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Existential Anthropology and the Transformation of the Existential Situation into Religious Meaning: The Rise and Similarities of Religion and the Arts

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

The human condition that makes us different from other animal species is our state of physical vulnerability. As our species became more vulnerable to the physical environment—with no fur, fangs, or claws; with poor sight, smell, and hearing—this situation eventually forced the vicarious-use of everything, from the use of tools to the making of clothes to the development of weapons. Therefore, in contradistinction to physical evolution, as our hominid progenitors became more vulnerable, the things that define our “humanness” became more distinct. In other words, the social forming elements to the existential situation provide the basis from which springs all things human, where seemingly disparate functions within the social dynamic—in this instance, art and religion—find common genesis. An aspect of the existential situation is the development of complete memory. In the following essay, starting with remembrance, we will see how the existential complex helps to form notions of art and religion; how impediment-to-will and exertion become essential elements to the formulation of religious ritual and fashion; and finally, we will take a look at the part worship itself plays in the performing arts.

The Existential Situation, Remembrance, and the Animation of Life

Because of the diminution of survival capabilities, memory necessarily replaces instinct. Every task, therefore, every endeavor, every motion is reliant on remembrance and vicarious-use, which itself is a mnemonic task. The

construction of clothes, tools, weapons, traps, snares, and nets involves complete recollection as to proper technique and sequence of assembly. All these things have to be remembered to be performed, taught, and passed on. The hunt itself involves techniques that have to be recalled. So as not to get lost, directional cues, the lay of the land, landmarks, and cardinal points of direction will be stored and referenced. Knowledge about animal behavior—their eating habits, their habits of predation and escape, and the effects of weather conditions on behavior—is essential information. The use of camouflage, scent, the right bait, the making and use of poison, and the use and training of dogs are all things that have to be recalled for a hunt to be successful. Thus, in the first instance, because of the state of vulnerability that humans devolved to, a complex process of recollection became manifest. Because of the personal circumstance of vulnerability to the elements, mnemonic development becomes essential to existence and survival. It is from this developed ability of event-retention that awareness about and consideration of the existential situation begins. Moreover, the same mnemonic dynamic which makes for the affinity between humans and the objects they create makes for the creation of fashion and art and the idea of an afterlife. As demonstrated, the process begins with the existential situation, requiring full memory, which leads to self-awareness about meaninglessness and monotony, the effects of which spur the creative animation of life through the idea

of spirit on one end of the existential spectrum to the use of color, adornment, and art on the other.

Remembrance and the Afterlife

Because of our complete memory, when mates leave us, we do not forget it. The memory of that mate is still fully alive, and the consternation of separation is channeled into constructive release. This is why we have memorials, pictures of remembrance, and funerary ritual. In the Lower Paleolithic period of the Neanderthal, there appears to have been a sense of an afterlife. Their skulls were placed in a circle of rocks as one of the so-called “skull burials” in a cave at Monte Circeo in Italy. Similarly, at Technik Tach in Turkestan, a child was caringly buried within a surround of five pairs of mountain goat horns (Hultkrantz, 1982, p. 24). Thus, it is the total awareness of discontinuation combined with complete memory which desires continuity. As Smith and Dale (1968) related about the Ba-Ila of South Africa,

They look back to the beginning of things and speak of a time when death was not. With reference to these statements about men passing away and not returning, we must explain that they do not mean that at death, a person is utterly extinct. It is the resurrection of the body that is denied. The person himself lives on. (p. 100)

As Freud (1950) relevantly stated about death, demons, and the soul,

Whenever I have succeeded in penetrating the mystery, I have found that the expected disaster was death. Schopenhauer has said that the problem of death stands at the outset of every philosophy; and we have already seen that the origin of the belief in souls and in demons, which is the essence of animism, goes back to the impression which is made upon men by death. (p. 109)

Therefore, from where does the idea of spirit come? It starts with the acute awareness of one's mortality, the remembrance of the death of others, and the extreme abhorrence of it (Malinoski, 1992, p. 51). Thus, it is the full awareness of death which gives cognition to a concept about overcoming it.

The forensic evidence of the earliest primary peoples, who cared for a contributing male after a severe injury, which probably put that individual in a physically non-contributing position, shows concern and affinity for company as fundamental to the human mindset (Dettwyler, 1991, pp. 375-384). Because of more exceptional memory which the circumstances of existence require, humans remember death; and because the company of others is cherished, death is abhorred; and because it is abhorred, death is shunned. Thus, the idea of and desire for continuation becomes a tool—like everything else human—leveraged against death.

In the Canaanite or Phoenician religion, death is killed when Anath, the goddess of love and war—in revenge for the death of her brother, Baal—kills

Mot, the prince of death. As a result, Baal, the god of vegetation, revives and causes the earth to bloom. The psychological abhorrence of death is revealed when Anath does not just kill Mot, but winnows him, burns him, and grinds him into dust (Russell, 1988, p.16). The rationale of victory over death is manifested when Baal revives and provides the earth with an abundance of life.



Anath, Semite War-goddess, 1200 BC

So, the creation of the idea of an afterlife is not only, as Freud (1950) would have it, the realization of a wish, but is a rationalized extrapolation which comes out of the existential situation. In other words, while life is evident in the existential situation, it is overcome by death, and since death comes inevitably and is a thing not wanted, it is overcome by life after it.



The idea of spirit comes because no one has physically returned from death. Once the hope of continuation is concretized into a concept of “afterlife” in which others “leave” and do not physically come back, then the state of being after death is not physical but must be something else. It is, therefore, spirit. Thus, ideas which serve as the basis for much religious ritual and theology develop at the instigation of the existential situation and from the critical component of complete and sophisticated memory.

Remembrance and Art

Similarly, the existential situation, which essentializes better memory, promotes the development of aesthetic interest. Because of the complete remembering of the cessation of others and the emotional connection to others, due to the necessary interdependence required to survive, there is greater consciousness about the finiteness of existence. This awareness combined with cognizance about the absolute monotony of animal existence gives incentive for the creation of reminders about the things that become meaningful: a successful

hunt, a successful battle, pictures of loved ones, the use of color, the depiction of scenery.

According to Anderson, one of James Cook's officers, New Zealanders were so communal that when a loved one or friend died in battle or otherwise, they wailed dolefully and cut gashes in their foreheads and cheeks until blood flowed freely. Anderson claims they did the same on the joyful return of a friend absent only a short time (though one would have to believe not to the same extreme). As their equivalent to our photographs as reminders, they also carved figurines from a "green stone" with pearl shell eyes, which they hung around their neck "as a memorial of those whom they held most dear" (Cook, 1961, Vol. 3, p. 815).

An example of artistic propensity of primary peoples comes when Hernando D'Escalante Fontaneda, who dwelt seventeen years with the mound-building estuarial Calusa and other tribes of Southwest Florida, writing in 1575, says the Canogacola, besides being numerous and great warriors, were "great painters" and that "whatever they see they paint" (Wilkinson, 1854).

Cave art was another early example of art used as essential reminders, triggering the reliving of the past to create a more constant animation against the reality of the animal existence about which we are conscious.



This is why today we adorn our homes with pictures or photos of memorable experiences involving friends, loved ones, or pets, or images depicting the glorification of historical events, or panoramic scenes of nature filled with color and beauty. And it's why when we leave our homes, we adorn our offices with the same, and why banks, hotels, museums, and public areas also offer such reminders of meaning. Art thus becomes our constant companion, providing a continuous flow of meaning as well as security against the insecurities we have about the realities of animal life. In my own experience, I have found another useful layer of meaning through the use of the coffee cup. Whenever we travel to other places, there are always coffee cups for sale at gift shops with scenes on them for the intended purpose that the buyer will remember the pleasant experience of the vacation taken. Before heading out to meet the stress of the

day, it is helpful to reach into the cabinet and pick a cup from one of our trips. Memories do flow back, providing a level of peace and satisfaction. Art and photography, in the same way, become humankind's constant companion, providing meaning through recollection.

Exertion and Religious Ritual

As counteraction to the existential situation—one of monotony, meaninglessness, and uncertain existence—the human mind creates an animated landscape of opposing powers. Thus, though they may fear a spirit—while the spirit world has its own will and desire and impresses the individual with that will (sacral-determinism)—the primary person believes he or she can, through ritual—which invokes a magical power—project and influence a control of their own (tele-determinism). This same determinism can be applied to others as well, in the lifting of taboo, the application of a curse, or the making of a blessing on oneself or others.

Sorcery, then, is essentially the art of influencing spirits by treating them in the same way as one would treat men in like circumstances: Appeasing them, making amends to them, propitiating them, intimidating them, robbing them of their power, subduing them to one's own will—by the same methods that have proven effective with living men. (Freud, 1950, p. 88)

The primary mind thinks it can, through mental projection and magical assistance, influence the course of history, even the course and form of the universe. To the primary person, there is a projection of will through ritual. If, for example, a dead ancestor, who is now a spirit and thus more powerful, is causing trouble, how does one counter? This concern is exemplified in the Isoma ritual of the Ndembu of Zambia, whose complex formulations are all purposed to lift the curse of a “shade” or ancestral spirit (Turner, 1969, pp. 18-37). Among the Bergdama, an ancient people who lived in remote parts of South West Africa, if it was believed the illness was sent by the all-powerful and influential deity Camab, then that person was left to die by starvation. If, on the other hand, the illness was sent by a dead relative, then the malady could be massaged, burned, or sucked out (Bjerre, 1960, pp. 56-61). The psychological determinism played out in the ritual conditions of conflict and control is amply revealed in other instances. As Katz points out, the Kung, a former gathering and hunting society living in the Kalahari Desert, saw hunting—because of its high risk and unpredictability—as an activity “subject to magical control” (Katz, 1982, p. 19). When it comes to healing, while the Kung apply medicinal herbs, they also practice deterministic healing.

The healing massage involves forceful manipulation of large areas of the body, concentrating on the shoulders, back, and stomach. The

massagers rub their sweat onto the one being healed and periodically shake their hands into space, expelling the patient's sickness. (p.51)

Epistemologically then, in the face of existence, primary people have their thoughts, their ability to speak, and their ability to do things with their hands, which physical nature necessitates be done according to formula, from tool and weapon making to the building of irrigation systems. The same formulaic way of getting things done becomes a template for ritual magic and the use of the supernatural power called *mana*. The projection of *mana* is illustrated in the belief that the sharing of power can either be projected onto or received from a weapon. For example, Kalahari Bushmen, as well as Australian aborigines, place, in a ritualized way, this power onto their arrows to assist the projectile in finding its target. Regarding countering a curse, the power of *mana* can be invoked and used as a shield by the ritual manipulation of things and words according to repeated formula. For this, the assistance of a shaman is often sought, whose power is great and connection to the spirit world more direct. Repetition of the ritual comes from psychological determinism itself. A positive outcome is entertained, and when that outcome is perceived to be fulfilled, the sayings and actions contained in the ritual are considered right and, therefore, will be repeated. Thus, we have an important social institution, religious ritual, resulting from a concern for power and control, manifesting itself through the exertion of will against impediment-to-will.

Exertion in Fashion

Like the meaning gained from the involvement of human exertion in a spirit world of powers and opposing forces, exertion also provides meaning when it comes to fashion and the performing arts. For most of its history, fashion is not a matter of simple adornment but becomes socially significant when pain and exertion are incorporated. An example of torturous conformity is Inuit boring holes in their cheeks to insert stone studs (Lubbock, 1872, p. 43). Others include Ubangi lip-stretching, African neck-stretching, Sumatran teeth-filing (Hollander, 1999, p. 118) and head deformation by Mayan and North American tribes (Brain, 1979, pp. 89-92). Kotzebue (1830, p. 24) relates how the Sitka islanders also practiced head deformation on their infants and lip-stretching by their women.



Neck-stretching: Ndebele, South Africa

(Permission: Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, "Faces of Africa," National Geographic)

Another form of exertion involving pain is the use of the corset and tight lacing in late eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe which was, according to Hollander (1999),

Most likely to occur among upwardly mobile young women trying to assert themselves, escape maternal stereotype, and gain power in the world, if only through erotic expression . . . Extreme practitioners laced themselves gradually smaller and smaller, patiently training their figures to the absolute minimum that could be borne, measuring themselves constantly, taking pleasure in the accomplishment, in the triumph over pain, and ultimately in the sensation itself. (pp. 124-125)

But, along with very tight neckwear and waistcoats, corsets were also worn by male officers during the rise of military dandyism throughout Europe after the Napoleonic wars. Many Regency dandies were upstarts, not landed gentry, and therefore expressed themselves with such fashionable statements to confirm their self-worth and gain the social status they were not born with (Kunzle, 2004, pp. 82-83).

The Melanesians also practiced waist compression. Cook (1961) described waist constriction on the island of Malakula, Vanuatu:

They wrap a piece of cloth or leaf round the yard which they tie up to the belly to a cord or bandage which they wear round the waist just under the short ribs and over the belly and so tight that it was a wonder to us how they could endure it. (Vol. 2, p. 465)



Waist Compression

Another form of body constriction was Chinese foot-binding. Like the European constriction practice, it too was culturally ingrained and, despite criticism, difficult to extirpate (Kunzle, pp. 287-288). Other forms of painful fashion come with what is known as scarification or cicatrization, a scarring process which causes the skin to lump or protrude in the form of dots and lines, with the usual purpose of creating patterns to adorn the body. In South Africa, the Nyambanas produce a row of warts about the size of a pea extending from forehead to nose. Of the Bachapin Kaffirs, those who distinguished themselves in

battle were allowed to incise their thigh, creating a long scar appearing bluish from rubbing ashes into the fresh wound. The African Bunns made their painful tribal mark by removing three thin vertical sections of flesh from the forehead to the mouth. The ridges were made more pronounced by rubbing in palm oil and ash. The Bornouese in Central Africa, with extreme pain on account of the heat and flies, embellish their bodies with ninety-one cuts: twenty cuts on each side of the face, one at the forehead, six on each arm, six on each leg, four on each breast and nine on each side, just above the hips. The inhabitants of Formosa painfully impress their bodies, making figures of plants, animals, and trees. The leading men of Guinea have their skin flowered like damask while the women of Decan have flowers cut into their forehead, arms, and breasts, the scars of which are then painted in noticeable fashion.



Scarification: Nuer, Sudan

(Permission: Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, "Faces of Africa," National Geographic)

Another category of indelible body art would be tattooing and body piercing, both finding a measure of favor in modern times. Involving a degree of pain, ritual, and sacrifice of time, tattooing was practiced throughout Europe and ranged from the Americas to Africa; that it was prevalent in the East, Asia and Oceania make the list much shorter where it was rare. Cook describes Tahitian tattooing as so painful that it was never practiced on anyone younger than twelve (Cook, 1961, Vol. 1, p. 125). Using the process known as *moko* (characterized by spirals, circles, and curved lines), the Maori incised the skin with a fine chisel and light mallet. *Moko* was a highly ritualized process. It was taboo for the person being tattooed to communicate with anyone but those involved in the process. Neither could they be touched by anyone but the artist.



Maori Curvilinear Design

In conjunction with the painful indelible processes of cicatrization and tattooing, tedious procedures themselves, temporary adornment could also involve complex drawn-out processes. Besides copiously adorning themselves with studs and jewelry, the Felatah women of Central Africa spent several hours a day on their appearance, beginning the night before by wrapping their toes and fingers in henna leaves to produce a purple effect. They stained their teeth blue, yellow, and purple, leaving some teeth their natural color for a contrasting effect; and with particular care, they penciled their eyelids with antimony trisulfide, creating a silver-white, slightly lustrous blue effect (Lubbock, 1872, p. 42).

According to Hollander, European missionaries in South America were offended at the long hours the Indians spent in cossetting, oiling, and painting their bodies when they could have been fishing, farming, and hunting. The Nuba of southern Sudan also spend much effort grooming and tending their bodies. After much washing, depilating, oiling, and exercising, they paint elegant designs contoured to enhance the body's structure and shape of the face. The result, as Hollander states, "is dazzling to the eye and quite satisfying to our sense of how one might celebrate physical perfection" (p. 117).

Melville recounts the time-consuming process the Marquesan women take in dressing their hair:

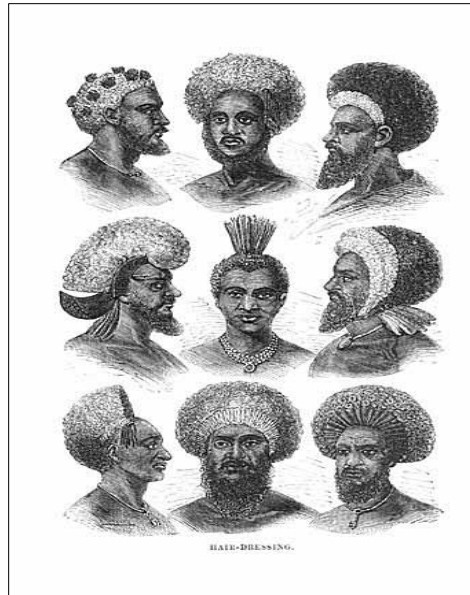
The long luxuriant and glossy tresses of the Typee¹ damsels often attracted my admiration. A fine head of hair is the pride and joy of every woman's heart! Whether, against the express will of Providence, it is twisted upon the crown of the head and there coiled always like a rope on a ship's deck; whether it be struck behind the ears and hangs down like a swag of a small window-curtain; or whether it be permitted to flow over the shoulders in natural ringlets, it is always the pride of the owner, and the glory of the toilette. The Typee girls devote much of their time to the dressing of their fair and redundant locks. After bathing, as they sometimes do five or six times every day, the hair is carefully dried, and if they have been in the sea invariably washed in fresh water, and anointed with a highly scented oil extracted from the meat of the cocoa-nut. (p. 267)

And as Thomas Williams recounts,

In another location in the South Pacific, the Fijian chiefs, with their hairdressers, consumed hours contouring into different shapes and dying into different color their hair. Black was favored, but white, yellow, and red were also used. The hair, up

¹ Melville used this term for the residents of the Tai Pi Vai valley on the island of Nuku Hiva, one of the Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific.

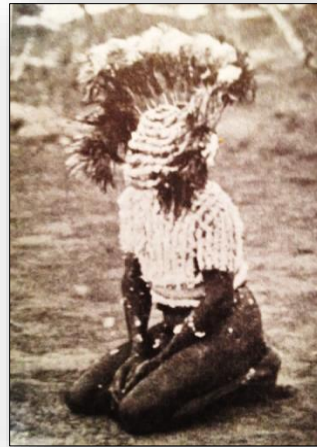
to three feet in circumference (one was noted to be nearly five feet) required them to sleep, surely uncomfortably, on wooden neck rests. On one head all the hair is of a uniform height; but one-third in front is ashy or sandy, and the rest black, a sharply defined separation dividing the two colors. One has a large knot of fiery hair on his crown, all the rest of his head being bald. Another has the most of his hair cut away, leaving three or four rows of small clusters, as if his head were planted with small paint-brushes. A third has his head bare except where a large patch projects over each temple. One, two, or three cords of twisted hair often fall from the right temple, a foot or eighteen inches long. Some men wear a number of these braids so as to form a curtain in the back of the neck, reaching from one ear to the other. A mode that requires great care has the hair wrought into distinct locks radiating from the head. (p. 158)



Fijian Coiffure

(Thomas Williams, *Fijians*)

One might wonder at the reason for the extreme lengths to which primary people went—from head deformation to the painful process of scarification—to make their fashion statements. But, as with many primary religious ceremonies—complex movements, elaborate costume, time (often taking days), and the practice of self-torture—the involvement of pain and sacrifice of time in personal adornment also increases meaning. Even the Australians, who went naked much of the time, spent great effort at religious ceremony to crown conveyers with elaborate headdresses of feathers and down, while the bodies of participants or initiates were decorated with paint or lines and dots of down.



Australian Ceremonial Dress

(Spencer and Gillan, *Native Tribes of Central Australia*)

Thus, when it comes to fashion, at the microcosmic psychological level—which simultaneously involves the macrocosmic aspects of rank, social approval, and identity—a similar level of accomplishment is accessible to all who can, without status or means, achieve, with protracted effort, a sense of accomplishment obtained and confirmed by the approval of others in agreement as to what is beautiful or fashionable.

Exertion and Worship in the Performing Arts

In the performing arts, applause and encore serve the purpose of glorification and confirmation. The audience experiences vicariously what the performer is doing. The difficulty embedded in the performance is appreciated

and designed to assemble meaning through approval. Applause itself is a self-confirming conviction that a given performance is exciting. Thus, where individual affirmation might lag at any given moment during a performance, it is suddenly uplifted in conformity to the excitement the majority of the audience displays. So, when individual doubt lingers, it is momentary when a consensus of approval is earned by the performer where the known criteria of beauty, form, and difficulty are met, and the showering of approval, through applause, is the gift of wages earned. Thus, excitement and involvement are brought to self-confirming and continuously sustaining levels, which the encore doubly confirms.

Similar to the complexities and extreme requirements involved in sports, we see at the highest level of achievement for the performing artist a multitude of obstacles. Dance can be roughly categorized into the genres of tap, hip-hop, modern, swing, contra, belly, country/western, flamenco, Latin, folk, and ballet. Each can take years of training with specific requirements of form to achieve a modicum level of expertise. In ballet, for example, though there are five basic positions, there are hundreds of moves, all difficult and some achievable only with extreme difficulty and skill (Grant, 1982).

By way of comparison, in sports, children today play with a level of competence exceeded by the seriousness and involvement displayed by parents. Few of these neophytes go on to achieve a level of distinction in high school. Fewer go on to play at the college level, let alone achieve distinction. Even fewer

participate in professional play and rarely accomplish a high degree of accomplishment there. All the while, all of this effort is channeled and structured through a system of tournaments and playoffs. After a grueling season, years of dedication, practice, physical sacrifice, and thousands of hours honing skills, expectation and anticipation is brought to a level of extreme animation shared by supporters and participants alike, and the winner, along with supporters, celebrates a glorious victory because of the knowledge of a great accomplishment defined by obstacles overcome along the way.

Similarly, after years of practice and refinement, the degree of excitement for modern dance and ballet is determined by the level of difficulty in the performance as impediment-to-will, which itself is designed to add layers of meaning to the existential situation. Like Tongan dancers, who received intervals of applause from fellow onlookers for their highly complex choreographed performance (Cook, 1961, Vol. 1, p. 109), meaning for the modern performer is confirmed in fulfilled purpose while the performance is confirmed in the minds of the audience with a showering of applause and encore. Thus, one reason adoration reaches a level of worship is it attaches the fan to a destiny played out as impediment-to-will. Another has to do with the psychology of separation sought by the performing artist, where the choreography of motion appears beyond human ability, such that when accomplished sets the performer apart from all others. So, when a skater attempts and achieves with perfection the triple axel or

the ballet dancer performs thirty-two consecutive fouettés or leaps that defy gravity, the evident level of difficulty separates the performer from the audience and other less-able performers, creating a persona of specialness to be rewarded and adored.

Thus, impediment-to-will is manifested in obstacles artificially placed before performer such that, through the process of overcoming, success is achieved. Like the exhausting, painful, and complex features of ceremonial ritual, the obstacles to overcome in sports are records to be broken, and opponents to overcome. In dance and theatrical performance, impediment is set with clearly defined, difficult-to-achieve standards of performance. Even fashion and personal adornment are made difficult with complicated, time-consuming, and sometimes torturous procedures. But while the reason for competition and impediment is to acquire meaning and animate life, the source of definition comes from the existential situation—that life itself is a struggle, an overcoming, and a competition against time and circumstance.

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