 5). What I derive from this is the cognitive naturalness of the idea of the mind (or soul, spirit, etc.) as a homunculus; that is, like a person but *contained within* a person. That is to say, a predictable consequence of our (possibly innate) propensity to attribute 'intentional psychology' to humans, animals, etc. is attributing a *homunculus-like form* to this 'interpreter' lodged within the other, when the other is being attributed with an intentional psychology. That is to say, if we are to attempt to 'depict' the physical realization of the other's possession of an intentional psychology, the natural way to do this is to make a duplicate of the other in homuncular form (a representation of the inner person who interprets the other's representations) and lodge that homunculus inside the other's body.

Let us return to the idol. We have established, I hope, that the idol is acceptable as a social other on the basis of 'fitting in' to the role expectations for idols as a particular category of social agents, that is, primarily passive agents or agents whose agency is exercised 'off-stage'. Practically and physically, this is perfectly manageable; we just have to stipulate what the idol, to conform to its role expectations, shall look like, and manufacture an artefact which has the stipulated external characteristics. But what about making an idol which, on the basis of its actual physical characteristics, motivates the attribution to it of an intentional psychology? How might we do that?

Well, we might not want to: according to Boyer (1996) the attribution of intentional psychology (or other occult attributes) to non-living things is a potent religious idea precisely because it so markedly contradicts two basic assumptions about reality, (i) that living and non-living things are totally distinct, and that (ii) intentional psychology can only be attributed to living things. On this theory, there would be a strong (basically innate) cognitive preference for religious objects (attributed with intentional psychology) to be aniconic in form; the more blatantly the supposedly animate ritual object failed to measure up to the normal criteria for animacy, the more enthusiastically believers would worship it. However, this prediction is not borne out in practice; where the technical system of a particular religious community includes techniques for manufacturing iconic or anthropomorphic images, idols, etc., such idols are very often manufactured. Moreover, supposedly aniconic religious objects are often locally interpreted in 'iconic' ways. Goodman's well-known jibe against the notion of 'realism' in art (1976) certainly applies here, namely, that since everything 'resembles' everything else in at least *some* respects, everything can, under some interpretation, be regarded as 'depicting' anything you like. Consequently an uncarved stone can be an iconic representation of a god just as well as a minutely carved stone idol which looks much more 'realistic' to us.

However, I think that we can quite easily distinguish between idols in which iconism, the impulse to depict resemblance, is thematic, and those in which iconism is non-thematic, as in litholatry, pure and simple. So I rephrase the question; given that we are dealing with that class of idols in which iconic depiction of the object of veneration is thematic, how are we to indicate, by means of pictorial or sculptural 'mimesis', that the artefact is endowed with an intentional psychology? There is a simple answer to this: we cannot. There is nothing physical that we can imitate here, there is no mind in objective form that we can copy and insert into the appropriate place in the idol. No matter how realistically we imitate the outward appearance of the body, we fall short of depicting the soul which, however, we are determined to imitate in some fashion.

To say that there is no ideal solution is not to say that there are no half-measures. Even if we cannot depict the mind, we can at least depict the possibility that there is a mind we cannot depict. By way of a thought experiment, let us postulate an 'ideal aniconic idol'—a sphere of perfectly homogeneous material, actually black basalt. We may suppose that the spherical stone idol has a mind, intentions, sensibilities, etc. but there is nothing about the material characteristics of the sphere, as such, which articulates with these beliefs, which are entirely theological and abstract. But let us modify the spherical idol somewhat by drilling a hole in it, or maybe two holes, which would then probably be seen as 'eyes'. Once the sphere was equipped with 'orifices' of this kind it would be possible, not just to imagine, abstractly, that it had a mind, perceptions, intentions, etc. but to attach these imaginings to the formal contrast between the exterior of the sphere, into which the holes were drilled, and the interior, to which these holes give access. Adding features which apparently make the sphere more 'anthropomorphic' (by the addition of eyes, a mouth, etc.) do not just serve the purpose of making the sphere a more realistic 'depiction' of a human being, they render it more spiritual, more inward, by opening up *routes of access* to this inwardness. The 'internalist' theory of agency (in its informal guise as part of everyday thinking) motivates the development of 'representational', if not 'realistic' religious images, because the inner versus outer, mind versus body contrast prompts the development of images with 'marked' characteristics of inwardness versus outwardness. Paradoxically, the development of idols which depict the visible, superficial, features of the human body make possible the abduction of the 'invisible' mind, awareness, and will from the visible image. The more materially realistic the image, at least in certain key respects, the more spiritually it is seen.

It would be misleading to suppose, though, that the need to articulate visually the contrast between inner mind and outer body leads ineluctably towards representational art forms, though this happens. My argument is that the indexical form of the mind/body contrast, is primordially *spatial and concentric*; the mind is 'internal' enclosed, surrounded, by something (the body) that is

non-mind. Now we begin to see why idols are so often hollow envelopes, with enclosures, like the hollow *mauri* stones, or the hollow sorcery-images we encountered in the preceding discussion of Polynesian idolatry (above, Sects. 7.5–6).

It is often the case that the human body (with an implied interior indicated by orifices) is used to index this primordial inside–outside relation. But there are other ways of achieving this as well. Suppose, instead of drilling 'eye' holes in the spherical idol, we leave it as it is, but place it in a box, an ark. At this moment it becomes possible to think of the spherical idol in a different way; we can easily suppose that the stone inside the box is the locus of agency, intention, etc. and the ark is the sacred 'vessel' which, body-like, contains and protects this locus of agency. Once the idol is in the ark we have, once more, the physical configuration necessary for thinking of the stone as 'opposed to' something else in the way that the mind (interior) is opposed to the body (exterior). The 'homunculus-effect', in other words, can be achieved without anthropomorphizing the index, so long as the crucial feature of concentricity and 'containment' is preserved.

#### 7.10. *The Animation of Idols: The Externalist Strategy*

There are thus two basic strategies for converting (conceptually) stocks and stones into quasi-persons in artefact-form. The first of these strategies consists of animating the idol by simply stipulating for it a role as a social other. The second consists of providing it with a homunculus, or space for a homunculus, or turning it into a homunculus within some larger entity. I shall discuss the 'internal' animation of idols in the next section. Here is an example which gives us a good view of the externalist strategy in action. Contrary to what one might expect, the most important images of the gods of ancient Egypt were not the monumental carved figures that have survived to this day, but much smaller, conveniently heftable, idols, as the following description makes clear:

in the temple of Hathor at Denderah, there were, among others, the following sacred statues: Hathor, painted wood, copper, inlaid eyes, height 3 ells, 4 spans, and 2 fingers; Isis, painted acacia wood, eyes inlaid, height 1 ell; Horus, painted wood, inlaid eyes, height 1 ell and 1 finger. The largest, therefore, was scarcely of life size; the smallest only about 16 inches in height. The reason for this insignificance in size was that for certain acts of worship the images had to be easily portable.

The paltry size and material of these little wooden dolls were, however, atoned for by the splendour of their abode, and the reverence with which they were served. The shrine of the god was in the innermost chamber of the temple, which was in total darkness save on the entry of the officiating priest bearing artificial light. It consisted generally of a single block of stone, often, especially in the later periods, of enormous size, hewn into a house which surrounded with impenetrable walls the image of the

god. The doorway in front was closed with bronze doors, or doors of wood overlaid with bronze or gold-silver alloy . . . after the daily ritual had been gone through, these doors were closed, fastened with a bolt, and then tied with a cord bearing a clay seal . . . Within the shrine, the image of the god reposed in a little ark, or portable inner shrine, which could be lifted out and placed upon the barque in which the deity made his journeys abroad on stated occasions.

The daily ritual of service to the image was in its main outlines the same in all the temples . . . the procedure was as follows. Early in the morning the priest of the day, after lustrations, entered the Holy of Holies, bearing incense in a censer, and stood before the shrine. He first loosened the door that closed the shrine, repeating as he did so a stereotyped phrase: 'The cord is broken, and the seal loosened,—I come, I bring thee the eye of Horus [i.e. light, the sun]' . . . As the doors of the shrine opened and the god was revealed, the priest prostrated himself and chanted 'The gates of heaven are opened, and the nine gods appear radiant, the god N is exalted upon his great throne . . . Thy beauty belongs to thee, O god N; thou naked one, clothe thyself.' Taking his vessels, the priest then began to perform the daily toilet of the god. He sprinkled water on the image twice from four jugs, clothed it with linen wrappings of white, green, red, and brown, and painted it with green and black paint. Finally, he fed the image, by laying before it bread, beef, geese, wine, and water, and decorated its table with flowers. (Blaikie 1914: 132)

It is not hard to see the applicability of the externalist theory to the cult of the idols in the temples of ancient Egypt, cited above. The daily round to which the idols were subjected, being woken in the morning, washed, made up, served breakfast, and so on, imposed agency on them willy-nilly by making them patients in social exchanges which imply and confer agency necessarily. There is no 'as if' or make-believe about such performances; they would be pointless unless these life-endowing rituals were literal transpositions of the means in which we induce agency in social others in human form, such as children.

Indeed, it is very hard to read this description without being reminded of children's play with dolls. This is not altogether an appropriate comparison, except to the extent that children do not 'play' with dolls but actually make a cult of, or worship them. 'Play' behaviour is supposed to take place in conceptual brackets, which say 'this is play—so I am not doing what I appear to be doing' (Bateson 1936). Children, outside the temple, might play at being priests, and pretend to worship toy gods, but this type of make-believe is entirely distinct from the activities of the priests themselves. They were not at play, but at work. They were serious.

Nor is it quite right to say that their actions were 'symbolic'—though of course everything rather depends on how the word 'symbolic' is understood. Offering food to the image of the god is not a pantomime or dumb-show, as if there were some alternative way of feeding a god which was being alluded to, but not performed. Receiving food offerings is how the Egyptian gods ate their food. This is not to say that the act of feeding the god by placing an offering before it is not symbolic in the sense of 'meaningful', but the 'meaning'

stemmed from the real (causal) outcome of this act of feeding; the god was no longer hungry. The essence of idolatry is that it permits *real physical interactions* to take place between persons and divinities. To treat such interactions as 'symbolic' is to miss the point. Images can be employed in worship in non-idolatrous ways, as aids to piety but not physical channels of access to the divinity—the Christian use of religious images is supposed to belong to this category, though in practice many Christians' use of images is *de facto* idolatrous, if not admitted to be so. We can only distinguish between idolatrous and non-idolatrous use of religious images because idolatry is in an important sense not 'symbolic' at all, whereas the use of images as aids to piety, rather than physical vehicles of divinity, is symbolic. The Egyptian ceremonies just adduced belong firmly in the category of idolatrous practices, and are thus real, practical, services performed for divine social others in image-form, not symbolic acts.

All the same, the way in which these idols were enmeshed in the structured routines of daily life can only provide a partial answer to the problem of idolatry. There are other features of the situation which seem to indicate the operation of different factors, which cannot be accounted for in terms of a purely 'externalist' notion of agency. For instance, as noted above, the purely externalist theory of agency makes no stipulations as to the physical or visual form of the object (index) which is treated as an agent. These Egyptian idols were, in fact, quite realistic representations of the outward appearance of human persons. The externalist theory of agency is not in a position to differentiate between 'iconic' idols, such as these, and 'aniconic' idols, such as stones, or the planks of wood, known as *baitulia*, which the Greeks worshipped (as Aphrodite, Zeus, etc.) before, and alongside, their subsequent cult of sculptural images of these gods. This indifference towards the iconic properties of idols is, in a sense, a point in favour of the 'externalist' theory; unless agency were a purely externally endowed property of idols, unconnected with their physical substance or form, then it is hard to see how the worship of aniconic idols such as stones or planks of wood would be possible. The externalist theory has got to be at least half-right, for this reason. Yet it cannot be wholly correct, or the impetus towards 'shaping' the idol—not just treating it as an agent, but making it look like or share physical attributes with a 'prototype'—would be inexplicable. Here one has to introduce the other theory of agency, the 'internalist' or homunculus theory. While it may be true that the agency of these idols derived in part from the way in which they were inserted into the relational texture of 'external' social praxis and language, this 'passive' agency is certainly not the whole story. These particular idols were in fact highly iconic, and moreover, the description given (by Blaikie, but deriving directly from Herodotus) emphasizes particularly their 'inlaid eyes'. In the next section I will describe in detail the consecration of contemporary idols, which crucially involves the animation of images by providing them with eyes. Eyes are, of all

body orifices, those which signify 'interiority' (i.e. the possession of mind and intentionality) most immediately (see the previous discussion of *darshan*). The particular attention paid to the eyes of these idols arises, not from the need to represent the body realistically, but from the need to represent the body in such a way as to imply that the body is *only* a body, and that a much more important entity, the mind, is immured within it.

Thus, it is equally important to note that the animation of these idols was being achieved, simultaneously, in a quite different way. The description given above emphasizes, besides the realistic form of the idols, their extraordinary and impressive surroundings. They were kept, except when being served by the priests, in a box or ark, which, in turn, was kept in the darkest and most central sanctuary of a vast temple complex, consisting of innumerable lesser sanctuaries, shrines, courtyards, barracks and workshops, etc. If we situate ourselves, not inside the innermost sanctuary, but outside in the courtyard, with the ordinary worshippers (who rarely if ever saw the idols themselves) then we may readily imagine that the idols (immured in the temple complex, and animating it like a giant body) come to stand for 'mind' and interiority not just by physical resemblance to the human body, but by becoming the animating 'minds' of the huge, busy, and awe-inspiring temple complex. Just as the 'mind' is conceived of as an interior person, a homunculus, within the body, so the idols are homunculi within the 'body' of the temple. And it is true that idols, even very representational idols, are invariably presented in a setting, a temple, a shrine or an ark, a sacred space of some kind, which has the effect of emphasizing their interiority, their secludedness and (relative) inaccessibility, as well as their majesty. The seclusion of the idol has, automatically, the effect of motivating the abduction of agency, on the basis of the equation:

idol : temple :: mind : body.

These reflections lead towards a relativization of the contrast between the external and internal conceptions of agency, sentience, etc. with which I began this section. It is obvious that the homunculus, or 'inner person' conception of agency essentially reduplicates, within the human person, the relation which always exists between a human person and a texture of external relationships, but within the interior domain, within the body. This imagery leads to the 'homunculus within a homunculus' problem which besets this type of theory, according to its critics. But this 'problem' is also an advantage, in that it tends to blur the distinction between the 'induced' kind of animacy which is imposed externally on the idol by enmeshing it in praxis, language, social relations and routines, and the 'internal' agency which the idol is supposed to possess as a 'mind' encapsulated in a surrounding body. Just as the idol, externally, is at the centre of a concentric array of relations between persons, so the idol, internally, can be seen as a concentric array of relations between the 'inner' persons—

the pandemonium of homunculi—of which it is composed. Let us turn to an example which reveals this in a particularly graphic way.

### 7.11. Concentric Idols and Fractal Personhood

To exhibit the animation of the idol through the congruence between the external relational context within which the idol is set, and the internal nexus of relations between the mind and the body (as a relation between inner and outer 'persons') consider the Polynesian example in Fig. 7.11/1, a carving from Rurutu in the Austral Isles, which has been in London since 1822 and which can be seen at the Museum of Mankind. This carving, in Rurutu called A'a, but more commonly identified as Tangaroa, is arguably the finest extant piece of Polynesian sculpture. Almost every other Rurutan idol was consigned to the flames by the missionaries, but this one was preserved, initially to drum up subscriptions for the London Missionary Society so that they could afford to destroy other, no doubt equally fine, carvings elsewhere.

The most striking attribute of this carving is the way in which the features of the god are represented by little figures which repeat, in miniature, the overall form of the god as a whole. This god sprouts little gods all over its surface: mathematically, it is akin to the type of figure known as a 'fractal', a figure which demonstrates the property of *self-similarity* at different scales of magnification/minification. Moreover, besides being a god made of many gods, the A'a is also a box or an ark. It is hollow inside, having a lid at the back, and it originally contained twenty-four or more additional, smaller images of Rurutan gods, which were removed and destroyed in 1822. For all we know, the gods inside the A'a were themselves hollow, though I think not. But whereas we think of boxes as less significant than their contents, the A'a, even though it is a box, is the primary image of Rurutan divinity, encompassing and subordinating all the subordinate gods who sprout from its surface and once resided in its interior. According to contemporary Rurutan traditions, the exterior gods encompassed by the A'a correspond to the kinship units (clans) comprising Rurutan society as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Many other important Polynesian

<sup>4</sup> Curiously though, contemporary Rurutans, according to the ethnographer Alain Babadzan have a quite different theory about the gods which, they know, were once inside the A'a. According to the Rurutan elders, there were three gods inside the A'a when it was made, by a Hero named Amaiterai. Amaiterai made the A'a after visiting a city none other than London, present resting-place of the A'a, which he reached in fulfilment of a species of knightly quest, imposed on him in order to win the hand of the adopted daughter of the King of Rurutu, who had been promised to his brother. In London Amaiterai encountered the God of Wisdom (who later was the God of the Christians, brought to Rurutu by the missionaries) whose image he replicated in the form of the famous A'a. The gods inside the A'a were three Polynesian gods originating in London: Room-etua-ore, alias Te Atua Metua, alias God the Father; Aura-roiteata, alias Te Atua tamaiti, alias God the Son; and Te atua aiteroa, alias Te Atua Varua Maita'i, alias God the Holy Spirit. In other words, the A'a is the Tabernacle in which the Trinity arrived on Rurutu, by the agency of a Rurutan hero, long before the missionaries themselves arrived. The A'a is in London, but it is present on Rurutu in the form of Christian belief.

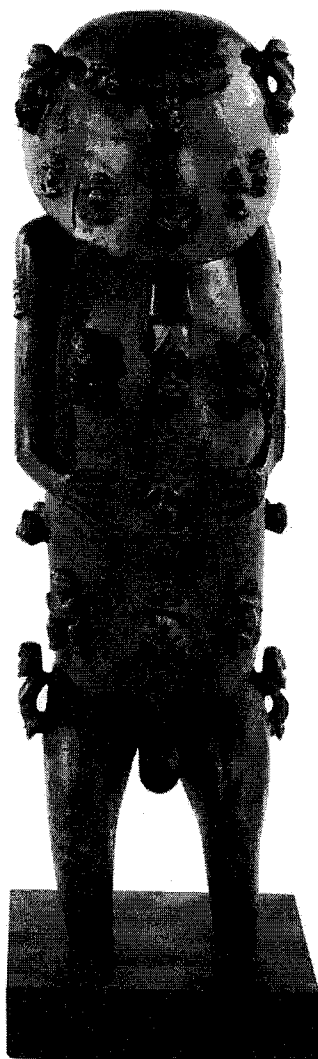


FIG. 7.11/1. The fractal god: A'a from Ruruta. Source: The British Museum, MM 011977



FIG. 7.11/2. Genealogical personhood objectified: a staff god from the Cook Islands. Source: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, Z 6099

carvings represent personhood in the form of genealogy, as for instance the related carving, a 'staff god', from the Cook Islands shown in Fig. 7.11/2.

What is particularly remarkable about the A'a is the explicit way in which this image of a 'singular' divinity represents divinity as an assemblage of relations between (literally) homunculi. In so doing, the A'a obviates the contrast between one and many, and also between inner and outer. The surface of this image consists of amalgamated replications of itself, or alternatively, a succession of budding protuberances. Internally, the image consists of itself, replicated on a smaller scale, within its own interior cavity. As such, it images both the notion of personhood as the aggregate of external relations (the outcome of genealogy, fanning out in time and space) and at the same time the notion of personhood as the possession of an interior person, a homunculus, or, in this instance, an assemblage of homunculi. We cannot individuate the A'a in the way in which we normally individuate persons by identifying the boundaries of their person with the spatial boundaries of their bodies, for the A'a has no such boundaries; it is like a Russian doll, and in this respect, it irresistibly recalls the lines in *Peer Gynt* in which the hero compares the (moral, biographical) person to an onion, composed of a succession of concentric layers:

—Why, you're simply an onion—  
and now, my good Peter, I'm going to peel you  
and tears and entreaties won't help in the least.  
[*Taking an onion, he strips it skin by skin*]  
There goes the battered outer layer—  
that's the shipwrecked man on the dinghy's keel.  
This layer's the passenger—scrawny and thin,  
But still with a bit of a taste of Peer Gynt.  
Next underneath comes the gold-mining Self—  
the juice, if it ever *had* any is gone.  
This rough skin here, with the hardened patch  
is the fur-trapping hunter from Hudson's Bay.  
We'll throw that away without a word.  
Next the archaeologist, short but vigorous;  
and here's the prophet, juicy and fresh—  
it stinks of lies, as the saying goes,  
and would bring tears to an honest man's eyes.  
This skin, curled and effeminate,  
is the gentleman living his life of pleasure.  
The next looks unhealthy and streaked with black—  
black could mean either priests or niggers . . .  
[*He peels off several layers at once.*]  
What an incredible number of layers!  
Don't we get to the heart of it soon?

[He pulls the whole onion to pieces.]

No, I'm damned if we do. Right down to the centre  
there's nothing but layers—smaller and smaller . . .

Nature is witty!

(Ibsen 1966: 191)

Peer Gynt's onion is also a fractal, of the same essentially concentric form as the A'a. Ibsen's idea, in utilizing this image is to show that there is no ultimate basis to Peer Gynt's personhood; he is made of layers of biographical (relational) experience accreted together, for which none the less, he must take sole responsibility. Perhaps it is not such a vast step to pass from Peer Gynt trapped in the aporias of nineteenth-century materialism and individualism to the theological impulse which motivates the A'a, which depicts the divine creator, the mind of which the world is the body, in the form of a body composed of other bodies, *ad infinitum*.

This idea is given contemporary expression in the work on personhood in Melanesia, by writers such as Marilyn Strathern (1988; cf. Gell 1998) and Roy Wagner (1991). Wagner, in particular, has developed the notion of 'Fractal Personhood', which he mobilizes to overcome the typically 'Western' oppositions between individual (ego) and society, parts and wholes, singular and plural. The notion of genealogy, which is so signally expressed in our two Polynesian examples (both idols, of course), is the key trope for making plurality singular and singularity plural. Any individual person is 'multiple' in the sense of being the precipitate of a multitude of genealogical relationships, each of which is instantiated in his/her person; and conversely, an aggregate of persons, such as a lineage or tribe, is 'one person' in consequence of being one genealogy: the original ancestor is now instantiated, not as one body but as the many bodies into which his one body has transformed itself. Wagner writes:

A fractal person is never a unit standing in relation to an aggregate, or an aggregate standing in relation to a unit, but always an entity with relationship integrally implied. Perhaps the most concrete illustration of integral relationship comes from the generalised notion of reproduction and genealogy. People exist reproductively by being 'carried' as part of another, and 'carry' or engender others by making themselves genealogical or reproductive 'factors' of these others. A genealogy is thus an enchainment of people, as indeed persons would be seen to 'bud' out of one another in a speeded-up cinematic depiction of human life. Person as human being and person as lineage or clan are equally arbitrary sectionings or identifications of this enchainment, different projections of its fractality. But then enchainment through bodily reproduction is itself merely one of a number of instantiations of integral relationship, which is also manifest, for instance, in the commonality of shared language. (1991: 163)

From the anthropological point of view, if not the philosophical one, the solution to the conflict between the external notion of agency, deriving from insertion in the social milieu, and the 'internalist' theory of agency, deriving

from an inner subjective self, is to be sought in this 'enchainment', the structural congruence between the inner self (which is relational) and the outer self (which is equally relational, but on an expanded scale). The 'genealogical theory of mind' which is explored, particularly, in Strathern's work (1988) seems perfectly expressed in the form of the A'a.

But this artwork, and its Polynesian cousins, is not unique. In fact, the possession of 'significant interiors' is a very common feature of sculptural works specifically intended for cult use, rather than as mere representations. Sculptural images which open up, like the A'a, to reveal other images, were manufactured in ancient Greece, and provided Alcibiades with a simile for his mentor, Socrates (as narrated by Plato in the *Symposium* 213–15):

I am here to speak in praise of Socrates, Gentlemen, and I will just do it by means of similes. Oh yes, he will perhaps think it is only for a bit of fun, but my simile will be for truth, not for fun. I say then, that he is exactly like a Silenos, the little figures that you see in statuaries' shops; the craftsmen make them, they hold panpipes or pipes, and they can be opened up down the middle or folded back, and then they show inside them, images of the gods. And I say further, that he is like Marsyas the Satyr [who was flayed by Apollo] . . .

Here the contrast is between the ugly exterior (body) and the divine interior (mind) of Socrates. The same kind of image was also developed in Christian cult art, though with a different theological implication. A class of holy statues called 'vierges ouvantes' was made in the Middle Ages, though few have survived into the present, perhaps because these images were particularly conducive to idolatry, as the following passage from Camille's work of *The Gothic Idol* shows. 'Our Lady of Bolton' which used, before the Reformation, to stand in a chapel of Durham cathedral was:

a marveyulous lyvely and bewtifull Image of the picture of our Ladie, so calld Lady of Boultone, which picture was made to open with gymmers [or two leaves] from her breasts downwards. And within this saide image was wroughte and pictured the immagine of our Saviour, merveylouse fynlie gilted holdyng uppe his hands, and holdyng betwixt his hands a fair large Crucifix of Christ, all of gold, the which Crucifix was to be taken fourthe every Good Fridaie, and every man did creepe unto it that was in that Church at that daye. And every principall daie the said image was opened, that every man might see pictured within her the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost, most curiouslye and fynely gilted. (Camille 1989: 230–1)

Camille illustrates a German example of such a 'vierge ouvante' (Fig. 7.11/3). 'Our Lady of Bolton' was related to the more common type of Christian holy image in the form of a reliquary, in that she was, besides an image of the Virgin, a container for the golden crucifix which was paraded on Good Friday. (For an Indian parallel to a 'vierge ouvante' cf. Fig. 7.11/4 showing Hanuman, the monkey god, opening his breast to reveal Rama and Sita.) Such images were controversial even when they were still in common use: Camille quotes



FIG. 7.11/3. 'Vierge ouvrente'. Source: Camille 1989: pl. 124. Nuremberg Germanisches National Museum. Painted wood. H. 126 cm

the theologian Gerson, in 1402, denouncing 'Carmelite' images which 'have the Trinity in their abdomen as if the entire Trinity assumed flesh in the Virgin Mary . . .' (1989: 232). These images were all too animate, they smacked of necromancy rather than religion. Later on in the same book, Camille shows how reliquary heads, containing the bones of saints, could become objects of deep official suspicion, especially the silver and golden heads supposedly worshipped in pagan ceremonies by the Knights Templars, who were suppressed in 1308 as a result (ibid. 271–7). The notorious 'talking head' reputedly devised by Roger Bacon is another variation on the same theme (ibid. 246–7). But the relation between religious art and sorcery runs very deep, we have already seen.

No such opprobrium attached to more ordinary reliquaries in human form, of which there are many famous examples, such as those illustrated and discussed by Freedberg (1989: 92–5, figs. 30–2). This author also remarks on the fact that in the Middle Ages, churches could not be consecrated at all unless they had holy relics installed in them. Just as relics animated the reliquary image, rendering it a particularly holy object (an object with a mind, or perhaps more precisely, a spirit, within it) so the church (fabric) as a whole became a 'body' whose animation also required the insertion of a relic. The normal place for the



FIG. 7.11/4. An Indian parallel to 'vierge ouvrente': the monkey god Hanuman reveals Rama and Sita in his breast. Source: A. Mookerjee (1980), *Ritual Art of India* (London: Thames & Hudson), plate 80. Kalighat school, south Calcutta, c.1850. Gouache on paper

insertion of relics into the fabric of a church was inside the altarpiece, in the altar itself, or buried beneath it.

The insertion of animating relics into images raises a fresh question, however, that of consecration—the management of the transition between the religious image as a 'mere' manufactured thing and a vehicle of power, capable of acting intentionally and responding to the intentions of devotees. We shall consider this aspect of idolatry in the next section.

### 7.12. The Rites of Consecration

It is fair to say that the worship of images or idols is most extensively practised, nowadays, in south Asia, among Hindus and (in a rather more qualified

way) among Buddhists. Here images are still being produced and installed in holy places in great numbers and here it is possible for anthropologists to observe the rites of consecration in detail. I shall therefore conduct the argument of this section with reference to three well-known south Asian examples, the consecration of the idol of Jagganath in Puri (Eschmann *et al.* 1978), the account given by Richard Gombrich (1966) of the installation of a statue of the Buddha in a Sinhalese monastery, and finally, the account given by Michael Allen (1976) of the consecration of the 'living image' of the goddess Taleju (Durga) in Kathmandu.

The images of Jagganath, his brothers, Balabadhra and Subadhra, and his wife Sudarsana in the temple of Puri (Orissa) are among the most revered idols in the whole of India, but, though anthropomorphic, these images are (visually speaking) quite obviously cylindrical sections of tree-trunk, dressed up and equipped with vestigial upper limbs and very, very, large eyes. The images are not old in physical terms, though their design is indeed ancient, since they have to be renewed every twelve, or at most every nineteen years, in the course of a ceremony called *navakalevara*. A detailed description of this ceremony (contributed by G. C. Tripathi) is provided in Eschmann's work on the history and affinities in 'tribal' religion of the Puri Jagganath cult. The tribal affinities of this important Hindu cult are not in doubt; I myself worked in the same region of India (Bastar district, which abuts onto the Orissa highlands to the west) among tribal Muria Gonds, whose images of divinities were aniconic wooden posts, without limbs or eyes, but otherwise highly resembling the Jagganath images, though on a reduced scale (A. Gell 1978; cf. S. Gell 1992).

Tripathi's account of *navakalevara* is a first-rate exercise in ethnographic description, which I cannot unfortunately summarize in any detail. The ceremony of renewal has five phases, as follows:

1. To find out the *daru* (sacred wood) with the prescribed characteristics and to bring it to the temple (involving a sacrifice to ward off evil spirits etc. and to sanctify the tree before felling it);
2. The carving of the wooden structure of the images;
3. The consecration of the images by the insertion of the 'life-substance' (*brahmapadartha*) into them;
4. The burial of the old figures, the funeral and purificatory rites of the Daitas (temple servitors, of low caste);
5. Giving the images their final form by means of several coverings of cloth etc. and by applying paint to them (Eschmann 1978: 230).

I omit the first two phases in this process, except to mention that the efficacy of the images depends, initially, on the auspicious location and form of the *daru* tree (it must grow by water, be surrounded by three mountains, have dark, 'red' bark, a straight trunk, with four branches, etc.). Numerous ceremonies

accompany the felling, transport, and carpentering of the *daru* tree. The images are made by temple servitors of low caste but high ritual privilege, the Daitas, ex-tribals who alone know how to create this type of wooden image, according to precise rules, important aspects of their work being kept secret by them, even from the Brahmin priests. Among the most important of their secrets is the actual nature of the 'life-substance' (*brahmapadartha*) of the images.

The consecration procedure commences simultaneously with the carving of the images, and is first of all conducted by Brahmins. Since the images are still being made, the Brahmins devote their efforts to consecrating a separate piece of *daru* wood, which, divided into four pieces, will become the 'lids' over the cavities in the finished images containing their 'life-substance'. This piece of wood is protected with offerings to evil spirits, then elaborately bathed and purified, then placed to rest on a ritual bed. After this, the spirit of the god Narasimha (of which Jagganath is a form, as well as being a form of Krishna) is induced into the wood by the recitation of mantras on each of its parts (equated with the parts of a body) over a number of days. This invocation procedure is called *nyasadaru*. After this, the ritually treated *daru* wood—and by metonymy, the larger sections of *daru* wood which are at this moment reaching completion as images in the Daitas workshop—is spiritually speaking endowed with life, flesh, blood, sense organs, etc. It can then be cut into four lid-pieces to fit into the four images.

The crucial ceremony however, is not conducted by the Brahmins but by the Daitas. These take the 'old' images from the temple, and strip from them the many layers of resin-impregnated cloth with which they are bound. They can then reach the compartments inside the old images in which their 'life-substance' is secreted.

The Daita entrusted with the job opens the belly of the old image in dead of night with his eyes blindfolded and the hands wrapped up to the elbows so that he may neither see nor feel the *brahmapadartha* of the image. The casket containing the *Brahmapadartha* is then taken out of the old murti [image] and placed in the new one. The cavity of the new image is then covered with one of the four pieces of the *Nyasdaru* [sacred wood] which has been consecrated for about two weeks by the Brahmins. (Tripathi in Eschmann 1978: 260)

Nobody really knows, except the Daitas, exactly of what object or substance the *brahmapadartha* is composed. It may be a relic, a portion of a wooden Jagganath supposedly incinerated (but not completely) by the Muslim iconoclasts under Kala Pahada in 1568. In the opinion of the Brahmins, it is a *salagrama*, a type of sacred stone, usually an oval river-pebble from the Himalayas containing fossilized ammonites, and/or cavities (see Fig. 7.12/1 from Mookerjee and Khanna 1977).

The Daitas now perform burial rites over the deceased images which have lost their life-substance. They weep and mourn, observing mortuary pollution restrictions for ten days. However, they derive benefit from this, in that they

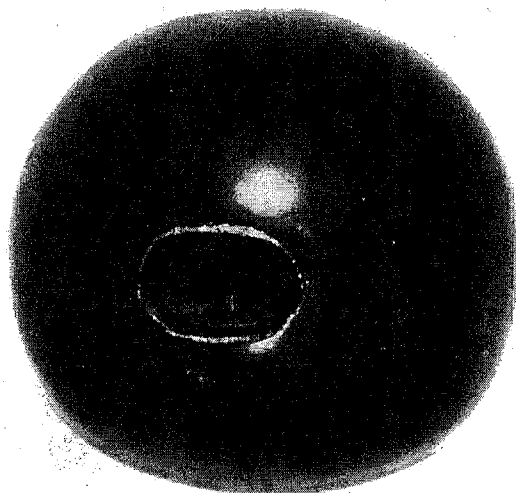


FIG. 7.12/1. 'World-seed':  
salagrama. Source: Mookerjee  
and Khanna 1977

are allowed to keep the cloth wrappings of the old images, which they cut into strips and sell to pilgrims. These pieces of cloth confer protection and good fortune on the purchasers.<sup>5</sup>

The final phase of consecration now occurs. Another caste of temple servants, said to be Kayasthas (a low form of Brahmins) undertake the wrapping of the images—who, in wooden form are just 'skeletons'—with their 'flesh', that is, with cloth and paint. The wooden 'bones' are first of all 'washed' by being impregnated with camphor oil. This gives the bones 'marrow'. Then, apparently, long red threads are wound around them, representing 'blood vessels'. After this, many strips of red cloth (for flesh) impregnated with resin (blood) and starch (fat, semen) are added, till the image begins to assume its final form. The outer wrappings are the image's skin.

Finally, the images are painted by craftsmen skilled in this art (*chitakara*). The very last act, which finalizes the consecration of the new images, is the painting in of the pupils of the immense eyes of the images, which is done by the Brahmin priests themselves, reciting Vedic mantras the while. After giving the last stroke of paint to the eyes of the images, the Brahmins give each a bath, to remove the pollution from the previous contact the images have had with low-caste carpenters, painters, etc. This is done not by bathing the image directly, but bathing the images' images, cast in large bronze mirrors kept for

<sup>5</sup> This prerogative recalls the 'feather exchange' following the decortication of the Tahitian *to'o* (7.6 above). The *mana* of Jagganath is disseminated via his exuviae, his body-parts, *jutha* (leavings) etc. Incidentally, the same is true in the Egyptian example discussed in 7.10 above. Every time the idols' clothes were renewed, the discarded garments were distributed to important persons, to use to wrap their own corpses in as mummy-cloths. Whereas in Polynesia and India, the cloth/feather exuviae of the god went to benefit the living, in Egypt they benefited the dead in the afterlife.

this purpose. After this, the new images are paraded and installed in their place in the temple with great pomp and ceremony (Tripathi, *ibid.* 262–4).

Two aspects of these interesting ceremonies are of particular concern to us. The consecration of the images evidently proceeds according to two parallel strategies simultaneously; first of all, the strategy of the Daitas, which focuses particularly on the placing of the life-substance *inside* the image, in the cavity, and secondly, the strategy of the Brahmins, which proceeds in the inverse direction, through the apostrophization of the representative billet of wood with life-endowing mantras (the phase of *nyasadaru*) and the application of the final stroke of paint to the pupils of the images' eyes. In other words, the Daitas' procedure could be called the inside-out procedure, while the Brahmins' procedure is the outside-in procedure. Both are necessary and mutually complementary.

The Daitas' procedure, is, perhaps, the more primitive, in that it seeks to render a physical analogy between the possession of a 'soul' and the possession of an interior cavity inhabited by a homunculus. Moreover, it is 'genealogical' because it establishes a kinship link between the old images and the new ones through the transmission of substance between 'generations' of images. The Brahmin strategy, for the most part, is more abstract than this; rather than fashion the image, they address it with mantras, animating it externally through 'the magical power of words' (Tambiah 1985). We can easily see that these two strategies correspond exactly to the two strands previously identified in the philosophy of mind and agency. The Daitas' strategy is the 'internalist' one, the Brahmins' the 'externalist' one. But it would be false to suppose that these two strategies are independent. In the end, the Brahmins concede to the internalist strategy to the extent that their final act is one of physical modification of the image, not mere apostrophization. Their culminating act of painting in the pupils of the eyes of the image is mimetic and iconic. Though the eyes of these images are not actually transparent, the pupils of any eyes are never 'things' but always *holes*, orifices, giving access to the hidden interior within which 'mind' resides. The surface of an idol is not an impermeable barrier, but a means of access to this essential interior.

In fact, the images of Jagganath and his companions are a series of 'skins' just like Peer Gynt's onion, with the same implication that the *ultimate centre can never be reached*. The outermost (relevant) skin of the idols consists of the temple of Puri itself (which is, of course, a microcosmos) which is filled with sacred words and odours—verbal and olfactory skins (cf. Anzieu 1989: 59). The idols reside in the centre of, and animate, this reverberating microcosmos, and are animated by the incessant flow of sacred words. Proceeding towards the centre we approach the idols through a 'social skin', the throng of pilgrims and attendant temple servants and priests, who, by their attentions and devotions, animate the idols occupying the cynosure of a great assembly of souls. The idols themselves are enshrined at the centre, framed on their altars, adorned with masses of flowers and jewellery, presiding over their material

wealth of heaped-up offerings, their external skins in the form of *possessions*. We cannot approach or touch the idols, so we can proceed further on our journey towards the centre in imagination only. What we see are their visible skins, but these are only outer wrappings. These wrappings consist of numerous layers, their inner skins of flesh, fat, semen, blood, bone, marrow. These we may penetrate, one by one, or gazing into the enormous eyes of the idols, we can enter their bodies directly. But what is there, concealed beneath, behind, the inky pools? Inside, there is a primordial cavity, an internal skin. And inside the cavity, an animating presence of some kind. Conceptually, we know that, in fact, this cavity contains a casket, another inner-inner skin. And what is in the casket? Even the man who placed it there does not know perhaps; he has certainly never seen its contents. We believe that there is a *salagrama* there, a sacred stone or world-seed. If so, what is in the *salagrama*? The *salagrama* itself has an interior, and, holes leading into this interior (cf. Fig. 7.12/1). We must enter these holes. And then what would we find? Who can say—and does it matter?—for by now it is apparent that the animation of the image is not a matter of finding the ‘sacred centre’ at all. What matters is only the reduplication of skins, outwards towards the macrocosm and inwards towards the microcosm, and the fact that all these skins are structurally homologous; there is no definitive ‘surface’, there is no definitive ‘inside’, but only a ceaseless passage in and out, and that it is here, in this traffic to and fro, that the mystery of animation is solved.

The consecration of an image of the Buddha in Sri Lanka, described by Gombrich (1966; cf. the discussion in Freedberg 1989: 84–7, 95) follows a similar pattern, though reduced. Buddhists, especially monks, are not supposed to worship idols, but showing respect to images of the Buddha, by making offerings and gestures of submission, is one way to acquire merit and secure a good rebirth, if not a very significant one. Once again, it proves to be the case that images of the Buddha are, if they are to have any religious importance, also reliquaries. Minute portions of the Buddha’s bodily remains are placed inside images to render them efficacious. However, this does not consecrate them, according to Gombrich; consecration is accomplished by the craftsman, who paints in the eyes of the image in the course of a special ceremony called *netra pinkama* the ‘eye ceremony’ (1966: 25).

The ceremony presents some interesting contrasts to the consecration of the Jagganath images, as well as many points of continuity. The Brahmin/Daita relationship is partially inverted in the ritual division of labour in the Sinhalese Buddhist consecration ceremonies. In Puri, it is the Daita who animates the image by putting ‘life-substance’ into it, and the Brahmin priest who paints in the eyes; in Sri Lanka, on the other hand, it is the monk (abbot) who places the relic into the Buddha statue, and the lay craftsman who paints in its eyes. This is a precise reflection of the difference between the Buddha (a dead human being with morally supernatural characteristics) and the Hindu gods, who are

non-human immortals. A Buddha statue celebrates the possibility of ‘a good death’ and monks are semi-dead individuals who aspire to the ultimate good-death condition. Consequently it is only appropriate that the handling of Buddha relics, which are pieces of a dead body, should be assigned to monks, who are semi-dead themselves, and who of course always preside over funerals (but not births and marriages) in Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka (or Thailand; cf. Tambiah 1985). In a sense, then, what the relic does is make the Buddha statue like the Buddha, by making it ‘dead’ through the insertion of a ‘death-substance’—in the rather paradoxical sense that Buddha-hood implies death-in-life. However, one can see that this ritual procedure hardly amounts to the ‘animation’ of the image. Gombrich understands this as the means of ‘legitimizing’ the statue as a Buddha image, so that from the monkish perspective no taint of idolatry arises. For the laity things are otherwise. Buddha is really a god, and approaching the statue of the Buddha, the lay worshipper, immersed in life and sin, seeks personal reassurance through communion with the Buddha’s living presence, conveyed through the eyes (see above on the Hindu equivalent of this form of worship, *darshan*). Because only lay people are ‘superstitious’ enough to engage in such theologically decried acts of worship, it is the lay craftsman who is charged with the task of animating the Buddha image.

The ceremony is regarded by its performers as very dangerous and is surrounded with tabus. It is performed by the craftsman who made the statue, after several hours of ceremonies to ensure that no evil will come to him. This evil, which is the object of all Sinhalese healing rituals, is imprecisely conceptualised, but results from making mistakes in ritual, violating tabus, or otherwise arousing the malevolent attention of a supernatural being, who usually conveys the evil by a gaze (*bālma*). The craftsman paints in the eyes at an auspicious moment and is left alone in the closed temple with only his colleagues, while everyone else stands clear even of the outer door. Moreover, the craftsman does not dare to look the statue in the face, but keeps his back to it and paints sideways or over his shoulder while looking into a mirror, which catches the gaze of the image he is bringing to life. As soon as the painting is done the craftsman himself has a dangerous gaze. He is led out blindfolded and the covering is only removed from his eyes when they will first fall upon something which he then symbolically destroys with a sword stroke. (Gombrich 1966: 24–5) [This could be an animal, such as a bull, but a pot, or a tree which exudes sap can be substituted.]

The detail of the mirror recalls the use of bronze mirrors by the Brahmin priests of Puri to ‘bathe’ the images by splashing water over their reflections. But the Puri Brahmins are unafraid to look at the images directly while painting in their eyes. Unlike the eyes of Jagganath, the eyes of the Buddha, when first opened, inflict death on the very person who performs the opening (a case of Artist-A → Artist-P; see above, Sect. 3.11). The craftsman must thereupon slay some creature in order not to die himself. This is very far from theologically Buddhist, and in olden times, the craftsman was dressed as a

'king' while performing the ceremony, that is to say, as the negation of a monk, a violent, worldly figure, who by sacrificing religious merit himself, allows others (monks, devotees) to achieve it.

Freedberg (1989: 95), commenting on Richard Gombrich in his magnificent treatise on the reception of religious and other types of images, raises a very basic question. Are images such as these powerful and efficacious (religiously) because of the ceremonies of consecration which have endowed them with significant, occult, characteristics, or is it because they are, first and foremost, images, linked by the power of *mimesis* to the deities they represent? Citing the support of Gadamer, he opts to assign primacy to representation. He argues that images work because they have intrinsic signifying-functions, which can be separated from the kind of efficacy possessed by religious objects (such as relics) which have not been shaped and formed by art into the semblance of persons, deities, etc. Such a point of view is necessary, and no doubt proper, for the art historian, who has to distinguish the 'power of images' from the power of mere unformed things, however sacred and sacrificing their origins. The anthropologist is in a slightly different position, however. The 'objects which resemble human beings' with which the anthropologist deals, primarily, are not portraits, effigies, idols, and so forth, but simply human beings themselves. Freedberg's emphasis on the centrality of artistic *mimesis* has, anthropologically, to be set in the context in which the 'representation' of a human being, or indeed a deity, is most commonly undertaken, not by any kind of effigy, but by a human actor playing a role. Churches may be stuffed with images of Christ, but the primary enactment of Christ in Christian worship is undertaken by the priest, who plays Christ and serves as Christ's image in performing the mass and uttering Christ's words. This is not to dismiss Freedberg's question, to which I will return in the next section, but before leaving the subject of consecration, it is interesting to compare the two consecration sequences we have examined, with a third, in which the 'index' of the divinity is not a carved image at all, but a human being.

*Kumaripuja*, the worship of the goddess (primarily a form of Durga) in the form of a young virgin girl, is widely disseminated in India, and is a particular feature of the religious system of the Newars of the Kathmandu valley, where the cult has been the subject of a detailed study by Michael Allen (1976). There are some nine or ten living goddesses in the Newar region, of whom the most important is the one traditionally associated with the royal household. The virgin girl is a form of the fierce royal deity, Taleju, who herself is a form of Durga, the violent and erotic goddess in the Hindu pantheon, the slayer of the buffalo-demon who rides on a lion and brandishes a sword. Allen's analysis concentrates on the paradox whereby a virgin, premenstrual girl comes to represent so fearsome a divinity, but what concerns us is only the mechanics of her divinization.

Virgin-worship can, meanwhile, be distinguished from the more common type of divine (or demonic) possession which is found in India. Possession by

the deity, in this form, is temporary and generally ecstatic; the medium goes into trance and becomes a 'horse' for the deity, making utterances in the person of the deity, and 'playing' for a while (dancing, swinging on a swing, etc.; cf. Gell 1978). There is no suggestion of ecstatic trance in the case of the *kumari*. This position is semi-permanent; once consecrated (at the age of 2 or 3), a *kumari* is and remains the goddess in person until the moment of deconsecration which transpires when certain 'negative signs' arrive—loss of milk teeth in theory, in practice, menstruation. The *kumari* comes from a particular caste, who are Buddhists, traditionally attached to the monasteries of Kathmandu which were disbanded by the present royal dynasty. She is, in caste terms, non-polluting but somewhat outside the Hindu hierarchical system. A candidate for *kumari*-hood must be old enough to walk and talk, of unblemished appearance, having lost no milk teeth, etc. Her horoscope must be auspicious, especially with regard to the king. Here is Allen's account of the circumstances of her installation, which occur at the end of Dasain (Dassara) the festival of Durga:

At nightfall eight buffaloes representing the demon are killed by having their throats slit so that the blood jets high towards the shrine that contains the Taleju icon. A few hours later at about midnight a further 54 buffaloes and 54 goats are killed in a similar manner. As may well be imagined, the small courtyard [of the Taleju temple] is by then awash with blood . . . At this point, usually about 1.00 A.M. the small *Kumari*-elect is brought to the entrance. She is supposed to walk by herself, in a clockwise direction around the raised edge until she reaches the bloody Taleju shrine. She must enter it, still maintaining a perfectly calm demeanour, and if all is well she is then taken upstairs to a small room for the installation ceremony . . . after the usual purificatory and other preliminary rites, the chief priest performs the main ceremony in which he removes from the girl's body all of her previous life's experience so that the spirit of Taleju may enter a perfectly pure being. The girl sits naked in front of the priest while he purifies each of her sensitive body areas in turn by reciting a mantra and by touching each area with a small bundle of such pure things as grass, tree bark and leaves. The six sensitive parts are her eyes, throat, breasts, navel, vagina and vulva. As he removes the impurities the girl is said to steadily become redder and redder as the spirit of the goddess enters into her.

At this stage the girl is dressed and made up with *Kumari* hairstyle, red *tika*, third eye, jewellery, etc., and then sits on her beautifully carved wooden throne on the seat of which the priest has painted the powerful *sri yantra mandala* of Taleju. She also holds the sword of Taleju and it is at this point that the final and complete transformation takes place. It is worth noting that though from now until her disqualification some years later she will be continuously regarded as *Kumari*, it is also believed that it is only when fully made up and sitting on her throne that identification is complete. At other times, especially when casually playing with friends, she is partly herself and partly *Kumari*. (Allen 1976: 306-7)

To what extent can one detect a parallelism between the installation of the *kumari* as a 'living icon' of Taleju, and the installation rites of more conventional



FIG. 7.12/2. *Kumari* with painted third eye. Source: Allen 1976

idols? As with each of our previous examples, the consecration of the *kumari* proceeds in two phases, one focusing on her interior and the other focusing on her exterior. The first phase consist of the 'emptying' of the *kumari*-elect of her past life (i.e. her personhood, agency, as a mere human being), which is objectified as the impurities removed from her orifices, eyes, throat, vulva, etc. She becomes a 'hollow vessel' into which, through the extraction of all previous contents, new contents may be drawn; that is, the spirit of the goddess Taleju. This phase, it seems to me, is the equivalent of the phase in the consecration of the Jagannath images in which the Daitas hollow out a cavity in the image and place therein a (foreign) life-substance. But after this has been effected, the transformation, as Allen makes clear, is still not complete.

The second phase of consecration consists of 'wrapping' the *kumari* in the dress of Taleju, and painting her, as well as providing her with the goddess's primary attribute, her sword. Allen does not make much of the fact, but the most striking visual symbol of *kumari*-hood, is actually the extra 'eye', the third eye, which is painted on the middle of her forehead. Of course, the priests do not have to paint in her pupils, as they would if she were a wooden idol—she has very pretty eyes of her own. But they outline her existing eyes with exaggerated make-up, besides adding an enormous painted eye above them (see Fig. 7.12/2). The parallel between the making-up of the *kumari* with an extra eye and the painting-in of the eyes of conventional idols is surely rather striking. In more general terms it is clear that the dressing, painting, enthronement, and provision of weapons correspond to the 'external' strategy of animation which I discussed earlier. Besides which, the *kumari* is externally animated in the usual way by the recitation of sacred words, and the metonymic effect of being seated on a magical design of great power, the *sri yantra mandala*.

In short, there is little to differentiate the consecration of the *kumari* from the consecration of any other idol, except that the *kumari* can walk, and talk,

and is in fact incarnate as a human being rather than a manufactured artefact. From the point of view of the anthropology of art, as outlined in this work, there is an insensible transition between 'works of art' in artefact form and human beings: in terms of the positions they may occupy in the networks of human social agency, they may be regarded as almost entirely equivalent.

### 7.13. Conclusion: From the Individual to the Collective

Thus I conclude this extended discussion of idolatry. I recognize, however, that the particular line I have taken has consistently resulted in the emphasis being placed on sociological, religious, and psychological agency at the expense of aesthetic and artistic agency. And I am left with Freedberg's pertinent objection: to travel too far down this road is to lose sight of art's specificity. While I hold that where each individual work of art (index) is concerned, anthropological analysis is always going to emphasize the relational context at the expense of artistic or aesthetic form, the network of agent/patient relations 'in the vicinity' of the work of art—the same does not apply when we come to consider artworks, not 'individually' but as *collectivities* of artworks. So far, each index that I have subjected to analysis has been regarded as a singular entity, embedded in a particular social context. However, artworks are never just singular entities; they are members of categories of artworks, and their significance is crucially affected by the relations which exist between them, as individuals, and other members of the same category of artworks, and the relationships that exist between this category and other categories of artworks within a stylistic whole—a culturally or historically specific art-production system.

Artworks, in other words, come in families, lineages, tribes, whole populations, just like people. They have relations with one another as well as with the people who create and circulate them as individual objects. They marry, so to speak, and beget offspring which bear the stamp of their antecedents. Artworks are manifestations of 'culture' as a collective phenomenon, they are, like people, enculturated beings. So far, none of the collective issues surrounding the work of art have been considered. In order to broach these issues, it is necessary to adopt a new register. Here, I can make amends for having written so many pages which may have seemed tangential to the study of works of art as normally understood. I shall, for a while, desist from the terminology of 'indexes' and abductions of agency, and suchlike, reverting to a more conventional vocabulary. Because there is one 'conventional' art-theoretical concept which even the most radical anthropologist of art cannot put to one side—the concept of style. Style, which is the harmonic principle which unites works of art into groups, into collectivities, corresponds to the anthropological theme of 'culture'. Culture is style, really, just as Fernandez suggested in a deservedly influential discussion (1973).

Each individual work of art is the projection of certain stylistic principles which form larger unities, just as each individual, in a kin-based society, is regarded as a projection, into the here and now, of principles of descent and alliance and exchange. The concept of style allows us, for the first time, to concentrate exclusively on works of art as such, and to discuss what may appear, indeed, to be their 'aesthetic' properties. So let me reassure those of my readers who are aesthetes and art-lovers (if I have any left after all the abuse I have showered on their heads)—you have reached the one chapter in this book you might possibly enjoy reading.

## 8

## Style and Culture

8.1. *On the Concept of Style*

In this chapter, my aim is to formulate a concept of 'style' adapted to the requirements of the anthropology of visual art. In the anthropology-of-art context the concept of style is distinguishable from the concepts of style applicable in Western art history and aesthetics in that the 'units' of style are not (usually) individual artists, or schools of artists, or movements, but 'cultures' or 'societies'. Actually, the units of style are conventional ethnographic isolates as represented for study purposes by museum collections and published sources on material culture. Such ethnographic isolates are historically bounded as well as geographically bounded; usually the collections and documents belong to a particular period. Where studies of ethnographic art in museums are concerned, the period in question coincides mostly with the colonial era. The focus is primarily on 'traditional' art forms, though it hardly needs to be said that during the colonial period there were startling historical developments in the so-called 'traditional' societies of the colonial frontier, which affected their art production in diverse ways. The problem of tradition and innovation in ethnographic arts would constitute too much of a diversion to discuss at this stage; besides which the subject has already received detailed attention from numerous other researchers, most notably by N. Thomas. For the purposes of this chapter, it will be assumed that the units of style are 'cultures' and that we are dealing with 'traditional' art as conventionally understood, setting to one side the acknowledged problems which these assumptions admittedly raise.

The problems of historical contextualization do not materially affect what I have to say about style, since the description of a style may be as broad or as narrow in scope as necessary to accommodate any given historical perspective. The question that I want to address is not historical but conceptual: what does the concept of 'style' contribute to the understanding of material culture? 'Style' is a vague word of uncertain definition and many, rather disparate, uses. Finding a use for it in the context of the anthropology of material culture might be considered a waste of effort, were it not, in fact, so pervasive, at least as a mode of classification. As it is, we are routinely accustomed to classifying objects as sharing, or not sharing, stylistic attributes with one another. But exactly what is shared (or not shared) in such instances is much harder to assess. Moreover, we are inclined to believe that what objects with shared stylistic attributes have in common, is not just some formal, external, property, but