

## REVERSAL OF GENDER ROLES IN ANCIENT GREECE AND VENEZUELA

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The purpose of this paper is to list and compare instances of gender role-reversal, especially those in which men assume the role of women.

### *I. Ekdysia*

We start with the *ekdysia*, a festival which was celebrated in antiquity at Phaistos in the southern part of Crete. The legend that goes with it explains that a mother, who was afraid lest her husband would expose their new born girl, dressed the girl as a boy and named her Leukippus (white horse). But, since she could not hide the child's real sexual identity for long, she prayed to the goddess Leto Phytia (Phytia refers to plants) to turn the girl into a boy. Leto listened to her prayer and the girl did indeed turn into a boy. 'The people of Phaistos still remember this transformation and offer sacrifices to Phytia Leto who brought male genitals to the girl. The festival is called *ekdysia* (the shedding of clothes) because the girl shed her mantle (Antonius Liver., *Metam.* 17).

The legend was thus connected to a festival during which men and women probably were dressed in clothes of the opposite sex. Strabo (X, 482) testifies that group weddings of an initiatory character took place in connection with this festival in which the bride was dressed like a man and the groom like a woman.

Further information is given by Plutarch (*Mulierum Virtutes*, IV, 245f.) who informs us that the first act of the group wedding of initiation involved transvestitism. This act was also common in the *Hybristica* (the outrageous), a festival celebrated in Argos. In addition one might mention festivals in honour of Dionysus, such as the *Oschoforia* to which we shall return later (Phot.Bibl. 322, 13; Bekker Luc. 145, 15).

It is testified also in Cos that the groom dressed as a woman to receive his bride (Plutarch, *Quaestiones Graecae*. 58, 304 e). In Sparta

the brides were dressed like men when they slept with their husbands after the wedding (Plutarch, *Mulier. Virt.* IV., 245 e, Polyainus, VIII, 33). This latter Spartan custom was interpreted by S.Pomeroy as having to do with homosexuality in Sparta. She misunderstood the fact that such customs were religious in nature and their meaning is to be sought in the symbolism of ritual rather than psychology.

The above festivals, which have reversal as a main characteristic, had an initiatory character. Weddings too are initiations of sorts. Reversal is a way of affirming identity as has been shown by many scholars recently, notably by V. Turner.

Slightly different are the cases where man and woman are combined in one. Macrobius (*Saturnalia* III. 8) discusses a special worship of Aphrodite in Cyprus.

'There is in Cyprus a bearded statue of the goddess with female clothing but male attributes, so that it would seem that the deity is both male and female'.

## **II. Dionysus**

Dionysus has an aspect of androgyny. He appeared to his worshippers dressed as a woman wearing buskins, women's boots (*kothornoi*), a female saffron-coloured dress (*krokotos*) and a woman's head-dress (*mitra*). His epithet *vassareus* derives from the female dress *vassara* (Aeschylus, frgt. 59; Hesychius under *vassara*, Polyd. Onom. Z. 59). Aeschylus (Nauck 2 frgt. 61) asks the question 'Where does the womanish man come from?' and in Euripides' *Bacchae* (333), the god is an effeminate stranger. A lemma in Hesychius refers to 'Dionysus, the woman-like and effeminate' *'Dionys, ho gynaikias kai parathelys'*. Lucian was puzzled that Zeus had such an effeminate son (*Dialogues of the Gods*, 248, 18, 1). Eusebius (Evang. Protr. III, 10, 11) describes Dionysus as a 'woman-shaped god...' Nonnus (*Dionysiaca* XIV, 159-160) says that Dionysus 'would show himself like a young girl in saffron robes and take on the feigned shape of a woman'. Finally, according to the Christian Kosmas of Jerusalem (PG 38, 402 Migne), 'Dionysus was a male/female god'.

It could be that the leader of the maenadic groups was also effeminate or androgynous. Euripides refers to the leader of the *thiasos* as an incarnation of the god (*Bacchae*, 115). A later epithet of Dionysus, *kathegemon*, may have derived from the performance of the headman. It should be remembered that in the *Bacchae*, Dionysus dresses Pentheus like a woman so he can lead him to the maenadic revels.

An interesting parallel is offered by a Phrygian Christian heresy, the Cyntillians or Priscillians. Only women could become priests

whereas Christ assumed a feminine form and was dressed in female clothing.

Dionysus' androgyny could be interpreted as referring to fertility or a remnant of matriarchy. Recent studies, however, have pointed out that he incorporates antitheses in his cult. One of the characteristics of his worship is the carrying of a large phallus in procession. The 'phallic' element is also present in Dionysus' followers, satyrs and silenoi, as they appear in Archaic vases. As W. Burkert has pointed out, this is a feature of gods who exemplify *the reversal of normal order*. (see also A-B. Høiby in this volume).

### ***III. Ancient Oschophoria and Role Reversal***

Before we proceed, it is worth looking at one festival which Plutarch attributes to the worship of Dionysus. As we shall see this festival incorporates elements of role reversal and an initiatory character. Plutarch in his *Life of Theseus* says:

"It was Theseus who constituted also the Athenian festival of the *Oschophoria*. For it is said that he did not take away with him all the maidens on whom the lot fell at that time, but picked two young men of his acquaintance who had fresh and girlish faces, but eager and manly spirits and changed their outward appearance almost entirely by giving them warm baths and keeping them out of the sun, by arranging their hair and smoothing their skins and beautifying their complexion with unguents; he also taught them to imitate maidens as closely as possible in their speech, their dress and their gait and to leave no difference that could be observed and then enrolled them among the maidens... And when he came back, he himself and these two young men headed a procession, arrayed as those are now arrayed who carry the vine-branches. They carry these in honour of Dionysus and Ariadne because of their part in the story, or rather because they came back home at the time of vintage. And the women called *Deipnophoroi* or supper-carriers, take part in the procession and share in the sacrifice in imitation of the mothers of the young men and maidens on whom the lot fell, for these kept coming with bread and meat for their children." (23) Here the young men assume the guise of women, but having accomplished their task, can take part in the procession as men.

Role reversal can have another function. Men can pretend they are women and feign birth-pangs. Plutarch in his *Life of Theseus*, 20 writes that in Cyprus sacrifices were offered in commemoration of the pregnant Ariadne who was brought to Cyprus. She died before the child was born. "At the sacrifice in her honour one of the young men lies down and imitates the cries and gestures of women in travail." The phenomenon by which men pretend they are in labour, is called

couvade and has been discussed by M. Douglas. It has been observed in contemporary African cultures and Douglas suggests that couvade solidifies claims to paternity especially in cultures where the marriage ties may be weak.

#### ***IV. A Venezuelan Ritual***

Let us now turn to a contemporary festival performed by Indians in Limon near Maracay, Venezuela. The harmonization of older customs with Christianity is indeed amazing.

In older times the rites to be discussed below were performed under a tree or by a river at the time of the full moon; today they are performed in front of the image of Christ or the Virgin Mary. The atmosphere of the celebration is one of joyful noise.

On the 15th of December, between 9 pm and 3 am of the following morning, a spectacular dance takes place in front of the manger of baby Jesus. The revel rout, consisting of about one hundred men, performs the Shepherd's dance (*Los Pastores*). The dancers are dressed like women. They arrive in a triumphant procession. The head-dancer wears or holds huge horns (*cotsiro*). The rest of the revel, dressed like priests or wise men, follow him in slow paces, wearing ribbons which hang from their waists. Alternatively they wear long dresses or huge masks and feathers on their head. They also hold Indian banners, so huge that they almost hide them. In the past the banners must have been made of long branches of trees or flowering bushes in the shape of a double cross decorated with multi-coloured feathers. Today coloured paper strips are used instead, being called *gachizio* or *sinikos*.

A group of musicians hold rattles (*maraca*). The rest play local instruments, such as the tetrachord (*tsaraka*), the *kein* (made of thick bamboo, and the *wiro* (made of hard shells of tropical fruit or of reed. They play it by striking it with a spoon, a small key or a coin). They also play the *furko*, a kind of drum which makes a very loud noise; perhaps this is to send away bad spirits.

The first men hold baby dolls, symbols of Christ, and approach the baby Jesus with slow ritual paces in order to leave the dolls in front of him and make their vows. They ask different favours from Jesus, promising him that they may be dancing for one, five or twenty years, or one hour or the whole night. The duration depends on the promise they have given him. These men are the 'mothers', the 'nurses', the 'pilgrims'. They take the holy infant in their arms, look after him and worship him.

The head-man who had been performing the dance for 20 years, told me that the leaders never explained why men were dressed like women. The emotionalism of the celebration was such that one was

reminded of Bacchae running about with torches in nocturnal ceremonies. The Indian dancers started by stretching out their right leg and beating it vigorously on the earth. This may symbolize invocation of mother earth who offers plants, fruit and food. After that they turned left and beat the earth with their left leg, bending their knee. The turnings, the vigorous movements, the joyful rhythm, the music, the hymns to dawn, love and Christ were really fascinating. After the end of each song, the dances rested and drank ron or water. The dance started then again and the music became so intense, that the dancers reached a level of ecstasy not knowing what they were saying or doing. They could even become dangerous. But the head-man with the horns reestablished order and protected the spectators from dangerous dancers. The dancers pulled up and down the banners decorated with coloured strips.

The similarities between maenadism and the ritual described above are indeed striking. Common to both are the ecstatic dances and the feeling of debauchery. The branches may symbolize vegetation and the return to nature. The horns of the head-man embody the 'raw' power of the animal world and are also a reference to pastoralism.

### **V. Conclusion**

We have surveyed here a number of phenomena involving transvestitism and role inversion. We have seen that some rituals signify initiation, others reversal of normal order; others yet involve fertility and the return to nature. Role reversal and transvestitism are important since, by a change of clothing, one turns to the opposite sex and temporarily assumes the reverse identity. Reversal of identity and imitation of the powers of the opposite sex can have important healing effects (on both the social and individual level). Moreover, they reaffirm the social order.

Sober ethnologists, having got rid of drunkenness and ecstasy should come to the conclusion that certain habits are expressions of the human soul and existence.

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