

Patterns in Philosophy and Sociology of Religions

Edited by

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Contents

	<i>Foreword</i>	vii
	<i>Preface</i>	xiii
	Introduction – Religion: From Theory to Action <i>Mihaela Gligor</i>	1
1	Religion and Violence in the Contemporary World: Is religion more of the problem or the solution? <i>Douglas Allen</i>	14
2	Changing Interpretations of Religion and Secularism <i>Sherry Sabbarwal</i>	42
3	Globalization and Religious Identities in India: Understanding the subaltern context of contestations <i>Santosh Kumar Singh</i>	63
4	<i>Illud tempus</i> in Greek Myth and Ritual <i>Radek Chlup</i>	91
5	Eliade’s History of Religion: A reaction against historicity and historicism <i>Sanjukta Bhattacharyya</i>	127
6	Rationality, Relativism and Religion: A reinterpretation of Peter Winch <i>Kevin Schilbrack</i>	151

7	Buddhist Images of the Body: A study of different patterns of human embodiment and performance <i>Carl Olson</i>	175
8	Bringing Peace in the World: The Buddhist Way <i>Madhumita Chattopadhyay</i>	203
	<i>Contributors</i>	224
	<i>Index</i>	230

CHAPTER 4

Illud tempus in Greek Myth and Ritual*

RADEK CHLUP

Few theories of myth and ritual can equal in fame the one proposed by Mircea Eliade. According to him, archaic societies generally refuse to put up with the profane time of history, feeling the need to relate to the time of origins when the world was still fresh and strong, “as it came from the Creator’s hands” (Eliade, 1959: 92). The time of origins is a time out of time, an *illud tempus*, “which is always the same, which belongs to eternity; [...] the time that ‘floweth not’ because it does not participate in profane temporal duration, because it is composed of an *eternal present*” (Eliade, 1959: 88). Archaic societies attempt to evoke the fullness of primordial time in rituals that repeat the archetypal events which took place in the mythical era. By “indefinitely reproducing the same paradigmatic acts and gestures” religious man manages “*to live close to his gods*” (Eliade, 1959: 91).

In the course of the last fifty years, Eliade’s theory of myth and ritual has often been the subject of criticism. Its reception has been particularly lukewarm with the anthropologists, most of whom have failed to recognize in his idealized image of the “archaic man” any of the natives that they spent many months with during their field research. Eliade is often regarded by them as an armchair scholar in the Frazerian mould, trying to squeeze all primitive societies into his

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sweeping artificial patterns (see e.g., Leach, 1966; La Fontaine, 1985; Wallace, 1966; for a neutral appraisal of anthropological critique cf. Saliba, 1978). All of these rebukes are certainly justified: it is obvious that Eliade's conception is unbearably idealizing and indiscriminate, and we would hardly find a "primitive: that would conform to it fully. Despite this, I would deem it rash to turn it down completely. As a religious studies scholar I consider the formulation of general, simplifying schemata indispensable for capturing religious phenomena, no comprehensive science of religion being possible without them. Eliade may not be a reliable guide to the world of primitive cultures, but the question remains whether at least he offers an interesting model for making sense of myths and rituals in general.¹

To answer this question, I shall try to apply Eliade's theory to some of the myths and rituals of the ancient Greeks.² I hope to show that his basic notion of ritual as an attempt at periodically re-actualizing the primordial era is in harmony with them, though it needs to be modified and further elaborated. However, while largely agreeing with Eliade at the level of phenomenological description, my own interpretative position will be entirely different.

Where Eliade only aims at interpreting the religious worldview in its own terms (though not necessarily emic ones), I shall also strive for its non-religious explanation. It was recognized by Edmund Leach already that some of Eliade's ideas are strikingly parallel to the French structuralist tradition, whether in its Durkheimian form or the Lévi-Straussian one (Leach, 1966: 29–30; cf. Dudley, 1977: 144–160). Following this suggestion, I shall transplant the scheme of ritual repetition into a different methodological framework, reading it from the perspective of the Paris school of Jean-Pierre Vernant and his followers.

Ritual repetition: playing the bear for artemis

At first sight Greek rituals appear well suited for an Eliadean type of interpretation. Most of them had one or more aetiological myths associated with them, explaining how the ritual had come to be

instituted in ancient times and giving the “reason” (Gr. *aition*, pl. *aitia*) of its performance. Aetiological myths were no dogmas and could apparently be altered and created freely, needing no official sanction. Often there were several ones in circulation, whether covering different aspects of the festival, or giving alternative explanations. Most of them were probably later than the rituals themselves, but that does not make them any less authentic. No matter how recent they were, they reflected adequately the meanings assigned to rituals by their participants and must have been of considerable import to them (Redfield, 1990: 118–119, 123–124; Parker, 2005: 374–383).

The existence of aetiological myths is in accord with Eliade’s conception of ritual as repetition of mythical events. Primordial happenings indeed count here as timeless archetypes to be imitated forever. At closer inspection, however, the pattern of repetition turns out to be slightly different from any of those described by Eliade. In his best known examples what we have is a straightforward imitation of ancient events: “for the traditional societies, all the important facts of life were revealed ab origine by gods or heroes. Men only repeat these exemplary and paradigmatic gestures *ad infinitum*” (Eliade, 1954: 32). In Greek rituals such a simple imitative pattern is less common and often we find a more complicated model. A significant number of Greek *aitia* do not tell of glamorous deeds of ancient gods and heroes that people would repeat over and over again. Much more typically they tell of an offence committed in primordial times, angering the gods and causing a plague, famine or some other disaster. In their despair people consult the oracle to find out how to end the crisis. The oracle explains what has gone wrong and suggests a religious remedy: to placate the powers offended, men have to institute a ritual that repeats the original transgression but in doing so corrects the mistake and makes everything end well.

A typical example is a ritual performed in honour of Artemis Mounichia at the Athenian port of Piraeus. Its *aition*³ tells of a she-bear who in ancient times came to frequent that place and grew tame. One day a young girl teased the animal and was scratched. The girl’s brothers killed the bear; but Artemis, the protectress of wild

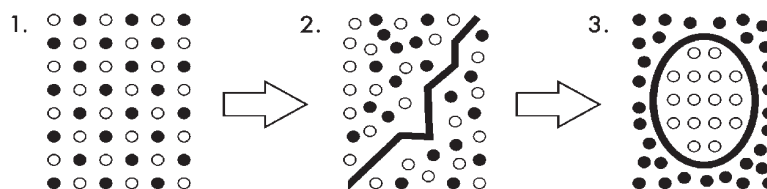
animals, became offended and caused a famine or plague. On consulting the Delphic oracle the Athenians learnt that the plague would only stop when someone sacrificed his daughter to Artemis. Nobody was willing to do so, until a man named Embarus offered to fulfil the task, on condition that he and his descendants should become lifelong priests at the sanctuary; people agreed. Embarus embellished his daughter and led her to the innermost part of the temple. There, however, he played a trick: hiding the daughter, he adorned and sacrificed a goat instead whom he had given the name of Daughter. The famine ceased but people became suspicious and went to ask Apollo again. The god ensured them that everything was alright: from then on they should sacrifice just as Embarus had done. Since then all the girls of Athens have been required to “play the bear” (*arkteuein*) for the goddess. The ritual itself can only be reconstructed fragmentarily, but we may safely suppose that it was meant to imitate the ancient events: a girl was presumably adorned for sacrifice, but then a goat was killed instead (for a goat sacrifice at the allied Artemis Sanctuary of Brauron see Hesychius, s.v. *Brauroniois*). “Playing the bear” probably means that the earlier part of the aition was also enacted and the girls were chased by some men playing the “brothers” (thus e.g., Redfield, 2003: 102).

An interpretation of this remarkable ritual would be well beyond the scope of this article.⁴ What is important for us is the basic pattern that we find here and that is by no means exceptional. At the beginning we have an idyllic state of primal harmony: the bear, normally wild and dangerous, is tame and playing with a girl. Yet the idyll soon turns out to be illusory and untenable: the animal is incapable of playing safely with humans and the girl gets scratched. The break-up of primal harmony is further accentuated by the brothers’ revenge. The gods consider it an offence but by sending a famine they only highlight the crisis. The good old idyllic world is in ruins. The solution suggested by Apollo is hardly encouraging: the sacrifice of a daughter may well end the famine, but its cruelty just confirms the disintegration. It is only through the deceit of Embarus that a true solution is found. Order is restored, but it is not a copy of

the original idyll. Far from it, the god orders the original misdeed and the ensuing deceit to be repeated forever. The ritual is meant to corroborate the change that has taken place. Through it a new order of things has been established, sharply separated from the old one. The founding of the ritual means the end of primordial time and the beginning of history.

The myth and ritual can be analysed into three stages: (1) The starting point is a state of primal harmony. It is pleasant, but being unnatural – or rather all too natural – it cannot last long. Men seem equal to animals at this stage and they live like them: enjoyably but wildly. Unlike them, however, they are not adjusted to this kind of existence, and sooner or later their maladjustment must come out. It is symptomatic that the dissolution of primal unity is more or less spontaneous and is not really anyone's fault. The bear could hardly guess that her claws would prove too sharp for the girl; and conversely, the brothers can hardly be blamed for having revenged their sister. (2) The misdeed generates a schism in the primal world and reduces it to chaos. Yet the schism has a positive potential: it becomes the germ of a borderline between humans and animals, between culture and nature. (3) Accordingly, its ritual repetition is prescribed by Apollo and his oracle. The task of the ritual is to cultivate and institutionalize the boundary that so far has only emerged wildly and spontaneously. The result is a clear division of reality into the orderly world of men and the savage, chaotic area beyond it:

Figure 1



Apparently, the pattern of ritual repetition is rather different here from the one Eliade usually speaks of. The Athenians do repeat mythical events indeed, but in an indirect way. The middle term

between their ritual acts and the original mythical events is the first ritual devised by Embarus and confirmed by the oracle. No doubt Embarus can be seen as a primordial cultural hero defeating the powers of darkness, and in this sense his action would fit into Eliade's scheme of ritual repetition.⁵ Yet such an interpretation would overshadow what I find most interesting about the ritual, namely the fact that while still a part of the mythical era, the accomplishment of Embarus means the end of it. The first ritual staged at the end of the aition is already a part of history and is meant to be identical to that performed in the Classical period. There is in fact a double repetition involved: the Athenians repeat the first mythical ritual, which in turn repeats the previous events. It does so in a non-literal way, however, thereby changing their meaning. The ritual repeats the original misdeed to amend and cultivate it. Its performance does not bring the participants into the heart of primordial time, but is just an excursion to its borders. It is a powerful reminder of *illud tempus*, but one that is strongly negative. The Sacred Time that is evoked is not a glorious era of meaning that the Greeks would nostalgically long for. It is rather a period of indeterminacy and ambivalence, a period that does have certain paradisiacal aspects indeed, but that is fraught with danger and unsuitable for a civilized human existence.

The Greeks certainly found their *illud tempus* fascinating and saw it as a sacred source of power – otherwise they would not keep returning to it during their festivals. Yet in the course of their returns they took care to set up a clear dividing line between themselves and the primordial era, guaranteeing that the mythical events would never repeat in their original form. Embarus is not a cultural hero in that he would follow in the wake of mythical beings and partake of their might, but rather in that he proved able to extricate himself from the mythical pattern of behaviour and acted like an ordinary mortal who must compensate for his lack of strength by cunning.

Primordial time and its ambivalence: cronus and the cronía

Greek aetiological myths throw interesting light on the concept of primordial time, one of the cornerstones of Eliade's thought. In his

view, ritual repetition is driven by the desire of *homo religiosus* to become “contemporary with the gods”, “to reintegrate a primordial situation” (Eliade, 1959: 91):

Man desires to recover the active presence of the gods; he also desires to live in the world as it came from the Creator’s hands, fresh, pure, and strong. It is nostalgia for the *perfection of beginnings* that chiefly explains the periodical return *in illo tempore*. In Christian terms, it could be called nostalgia for paradise. (Eliade, 1959: 92)

In their rituals, the Greeks indeed kept returning to the mythical era of famous founding heroes who were still able to meet the gods face to face. This era undoubtedly does resemble the Judaeo-Christian paradise in many respects. In a classic passage of his *Works and Days* Hesiod calls it the Golden Age, the time when “Cronus ruled the heaven” and “men lived like the gods, free of care in their hearts, [...] rejoicing and having fun, unburdened by evil of any kind” (111–115). By contrast, men of Hesiod’s time live in the Age of Iron, ever toiling and suffering, living a life full of troubles (176–178).

At first sight, Hesiod confirms the words of Eliade. On closer inspection, however, the notion of a Golden Age becomes more complicated. Its true nature is epitomized in the figure of Cronus, its divine patron. The Greeks were unanimous in regarding him as the just ruler of the Golden Age, but they also knew his darker side: in the *Theogony* of Hesiod he is depicted as a cruel king who has seized power by castrating his father Uranus, eating his own children in a desperate effort to safeguard his position. It is only when Rhea manages to hide Zeus, their youngest son, that after a long battle Cronus’ regime can be overthrown and the Olympians set up a true cosmos. Accordingly, Cronus appears as a two-faced divinity: cruel and kind, beastly and idyllic. Both aspects are present in stories of his final fate: he was supposed to have ended up imprisoned in Tartarus, but it was sometimes added that he was eventually freed by Zeus and transported the Islands of the Blessed. He has become their ruler, but even there he still retains some measure of his beastliness and has to exercise his function in fetters or even in sleep (for sources cf. Versnel, 1994: 90–99).

Similar inconsistencies can be found in Cronus' rituals. Cronus was very much a *deus otiosus*. In terms of cult he was marginal and was not regarded as an active power to be worshipped. Nevertheless, throughout Greece one festival at least was celebrated in his honour: the Cronia, a counterpart to the Roman Saturnalia. These, too, were full of striking contradictions (Versnel, 1994: 99–105). On the one hand, they included bloodless offerings of cakes and bread, i.e., of idyllic foodstuffs typical of the Golden Age when men were vegetarians and refrained from killing animals. Primordial harmony is strongly evoked by the best-known feature of the festival: servants dined together with their masters, recalling thus the ancient era of universal equality. On the other hand, the Cronia were associated with cannibalism and human sacrifices. These were not actually performed, of course, and were projected into the mythical era⁶; nonetheless, stories about them showed clearly that the age of Cronus was far from idyllic.

As has been shown by H.S. Versnel (1994: 106–135), the best modern interpreter of Cronus, both images of the god are really complementary, contradictory as they may seem to be. They both present a picture of the Other, of a world turned upside down. Every otherness has a double face, being both utopian and scaring. It is liberating, removing the strains of our present world order and presenting other possibilities of being. Yet it is dangerous, threatening to destroy the cosmos altogether.⁷ When masters dined with their servants during the festival, they were re-installing the Golden Age for a moment – not because they would long to return to it, but in order to remind themselves how problematic such a return would be. It would mean harmonious co-existence, but one achieved at the expense of abandoning the rules of civilization. The Greeks did not desire to merge with their origins and took care to remind themselves of both faces of Kronus. They knew how difficult origins can be and were grateful enough for their Iron Age, despite bemoaning its hardships once in a while.

While scarcely pointing to a “nostalgia for paradise”, the Greek attitude is not in conflict with Eliade's wider conception as such, of course. Eliade knows well that the mythical period need not just resemble a paradise but may equally well turn into a chaos. In one of

his late essays (Eliade, 1969: 87) he makes a distinction between two kinds of primordiality: (1) “a precosmic, unhistorical primordiality”, in which the mythical era is understood as primal perfection while the creation amounts to a fall, and (2) “a cosmogonic or historical one”, in which the creation is seen as an act of ordering the chaos that prevailed at the beginning. To these correspond “two species of *religious nostalgias*: (1) the longing to reintegrate the primordial totality that existed before the creation, [...] and (2) the longing to recover the primordial epoch that began immediately *after* the creation.” A good example of the second type are rituals of the New Year, guaranteeing the continuity of life by dissolving the old year in primordial chaos and letting a new one arise fresh and strong by repeating the mythical creation (Eliade, 1954: 51–77). It is interesting that in Eliade’s view “the New Year scenarios in which the Creation is repeated are particularly explicit among the historical peoples, those with whom history, properly speaking begins” (Eliade, 1954: 74). Apparently, these peoples start to be able to appreciate their historical existence more, striving for a *regeneration* of history rather than its complete abolition.⁸

A similar approach may well be applied to the ancient Greeks. As an example we can take the Cronia again. In Athens they took place shortly after harvest in the month of Hekatombaion, the first month of the year. Hence, while not being a New Year festival in the strict sense of the term, typologically they may be classified as one (Versnel, 1994: 119–121). The Otherness evoked in them is certainly a kind of chaos, dissolving the usual order of things to make it rise anew. The creative stage is missing from the Cronia as such (they only echo the rule of Cronus, not his subsequent overthrow by Zeus), but as Walter Burkert has shown (1985: 227–234), in Greece the transition between the old year and the new one was really realized by a sequence of several rituals, of which the Cronia only formed the first stage. In Athens, the Synoikia took place shortly after them, recalling the unification of Attica by Theseus, and thus the establishment of the city of Athens in its historical form. Then at the end of the month came the Panathenaia, the greatest Athenian festival (for details see Parke, 1977: 33–50).

Its main event was a bombastic procession to the Acropolis, bringing a new robe for Athena – a huge *peplos* for the colossal statue of the goddess woven by a special team of maidens and embroidered with scenes from the battle of gods and Giants.⁹ In the procession all classes of inhabitants were hierarchically represented, including deputies from around 400 other cities that in the 5th century formed the Athenian empire. In many cases the procession resembled the modern May Parades of former communist regimes and there can be little doubt that its function was very similar: it reconfirmed the present political order and manifested its strength. Thanks to this the Panathenaia can be seen as a creative stage of a ritual sequence whose chaotic stage was played by the Cronia. It is significant that one of the aetiological myths claimed the festival to have been established in commemoration of Athena's victory over Aster in the battle of gods and Giants, which was the last step in establishing the orderly rule of Zeus. It was precisely this victory that was most frequently woven into the *peplos*.

In this respect the Cronia correspond to Eliade's New Year pattern and we can see them as a festival of chaos in which the old, worn-out order is dissolved to be re-created by a repetition of primordial cosmogony – represented here by the victory over the Giants periodically re-actualized on Athena's *peplos*. Nevertheless, this model only captures one side of the picture. From a different perspective, the chaos evoked in the Cronia can be seen as a Golden Age, bearing features of primal harmony. On this reading the end of Cronus' rule would amount to a fall, and would thus agree with the other type of primordality sketched by Eliade. This is highlighted by a number of *aitia* in which the end of primordial harmony results from a human offence. Moreover, we have seen (and will see further) that Greek rituals can easily imply both models at once, presenting the end of the mythical era as both a fall and a creation. The Greek concept of primordial time thus implies a more complicated relation of chaos and order and can never be squeezed into a simple linear model in which primal chaos is followed by a period of creation, producing the ideal mythical Cosmos in its strong and "golden" form.

Setting up the boundaries: the rite of animal sacrifice

While not seriously contradicting Eliade's scheme, Greek myths and rituals seem to represent a rather intricate subtype of it. Unlike most cases discussed by Eliade, the Greek examples analysed so far are characterized by an essential ambivalence that is connected with mythical events in all their stages. Eliade generally tends to depict the mythical world in an idealistic light. He knows that chaos is a regular part of it and that myths can be full of crises and primordial schisms, but on the whole he is inclined to see things in a more or less black-and-white way and prefers instances in which negative aspects are outweighed by glorious creative actions of gods and heroes. The Greek version of the Sacred Time theme is interesting in that it makes such a simplified polarisation impossible, inviting us to reconsider the meaning of the whole conception.

What seems particularly conspicuous is the crucial part played by the boundaries that in most aetiological myths are carefully being set up between our world and the primordial one. To illuminate their importance, we can have a look at what is generally considered the most important Greek ritual – the rite of animal sacrifice. The classic aition is given by Hesiod (*Theogony*: 535–616; *Works and Days*: 45–105). It takes place in ancient times before the birth of culture when the relations between gods and men were unclear and were a subject of negotiation. Prometheus tried to improve the lot of mankind by suggesting a division of sacrificial animals that is most advantageous for men. Killing an ox, he separated the flesh and entrails from the bones. Enclosing the former in the stomach and covering the latter with fat, he gave Zeus to choose. Zeus understood his deception all too well (*Theogony*: 550–552), but planning to impose hardships on mankind anyway, he pretended not to know and chose the inviting-looking parcel of fat – only to get furious on discovering that he had got nothing but bones. Hence it is that men burn fat and bones for the gods but eat all the meat themselves.

The myth recalls a familiar pattern. Its starting point is a state of primal harmony, which from the very first is depicted as problematic. It is felt to be confusing and gods and men are negotiating to find a way out of it and establish proper distinctions. These

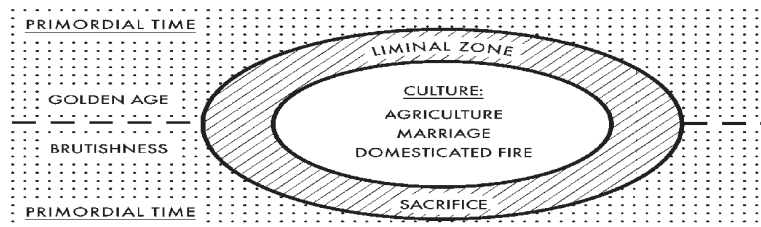
are established by deceit, i.e., there is something unnatural about them. Prometheus' cunning trick initiates a mythical crisis – but one that is seen as correct, being in concord with the plans of Zeus. A retaliation follows, taking place in three stages: (1) Zeus takes away from men the celestial fire that they had so far been able to use; Prometheus steals it back. (2) In revenge, Zeus strikes even harder and produces the first woman, the source of all evil. (3) To make things even worse, a third catastrophe follows: in his anger Zeus hides from men their livelihood, so that they have to start working. What this punishment implies is that hitherto men had no need to work, living in a Golden Age in which the earth produced everything by itself. From now on, they will have to practice agriculture and toil hard for their living.

What does this mythical scenario tell us about the meaning of sacrifice? A classic answer has been given by Jean-Pierre Vernant (1982: 135–140, 168–185), who shows the institution of animal sacrifice as highly ambivalent. On the one hand, it marked the end of a Golden Age, a separation of gods and men, the beginning of toil and suffering. On the other hand, it meant the beginning of culture in three regards: (1) It amounted to the rise of agriculture, which was not only seen as hard work but even more importantly as the foundation of human civilization. The Greeks valued agriculture highly and regarded it as a sign of cultivated life. (2) Nor did the advent of the first woman have negative consequences only: it made the crucial civilizing institution of marriage possible. While animals mate at random, human procreation is subject to strict cultural rules. The Greeks considered marriage as parallel to agriculture and the association of both figured even in the marriage ritual (Detienne, 1994: 116–117). (3) Last but not least, the theft of fire was a fundamental achievement too. Previously, men had had fire at their disposal as a matter of course, i.e., as something natural. After having been deprived of it, they had to obtain it again and henceforth guard it anxiously. In this way, fire has passed from the realm of nature into the sphere of culture, and Prometheus could justly be regarded as a civilization hero who had wrested mankind from its primitive bestiality. For the same reason fire plays a prominent part in the sacrificial ritual: while animals eat meat in its raw state, men cook it and roast it, turning food consumption into a cultural act.

The institution of animal sacrifice has created a gap between gods and men but it has elevated mankind from the level of animals to that of cultural beings. We may thus say with Vernant that the sacrificial ritual has situated mankind firmly “between the beasts and the gods” (1982: 183). Interestingly enough, however, the two extreme poles of this system are strikingly close to each other. By separating themselves from the gods, men lost their animal features too. The Golden Age bears remarkable bestial characteristics and it is only after breaking loose from it that men attain their proper cultural state. One cannot help but regarding the Golden Age as analogous to the realm of Nature which is both bestial and divine, both wild and idyllic. For this reason it is only right that the primal era has ended. To return to it would mean to abandon one’s civilized humanity, which the Greeks refused to do. In the long run, Prometheus’ deceit has proved appropriate for mankind, just as Zeus had foreseen. Animal sacrifice kept reminding the Greeks of their cultural state, setting up a clear dividing line between culture and nature. The sacrificial act as such stands at the boundary between these two spheres and is liminal in many respects: it resulted from Prometheus’ cheating and has something dark and terrifying about it, being an act of killing. Paradoxically, however, it is through this very act of killing that cultural order can be defined and upheld.

Clearly, the sacrificial scheme corresponds to the pattern we have traced in the Mounichian myth and ritual, being but an amplification of its third stage. At the same time, it bears strong resemblance to a pattern that Eliade discusses in connection with sacred space:

Figure 2



One of the outstanding characteristics of traditional societies is the opposition that they assume between their inhabited territory and the unknown and indeterminate space that surrounds it. The former is the world (more precisely, our world), the cosmos; everything outside it is no longer a cosmos but a sort of “other world”, a foreign, chaotic space, peopled by ghosts, demons, “foreigners”. [...] At first sight this cleavage in space appears to be due to the opposition between an inhabited and organized – hence cosmicized – territory and the unknown space that extends beyond its frontiers; on one side there is a cosmos, on the other a chaos. But we shall see that if every inhabited territory is a cosmos, this is precisely because it was first consecrated, because, in one way or another, it is the work of the gods or is in communication with the world of the gods. The world (that is, our world) is a universe within which the sacred has already manifested itself, in which, consequently, the break-through from plane to plane has become possible and repeatable (Eliade, 1959: 29–30).

The model that Eliade sketches in these lines is analogous to the three stages of myth and ritual at Mounichia. The “chaos” of uninhabited territory corresponds to the untenable “natural” state in stage one. Stage two coincides with what Eliade later in the same book terms an “irruption of the sacred” (1959: 97), causing a schism that in stage three will become the basis of a boundary between cosmos and chaos. The same structure is apparent in the myth of the institution of sacrifice, the manifestation of the sacred taking the form of the first sacrifice followed by a struggle between Zeus and Prometheus.

The question is in what sense the “irruption of the sacred” serves as a foundation of the world. Eliade mostly takes it for granted that it does so by means of a positive creative act of some sort. He sees its manifestation primarily “as an irruption of creative energy into the world” that “*establishes* the world as a reality” (Eliade, 1959: 97). Often this is certainly the case, yet in Greek *aitia* the situation is more complex. The sacred as such (i.e., the intervention of the gods) is frequently of a strongly negative kind. In the Mounichian myth Apollo’s order to sacrifice a daughter can hardly count as a glamorous creative act, escalating the crisis even further. It is Embarus who plays the constructive part, but not even he is a

prototype of the founding hero. His heroic deed consists not so much in having defeated the powers of darkness and set things in order, but rather in “neutralizing” the conflict, in having deprived it of its destructive power and turning it into a source of life and strength. Following in his footsteps, the Athenians forever repeat his achievement, recalling the ancient crisis in a ritual manner that makes it harmless and sets clear boundaries to it. By doing this they reconfirm the present order of the world that was introduced after the crisis had been warded off. Yet the crisis as such – i.e., the “irruption of the sacred” – is purely negative. To the Athenians it indicated the limits of their cosmos, without providing a positive foundation for it. Indeed, most of them probably had no idea what crucial cultural values those ancient events were supposed to have established.

The myth of first animal sacrifice is more explicit in this regard, referring the institutions of marriage and agriculture. These were undoubtedly among the cornerstones of the Greek “cosmos” and were connected by an intricate network of relations to a number of crucial cultural values (Detienne, 1994; Vernant, 1982: 130–167). It is symptomatic, however, that in myth even these are only present negatively: the creation of the first woman and the necessity to work the earth are depicted as Zeus’ punishments, not as magnificent culture-founding acts. The positive establishment of both of these institutions was of course the topic of other myths. The gift of farming, for instance, was frequently attributed to Demeter. Yet even in this case the central subject of the cult – such as the Eleusinian mysteries or the Thesmophoria – was rather the crisis that had preceded the spread of agriculture (see the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*). It was caused by the goddess herself, who made the earth infertile as a protest against the abduction of her daughter by Hades. From the Greek perspective justice was on Hades’ side, for he took Persephone for a bride after having obtained the consent of Zeus, her father, i.e., in accordance with standard Greek marriage customs. Nevertheless, Demeter refused to admit the marriage and against all cultural rules insisted on keeping her daughter to herself. After long negotiations all the parties reached agreement, the goddess restored fertility and with the help of Triptolemus spread agriculture all over the world. The constructive ending of the myth conforms to Eliade’s

classic pattern. It is noticeable, though, that in myth and cult the spread of agriculture was more of a postscript, the main topic being Demeter's anger and its seeming inappeasability. At its basic level the cult of Demeter looks not so much as a celebration of the gift of farming but rather as a powerful reminder of how fragile and precarious human agriculture is.¹⁰

Eliade is convinced that a cosmos can only be established by a manifestation of the sacred, nothing else being able to "project a fixed point into the formless fluidity of profane space" (Eliade, 1959: 63). A similar conclusion was much earlier reached by Émile Durkheim (1915: 9–20, 427–447) and Greek myths and rituals seem to support it. Nonetheless, they also show that the "irruption of the sacred" need not just consist in a positive act of creation. In Greece it is more commonly described as a mythical crisis and a source of danger. The aim of rituals is to turn the danger into a blessing. A good example of an "irruption of the sacred" is the most important of all Greek ritual acts – animal sacrifice. The killing of the victim – normally accompanied by a shrill scream of female participants – as an extreme act at the border of life and death was a perfect way of re-actualizing that flash of Otherness with which the sacred breaks into the world. The sacrificial act recalled the ancient strife between gods and men and reconfirmed it. The deceit of Prometheus was constantly repeated: over and over again the gods were receiving nothing but worthless bones. At the same time, however, the ritual was able to repair the ancient crisis, for it was seen as a way of approaching the gods and paying tribute to them.¹¹ Animal sacrifice thus functioned as a landmark, keeping the sacred at a safe distance while making communication with it possible.

Nature and culture: the boupbonia

Why do the gods in Greek aetiological myths call basic social institution into question so often rather than positively founding them? Why is cultural order based on a crisis occasioned by the gods and human deceit reacting to it? Eliade provides no answer and prefers other mythical patterns in which similar problems do not appear. In the second half of my article I am going to attempt an answer of my own, though one heavily inspired by contemporary anthropological

approaches to the study of Greek myths and rituals. My interpretation shall digress from that of Eliade not only by laying stress on the ambivalence of mythical events but even more importantly by being set in a different methodological framework.

As a convenient starting point of our discussion we may once again take the subject of animal sacrifice. An alternative view of it was offered by a remarkable Athenian rite called *Bouphonia*, “Ox-Slaying”. It was a part of the *Dipolieia*, a festival of Zeus *Polieus* (Protector of the City) which took place at the summit of the Acropolis. Its detailed description was given by Theophrastus at the turn of the 4th century B.C., and it is worth quoting in full (as preserved by Porphyry, *On Abstinence* 2.29–30):

In antiquity [...] humans sacrificed grain to the gods, not animals, and they did not use them for their own nourishment. At a public sacrifice in Athens, one of the oxen coming in from the fields is said to have eaten some of the meal in honeyed oil and the incense and to have trampled all over the rest. A certain *Diomos* or *Sopatros*, not a native but someone farming in Attica, became enraged at what had happened. He seized an ax that was being sharpened nearby and struck the ox. The ox died. When the man recovered from his anger and realized what he had done, he buried the ox and went of his own accord into exile in Crete as one who had committed impiety. Then the rain stopped falling, and the grain no longer grew. Delegates were sent by the state to Delphi to inquire of Apollo. The Pythia responded that the exile in Crete would redeem these conditions: avenge the murder and resurrect the dead in the same sacrifice in which it died, and things would be better for those who tasted the dead and did not hold back. A search was undertaken, and the man responsible for the deed was discovered. *Sopatros* reckoned that he would be released from the unpleasantness of being polluted if they all did these measures in common. He told those who came to him that the ox must be slain by the city. Since they were at wit’s end over who would be the slayer, he offered them this possibility: if they made him a citizen, they would share the murder with him. Agreement was reached on those terms. When they came back to the city, they arranged the affair in the way in which it remains today.

They chose girls to bring the water. They fetched the water used for sharpening the ax and knife. After sharpening, one man administered the ax, another struck the ox, and a third cut its throat. They next skinned it, and everyone tasted the ox. Afterwards, having sewn up the hide of the ox and stuffed it with hay, they set it up again with the same stance as when it was alive and yoked it to the plow as if ready for work. Assembling a trial for murder, they summoned all who had participated in the deed to defend themselves. The water fetchers charged that the sharpeners were more to blame than they. The sharpeners said the same about the ax-administrator, and this one of the throat-cutter, and this one of the knife which, being without a voice, was condemned to murder. From that time to the present always during the festival of Zeus Polieus on the Acropolis at Athens those mentioned above perform the sacrifice of the ox in the same way. Having placed meal in a honeyed oil and cakes of ground barley on a bronze table, they drive around it selected oxen. Whichever takes a taste is struck. The families of those who perform these rites exist today. Those descended from Sopatros, who struck the ox, are all called Ox-Smiters. Those descended from the one who drove the ox around are called Prodders. Those descended from the slaughterer they named Carvers because the feast came from the distribution of the meat. They filled up the hide, whenever they were brought to court, and threw the knife into the sea.¹²

Plainly, the Bouphonia are to be read as a defence of animal sacrifice and a justification of the awkward fact that innocent domesticated animals were daily being slain to the gods, despite being useful members of the household. In case of the working ox the paradox stands out particularly well – no wonder that normally its sacrifice was forbidden and was only reserved for this one extreme occasion (Parker, 2005: 190–191). On closer inspection we discover that in fact the Bouphonia merely underscored some standard features of the sacrificial rite (for its description see e.g., Burkert, 1985: 55–57). Its participants typically tried to preserve the feeling of innocence till the very last moment. The knife that was soon to cut the artery of the animal was carefully hidden in a basket beneath grains of barley. Moreover, like most cultures the Greeks

took great care to make the impression that the animal approached its death willingly, considering it as a privilege. To this end the beast was sprinkled with water and its consequent shiver was taken as a sign of assent.

Several modern scholars have interpreted these measures as symptoms of guilt that the Greeks were supposed to feel for the killing. The Bouphonia have been regarded by them as a “comedy of innocence” performed by the Athenians in order to appease their guilt feeling and persuade themselves that everything was in order (Meuli, 1946: 275–277; Burkert, 1983: 16–22). Such a view, however, is entirely unlikely. In the Classical period the Greeks considered the rite a farce themselves (see Aristophanes, *Clouds*: 984–985), and it is barely imaginable that even in earlier times the absurd lawsuit staged during the festival could have disguised the cruelty of sacrificial killing in any way. Indeed, the actual effect of the Bouphonia must have been exactly opposite: rather than camouflaging the problematical nature of animal sacrifice, the ceremony brought it to light. If the Athenians really wished to hide from themselves the obvious fact that innocent domesticated animals got killed during sacrificial rites, they would have done better not to mention it at all and stress the positive side of animal sacrifice only (as they frequently did). If instead they periodically reminded themselves that the first sacrifice had been a crime, they must have had more interesting reasons for such a curious activity.

It is more promising to look at the Bouphonia from the perspective of the aetiological pattern sketched above. We have seen that in many cases rituals imitate an ancient mythical misdeed in order to correct it. As a consequence rituals constantly evoke the danger that would threaten if we failed to perform them (Redfield, 2003: 91). This is just what happens at the Bouphonia, which follow this pattern step by step: an ancient transgression (more or less inadvertent) is followed by divine punishment; an oracle commands the offence to be repeated. The ritual instituted by Sopatros manages to atone for the crime by being non-literal. The primordial crisis is forever evoked only to be averted and turned into a triumph. The result is the foundation of culture, i.e., in this case of the sacrificial ritual that was the cornerstone of Greek religion. The comic lawsuit

staged at the Bouphonia is no less bizarre than the substitutional goat sacrifice for Artemis Mounichia. In the eyes of the Greeks it no doubt corroborated the victory of culture over nature. The slaying of a working ox was essentially a crime but ritual was able to provide a cultural justification for it (Vernant, 1991: 299–301).

From this point of view the subject of the Bouphonia is the passage from nature to culture. This passage frequently entails crime and deceit, because the separation of culture from nature is always partly deceptive. Culture is opposed to nature and in many respects needs to present itself as its adversary. But it also grows out of nature and needs to stay in touch with it. Human identity is cultural. Man differs from animals in that he needs to identify with a social group, its cosmology, its rules and principles. Despite this, however, he remains a biological being. He may tame and cultivate natural processes, he may classify them and impose cultural order on them – yet he continues to be subject to them himself and at a certain level the difference between him and animals is slight. It is hardly accidental that rituals deal with biological processes so often (such as food consumption or sexuality). It is in them that the overlap of culture and nature is most conspicuous, and great pains have thus to be taken to keep the two spheres separate without blocking their contact altogether.

Greek animal sacrifice is a good instance of this problem. Its subject is the slaying of animals, which is biologically indispensable. Let us recall that the main part of the sacrificial ritual was the feast that followed the killing, and that sacrifices were the main occasion for meat eating (Detienne, 1989: 3, 11). Sacrifice is thus at heart a biological event with a nutritive function. Yet it is subject to strict rules that strive to separate the realm of nature and culture as clearly as possible. By killing animals in an institutionalized way, man rises above them and demonstrates his superiority.

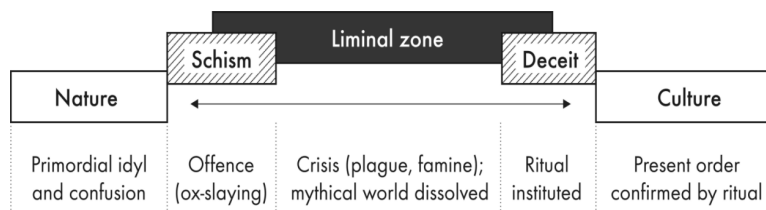
But how to discriminate what at bottom is blended? How to make one and the same act both cultural and natural without losing the distinction between the two? To a paradoxical problem there can only be a paradoxical solution. If we are to separate two terms without preventing their communication, we need a third term that contains elements of both while standing outside them. The middle

term has to represent a liminal zone “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1969: 95) in which everything is possible. Greek rituals evoke precisely such a liminal zone. The whole process strongly resembles van Gennep’s three stages of rituals of passage. The starting point is a mythical offence, corresponding to the phase of segregation. The offence is inevitable and often accidental (Sopatros can hardly be blamed for punishing the ox). Yet it is perceived as a crime, for it amounts to a suppression of nature, which must always be unnatural. Stage two follows, throwing things into a state of liminal chaos – in our case taking the form of famine and the pollution and exile of Sopatros (vaguely reminiscent of the temporary expulsion of initiands that frequently takes place during rites of passage). A solution is discovered in stage three, which is symmetrical to stage one, imitating the original misdeed, yet leading to a new, cultural state. Accordingly, the form of imitating is cultural as well (Vernant, 1991: 300–301): it is based on a *deceit* that enables the participants to have their ox and eat it too. The deceit is still a part of liminal chaos – in everyday life the ludicrous lawsuit would have been unacceptable. But it is already halfway towards being cultural, demonstrating human cleverness that all culture is based on. Equally cultural are the particular measures taken by Sopatros: the guilt is erased in a lawsuit and the ox is symbolically resurrected in a cultural position – harnessed to a cart. The *rite de passage* pattern is well illustrated by the fate of Sopatros: originally he was a stranger, i.e., a person standing outside the cultural order of Athens; at the end of the story he becomes a citizen, i.e., is integrated into the order.

By symbolically resurrecting the ox, Sopatros has sealed the passage from nature to culture. By repeating the archetypal ritual periodically, the Athenians re-confirm the passage, but they also ensure that their cultural order is in touch with something that transcends it and that due to its liminal nature is capable of mediating between cultural order and its opposite. The killing of the sacrificial animal embodies precisely this mediating element (Endsjø, 2003: 335–336). Normally, killing has its place outside the realm of culture: it is animals that eat one another at random, not civilized human beings. Yet killing is indispensable even within culture. The act of killing thus needs to be transformed: stripped of its natural,

beastly aspect, it is turned into a cultural act with clear rules. It is no wonder that on standard occasions the victims could only be domesticated animals, i.e., those incorporated into culture. Significantly, however, the killing is done for and in the name of the gods – despite the fact that most of the animal is eaten by humans. The gods stand outside the polarity of nature and culture, being thus able to connect them without blurring the borderline between them.

Figure 3



Socio-political implications: the arrhephoria

The relation between nature and culture is not only to be negotiated in case of biological conditions of human life, but even more urgently in connection with the status of all socio-political arrangements as such. This is fittingly illustrated by the last ritual that I have chosen for my discussion – the Arrhephoria, a mysterious Athenian festival in honour of Athena Polias (Protectress of the City). Its brief description is given by Pausanias (*Description of Greece* 1.27.3, tr. by J. Frazer):

Two maidens dwell not far from the temple of the Polias: the Athenians call them Arrhephoroi. These are lodged for a time with the goddess; but when the festival comes round they perform the following ceremony by night. They put on their heads the things which the priestess of Athena gives them to carry, but what it is she gives is known neither to her who gives nor to them who carry. Now there is in the city an enclosure not far from the sanctuary of Aphrodite called Aphrodite in the Gardens, and there is a natural underground descent through it. Down this way the maidens go. Below they leave their burdens, and getting something else, which is wrapt up, they bring it back. These maidens are then discharged, and others are brought to the Acropolis in their stead.

As we know from other sources, the ritual was performed every summer (*Etymologicum Magnum* 149.14). Since the new maidens were brought in immediately after the old ones had been discharged, it follows they had to serve to the goddess for a full year. They were between seven and eleven years old and were chosen for their task by the Archon Basileus, one of the highest officials of Athens (*Etymologicum Magnum* 149.14, 362.39). Throughout the year they had other services to fulfil, such as assisting in the weaving of the sacred *peplos* that was to be presented to Athena at the Panathenaia (Harpocration, *s.v. arrhephorein*).

In themselves the Arrhephoria are hard to make sense of, but modern scholars have noticed that they relate to the myth of Athenian origins (for its classic account see Apollodorus *The Library* 3.14). In the myth we find two interesting personages. The first one is Cecrops, the first king of Athens who was born from the earth and was snake-formed where his legs should have been. The second one is Erichthonios, whose birth was even more remarkable. His father was the god Hephaestus, who once fell into a passion for Athena and tried to get hold of her. Athena would not submit and he only managed to ejaculate on her thigh. Athena wiped the sperm off with wool and threw it to the ground, thus impregnating it. After some time Erichthonios was born from the earth. Athena put him in a chest and gave it to the three daughters of Cecrops to guard, strictly forbidding to open it. But two of the girls opened it out of curiosity, beholding a dreadful spectacle that various authors describe differently: they may have found a snake coiled around the baby, or even two snakes or perhaps it was Erichthonios himself who was partly a snake like Cecrops. The girls were driven mad by the sight and leaped from the Acropolis.

Plainly, the myth is a mythical model for the Arrhephoria and we may read it as their *aition*, though an incomplete one. By comparing the myth with the ritual we find the familiar pattern once again. At the beginning there is an offence taking place in primordial time. We do not know how the ritual was instituted but it is obvious that it is meant to repeat the original tragic story in a non-literal way, trying to amend what had gone wrong in the myth. The mythical

maidens die, but the ritual ones overcome their curiosity and keep the chest closed. The ritual does not imitate the mythical archetype out of nostalgia but in order to correct it and prevent its repetition.

What is the meaning of the Arrhephoria? There is no unanimous answer to this question, of course, for rituals are essentially polyvalent and one of their chief achievements is precisely their ability to connect various levels of meaning that would otherwise seem incompatible and contradictory (Turner, 1967). One possible interpretation is suggested by the myth, which is generally read as dealing with the problem of Athenian *autochthony* (see e.g., Csapo, 2005: 238–244; Redfield, 2003: 118–127; Loraux, 1993, *passim*). The Athenians were among the few Greek cities that claimed to have been born out of their own earth. While other cities told myths of how their ancestors had conquered their territory, the Athenians insisted on having lived in Attica since time immemorial and being linked to their land in a natural way through the half-chthonic figures of Cecrops and Erichthonios. The ideological import of this was enormous: in the 5th century B.C. it made the Athenians feel much superior to other Greek communities, a true mother city of them all (Loraux, 2000: 47–64).

The idea of autochthony was crucial for the Athenians, yet it was highly unnatural:

In actuality, people occupy territory; they secure it by military organization, and by the application of technique they cultivate it and turn it to the purposes of culture. By the myth of autochthony, however, the people, and (more important) their cultural organization (since the autochthon is a founder-king), are represented as natural products of the soil. Thus a historically contingent fact – the location of a culture – is represented as a natural kingship; an event is transformed into a structure. (Redfield, 2003: 123–124)

The Greeks recognized the problem themselves and at a certain level of their thought were aware of the historical contingency of all territorial claims.¹³ Despite this, the Athenians pretended to have a natural claim to their land, having grown out of it in the manner of vegetables. Why is this so? The answer is connected with the status of all socio-political arrangements (of which the possession of land

is just one aspect). Not even these can ever be “natural”, as the Greeks knew all too well, priding themselves on their cultural institutions and feeling above all natural conditions.

Nonetheless, the Greeks also knew that if socio-political forms are to persist throughout the never-ending debates of conflicting individuals, they must make a claim to being more than a contingent product of history or the result of rational agreement.¹⁴ In other words, they must present themselves as at once cultural and natural.

What we have here is a paradox similar to that we have detected in the Bouphonia: just as man is both a biological and a cultural creature, and thus needs to keep both of these aspects together without losing the distinction between them, the same holds for the *polis* as a whole. The *polis* is a creation of culture, but to survive it has to be depicted as equally a product of nature.¹⁵ The solution of this paradox is the same we have seen in the previous section: we need to find a mediating term that would connect the two realms while separating them clearly. Once again, myth is an ideal mediator, referring to a plane of reality that transcends standard human categories, including the law of contradiction. The myth of Erichthonios illustrates this well (Peradotto, 1977; Csapo, 2005: 238–240). Being a founder of the cultural order of Athens, Erichthonios is neither a being of nature, nor that of culture. His birth is both sexual and asexual: there is an ejaculation, but no intercourse. Equally asexual was the birth of his parents: Athena was born from Zeus’ head, Hephaestus was conceived by Hera without a male partner. There is something monstrous about Erichthonios and it is no wonder that the sight of him scarred the daughters of Cecrops to death. The snake-motif suggests that the monstrosity has to do with mixing up the human and the animal, the civilized and the chthonic. Erichthonios is a liminal creature – which is why he is able to bridge the unbridgeable.

The sphere of nature is represented in the myth by the daughters of Cecrops. From the Greek perspective, girls from their first menstruation to the point of their wedding belonged to Artemis, the goddess of wild, “virgin” landscape. Free of work and adult responsibility, these innocent maidens personified the Golden Age, and the Greeks let them dance in choruses during religious festivals

(Calame, 2001: 90; Redfield, 2003: 113–114). Yet they also had a share of the savagery of nature – this being the point of their association with bears in the Mounichion ritual (Vernant, 1991: 200). In myths the followers of Artemis mostly end tragically: they wish to preserve their purity but inevitably at the bloom of their youth they are pursued by male seducers, choosing to die rather than succumb to their sexuality. In practice this mythical motif was associated with the passage of girls into the “cultural” state of marriage (Vernant, 1991: 198–201). Once at its threshold, the girls had to let die their “natural”, virginal identity to become women and mothers. The death of a maiden ripe for marriage was a powerful image helping to articulate the boundary line between nature and culture. In real life girls were able to cross this boundary, of course, avoiding the sad fate of their mythical forebears. But the myths reminded them that the passage was substantial and not to be taken lightly (Redfield, 2003: 111–118).

In this light we may understand the death of the daughters of Cecrops as a necessary end of the natural and “virginal” stage of the history of Athens. The Arrhephoria imitate this crucial event, but do so from the perspective of culture, trying to amend what in ancient times had gone wrong. In myth the daughters of Cecrops are adolescent,¹⁶ pertaining to Artemis (who is virginal but sexual); in the rite they are between seven and eleven years, i.e., at an age when their sexuality is still dormant and they are the servants of Athena (who is virginal but asexual). Their mysterious chests, on the other hand, associated sexual content in antiquity already,¹⁷ and it is perhaps not accidental that the girls pass close to the precinct of Aphrodite. “In this way they represent the ambiguity of the myth, which tell us that the origin of the Athenian people is both sexual and asexual” (Redfield, 2003: 125). Unlike their mythical predecessors, however, they manage to curb their curiosity, performing thus the victory of culture over nature.

Their service is a sacrifice in that it requires them the suppression of an impulse – in this case, the impulse of curiosity, which plays such a large role in the sexuality of children. They have learned their lesson from the daughters of Cecrops; they will not inquire

too closely into the origins of Athens, into that primal scene that generated the Athenian state. (Redfield, 2003: 126; cf. Zeitlin, 1982: 152)

The Arrhephoria call our attention to a crucial dimension of myth and ritual. Myths tell of roots and origins – not in a temporal sense, but in a metaphysical one. Myths talk about what is beyond the horizon of our world but what this world rests upon. Why do all worlds need to be anchored in myth? Because every socio-cultural system is an arbitrary construct that is unnatural and yet cannot do without a connection to nature. As a result, every socio-cultural arrangement is based on a paradox. Myth is one of the few cultural media that can absorb the paradox and work with it constructively. The myth of Athenian autochthony is but one of many examples of this, reflecting the general truth that the ultimate roots of social and political arrangements are always monstrous and mysterious (Redfield, 2003: 126). The Athenians acknowledge this, but while admitting the monstrous foundations of their own identity, they make the decisive step of not tampering with it, leaving it behind the borders of their world. The Arrhephoroi carry the arcane source of Athenian power in their chests, but they resist the temptation and do not open them. The secret of primordality can remain concealed and keep its strength. The same maidens help to weave the *peplos* which is an epitome of the socio-political order of Athens. In this way they embody a link between the dark primordial origins of the *polis* and its present arrangement as celebrated by the Panatheia and their *peplos*.

Conclusion

My discussion has not been meant as an exhausting analysis of all the patterns that we can find in Greek myths and rituals, and still less as a model valid for all religions in general. My aim has been more modest: to compare the Greek concept of primordial time with that of Eliade, showing that the former emphasizes certain interesting features not quite evident in the latter. The Greeks were acutely aware of the ambivalence of the mythical era, and their rituals were not just meant to evoke it but to keep it off as well, protecting the

cosmos from it and making sure that it does not flow into it freely. A particular part was played by mythical heroes, who tended to use tricks and deceits as their main weapon. In the eyes of Eliade none of these differences would probably be disturbing. He admitted that particular conceptions of primordality differ from culture to culture¹⁸ and the Greek model would no doubt seem to him as one of the variants of the need of archaic peoples to relate to the world of myth and draw strength from it. Its peculiarities might be explained by the fact that the Greeks were already a highly developed society with a sense of history, their attitude towards mythical beginnings being more complicated than in traditional ahistorical societies (Eliade, 1963: 110–112; cf. Allen, 2002: 200–203).

It is questionable, though, whether the Greeks really were that specific. Their ritual patterns might have been more complex than those of more primitive societies, but the essential ambiguity that we have seen to pervade them seems to be a fundamental feature of myths in general. The mythical era is sacred, thus sharing a basic property of the sacred that was already indicated by Durkheim: its ambivalence. The sacred is both attractive and repulsive, both *tremendum* and *fascinans*. Accordingly, the task of rituals is not just to bring the profane world in touch with the sacred (as Eliade keeps emphasizing) but also “to prevent undue mixings and to keep one of these domains from encroaching upon the other” (Durkheim, 1915: 299). Eliade is aware of the ambivalence of the sacred (see e.g., Eliade, 1958: 14–19), but he tends to marginalize it in his discussions, preferring to picture the time of origins as a magnificent epoch to be longed for with nostalgia. The Greek examples make it possible to correct his account and give more depth to it.

At the same time, the Greek vision of primordial time is highly interesting in that it offers an opportunity for setting the whole problem of ritual repetition in a different methodological perspective. This is important, for it is precisely Eliade’s methodology that has often been a subject of critique. He has commonly been blamed for being “crypto-theological” and presenting an original religious vision of the world rather than a neutral scholarly analysis.¹⁹ Penetrating as some of his analyses may be, in most cases they only satisfy those who see the world religiously themselves.

Secular readers are rightly puzzled by the idea of the sacred “irrupting” into the world, and they would like to know how the archaic peoples arrived at their worldview in the first place. Eliade provides no answer and does not even feel the need to ask the question. Being a religious person himself, he found the archaic vision natural and meaningful enough. Indeed, he refused to take seriously all explanations of religion that would take their starting point from elsewhere than the sphere of religious ideas. No wonder that a number of secular scholars refuse to take him seriously.

My own interpretation has the advantage of being able to keep a number of Eliade’s descriptive categories while placing them in a different explanatory framework which is not religious itself but is not reductionist either – for it does not deny mythical entities their transcendence. In my account the mysterious power of primordial time has to do with the nature of order, its boundaries and its relation to what transcends it – to chaos and disorder. The point is well put by Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*:

Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder is by implication unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power. Ritual recognizes the potency of disorder. (Douglas, 2002: 117)

On this interpretation, chaos is not a nihilistic negation of order but corresponds to what Eliade calls “a plenitude of being” (1959: 97). It contains all possible arrangements of reality, every particular ordering of the world being but a segment of it. Consequently, while being a source of threat for every cultural arrangement by pointing to its limits, it remains its ultimate foundation. Every cosmos is dependent on chaos and needs to come to terms with it. It needs to face the possibility of alternative orderings of things. It needs to take

into account that no ordering is able to contain all of reality; there will always be situations that do not fit. Moreover, no cultural arrangement can avoid internal contradictions, “since in the endless variety of real situations, norms considered equally valid in abstraction are frequently found to be inconsistent with one another, and even mutually to conflict” (Turner, 1967: 40). Finally and most importantly, every cultural arrangement is in danger of ossifying. If it is to avoid this danger and keep its dynamics and capacity for change, it needs to have some sort of meta-order at its disposal that makes modulation possible (Redfield, 1990: 121–123, 132–133).

For all these reasons most traditional societies need myths – for myths deal precisely with the “orderly disorder” (Redfield, 1990: 122) that all order is rooted in. Myths embody the Other; they present alternative possibilities of being, but do so in a way that in the end legitimizes the present status quo. Myths provide a means of bridging the contradictions that no ordering can escape (the nature-culture relation analysed above being but one particular example). They offer a flexible, transcendent framework that cultural order can have recourse to when in danger of suffocating by its own rules. Myths are fundamentally polyvalent and their holistic images are susceptible to an infinite number of interpretations. Owing to this they can support various mutually exclusive claims that are raised by different members of the society at different times. Myth thus enables social and cultural change – for every new form of ordering can be understood as a legitimate reinterpretation of the same set of myths (Leach, 1954: 264–278).

The bottomless world of myth and the present socio-cultural arrangement are bridged by ritual. With the help of ritual cultural order can return into the mythical era regularly and purify itself of all that has become stale or subversive. Ritual is a part of cultural order but in its heart it opens up to the world of chaos, imitating mythical events that stand beyond the horizon. It does so in a controlled way, however, being bound by strict ritual rules, constructively absorbing chaos into the present world-order (Turner, 1982: 79–85). This is why Greek rituals attempted to correct so often what in mythical times had gone wrong. They enabled the Greeks to draw power and

reality from primordial times, and yet leave them safely detached behind the boundaries of their world.

It is not likely that Eliade would have accepted all of these synthetic conclusions, but he would no doubt have been familiar with most of the building blocks of which they are composed. It has been my aim to show that while the basic patterns I have traced in Greek myths and rituals would have been familiar to him (despite not being identical to any of those explicitly discussed by him), they can also be put together and made sense of in a different way than he would have preferred. Thanks to this Eliade's ideas can continue to be fruitful even for scholars who do not share his overall approach to religion. In my view, it is precisely in such cases that a scholar's legacy can be shown to be truly abiding.

NOTES

1. In my approach I partly follow Guilford Dudley, in whose view the generative power of a theory system "lies in its capacity to make intelligible what had been unintelligible or less intelligible before" (Dudley, 1977: 159) and it is from this point of view that Eliade should be judged. According to Dudley, though Eliade's theory "is one flawed by inconsistency and ambiguity" (159), it is still one that deserves to be treated seriously. Its future, however, depends "on its capacity to make adaptations" (160). For Dudley, the "creative shift needed for Eliade's program is one that will align it straightforwardly with a major research tradition, that of French deductive, systemic analysis" (160; cf. 144–156). This is basically what I mean to do in my article.
2. The choice might seem surprising, for the Greeks can scarcely count as a typical specimen of those "archaic societies" that are the main focus of Eliade's attention. Eliade himself took little interest in them, seeing them as too imbued with history already and claiming even that in Greece true archaic ontology was no longer practised in the sphere of myth but in that of philosophy (Eliade, 1963: 111–112; Eliade, 1954: 34–35; Eliade, 1969: 72–73). Yet "archaic mentality" need not be incompatible with history. In my view, Eliade's claims concerning the "archaic mentality" should be read as *typological* statements, i.e., as referring not to a historical stage in the development of humankind but to a timeless pattern which runs across various societies and which can

easily combine with that of “historical mentality”. It is only on this reading that Eliade’s reflections on the traces of the archaic mentality in modern times can be made sense of. Cf. Allen, 2002: 236–242.

3. The story is told by a number of late encyclopedias. See e.g., *Anecdota Graeca* 1.144 (ed. L. Bachmann); *Suda*, s.v. *Embaros eimi*.
4. Modern scholars mostly assume that the rite was a kind of initiation for girls. Cf. Vernant, 1991: 198–203, 217–219; Redfield, 2003: 102–110; Parker, 2005: 242–248.
5. The whole pattern might be compared e.g., to that of the healing ritual of the Na-khi in south-eastern China that Eliade discusses several times (see e.g., Eliade, 1963: 26–28); the ritual repeats the ancient mythical fight that the First Shaman Dto-mba fought with evil spirits bringing sickness; by recapitulating the Creation of the World, the rise of sickness and the emergence of the First Shaman, the real shamans are able to draw from his strength and repeat his victory. In a similar way we might claim that the Athenians rehearse a primordial crisis only to stage its mythical solution once again.
6. On Rhodus, for instance, they were supposed to have been performed in ancient times, but later a symbolic substitution was discovered and a criminal sentenced to death that would have been killed anyway started to be executed instead (Porphyry, *On Abstinence* 2.54). What we have here is a shift from the literalness of myth to the symbolicalness of ritual similar to that we have seen in the Mounichia ritual. In most cases, however, human sacrifices were projected not into the past but outside the borders of the Greek world (cf. e.g., Sophocles, fr. 126 Radt); structurally this amounts to very much the same thing, the boundaries of time and space being often symbolically identical.
7. Cf. the role of the “savage” peoples in modern European thought: often idealized in the manner of Rousseau, their image could easily switch to that of beastly cannibals. By way of analogy, the Greeks imagined the first people as having fruits in plenty from the trees and having no need for clothing or bedding due to the mild climate (Plato, *Statesman* 272a), yet the same natural simplicity in other contexts could appear as primitiveness and brutishness (see the *Homeric Hymn to Hephaestus* 4: “in earlier times men used to live in caves in the mountains, just like wild beasts”).
8. It needs to be remarked, though, that Eliade does not distinguish clearly between these two approaches and claims repeatedly that even in these cases a desire to *abolish* all creation is implied; cf. Eliade, 1958: 399–400, 402; Eliade, 1963: 50–51.

9. The huge *peplos* was only prepared for the greater Panathenaia, celebrated every four years. Whether a smaller *peplos* was offered to the goddess during the lesser Panathenaia is disputed; against this view cf. Parker, 2005: 268–269.
10. Indeed, Demeter is not a patroness of agriculture as such but rather of *fertility* as an unpredictable power that cannot be secured by technological means only, being perceived as transcending the reliable structures of man's world (Chlup, 2007).
11. As a matter of fact, the Greeks took it for granted that the gods regarded sacrifices as a tribute (*geras*) and ignored their material aspect, living sufficiently well on nectar and ambrosia. See already Homer, *Illiad* 4.48–49.
12. I am using the translation given in Vernant, 1991: 301–302, signed as 'T. Taylor (Oxford, 1913)', a source I have not been able to trace (it is not the classic translation of Thomas Taylor published in 1823).
13. A good example of this is given by Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* 4.97–98: When in 424 BC the Athenians took over Delion, a Boeotian sanctuary of Apollo, and fortified the temple, they were accused of impiety by the Boeotians. The Athenians replied that they had done no harm to the sanctuary; they occupied it, no doubt, but there was nothing wrong about that – it is only natural that land and sanctuaries are sometimes conquered by others: "The Boeotians themselves now hold as a rightful possession sanctuaries that they had originally entered as usurpers – just like most other people who had conquered a territory, having driven out its inhabitants by force."
14. This is well reflected by Plato, who knows that not even the most perfect constitution could ever inspire confidence without being legitimated by myths. Thus, after the lawgiver has brought up the first generation of citizens according to his rules, he must next persuade them that they received from him all their education and training in appearance only: "in reality during all that time they were being formed and fed in the womb of the earth; ... when they were completed, the earth, their mother, sent them up; and so, their country being their mother and also their nurse, they are bound to advise for her good, and to defend her against attacks, and her citizens they are to regard as children of the earth and their own brothers" (*Republic* 414d–e, tr. by B. Jowett). A page later Plato asks himself if the citizens can ever believe this, answering that those of the first generation probably not, but their sons and further descendants yes (415c–d).

15. Similarly, it is widely held even in our own Western civilization that its founding principles – such as the equality of all human beings or the existence of universal human rights – are “natural” and thus valid for non-Western countries too.
16. We can see this not just from numerous vase paintings but also from the fact that Euripides in *Ion* (495–502) lets them dance in a chorus; see Redfield, 2003: 120.
17. According to the Lucian scholiast (p. 276.13, ed. Rabe) they contained models of snakes and genitals made of dough. There is no reason to take his information seriously (Pausanias stresses that not even the priestess knew what the objects were), but they illustrate how the rite was understood at the level of popular imagination
18. See particularly Eliade, 1963: 42, 93. In his earlier works Eliade often underestimated cultural distinctions and tended towards sweeping generalizations, but he seems to have become more careful in the 1960s.
19. The debate is too extensive and sufficiently well known to be summarized here. Among the best known representatives of the critical approach are Donald Wiebe or Robert Segal. Interestingly enough, Eliade is sometimes condemned by the adherents of phenomenology themselves. Dan Merkur, for instance, contrasts his approach to the sacred with that of Rudolf Otto, accusing him of practising “idealism [...] under the name of phenomenology” (Merkur, 1996: 112).

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