Chapter X

The power of gods, the laughter of men
A theoretical divertissement on a Hawaiian fact
(1981)

Translated from the French by Jane Fair Bestor

Dixi enim dudum, materiam aliam esse ioci, aliam severitatis; gravium autem et iocorum unam esse rationem.

[For as I said earlier, the subject matter of jokes and of serious speech differs, yet the methods of seriousness and of joking are the same.]

Cicero, De Oratore II, LXVI, 262

Ne s’ensuit-il pas, Monsieur, d’une façon assez géométrique, que l’Ame juge le plus beau, ce dont elle peut se faire une idée dans le plus petit espace de temps?

[Does it not follow, sir, in a rather geometric way, that the soul deems most beautiful that of which it can form an idea in the shortest space of time?]

M. F. Hemsterhuis, “Lettre sur la sculpture” (1792)

The purpose of this article is to explain a fact of Hawaiian ethnography by identifying the general mechanism that underlies it. This fact is the following: the principal processes at work in sacrificial rites have two opposing applications, one serious, the other comic.

Translator’s note: In the case of quotations cited to a non-English edition, the English translation is my own. When a translated quotation is cited to an English edition, I have used that translation or, in the case of Freud, have retained Valeri’s own quotations from the English edition cited in his original text. Warm thanks to Rupert Stasch for his thoughtful suggestions and help with sources.
The ritual application
These processes all derive from a basic principle: for a sacrificial rite to be efficacious, at a certain moment and at a certain level it must unify things that are distinct in ordinary experience and discursive thought.

This principle applies to three orders of phenomena: (1) to relations between symbolic objects; (2) to relations between these symbolic objects and the things they symbolize; (3) to the relation between an individual and the class, species, or type to which it belongs.

These applications correspond to three basic processes of Hawaiian ritual sacrifice: (1) symbolic objects belonging to the same set are mutually substitutable. From the ritual point of view they thus have the same value; (2) every object that functions as a symbol is considered identical to the thing it symbolizes and can take its place; (3) the individual is identified with the group or class to which it belongs. Consequently, in the ritual context an individual can function either as an equivalent of the class as such, or as the equivalent of all the individuals included in its class.

The efficacy of these processes is guaranteed by the presence of the gods, who personify them and make them possible. All ritual thus implies the activation of the gods. Here I can only present a brief illustration of these three processes. For further details and a complete demonstration, I refer the reader to my book on Hawaiian religion (Valeri 1985a).

- According to the Hawaiians, certain species or other entities that function as symbols in the course of a rite are mutually substitutable (process 1). They thus constitute a set of permutations. Each of these sets is under the aegis of a god whose properties evoke those of the species. The species in question are considered to be his *kino*, or “bodies”: the god is thus the reification of the relationships of transformation that link these “bodies” and of their equivalence in certain contexts. For example, the god Kane encompasses a vast grouping of species that are linked by different relationships of analogy or contiguity, by the similarity of their names, etc. (see Handy 1968: 45). But these symbolic relationships, which are rooted in everyday experience, become relation-}

1. A. M. Hocart (1970: 45, 69, etc.) has popularized this theory, which he took over, in fact, from his Polynesian informants.
ships of identity in ritual: an individual of one species can take the place of an individual of another species, substitute for it. In a sacrifice, for example, the species pig can be replaced by vegetable species or fish of lesser value, which are appropriately called *pua’a lau*, “pig leaves,” or *pua’a kai*, “pigs of the sea.”

- These “horizontal” substitutions are themselves subordinated in sacrificial rites to “vertical” substitutions between concrete symbols (species, images, etc.) and that which they symbolize (process 2). Three of these symbolized entities have a fundamental importance: (a) the sacrifier, (b) the god, and (c) the final state sought by the sacrifier.

  (a) The idea that the sacrificial victim, and, more generally, the offering, is a substitute for the sacrifier is well known to be widespread around the world. Hawaii is no exception, for the principal elements of sacrifice have a close symbolic and emotional relationship with the sacrifier. However, in order for a sacrifice to be efficacious, the symbolic relationship that exists prior to the rite must become a real identity during it. In the eyes of the gods, the victim substitutes for the sacrifier because it really becomes the sacrifier.

  (b) Certain elements, at least, of the offering also symbolize the god, since they are chosen from among the species that are supposed to be his “bodies” (Emerson 1965: 19, 20). Here again, however, the symbolic relation is transformed into a real identity. This happens in two respects. On the one hand, the presence of a “body” of the god guarantees the real presence of the god during the rite; on the other hand, the sacrifice ends with a meal in which the sacrifier and his associates eat part of the offering. Now the purpose of this meal is to enable the sacrifier to absorb the divine *mana* (cf. Valeri 1985a); the species eaten must therefore be a real substitute for the god, not a mere symbol.

  What holds for the species that represent the god holds a fortiori for his image: in the course of the rite it becomes an *akua maoli*, a “true god” (Malo 1951: 171), because it incorporates the god.

  (c) The species that constitute the offering also symbolize the state in which the sacrifier hopes to find himself at the end of the sacrifice: health, prosperity, good luck, integrity, etc. In the course of the sacrifice the species must really come to embody these
states and must thus assume a status different from that of a symbol in Hawaiian eyes.

- The third process has many applications. For example, it justifies the efficacy of first-fruits sacrifices, in which the individual or the individual fruits function as the equivalent of the whole to which they belong: the entirety of a fishing catch or harvest, the entirety of a species, etc.

Another application concerns the relationship between the sacrifier and the god. In effect, the sacrifier can be considered as an individual for whom the god represents the class. More precisely, the gods personify the different norms and models to which the actions of the sacrificers must conform in order to be acceptable or efficacious. The basic operation of the majority of sacrifices thus consists in making the individual (the sacrifier) merge with the model (the god), then in reproducing their separation, without which the human individual could not continue to exist. To the extent that the sacrifier has been transformed into the example of a type, into the copy of a model, he can be reintegrated into empirical reality.

In sum, in the course of the rite two separate entities, the individual and his class, the action and its norm merge; these terms are then separated again, but the first term of each pair has been transformed. This basic process encompasses and justifies all the others, in particular the first two processes I considered above.

To conclude this section, let us consider the unfolding of a sacrificial rite in its general outlines. At first the offering has only a symbolic relationship with the sacrifier and the god; it evokes both of them and their relationship. Then, at the culminating moment of the sacrifice, it becomes “really” identical with both the sacrifier and the god: this is the point at which they coincide. Finally, a new separation is produced from this identity: one part of the offering (that is, of the transcendental identity of the god and sacrifier) remains incorporated in the god, while another part is incorporated by the empirical sacrifier, who thereby becomes the copy of his model, its empirical translation.

The efficacy of sacrifice thus presupposes the coexistence of two opposed points of view: certain things are distinguished in the human order but are unified in the divine order, as this is manifested in ritual. Thought departs from distinction, at the human pole, and returns
thereafter having passed through the pole of indistinction, the divine pole of ritual. It is the latter that has the power to produce transformations, but these transformations are only efficacious by reference to the first pole. The ideological dominance of the divine order in sacrifice thus manifests the preeminence of the instance of transformation; but this reveals the preeminence of the human order, which alone justifies it. Thus in ritual the ideological subordination of the distinct to the indistinct, of the human to the divine, masks an inverse relationship of subordination. It is this hidden relation that certain myths bring out.

The comic application
Let us begin with a myth that illustrates perfectly the comic transposition of the processes put to work in sacrificial rites.

M1
Kauakahi is an ancient king of Kaua‘i who lives on a mountain. One day he descends to the coast and sees a sea goddess (Ulipo‘aiokamoku) sitting on a rock near the shore and combing her hair. He falls so in love that, on returning to his house, he sculpts an image of the goddess in stone that resembles her perfectly. He returns to the coast and places the image on the rock. Hiding behind it, he mimes all the gestures of the goddess so well that she thinks her own image is real and approaches it. The king takes advantage of this to make ardent love to her. Hence the goddess agrees to become his wife and follow him to the mountain. No sooner have they arrived at Kauakahi’s house than he disappears and transforms himself into an image (this time of himself). Since there are many identical images in the house, Ulipo‘aiokamoku is unable to recognize her husband. But an ancestress of his tells the goddess to choose the image that she prefers and embrace it. No sooner does she embrace the image of her choice than it is transformed into a man: he is her husband. A god with whom Kauakahi maintains friendly relations warns him that he risks

2. The place where he lives is called Pihanakalani, which Pukui and Elbert (1971: 301) translate as “gathering place [of] high supernatural beings.” It seems to me more reasonable to translate it as “meeting place of the king [ka lani].” Kauakahi matches the mythological stereotype of men of royal rank; for example, he is carried by birds that live in his house.

3. Her name signifies: “The blue of the deep sea, which is the girdle of the island.”
risks being carried away to the bottom of the sea by the goddess. To avoid this fate, the god counsels Kauakahi to carry his own image always with him. Accordingly, when the couple descends to the coast and Ulipō'aiokamoku tries to drag her husband under the water, Kauakahi is able to save himself from his wife’s fatal embrace by placing his image in her arms (Emerson, in Malo 1951: 86–87).

We may begin by noting that the structure of this narrative exactly transposes the structure of sacrificial action:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sacrifice</th>
<th>M1</th>
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<tr>
<td>- One mimes the god by using his image and his natural “bodies.”</td>
<td>- Kauakahi mimes the goddess by using her image and gestures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The god is present in these symbols; he merges with them.</td>
<td>- The goddess is attracted by her image, which thus assures her presence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The sacrifier unites with the god.</td>
<td>- Kauakahi unites with the goddess by marrying her.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- If the sacrifier were joined directly with the divine sphere he would die; the connection must therefore be made through a substitute (the victim as “image” of the sacrifier).</td>
<td>- If Kauakahi were integrated into the divine sphere (inhabited by the goddess) he would die; to avoid death he must yield up his own image, which functions as his substitute, to her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The sacrifier lives because he is separated once again from the god.</td>
<td>- Kauakahi lives because he is separated once again from the goddess.</td>
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The narrative derives a comic effect from properties of the divine that are taken seriously in sacrificial rites. The chief property that is transformed in this manner is the lack of differentiation of symbol and thing symbolized: the goddess constantly confuses images with the things they represent. Thus she allows her person to merge with her own image and the image of Kauakahi with Kauakahi himself. We see here two equivalents of what happens in sacrifice, since the latter both enables a god to be drawn into his image and the sacrifier to be substituted by a victim that is his “image.” In the rite, this last substitution functions in two opposite senses: the sacrifier becomes his symbol and the symbol becomes the sacrifier. Similarly, in the myth the goddess’ first embrace transforms the image of Kauakahi into Kauakahi himself; the second embrace is associated with the inverse transformation. In the myth, just as in the rite, the reversible character of this
transformation—symptom of the perfect identity that exists between symbol and thing symbolized—permits a human to enter into relations with the god and then to separate, in order to avoid the fatal consequences of permanent union with divinity.

The transformation of Kauakahi into an image is presented in a context that evokes other ritual processes. Indeed, the image of Kauakahi is indistinguishable from other images, just as in a sacrifice one symbol of the sacrifier can substitute perfectly for another symbol. Again, the fact that all his images resemble each other seems to indicate that in relation to the divine, Kauakahi loses all individuality; he is indistinguishable from his type. Furthermore, images normally represent gods and not humans; consequently, when Kauakahi is transformed into an image, he is assimilated to a god. Now, we have seen that in the rite the sacrifier undergoes an analogous destiny when he is merged with his type.

Let us now consider another myth that is very similar to the one just summarized but that seems to begin where the other ends, in other words, with the marriage between a goddess and an image that she takes to be her real husband.

M2
This myth also concerns the relationship between a sea goddess (Lalohana) and a human king (Konikonia). The king’s fishermen report a strange event: they threw out their lines on a coral reef and when they drew them back, the hooks were no longer attached. Kū‘ula, who is the brother of Lalohana and who lives incognito at court, explains the mystery: the coral reef is inhabited by gods; among them is his sister, who has cut the hooks. Konikonia hence demands Kū‘ula’s sister in marriage. Kū‘ula replies that she is in love with her husband, who turns out to be a sculptured image (kāne ki‘i, “man-image”). However, this strange husband is absent. Thus it is possible to try to entrap the goddess. Here’s how. First Konikonia must put an image in his house; then he must stand two identical images before the door and two others at the entrance of the royal enclosure. Other images must be placed in single file between the enclosure and the beach. Finally Konikonia must line up canoes in the space between the beach and the reef and place an image in each canoe. Another image must be tied to a fishing line and submerged at the bottom of the reef.
Everything is carried out as Kū'ula suggests. When the image attached to the line touches the bottom of the sea in front of the goddess’ house, she thinks her husband has returned and embraces him; but, perceiving another image on the surface, she rises to embrace that one also. Thus in passing from image to image this rather fickle-hearted goddess arrives at the house of the king, enters and lies down with the last image she finds. When she falls asleep, Konikonia takes the place of the image. Their marriage is thereby consummated. After ten days, however, the goddess’s parents send the Ocean to look for her. The sea rises and covers the whole earth: it doesn’t recede until the goddess returns home (Malo, ms.; Malo 1951: 234–37).

This myth also appears to be a comic distortion of the schema of sacrificial action. This impression is reinforced by an important detail: the god Kū'ula, who teaches Konikonia how to possess the sea goddess, is the very one who, in a “serious” myth, teaches men the secret of first-fruit sacrifices for fishing, a rite that permits them to catch fish without danger (Fornander 1916–20, VI: 172–75; Manu 1901, reprinted in Thrum 1923a: 215–49; Anonymous 1924; Wahiako 1930, in Beckwith 1940: 20–22; Stokes 1919: 52–56).

There is thus a certain equivalence between the fish in the ritual and the goddess in the myth. Lalohana is in effect associated with fish, which she protects by cutting the hooks; furthermore, she is related to the fish pā'ō'o (Malo 1951: 237). But the myth doesn’t concern the serious problem of how to acquire fish; instead it deals with the conquest of a goddess as a sexual object. This conquest is made possible by the existence of a series of key differences between human and divine thought:

1) The goddess makes no distinction between a symbol and the thing it symbolizes; she mistakes an image (her husband) for a man and a man (Konikonia) for an image;

2) She doesn’t distinguish an instance from its type ([a] the different statues of the god are not distinguished from him; and [b] the man is not distinguished from the statue—thus from the god—who personifies his type; the goddess mistakes the man for the god);

3) The different individuals of a class are not distinguished among themselves;

4) Spatial relations are confused with temporal relations, the order of simultaneities with the order of successions: it seems, in-
deed, as though the goddess thinks she sees her husband in motion in the series of statues and for this reason she passes from image to image.

Here in condensed form are the presuppositions that lie at the basis of sacrificial ritual, but their use in this context elicits laughter.

Even more than Uli, Lalohana represents the divine as a lack of differentiation of all that humans distinguish. As a result, she reveals the danger for human existence of prolonged contact with the divine. In effect, in M2 the passage of the goddess from sea to land generalizes the lack of differentiation, which is effectively represented by the deluge.

A third myth shows that the basis of divine power (the lack of distinction among things and qualities that humans are obliged to recognize as separated) is also the basis of the power that humans have over the gods. From this perspective, this myth is closer than the others to the ideology of ritual.

**M3**

Pūpūhuluena does not know about cultivated plants because they belong to the gods. He lives by fishing. Once while fishing he meets the fishermen of the god Makali‘i. They are not familiar with the nut *kukui* (*Aleurites moluccana*), crushed by Hawaiian fishermen to extract its oil, which they spit on the surface of the sea in order to calm it and make the fish and nets visible. The divine fishermen stupidly spit the oil of another nut that has no effect. Pūpūhuluena gives them some *kukui* nuts and teaches the fishermen how to use them. In exchange, he receives some taro and cooked sweet potato. But instead of eating these foods, Pūpūhuluena puts them aside to plant. The fishermen inform him that cooked plants cannot germinate; only raw, living plants can reproduce themselves. These, however, are jealously kept by the gods. In order to get hold of them, Pūpūhuluena will have to sculpt a divine image (*ki‘i*) and place it behind him in his canoe. He will also have to weave a basket in which one of the fishermen will hide in order to instruct him whenever the gods ask a question or set a trap for him. Having to approach the gods, Pūpūhuluena asks them for plants, but the gods first put him to a test by asking him the names of the different tubers. The fisherman hidden inside the basket tells him the name and properties of each one. Pūpūhuluena thus emerges the winner of the contest. The gods then invite him to play with them.
Taking advantage of the situation offered by the game, Pūpūhuluena humilates the gods by standing them on their head. They are so ashamed that they agree to let him have a tuber of every variety. Thus Pūpūhuluena is able to introduce agriculture in his homeland (Fornander 1916–20, IV: 570–73).

In this myth, the theme of the gods who confuse images with what they represent is not highlighted. Nevertheless, an important trace remains, since it is by placing the statue of a god (kiʻi) in his boat that Pūpūhuluena can approach the gods, probably because they do not distinguish the statue from the man and so take the latter for a god.

More important in this myth is the theme of divine stupidity and even infantilism. The fishermen of the god Makaliʻi are stupid and ridiculous because they are incapable of properly using fishing techniques. As for the gods who guard the tubers, they are easily duped by our hero, though at first, it is true, with the aid of a divine fisherman. The gods are also ridiculous because they spend their time playing like children; furthermore, it is thanks to this trait that Pūpūhuluena can humiliate and pollute them. In sum, the myth describes, we can suppose, the effect it produces on the listener: the power of the gods is neutralized by the laughter they elicit in their interaction with humans.

We observe that in this myth enigma is an important aspect of this interaction and that this aspect reintroduces in a particular form the confrontation between differentiation and lack of differentiation to which the confrontation between humans and gods is reduced in these myths. The gods try to make all the tubers appear identical, but Pūpūhuluena gains the upper hand because he manages to tell them apart. Here, thus, the man wins by distinguishing that which the gods present to him in an undifferentiated form. Allow me to make an audacious comparison: perhaps we have here the equivalent of the motif of Oedipus and the Sphinx. The latter has the upper hand over humans as long as they are incapable of distinguishing that which she

4. Moreover, laughter always puts an end to divine taboos and so to the powers that justify them (see for example Fornander 1916–20, V: 140). This suggests that there is an incompatibility between human laughter and the power of the gods. I would add that the Hawaiians greatly appreciated jokes and had a very developed sense of humor, often exercised at the expense of the gods (cf. for example Ruschenberger 1970, II: 322; von Chamisso (1907): 139–140; Choris 182: 123).
condenses in her enigmas. Like the gods in the Hawaiian myths considered in this essay, the Sphinx represents the pole of undifferentiation—but the power of both dissolves as soon as humans are capable of separating, of analyzing, that which gods or monsters conflate.

We must now consider two myths in which the most typical divine “error”—the confusion between symbol and thing symbolized—is attributed to children.

**M4**
Halemano comes to abduct the beautiful Kamalālāwali from her brother, Kumukahi, and offers him toys and divine images (kiʻi) to charm and distract him. When he finally realizes that his sister has been abducted he pursues her, but, captivated once more by a divine image that he sees on Oʻahu, he lingers on this island and allows the abductor to escape with his sister (Fornander 1916–20, V: 234–36).

**M5**
Lonoikamakahiki, the youngest son of King Keawe, first mistakes the images of the gods for real men; then, when he is told that these are images of the gods, he thinks that they are the gods in person and is greatly frightened (Fornander 1916–20, IV: 262).

M4 illustrates the motif of the infantile overvaluation of images, M5 a double confusion: between images and gods, on the one hand; between humans and their types (the gods), on the other. In effect, the images are first confused with humans, then with gods.

A comparison of myths M1–M3 with myths M4 and M5 suggests that the thought processes that characterize the gods are considered infantile; divine thought is perceived in some sense as regressive.

We have seen that M1 is structured like a sacrifice; it is clear that M2 and M3 are as well. However, the encounter between gods and humans that these myths present has comic and not serious effects as in sacrifice. The same processes of divine thought—that is, the unifications that characterize it—are the source of these comic effects.

Two problems thus arise: why are the same unifications that are taken seriously in one context able to produce a comic effect in another context? Why do the myths ridicule the gods (explicitly) and the sacrificial rites (implicitly)? It is evident that the second question cannot be answered without addressing the first. Therefore we must begin with this one.
Theory and interpretation
It has often been noted that a relationship of homology and even of identity exists between the processes of the comic and those of other symbolic activities, but it is above all Sigmund Freud who has reflected on this fact. His book on jokes emerged from problems posed for him by the similarity between the “dream work” and the “joke work.” These problems are related to those I raise here. All the same, the two terms of the Freudian comparison do not have the same importance for my concerns. If everything that pertains to jokes and the comic clearly has a direct interest for the interpretation of the myths I have cited, that which concerns dreams bears only indirectly on ritual, which is the other term of my comparison. This is why it seems more useful to me to consider the meta-psychological concepts that constitute Freud’s framework for comparing jokes and dreams than to draw inspiration from this comparison itself.

Before approaching these concepts and elaborating them for my own ends, I would like to say that I am very conscious of the difficulties they raise and of the hypothetical—even speculative—nature of my conclusions. In the final analysis these difficulties stem from the problematic character of every effort to pass from the ordering of signs (which is a fact of experience) and of the corresponding ideas (which is already much less so) to their psychical and even physical correlates.

Yet this endeavor is essential in certain cases. The most important is that of laughter, which consists in the discharge of a certain mental energy in the body. It thus reminds us in our own experience that there exist quantitative energy correlates to our thoughts and that we cannot avoid the problem of the link between the quantitative and qualitative in mental life. Perhaps it is because the enigma of laughter contains an implicit lesson on the materiality of thought—and on its connections with the body, pleasure and unpleasure—that it has always fascinated philosophers. That said, let us pass to the meta-psychological concepts that interest us here.

It is well known that Freud establishes an opposition between the reality principle and the pleasure principle. The perception-consciousness system is sensitive, on the one hand, to the diversity of qualities that reflect—through more or less complicated mediations determined by the cultural order—the external world. On the other hand, it is sensitive to increases and decreases of tension coming from the interior, “as expressed on a single qualitative axis—namely, the

One pole of psychical life thus tends toward qualitative differentiation, the other toward qualitative undifferentiation. Freud postulates that these two poles have energy, hence quantitative, correlates. The pole of pleasure corresponds to a lesser degree of tension than that which is associated with the pole of reality. It satisfies drives “via the shortest route” (ibid.: 324), independently of information that bears on the real conditions (natural and cultural) of their satisfaction. In contrast, the pole of reality presupposes an effort of analysis, the investment of sufficient energy to distinguish qualities and to test the adequacy of representations to experience. At this pole, the mental apparatus thus exists in a state of tension. Freud further assumes that tension is associated with unpleasure, whereas pleasure is associated either with a lack of tension or with a discharge of tension that is produced when this tension becomes useless, following the real solution of a problem or a regression toward its imaginary solution “via the shortest route.”

On the cognitive plane, that is, of the differentiation and arrangement of ideas,

it cannot be doubted that it is easier and more convenient... to jumble up things that are different rather than to contrast them—and, indeed, that it is especially convenient to admit as valid methods of inference that are rejected by logic, and, lastly, to put words or thoughts together without regard to the condition that they ought also to make sense. (Freud 1960: 125)

On a first approximation, we can thus suppose that the more thought requires work, the more it is differentiated and submitted to the test of reality, the less its functioning is associated with a state of pleasure.

5. According to Freud, no simple relationship exists between the feelings of pleasure and unpleasure and the quantities of excitation that correspond to them: “the factor that determines the feeling is probably the amount of increase or diminution in the quantity of excitation in a given period of time” (Freud 1961: 2). Moreover, the pleasure principle does not necessarily operate by lowering the quantity of excitation as much as possible; it can limit itself to maintaining this quantity constant (ibid.: 3). In fact, “the pleasure principle follows from the principle of constancy” (ibid.: 3). Here Freud develops some of Gustav Fechner’s ideas.
Inversely, the less work it demands, the less it differentiates, the more it is associated with pleasure.

Note that here pleasure and unpleasure are defined in relation to functioning and not to results. It is evident that the solution of a problem yields pleasure, even though it requires unpleasing work in itself. Furthermore, the functioning of thought cannot be decontextualized: confusion and nonsense only give pleasure if they are admitted by the logical censor, without which they are only errors and trigger defensive reactions that turn the accumulated investments of energy into unpleasure.

Consequently, at least two variables must be considered in order to classify different symbolic productions according to their pleasurable or unpleasurable effects: the state of differentiation of thought and the context in which thought functions. For example, if thought that functions according to the pleasure principle is capable all the same of producing an acceptable sense, the censor will not intervene; there will thus be pleasure. But pleasure will also result if, for some reason, the logical censor is diverted, or if its level of attention lowers.

All mental productions correspond to a certain state of equilibrium between the two polar tendencies of thought, in other words, to a certain state of equilibrium between differentiation and undifferentiation. At the semiotic level, the most extreme expression of the pole of differentiation is constituted by the propositional form; in contrast, rhetorical figures can be linked to the pole of undifferentiation. They result, in effect, from the unification of signs that are distinct on the axis of contiguities (syntagmatic) and on the axis of similarities (paradigmatic).

These concepts enable us to recognize the relations that exist not only between the joke work and the dream work, but also between the joke work and the work of art and ritual, which concern the solution of our problem more directly. Let us begin by recalling briefly how Freud explains jokes and the comic.

In these two modes of functioning of our mental apparatus—as in humor, which I leave aside—pleasure is due to an “economy of expenditure.” However, this economy differs for jokes and the comic: in the first, it consists in an “economy in expenditure upon inhibition”;

6. Nevertheless, the anticipation of pleasure associated with the result can affect the feeling associated with the work destined to obtain this result. Pleasure and unpleasure can thus be mingled in work, which obviously complicates matters.
in the second, in an “economy in expenditure . . . upon ideation (upon cathexis)” (Freud 1960: 236).

In the joke, pleasure results from a discharge of the energy used to inhibit either forms of logical organization that are normally inhibited because they violate the norms of critical thought, or the contents associated with these forms. This liberation is made possible because the revision of a preconscious thought under the influence of modes of thought from the unconscious (which follow the pleasure principle) (Freud 1960: 166) produces results judged acceptable by the critical function. They are acceptable because unifications between different chains of thought sometimes permit thought to seize a meaning admissible to the critical function by more direct and easier paths than those of the propositional form. If this short-circuit is produced in a situation where the attention of the hearer is not immediately absorbed by a different object than the joke just heard, the anticipated mental energy remains unused and is discharged in laughter. A certain pleasure is thus produced.

In sum, jokes appeal to a source of pleasure—the short-circuits produced by word plays and nonsense—whose true nature they do not hide from the critical function. “They restrict themselves, however, to a choice of occasions in which this play or this nonsense can at the same time appear allowable (in jests) or sensible (in jokes), thanks to the ambiguity of words and the multiplicity of conceptual relations” (Freud 1960: 172). These jokes, which Freud calls “disinterested,” only mobilize the pleasure linked to the exercise of certain “economic” modes of thought. But there are also “tendentious” jokes, in which the purely intellectual play functions as “foreplay” that allows a content suppressed in the unconscious to attain consciousness. From this, according to Freud, an additional pleasure results.

Let us now pass to the comic. For Freud, the comic always results from a comparison between two expenditures of energy: that which is made by the comic person and that which is made by the one who laughs. The difference produces a discharge: laughter. Clearly this comparison can only take place through the mental reproduction of the two expenditures in the person who laughs. The comic thus requires a process of empathy: to laugh, it is necessary to place oneself in the psychic state of the ridiculous person and to compare it with one’s own in the same situation.

To be efficacious, the comic, like jokes, should be doubly set apart:
1) the habitual rules that preside over the application of the logical or moral censor should not be applied to the situation in which laughter is produced;

2) no other object should enter the field of attention; otherwise the energy saved would be reinvested in this other object and laughter would be prevented.

In other words:

1) to function, the joke and the comic require what Gregory Bateson (1972: 157-161) calls a “psychological frame,” a metacommunicative signal that marks an opposition between rules that are valid inside of the frame and those that are valid outside of it;

2) associated with the “framing” function there is also a “screening” function (cf. Gombrich 1959: 228, 276). This function does not simply recall the difference between internal and external rules, by recalling at a single stroke the fictional character of that which is “framed.” More importantly, it screens out external experiences that come to disturb experiences internal to the frame.

As I have indicated elsewhere, play (thus also jokes and the comic), art and ritual can all be distinguished according to the relative importance of the screening function in each of these activities (Valeri 1981a: 237–39 [see Chapter XI, this volume]). In jokes, especially, it is less important than in the other activities, since here the critical function, the reality principle, is always dominant. Reality is not forgotten, rather a context is created in which a certain play of nonsense is compatible with awareness of the preeminence of the real.

In art, in other words in aesthetic experience, the attention oscillates between what is inside and what is outside the frame. It can be said that the frame functions at one moment as a screen in regard to everything found outside the work, at another moment, inversely, as a screen of everything that is found in the interior. The attention thus moves back and forth between reality and fiction.

But what is the relation between this oscillation and the pleasure characteristic of the aesthetic experience? As we have seen, this pleasure must depend on the unifications that art, like jokes, achieves. Nevertheless, art produces a different result from jokes since we do not laugh at a work of art unless it is comic—but then the comic is in
the object represented. There must therefore be a corresponding difference in the mode of functioning of art.

It has often been noticed that art realizes a combination of varying and non-varying elements. This is particularly evident in arts that make use of the temporal dimension (poetry, narrative, music; cf. Lévi-Strauss 1971), but it is no less true of plastic and figurative arts. The pleasure characteristic of art is due precisely to this combination of variations and invariance, which is translated by two opposed psychological effects. The surface variability of expression attracts the attention and so produces an increase in mental investment. But these variations are resolved, thanks to unifying processes (rhetorical, metric, and semantic) into identities—that is, into something known that requires no effort of comprehension. The tension is relaxed and pleasure results. In other words, art solicits the attention for an instant, but it undoes its intrigue by reducing the strange to the familiar. Every work of art is constituted thus, by different “rhythms” consisting of “intrigues” that are resolved and reproduced at different speeds. What Roman Jakobson (1960: 358) calls “the poetic function”—the “projection” of the axis of identities onto the axis of contiguities, or succession (and, at the limit, of time)—is indeed the source of aesthetic pleasure.

This pleasure differs from that of jokes, in that the mental tension is not resolved immediately and almost violently in laughter. On the contrary, the pleasure is maintained in time, it lasts. This is because the stored-up energy is only partly liberated, for two reasons:

1) On the one hand, the attention is displaced to the exterior of the work of art, which, as we have seen, is never completely isolated from its external context (from this results the oscillation of attention mentioned above);

2) On the other hand, even inside the work of art, once an intrigue is resolved, the attention is immediately engaged by another one; the liberated energy is thus partly reinvested in the form of attention.

In sum, on the one hand, there is a certain investment of attention toward external reality that corresponds to the resistance of the critical

7. In this latter case, as Henri Bergson ([1900] 1914) has shown, it comes under the laws of the comic rather than those of aesthetics.
function to the power of illusion in the work of art; on the other hand, there is a new investment that reproduces this illusion. The interval between each “resolution” is probably filled by the investment of attention in the exterior of the frame.

The pleasure inherent in the recourse to unifying modes of thought is thus doubly tempered in the work of art: by frame-internal reinvestments of saved energy and by frame-external reinvestments that are coordinated with them. From this feature, I believe, derives the characteristic link between the experience of art and duration, a link that contrasts with that between the joke and the instant.

Let us now consider ritual. It must be said at once that ritual is an enormously more complex phenomenon than the work of art, and, a fortiori, the joke. At times we are entitled to wonder whether ritual doesn’t constitute the heterogeneous sum of different phenomena. I myself have insisted elsewhere on this complexity (Valeri 1977, 1979, 1981a [see Chapters XI, IX, and Appendix III, this volume]). However, to the extent that the problem of ritual is linked to the problem of pleasure and unpleasure, two aspects of ritual seem fundamental to me. The first is closely related to art; the second to the fulfillment of desire. In brief, I would say that the first aspect elicits aesthetic pleasure, whereas the second does not yield any pleasure, because the recourse to modes of thought dominated by the pleasure principle serves to offset an unpleasure.8

There is nothing to say about the first aspect that I have not already said on the subject of art. All the same, I should mention an essential fact that would merit a long discussion: the aesthetic experience of ritual constitutes an equivalent, an enactment, of social experience, which it translates in the form of schemata. On the one hand, “intrigues” are tied and untied; on the other hand, the form of these ritual “narratives” and even more the actors and the signifiers they connect necessarily turn the attention to the exterior of the ritual frame. Thus the dialectic of internal and external experience, which is the basis of the aesthetic experience, is reinforced in ritual. This dialectic gives ritual its social efficacy by restructuring the experience of the actors and the relations that bind them together.

If we limit ourselves to considering the aesthetic dimension of ritual, we can reduce indigenous belief in its efficacy to an objectification of its moral and conceptual consequences. But that would be to leave

8. It is in this respect, and this alone, that ritual is related to dreams.
aside another dimension of the ideology of ritual, which postulates that ritual practices have a specific efficacy relative to precise goals and interests. This other aspect places us in the presence of a true “realization of desire.”

It is undeniable that in numerous rites the actors drop the distinction between certain ideas (corresponding to real qualitative differences), and even the distinction between the idea of representation and that of reality, in order to represent a certain desire as accomplished. It is also undeniable that the actors believe that sooner or later this representation will be effectively realized. Finally, we are obliged to recognize that if they resort to processes of thought guided by the pleasure principle, they do so because the processes normally adequate to realize their desire are not effective in the case in question. We have seen that the representation of an unresolved and unanalyzable problem is accompanied by an acute and constant mental tension that becomes intolerable. We may thus conclude that by representing the problem as resolved, the actors may reduce this unpleasing tension. However, as I noted earlier on the subject of Hawaiian sacrificial rites, there is no simple “regression” or even hallucination that would make rites comparable to dreams. In reality we witness the coexistence of two opposed representations: on the one hand, a normal representation; on the other, a representation that requires the elimination of certain normally accepted qualitative distinctions.

The coexistence of these representations is only made possible by the belief in an invisible order that is creatively superimposed on the visible order. In other words, people believe in the gods, who produce in the invisible order the identities that enable their followers to believe in the efficacy of rites without, however, renouncing “reason,” the clear and precise view of visible reality that rites implicitly, and myths explicitly, consider as proper to the adult human. From this results the rift in the religious consciousness that is experienced in ritual. On the one hand, the believer remains faithful to the order of visible reality; on the other hand, he wants to believe in a different order that functions according to the pleasure principle.9 The pleasure principle is thus put to work for a vital interest that reason cannot satisfy, but reason is saved in its normative role for human affairs,

9. The screening function thus becomes predominant, since belief in the efficacy of ritual presupposes the neutralization of experiential indices that contradict its effects and the methods it uses.
because people do not consider the operations of the pleasure principle as their own, but as reified in the gods.

Consequently, the status of the gods is necessarily ambiguous. When people need them they take them seriously; when they don’t need them they mock them. More precisely, in ritual the mental operations that express the pleasure principle are used to avoid an unpleasantness; in the comic myths, as also in certain festivals, these same operations serve only to produce a certain pleasure. But in ritual as in myth, the pleasure principle is only acceptable if people refuse to recognize it as their own.

The basic condition for the comic transformation of thought processes that are personified by the gods is an interest that is satisfied by “rational” thought. Consequently, the transformation entails the dominance of this thought. If, then, the processes of divine thought are a source of pleasure, it is because comic myths present them in such a way that they do not menace “rational” thought. In sum, there is a connection between a certain form of presentation of the gods and the dominance of rational thought (as this is conceived by the Hawaiians), and this connection explains why the comic becomes a sign of reason and serves to reconfirm its value.

It thus seems that our myths function in a fashion analogous to jokes. This is confirmed by their use of a form of the comic that is closely related to jokes, that is, the comic “naïve.”

The chief way to release the comic potential of the laws of divine thought is to represent the gods as being “naïve,” like overgrown children. This “naïveté” enables human reason to tolerate them, once the fundamental distinction between the visible and invisible that is basic to their ritual use is abolished.

In the myths, indeed, the gods are not an invisible postulate. They enter directly into the visible world, and in human form; consequently their thoughts and actions are necessarily evaluated according to the criteria that apply to humans and that I call “rational.”

The “naïve person” is defined as someone in whom the reality principle does not function or who does not inhibit the processes of thought and action dictated by the pleasure principle. Consequently, this person provokes laughter by virtue of a mechanism analogous to that of jokes: he lifts an inhibition for those who enjoy his foolish behavior. In other words, the spectacle of someone who lacks the inhibition exercised by the critical function on the use of processes of unconscious thought has the effect of lifting this inhibition for an in-
stant in those who witness his actions or who represent them. This is why they laugh: their laughter is due to the sudden liberation of energy employed to maintain the inhibition.

Thanks to the naïve person, then, the critical function is suspended by a proxy. Without this detour, the release would produce defensive reactions and hence unpleasure. In sum, as Freud writes, “the naïve is a marginal case of the joke; it arises if in the formula for the construction of jokes we reduce the value of the censorship to zero” (Freud 1960: 185). The comic naïve would be “a species of the comic in so far as its pleasure springs from the difference in expenditure which arises in trying to understand someone else; and it would approach the joke in being subject to the condition that the expenditure economized in the comparison must be an inhibitory expenditure” (Freud 1960: 188).

The myths are not limited to representing the gods as naïve. They also give the gods human motivations of an inferior order, such as a propensity for sexual promiscuity (M2), a certain narcissism (M1), and a completely childish interest in play (M3). We find here another basic technique of comic production: degradation. On the logical as on the moral plane, then, the passage of the gods from the transcendent to the human order is fatal to them, since they manifest themselves in inferior, degraded forms that arouse laughter.

The degradation of the gods when they lose their transcendence indicates that the forms of divine thought can only be taken seriously in transcendence. In immanence they are shown to be identical to infantile thought (cf. M4, M5). It is as such, in their being absurd but naïve, that they arouse laughter. In the context of the myths, in effect, two of the basic processes personified by the gods in ritual (the lack of distinction between symbol and symbolized; the lack of distinction between individual and type) amount to two of the principal comic techniques recognized by Bergson.

Let us begin with the process that abolishes the distinction between the individual and the class to which it belongs or the type to which it corresponds.

Pascal had already noted that “two similar faces together make people laugh by virtue of their resemblance, though neither of them is amusing by itself”; but it is Bergson who gives us the exact expression

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of this phenomenon: “The comic character is a type. Inversely, the resemblance to a type has something comic about it.”

It is true that the explanation Bergson gives is not satisfactory; Freud instead gives us the key to the affair by showing that in this case laughter is due to “a comparison between the expenditure on expectation and the expenditure actually required for an understanding of something that has remained the same” (Freud 1960: 209). That is, a person who corresponds to a type presents a lesser problem of comprehension than someone who presents individuality as such.

The confusion between symbol and symbolized and that which follows from it (the convergence of two domains or separate and even contradictory series of events) is a particular case of *quiproquo*, to which Bergson makes the following general formula correspond: “A situation is always comic when it belongs at the same time to two entirely independent series of events and can be interpreted in two wholly different senses at once.”

This definition accounts for one of the principal sources of comedy in the myths: symbols and things symbolized belong to two independent series, but they correspond sufficiently that a symbol can be interpreted as something symbolized. From this fundamental *quiproquo* flow others that concern the relationship between the series of human and divine actions: the same event is interpreted in a certain way by humans and in an opposed way by the gods. But it is the gods who are the victims of *quiproquo*, because humans produce it artificially in them. In contrast to the gods, humans do not conflate symbol and thing symbolized and are thus able to control the comic play.

It is remarkable that the detailed description of the mechanism of *quiproquo* that Bergson offers us applies equally well to sacrificial rites:

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11. “Le personnage comique est un *type*. Inversement, la ressemblance à un type a quelque chose de comique” (Bergson 1959: 458).

In the *quiproquo* [in sacrifice], indeed, each of the characters [the god on one hand and the human being on the other] is inserted in a series of events that concern him . . . . Each of the series specific to each of the characters is developed independently, but at a certain moment the series meet each other under conditions such that the actions and words that belong to one could just as well belong to the other. From this arises misunderstanding among the characters, from this, equivocation. But this equivocation is not comic in itself; it is so only because it manifests the coincidence of the two independent series.¹³

**Bergson adds:**

The proof of this is that the author must strive to draw our attention to this double fact of independence and coincidence. He generally succeeds by constantly renewing the false threat that the two coinciding series will separate. At every moment the whole thing threatens to fall apart and gets patched up again; it is this game, far more than the oscillation of our mind between two contradictory assertions, that elicits laughter. It makes us laugh because it makes plain to us the reciprocal interference of two independent series, the real source of the comic effect.¹⁴

I have separated this text into two parts because the first part enables us to see the homology that exists between the sacrificial process and the stories recounted by myths M₁, M₂, and M₃, while the second part, by turning our attention to the coincidence and independence of

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¹³. *Dans le quiproquo, en effet, chacun des personnages est inséré dans une série d’événements qui le concernent . . . . Chacune des séries intéressant chacun des personnages se développe d’une manière indépendante; mais elles se sont rencontrées à un certain moment dans des conditions telles que les actes et les paroles qui font partie de l’une d’elles puissent aussi bien convenir à l’autre. De là la méprise des personnages, de là l’équivoque; mais cette équivoque n’est pas comique par elle-même; elle ne l’est que parce qu’elle manifeste la coïncidence des deux séries indépendantes (Bergson 1959: 433–34).* [Bracketed material in the block quotation added by author — Ed.]

¹⁴. *La preuve en est que l’auteur doit constamment s’ingénier à ramener notre attention sur ce double fait, l’indépendance et la coïncidence. Il y arrive d’ordinaire en renouvelant sans cesse la fausse menace d’une dissociation entre les deux séries qui coïncident. À chaque instant tout va craquer, et tout se raccommode; c’est ce jeu qui fait rire, bien plus que le va-et-vient de notre esprit entre deux affirmations contradictoires. Et il nous fait rire parce qu’il rend manifeste à nos yeux l’interférence de deux séries indépendantes, source véritable de l’effet comique (Bergson, 1959, p. 434).*
divine and human actions, enables us to understand the technique that enables this process in the myths to make us laugh. As we have seen, this technique can be used because the distinction between visible and invisible has been abolished: divine action unfolds on the same plane as human action.

In our myths there is thus a secret judgment on the sacrificial rites, but all the same we find there a refusal to consider the gods as pure reifications of a certain level of functioning of human thought. They continue, indeed, to compel belief. Laughter thus does not go so far as to dissolve them and with them ritual. It is limited to reproducing the limits in which their existence is possible and necessary.\(^{15}\) This is what M\(_2\) teaches above all when it makes the comic suddenly turn tragic, in showing that the goddess’ prolonged presence in the human world produces a “deluge,” that is to say a total lack of differentiation of the human and the divine and, in fact, the end of every distinction.

In sum, the entry of the gods into the visible world is comic only up to a certain point: beyond this point it entails the destruction of the human world, which is founded on the acceptance of the qualities of the real and on a system of differences that the gods deny by their presence.

From this point of view, we can consider laughter not so much a negation of the sacrificial schema as its attenuated realization. Laughter indeed permits a momentary coexistence of the divine and the human, but its inevitable effect is to push the gods outside of the human sphere. At the level of narrative it thus functions like ritual,\(^{16}\)

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15. In all the myths considered, we find, in addition to the totally ridiculous and infantile divinities, divinities who could be defined as “domesticated” by humans, since they maintain amicable relations with the latter (the god who is the friend of Kauakahi [M\(_1\)]; Kū’ulakai [M\(_2\)]; the fisherman of Makali’i [M\(_3\)]). These are divinities that assist humans in their interaction with the completely “stupid” divinities. The image of the gods is thus dichotomized: alongside a representation in comic terms, a more serious representation infiltrates these myths. Thus the comic myth, which contributes to reproducing the second image by ridiculing the first, contains in itself the indication of its purpose. Just as in other myths the serious god teaches humans the art of reproducing him through sacrifice, here he teaches them the art of reproducing himself through laughter.

16. Mikhail Bakhtin (1968: 203, 211) has also recognized a relationship between laughter and sacrifice. One of the most striking examples of the transformation of a sacrifice into laughter is offered by the Carnival of Venice (see Muir 1981: 156–81).
which for an instant unites divine and human, and thus symbol and symbolized, type and individual—but in order to separate them.

All the same, there is a fundamental difference, as we have seen, between sacrifice and laughter. In sacrifice, the unifications that are produced for an instant are taken seriously (up to a certain point at least), since they are needed, whereas in laughter, the gods are made a source of pleasure, and perhaps of irony on the self as sacrifier. Our comic myths occupy a curious position: they seem to presuppose belief in the existence of the gods, but only to mock them. In reality, this contradiction reveals the essential feature of these myths: they contribute to returning the gods—and thus belief in the gods—to the only place where they are possible and compatible with the human conception of the real. Envisaged in this manner, the comic myths only prolong and accentuate a movement that is produced, as we have seen, in the second part of sacrificial rites.

In this regard, we cannot fail to note a certain homology between our comic myths and certain annual festivals. Indeed, the Hawaiian year oscillates between two poles. The pole of sacrifice corresponds to the period of the year when the temples are open, sacrifices are made, and the gods are taken seriously, as is royal authority, which depends on them. The pole of festival corresponds to the period of the year, kapu Makahiki, when the temples are closed, sacrifices are forbidden, and the gods and the king are mocked.

It is remarkable that laughter and play are forbidden in the rites that correspond to the first pole, whereas they dominate in festivals (Kepelino 1978: 64–66; Malo n.d.: 149; ‘Īi 1963: 72–73; Fornander 1916–20, VI: 205). One of the gods who presides over these is even called Akua pa‘ani, “god of play.” But I speak of all this elsewhere, and it is long past time to stop this imprudent divertissement before this article falls into the sacrificial pole and takes me along with it. My only excuse is that it was written in the middle of the Makahiki!

Post scriptum (April 1984)
The present paper was originally published in French in the journal Anthropologie et Sociétés, 1981, 5 (3): 11–34. It is presented here, with minor changes, in a translation ably prepared by Jane Bestor in 1982 [and revised in 2013 —Trans.]. I must confess that since then my thoughts on the matters treated in the paper have evolved. Yet I am unable, at present, to rewrite it; moreover, I am told that it is still of
some interest as it is. I hope that it will be useful as a basis for discussion. I am comforted in this hope by the interesting comments that I have received on the French version, particularly those by Jane Bestor and Terry Turner. Although I have not yet been able to take those comments into account, I wish to thank their authors warmly.