

Reflections



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Apology

These “Reflections” are offered in the spirit that what is available to an author (or to anybody) is not Reality itself but an image, a reflection, of reality, refracted through the fun-house mirror of his imagination. The writer’s aim then is to be a fair witness, even if changes inevitably happen, both consciously and unconsciously, to the image between its first conception and its being written down. The task then is to sustain the act of witnessing, which brings the writer himself alive in the empty space between the Witness and the what is witnessed. When this takes place, a certain energy can become manifest.

Acknowledgements

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Epigraphs

*Don't search for God
Search for the one searching for God
But why search at all?
He is already here
Closer than your own breath*

Jalaluddin Rumi

*A god can do it. But can you tell me how
a man can enter through the lyre's strings?
Our mind is split. And at the shadowed crossing
of heart-roads there is no temple for Apollo.*

*Song, as you have taught it, is not desire,
not wooing any grace that can be achieved;
song is reality. Simple, for a god.
But when can we be real? When does he pour*

*the earth, the stars, into us?
Young man, it is not your loving, even if your mouth
was forced wide open by your own voice – learn*

*to forget that passionate music. It will end.
True singing is a different breath, about
nothing. A gust inside the god. A wind.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

The Way of a Tourist

[a shorter version of this was published in *Shambala Sun* magazine, Feb. 1996.]

I am writing about a religious experience, my only one occasioned by the presence of artifacts from one of the major world traditions. This took place at a Buddhist temple in Nikko, Japan. Nikko is a major destination for Japanese domestic tourism. According to a brochure I picked up, there was a saying “you haven’t experienced beauty until you’ve seen Nikko.” Having myself recently before this experienced the solemn grandeur of Kyoto’s temples, the ancient richness of Kamakura, the sublime intimacy of traditional gardens, and other wonders, I was not expecting anything revelatory in Nikko. But I went, more out of touristic duty than as a passionate pilgrimage.

Dutifully, I walked and looked. I covered most of the temple precincts of Nikko, set so enchantingly on the forested mountainside. After half a day I was feeling saturated with impressions and thoughts, and to tell the truth, I was near exhaustion from carrying my heavy backpack up and down the mountain, in the rain, and with symptoms of fever from a case of flu I was nursing. But I had two hours left until I had to make my way to the train.

In desperate need of refreshment, I trudged to one of the teahouses in the central plaza and sat down. As I ordered green tea, an old monk came in. Somehow I guessed that he spoke English and began talking with him. I learned that many of the temples of Nikko were in active use by a resident community of Buddhist monks, not Zen, but of a more “traditional” sect. He asked if I had seen a certain temple, saying that many monks lived there. I had not seen it.

When he left me to my tea, I took out my tourist guidebook and looked up the temple, out of curiosity. It was a little out of the way, it said, and off the main tourist circuit. It had been built some number of hundreds of years ago by a prince, for some purpose of the Imperial family. It had a small, but fine, shrine.

I was intrigued. Feeling rejuvenated, I set off to see it. A half-mile walk brought me to one of those great gates found all over Buddhist Asia, where one has to enter between two guardian warrior-spirit sculptures. The ones here were three times life size and very fierce, wielding terrible weapons, treading upon the still-writhing bodies of recently vanquished chthonic beasts. Their gaze regarded one but little, seemingly looking past oneself toward more formidable cosmic enemies. The idea occurred to me that it would not be advisable to enter here with any thoughts inimicable to the teaching of the Buddha; I tried to drop any such thoughts and leave them outside.

Past the gate, I was surprised not to be in the courtyard of an imposing temple, as elsewhere in Nikko. There was instead a low rather nondescript building, not particularly old. A sign politely informed me that, as these were residences, it would be a good idea to be quiet and not to go too near.

Off to the left was a second gate, with two more fierce guardians, these a little larger than life-size. I noticed that the gaze of the warriors seemed directed at oneself, and held not wrath but wariness. Their weapons were held not in the attitude of the act of destruction, but in readiness. They stood upon the earth, perhaps on the rocks of this very mountain. I redoubled my temporary vow of obedience to the Buddha, and dropped a few more bad thoughts on the pavement.

Entering through the second gate, a long switchback climb appeared, flight after flight of ancient stone stairs. Finally I arrived at a third gate. Here, the guardians were a little under life-size, and more surprising, they were not fierce at all. They did not seem to regard one; their gaze was fixed on some other world, perhaps an inner one. One of them, I remember, was balanced lightly upon what appeared to be turquoise waves of chaotic shape. Were these, I mused, the waves of unruly thought and feeling of the unenlightened mind? Or perhaps the incomprehensible energy waves of existence itself?

I pondered what it was I ought to give up in order to have the right to pass this gate. The guardians appeared unthreatening; but perhaps if

I wanted to see whatever it was that they saw, I would have to be as indifferent to my imperious self, now standing before their gate, as they seemed to be. It was instantly born in upon me what a complex and massive thing a self was—it could not just be dropped, all at once. I resolved to dissect it and drop unnecessary parts of it on the path beyond the gate.

Through the gate there was another series of stairs. With each step, I recognized and laid beside the stair another inner burden—antagonism; fear; confusion; anxiety; love of comfort; impatience. Suddenly I came upon a strange image in the path—a pair of well-rounded breasts, with nipples, hewn from the living rock of the mountain. What was the meaning of this? Did it represent spiritual nourishment? The need to be as a little child? Was it a memorial to the love of some Imperial princess? Or, did it mean that this was the step at which I had to drop all sexual desires? I decided to assume it carried all of these meanings. As for sexual desires, these are never far from my mind, but in my weakened physical condition, they wore on me at that moment somewhat oppressively. I noticed a surprisingly distinct sensation of relief when I dropped them beside the path. I made a mental note to pick them up again on the way back down.

Climbing on, at last I came to the vestibule of the shrine. As is customary in Japan, I removed my shoes, bowed slightly, and stepped inside. I was alone except for a caretaker, here high above the throngs of tourist Nikko. I was in a largish nearly empty room with a floor of tatami rice-straw mat, cool and inviting to bare feet. The only furnishings in the room were antique religious artifacts displayed along the walls, each with a little tag specifying date, provenance, and function. These items were as old as almost any I had seen in Japan.

As I came halfway round my circuit of the room, I observed that there was a doorway leading to a smaller room. There was a rope in front of it, and a sign that tourists were not to go past this point. The smaller room was also covered in tatami, and held antique artifacts,

apparently older still.

Beyond the second room was a third small room, slightly elevated. In it was a long low table of age-blackened polished wood. On the table were small artifacts of very fine workmanship, and, it seemed to me, high artistic merit and spiritual significance. On each side of the table were three round cushions, so that six monks could sit in two rows, facing each other. The atmosphere was charged with that specific eerie quality of feeling often encountered in the inner court of Asian temples. I mused on the purpose of esoteric ceremonies that must have been performed so many times here over the last hundreds of years, and that might perhaps be performed this very evening.

Suddenly I noticed that beyond the small room there was yet a further room, or perhaps it should be called a crypt--it would only have been possible for a very small person to get into it. It was partly closed off by a curtain. Something very dark was inside, but I could not make out what it was.

As I shifted my position to the center of the rope to get a better view, it hit me. A collimated beam of emanations was coming out from whatever it was in the crypt, focused through the axis of the two intermediate rooms, and entering direct into my body as I stood there. I felt as I had never felt before--overwhelming peace, love, the unity of everything, and the supreme perfect beauty of that unity. I felt that what was passing through me was not for me, but for the world, and that it was powerful and deep enough to touch the whole world, no matter what individual people who received its full force might do with it. But words fail and die away in front of such facts, and I have already said more than I ought, though also perhaps far less.

I did not stay long there. I felt instinctively that to tarry would be to court fantasy, and to spoil the purity of what I had tasted. In any case, nothing could possibly be added to that experience.

I left the shrine quickly, pausing only to buy a souvenir trinket from

the caretaker. On the way back down the mountain, I carefully picked up each thing I had dropped on the ground.

As I walked slowly away, I mused full of wonder about how much human time and energy and, probably, lives, not to mention how much money, had been spent over the centuries to nurture and empower whatever it was that was transmitting from here. Perhaps only a very few of all those people had been given to experience what had been given to me; for the rest it was only a tale of wonder. But surely even a tale of a tale of that wonder would have been candle enough to lure a whole army of moths to its flame, if nurtured and carried lovingly and knowingly in the form of the rituals and texts and artifacts of a great tradition.

I am not writing such a tale. For one thing, I think there are many people, including myself, for whom it is not possible to live as a Buddhist, or on any fixed path, in the contemporary world. Yet, just for those of us whose “civilized” way of life alienates us from tradition, whose spiritual hunger usually goes unrequited, it seems to me that there is another possibility, to which I am trying to point. Just for us, it is not too difficult to go almost anywhere in the world. Or, even if we simply stay in place in one of the great centers of contemporary culture, almost everything in the world will eventually pass by our door and beckon our attention.

In a way, life for us “post-modern” people is potentially richer than for almost anyone at any previous time of history, spiritually as well as materially. But, it must be squarely faced, this potential is only very rarely realized--almost without exception, we settle for routine, for pre-packaged experiences and ideas, and successfully avoid both the difficulties and the adventures that are offered to us. The question is, how to be free enough innerly to recognize and profit from the extraordinary encounters our external freedom makes possible. The answer, I am suggesting, lies in the combination of a rigorous sincerity about what one wants and needs, coupled with a spirit of playful and wholehearted engagement. That is what I mean by “The Way of a Tourist.” It is a difficult craft, worthy of serious study.

Drum Is the Ear of God

Africa's Inner World of Music

Music and Inner Life

[A version of this article by Richard Hodges was published (anonymously) in *Material for Thought* #13, 1992, Far West Press, San Francisco.]

Every culture lives within the interplay of two movements, an outer movement of performing the activities necessary for the continuation of physical life and an inner movement towards relating to forces, being and intelligence beyond and above that life. The music of a culture is a measure of the relationship and balance between these two movements.

There is a music, nowadays practiced mainly in certain places where the traditional spirit has not completely given way to modernity, that uses its power over the feelings to cut through the self-absorption of everyday life and bring one to an experience of communion, the sense of being part of the vast play of forces that encompass and connect all beings. In Africa music and dance evoke a sense of communion on many levels in a rich tapestry that includes spiritual aspiration, religious experience, evocation of deity, psychic and physical empowerment, enactment of myth and history, teaching, healing, courtship, cultural assimilation and solidarization, mutual criticism, celebration, entertainment and exercise.

Traditional Africa maintains a distinction between religious music and social music. This distinction corresponds to the widespread understanding that spiritual life and material life are on different levels. While many processes of a secular nature may take place in a religious context and vice versa, this is felt as part of the unique drama of each situation, not as an undesirable contradiction. In effect, this ambiguity represents an affirmation that spiritual life and material

life are inseparably united as constant reciprocal movements of the human spirit.

In Africa, as in many other traditional cultures, religious music and dance play the central role of invoking possession-trance. In possession, the person loses consciousness of himself as an individual and becomes the vehicle or mouthpiece of a “deity,” a personification of one of the great forces of the inner or the outer world. The actions and speech of the person possessed are regarded as those of the deity and are looked to for advice, healing, prophecy, and magical power.

The deities in whose service music and dance are performed are traditionally understood not as being divine in themselves-rather, their divinity is a particle of the Divinity of a higher principle, the creative principle behind the Universe. But this principle is already always everywhere and in everything and hence needs no service to call its presence. No special temporal material condition, such as a temple, ceremony, or artifact, can concentrate its force. Its action at our level is non-action. Its symbol is silence. In music, it is expressed by the rhythmic pulses that are heard innerly though the instrument is not played; through their silence, these pulses give shape and meaning to the rhythm that is heard outerly.

The Great Principle is too far above the level of man for him to relate to It directly. The deities are necessary intermediaries through whom man and God address each other. In some traditions the drums themselves are also specially invested as divine intermediaries. The Dogon say that Drum is the ear of God and one must beat it with the attitude that one is speaking to God on behalf of mankind. This attitude requires respect, but also great force. In the words of a religious song of the Blekete cycle (Blekete is the name of a deity of the Ewe people of Ghana and also the name of the principal drum that is used in this cycle): “A feeble effort will not fulfill the self.”

Possession is a magic door to religious experience, but it alone does not constitute a complete relationship with the divine. To have this, to make available to oneself the powers and knowledge that are the

property of a divinity, requires a further payment-to make oneself morally divine, to conduct one's life in a way that is pleasing to the divinity. Many obligations and prohibitions corresponding to each deity are known in tradition; however, detailed observances are less important than the prime moral law. This law is the sacredness of Life, which includes the need to understand the particular place and way of each living being. Through the experience of dance, song, and music the law is conveyed and received collectively and individually. A song of the Blekete cycle expresses the following thought:

In God's shrine, this world,
What everybody wants is a good life.
Why do people always make trouble?
God has given principles to live by,
But only you yourself can follow them.

Traditional African music is, first of all, participatory. All the activities of daily life may be-and often are-accompanied by music, song, and rhythm. And every day, there may be a special event in which music and dance is the central activity. Almost everyone present will be actively involved in several different ways at once, playing instruments, dancing, singing, hand-clapping, observing, commenting, being commented upon.

Subtle verbal expressions may be encoded in drum language. Almost everybody can understand this language at a basic level; often there will be other levels of meaning woven in which can be understood only by drumming initiates of a certain level of experience. This is the source of the concept of the "talking drum." Drum language may be used for reciting history and myth, for praising kings and patrons, for topical social commentary, for long-distance communication.

In Africa, music touches everything. The traditional musician acts in extra-musical roles that vary from culture to culture within Africa. Among the Senufo, he may be healer and sorcerer. Among the Mandingo, there is a special caste of musicians who serve as historians, having memorized vast repertoires of songs and

narratives commemorating past events and genealogies. In several nations, there are styles of drumming closely associated with the chieftancy, the king himself being the master drummer among masters (as for example with the Watusi and the Dagomba). Each craft or occupational tradition, such as weaving, blacksmithing, the military, farming, or hunting, has its music and its musicians who play before, during, and after every major activity; this music plays an important role in preparing for and regulating the performance of these activities.

Within this context, a very special role is played by the master musician, who must be not only a consummate artist, but also wise and roundly educated and capable of exercising his power of influence with great responsibility. He must be deeply experienced concerning human nature and its manifestations in relation to the experiences which music can induce. He must develop and constantly exercise an extraordinary alertness and perceptiveness. There is a saying that a master drummer must have seven eyes, and that with these eyes he can see the skeleton inside people.

In order to be able to fulfill this role, an individual is carefully selected and intensively trained, often from a very early age. The training of musicians is a complex matter, differing from tribe to tribe, and even for different types of musicians within one tribe. One theme is apprenticeship, a special relationship to an elder musician who becomes the student's musical father. In the frequent case of family transmission, this mentor would be his actual father. Another theme is initiation. There are numerous secret societies with special music associated with particular rites. Certain music may be played only by initiates of a certain grade. A third theme is a kind of musical scholarship which is an age-old tradition in Africa. Some musicians aspire to know well not only the music of their own community but also that of others, and spend years traveling widely to learn and to carry local music to distant places. Under the conditions prevailing in Africa of numerous coexisting independent but culturally related ethnic groups, this exchange has contributed to the development of a very complex and mature musical culture.

The body of knowledgeable musicians exercises a sophisticated critical influence which plays an important role in musical training, since every player is always being judged by a large number of knowledgeable peers. This tradition supports a system of incentive for personal effort and accomplishment quite separate from the incentives arising from biological imperatives and from economic life.

The Structure of African Percussion Music

The Ensemble

The foundation of African music is the complex of rhythmical structures expressed by the percussion ensemble. The sound is built up in a series of layers of parts that correspond to a hierarchy among the ensemble members. The simpler, more basic parts are played by less experienced players while the lead part is played by the most experienced musician present. Ideally a “master drummer” fills the role of ensemble lead. His qualifications include a complete understanding of the way all the parts fit together and a developed sense of performance values which enables him to manage the ensemble. He assigns parts and often decides what parts must be omitted or simplified, based on the skills of the performers. When necessary in order to transmit his understanding to ensemble members, he can demonstrate all necessary refinements of any part and can himself play enough parts simultaneously to create an impression of the full texture of the composition.

While no one is allowed to play a part he is not qualified to play well enough to contribute to the ensemble, the hierarchy is not completely rigid; a highly accomplished musician might for example take one of the simplest parts. His experienced touch allows him to obtain a finer quality of sound than a lesser player. His rhythmic understanding and more developed sense of time would

enable him to reveal hidden depths in that part, providing example and encouragement to the student. The full expression of the music requires the material support of very fine playing of the most basic parts to provide the foundation and rhythmic energy upon which the higher parts can play. The fullest expression of the music requires the material support of very fine playing of the basic parts, in the same way that a developed sensitivity of the body is the necessary material support for development of the feelings and the mind.

The master drummer may use rhythmic dialog to invite or challenge certain individuals to play lead parts of their own. He may then expand or comment upon their ideas by his response. This is one of the many ways that the master, when he is present, uses the ensemble context as a vehicle for aiding the development of the players for whom he is responsible and for propagating the tradition.

Polyrhythm

The relationship among layers of rhythm within a composition is articulated by the principle of polyrhythm: the simultaneous playing of two or more rhythms having different starting points. This technique is at the heart of African music. While Western composers occasionally make use of polyrhythmic ideas, this technique is much more pervasive and highly developed in Africa.

The basic problem that faces the composer using polyrhythms is how to allow each part to have its own character and at the same time to give the whole ensemble an integrated texture of sound. In African music, which is almost always for dance or for accompaniment of repetitive motions of daily work, there is the additional requirement that the overall sound must evoke and be grounded in the sense of movement of the human body.

The different layers of an African polyrhythmic composition represent different voices in dialog with each other. This is known as “call and response.” The voice expressed by each rhythm has periods

when it is speaking alternating with periods when it is either silent or just softly keeping time, listening as it were to the response of another voice, to which it responds in turn. There may be moments of overlap, when a voice begins its response before the preceding voice finishes speaking.

One or more of the simultaneous rhythms may repeat in a cycle whose duration is not a multiple of the fundamental meter. This has been called “polymeter” by some Western observers. However, trained African musicians insist that this is a misunderstanding. There is in reality only one meter in effect at one time, and it is the responsibility of each performer and listener constantly to maintain the sense of this meter as the foundation of his hearing and playing.

The Main Beat

The foundation layer of African rhythm is always the “main beat,” which expresses the basic meter. There are almost always four main beats which repeat in a cycle. This is the beat to which a musician will keep time with his feet and body while playing. It is also the basis of the main movements of the body in the dancing that is done to the music. Each period from one main beat to the next is subdivided into either three or four subordinate pulses. The tempo of the main beats must be maintained very precisely for the energy of a performance to develop.

The tempo of the main beats is usually rather fast, from about 60 to about 180 per minute. At the upper end of this range, the subordinate pulses occur as fast as twelve per second.

The first beat of each cycle of four main beats is the downbeat. Neither the main beats nor the downbeat imply extra accentuation. There is a principle that there is no distinction of accentuation between any notes played by the same “voice.” When distinctions between different notes are required, they are made by differentiating the quality of sound, not the quantity. This differentiation may be

The Bell Pattern

One bell pattern deserves special examination. This pattern and its variants are so widely used in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa that it has been called “the standard pattern” by ethnomusicologists. This pattern is also found wherever sub-Saharan musical influences have diffused, including a number of distinctive musical traditions in North Africa and in the Americas. This pattern is coordinated with and fits within the meter of four main beats of three pulses each.

It is of some interest that the pattern between strokes in this bell pattern is the same as that of the whole- and half-steps in the diatonic major scale. Here we are comparing patterns in time and pitch, which might be considered apples-to-oranges; but it illustrates the idea that African music is projected upon a richly interconnected rhythmic organization that repeats indefinitely in the dimension of time, analogous to the organization of tonal music in the dimension of pitch, with tonal pitch conceived as repeating in octaves.

```

<-----o n e p e r i o d----->[repeat ...
C C# D D# E F F# G G# A A# B [C ...    chromatic octave
do . re . mi fa . so . la . si[do ...    diatonic scale
|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|    whole steps
|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|    half steps
|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|    «intervals»
x . . x . x x . x . x . x [x ...    bell pattern
X . . X . . X . . X . . X [X ...    Main beats

```

The bell pattern can be heard as two distinct sections which connect to each other through the “intervals.” [Note 1] This creates a sense of alternation between outward and inward movements, evocative perhaps of breathing or of the two directions of consciousness. The same device is also used at a larger scale. A rhythm may have a «front section» and a «back section» each of which is constructed upon a similar rhythmic idea, but with mutations of weight and syncopation that express movement out and return home.

Upbeats

The next layer of rhythmic architecture is often a figure in which an instrument will play on the “upbeats,” the two pulses leading up to but not including each main beat. Sometimes, a more complicated figure is used which still demarcates the upbeat pulses. This pattern is in call-and-response to the main beats. It is often played strongly on a high-pitched instrument, which makes this pattern very prominent in the overall impression of sound, sometimes more prominent than the main beats, which may be played very softly, or very low-pitched, or not played at all. When played with the precise feel, this simple pattern can evoke an intense emotional response. A traditional description of this pattern envisions it as “a baby crying” above the dialog of the other parts.

Middle Parts

The basic parts combined-main beats, bell, and upbeats-outline the rhythmic space in which the music takes place. We only begin to hear actual music when the important layer of “middle parts” is added. These parts repeat in a cycle which is usually a multiple of the downbeat cycle, but there is more room than with the basic parts for individual improvisation. The middle parts further articulate the architecture of the cycle, dividing it into segments of time each of which is occupied by a “voice” sounding a coherent rhythmic motif.

The call-and-response between these voices takes on a sense of poetry, of rhyming.

Lead Parts

The foreground layer of the composition consists of a “lead part” or parts in dialog. Working off the energy generated by the basic parts, the lead player introduces musical ideas which develop the polyrhythmic potential latent within the basic rhythmic structure, expressing his creative understanding. These often cut across the other parts in a way that is a challenge to rhythmic perception. This may stretch the mind in an unexpected direction. For example, in the drumming that is a major component of the Haitian Vodou service, unexpected breaks (“casse”) by the lead drummer are recognized as a principal means by which the master drummer induces and controls possession in the dancers. It is the responsibility of the drummer to be aware of the dancer’s changing state and degree of preparation for possession in order to know when and how to intensify or calm the energy.

Bringing the Parts Together

Tradition maintains that the main beat in music represents one’s purpose, while the crossing rhythms represent distracting impulses. The profound difficulty of maintaining orientation to the beat is a surprise for most Westerners who undertake serious engagement with the music. Beginners may solve the problem by blocking out rhythms that conflict with the one they are playing, but to go further, and particularly to play crossing rhythms with the correct feel, requires that the student learn to hear immediately each rhythm in its relationship to the main beat. The reward for learning this is to experience these crossing rhythms as subtle and delightful patterns of tension and relaxation.

To play any part requires a concentration of consciousness within

oneself at a depth where one can receive and contain an inward flux of rhythmic energies from the other parts and simultaneously can emanate a rhythmic energy that is not a reaction to what is received but is rather a distillation, an expression of one's individual will conditioned into coherence with the ensemble. There is a drummers' proverb: "The bell does the hard work; lead is the easiest part to play." The bell, as the driving engine of the whole machine, cannot react to anything that may happen outside, not even to others' errors. The bell player must emphasize the conscious attitude of an independent source of emanation. The lead part on the other hand serves to tie the other parts together and raise the energy to a new level; the attitude of the lead player emphasizes the aspect of reception and containment.

The quality of sustaining a relationship to the main beat while playing one's own part is called "grounding." This is especially demanding when the rhythm is syncopated. A student may find his grounding criticized by other musicians. He may be told, for example, to let his rhythm "sit down," meaning to allow the playing to be done through hearing all of the main beats and their subordinate pulse, even when they are implied rather than played. The relationship of the rhythm he is playing must appear through contact with an inner sensation rather than through self-assertion, calculating, or trying to direct the hands with the mind. To assist this contact a musician may allow a dance-like movement of his feet and body while playing his instrument. When this movement expresses continuous contact with the earth, it is considered a sign of good rhythmic grounding.

An African ensemble aims at an extraordinary shared precision of timing and rhythmic weight, known as "locking together." When achieved, it is a distinct and specific experience for listeners as well as performers. This precision is not a function of rigorously equal subdivision of time. Subtle delays and anticipations act as colorations within the rhythmic cycle and establish an organic texture that echoes through sensation and movement within the body. This is analogous to "swing" in Jazz (which was influenced by African music). Each different traditional beating has an essential swing

characteristic, far more complex and precise than the analogous elements of Western music. Understanding them and being able to maintain their expression in performance is a key to rhythmic grounding and the essence of African musicianship.

As the basic, middle, and lead parts come together, the composition takes on the richness and vitality that characterize the sound of African music. The tempo of the underlying pulsation is too fast to be grasped by the analytical mind, so the impression passes directly to the emotions and to the instinctive movements of the body. We hear the throbbing currents of life processes intersecting with the psychological drama of individual torment and redemption, all pulsating within a mathematically constructed space of cyclically repeating creation and destruction. Then, as new rhythms investigated by the lead are felt in the body in relation to the sensation of the main beat, a channel may be opened relating awareness within the physical organism to organizing principles and forces that lie behind the surface of everyday existence. This can be one of the main purposes of music and dance, something that traditional Africa has known since time immemorial.

Notes:

[Note 1] According to Ouspensky, following the teaching he received from Gurdjieff, the diatonic scale is the survival of a very ancient metaphysical symbol representing the structure of a process of any nature: cosmic, psychological, organic, etc. The pattern of long and short steps has a specific significance which is at the heart of the meaning of this symbol. The short steps, which Ouspensky calls the “intervals” of the octave, represent the points at which a process can change its direction, or at which a new influence can enter.

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See also my list of other Sources on Africa-related music and culture at <http://richardhodges.com/Sources.html> .

The Quick and the Dead

The Souls of Man in Vodou Thought

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The concept of the soul can be expressed as “that in a man which is capable of surviving physical death.” Much of the dialog of religion over the millennia has been concerned with the human soul: whether soul or souls exist, their nature, their stages of development, their fate, their relationship to God and to other metaphysical beings, and their relationship to the individual lives of people. In traditions derived from Africa the existence of various spirits including the souls of man is a matter of direct experience. The presence of spirits is encountered frequently through the experience of “possession” which is enacted in ceremonial. These ceremonials in their symbolism also outline a path of development by which souls either return to the general psychic circulation of the community, or in rare cases, become divinities, individualized spiritual presences that are permanent as long as they are “fed” by the community.

Though we might want to think of these ceremonials as dramas, it would be a mistake to think that the participants are only play-acting. To witness ritual possession, or to experience its onset, leaves the unavoidable impression that something very real and very profound is taking place in the psyche of the possessed. Perhaps the possession-drama is similar to what takes place in the best performances in Western theatre, when the actor as is said “becomes the role.” But true possession goes much further than this since the entire personality of the person possessed abandons its body, its “horse.” The very different personality of the spirit that replaces it as master of the horse then manifests spontaneously as an actor in the present moment.

In nineteenth century France, the Nancy school of hypnotism discovered a way of producing states of abandonment of the body

by the personality as profound as in traditional ritual possession. This only became a minor chapter in the history of Western medical psychology. There is a deep-seated prejudice in the West against loss of control. There is such a high evaluation of the individual and his personality that it is very difficult to conceive of the possibility for the ego to relax its grip and to accept to be displaced by something higher and finer. Such relaxation is one of the fundamental states of the human psyche. The absence in the West of cultural institutions for the socialization and development of this state is one of the signs of the loss of genuine psycho-spiritual knowledge in modern times. But this knowledge has not been lost in Africa, nor in the traditions of the New World that derive from Africa. In the New World, African religious ideas have rubbed shoulders with Judaeo-Christian ones for several centuries now, and the result is a mixture that throws a revealing light on our own spiritual inheritance and aspirations.

The Vodou Religion

In Vodou both man and cosmos are considered to be of two natures: half metaphysical, half material. The symbol of the cross (fig. 1) is often used to show how these realms reflect each other in the mirror which is the horizontal arm of the cross. "Sound the mirror!" is a formula repeated over and over in the liturgy of Vodou, a call to its devotees to ponder and plumb its deepest secrets.

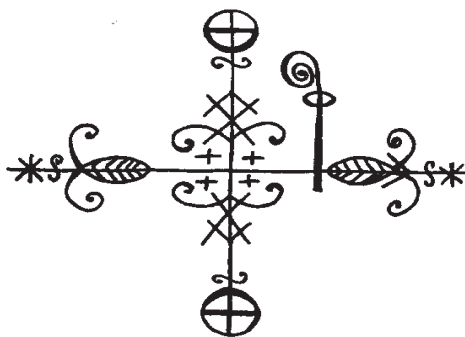
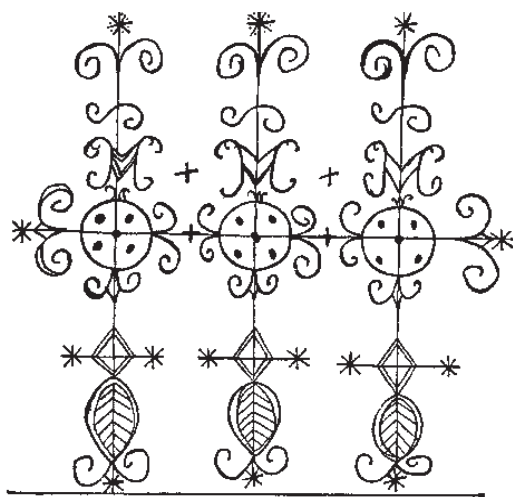


Fig. 1 Veve to Legba

The Vodou cross is used as an icon or *vévé* of the lwa Legba. A Vodou “lwa” is a Divine being, a representative of cosmic law (*loi*). A *vévé* is a ritual iconic drawing that is traced on the packed earth of the Vodou ceremonial ground; at the end of the ceremony it is erased by dancing over it. It is said to attract the attention of the lwa so that they will be encouraged to “come down” and manifest by “mounting” or “possessing” the bodies of devotees.

Legba rules the crossroads. On the cosmic plane he represents the intersection between the world axis and the plane of reflection. Standing at the boundary between the worlds, he is both the gatekeeper and the great road that allows passage between them. He is both the primal energy which reaches down to manifest among men, and the path by which men rise to encounter the higher. As the intermediary between the human and Divine realms, Legba is always saluted first in any ritual. On the earthly plane he is experienced as the play of divine forces, as the appearance of a higher level, as miracle, as passage, as conflict and its resolution, as paradox and humor. While he is in one sense first among the lwa, he is also considered to be only the servant of the lwa, their messenger. He is also perhaps the most human of the lwa; his aspect of contradiction is often experienced in human affairs.

The idea of reflection is further elaborated in the symbol of the demiurgic Divine Twins. It is they who contemplate each other in the mirror of Vodou. The Twins, originally hermaphroditic, subsequently take on a secondary division into male and female, divided in two by the vertical trunk of the cross. In Vodou the twins are always regarded not as two but as three (fig. 2), and sometimes as five, symbolizing the unity of opposites which appears as a third element when opposites cooperate creatively, and as the quintessence which is the completion of two complementary oppositions.



←←← *Marassa - Dossou - Dossa* →→→

Fig. 2 Veve to Marassa as Trinity

From this sexualized, twice divided, divinity is born the human race. The Twins are thus the first humans, the first children as well as the first ancestors, the first dead. In Africa and its New World annexes, the sacred dead are of paramount importance; they represent the ancestral wisdom accumulated from past human experience, and also the channel through which the spiritual emanation of the original creation makes contact with each generation, and finally that which ought to concern every living human being above all else, his most fitting fate and end. In the rituals of passage that follow death, what is important in a person, the compartments of his soul, are disinhabited from the now useless physical body and helped to pass properly into the estate of the dead, where they can be of benefit to subsequent generations as well as participate in their own further transmigrations. Concerning the importance of a proper burial, there is this saying, uniquely African in flavor: "a man buries himself while he is alive;" in other words the quality of a person's burial, which is everyone's highest aim, is a mirror of the quality of his life.

It is interesting that the feast of the Twins is often observed on All Saints Day (in some places the observance is on Christmas day or some other holy day). For this feast two plates of food are prepared. One plate, which has mostly sweets, is distributed to the children, who are the only ones allowed to eat from it; the other plate is left in a cemetery as food for the dead. Thus, the children as progenitors of the next generation of adults, are introduced to the dead of previous generations, effectuating the transmission of cultural and spiritual continuity. Our own custom of Hallowe'en has a similar meaning.

Vodou recognizes three spiritual components which together with the physical body make up a man. In the terminology of this tradition, they are called the ti-bonanj (petit bon ange) "little angel," gwo-bonanj (gros bon ange) "big angel" and mét-tét (maitre tet) "master of the head." The ti-bonanj represents the individual consciousness of a man, his ego, his personal experience. It is the seat of moral action of the individual. After death of the physical body it stays on earth for a period of time and then ascends to a heavenly audience where its deeds are judged. Because it then has no further relationship to the living, the ti-bonanj is of slight concern to the practices of Vodou. The mét-tét and the gwo-bonanj on the other hand represent what a man has been entrusted with from the realm of communal, ancestral, spirits. It is what he possesses in fief and finally must give back to that realm. It is with these that Vodou is concerned at every passage of a person's life.

A devotee's mét-tét is one of the lwa. From among all the different lwa, the one which is the principal inhabitant of a person is discovered by a process of divination. In most cases the lwa who is determined to be the mét-tét appears to reflect a person's essential character. It is then fixed "in his head" in a series of initiations beginning ideally shortly after birth, but it can take place at any time. The whole life of the person is from then on consecrated principally to the service of this lwa; and the lwa reciprocates by functioning as a kind of guardian angel who aids the person throughout his life.

An important part of the drama of the singing and dancing which constitute the ordinary liturgy of Vodou is when a lwa "mounts" a

devotee. For a person who has been initiated, it will usually (but not always) be his mét-tét that mounts him. The person vacates his body temporarily so that the lwa can use it to communicate his specific kind of socio-spiritual energy to the congregation, who receive it as a needed influence. The whole ritual is also understood as feeding the lwa--the lwa only can exist if they are fed, by the ritual services and dances enacted for them, and particularly by the invitation to mount the body-horses of their devotees. If a person serves well, he enriches the standing relationship between his community and the lwa who is the master of his head. The main function of the ordinary funeral rite is to reclaim the mét-tét from the person who has carried it and return its enhanced vitality to the community.

The gwo-bonanj is a particle of Bondye (bon dieu, "High God"). It is entrusted to a man as his life force, his invisible core; it is his vital spirit, his blood, his breath, his disposition, his intelligence. Its movements, its rises and falls are the invisible driving force behind the visible manifestation expressed by the man's body and his ti-bonanj. Finally, it is what a man's life amounts to, what he as an individual represents in eternity. For those who are his direct descendants, it represents their ancestry, and through them undergoes a kind of reincarnation. The funerary rites coupled with the naming, baptism, and initiation rituals that mark the important passages in a person's life function to facilitate this process. If a person has lived well, his memory is cared for by people for several generations. His gwo-bonanj, elevated to the status of a minor saint, may be worshiped and even prayed to for specific benefits. Under certain conditions, it can even "mount" or possess people as the lwa do.

But there is perhaps another possible fate for the soul. In Vodou, the gwo-bonanj also has the possibility ultimately to become an eternal, a lwa. This path is open in general only to the gwo-bonanj of an extraordinary individual, usually one who has served as a houngan or mambo, a priest or priestess of Vodou, and who in that capacity has worked in such a way as to transform his soul to a higher level of existence. This result would be recognized at such a person's

funeral, which would be a much more complex rite than for an ordinary person; for ordinary people, there are actually sometimes rites performed to forestall the possibility that their gwo-bonanj might become a lwa.

Among the lwa of Vodou, there is one who has a special function in the transformations of the soul. This is Ezili, who is identified in Vodou with Mary of the Christian tradition. Of all the lwa, she is the most popular and most served throughout Haiti, and is regarded as the patroness of the Vodou religion itself. She is conceived as bearer of the principle of feminine eros and fertility, of desire, emotion, and creativity in general, as the eternally fecund womb of all that has vitality, mother both of the human race and of that of the lwa. She is the lunar, female counterpart to the solar, male Legba.

Through her capacity to give birth, she transforms the raw energy of Legba's will to exist into that which can live and grow.

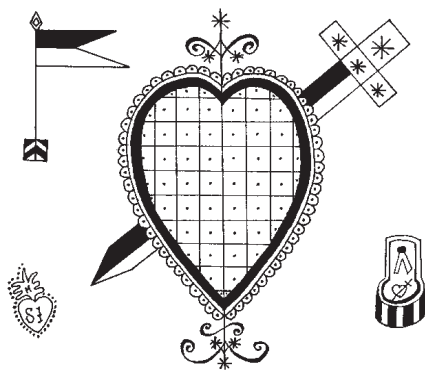


Fig. 3 Veve to Ezili

In Vodou, no contradiction is perceived between Ezili's erotic fecundity and her virginity, which is interpreted to mean transcendence of ordinary life. It is perhaps in this transcendence that she most resembles Mary. Ezili is envisioned as possessor of all things rich and beautiful, to a degree beyond human comprehension. There is in Ezili's worship a demand for that which transcends the ordinary, in her largesse, in the extravagant offerings of beautiful and valuable

things which she expects as sacrifices from her devotees, and in the reorientation she demands toward a plane of feeling infinitely more exalted than the concerns of ordinary life. Many of her devotees undertake a “marriage” to Ezili; this condition obligates them to expend much of their personal resources toward providing her needs, and a whole day each week to her service during which they must refrain from other sources of personal satisfaction especially sexual. In return they receive the finest that religion has to offer, Ezili’s transcendent bliss.

Perhaps it is appropriate to see Ezili not as any particular feeling but as the potency to feel, the organ as it were of the human psyche which is capable of feeling. Some such idea seems to be indicated in the gridded heart of her *vévé* (fig. 3) which may represent the field in the psyche upon which feelings play. Such an infinitely sensitive organ of perception then is that which on the one hand can elevate a person’s consciousness to the divine plane, or on the other, if adulterated with impure feelings, can reduce it to the subhuman level.

But humans, being what they are, are never really able to love Ezili purely enough or to live up to her demands. For this reason, at the end of her mountings, Ezili usually weeps beyond consolation, betrayed by those who would obey her but cannot. Her pierced heart is the same as that of Maria Dolorosa (fig. 4) who weeps for the failure of mankind to understand and treasure the force from above.



Fig. 4 Maria Dolorosa

Richard Temple (Temple 1990, and letter to Material for Thought, #14, Nov. 1995) has proposed a symbolic interpretation of the three main crossroads of the life of Mary as described in the Gospels and as frequently depicted in icons of the Eastern Orthodox church. These events are Mary's childhood and early religious training; the annunciation and birth; and the dormition and assumption. Temple proposes that they represent the sequential birth in Mary of the three "higher bodies" (astral; mental; and causal, following the terminology of Ouspensky). This also shows the stages in which the higher bodies must be developed in the course of a life of spiritual aspiration and work. This is entirely consonant with the image of Ezili in Vodou.

Vodou highlights two ideas which are inherent in this archetype. First, Ezili is conceived as a primordial cosmic principle whose nature is that of emotion. Her manifestation is the essential core of human nature, with all its latent possibilities of higher development in the

direction of refinement of the emotional life. It is this possibility that distinguishes the human from the animal realm. Second, the nature of religion itself is seen as that of sacrifice: the sacrifice of that which is most precious in ordinary life in the hope of that which is infinitely more valuable in another life.

The Nature of the Soul, and its Possible Development

Customs of invocation and reverence for a variety of levels of spirits, ranging from the souls of recently departed ancestors to very high metaphysical beings, are found in most indigenous cultures, and are even found as folk practice among the faithful of nominally monotheistic religions including Catholicism. Vodou places great emphasis on the principle that all its rites and beliefs, especially those concerning the spirits of the dead, address the spiritual and social fabric of the community. In other words, the spirits who are addressed do not inhabit some inaccessibly transcendent world, but the real world in which people live and interact. This is generally true in African religions. Two examples can be offered of the way this principle is reflected in the practices and beliefs of Vodou. First there is the absence of rites connected with the fate of the *ti-bonanj*, and second the poverty of rites specifically for the service of *Bondye*, who though higher than the *lwa* is so much higher that he is of little moment in this world.

There is an important suggestion in all of this about what the soul really is: it seems to subsist not just in something inside a person, but also in the network of forces and relationships of a spiritual as well as a material nature which a person establishes with other people during his life. Some of these relationships are such that they are not destroyed when the body dies, and may continue to act for a long time. However, not having the person himself (i.e. his body and his *ti-bonanj*) to continually reinforce them, in most cases they gradually die out and enter into the general circulation of the community.

When the feeling function is purified, made more able to accept

the universal, selfless quality of feeling to which man is called by religion, there arise better and deeper relationships with others. As other people are affected beneficially by these relationships, they spontaneously send good wishes to the person who is the source of these benefits and in that way begin to feed his remembrance among people. A point can be reached, these teachings seem to be telling us, where this aspect of a man's inner and outer structure becomes permanent, able to exist and to act independent of his physical vehicle.

Notes

Vodou (the current official spelling) is the popular religion of Haiti. It is derived from the religions of West and Central Africa, brought to the New World during the "African Diaspora." The word "Vodou" comes from the word for divinity in certain languages of West Africa. Its root meaning is "hidden."

These traditions have put down deep roots in most of the New World and have given rise to a bewildering variety of forms in which African ideas are mixed in varying degrees both with indigenous pre-Columbian traditions and with religious ideas from Europe and the mediterranean area, especially Catholicism, spiritism, and Freemasonry. Ideas and symbols from our own tradition are often seen in unfamiliar perspective in these mixings.

Several of these New World African traditions have been studied by Western observers. Perhaps the most sensitive such reports are several concerning Haiti. There, almost the entire population, though nominally Catholic, actually hold more profound devotion for the divinities and rituals of Vodou.

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See also <http://richardhodes.com/Sources.html> for sources on African and African diaspora music and culture.

From the Mat to the Street

Judo and Life

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My Judo teacher was always yelling “Relax!” I could not understand. Was I really so tense that he singled me out for this admonishment? Didn’t he realize that yelling “Relax!” only made me more tense?

In competitive tournaments I often did not do well. It was embarrassing to be thrown by men weaker than I, and I often felt that I didn’t understand, really, anything about Judo. I remember one tournament clearly. My opponent was a big brown belt. As he attacked I was afraid he would throw me-and in the same instant I heard my teacher’s command “Relax!” echoing like an electric current in my body. I softened; and in slow-motion-time absorbed the attack, then simply threw him to the mat. I ran to my teacher and embraced him. This may have seemed strange to others who knew us. I had won matches before, but this was the very first time I had done so from understanding. I think he knew.

Afterwards, I looked at him differently. Before, when I practiced with him I had only felt his strength, his hardness. Now I began to sense that underneath this hardness was a deeply studied capacity for relaxing at just the right moment. I made a personal vow to study this myself.

The word “Judo” can be translated as “The Way of Softness” or “the Way of Yielding.” All the time I have practiced Judo I have pondered the meaning of this idea, puzzling given the strong force commonly used in the art. I had been told a number of different interpretations but none seemed convincing to me. After this experience I had my own basis for understanding the word I had just discovered one meaning in the athletic principle that a certain tempo of relaxing the whole body can absorb harmlessly even a powerful attack. Later

other meanings opened up also. I came to understand a deeper secret, one concerning awareness: with a relaxed erect posture and a light grip on the opponent, it is possible to sense his moves almost sooner than he does them. To practice this successfully took a great deal of work to break my beginner's habit of stiff-arming my opponent away from me, out of fear, which made it impossible to feel him. Yet another practical meaning of "Ju" is that by allowing the opponent to move in his own way, yielding to his movements and following them with one's own body, one receives direct impressions of the essence of the other person. At times there is a kind of non-verbal dialog that is very subtle.

I noticed that most people who were good at Judo had only a partial understanding of "Ju": their Judo was a mixture often containing more hardness than softness. Two or three times I met people whose Judo was almost completely softness, and they were not only highly effective, it was a joy even to be thrown by such a man. Though I am an advanced practitioner, now holding a third degree black belt, I never quite reached this level. But I often remembered to aim for it.

Judo is meant as a training for life. Historically, it was defined as a formal body of practice during the late nineteenth century, a period in Japan of renewal of ancient spiritual and aesthetic ideals and schools. The "Do" part of "Judo" means "Way," both in the sense of the way things naturally are, and in the sense of a path for people to follow to reach harmony with this way. It is the same word as the Chinese "Tao." Judo is part of the education of a schoolboy, and is considered to provide a basic foundation in Japanese cultural and spiritual values: discipline, respect, mutual dependence, fortitude, resourcefulness, craftsmanship, and so on, in addition to the most mysterious value: softness, the "Ju" of Judo.

After World War II Judo was adopted enthusiastically in the United States and even more so in Europe and Latin America. In the West it was pursued more as a sport; but in my experience as a student it seemed to me that many of the original values could still be found

in it. This was true even though these values are rarely spoken about, unlike in other Oriental martial arts in the West. Judo's teachings are somehow implanted in the rituals and experiences of actual practice, and are learned mainly through the body rather than the intellect.

I have often asked myself how the things I learned in Judo have become a part of how I am in life, and how this is for others whose Judo I came to know. Certainly it is not always true that the values of Judo translate directly to life situations, or that when they do the effect is always beneficial. A process of conscious practice is necessary to naturalize and embody any new value in a new context, and it is a mistake to assume that the results of practice in one arena can transfer unconsciously to another.

Of numerous cautionary examples one comes to mind. A certain teacher whom I studied with for a while was an extremely accomplished master. I never met anybody his equal in skill. He had developed powers that were almost supernatural-his body could take on a gravity that made him immovable; and when he was seriously fighting his eyes glowed with a disturbing fire. I once asked him how he had become so good. He told me this story: He had been an athletic prodigy in his village, and when he went away to college in Tokyo his reputation preceded him. But in the big city he soon met Judo men with much more experience who easily deflated his pretensions. His sense of shame at losing was so great, to men he considered inferior, that he would not be able to sleep. He would lie awake all night going over and over in his mind how he had been defeated, and analyzing what he could do to prevent it, resolving never again to lose in that way. After hundreds of such defeats, he had lost in every way possible, and no way remained for anyone to defeat him.

This story illustrates in a very concentrated form several of the principles of Judo, especially the principle called "mutual benefit": one fights seriously in order to help the opponent practice; one defeats him in order to help him learn something he needs; and of

course when one is defeated one allows oneself to be helped by it, and tries hard to understand the lesson. Through such practice this man had indeed acquired bodily powers far out of the ordinary.

But his Judo practice did not correct a certain defect of character, which was that he had a cruel streak. In fact, it made this defect worse, since he had the means to indulge his weakness, and opportunities to justify it to himself in the name of teaching someone a lesson. With and without justification, he hurt people, once or twice seriously. In business he showed the same combination: indomitability combined with a certain cruelty. It did not work as well in business as it did in Judo. At one point, according to stories I heard, he and his partners were bankrupt and were facing criminal charges for some kind of dubious actions.

I do not know why he had left Japan; perhaps if he had stayed the moral discipline of the teaching would have eventually been able to help him. But as it was, he lived a lonely and somewhat bitter life.

One must always be careful in applying the experiences and methods of a path outside the path. In its most basic form, this is taught to all beginning students of martial arts in the commandment not to seek opportunities to apply the art on the street. It is not only that the techniques might be dangerous to unprepared opponents—they also might prove not equal to the situation. The Ju of Judo is not necessarily what is required in a street fight, at least not until it is thoroughly mastered. A relish develops for the intensity and immediacy of physical struggle—but it may be better to leave that taste on the mat.

The question is broader than intentional application of techniques. There are ways of moving, ways of responding to challenge, ways of relating to people, that the student of Judo discovers creeping into his whole life. He is likely even to take pride in this. A Judo student may often have the experience of being flattered by others who notice the way he moves “from his center.” In relationships of emotion the problem is more complex. It takes years of repeated practice under a watchful teacher to learn how to bow to an opponent in a way

that expresses the right respect. Toward a peer, this respect includes the willingness to attack vigorously, acknowledging the opponent's ability to profit from being attacked. But what happens when one's business colleagues, or one's domestic partner, experience the half-conscious expression of this attitude toward themselves? What kind of discipline, and how long, would it take to refine this attitude until it could be felt by others as an expression of love, in life as it is in Judo?

What then can be taken from the mat to the street? In the traditional teaching of Judo, there are three principles that are explained to students as a foundation for the path. These are: non-harmfulness (i.e., do not injure the opponent or oneself); mutual benefit in study of the way; and work for self-improvement. I think that the reason these are selected for special emphasis is that they are what Judo tries to teach for life.

There is a certain moral logic by which these principles taken all together can support a well-rounded approach to any situation. Each of the legs of this inseparable tripod provides a correction to the potential imbalance of the other two. A man may help himself, and help others, but if like our earlier example he does not master non-harmfulness, all his powers will turn to poison. Or if someone fails to work diligently on self-improvement, he will never learn much, and even if he tries to help others, his efforts will be useless and they may even mislead and do harm. Or if a man works on himself, and never does harm, but does not help others learn what he has learned, he fails to repay his debt to the teaching, and the arrearage will stop him at a certain point.

A wise teacher once told me that what is of value is never the habits and skills acquired from practice, but the understanding that results from consciously undertaken struggles. This is what many people do not understand who naively look to martial arts, or other practices, for a magic key to success. Repeated practice always gives results, but these results, he said, actually become an enemy because they tend to become part of a person's unconscious nature. Especially if

these habits are effective, they tend to reinforce the person's vanity and laziness.

Useful practice, according to this teacher, is practice that is based on consciously accepted principles, such as the three principles of Judo. It values the struggle above results. The struggle is ultimately always a struggle to be aware of one's laziness, inattention, carelessness, misunderstandings, one's tendency to rely on habit, and other defects of character. This then is what may be taken from the mat into life.

The Way of Sacrifice and the Light Within

We read the following concerning the practice of human sacrifice in Mesoamerica, and Quetzalcoatl, who according to tradition tried to put an end to this practice!:

The [voluntary] sacrifice of the youth [whose heart was cut out after a year of being treated as a king] was linked with a profound philosophical idea that only the true, the deified, heart is worthy to become nourishment for the great star [the Sun] that maintains life on earth. The Nahua [Aztec] peoples believed that we are born with a physical heart and face, but that we have to create a deified heart and a true face. The ordinary word for heart was *yollotl*, a word derived from *ollin*, movement. Thus the ordinary human heart is the moving, pumping organ that keeps us alive; but the heart that can be made by special efforts in life is called *Yolteotl*, or deified [heart]. The phrase used to describe the face that we must make if we are to be truly men is *ixtli* in *yollotl*, which signifies a process whereby heart and face must combine. The heart must shine through the face before our features become reliable reflections of ourselves.

Thus heart-making and face-making, the growth of spiritual strength, were two aspects of a single process which was the aim of life and which consisted in creating some firm and enduring centre from which it would be possible to operate as human beings . . . If we are unable to create this second heart and face, we are merely vagrants on the face of the earth. The idea of vagrancy is expressed in the word *ahuicpa*, which means literally 'to carry something untowardly.' Without this enduring centre, as the Nahua poet tells us:

...You give your heart to each thing in turn.

Carrying you do not carry it.

You destroy your heart on the earth.

Are you not always pursuing things idly?

But of course this idea of feeding the sun with a symbolic heart, created within a man's psyche, was very soon distorted. Offerings to the gods made in flowers picked from the meadows and the cornfields became offerings of enemy hearts torn out. . . The whole gory process is a long way from the Nahua ideal of creating the heart *Yolteotl*, or of the Maya idea . . . described by Domingo Martinez Paradez: ' . . . So in Maya anthropogeny there exists the concept not only that consciousness is given to man, but also that it must be formed, and it is the god's task to do this.'

This is the central idea and purpose of the Quetzalcoatl or plumed serpent

myth, for Nanautzin is one manifestation of Quetzalcoatl. He is the plumed serpent in his lowliest state, but his self-sacrifice saves the universe from extinction and opens up latent possibilities not only for the heavenly bodies but also for man.

We note here the similarity with the idea of Gurdjieff that man is not born with a soul, but that a soul must be made, by what he calls “conscious labors and intentional suffering.”

A possible connection with Quetzalcoatl is the story in Beelzebub’s Tales [chapter XXIV, fifth descent]. At a “learned conference” in Babylon the surpassingly learned ‘Hamolinadir’, gives a sorrowful speech about the “instability of human reason,” its susceptibility to being convinced of anything. He bases this on his experience of being “convinced” by contradictory arguments about the burning question of the day, the existence of the Soul. He compares this ongoing discussion to the building of a great tower in Babylon, doomed to collapse. After his speech he is said to have departed forever to go “Nineveh” to raise “maize”. Now “maize” is Zea Mays, the New World crop that we call corn; in the 5th century BC the only place in the world where maize was raised was America. I would suggest that the hidden meaning of the story is that Hamolinadir sailed to Mexico and became Quetzalcoatl, who was in Mexican Myth the promethean bringer of all arts, crafts, the initiator of the cultivation of maize, and avatar for the development of high religious culture. The date is arguably consistent with the earliest foundations of the pyramids at Teotihuacan, whose most ancient and holy place is a temple to Quetzalcoatl.

As to “Nineveh,” it is interesting that Nineveh first appears in history around 1800 B.C.E. as a center of the worship of Ishtar. In the story of Ishtar, she enters the underworld and is permitted to return, but is required to go back to the underworld for half of each year. This story follows the same archetype as a number of myths, including the stories of Orpheus/Eurydice, and of Quetzalcoatl. Like Quetzalcoatl, she was identified with the planet Venus. Is it possible that “Nineveh” and “maize” was a code pointing to the New World?

Beelzebub need not always be taken literally; the story of

Hamolinadir may just as well be allegory; and so may this idea of a pre-Columbian contact be a metaphor for a process that takes place across a divide in the collective unconscious rather than across the Atlantic Ocean.

When I proposed this theory once to Pentland, main teacher of the Gurdjieff community in the United States, he pointed out that Hamolinadir had taken a vow never to build pyramids again. My reply was that evidently when he got there, he found he couldn't keep his vow. Pentland seemed to like that. The point is that the story of Quetzalcoatl is precisely the story of a man who couldn't keep his vow. Quetzalcoatl's vow is reminiscent of many old-world teachings of the era such as that of Pythagoras: it includes not taking life, hence vegetarianism and not sacrificing animals; non-intoxication; refraining from sex for pleasure. Note that, similar to Beelzebub, one of Quetzalcoatl's missions was to eliminate the practice of animal sacrifice. In this it seems he largely failed; animal and human sacrifice continued to play a central role in much of Mesoamerican religion.

Probably the "learned conference in Babylon" at which Hamolinadir gave his speech in Beelzebub's Tales is referring to the period of the "Axial sages", perhaps around 500 B.C.E. The Aztec, Mayan, and Toltec cultures from which come most of our knowledge of Mesoamerican ideas flourished later than this period. But as Greek and Zoroastrian thought of that era underlie the later thought of Christian and Muslim culture, so the Quetzalcoatl story which originated much earlier underlies all the later rich development of Mesoamerican culture and religion. Even today Quetzalcoatl is of all the gods the one closest to the hearts of the many people in Mesoamerica who still follow the old traditions.

Quetzalcoatl was said to have visited the underworld and gathered the bones of human beings, who had all been destroyed in the collapse of the fourth world cycle, and brought them back to life to start the fifth cycle. In one version of the myth, Quetzalcoatl succumbs to seduction by the powerful god Tezcatlipoca in the manifestation

of a human witch. Later he repented of his sin, and out of remorse threw himself upon a funeral pyre. But the purity of his heart was such that he was assumed to heaven and became the planet Venus, which spends half its season in the heavens where it is the brightest point of light, and half in the underworld, where it is unseen, occult. One of the epithets of Quetzalcoatl/Venus is “Master Light”; his apotheosized heart is metaphysically the source and prototype of all that illumines. The eternal struggle between Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, patron of human sacrifice, drunkenness, sexual excess and so on, is a myth of the duality of light and darkness.

This story begs comparison with several Greek myths, notably that of Orpheus, who went into the underworld to retrieve Eurydice; but because Orpheus looked back at his lover, defying Hades’ command, she was condemned to spend half her time in the underworld, half in this world. Like Quetzalcoatl, Orpheus was also patron of the arts, especially music. All this would be well-known to any learned man (such as Hamolinadir) of the axial era, 600-300 B.C.E., in which the cult of Orpheus was in its heyday.

Here is another extract² that hints at a further connection, or at least a resonance, between Mesoamerican thought and early Greek. Note the unspoken presence of the shade of Orpheus.

The Aristotles of the Aztec were men called *tlamatinime*, (singular: *tlamantini*), or “knowers-of-things”. These men sought truth solidly established and rooted in the fundamental nature of things and determined the only things in life that are real, the only things that are “rooted”, are “flower and song”. In the search for truth, in seeking that which is basic and fundamental to all of life, they determined it is ART that is true and eternal, the only thing of real value. Therefore, it was ART alone that protected them and empowered them. (I capitalize art here to emphasize its importance.)

Art is everlasting; said the *tlamatinime*, and even if the tangible embodiment of art should fade, its essence will, like the gods to whom it is dedicated, will last forever. Flower and Song is the expression used

2 From an essay by Marie Jordan, <http://www.miracosta.cc.ca.us/home/mjordan/aztecart.htm>

by the Aztec, Flower-and-Song being a compound one word as Bread and Butter. The flower-and-Song will perish, but not its essence, like the gods they serve. One codex described the tlamatinime as follows:

He is the way, the true guide of others ...
 He teaches the world ...
 He holds a mirror before others,
 He makes them mindful and judicious ...
 He shines his light on the world
 He inquires into the region of the gods above,
 and into the region of the dead below ...

(Codice Matritense fol. 118rx)

The tlamatinime engaged in speculative thought like Western philosophers, seeking to illuminate the major metaphysical questions of life by examining traditional beliefs, correcting and extending them when possible. Aztec wisemen realized that all earthly things are transient and by their nature doomed for destruction.

Hence, I weep,
 for you are weary,
 Oh God.
 Jade shatters,
 the quetzal feather tears apart.
 Oh God, you mock us.
 Perhaps we really do not exist,
 Perchance we are nothing to you?

(Cantares Mexicanos, fol. 12v)

So then the wisemen of the Aztec asked, if life is transitory, or only a dream, how should one live out one's days? One answer was to live life to the fullest during the brief time that remains, but this was disputed by the view that *neltiliztli* (truth) was solidly established and rooted in the fundamental nature of things, only things in life that are real and rooted are Flower and Song. The concept conveyed by flower and song is art in the broadest sense of the word, including poetry, symbol, metaphor and all that has meaningful beauty.

Finally, my heart understands it: I hear a song,
 I see a flower.
 Behold, they will not wither!

(Ms. Romances de los senores de la Nueva Espana fol. 19v)

They will not end, my flowers,
they will not cease, my songs ...
Even when the flowers wither and grow yellow,
they will be carried thither,
to the interior of the house
of the bird with the golden plumes ...

(fol 13v)

Art, to the Aztec, was everlasting, and even if the tangible embodiment of art fades, its essence will last forever, just like God or the gods. Aztec aesthetics, then, is founded on a belief that:

1. true art comes from the gods and

2. it is manifest in the artist's mystical revelation of sacred truth.

3. through such revelation the artist transcends mortality and the transient world of the senses and becomes a part of the eternal.

The artists were special people and had to be born on a particular day to hold meditative spiritual qualities. The gods spoke through the artist, thereby connecting him with the divine. All art comes from the gods. As one codex reads:

"The true artist determines matters in his heart and meets things with his mind."

(Codice Matritense de la Real Academia)

and:

"the good painter is wise, he has God in his heart."

Only people who learned to converse with their own hearts had any hope of bringing genuine flower and song into the world.

Another reason for interest in this material is the connection with Carlos Castaneda. Certainly Castaneda, who read widely, would have known the Greek material, had read Beelzebub and Fragments (this is evident in many borrowings of words and ideas that he reworks for his purposes; and Castaneda is known to have corresponded with Pentland), and he would have known the Mesoamerican traditions

from oral as well as literary sources. His theme of the sorcerer who burns up with The Fire From Within (the title of one of his later books) and leaves the earthly plane to disappear into “infinity” was a central part of what he presented in the group work of Castaneda’s last years. It was taken by some to imply a kind of voluntary suicide, which may have actually happened in the still unsolved disappearance of his three closest disciples [see the later chapters of *Sorcerer’s Apprentice* by Amy Wallace]. Certainly however the inner meaning of such an idea must be closer to what Gurdjieff described, as quoted by Ouspensky: “dying” to oneself, after “awakening”, in order then to be “born”.

How do we understand then this idea of a light being kindled by sacrifice, so clear in the Quetzalcoatl/Venus story, and found in various forms in other traditions including Zoroastrianism, and Christianity, such as in the following from John 1:

[4] In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

[5] And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

[6] There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

[7] The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light,...

Do these stories of sacrifice, set on a cosmic plane, refer more practically to an inner truth? What is the practice of inner sacrifice that kindles the light? Is not some such process undertaken every time we “work”: when we sit in meditation, when we “work with others” as in the Gurdjieff teaching, when we worship in a shrine, when we dance or chant in ritual, and so on, where the conditions of such work always require from us a giving up of many habits that we are ordinarily identified with? Whether this takes place mechanically, the sacrifice as it were being forced from us by the conditions, or more rarely is voluntary, a gesture made from understanding and intent, the result after a certain passage that takes place in darkness is the appearance of a presence that illuminates the unknown insides of our body feelings and mind.

Certain drugs also are known that can induce a state of inner illumination. Both Gurdjieff and Castaneda describe how in a “school”

a drug may be used to give a foretaste, a preview of something that can be obtained later in a more integral and permanent form by means of work for being. LSD especially in the last two or three generations has drawn many people to Castaneda, Gurdjieff, and other esoteric teachings. It has the capacity to radically disconnect the conscious mind from its ordinary relationship to space, time, logic, and identity. However the wish to Be can remain intact, and the person, may after a struggle relinquish his ordinary largely false sense of self and this wish may forge a new temporary stability on a foundation of pure consciousness. Or the wish may fail leading to disintegration and unspeakable anguish. Usually a person is unprepared for either kind of experience and it leads to nothing important, or sometimes to great harm; but in a “school” that uses such means there will be both preparation and a context for using the experience afterward.

This is the secret meaning of “working in the dark”: work always begins by going into the dark; as in a well-known Mullah Nasr Eddin story, the place to search for something lost is not where one can already see, but where one cannot. Much the same is said in the great Taoist text *Secret of the Golden Flower* [Thomas Cleary trans.], for example:

the pupil understands how to distill the dark anima so that it transforms itself into Light.

What happens next is crucial. The person who experiences this light, whether from drugs or esoteric exercises or no known cause, usually has an irresistible tendency to align the experience with symbols that he is familiar with, or to create new images of it. This is probably both the source of all the religious and philosophical ideas and institutions that have come down to us, and the everlasting spring from which they are constantly renewed among people. However, no symbol can contain the energy of such an experience; a symbol, verbal formulation, or religious image is, to use a Zen expression, merely a “finger pointing at the moon”, not the moon itself. To worship a symbol itself rather than the light it represents is to worship an idol. The person is in danger of being robbed by his own hand of

the energy of the experience itself and the alchemical effect it might have for his own being. This is hinted at in different ways in the traditions; it is the deep reason behind the idea of esoteric secrecy: secrecy is something a person owes himself in respect of his highest experiences. He even must keep certain secrets from “himself”, from the part of himself that would debase true gold to the cheaper currency of mental and emotional fascination. In a similar same vein Pentland had a favorite toast: “To our highest experiences, may we forget them”.

In the ideas of Gurdjieff we are told that man creates a certain substance which can go for the growth of a higher body but is ordinarily “eaten” by “the moon”. Castaneda has a similar idea, a metacosmic “Eagle” that “eats” the energy of perception. This idea appeared first in *Tales of Power*, which contains several ideas similar to Gurdjieff and was written in a period when he was in correspondence with Pentland. In both systems, this “eating” is said to take place at a person’s death; however we may be entitled to regard “death” as possibly indicating both the “death of ego” that enables higher states of inner presence and light, and also the subsiding of a state as the person returns to the ordinary. Can we regard these images of “being eaten” as an indication that the energy of “higher experiences,” of which everyone may receive a natural quota, and which some people pursue more of, almost always is spent on something outside, and the person himself retains only a disturbing memory? Both systems offer a possibility of this energy not being eaten: Castaneda speaks of a tiny chance by which an “impeccable” sorcerer can evade the Eagle. Gurdjieff says that it is possible to develop “moon within” to which the substance can be sent that is normally taken by the moon.

Jacob Needleman recounts a Hassidic story in which a Rabbi was listening to another Rabbi reading a sacred text. In this text it is said that a certain truth should be “placed upon the heart”. The first Rabbi asks, “Why does it not say to place truth in the heart”? The other Rabbi answers “It is not in man’s power to place something in his heart, only God can do that. But if the truth is placed on the

heart, then when the heart breaks, it can fall in.” Can the heart be broken by suffering to witness one’s own willful talking about the highest truth, inner as well as outer talking? That is indeed taking God’s name in vain, breaking the esoteric rule given in Judaism of never “pronouncing” the name of God.

Is it enough just to recognize and suffer this process of loss of energy by identification? Can this suffering help us not to give away our inner experiences? This may represent one meaning of Gurdjieff’s “remorse of conscience”. As I write in a poem:

Be Still and Know

I am the presence in the silence,
I am the light behind the mind,
Under the body, source of being,
I am the core and you the rind.

Still, in reflected light you see me,
Feel me in love that warms the heart.
Yet, with a chill, you always miss me--
Know I am One, and you a part.

We must leave open the way of art. As anyone can hardly help being aware, there is much opportunity for self-deception and false pride in making art; that weakens art, and is one of the main enemies that a would-be artist must struggle with. Gurdjieff gives us the idea of “objective art” which is contrasted with the “subjective art.” It would be hard not to recognize the subjective nature of almost every production that we encounter in today’s culture, and in past cultures and eras too, how everything feeds what Beelzebub called “unbecoming properties” of people and of the artist himself: vanity, greed, lust, violent attachment to ethnic and religious identities, and so on. Is there indeed anything that is not tarred by this brush? Can we say that for example the music of Bach is “objective”? Or the music of Gurdjieff? Certainly they are much less subjective in this way than almost all of the music we know, not excluding what is usually called religious music. What can we find that is objective,

or at least less subjective, in ritual; in architecture; in painting; in dance; in sculpture; in theater; in music; to enumerate the seven categories listed in the chapter called “Art” in Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson? Or in literature and scripture? But the purpose of Beelzebub is certainly not to found a new branch of art criticism however elevated its principles. It is rather I think to offer us a new vision of what art as a whole is and should be in the life of people.

And even if it may be true that all the art we know has the subjectivity of the artist in it, it seems nevertheless that a moment, a gesture, a paragraph or two, in a work of art completely transcends the subjectivity and presents us with something new, fresh, full of unexpected truth and meaning.

To create art and give it to others may indeed be a voluntary sacrifice of an inner experience to create something external as a vehicle for the artist’s finest energies, even at the accepted risk of losing some of the energy for the artist himself. If I may be so bold as to offer an interpretation of one of the most “sacred” ideas of Gurdjieff, this may be one meaning of “conscious labor and intentional suffering”. In this way, something fine may be able to be shared among others. It is probably true that higher experiences are not given only for the benefit of the individual who experiences them, but for the whole community of which he is a part, even for all humanity. It may even be that what one can hope for that is called in different traditions a “higher body” or “individual immortality” consists in something that lives in the communal psyche, something whose blood is of the nature of art. Surely this is one of the reasons for undertaking the often thankless task of creating what we are calling “art,” in the wide sense that includes all sorts of external productions whether or not they have a physically enduring form and whether or not they are recognized as anything special.

For guidance in how to engage in art as a path, we could well look again to Orpheus. Orpheus may or may not have existed as a person; scholarship is divided, and Beelzebub makes a point of saying that no such person existed. A similar question exists in respect to

Quetzalcoatl: was he a man who was elevated to heaven through his conscious labors and intentional suffering, or a Divine principle that incarnated as a man? If Guthrie, in his superb study *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, is correct in his view that Orpheus represented a reforming tendency in early Greek religion, and brought together and intermediated between the abandoned orgiastic worship of Dionysos and the restrained elevated intellectuality of Apollo, in whose name the Delphic Oracle dispensed prophecy as well as law, this may point us in the right direction. Surely both abandon and order are required for art to appear, together they form the vessel in which artistic creation is fermented. The Orphic impulse was realized most potently in the schools of the pre-Socratic philosophers such as Parmenides and Empedocles³, and especially the school of Pythagoras, all of whose rules for thinking and for engaging in life must have formed the walls of the furnace in which burned their extraordinary creative activity whose energy is still not exhausted and which forms much of the spiritual infrastructure of Western civilization.

We have seen how the idea of sacrifice and redemption is found in a number of traditions of what is called the Axial Era, 600-300 B.C.E., a period of extraordinary outpouring of teachings and scriptures. It is this period in which Beelzebub's "learned conference" is set, and Gurdjieff's trope may be simply a reference to this whole period rather than an account of an actual gathering of wise men in Babylon. We have proposed including Quetzalcoatl among the flowers upon this tree, which also include: Buddhism; early Greek religion and literature and later the philosophers, all of which breathe the atmosphere of the Orpheus story; Taoism; Confucius; Zoroastrianism⁴; the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Upanishads and Gita of Hindu tradition; the Hebrew prophets (whose sacrifice

3 See Peter Kingsley, *Reality*

4 Zoroaster was one of the axial sages according to the traditional dating; but see a paper by Kingsley, "The Greek Source of the 6th-Century Dating of Zoroaster" where he concludes that Zoroaster probably lived at the end of the bronze age, around 1200.

and redemption theme is supposed to have been fulfilled in a very high form in Christianity); and a variety of mystery schools of the Mediterranean and Middle East known only from fragments and hints.

Much has been made of this material but it is common these days to consider it all as Religion, Philosophy, or Myth. Especially in these post-modern times, when all these categories are latently suspect, and only lip service is often paid to really engaging with them, this tends to cast into concrete what was once a living fire, a “fire from within”. This distances us as individuals from ideas and principles that were originally meant to be “placed upon the heart”.

I have tried to bring the idea of sacrifice home, hopefully in the spirit of what Gurdjieff meant by saying that some traditions have “philosophy” (literally “love of wisdom”), some have “theory” (literally “contemplation”), but only the tradition from which he distilled a path has “practice”.

Rhythm, Ego, and the Real Self

For years I have been interested in African music. The earliest influence that I remember was hearing as a teen-ager the LP album of music recorded by the 1938 Denis-Roosevelt expedition [Primitive Music of Africa, Mainstream records S/6021]. This new music was a revelation. The propulsive beat was entirely new to me; inexorable and disciplined, it spoke of a possible deeply grounded relationship to the body. Also new was the sense of independent but related interlocking rhythms, which seemed to speak of a mysterious metaphysics of time. I had been a fairly serious amateur musician in the classical tradition for some years, but I was profoundly impressed with this music, which could dispense with tonality and harmony and yet seemed to achieve solely by rhythmic means beauty and eloquence, though in a language I did not understand. I knew that I had to learn something of this language if I ever wanted to know what the totality of this human phenomenon called music really is.

Over the years after this encounter, I searched among other recordings, read a few books that fell to hand, asked a few questions of friends who knew music, and in that way got some interesting material. But I didn't find anything that matched the original impact or in any way answered the questions I had. Gradually, this quest lost much of its original fire, but it never quite went out, and years later when I happened to see an ad for a weekend workshop at Esalen with Nigerian master drummer Olatunje, I decided to go.

After an hour or two of introductory exercises, the "serious" playing started, several long continuous set pieces for the dance class that was also part of the workshop. The inexperienced musicians including myself were allowed to play any support part they could "hang" with, as it was said, while Olatunje or one of his senior students played a foreground "lead" part. Each support part consisted of repeating over and over a simple rhythmic pattern in time with all the other parts. This entailed a number of difficulties that were surprising. For one, what it meant to be "in time" was tricky. At

first it was difficult even to listen well enough to hear the main beat, which as I was learning did not always insist upon itself as much as in Western music. Then there was the subtlety of what it meant for one's part to be precisely related to the beat. Finally there was the physical difficulty of sustaining the effort of playing. Even playing a small instrument such as the bell, a hand-forged iron shell that had to be struck rather hard with a wooden stick, was tiring after five or ten minutes.

My ego being what it was, I was not to be satisfied until I played the largest drum. As soon as the opportunity presented itself, I took up the post before this drum and started striking it with my hands, imitating as best I could what Olatunje had showed. I could hear clearly that the sound I obtained was nowhere near his either in quantity or quality. But I understood that it takes practice to learn and since he did not kick me off the instrument I persevered. As I became more confident of the simple rhythm that my part consisted of (though I still sometimes lost it) I hit the drum skin with increasing abandon. Olatunje seemed to smile a faint approval upon my effort. At breaks between sets, I noticed that my hands were starting to tingle, then becoming sore. Olatunje gave all the student drummers a special oil and some little exercises that were supposed to help sore hands, and they did help, but only to a certain extent. Mine had become so tender that it was acutely painful to touch anything. But there were no blisters, and I was determined to prove myself, and also to get my money's worth, so when the music started again I went back to the large drum and played, though with weakening effort. My attention was suffering too, and I often wandered off the beat.

I was beginning to conclude that the point of diminishing returns had long been passed. Just as I was about to yield my post, Olatunje came up behind me and whispered something that struck me like a bolt of lightning: "Every time you hit the drum, it must say 'I Am'!" I felt a new, mysterious, meaning in the music we were playing, and a kind of—responsibility—to it. I was charged with energy and continued playing with renewed attention and force until the impulse faded and, this time without regrets, I called it a day.

Ever since then I have held this instruction like a Zen koan, for which one has no answer, but which provides a ground for search. I asked myself over and over, and tried to answer in many ways, mostly unsatisfying, what is this “I Am”? What is it to say “I Am”? What is it that can say “I Am”? And what does it mean, this “Every time!”

The first thing that became apparent was that what deserves to be called “I” is not my “ego,” which is always pushing itself forward. It was more like that moment when Olatunje whispered to me—an “I” appeared not of the nature of assertion, but of recognition, not an exertion of will but a reception of a new energy, by a self above the ego that only appeared in the act of reception. I had been told a law that I had never known about before, and I had heard it, and it was the key to a fresh vision of the universe.

But it is not quite so simple—in fact it was my “ego” which had put me in a condition to be able to receive. In general this seems to be necessary. The ego must yield its primacy for the self to appear, but first it must play its part. In my account, the ego obliged the body and mind to endure a hard discipline in service to an ideal. Because a real price had been paid, the ego could accept help when it was there to be received. The two are partners—ego and self—in this drama, which seems to be an essential process of what it is to be a human being.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The reflections and interpretations in the preceding paragraphs of what had taken place were the result of years of subsequent thought and study, about music and also in traditional studies of man and his place in the cosmos. What I want to go into now is how the ideas of ego and self and their relationship are actually encoded in the music itself, in this ancient tradition of African polyrhythmic music and dance.

Studying next with CK Ladzekpo, a master drummer from Ghana, I recognized an ancient teaching that begins to answer the question of how music works. One of the most important characteristics of sub-Saharan African music is polyrhythm, where two or more basic rhythms that start at different points in time repeat simultaneously.

Rhythms resonate with specific movements within the psyche. Polyrhythm evokes contradictory movements. The mind tries to cope and is stretched beyond its usual tunnel vision, in which it believes in only the one movement that it happens to perceive at the moment. This opening then allows the appearance of consciousness of self, which is consciousness of the inner movement as a whole.

An ecstatic response can come while listening closely to almost any piece of music. But this opening can be very profound with music that is composed based on precise knowledge, when it is played, danced to, or listened to under conditions that facilitate the right kind of attitude and attention. CK had much to say about African rituals where this is the aim. The idea is that in these rituals the music and other ceremonial devices enable certain specific “divinities” to come down and enter individual participants, temporarily to “possess” them, as is said. These embodied spirits then enact a kind of dramatization of some universal truth, much in the way that Jung described how myths and fairy tales bring forth archetypal material from the “collective unconscious.”

I went to Ghana with CK to pursue my quest. He took me to a ritual led by one of his many brothers, a ritual of the polytheistic cult called Blekete. After watching for a while I decided to participate and began to dance. Again, my ego was such that I tried to imitate the more impressive dancers. I danced very strongly. I was surprised when several people, including the priestess I was dancing with, who was in full trance, began to spray water on me and fan me and physically restrain my movements until I was forced to dance more calmly. At first I was very disturbed by this treatment, but I began to feel that I was being given a special kind of inclusion and brotherhood. Possession seems very different from the “I am” that Olatunje spoke about, but this was very much like what I experienced when he whispered to me.

CK explained to me that the dancers had interpreted my strong dancing as the onset of possession. When people first become possessed, they usually pass through a “crisis” in which powerful

forces seem to be struggling for control. This crisis may be dangerous. The cult community then takes responsibility to train and discipline the person's state so that it can become useful. What they were doing with me, "cooling" the crisis, was the beginning of this process, a lengthy "initiation" that everyone must go through who becomes a full member. Later, dancers and drummers have to learn to manage the clashing rhythms. This practice leads to the development of a stable axis of grounded awareness that is not disturbed, even in possession.

Many if not most non-Western cultures have a form of possession ritual. The question of whether something similar is present in the West may be partially answered by our Art. Initially the artistic impulse comes mainly from the ego, and what is communicated is subjective and merely personal. But if the artist is to become mature, which is rare nowadays, he must be disciplined and tempered until he is able to serve something universal. This training of the axis of moral and physical attention is needed before ego and ecstasy can both take their rightful places within life. And for this the artist receives that special joy, which almost all real artists have spoken about, of being not the author but the channel for his work.

So what is the place of the ego? There is an African musical idea that bears on this question. In many ensemble compositions, with each musical part having its prescribed function, there is often one instrument, perhaps a high-pitched drum, which is said to be like a baby crying. The role of this part is fluid—it can be petulant, pleading, teasing, annoying, mischievous, humorous, triumphant, changing from moment to moment. It is always full of emotion. Sometimes it is a minor part within the music, but at times it is the most developed and creative part, seeming to leap nearly free of the more static rhythmic framework. Is this the raw human spirit crying out for ecstasy? We find something like this in other music and art too: in the searching rubato of a well-played piece of Chopin, in the frenzied lead solo that breaks from the dark tension of a heavy metal set, in the controlled chaos of a Pollock painting. Is this the ego in its place, disciplined personal yearning acting to energize life? Is

this one idea that is hinted at in the story of eating the apple in the garden, not a harbinger of exile but a hunger to leave the womb of unconscious existence?

And what is the place of man, of the individual himself? There is an ancient idea about this. For Western thought, it was perhaps most powerfully expressed in Plato's Symposium, where he called this place "love." This idea is that the place of man is in between, between ego and real self, between the merely human and the divine (as Plato put it), between the devil and God, between good and evil. It is the place of a special kind of awareness, where the ego, with its lies and its power, is seen clearly, and also present is the cosmic identity that subsists in a realm above all individual desire and memory. This is the fragile realm that is offered to me, for an instant, by experiences that take me "out of myself." To consciously inhabit this realm is the work of a lifetime. It is a work that is indeed far beyond art or "possession," but which these point to, like the Zen "finger pointing at the moon."

The stable axis that can be developed by practices such as polyrhythmic dancing and drumming is something that prepares a person to stand in this in-between place. It is a quality of attention that is always in movement, renewed constantly from moment to moment. It inhabits the flow of time, at the balance point of "now." It is more real than either the eternal time dimension of the higher self, or the pushy yearnings of the ego, which always look forward and backward but never experience "now." It is the real "I" of man.

A Prolegominism to Erasure

One group I relate to is BAMC, the Bay Area Music Circle, which has monthly concerts in which members play for each other. The last concert was via Zoom and was, perhaps surprisingly, very good. For the next concert someone performed John Cage's 4'33", in which the musician(s) play only silence for 4 minutes 33 seconds. The score consists entirely of rests.

In this postmodern world it is understood that the only way to examine in its fullness an idea, an event, a person is under erasure, a practice in which the thing to be examined is crossed out as such but left partly visible under the mark of erasure. An example is this drawing of Carlos Castaneda in which he has erased half of his face:



Carlos told artist Richard Oden that he wished to erase only half of his drawing because "I am not at the point at which I can eradicate myself entirely."

Another example is civilization today, under Coronavirus.

Erasure in this sense is an idea from Heidegger; it was taken up and amplified by Derrida, where I discovered it. Erasure may be the fundamental esoteric gesture. Erasure is an underlying trope in many traditions. For example, witness the deconstructive, esoteric heart of the Heart Sutra:

There is no ignorance,
and no end to ignorance.
There is no old age and death,
and no end to old age and death.
There is no suffering, no cause of suffering,
no end to suffering, no path to follow.
There is no attainment of enlightenment,
and no enlightenment to attain.

Erasure connects with what Gurdjieff said on the very first page of his first book *Beelzebub's Tales To His Grandson*, a kind of prospectus:

Ten Books, in Three Series
Three books under the title of "An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man," or, "Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson"
....strictly directed towards the solution of the following three cardinal problems:
FIRST SERIES: To destroy, mercilessly, without any compromises whatsoever, in
the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted in
him, about everything existing in the world.

Now, did he accomplish this merciless destruction? No, it takes more than a book, or ten books, to do that. But now we can read that even the promise given above is already an erasure, an erasure of the naive confidence we have in our beliefs and views.

At the end of the book, Gurdjieff recommends a practice of *memento mori*, contemplation of one's death, as the only thing that can save man from the tyrant of his own petty absorption in life. While death itself may be final erasure, one can make use of the shadow that it casts on every moment of life by such intentional erasure of the common deadening sense that there is always plenty of time.

The Bezels of Beelzebub

[This paper was presented as a talk at the All & Everything Conference, 2018, Portland Oregon]

*The Bezels of Wisdom*⁵ is the title given to the earliest full English translation of one of the most important Sufi texts, Ibn al-Arabi's Fusus al-Hikam. It was written, or rather “received,” in the early 13th century, and represents a climactic pinnacle of the development of Sufi mysticism in Islam. Like many Arabic words, “Fusus” has a number of meanings; it can refer to the bezel or mounting of a gemstone, or to the gemstone itself, or to a facet of a gem. It is the metaphor that organizes the book: a chapter is devoted to each of 27 prophets or saints whose stories are told in the Quran, whom Ibn al-Arabi interprets as the bearer of a particular “wisdom,” a unique Gem, as it were.

It is said that the 27 “bezels” correspond to the 27 fundamental types of Mohammedan saints. Gurdjieff says that there are 27 fundamental types of three-brained beings⁶. Is this possibly a reference to the Fusus? A speculative way of reaching the number 27 that may connect with types is the number of possible combinations of one the three subparts (moving/instinctual, emotional, intelligent) of each of the three centers (body, feelings, thought)⁷. Other speculations have also been proposed⁸.

5 The Bezels of Wisdom, by Ibn al-Arabi (Author), R. W. J. Austin (Translator), Titus Burkhardt (Preface), Paulist Press (November 1, 1980). Many other translations and commentaries have appeared since.

6 BT p. 485 the chapter “Art”. [In the following text and notes BT refers to Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson, 1950 edition.]

7 See P. D. Ouspensky, The Fourth Way. My website www.richardhodes.com has a visual image of this idea.

8 For example by Lee van Laer (private communication).

Gurdjieff said that he spent periods of time with Dervishes⁹; since almost all Sufi orders regard Ibn al-Arabi as “Shaikh al-akbar,” Greatest Teacher, and revere the *Fusus* as a foundational mystical document, Gurdjieff would likely have been familiar with the book. Perhaps his use of the method of writing with “pictures” and “stories” in order to reach the subconscious was influenced by Ibn al-Arabi, who was a master of the art.

Bezels of Wisdom came out in 1980. I remember how John Pentland, the founder of Gurdjieff Foundation groups in San Francisco, encouraged people to read it. He was not afraid to bring material from other traditions when it served to wake people up. It is a very difficult book; reading it challenges many preconceived ideas and awakens one to the possibility of a level of understanding far above the ordinary, and to a new way of engaging with spiritual texts and stories. I tried to read it then but was not ready; it took many years before I was able to open its pages again and work with it.

One of the sources of astonishment in *Bezels of Wisdom* is the way Ibn al-Arabi interprets the Quranic stories. In Sufism it is said that everything must be interpreted, pondered with a deeper understanding than the literal. Ibn al-Arabi’s interpretations were often very provocative. Some literalists accused him of heresy and called for his execution; but his Islamic credentials, and his connections to power possessing beings of his times, proved unassailable. Unlike

9 In *Meetings with Remarkable Men* in the chapter “Soloviev” Gurdjieff describes living near Bukhara and encountering Dervishes of various sects, including his “old friend Bogga-Eddin.” In the chapter “Skridlov” he tells that he stayed in the ruins of Old Merv for a year studying so that he and Skridlov could pass themselves off as Dervishes. Also, Chapter 41 of *BT* describes in details an encounter with the Bokharian Dervish Hadji-Asvatz-Troov.

many provocative contemporaries¹⁰ he survived and did not need martyrdom to make his legacy immortal. As a quick example, Ibn al-Arabi interprets the story of Noah¹¹, which is similar but not quite the same as in the Old Testament, as a story of misunderstanding of God's commandment: Noah scolded people for their sins and drove most of them away. Those who followed him onto the ark were misled; what God really intended was that people drown in the ocean of his love! This is only a very rough gloss of what Ibn al-Arabi says about Noah; the chapter is extremely subtle and difficult to fully understand.

I will here use the idea of bezels to organize a reading of Beelzebub's Tales as a series of settings of stories of significant individuals.

It is sometimes said that Hassein represents us, the person to whom BT is really addressed; but for this to be true would require that we become able to really listen, to engage an attention that is not clouded by attachment to the cacophony of associations, judgments, self-glorifications, etc. which usually accompany our efforts to listen or read. This is one way BT works on us, by showing us how different we actually are from the way we imagine ourselves, and making us feel the need to become more "becoming". It is reported¹² that Gurdjieff said that no book could really be a teacher, but if there was one that could be our teacher it would be BT.

10 For example Mansur al-Hallaj. Al-Hallaj means "the carder," i.e. to straighten the fibers of raw wool. It was said that as a Sufi teacher he was a "carder of souls." He famously said "I am the Truth." "The Truth" (Al-Haqq) is one of the Names of God, and literalists interpreted this as a claim to personal divinity, a heresy. He was executed in 922 CE.

11 The Bezels of Wisdom, chapter 3. The Quranic story is in Sura (chapter) 71 "Nuh" (Noah). The Old Testament story is in chapters 6-9 of Genesis.

12 Oral communication of John Pentland

The Bezels

Here I list 27 “Bezels” of BT. The list is somewhat arbitrary, it could have been a bit longer, but these are the main individuals whose stories comprise a major part of Gurdjieff’s message:

God

Beelzebub (the protagonist/narrator. Ch I, Arousing of Thought)

Hassein (grandson of Beelzebub, to whom the “tales” are addressed)

Gurdjieff (the Author)

The Reader

Mullah Nasr Eddin (Ch I, Arousing of Thought)

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Karapet of Tiflis (Ch I, Arousing of Thought)

Transcaucasian Kurd (Ch I, Arousing of Thought)

Ahoon (Introduced in Ch II, Why Beelzebub was in Our Solar System)

King Appolis (Ch XV, First Descent)

Priest Abdil (Ch XIX, Second Descent)

King Konuzion (Ch XX, Third Descent)

Saint Buddha (Ch XXI, First Visit to India, and Ch XXII First Time in Tibet)

Gornahoor Harharkh (Ch XXIII, Fourth Sojourn)

Woman (Ch XXIII, Fourth Sojourn)

Belcultassi (Ch XXIII, Fourth Sojourn)

Hamolinadir (Ch XXIV, Fifth Flight)

Ashiata Shiemash (Introduced in Ch XXV)

Aksharpanziar (Ch XXX Art)

The messengers: Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Lama (Ch XXXVIII, Religion)

Choon-Kil-Tez and Choon-Tro-Pel (Ch XL, Heptaparaparshinokh)

Hadji-Asvatz-Troov (Ch XLI. The Bokharian Dervish)

Atarnakh the Kurd (Ch XLIII. War)

Makary Kronbernktion (Ch XLIV. Justice)

For reasons of brevity we shall not be able here to study all 27 Bezels. We now proceed to an examination of some of the key ones.

God

Gurdjieff said¹³ that his school taught “individuation,” and this meant that a man must find his own unique aim or purpose in life. He said that his own aim, or “whim”, was to bring about “a new conception of God in the world, a change in the very meaning of the word.” What does BT say about this? There are these words on the first page of BT, in which Gurdjieff defines his aim for the book: “To destroy, mercilessly, without any compromises whatsoever, in the mentation and feelings of the reader, the beliefs and views, by centuries rooted in him, about everything existing in the world”. As is made clear in many passages, what must be destroyed are all conventional ideas about religion, and about God. Beelzebub uses the word “God” for the most part in a way that implies it is a mistaken idea that people have. Here is a key passage¹⁴:

“Here you should know that your contemporary favorites very often use a notion...expressed by them in the following words: ‘We are the images of God.’

“These unfortunates do not even suspect that, of everything known to most of them concerning cosmic truths, this expression of theirs is the only true one of them all.

“And indeed, each of them is the image of God, not of that ‘God’ which they have in their bobtailed picturings, but of the real God, by which word we sometimes still call our common Megalocosmos.

“Each of them to the smallest detail is exactly similar, but of course in miniature, to the whole of our Megalocosmos, and in each of them there are all of those separate functionings, which in our common Megalocosmos actualize the cosmic harmonious Iraniranumange or ‘exchange of substances,’ maintaining the existence of everything existing in the Megalocosmos as one whole.”

Rather than the word “God”, when he is being serious Beelzebub almost always uses capitalized appellations containing the word

13 Philip Mairet, A. R. Orage: A Memoir pp. 104-105

14 BT chapter XXXIX “The Holy Planet Purgatory,” p. 775

ENDLESSNESS,forexample“ourUNI-BEINGENDLESSNESS.”¹⁵ This indeed appears to conform to Gurdjieff’s statements about his aim, and with the idea that God is “the World,” as expressed in the above passage.

The idea of the Image deserves deeper examination. For the Christian West, the source of “the image of God” is presumably Genesis 1:27, and most people take it to mean that Man was somehow created to be “like God”. Gurdjieff supports this in statements such as the one quoted above. But in the works of Ibn Arabi, the idea of “image” is much more metaphysical than the way this is usually understood: there is a plane of existence which he calls the *Alam Al-mithal*, the “Realm of Images”, which is a world intermediary between the physical world and the Divine world proper. It is this realm in which subsist those entities such as Angels, and even God, through which Man has contact with the Divine; and in which God has contact with Man.

Henry Corbin, the important 20th century scholar-mystic of Ibn Arabi’s thought, opens up a more precise understanding in his great book *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, particularly in chapter V “Man’s Prayer and God’s Prayer,” in which he explains the idea of a reciprocal creation, in which Man “prays” God into existence and God “prays” Man into existence; this co-creation takes place in the “imaginal” realm, Corbin’s translation of *Alam Al-mithal*.

Are we correct in our supposition that Gurdjieff’s idea of God was influenced by the Sufi idea just explained? This would distance Beelzebub’s idea of God even more decisively from the dogmatic received ideas according to which God has an existence which is like that of a “thing”. Can we agree that God “is” an image? And so is Man? And so is the World?

15 BT chapter XVI “The Relative Understanding of Time,” p. 124. Similar appellations occur many times in the text, almost all with slight differences which may or may not be significant.

There are five individual human beings whose stories overarch the whole of BT: Beelzebub; Hassein, Beelzebub's grandson¹⁶; the author Gurdjieff¹⁷; the reader¹⁸, and the mysterious Mullah Nasr Eddin. Gurdjieff and the reader appear as characters in the first and last chapters; Beelzebub is both narrator and among the dramatic personae of almost every chapter; Hassein's story is told in the development of his understanding as he listens to his grandfather's tales.

Mullah Nasr Eddin¹⁹

"Mullah" is an Arabic word meaning originally "guardian" or "vicar" or "religious teacher"; "Nasr" means "victory" and also "help"²⁰; and Eddin (al-Din) means "of faith, religion (i.e. Islam)". So "Mullah Nasr Eddin" means something like "Teacher of help of faith". There are many traditional Sufi "teaching stories," often humorous, about him. He appears to be based on an actual person born possibly in the 13th century in Turkey near Konya²¹, thus roughly contemporary with Ibn al-Arabi.

His character in BT is shadowy: he appears in BT as the apocryphal source of over 100 pithy phrases which though very puzzling seem somehow apropos. In some sense the whole thrust of BT is condensed into the numerous brief, often mocking, phrases that Beelzebub quotes from the Mullah to illustrate some story.

16 Note that the grandson of The Prophet Muhammed was named Hassein (often spelled Husayn)

17 Gurdjieff appears in his own persona in BT mainly in the introductory matter, in Chapter I "The Arousing of Thought" p. 3, and in Chapter XLVIII "From the Author", p. 1184.

18 The reader is addressed directly in Chapter I "The Arousing of Thought", and in Chapter XLVIII "From the Author".

19 Mullah Nasr Eddin first appears in BT chapter I, p. 9, and is quoted throughout the book.

20 "Victory" is the common meaning. In Quran 110 al-nasr has the older meaning of "help [from God]"

21 See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasreddin>

Beelzebub (as a Bezel)

Why and how did Gurdjieff decide²² to make his main character this personage known as the Devil in Christian tradition, and widely reviled? Gurdjieff says that he made this decision “not without cunning”, and that he hoped to appeal to Beelzebub’s well-known vanity by advertising his name. Why? So that Beelzebub would help him, with his powers and knowledge. He does this even though, or even precisely because, it will offend the reader. To explain this G resorts to the story of our next Bezel:

Karapet of Tiflis

The Karapet²³ had the job of blowing a steam whistle every morning to wake up the railway workers. It also woke up everybody else, which greatly annoyed them. While doing this, the Karapet had the strange practice of cursing everybody he might awaken. “Why?” Gurdjieff asked him. Long story short, he had discovered that everybody cursed him every morning for waking them up, which caused bad results for him; but if he cursed them in advance it would protect him from their curses. We now begin to understand something of Gurdjieff’s method, of which we will soon observe many examples...

Gornahoor Harharkh

Gornahoor Harharkh, Beelzebub’s “essence friend”, is a raven being who lives on Saturn. He first appears in Chapter XVIII “The Arch Preposterous” (p. 151). He demonstrates to Beelzebub a vacuum chamber in which the three independent holy forces, having been separated from each other, can be rebledened. Their “striving to

22 BT chapter I, p. 41

23 BT chapter I “The Arousing of Thought” p. 44

reblend” has a force of 3,040,000 “volts”. Unfortunately Gornahoor makes a mistake in pulling certain levers and Beelzebub briefly fears for his life. Preposterous things transpire in Gornahoor’s laboratory, including an electrical explosion which renders Beelzebub temporarily blind, and a mistake by Gornahoor in operating his equipment which causes Beelzebub to experience the process of ‘Rascooarno’, i.e. death—he became unconscious in his ‘Thinking’ ‘Feeling’ and ‘Moving’ centers. He momentarily experiences a “criminally egoistic anxiety” for his own existence, for the “first and also the last time” in his life. Fortunately, Gornahoor is able to correct his mistake. Later in the chapter, Gornahoor contrives to transform copper into gold by invoking in the copper a process that Beelzebub compares to war on the planet earth.

We are told²⁴ that Gornahoor who had once been considered a great scientist was now considered a has-been, eclipsed by his own son Gornahoor Rhakhoork, Beelzebub’s godson. In chapter XLV “In the Opinion of Beelzebub, Man’s Extraction of Electricity from Nature and Its Destruction During Its Use, Is One of the Chief Causes of the Shortening of the Life of Man”²⁵ we finally discover that Gornahoor Harharkh agreed with Rhakhoork that his long occupation with investigations of ‘the omnipresent cosmic substance [Okidanokh]’ had been an ‘unredeemable sin’. Rhakhoork explains his conclusions, from long study, that the extraction from Okidanokh of ‘electricity’ by ‘three-brained beings’ of Earth, similar to what his father had done on Saturn, and its use for ‘egoistic aims,’ was the chief reason the lifespan of these beings had decreased so dramatically.

Abdil, a priest

Beelzebub made his second descent to Earth²⁶ soon after the “Second Transapalnian Perturbation,” the submergence of Atlantis. The reason he did so was because he was asked by His Conformity the

24 *BT* p. 166

25 *BT* p. 1145

26 *BT* chapter XIX “Second Descent to the Planet Earth”, pp 177 ff

Archangel Looisos to see if he could find a way to convince people of the senselessness of the practice of animal sacrifice. As Looisos explained, Earth's visible moon and its other invisible moon Anulios required for the regulation of their atmospheres a certain sacred substance that was liberated from animals and human beings at their deaths; but recently due to the widespread practice of animal sacrifice, there was an excess production of this substance which threatened to produce a cosmic catastrophe.

After settling for a while in a city up the river Amu Darya, Beelzebub happened to meet a sympathetic priest named Abdil. Perceiving that Abdil could be useful for his purpose, he made friends with him, and convinced him of the absurdity of animal sacrifice. Preaching at his temple, he gave a speech that was so successful he became widely popular. This threatened the other priests of the country, who depended on animal sacrifice for their living. They organized an ecumenical trial at which he was condemned. Like many other truth-speaking priests, he was executed. But his teachings had an effect: the practice of animal sacrifice was noticeably reduced.

Woman, and the 'Ape question'²⁷

Beelzebub invited Gornahoor Harharkh to come to Mars to assist in constructing a Teskooano (telescope), which increased the visibility of remote cosmic concentrations 7,000,285 times. While observing Earth with this telescope they had serious conversations about the three-brained beings living there. Beelzebub decided to descend to the planet for the fourth time and bring back to Saturn some 'apes' from the planet Earth in order to carry out certain 'elucidating experiments'. The nature of these experiments is not explained.

Let us look now at the text immediately following which recounts one of the most disturbing tales in Beelzebub's Tales, one which throws a certain light on our narrator-bezel, Beelzebub himself.

Beelzebub describes how the 'Ape question', whether apes

descended from men or vice versa, became a burning question on the planet Earth two times: he bitterly attacks both an otherwise unknown ancient wiseacre Menitkel who “proved” that apes descended from feral men; and ‘Darwin’, who, much later, “proved” that men descended from apes.

Now comes the disturbing part. Quoting Mullah Nasr Eddin to the effect that “The cause of every misunderstanding must be sought only in woman” he tells how after the second Transapalnian perturbation (the loss of Atlantis) two things happened²⁸: 1) people began to engage in sex only for pleasure; and 2) groups of men and of women had to live separate from each other. The men resorted to ‘onanism’ and ‘pederasty’, but the women, it seems, could not get enough pleasure in this way and began to have sex with various animals. Because the ‘passive’ sex is capable of conceiving from the sperm of two-brained beings, they gave birth to ‘misconceived’ beings called apes, which tended to resemble the two-brained being whose sperm gave rise to them.

Now...it is simple enough to understand that Gurdjieff enjoined us, more than once, not to take literally anything he said²⁹, and indeed it is possible by means of allegorical hermeneutics (see below) to understand something valuable from this tale, but what does Beelzebub’s flagrant disregard for literal truth, as well as for the feelings of women, who other than in this passage play almost no role in BT, tell us about his character and even about Gurdjieff’s? For one, it suggests that he is not entirely to be trusted, and not entirely to be admired, despite what Gurdjieff states is his aim in using Beelzebub as a main character.

Just as in Sufism, every story must be interpreted in order to fathom its gist. Here is one interpretation of the ‘ape’ story (not the only one possible, I hasten to add): the ‘passive sex’ represents the mechanical

28 BT chapter XXIII “Beelzebub’s fourth sojourn” pp. 276 ff.

29 For example Views from the Real World, New York February 24, 1924 “Influences” p. 196

aspect of human nature; the ‘active sex’ represents the individual will. In the normal process of inner procreation the active will emanating from the mind of a complete three-brained being programs the mechanical part to be able to do something as-if consciously. For example, in learning to do something that is difficult, and which represents a high aim, such as playing a musical instrument, or performing a Sacred Dance, a conscious intent, a precise idea of an action that needs to be performed, is inculcated in the mechanical part by “practice”. Something very fine, of a nature intermediate between that of the body and that of the ‘I’ or consciousness, then gradually forms in the organism. This something is as if it were a semi-autonomous being which is capable of performing this action independently. The mind then simply initiates the action of the passive part and is free to contemplate, ecstatically, the experience and the meaning of the action (e.g. a piece of music or a ritual dance).

But as people ordinarily live, the ‘active’ will is not that of a three-brained being, rather it is conditioned by impulses that are merely emotional or moving/instinctual/sexual. The formation resulting from the action of such an impulse on the “passive” part is then capable only of a poor simulacrum of consciously initiated action—an abomination. Almost everything that people do consists of such ‘aping’.

Belcultassi³⁰

Belcultassi is one of the most important Bezels of Beelzebub. Unlike many of the Bezels, we feel Belcultassi’s humanity, and that he went much further than we have had the courage to do in addressing his inherited flaws:

“When this same later Saint Individual Belcultassi was once contemplating, according to the practice of every normal being, and his thoughts were by association concentrated on himself, that is to say, on the sense and aim of his existence, he suddenly sensed and

cognized that the process of the functioning of the whole of him had until then proceeded not as it should have proceeded according to sane logic.

“This unexpected constation shocked him so profoundly that thereafter he devoted the whole of himself exclusively to be able at any cost to unravel this and understand.”

There is much import for us in this short passage, and in what follows in the chapter. Here for example are Belcultassi’s desiderata:

One should have a practice of contemplation, in which one’s thoughts are concentrated on oneself.

One should contemplate the “sense and aim” of one’s existence.

One should cognize that there is something wrong in one’s functioning.

One should devote oneself to understanding this fact.

It is necessary to make intensive efforts to be ‘sincere’ with oneself, which means to conquer ‘self-love,’ ‘pride,’ ‘vanity,’ etc.

One needs to find and work together with friends who have the same understanding.

Belcultassi therefore founded the society Akhaldan in order to pursue this program. It hardly needs saying that this is the charter of what we call “The Work.”

The word ‘Akhaldan’ meant, we are told, “the striving to become aware of the Being of beings.” This is an extremely interesting idea: that beings, including oneself, have a property that can be called Being, which it is possible and necessary to become aware of. As said previously, the practice of contemplation means to concentrate one’s thoughts on oneself, i.e. one’s own Being. Further we understand that in relation to others, we should strive to be aware of their Being. Being includes the whole of oneself—this is very different from the way in which one usually considers only a fraction of oneself, or of another person, usually based on an egoistic desire.

We learn in chapter XXXIX “Purgatory” (p. 764) that “being” means having three ‘bodies’ that are of a different nature, are composed of substances from different cosmic sources. The contemplation of the

Being of oneself and of others must include the awareness of at least the possibility of a second and third body.

Perhaps the most powerful image in Beelzebub's Tales is the emblem of the society Akhaldan, a statue called "Conscience": "An allegorical being [with the trunk of a] 'Bull' [legs of a] 'Lion' [wings of an] 'Eagle', [and in place of a head, two] 'Breasts of a virgin' [affixed to the trunk by] 'amber'" We are challenged, but perhaps not too surprised, by the idea that the 'Bull' represents the indefatigability of the labors necessary to 'regenerate' oneself; and that the 'Lion' means that we must perform these labors with 'cognizance and feeling of courage and faith in one's "might"'.

What is more surprising is that the 'Wings' mean that "it is necessary to meditate continually on questions not related to the direct manifestations required for ordinary being-existence." And then the 'Breasts' symbolize that Love should always predominate in our practice; and the 'amber' indicates that this Love should be "strictly impartial...completely separated from other functions".

Do we really practice in this way?

Hamolinadir

Hamolinadir³¹ is one of the learned beings who was forcibly brought by the Persian King to the Learned Conference in Babylon. He was an initiate of the highest 'school' existing on earth, in Egypt, the "School of Materializing Thought."³² He is described as having

31 First appears BT Chapter XXIV "Beelzebub's fifth flight", p. 332

32 We are reminded here of the Tibetan Buddhist practice of 'Tulpa', a paranormal being or object that is created and projected by the mind of an adept and becomes visible to others. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tulpa> . Sometimes a tulpa may be created without intention, especially when a very intense emotion occurs. When this happens at death, it is the origin of 'ghosts'. The practice of 'Tulku' or intentional reincarnation is a more advanced form of this technique; this is how incarnate Lamas ensure the continuation of their lineage.

his own ‘I’, the power of rationally directing the functioning of his common presence.

Now, in Babylon at that time, the burning question had become the question of the Soul: whether man had a soul, or not. Hamolinadir’s speech to the Learned Conference took the theme of the “Instability of Human Reason.” Shouting and sobbing at the same time he said that while known as an exceedingly wise man, having finished a course of study higher than any that ever existed or may ever exist, he simply did not know the answer—he found himself agreeing, mechanically, with whatever argument he had most recently heard.

He also speaks of the “tower” that is being built in Babylon, in order to ascend to “heaven.” This tower is being built of disparate materials and inevitably will fall and crush everything. Presumably one meaning of the “tower” is people’s structure of noncongruent ideas about what Hamolinadir calls “questions of the beyond”³³. To avoid being crushed, Hamolinadir leaves Babylon and goes to “Nineveh” to raise “maize.”

I detect a provocative interpretation here: “maize” can only mean Zea Mays, Indian corn, a plant which at the time of the Learned Conference (6th century BCE?) was only known in the New World; the word “maize” is derived from an indigenous language of Hispaniola, the island where Columbus landed. Now, is it possible that Hamolinadir went to the New World? I discuss elsewhere³⁴ the possibility that he did so and became the semi-divine personage

33 We recommend to the reader a most interesting essay by Jacques Derrida “Des Tours de Babel” (1985) which deeply ponders the meaning and implication of the Biblical story, and of what the term “Babel” has come to mean in culture, and in particular about the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of “translation.” It is worth observing, as Derrida does, that in some European languages the word for “translation” and for “distortion” (traduction) are almost identical. We take no position on the “translation wars” concerning Beelzebub’s Tales, but the ponderings of Derrida are certainly relevant.

34 “The Way of Sacrifice and the Light Within”, <http://richardhodes.com/SacrificeAndLight4.htm>

Quetzalcoatl, promethean bringer to ancient Meso-America of culture, arts, poetry, and high religion. Nineveh, an ancient sacred site near the Kurdish city Mosul, is sacred to Ishtar, whose story has some deep parallels to Quetzalcoatl's.

Ashiata Shiemash

The name Ashiata Shiemash means, possibly, "Sun of Asia". Some observers think that the prototype for Ashiata was the ancient prophet Zarathustra³⁵ (also spelled Zoroaster). Although Zarathustra's exact dates and places are in dispute (current scholarship seems to converge on the area Northeast of present-day Iran and dates around 1200-1000 BCE³⁶), the account in BT may fit: it says that Ashiata was born in Sumeria 700 years before the Learned Conference in Babylon. Many Sufis think that Sufism has pre-Islamic roots including especially Zoroastrian mysteries, and Corbin says that Iranians while nominally Muslim feel themselves almost as much spiritual followers of Zarathustra as of Mohammed. Zarathustra's main written scripture, the Zend Avesta, was written in a proto-Iranian language that was quite close to the language of the Hindu Vedas. Probably Zoroastrian teachings spread in two main branches, one moving westward and informing Iranian religion, the other southward to become a source of Indian tradition. J. G. Bennett says³⁷ that "Sarmoung," the name of the brotherhood where Gurdjieff says he received his teaching³⁸, was an Armenian pronunciation of a Persian word "Sarman" which means "bee", a reference to collecting

35 See for example the web page <https://levitmong.wordpress.com/2016/07/31/magi-of-conscience-zarathustra-and-ashiata-sheimash/>.

36 Peter Kingsley, "The Greek Origin of the Sixth-Century Dating of Zoroaster," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 53, 1990, pp. 245-65. Kingsley convincingly demolishes the earlier scholarly opinion favoring a date around 600 BCE.

37 Bennett, John G., Gurdjieff: Making of A New World, pp 56-57, Bennett Pub. Co., 1992

38 Gurdjieff, G. I., Meetings with Remarkable Men, Penguin 1991

and preserving the honey of traditional wisdom, and may mean “he who preserves the teaching of Zoroaster.”

Zoroastrianism was the earliest historically known religion addressed by a Teacher or Messenger to mankind as a whole, rather than a local or tribal religion. This is not the place to examine the very complex tradition of Zoroastrianism in detail—I will only say that it emphasizes the importance of conscience.

In BT, Ashiata was said to be the only “messenger sent from above who...succeeded in creating conditions [which] somewhat resembled [normal] existence of three-brained beings.”³⁹ Ashiata did not “preach” anything and therefore “none of His Teachings” were passed down—except in the form of a “Legominism” with the title “The Terror of the Situation.”⁴⁰ In this legominism Ashiata reviews the efforts of preceding messengers to use the being-impulses “Faith”, “Hope”, and “Love”—but finds that these impulses have so degenerated among human beings that they are almost the opposite of what they should be. What he turns to instead is “conscience,” which still survives because it is buried in the “subconsciousness.” His method was to create “conditions” in which this buried conscience might become conscious. The conditions of Gurdjieff’s work communities are intended to fulfill exactly this function, mainly by enabling people to see their own unbecoming inner and outer manifestations when they work with others.

A very important survival of Ashiata’s legacy is the inscription on a marble tablet which is the property of the “Brotherhood Olbogmek”:

39 BT p. 318.

40 BT chapter XXVI “The Legominism...‘The Terror of the Situation’” p. 361

‘Faith,’ ‘Love,’ and ‘Hope’

Faith of consciousness is freedom
 Faith of feeling is weakness
 Faith of body is stupidity.

Love of consciousness evokes the same in response
 Love of feeling evokes the opposite
 Love of body depends only on type and polarity.

Hope of consciousness is strength
 Hope of feeling is slavery
 Hope of body is disease.

The way in which Gurdjieff’s conditions of work help is mainly what is said here about Love: as taught by the allegorical statue “Conscience,” the emblem of the society Akhaldan, conscience demands that we always “Love” “Impartially.” The situation that these conditions help us to sense the terror of is that our “Love” is almost always based in feeling, or in physical attraction—rarely is it impartial, conscious.

Atarnakh⁴¹

A society arose around 1500 CE with the aim of eliminating or reducing the evil of war which had reached unprecedented ferocity in Central Asia⁴². They held an organizational conference in Mosulopolis, presumably the ancient city of Mosul in Iraq, which is still a hub of discord. Among the programs of the society were to establish a common language and a common religion. The Kurdish

41 Besides the account in BT chapter XLIII “Beelzebub’s Opinion of War” pp. 1091 ff, one of the piano pieces by Gurdjieff and de Hartmann has the title “Atarnakh.” It is a charming composition, with a martial rhythm that evokes nomad warriors galloping through central Asia.

42 Tamerlane, who is said to have sent a representative to this society, in his efforts to re-establish the fractured Khanate of Genghis Khan, is estimated to have killed as many as 17 million people (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timur>). We note that similarly dire slaughter was taking place at the same time in the New World—an epoch of solioonensius?

philosopher Atarnakh, who was learned and charismatic, but vain and proud, spoke at the conference, delivering a treatise with the title “Why do Wars Occur on the Earth?” Through intensive studies he had arrived at an understanding that the cosmic law of “reciprocal maintenance” required a certain definite quantity of deaths each year on earth, and this was the cause of war. This talk greatly affected the gathered learned beings. They split into two parties: one party agreed with Atarnakh; the other party believed that war could be stopped if the society simply enacted a suitable program. After a vicious quarrel, Atarnakh himself settled the question by proposing a resolution, which was accepted by the society, that nothing could be done about war and that the society might as well dissolve itself.

But then Atarnakh changed his mind: in another speech, he said that the deaths required were not necessarily those of human beings, but that deaths of animals would suffice. He proposed re-establishing the ancient practice of animal sacrifice on a wide scale. This was done, and as a result the human mortality rate as well as the birth rate declined because, as Beelzebub reminds us, the main purpose of the life of human beings is, by means of conscious labors and intentional suffering, to create substances required as food for the moon and food for the sun, and these substances are only released to serve this function upon death.

Later, a certain Persian dervish Assadula Ibrahim Ogly did not have Atarnakh’s understanding and only saw in these sacrificial customs a horrible injustice. Thanks to his preachings, the sacrifices

greatly decreased.⁴³ The unfortunate result of this was, according to Beelzebub, the First World War.

What is the take-home from the stories of Abdil and of Atarnakh and Ogly, who each tried to intervene in the practice of animal sacrifice, as did Beelzebub himself? It seems to have been all in vain, or worse. And in the concluding paragraphs of the chapter on war⁴⁴ Beelzebub advises Hassein—us?—that it is a fool’s errand to try to end war:

“We can only say now, that if this property of terrestrial beings is to disappear from that unfortunate planet, then it will be with Time alone, thanks either to the guidance of a certain Being with very high Reason or to certain exceptional cosmic events.”

Makary Kronbernkzion⁴⁵

Several of the stories in BT have the subtext that very High Beings, cosmic as well as human, with grandiloquent titles such as “His All-Quarters-Maintainer the Arch-cherub Helkgematis,”⁴⁶ sometimes do things that have bad consequences. It seems that they do not always have common sense, but operate from a conviction of the rightness of an understanding that is merely theoretical. The story in chapter XLIV, “In the opinion of Beelzebub, Man’s Understanding of Justice is for Him in the Objective Sense an Accursed Mirage” is a dramatic example.

43 The name of this dervish given in BT p. 1103 does not seem to be capable of being aligned with any historically known person. Ogly is a very common Azerbaijani surname. I could find no historical record that the Islamic custom of sacrificing animals during certain rituals ever decreased in this way. In fact, the number of such sacrifices seems to have increased dramatically over the last several centuries and now amounts to tens of millions of animals every year. That said, the meat from the sacrificed animals is eaten, and a part of it is distributed in a prescribed manner to the poor; so this is not perhaps any worse than the nearly invisible slaughter for food of much larger numbers of animals in the modern world.

44 BT Chapter XLIII p. 1118

45 BT Chapter XLIV p. 1127 ff

46 BT p. 1125

It seems that certain higher being bodies (“souls”?) living on the Holy Planet Purgatory once tried to understand what was wrong with beings of the planet Earth. They assembled a committee to investigate, and it was decided that the cause was that earth beings believed that “Good” and “Evil” were special factors outside the essence of beings and were responsible for their good and bad manifestations. They made a resolution, which was sanctioned at the highest cosmic levels, declaring anathema whatever human being had been the cause of this notion. A certain Makary Kronbernkzion, a human being who had developed a higher being body, was discovered to have been the originator of the idea of this “good” and “evil”. Unfortunately the resolution could not be vacated; but a mitigation was agreed to, that his higher being body would exist perpetually on Purgatory without the possibility of merging with the Sun Absolute.

Beelzebub himself was not convinced of the guilt of Kronbernkzion. After an intensive search he was able to discover the book created by Kronbernkzion in which the notion “Good and Evil” was first employed. It turns out that what he had meant by this notion was not at all what he was being punished for. By “Good” he meant the downward-flowing ‘passive’ current of cosmic creation; and by “Evil” the backward-flowing ‘active’ current of the efforts of beings to return to the Source. But earth people, not having the data for ‘various being-aspects of a world view,’ instead formed a world view based on a vastly oversimplified misunderstanding of “good” and “evil.”

Hassein

We have met Hassein, as the listener to Beelzebub’s tales, over and over. Finally, in chapter XLVI “Beelzebub Explains to His Grandson the Significance of the Form and Sequence Which He Chose for Expounding the Information Concerning Man,”⁴⁷ we meet the mature Hassein. He is weeping for the fact, which he now understands,

that through causes depending only on “the unforeseeingness⁴⁸ of certain Most High Sacred Individuals”, who long ago implanted the organ of illusion called “Kundabuffer” in their ancestors; and even though this organ was later removed, its residual consequences still deprive people of the possibility of experiencing “bliss” during “sacred feeding of the second being-food.”⁴⁹ Second being-food is, of course, air, and the “sacred feeding” seems to mean something like “meditation.”

Beelzebub is joyful that his grandson has put himself in the place of another, and though Hassein himself does experience this bliss, he wept because others could not.

Does Hassein represent “Us”? How then are we to perform our “being partkdolg duty,”⁵⁰ how to engender that fire, that “Zernofookalnian friction”⁵¹ between “yes” and “no” in ourselves, which alone can generate the higher substances needed for the creation of our higher bodies, how perseveringly actualize the striving toward the manifestation of our own individuality? What aim can we undertake, as a personal duty, a whim that is uniquely our own? How to experience our own bliss, and allow and encourage others to have theirs? How to do that which is the most sacred duty of every human being—to do good, for others? Yet with a certain modesty about what it means to do good which is expressed so clearly by what I heard our teacher Pentland say, many times, especially in the last year of his life: “We cannot help. Help yourself.”

48 “unforeseeingness” occurs many times in *BT* in relation to “High Beings”, here p. 1162

49 *BT* p. 1162

50 The term “being-Partkdolg duty” occurs many times in *BT*, here p. 1167

51 *BT* p. 1168

The Crown of Unknowing*Obelisk at Heliopolis*

Consider the obelisk. It is made of the same stone that the cities of man are made of; but it stands alone amongst the ordinary buildings. What does it represent?

The base is square. It represents Reason, the crown of the animal, which makes the animal human.

The obelisk is solid, hewn as one whole by hard labor from the living rock. It is not hollow like buildings are made, to hide the many sins and crimes committed within them. This means that the obelisk represents something substantial, even though originally conceived by “imagination [which] bodies forth the forms of things unknown...and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name” (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Wm. Shakespeare).

It is erected by means of an invention which, no longer needed, has been forgotten. Reaching skyward, the trunk of the column soars high above the ordinary occupations and ideas of man. It represents

Gnosis, knowledge of higher things. This is the crown of Man, which makes Man a Seeker.

It narrows gradually toward the top. As idea and image build upon each other, they rise further from the ground, the animal. The passage upward narrows, becomes less easy for merely human Reason to fit.

At a certain height there is a sudden increase of the inward slope. Here is an interval above which instability would prevail. Reason cannot continue without danger. Something other is needed to go further. The column is topped by a short pyramid narrowing to a point. The pyramid is the Crown of Unknowing, which elevates the Seeker above illusory attachment to particular ideas and images, rendering his mind and heart “capable of every form” (*The Interpreter of Desires*, Ibn Arabi).

The point, a nothingness, casts a shadow on the earth that marks the days and hours. The point itself subsumes all time and represents eternity.

Parallel to the obelisk of Gnosis, nearly indistinguishable from it, stands the obelisk of Religion. At its base are the polytheisms, the pantheisms, the cosmos of the Manifold Gods, with their fantastic stories. Higher there appears an apotheosis, an absolute God who subsumes the gods. A little higher, toward the top, there is One God Alone, the cosmos of monotheism. Approaching the break towards the upper pyramid, God becomes further from Man and his Reason. His nature and Being flee towards incomprehensibility.

The point at the vertex of the pyramid atop the obelisk of Religion is the miracle of apophasis—the unsaying of God, since God’s name is no longer sayable. Words fail and fall away. Reason and feeling are purified and become one. Man, dying to himself, becomes immortal.

Stories From my Native People

[Traditional Creation Story]

In the water world, which was two worlds before ours, there were two snakes. They were exactly alike, and they were always together. They were always coiling around each other and you couldn't tell whether it was one snake or two. Sometimes, one would swallow the other, and then it would shed its skin, and the skin would turn into the other snake and they would go back to their play. It was their way of making love. They gave birth to the spirits of all the animals and plants, but there was no place for them; they just had to swim around in the water that was everywhere.



Then Rabbit got jealous of the way the snakes always had so much pleasure just by touching each other. He went and asked them, “can you teach me how to do that?” But they didn’t pay any

attention, they were enjoying themselves so much. So Rabbit got mad and bit one of the snakes and killed it. The dead body of that snake became land, and all the animals and plants had a place to live. It was now the land world, the last world before ours. Rabbit found another rabbit and did what he had seen the snakes doing. He wasn't as good at it as the snakes had been, but soon there were lots of rabbits. He taught all the other animals to do the same thing, but they didn't learn it as well as Rabbit, and there were never as many of any kind of animals as there are rabbits.

After a while the other snake got lonely. He had the power to change death to life. So he bit the body of second snake, and it woke up. He was mad at Rabbit and hunted him down and bit him to death. That was how Death came into the world.

But the second snake was now different from the first: since he had used his bite for death, he could no longer use it to give life. The two snakes talked about it and decided they couldn't play together like before. The first snake said "I'll go above and be the Sun; you go below and be the Darkness." All the animals decided which ones would be awake in the day and which in the night.

Then the second snake asked "How will we be able to talk to each other and decide when to send life and when to send death into the world?" The first snake thought about it, then he bit the dead body of Rabbit and it woke up. Snake said to him, "You are the cause of all the trouble. You are responsible for bringing both death and life into the world. You will now have to be awake both day and night, and take messages back and forth. You will be called Man." The snakes taught Man how to make fire, so he could see at night, and how to make weapons and tools and clothes, and how to make dances and songs to carry messages back and forth between the Sun and the Darkness.

The two snakes went to their places, and Man did what he had to do. That was the beginning of the Sun world, the one we live in.

The Teachings of My Native People

According to the teachings of my native people, the essential self of every being is called its *mRadd-he*. Its struggle or fate is called its *mSamm-he*. The proper path is for the *mRadd-he* to live quietly in union with its *mSamm-he*—only then can its implicit form unfold fully, a form for which no name is given, which means that it is ultimately limitless.

The great mystery lies in this unfolding limitlessness, which is encrypted like DNA within the male and female seeds, the *mRadd-he* and *mSamm-he*. Through union, the limited, partialized substance of the seeds reveals the infinite encoded within them. As their names imply, the *mRadd-he* is like a wheel and the *mSamm-he* is like a city, and the rolling of the wheel freely along all possible paths through the alleys and streets of the city constitutes this limitless unfolding.

However, the strifes of life, which result from certain resistances to the desired quiet union, resistances internal to the seeds themselves as well as external impede this process and sometimes seem to block it completely. Therefore our prayer is to become quiet in front of these strifes, which causes them to dissolve. Then true experience unrolls endlessly, experience not of the superficial and accidental strife but of the *mSamm-he* itself, the essential struggle which is the unique partner of one's *mRadd-he*, the experiencing self.

Who Song Is

“Father, I want to ask you something. I want to know who Song is, and who is Drum.”

“Yes, son. You play the drum well now. When you play it makes people dance and sing. So what else do you want to know?”

“I want to know what Drum says, and where Song learned how to sing.”

“Son, you know that Drum and Song say things that are like good talking, such as the wise do.”

“Yes, father, I know how to drum the old sayings, proverbs like ‘A bed falling to pieces is sweeter than a new one.’”

“And you are always clever to find the right saying, and how to turn it to fit, when someone needs to hear something. So, what else do you need to know?”

“I need to know who first drummed these sayings.”

“You know that your great-great-grandfather on your mother’s side first drummed the saying about the bed, and you know the names of the people who first drummed almost all of the other sayings. So what is it you still have to find out?”

“But tell me, who told great-great-grandfather that saying? Was it Drum himself who told him?”

“No, you know that Drum never speaks for himself. He only says what people ask him to say.”

“Who then told my ancestor that saying, so that he could ask Drum to say it?”

“Son, there is a story . . .

“In old times, before the trees had birds in them, there were some

beings who had only one eye, and no ears. They looked like giant tadpoles, the size of a man, all green, and they stood up on their tails.”

“Yes, father, our people dance the masque of those strange beings at our big festival each summer.”

“Do you know what became of those beings, and how we know about them?”

“No, father, I do not know that story.”

“It was like this.

“There was once an old man who was very lonely. He had lost all his relatives. He walked around all the time looking for someone to talk to, but in every village people would say ‘No, he is not related, I have nothing to say to him.’ ”

“But father, why did he not take a drum and play, or hire some musicians, and then people would gather. When people have sung and danced together no one will refuse to talk.”

“Son, in those days, there were no drums. That is part of the story.”

“Go on, please, father.”

“So one day the old man came to the village of the tadpole beings. All day he tried to talk to them, but they had no ears, so they didn’t even hear him. When night approached he went sadly down to the river, a little way from the village, and made camp.

“That night, sleeping by the river, he had a dream. A great storm came up with thunder and lightning. The river rose and flooded his camp and even flooded all the way up to the tadpole beings’ village. The tadpole beings, finding themselves in their right element, began to laugh and play. They thanked the old man for bringing the river to them, and he wasn’t lonely any more.

“In the morning he woke up and made sacrifice to the river. he promised not to eat any of the river’s fish that day. He was hoping

that his dream would come true. But nothing happened.

“Each night he had the same dream and each morning he repeated the sacrifice. He became very hungry because there was not much to eat there except fish. One day, in desperation he took a stick and pounded on a big tree by the river to see if it had any bees in it. The tree happened to be hollow all the way through and it made a loud sound. The man was angry that there was no honey. He continued pounding the tree until the sound was just like thunder. Then, just as in his dream, a storm came up and the river rose, all the way up to the village of the tadpole beings.

“We still use the same drumming when we need it to rain. It changes people’s hearts from hunger and anger into a very deep feeling of hope.

“So that was the origin of drumming, and of magic.”

“Father, how did the drummers learn to make drum talk, and to drum wise sayings?”

“After the water went down, it turned out that the beings were not tadpoles after all. They had gotten very wet, but they dried up in the sun and shriveled down until they were only a few inches tall and weighed practically nothing. Their tails split down the middle and became two legs. They were so light they could dance around everywhere and even float through the air. When they learned to control their floating movement, what they were was birds! They were so happy they made all sorts of bright sounds.

“The man watched them and listened to them, and by repeating what he saw and heard he learned to dance and sing. He taught other people, and was never lonely again. By the way, it turned out that the birds had ears after all—the water washed out the mud that had plugged up their ear holes.

“So that is the true story of how drumming and dancing and singing were given to man, to bring people together, and create joy and companionship.”

“But father, you still haven’t told me where wisdom came from. How did people learn wise sayings?”

“Music and dance and magic came from people repeating things that happened in our world, which is God’s shrine; but people learned wisdom from their own mistakes. Every time somebody did something foolish, he would make a song or a drumming about it. The first saying was ‘Beat the tree that doesn’t give honey.’ ”

The Heart of the Sky

Baba, can you tell me the meaning of our rite? I put on the mask of Ergon and dance to the drums. Is it Ergon himself, or one of his genii? Anyway, he dances my body. What is the meaning of this? Why do we do this thing?

Son, tell me, how do you feel when this happens?

I feel a great joy. It is better than sex.

That is good. Many people feel only a little. And please answer another question: are you still there, or do you disappear when this happens?

I am still there. My body is being danced—it is as if I am watching the dance, from inside.

That is even better. Quite often the person who is being danced like that swoons. He may not even remember later. It is very important to remember.

Why? What is the purpose of this?

This is a deep secret. If I tell you, you must not tell anyone, until you have fulfilled certain obligations, which are difficult. Do you promise?

I promise.

Tell me one more thing: when he comes, where does Ergon come from? Is it from the sky, as our stories say?

No. I sense him coming from my own head—from just behind the right ear, but inside the skull.

And where does Ergon go?

He goes into my chest, just behind the heart. And from there he sends out rays that take over my limbs, and dance them better than

I could.

You have sensed correctly. Now tell me, who is Ergon, what do our stories say?

Baba, can you tell me the meaning of our rite? I put on the Mask of Ergon, and dance to the drums, and something enters me: is it



He is the Heart of the Sky. After Egu created the World, he was lonely. He created Ergon and gave him the task to create man, who would talk with Egu and be his junior companion.

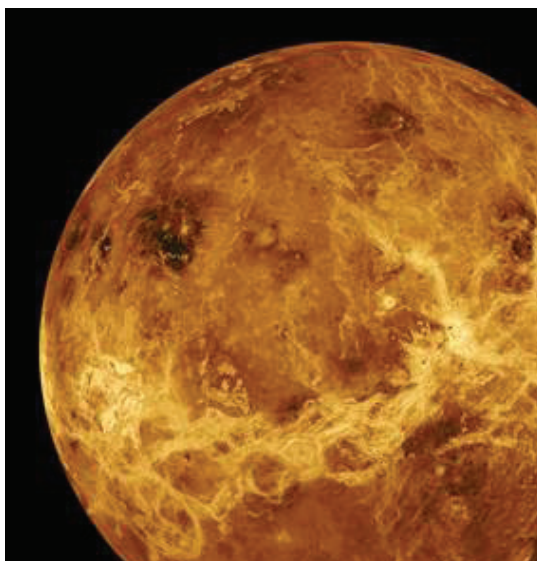
Have you had conversation with Egu?

No, but sometimes I hear a word or two when Ergon is dancing me. It is in a language I do not understand. A deep powerful syllable. I think it is a command.

You must learn this language. It is the language of the heart. When Ergon is in you, speak to him. Ask him to teach you. If you ask sincerely enough, he will not refuse.

What is the purpose of speaking with Egu?

I am not the one who can answer that. But the heart of man must be united with the Heart of the Sky.



Venus, the Heart of the Sky
[composite surface of the planet]

Lord Ergon, Heart of Sky, you have come down. We dance, you dancing me, my heart filled with overwhelming joy. Yet still I need to know, and I ask you: what is the meaning of this?

Younger brother, man, I do not care for what you call “meaning”—I only know the dance itself. What you ask is for a higher One than I to answer.

Is that Lord Egu, maker of the world, and of you? I have heard of him...and now I think I hear his voice. It sounds a word I do not know—it sounds like “*Þrrm*.” What does it mean?

It means “Be silent. Cease your questioning and only Be.”

And now he says “*Þiil*”—please tell me...

“Raise your inner eye, look higher than the Sky.” Can you fulfill these words?

These are hard commandments. But wait—a penetrating x-ray

beam comes down. I see my heart transparent, empty. What I felt so strongly is but a tawdry yellow glow that fades against this light.

Listen deeper—what word do you hear now?

Nothing—wait, just a whisper—“**srrsrrsrr**”—something like that.

It means—no, I cannot tell you. You must answer for yourself.

This seems a riddle—you say I am to just Be—but I also need to know the meaning.

Welcome, elder brother, to the puzzle that makes man Man. You are above me now, at least you reach in that direction. I am only single; you are double, because you need to Know as well as to Be. Now you must address your question to Egu.

+ + +

Egu, why do I have this question? Why do I exist? What is the answer?

GmmUii Ullm Hbbq Uii Ullm

What? No wait; perhaps I begin to understand you—“the question is from you, the answer must be from you.” How do I seek the answer?

[silence]

Do I create myself by wondering? Is that the end of the matter? If so, it is like a snake eating its own tail—but then, in the end there is nothing.

Srr Eshsh Viil

There is another, higher than you, Egu? Another, who is called “Esh”? Where does he exist?

Eshsh Viil Hrrm HrrmI

Esh is beyond existence and non-existence?

Tjju Eshsh

I exist in Esh? Then that unrolls the snake! The snake of questioning lies between me and Esh; the question does not consume itself. Is that the answer?

[silence]



Songs in the Sea



The light boat leapt like a wild animal over the foam-flecked waves. Already well out of sight of the mainland, it was only a few miles more to where the big salmon prowled. Red Bear could already feel the tug of their weight on his line, already taste the warm succulence of their flesh renewing his body, which would be aching and hungry after a long day on the open sea, already hear the murmuring of the women and smell their perfumes as they brushed close to him around the fire.

“Pull with your will!” commanded old Eagle’s Cry. Eagle’s Cry was master of boat today, a rare treat for Red Bear, for he had been master of boats since before any of the other men were born, and was counted the wisest man of the whole people, and the craftiest fisherman. “Pull with your whole body! Feel the weight of the sea in your back”

Red Bear loved this kind of command. He was proud of his strength, but because he was the youngest of the of the men, and also by far the biggest he was always put at the back of the boat. His great bulk, twice that of any other man, was useful in the back as ballast, as he knew, but there he was always last to be noticed by anybody. But being asked to row as strong as he could, he knew that with each of his mighty strokes, all the other men would feel the boat surge forward and wonder at how one man, himself, could give it such a push.

He worked the double paddle back and forth, each stroke dipping smartly in the jade water and coming up leaving a delicate little eddy, the signature of a well-pulled oar. As he gained energy from the common effort, he put more and more of his arms, back, and legs into each pull. The boat almost flew, its bow where Eagle's Cry presided lifting clear of the sea, so that only the rear where Red Bear worked sat full in the water.

Suddenly though, he felt the thin bark hull beneath his right foot give way. The strength he was putting into his legs had become too much for the light material to withstand. He felt the water rising about his ankles and a cold fear gripped him. The other men knew instantly what had happened. Three of them dropped oars and began to bail furiously with the bailing gourds, while by a time-honored understanding that did not need to be spoken, Red Bear himself and two others continued to row to maintain seaway.

Eagle's Cry spoke quietly—though he was at the other end of the boat Red Bear heard him clearly, and it seemed that the words were meant for him alone. "Try to stay calm inside." Strangely, his heart was, in fact, calm, though his mind was racing, and threatened to get the better of his heart. He was grateful for the words of the boatmaster, and tried to obey them.

The boatmaster steered the prow to the north, toward an area on the horizon where he knew there was a scattering of low uninhabited islands at a distance of a few miles. The boat was now riding low, its progress greatly slowed by the lesser number of men rowing and

by the great weight of water it carried. It would take several hours of back-breaking effort to reach the relative safety of land, and what would happen even then was far from certain. They could survive a few days from supplies on the boat, but could not count on finding anything on any of these islands, not even fuel for a signal fire. They would have to burn the boat itself, for otherwise it might be many days before search parties would discover them in that sector of the vast ocean.

Worse, the water seemed to be winning the battle against the frantic gourds. One more man dropped his oar and began to bail, as did Eagle's Cry himself. In spite of his great age and frailty, he seemed to move as much water as any of the young men. But it was still not enough. In desperation, Otter Man, who swam with power and skill, slipped over the side into the freezing sea and swam beneath the boat. Taking a great risk, he broke away a piece of torn bark to make the hole clean, then stuffed his leather tunic into it. This slowed the water enough that it now seemed possible to reach solid ground.

After what felt like an eternity of sweating and grunting, muscles cramped from exhaustion and cold, hands raw, the party rejoiced when they spotted sign of an island. Making for it, they approached the uninviting shore after another half hour's toil. Unfortunately the current was running stronger than even wise Eagle's Cry had calculated; it was apparent that the slow craft would be swept clear of the shore. Swimming would be faster, so at the boat-master's word, the men abandoned ship and swam for their lives, Otter Man towing Eagle's Cry with one of his strong arms.

On the island, the men sat together to recoup some of their life, and to ponder their situation. Eagle's Cry sat opposite Red Bear and looked steadily at him for a long time. Red Bear returned the gaze, calmed by the power in those eyes, but disturbed to notice that they were empty, bottomless wells, in which there was not only no blame, but it seemed that no human emotion could amount to anything in that look, perhaps not even life itself. That pitiless look was branded indelibly on Red Bear's soul. It was a great gift from the master, and

Red Bear knew that it would one day be a source of great power, years later when he himself would become a master of boats. If, that is, the company survived their present peril.

At length, the men got up, and without a word, began to comb the island. They were searching for any resources that might be useful, any trace of fresh water, any edible plant or animal, any fuel for a fire. By nightfall, the desperate nature of their plight was clear—there was little on the island. They could not live more than a few days, and rescue was unlikely.

The men huddled together for warmth. Sleep was out of the question, so they began to sing old songs, and new ones, that told stories of travelers, warriors, and men of the sea. The stories all were stories of death, but death with honor at having lived well, having borne steady witness to the powers of nature and of the great men of old, having made the gods proud that they were men such as could die well.

Towards morning the singing no longer had words, it was just a low humming. Each man was turned almost wholly within himself. Red Bear looked calmly upon the group through the new eyes he had received from Eagle's Cry. His vision seemed to expand and take in the whole ocean, to reach the shores of islands and continents that lay in every direction. He saw all the many different peoples going about their myriad enterprises, most of them unconscious of the grandeur that he was now touching. To know that was enough. He was ready to live or to die.

The Breeds of Dogs

Gurdjieff said that we have “dogs in our centers”. But what dogs? Has anyone ever pondered this koan? Among the many different kinds of dogs found in our centers we may, perhaps, recognize one which is ourself. The breeding of dogs is one of the highest occupations of man. It is similar to what Nietzsche spoke about, the necessary “breeding” of man in order for him to become Higher Man. The history of man and his dogs reveals this. Since paleolithic times dogs have been the companions of man and, if I am right, his mirror. It is well said, but only in English does it make a punning palindrome: “Man is God’s Dog.”

Here are the main breeds:

Top Dog: never at rest until it exerts its authority over others. Bred of fear, and breeds fear in others, if it can. But can be defeated by almost any other of the breeds if they fulfill their dog-being-duty.

Wolves: a kind of ur-dog. Ruled by primeval lusts. Capable of savagery that is astonishing only to those who do not know the Law of Nature. Sly, and careful not to put itself in danger, unless really hungry or otherwise necessary. Can bond with individuals and groups including those of other species, in which case it can exhibit nobility of spirit.

Big Dog: a lazy kind of dog, passive-aggressive some say, but powerful and not to be trifled with. Stands up to Top Dogs, and to Wolves. Capable of responsibility for sheep; and if you keep sheep, you would be well-advised to have a Big Dog to guard them. But has little interest in masters, only in sheep.

Hunting Dog: always active. Needs to be carefully trained by a master, for whom it will find and indicate presence of prey. Will resolutely go after prey when asked. Can exhibit amazing bravery, but a good master must not ask for this without due consideration,

because it can lead to death of dog.

Bad Dog: on hair trigger to be angry. Bred of loneliness and hurt. Bark is usually worse than bite, but can bite, so be careful. Attacks are often sham, miss target, perhaps intentionally. Will avoid stick, so just hold stick in front of dog if it attacks. More dangerous in packs because you would need a lot of sticks. Can be useful—good for guarding unattended properties.

Good Dog: the worst breed. Always fawns for approval and affection. Loyalty can quickly transfer to anyone who feeds and caresses it. Many if not most dogs these days belong to this breed, because modern life breeds it.

Mad Dog: unpredictable and dangerous. Avoid or kill if possible. Bite may infect with madness—the origin of the “werewolf” myth.

Police Dog: trained to attack on command. Usually gentle with children, but poor practices often breed animal that is unpredictable and dangerous.

Conscious Dog: more aware of surroundings than most people are. Impossible to defeat in a dog-fight because it doesn’t fight; if challenged it plays at fighting, and plays very well. Often bonds with cats. Like them, it is not very sensitive to feelings of humans or other dogs or other species, whom it considers itself superior to.

Poetry**Where once a man**

I got the call—"your father died, they bury him on Friday"

I think he thought I didn't like him. There were some reasons.

Once he put his hand on my girlfriend's thigh, said he knew she wanted "it".

She told me without rancor, forgiving an old man.

I forgave him too. I'm not sure he knew that.

And there were other things, some harder to forgive, that we won't speak of here.

It wasn't true—I loved him. First for all the things he taught me:

Little things like how to calculate the distance to the stars

And big things too.

I went of course. I booked a flight and car, drove two hundred miles,

Got there just in time. The little church.

The doleful undertaker. Fifty people who had known him.

The unctuous preacher said some words.

They handed me his ashes in a box.

I saw something that day I won't forget:

Among the people gathered there, and in myself,

A man-shaped hole

Where once a man had been.

Summer Night San Rémy

(haiku)

ca
co
pho
nous
ci
ca
das

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ly

fall
si
lent

—

rad
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dark
ness!

Artificial Light

A puzzling business, setting up this campsite
In the forests of myself,
A tent, a little fire for light.
By what right do I call this “my space”,
Call that “wilderness”?
Could I let die this artificial light
And live the darkness,
Only sense and feel these presences
Out in infinity.

Predator

“Who am” an unquiet predator
Who stalks the forests of the self
By moon and sun.
His prey is great fat images;
He spies one, runs it down,
Tears off chunks, swallows whole,

Then rests in brief satiety
Rolling, lazy, on the ground,
Taking on its smell and stain
To ease the next hunt.

Sometimes he stays his own sharp hunger
To assist a fellow hunter,
And once in a great while
Climbs a hilltop high above the treeline,
Perhaps with a companion,
Looks around.

There it all is: forest, desert, river, sky.
And far horizon: calling quietly,
Receding always if pursued,
Unknown, unknowable,
Forever.

The Twisting Mind

Grasp the twisting mind this once
Gently as you would a young snake
Innocent of touch
And hold it up to the Sun
That burns silent and alone
In the clear deep.

See how it wriggles out of its itching skin,
And the two of them lie there:
Snake glowingly renewed, sweet, still,
Nourishing its potency in the Solar warmth;

Skin old, dead, dry,
Mere empty cast of life,
Now capable only of reminding us
Of the difference between form
And what breathes inside form

Frequent Flyer

Got a frequent flyer coupon on the airline of love
You don't know where you're going, but you've got to make a move
The captain's in the cockpit and the hostess brings a drink
At seven miles a minute, there isn't time to think.

You know it's just a capsule, this trip through time and space
From thirty thousand feet above, the world's an empty place
You feel the woman touch you, and you need her, and you cry
You know she doesn't love you, and it makes you want to die.

But it doesn't stop you hoping as your fingers start to roam
And you wish you didn't have to have a round trip ticket home
The thunder in the engines makes her voice sound far away
You wish that you could talk to her but don't know what to say

The morning sun is rising in the window by your seat
You forget that time is rushing and that night will soon repeat
The mountains and the forests and the valleys start to glow
And the sun sends golden fire along the river down below

For a moment you can feel her take your hand and hold it strong
And the moment is suspended like a high note in a song
But the melody continues and you see the seat-belt light
And the captain's voice is hoping that you had a pleasant flight

You wish that you could stay there, though you know you'll fly again
And you know it doesn't help to wonder who or where or when
But the woman there beside you is the one you want to know
And she has not decided which way she wants to go

Painted Love

Painted love
 in many colors
Is her portrait
 on my wall.
Every day
 I gaze and wonder
If the painter
 knew that girl.

Did he see her
 in her glory
When the sun
 rose in her eyes?
Did he only
 know the story
Of her many
 stolen sighs?

Did his paints
 turn red with longing
For the beauty
 they portrayed?
Must have wanted
 her, but did he
Touch her, and
 was he afraid?

Painted love,
 my silent picture,
Tells no stories,
 tells no lies.
Leaves me here
 to weep, and wonder
If the painter
 also cries.

What Does the Elephant

What does the Elephant consider of the blind men
Feeling it so unsightfully?
Does it too wonder, or does it grasp what is going on?
Is it perhaps embarrassed at the strange procedure,
Being discussed, and being touched, yanked,
Smelled, groped, handled God knows where?
Why does it stand there patiently,
Enduring all that sightless feeling?

Would it be happier if it were seen?
What more could sighted men know, anyway?
No, that would still not end its massive loneliness,
Even if an opened eye, like Shiva's,
Burned away the phantoms of imagination.
What could being seen mean to the Elephant?

What does the Elephant remember from before Time,
Darker than any fate that men could bear,
Which if they guessed might send them screaming
Back into non-being for eternity?

As curious as cats they come;
Its secret safe it brooks approach;
What does it want of men, if anything?

Even endless Time could not foresee itself,
Always an unanticipated thing appears.
Is Man that thing? And does the Elephant
Now play Time's deputy, examiner?
Who then is feeling whom? This is the dance:
Feeler and felt exchanging innocence.
What does the Elephant, and what does Man?

New Byzantium

What is this village, built up not so long ago?
Whose walls, though crude, of mud and sticks,
Stand proud, as if they were the walls of high Byzantium,
Enclosing, like those older walls, great shining things
Of gold and porphyry. And Men whose meditations
Nearly touch the hem of God...but these are rare,
One hardly finds them, hidden in the crush
Of commerce, power, greed, false words.

It is the way of cities to grow great, and then corrupt,
And then the hordes will batter at their walls
And bring them down, never guessing in their war-lust
What holy greatness they destroy.
Is this new village fated to reprise that death?

Will there survive a love-song,
Telling us again how Man and God
Here consummated their affair?

Questions

What is it like to be a star?
And do they wonder what they are?
And do their planets all complain
Of atmospheres, and rocks, and rain?
And do they sometimes disagree
With movements in the galaxy?

Or do all things accept their place
But members of the human race?
And is this questioning just fuss
Or is it what makes men of us?

Now

“Now” is a crossroad where a narrow gate opens North
to an unmarked path.

We trudge back and forth along the main road.

Our path through the sand leaves ruts, which we call “Past” and “Future.”

Passing by the gate, we happen to glance through it.

We are frozen by the northern light.

Wind and sand begin to cover our tracks.

Re-Readings

Cicero says, in *On The Nature of the Gods* (*De Natura Deorum*, 45 BCE), that the word “religion” (Latin *religio*) derives not as usually thought from re-ligare, which would mean “to reconnect” (e.g. man with god) but from re-legere “to re-collect”, “to re-member”, “to re-read”. In order to have a true relationship with our sacred books, including the book of the world, and the book of oneself, one must re-read them.

Re-reading also implies re-creation. The following are my re-readings of a few traditional sources.

The Cuckoo of Awareness

Attributed to Vairocana

From a 10th Century Bön Dzogchen text discovered in the in the Dunhuang caves

The way things are is non-conceptual
but the way of action is conditioned by forms.
Having abandoned the disease of striving,
Since one already has it all,
through being spontaneously present
one leaves it as it is.



Yungdrung, the left-turning swastika of Tibetan Bön religion

Blekete Song

Possession-dance song

Ghanaian syncretistic cult Blekete

In God's shrine, this world
What everybody wants is a good life.
Why do people always make trouble?
God has given principles to live by,
But only you yourself can follow them.



Adinkra symbol Gye Nyame, “except for God”
“Nothing is real except for God”

Song

from *Cantares Mexicanos*, 16th century Aztec song collection

Song is a flower-place⁵² within my soul.
 The vapor-scent befuddles me.
 My heart grows sweetly drunk in the joy-place
 Before the Ever-Present⁵³, Ever-Near



Two Aztec singer-shamans, *Codex Borbonicus*, Paris

Beauty

from *Cantares Mexicanos*

Beauty-painted viper, stay, be still
 while I dream-imprint your subtle pattern.
 I shall weave it in a gift-cloth⁵⁴
 To entice a lover.

Her beauty shall exalt
 alone, of all that shines,
 You: ever-present serpent⁵⁵



Image: Gaboon Viper



Image: The Brazen Serpent,
 William Blake

54 “Gift” means “Poison” in German; hence, the viper’s venom, which in cloth-form subjugates the separate ego, as does love.

55 “Ever-Present” here becomes a double anagram: “Ever”=Reve (“Dream” in French); “Present”=Serpent.

Ayat an-Nur

Verse on Light, Koran 24:35

God is the Light of heaven and the earth.
The image of His Light a lamp within a niche.
The lamp is in a glass, the glass, as it were, a glittering star,
lit from a blessed olive tree,
neither of the East nor the West,
whose oil appears to shine,
though never touched by fire:
Light upon light,
God guides to His Light whom He chooses,
God shows forth images to mankind,
God is knowledge of all things.



Creation Hymn

Rg Veda 10.129

Ancient wise men sensed a doubled universe—
Existence here below, source up above.
This line drawn, questions then arose:
What *is* above, and what below?
How *does* potential put on being?

Who indeed can say?
The very gods are later than Creation,
And whether He whose eye's perspective
subtends All did make the world, or did not—
He alone might know the reason it was made;
or may not know.



