Women's "Cocoon Work" in New Religious Movements: Sexual Experimentation and Feminine Rites of Passage*

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On the basis of research into alternative women's roles in eight new religious movements, this study addresses conflicting views concerning the relationship between gender role ambiguities and women's participation in the sexual innovations developing in NRMs, summed up as the "empowerment" versus the "neopatriarchy" school of thought. A close study of the literature and histories of these groups suggests that they are more varied, flexible, and experimental in their patterns of sexuality than previous studies would indicate; and that, for the majority of members, involvement is a transitory phenomenon, providing them with opportunities for participating in laboratories of sexual experimentation. Adopting a "gendered" approach to the issue of "cult conversion," this study argues that contemporary women find protective, supportive microsocieties in NRMs, which enable them to try out a spectrum of clearly defined roles that prepare them to choose a more personally gratifying adult mode when they eventually defect. By temporarily inhabiting the stylized feminine roles in NRMs and submitting to their leaders' erotic/ascetic ordeals, members appear to undergo a self-imposed psychological metamorphosis, or "cocoon work," which in many ways resembles the ritual process found in feminine rites of passage in traditional societies.

In contrast to the depth of interest shown by historians and anthropologists in women's participation in utopias (Foster 1981; Kern 1981; Moore 1977), ecstatic cults (Cohn 1970; Lewis 1971), and Christian heresies (Pagels 1988; Ruether 1983), the issue of women's experiences in contemporary nonconventional religions has not been adequately addressed. Fieldwork in the area of NRM sex roles is limited (Wagner 1982; Wallis 1982; Richardson, Stewart, and Simmonds 1979; Wessinger, forthcoming), and only a few "gendered" approaches to "cult conversion" processes (Grace 1985; Rochford 1985; Barker 1984) have been written. Thus, the appeal for women of communities practicing spiritually based forms of celibacy, polygamy, eugenics, or "free love" remains enigmatic.

Robbins (1988) identifies a rift between those scholars who stress the *empowerment* of women in unconventional spiritual groups (Babb 1986; Bednarowski 1980; Haywood 1983; Neitz 1988) and an opposing "camp" (Aidala 1985; Davidman 1991; Rose 1987) who portray NRMs as a *backlash* against the feminist movement and a retreat into conservative family patterns within enclaves of patriarchy. Jacobs's study of women's defection from NRMs (1984), for example, presents NRMs as magnifying the patriarchal patterns of authority found in mainstream religions. Since social control in charismatic communities is greater, Jacobs (1984:158) argues, "the overall effect is a system in which men are dominant, women are submissive and the exercise of male power leads to almost total subordination of the female devotees." Interestingly, scholars of nineteenth-century "new religions" tend to find their women "empowered," whereas studies of contemporary NRMs (with the notable

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exception of Wicca) often stress the theme of feminine degradation, a view reflected in literature of the anticult movement (Ritchie 1991) and in the press — as summed up by *The Guardian* (1991:33): "The degrading treatment of women in many religious cults today reads like a chapter from the dark ages. Yet 200 years ago, women were leaders of a number of sects, asserting feminine equality (and even superiority) within them. What went wrong?"

Perhaps the most objective and comprehensive analysis of the relationship between current gender ambiguities and youth's conversion to NRMs appears in Aidala's seminal study (1985). Aidala argues that communal NRMs are responding to the erosion of norms regulating gender roles occurring in the larger society. She demonstrates that members of religious communes (as opposed to secular ones) exhibit a low tolerance for the shifting interpretations of masculinity and femininity. She proposes an "elective affinity" between the clear-cut sex roles found in charismatic groups and the need perceived in contemporary youth to resolve gender-related ambiguities. She finds that, unlike the individualistic experimentation occurring in secular communes, where the rules governing sexual behavior are ill-defined, religiously based gender roles are rigid and absolute. While Aidala (1985:297) notes among her groups "a great diversity in sexual and gender role ideology," she emphasizes their universal patriarchal character. In her view, joining religious communes represents a *flight* from feminism, modernity, and the moral ambiguity that characterizes our pluralistic society. The static, rigid quality of new religious sex roles, therefore, she interprets as a *rejection of* or *reaction against* the more fluid and experimental approaches prevailing in the secular sphere.

In this study I propose a "gendered" specification and modification of Aidala's central argument: that communal NRMs provide ideological resolutions to moral ambiguity and gender confusion. First, evidence shows that new religious sex roles are considerably more diverse than Aidala acknowledges, challenging previous classifications as "patriarchal" or "feminist." Second, they are more *fluid* in their patterns of gender and authority than Aidala's more static portrait suggests — and, if observed over a period of time, exhibit flexibility and a commitment to experimentation. Third, given the high attrition rates found in NRMs, and striking affinities between the "liminal period" (Turner, 1968) and new religious sexual experiments, I argue that the "cult experience," for most female participants, can best be understood as fulfilling a similar function to the feminine rites of passage found in traditional societies.

This study will demonstrate the wide variety of feminine roles available in NRMs, and will analyze the various routes to resolving gender ambiguity outlined in these movements. Eight groups were selected for study, as examples of NRMs in which women's roles were radically alternative, highly developed, and mutually contrasting:

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)
The Unification Church (UC)
The Rajneesh Movement (currently known as Osho Friends International)
The Institute for the Harmonious Development of the Human Being (IDHHB)
The Raelian Movement International
The Northeast Kingdom Community Church (NEKC)
The Ansaaru Allah Community (AAC)
The Institute of Applied Metaphysics (IAM)

Information on their gender roles was gathered from a variety of sources, including NRM literature, videocassettes of leaders' discourses, field research, and over 150 interviews with members and ex-members.

THE DIVERSITY OF NEW RELIGIOUS WOMEN'S ROLES

Aidala (1985:297) insists that "in none of the religious communes did ideological formulation or practice pose a direct challenge to the traditional allocation of greater social and economic power to men. Many groups actively promoted traditional inequalities. Those that did not denied the reality of inequalities which allowed traditional patterns to continue." Many of the groups studied here challenge this statement. The Raelian Movement, for example, deliberately encourages homosexual and bisexual expression (Palmer 1992). Rajneesh and Brahmakumari leaders are overwhelmingly female (Babb 1986; Barker 1991; Gordon 1986). Leaders' speeches conveying notions of radical or conservative romantic feminism (Ruether 1983), denouncing men as world spoilers and exalting women as world saviors, appear in such NRM literature as *A New Vision of Woman's Liberation* (Rajneesh 1987), *Adi Dev the First Man* (Chander 1981), and *Sensual Meditation* (Vorilhon 1986).

The most striking feature of women's roles in new religious movements, besides their diversity, is their clarity and simplicity. This clarity seems to be achieved by emphasizing *one* role and de-emphasizing or rejecting others. Krishna-conscious women, for example, are defined as "mothers" by title and by occupation, even if unmarried or childless (Knott 1987; Rochford 1985). The sexually expressive Rajneeshee is a "lover" in relation to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (metaphorically speaking) and to the male disciples; but she was not permitted to give birth or raise her existing children during the communal phase, and the role of "wife" is still considered demeaning (Belfrage 1981; Milne 1986). Women in the Raelian Movement are defined as sensually aware, bisexual "playmates" and tend to reject marriage in favor of "free love," and avoid procreating in anticipation of being cloned by extraterrestrials (Vorilhon 1986; Palmer 1992).

Even many NRMs that appear to foster "traditional" roles deviate widely from the mainstream (and from each other) in their interpretations of woman's domestic role. Exemplary "wives" in the Institute of Applied Metaphysics are postmenopausal, childless "handmaidens" and work partners to their considerably younger "lords" (Morris 1986). "Wives" in the Ansaaru Allah Community are heavily veiled and come in sets of four, since the Nubian household should (ideally) feature a Domestic Wife, a Cultured Wife, an Educated Wife, and a Companion Wife (As Sayyid 1988). In their role of "breeder," AAC women are exhorted to usher in the 144,000 pure Nubian children to "rapture" their parents when the satanic reign of the "paleman" ends in the cataclysm of 2000 (As Sayyid 1987). In spite of this literary emphasis on the ideal Muslim family, real-life Ansaars live in same-sex dormitories, separated from their children, and are permitted to cohabit with their spouses once every three months in the "Green Room," in accordance with their founder's racialist eugenics theory (Philips 1988). Unificationist women have opted for a wider range of roles — but only one role at a time. They begin their careers in the movement as celibate "sisters," and then become "daughters" of Reverend Moon when he blesses them in marriage to one of their "brothers." These marriages remain unconsummated for three or more years, during which time the "wives" strive to mature into "The Ideal Woman" (Grace 1985).

Thus, a survey of a corner of the "spiritual supermarket" suggests that a contemporary North American woman who is seeking alternative spiritual, sexual, and social experiences is presented with a remarkable range of possibilities. She can be a celibate "sister," a devoted "wife," a domineering "lover," a veiled "Nubian Bride," an immortal "Yin-Yang Unit," a "breeder" of the perfect race, an ageless, celibate "daughter" with magical powers, a "quadrasexual playmate," or an asexual shaman.

New religious models of gender also vary widely. Aidala (1985:294) found three basic approaches to understanding gender relations: "biblically based understandings of patriarchy, bio-mystical complementarity and subjectivist denials of gender differences."

These three approaches apply to the eight groups explored here and correspond to Allen's typology (1987:21) of sex polarity/sex complementarity/sex unity, describing three philosophical notions of sex identity developed within Christendom. Some elaboration is required in order to increase the relevance of this model to eclectic and "oriental import" NRMs, as follows[1]:

Sex Complementarity groups endow each sex with unique spiritual qualities, and emphasize marriage as the union of spiritual opposites in order to form a whole androgyne. Gender and marriage continue in the afterlife, marriage to the dead is possible, and weddings and procreation assist in ushering in the Millennium. A dual or androgynous godhead overshadows these communities. The Unification Church, Northeast Kingdom, and Institute of Applied Metaphysics conform to this view.

Sex Polarity groups regard the sexes as spiritually different, and as useless or obstructive to the other's salvation. The notion of sex pollution is importantly present and the sexes are segregated so as to avoid weakening each other's spiritual resolve. Levels of salvation might be quite different for men and women since they are unequal. ISKCON and the Ansaars espouse this view, whereas the Rajneeshee and the Brahmakumaris might be described as "reverse sex polarity" groups, where women are vaunted as spiritually more powerful than men.

Sex Unity groups view the body and its gender as a superficial layer of false identity obscuring the immortal, asexual spirit. Groups espousing this view might adopt "unisex" clothing and cultivate androgynous social *personae,* or they might "play act" traditional sex roles while maintaining a psychological detachment from these roles. In shamanistic or gnostic groups there is often the notion that by transcending the limits of social/sexual identity, the adept can release the powerful spiritual potentialities. The IDHHB, Scientology, and the Raelians espouse this view.

While these models are not necessarily unique to NRMs, and feminist theorists like Mary Daly, Dana Densmore, and Valerie Solanas have articulated versions of androgyny and sex polarity that are no less radically alternative (Castro 1984), new religions appear to offer more scope for collective and individual experimentation in praxis. Women in secular society, whether they define themselves as lesbian feminists or as Real Women, must confront conflicting notions of gender in moving from the private through the different sectors of the public sphere. The secretary, for example, will expect sex unity in her paycheck, will "act out" sex polarity in the synagogue or the YMCA locker room — but might yearn for sex complementarity in the course of her Friday night dinner date. Elaborate "facework" is required in our pluralistic society as women move from one arena to the next (Goffman 1959; Westley 1983). Within intentional communities, however, *one* model of gender prevails. Dress codes, rituals, work roles, and authority patterns tend to reflect a single, clear-cut model of male-female relations.

Creation myths educate new religious women in the mysteries of sexuality and offer theodicies to explain the ongoing war between the sexes that is waging outside their utopias. These myths convey clear-cut models of gender — as, for example, when the 3,500-year-old warrior Ramtha (channelled by J. Z. Knight) relates the myth of how one god, Duvall-Debra, split into male and female and how the two became enemies "through jealousy, possessiveness and . . . superiority" (*Ramtha Intensive: Soulmates,* 1987). The notion of sex unity is dramatized in the *Creation Story Verbatim* (Gold 1973) when "god" recalls how he sent a spaceship to save human specimens when Atlantis was flooded, and

1. These categories also overlap with Rosemary Ruether's typology (1983:199) of eschatological, liberal, and romantic feminism.

how the ship's captain "goofed" by rescuing two males, so that one of them had to undergo a sex-change operation, and then even god couldn't tell which was which.

New feminine archetypes hold out keys to understanding — or at least testing — who woman is and what her potential might be. These narratives establish the guidelines for courtship rituals, marital relations, and sexual ethics in spiritual communities. Informants described the therapeutic and empowering effects of inhabiting these roles. One ex-Ansaar observed, "I felt superior wearing the veil, because it was not easy. . . . I had to put away western ideas of beauty and fashion and become a Muslim. . . . It made me feel godly. It made me feel like Eve when I learned that Eve dressed this way after the world got populated. . . . Also, Sarah, Abraham's wife — and all the other righteous women in the Bible." Unificationist women are encouraged to relate their own sad experiences of the "abuse of love" with Eve's tragic seduction at the hands of Satan. Participants in the 1983 "Conference on Eve," held at Barrytown, New York even described encountering Eve and conversing with her during their "travels in the spirit world."[2] Within these carefully supervised playing fields, women can explore the potential and limitations of new religious models of gender in their daily life.

THE EXPERIMENTAL QUALITY OF NRM PATTERNS OF GENDER

A striking feature of new religions, when observed over a period of time, is their flexibility in trying out different patterns of authority and gender. This experimentation occurs on two levels: the collective and the individual.

Collective Experiments

A close study of NRMs' short histories reveals a tendency to "flip-flop" in policies for awarding leadership posts determined by gender. Two outstanding examples of this pattern are the Institute of Applied Metaphysics (IAM) and the Rajneesh movement. In the early days of IAM (1963-1975) women were leaders, but after the "Yin-Yang units" were formed, husband and wife were defined as equal halves of a whole person, and took part in ritual and work life as a team. Women's authority began to plummet in 1983 after the founder Winifred Barton was deposed by her husband (Morris 1986). A similar mood of experimentation can be found throughout the history of the Rajneesh Movement. During the 1981-1985 communal phase in Rajneeshpuram, women were conspicuous in leadership positions. After the "Sheela scandal" in 1985, however, the group became disillusioned with the utopian notion that women were less aggressive than men, and the international communes began to appoint male leaders. This experiment was abandoned after the group settled back in Poona, and women took over the reins again.

Even "patriarchal" groups fostering nostalgic recreations of perfect families from a mythic golden age are wont to improvise. The acephalous Northeast Kingdom Community will occasionally modify its conservative gender roles, as when the women in Island Pond put aside their head coverings during working days, in response to a collective revelation received by the elders in Boston in April, 1991.[3] The AAC leader, As Sayyid as Imaam Isa, after instructing women since 1969 to wear a face veil, accept polygamy, and devote their energies to housework, suddenly announced in the January 1992 *Nubian Village Bulletin* his change of title to "The Lamb, Liberator of Women," and advised women to discard the

2. "Conference on Eve" materials from Unificationist women's conference at Barrytown seminary, April 3, 1983.

3. This innovation was explained during a visit to the Island Pond Community in April 1991.

veil, wear "pantoons," and embrace monogamy. Today women are permitted (in theory) to "peddle" crafts on public streets, drive cars, and preach in the mosque.

Exercises permitting members to "play-act" the opposite sex are found in several therapeutically oriented NRMs. The Raelians hold a transvestite banquet dance on the final night of the Sensual Meditation Camp, and, as one member put it, "We show the opposite sex what we don't like about the way they treat us!" The Rajneesh hold a "Sexual Fantasies" party at the end of their "Tantra" therapy groups in Poona, and one participant described how one man dressed as a prostitute, another dressed as Lolita, and one woman came as a male "flasher." The IDHHB practice "gender-erasing" in the "Daysnap" exercise, which requires participants to vocally assume the personalities of "Helpful Herbie," "Gross-out Gertrude," "Doubtful Danny," or "Condescending Connie" (Palmer 1976). Est trainees "make asses of themselves" in a role-playing exercise described by Rhinehart (1976:150-151):

> In two of the most difficult roles, women are asked to play the role of a loud, stupid, blustering drunk, and men are asked to play a "cute" ten-year-old girl reciting a silly flirtatious poem about herself: the women being asked to be aggressively masculine, the men pertly feminine.

Individual Experimentation

The experimentation in gender and sexual mores found in NRMs can also be observed taking place on the individual level. As Robbins and Bromley (1992:3) pointed out, new members who "adopt the convert role and collaborate in the process of self-reconstruction often conceive of themselves as engaged in experimentation." Several informants for this study described conversion careers in which they had moved through a series of spiritual movements, assuming serial feminine identities and experimenting with various forms of celibacy, polygamy, and/or pantagamy.

The interview data and sex ratio surveys challenge prevailing notions that "cultwomen" are the passive victims of the ineluctable forces of charisma, "brainwashing," or "patriarchal authority," who will submit to whatever sexual excesses emanate from the leader's dark libido. Our informants made it clear they chose *which* experiment to participate in, and for specific personal reasons. The interviews suggest that women are drawn to groups that offer them the roles they feel comfortable inhabiting, an escape route from the too-demanding roles in the modern family, or an initiation into a longed-for role that eluded them in secular life. A comparison of sex ratios indicates that some movements hold a stronger appeal for one sex than for the other. Men outnumber women two to one in the Unificationist Church (Barker 1984; Grace 1985), whereas women outnumber men by a considerable margin in the Brahmakumaris (Babb 1986), and by a slight margin in the Rajneesh Movement (Braun 1984; Gordon 1986; Milne 1986). Groups that espouse the "reverse sex polarity" view and promote feminine leadership appear to attract more women than men.

Contributing to the argument that women select NRMs that serve their particular needs is evidence that different age sets are represented in different movements, as are specific classes of women. The great majority of women attending Spiritualist seances are in late middle age or elderly (Haywood 1983), whereas the mean age of women in the Rajneesh Movement is between 31 and 35 (Braun,1984; Carter 1987). ISKCON, however, appeals to girls in their late teens and early twenties (Judah 1974). Studies of the Rajneesh have consistently shown that the disciples tend to be highly educated professionals from the middle to upper-middle class (Wallis 1982). Women in the AAC are recruited from the middle to lower-middle classes and are exclusively black (Philips 1988). Single mothers appear to find the Northeast Kingdom Community attractive, whereas many of the

Rajneesh and Raelian women interviewed had postponed or rejected childbearing in favor of a career, and had lived out of wedlock with a number of men before joining the movement.

New religious sexual experiments might be seen as a *series,* dedicated to solving specific sets of social problems confronted by contemporary women. NRM literature offers theodicies that account for the failure of marriage in the secular realm, and advertise spiritual solutions to problems of intimacy that resonate with different audiences. A Krishna devotee, for example, described her parents' brutality throughout her childhood, and claimed that the male authority in ISKCON offered women a benign "protection," because it was based on a "spiritual line of discipline succession." A *chela* of Elizabeth Clare Prophet described how she had suffered during divorce, and how "Guru Ma made me understand that my former marriage was only a *karmic* relationship — something we had to work out from our previous lives." Having recently married a celibate "soulmate" in the Church Universal and Triumphant, she happily anticipated her eventual reunion with her "twin flame" into an androgynous, enlightened being. A Rajneesh "lover" recounted her pain in losing her two-year-old daughter to leukemia, and her relief in joining the Rajneesh commune, where motherhood was not an option, and where she could "surrender to Bhagwan" and assuage her grief through short-term, pluralistic love affairs with the "beautiful, soft swamis."

THE "CULT EXPERIENCE" AND CONTEMPORARY RITES OF PASSAGE

Aidala's study does not address the issue of defection. While my findings corroborate her observations concerning the appeal of the ideological certainty of new religious gender roles to youth, it appears significant that between 80 and 90% of members participate in these alternative patterns of sexuality for one, two, or even three years — and then leave. Sociologists consistently have maintained that NRMs exhibit high rates of voluntary defection and that the average length of membership is less than two years (Barker 1984; Judah 1974; Ofshe 1976; Skonovd 1983; Wright 1988). Bird and Reimer (1982) found that in the Unification Church at least 80% of members defected within two years. In ISKCON less than 600 disciples out of the original 10,000 initiated under Swami Prabhupada have remained in the movement.[4] The Rajneesh Foundation International claimed 250,000 members in 1985, but Belfrage (1981) described a common pattern of defection by Poona visitors, following their impulsive decision to "take sannyas" (initiation). Of the Ansaar's leader, Philips (1988:37) noted, "every two or three years he has a major turnover of followers."

"The temporality of membership should alter dramatically the way in which unconventional religious movements are perceived," noted Wright (1988:163). The high attrition rate suggests that joining spiritual families rarely turns out to be a satisfactory solution to the ambiguity surrounding gender issues, but rather that NRMs in general (and their sexual innovations in particular) provide laboratories for individual and collective social experimentation. This interpretation, however, cannot be applied to lifelong participants who commit themselves to furthering the group's collective goals. When Unificationist couples remain together to raise their "perfect children," and aging Brahmakumari leaders maintain their vows of celibacy as they instruct future generations in the *gyan,* these members have evidently rejected the experimental mode to forge a new culture.

The theory that NRMs provide experiences analogous to those found in traditional rites of passage has been convincingly argued by a number of scholars. As Melton and Moore

4. This estimate was communicated by a former temple president in Canada, who had been initiated by Prabhupada in 1968.

(1982:46) wrote, "the phenomenon of the 'cult experience' . . . must be seen within the context of states of transition — particularly the transition from adolescence to young adulthood." Turner (1968) pointed to the hippie movement, and Levine (1984) to "radical groups" as fulfilling a function similar to traditional rites of passage. Prince (1974) pursued a similar line of argument, but adopted the metaphor of "cocoon work," suggesting a process of psychological healing and maturation.

These authors point to a *lacuna* in our society, which has set individuals adrift as the role of public ritual has declined in the wake of secularization. "Instead of having one's change in situation acknowledged clearly and publicly with social support and with knowledgeable ritual elders to usher one through the limbo of the transition state," Melton and Moore (1982:50) noted, "in modern culture one is all too often left to one's own devices, having to seek out social support and 'ritual elders' wherever they may be found." Rites of passage are an urgent imperative in our pluralistic society, they insist, if only because the coming of age in America involves confronting so many complex and depressingly insoluble problems. One of the major dilemmas, they agree, is that of choosing one's sexual orientation and code of sexual ethics. Prince (1974:271) asked, "What is it to be a man, or a woman, a father, or a mother? Educated side by side and equipped for identical roles in the same universities, how can male and female find differences and sexual identity?" He described the pessimism of contemporary youth at the prospect of adopting their parents' way of life, which they seem to feel is "a blueprint for disaster."

Aidala (1985:289) accounts for this attitude as follows: "As horizons expand beyond the family unit, traditional gender roles into which they have been socialized...fail to resonate with emerging social-cultural realities." It seems fair to assert that woman's coming of age today is even more problematic than man's, requiring not only the initiation into women's mysteries, but also into the public realm of professional life — until recently an almost exclusively male domain. Toffler (1974) spoke of "overchoice," and Glendon (1985) deplored women's "role overload" in the "New Family." For women facing pluralistic and open sets of possibilities, their gender identities must be "accomplished" (McGuire 1992) and sexual relationships "negotiated" (Rose 1987).

It might be argued that new religious founders play a role comparable to traditional societies' "ritual elders" in youth's search for authority — for some authentic voice to outline the true shape of their sexuality which reflects the divine cosmos. The certainty of charismatic *gurus* on matters of sexual morality contrasts sharply with the rather "wishy-washy" stances of mere priestly authorities (Bibby 1987:164), rendering them attractive to disoriented youth. While Turner (1968) and Foster (1981) insisted that the distinctive features of the liminal period of individual rites of passage can also be seen in larger, more complex social transitions, it is, however, important to distinguish between the two contexts. In contrast to the approved shamans or priestly authorities, the well-established social statuses, and the predictable ceremonies of long traditions, Foster (1981:9) observed,

> the prophet-founders of millennial movements face a more difficult task. They must begin to create a new way of life and status relationships at the very same time that they are trying to initiate individuals into those not yet established roles. In short, the desired end point is often unclear.

None of these theorists has addressed the issue of whether these ritual processes are different for men than they are for women — an oversight that apparently also exists in anthropological literature, where "discussions of female initiation ceremonies are fewer by far [than of male] and often their function is clear: a severe suppression of female sexuality and symbolic expression of female inferiority" (Myerkoff 1982:123). An exception is found in Lincoln (1991:101), who argued that Van Gennep's *rite de passage* model is based on a study of male initiations, and proposes a trope of insect metamorphosis as more descriptive of

women's initiations. Lincoln (1981) suggested that female rites of passage follow a tripartite structure of enclosure, magnification, and emergence, and that these dramas celebrate woman's new reproductive function and invest sacred power in her body, thus ensuring the future of her society. Women's roles in NRMs, which are usually far more stylized and confining than the roles of men (Aidala 1985:311), might be analyzed within this framework. For the collective, woman's body is often a symbol of the commune, the maternal womb from whence the "New Man" will emerge. The Lamb eloquently expresses this notion:

> We are the caterpillar that crawled around on the ground alongside the snake in America. . . . We metamorphosed step by step into a perfect being. We wore all kinds of African attire . . . like bones in our ears. . . .The destination of the caterpillar was he would be painted by the hand of the Artist of the Universe. . . . So we walked around cloaked in our cocoon (the veil, Jallaabiyah) awaiting the great day when we would unfold the cocoon and come forth in our beauty as a nation. (*Nubian Village Bulletin,* 1992, Ed.1:15)

On the individual level, women experience the "enclosure" of a stiff, cocoon-like group identity, and give birth to a new feminine identity — which is frequently better suited to living in the larger society. Studying the progress of Ansaar apostates, one might argue that they retreat behind the veil so as to undergo a period of racial deconditioning and psychological metamorphosis, until they are ready to expand beyond the boundaries of the sect; and they emerge perhaps better equipped to cope with the problems of being an African-American woman in a white society.

Sexual Innovations and Liminality

Some of the more singular features of NRM sex roles — their ideological rigidity, their surrealism or postmodernist qualities — can be better understood within the framework of Turner's thoughts on liminality. Turner (1968) outlined Van Gennep's three stages, and expands upon the second. The initial "separation" stage involves a symbolic death of the novice to his or her former sociocultural state, and the third stage of "reaggregation" involves rejoining the community. The second "liminal" period is found to be the most central to the ritual process. Described as a "social limbo" of ritual time and space, the liminal period has three major components: the communication of *sacra,* the encouragement of *ludic recombination,* and the fostering of *communitas.*

The communication of *sacra* can be observed in the instruction female novices receive in new religious narratives, creation myths, and iconography of female saints or deities. Besides these exhibitions, there are ritual actions, stylized postures and greetings, and community dances that reflect sacred models of sex identity.

Some of the more outrageous sexual innovations found in these groups begin to "make sense" if considered as *ludic recombination.* NRM courting rituals — the Rajneesh "Tantric" exercises, the Raelian transvestite balls, the IDHHB "Objective Sex" workshops, the "Moonie" matchings and mass marriages — might strike the outsider as extreme versions — even parodies — of "mainstream" American courting rituals, and many of them imply harsh critiques of the poorly organized and minimally supervised "dating game" practiced in secular society. These playful recombinations of American cultural traits resemble the "unusual, even bizarre and monstrous configurations . . . masks, images, contraptions, costumes" found in traditional rites of passage.

The clear-cut, spiritually based gender roles outlined in new religious literature invite participation in *communitas,* the "direct, spontaneous and egalitarian mode of social relationship, as against hierarchical relationships among occupants of structural status-roles" (Turner and Turner 1982:202). A recurring theme in interviews was woman's hope of rebuilding better relationships with men, based on the mutual recognition of each other's

essential spiritual status — which outweighed the sexual element. One Krishna-conscious "widow" noted, "When I talk to my godbrothers and godsisters, there's a special understanding. We all know we are spirit-souls and have lived on this earth in many different bodies for hundreds of thousands of years. We know our godbrothers respect us and would never treat us as instruments of sense gratification." A Rajneesh "supermom" explained the "heart connection" she felt with the male sannyasins in a commune, which enabled her to navigate the emotional pitfalls of a "free love" lifestyle:

> The swamis here are more available than most men. You can confront them, pour your guts out and they don't just walk away. That's because they're coming from the heart space, they have a commitment to the spiritual search, so they are more vulnerable...and not afraid to show their emotional side.

What these women appear to be describing is the experience of *communitas,* a generic bond outside the limits of social structure; a transient condition that liberates them from conformity to general norms, and opens a space for experimentation.

I would argue that the deceptively conservative roles of "wife" or "mother" present opportunities for a process of self-reconstruction that is no less radical than that observed in "feminist" groups; that some of these "traditional" roles, on closer examination, appear no less deviant than those found in "free love" NRMs; and that their stiff, stylized quality suggests that the women who inhabit them are not embracing a permanent life-style, but rather trying on a modern version of the ritual mask. "Wives" in the Ansaars, ISKCON, Unification Church, and CUT might dress up and play the role with gusto, but in most cases are not actually permitted to live with, sleep with, clean up after, or cook for their "husbands."

Whether the group espouses sex unity, complementarity, or polarity, a common thread running through their rhetoric is the notion of the androgyne. Women and men, whether they practice monogamy, celibacy, or "free love," set aside their individuality and strive to build a collective identity, to experience "communion" (Kanter 1972) with the opposite sex, and to merge into an undifferentiated whole. Rejecting hierarchical relationships and social status, initiates embrace the symbolism of totality, the presexuality of childhood innocence or the perfection of androgyny. New religions function as protective microsocieties where women can recapture a sense of innocence, and slowly recapitulate the stages of their sexual/social development in a new cultural setting. These "traditional" women, therefore, also seek "empowerment," albeit of another kind. As Gross observed (1987), societies that segregate the sexes through gender-based work roles and dress codes seem to be particularly successful in conjuring up an aura of mystery, charm, and taboo around the opposite sex. For this reason, the phenomenon of modern women choosing to inhabit the stylized roles in NRMs might be better understood *not* as a rejection of pluralism and contemporary experimentation (Aidala 1985), nor as a lifelong choice to opt for traditional family values in the face of gender uncertainty in the larger society (Davidman 1991), but rather as the ancient and familiar search for the powerful religious and social epiphanies available within the ritual passage.

CONCLUSION

This study has endeavored to prove that one of the significant cultural contributions of NRMs is their provision of a modern equivalent to the feminine rites of passage found in traditional societies, which allow women to engage in an intensive process of self-reconstruction. While utopian sexual innovations have usually been interpreted as collective rites of passage (Foster 1981), or as "commitment mechanisms" (Kanter 1972) designed to bind members to the whole community to become the hierophants or parents of the next

generation, there is evidence to show that the majority of members eventually reject the authority of their ad hoc "ritual elders" and instead use these rites of passage for individual ends. The significance of our apostates' erotic/ascetic ordeals, whether in retrospect they found them to be repressive or empowering, resides in their ritual aspects. Thus, while NRMs are obviously not indistinguishable from traditional rites of passage, but rather might be seen as near substitutes, the experiences of their women — while perhaps not authentically "liminal" — at least are "liminoid."

The data suggest that the innovations in sex roles and sexual mores presently developing in NRMs, far from representing a conservative reaction against "mainstream" experimentation and feminism, might more accurately be characterized as offering even *more* extreme, intensified, and diverse versions of the ongoing experimentation already occurring outside these utopias. The highly organized and strictly supervised group experiments occurring in NRMs appeal to prospective members as safe havens in which they might engage in more radical forms of experimentation than are possible in the secular sphere. Our informants appeared to be reacting not so much to gender ambiguity per se (Aidala 1985:287), but rather to the disorganized and haphazard ways in which "sexual experiments" were being conducted in the larger society.

While inhabiting these new, postmodernist Eves, Sitas, and Fatimahs, if only for a few months or years, these women apostates had found an arena for the symbolic and ritual expression of their own half-formulated and conflicting notions of sexuality, and its place in the divine cosmos. For the researcher, investigating these alternative and sacred patterns of sexuality tends to confirm Durkheim's theory on religion's representational and interpretive function (Durkheim 1912). By replicating, resolving, and even parodying the pluralistic approaches towards sexuality prevailing in our transitional age, new religious Eves and Adams hold up fragments of a mirror, inviting society to see itself and to become self-conscious.

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