

OBSCENITY: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPRAISAL

WESTON LA BARRE*

The anthropologist discovers no absolutes with respect to the descriptive *content* of the obscene representation or word or act. The customary law, so to speak, is always logically prior to the behavior: nothing is obscene that has not been previously defined culturally as such. It is as if, where the culturally styled corset would have its society appear thin, there, and there alone, does the renegade flesh choose to bulge with the imperfectly disguised tension that is the obscene—for that society.

It is true that, since immediately sexual behavior is prohibited in all societies in some contexts (*viz.*, the universal incest taboo)¹ or otherwise in some manner culturally restrained,² the sexual is a characteristic root of the obscene. Nevertheless, if public coitus in Yap and Formosa³—even ceremonially open coitus in the Society Islands and elsewhere⁴—is the pattern, then any “obscenity” of the matter disappears here, along with the social disappearance of the neurotic or legally reprehensible voyeur. The same is true with respect to other physiological acts that in our society are a common root of the obscene. Thus, where public micturition and defecation are both condoned and practiced, there the “obscene” exhibitionism of the acts also disappears;⁵ and unless cleanliness training has been sufficiently rigorous in a society to obtain the necessary repressions, then its culture will lack scatological humor or obscenity.⁶

In these discussions of obscenity, therefore, we must guard against any facile assumption that our parochial patterns, however deeply engrained both emotionally and legally, necessarily constitute human absolutes. For example, there exists in the museum of the University of San Marcos, in Lima, Peru, a reserved section containing collections that are shown only to qualified persons. The ancient Peruvians—not

* A.B. 1933, Princeton University; Ph.D. 1937, Yale University. Associate Professor of Anthropology, Duke University. Guggenheim Fellow (research and writing on Orient), 1946 and summer of 1948; Fellow, American Anthropological Association. Author, *THE PEYOTE CULT* (Yale University Publications in Anthropology No. 19, 1938); *THE AYMARA INDIANS OF THE LAKE TITICACA PLATEAU, BOLIVIA* (Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association No. 68, 1948); *THE HUMAN ANIMAL* (1954). Contributor to various anthropological and sociological periodicals.

¹ See WESTON LA BARRE, *THE HUMAN ANIMAL* 121-30 (1954).

² See chapters six (“Father Comes Home to Stay”) and seven (“And Makes It Legal”) in LA BARRE, *op. cit. supra* note 1, at 98-131.

³ See C. S. FORD AND F. A. BEACH, *PATTERNS OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOR* 68 (1951).

⁴ See P. MANTEGAZZA, *SEXUAL RELATIONS OF MANKIND* 34, 37, 135 (n.d.)

⁵ See J. G. BOURKE, *SCATOLOGIC RITES OF ALL NATIONS passim* (1891).

⁶ *E.g.*, the *koymshi*, or obscene “mud clowns,” of the Pueblo peoples are the converse of their strict cleanliness training. Documentation of this modern insight may be abundantly found in an older classic, MATILDA C. STEVENSON, *THE ZUÑI INDIANS, THEIR MYTHOLOGY, ESOTERIC FRATERNITIES, AND CEREMONIES* (Twenty-third Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology 1904). See also J. G. BOURKE, *THE URINE DANCE OF THE ZUÑI INDIANS OF NEW MEXICO* (1920).

only the Inca proper, but the Chimu and Nazca and others as well—were accustomed to depict in their portrait jars the entire round, without exception, of their daily life, material and non-material.⁷ Thus, among the scenes portrayed are various styles of coitus and other sexual acts, grotesquely ithyphallic drinking jars, and the like. The point to be made is this: the existence of this segregated “reserved section” is an ethnographic commentary on our own society, not on that of the ancient Peruvians. The same principle holds for the Christian tourist viewing the “obscene” carvings on the famous Hindu temple at Benares; he may have met all these things before in Krafft-Ebing, but he finds them unexpected or out of context in a religious edifice.

The relativity of verbal obscenity is even more readily apparent and may be demonstrated by almost mechanical procedures. For example, a major soap-maker recently was considering a name for a new soap-powder and had the business acumen to ask a group of linguists to investigate any possible untoward meanings of the name in some fifty foreign languages. In English and in most of the other European languages, it meant “dainty”; in Flemish, it meant “aloof”; in Gaelic, it meant “song”; in Afrikaans, it meant “horse”; in Persian, it meant “hazy” or “dim-witted”; and in Korean, it sounded very much like a word for “lunatic.” These were bad enough. But in all the Slavic languages, it was obscene. The proposed new name was hastily abandoned.⁸

The obscene is psychologically close to the humorous in our society—to the sexually and scatologically humorous at least. But whereas such humor, accepted, releases tensions, the obscene arouses anxiety.⁹ When relatively “harmless” or lightly repressed materials return to consciousness, then the unregenerate animal wish has skillfully outwitted the psychic censor implanted by social conditioning, and we have a successful “return of the repressed”¹⁰—though it may still need to retain some protective disguises or maintain a disingenuous ambiguity into which pretended innocence may retreat. For this reason, puns, plays on words, or fortuitously overlapping symbolisms are highly desirable as release-mechanisms for our repressed sexual, sadistic, or scatological components. Scratch any culture-bearer and find a Rousseauist: the brother Adam in us all admires the skill with which the wit both obtains the wish and retains apparent cultural probity. Wit consists precisely in the skillful searching out of these masking ambiguities and overlaps and in their clever contextual compositionings, so that in this sense, our appreciation borders on the esthetic.

Actually, from the point of view of the unconscious, the *cliché* should be re-

⁷ The practice has been of inestimable value to botanists, archaeologists, anthropologists, and even psychologists and sexologists. In this last connection, it may be of interest to note that Dr. Alfred Kinsey, of Indiana University, has a fine representative collection of “obscene” Peruvian pottery. See slide lecture, *Ancient Peruvian Erotic Art*, read by Dr. Alfred Kinsey, Central States Anthropological Society meeting, May 6, 1955, Bloomington, Ind.

⁸ See Ryan, *Business Enlists the Gift of Tongues*, N.Y. Times, May 15, 1955, §3, p. 1, col. 2.

⁹ See generally, Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, in THE BASIC WRITINGS OF SIGMUND FREUD 633 (Modern Library ed. 1938). See also, Honigmann, *A Cultural Theory of Obscenity*, 5 J. CRIM. PSYCHOPATHOLOGY 715 (1944).

¹⁰ See, e.g., La Barre, *The Psychopathology of Drinking Songs*, 2 PSYCHIATRY 203 (1939).

versed: "I don't care if it's funny, just so it's dirty." But as the strength of repression varies in different individuals—and there may have been varying severity of conditioning even among individuals in the same society—we may, therefore, expect to find that what is "funny" for one person is "dirty" for another. Protective anxiety (disgust) will then lead the latter to withdraw his franchise from the transaction and resume the standard moral pose of the society. Perhaps his superego requires further liquidation in alcohol.

The obscene, relatively to the accepted "humor," is, on the other hand, the word or act which in its direct and blatant form is likely to meet the standard resistance and repressions of the entire group. Once again, the cultural dimension of this is evident, for we can observe subgroup differences. The same upperclass sophisticate who enjoys the virtuous bedroom or bathroom joke at a cocktail party will be entirely bored with the endless shallow innuendo of popular songs—stating much the same things, but with varying repression-tensions, and hence requiring less intellectual work to circumvent the repression. The victory is too easy, the opponents too undisguised; and since class membership is, in part, attained and kept by varying disciplines of immediate wish, then the immediately scatological is rejected as "vulgar," which is a class-designator rather more than it is a moral judgment.

In a sense, also, obscenity occupies a position midway between the (possibly) reprehensible-humorous and outright-criminal. For example, father-daughter incest in our society is so utterly unthinkable that it is immediately classified as the categorically criminal. Yet, in American Indian stories of the supernatural tricksters "Coyote" and "Raven" (and among the Eskimo, even in sacred myths, as of the sea-goddess Sedna), father-daughter incest frequently recurs as a motif in humorous context.¹¹ Possibly some of the *sgraffiti* in our Men's Rooms occupy this position intermediate between the obscene and the criminal. A good test case of this intermediacy is found in a field experience I had among the Aymara Indians whom I studied in the region south of Lake Titicaca in Bolivia.¹² These Indians have been subject to European influences since Spanish colonial times, though in remoter regions, they remain relatively unacculturated. I had been questioning an old man at Tiahuanaco on the thoroughly banal kinship system of the group and had asked the native term for "sister-in-law." The old man said something in response and then, for some reason, fell into an evil chuckling. My interpreter, a somewhat mission-acculturated *mestizo*, did not interpret this and tried to brush it off as unimportant or irrelevant. But I persisted, fearful of missing some new point that is the meat of ethnographic research. Finally, but only after considerable resistance, the

¹¹ Characteristic "Coyote" tales are found in G. A. DORSEY, PAWNEE MYTHOLOGY 430, 433, 438, 439, 447, 451, 453, 460, 463-65 (1906). "Raven" tales are found in FRANZ BOAS, KWAKWITL TALES *passim* (Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology No. 2, 1910, and No. 26, 1935). For the Sedna legends, see FRANZ BOAS, THE CENTRAL ESKIMO 399 (Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology 1888).

¹² See WESTON LA BARRE, THE AYMARA INDIANS OF THE LAKE TITICACA PLATEAU, BOLIVIA (Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association No. 68, 1948).

interpreter translated the old man's response for "sister-in-law" as *spare wife*—thus establishing the conjectural possibility of a former type of polygamy in which a man may marry his wife's sister also.¹³ The old man was sufficiently close to the old life to find this funny (as a prohibited, but conceivable, behavioral possibility); but the younger man, indoctrinated with the Christian prohibition of polygamy, was shocked and attempted to protect the ethnographer from the morally reprobated information (as an unthinkable act).

In our society, it must be insisted, obscenity inheres in a definable list of things that may not necessarily be prohibited elsewhere: in the use of tabooed *artistic representations* or *words*, in *nudity* of certain parts of the body, and in the performance of publicly prohibited *acts*. We have already touched upon the first in discussing ancient Peruvian pottery (a variation in "obscenity" in ethnographic space); but variations in "obscenity" are possible in culture-historical time also within the same tradition (*e.g.*, the nudity of classic Greek statues and Renaissance sculpture was covered with a fig leaf in Reformation and Victorian times.) It is perhaps enough to remark further here that we have no reason to suppose that the large and unmistakably phallic—indeed, essentially and contextually phallic—wooden statutes of the ancestors used in Melanesian religious ceremonies evoke any other emotions than awe, reverence, and perhaps fear. Any "obscenity" involved is the artefact of our own cultural projections.

Indeed, in other contexts, the shoe may be on the other foot, and *we* may be accused of obscenity when none, certainly, is intended. A cultivated Chinese gentleman, for example, once remarked that the pronounced and regular rhythms of the Sousa march, "The Stars and Stripes Forever," played by a Marine band, seemed to him almost unbearably lascivious and suggestive of coitus; Chinese classical music, even in dealing with love episodes, is quite discernibly different. For us, however, this vigorous and bombastic music evokes only the masculinity of marching men, the martial theme, and Fourth of July oratory. With far more ease, we might be persuaded that Liszt's "Liebestraum" was flagrant pornophony, complete with nocturnal emission, since that was its announced programmatic content.

The cultural relativity of the obscene might further be illustrated by an innocent picture which appeared during the war in the North African edition of Stars and Stripes. The picture purported to be that of an American GI teaching an Arab the homely art of dunking doughnuts. But what actually is happening here? Is the GI really teaching, or even essentially teaching, the Arab all there is to know about doughnut-dunking? Doughnut-dunking implies Emily Post, a male vacation from females striving for vertical social mobility, Jiggs and Maggie, the revolt of the American he-man from "Mom"—and much else besides. The archly bent finger

¹³ It is true that later my professor at Yale, Dr. G. P. Murdock, an expert in these matters, took me sharply to task on this, but for scientific rather than moral reasons. He properly criticized me for not distinguishing then between "sister-in-law" as brother's wife versus wife's sister, for which English has only one common term. I should make it clear here that my Aymara informant was guilty perhaps only of the latter, sororal polygyny, not of fraternal polyandry.

is an American lampoon of the effete tea-drinking Englishman and reminds us of 1776—and who, after all, won that war? It implies the masculine frontier, class muckerism, and Boston versus the rest of the country. There may even be echoed a robust Anglo-Saxon parody of Norman-French manners in Montmorencys and Percivals, and thus recall 1066 and all that. It may be all this and more. But is the Arab, in fact, being “taught” all these culture-historical implications of an alien tradition—about which our GI, in all probability, is neither conscious nor articulate? On the contrary, the Arab brings to it his own cultural apperceptions and interpretations. To be sure, the Arabs knew all about coffee (and sugar too, for that matter) long before Europeans; in fact, the common European names for these two things are all derived from the Arabic. The Arab is far more likely to be worried about another matter: is this oddly-shaped breadstuff perhaps cooked (O abomination!) in pork-fat; and is this act of eating it not so much naughty-humorous as filthily blasphemous? But perhaps he may be reassured that the cooking fat does not derive from an unclean animal, and he can be happy that it is cottonseed-oil or peanut-oil, possibly laced with beef suet, none of which were prohibited by the Prophet. Where, then, can he search for an explanation of the GI’s manifest amusement at himself in doughnut-dunking? Ah, at last it is clear: the doughnut is an obscene symbol for the female (such as is common in Arab life), with coffee “black as night, hot as hell, and sweet as a woman,” as the Arab prefers it. Now, perhaps, in universal male confraternity, he can join with his GI friend in tasting the sweetness of women. But these outlandish paynim kaffirs are certainly peculiar buzzards in their symbolisms! However, we are reassured, for these are the Arab’s ratiocinations, not ours; we are only dunking doughnuts, and vast disparate cycles of culture history are tangential at only one point—in the dipping of this comestible in this potable.

Blasphemy is, no doubt, also cognate with the obscene in another way. Blasphemy is the utterance of words prohibited of the sacred; but obscenity may be utterance of the tabooed with respect to the secular. A primitive may be forbidden by his religion to utter the name of a dead kinsman or even a word in which a syllable suggests the name or part of the name of his dead relative. But these tremendous sanctions may be no more potent emotionally than those which make taboo to us the utterance of certain thoroughly secular and commonplace words. In a medical work, we may write learnedly of feces; and the missionary back from China may speak of night-soil before the Ladies’ Aid Society. Rose fanciers may discuss a preferred manure, animal or vegetable, quite openly at the Elite Garden Club; and even the Bible speaks earthily of dung. Wholly unexceptionable literary works may discourse on excrement, poets may write of ordure and effluvia, and Sir James George Frazer deal insightfully with exuvial magic. An entirely nice girl may tell her college room-mate that her boy-friend’s line is just so much bull; and little boys playing double-dares yell “chicken” and Mamma does not scold. In heated political discussion at the Faculty Club, the current Republican government-

by-ad-agency may be pronounced thorough crap (or crud), nobody's feelings be hurt, and the discussion continue on the same high intellectual plane. But under no circumstances, scholarly or otherwise, may one give public utterance to that homely four-lettered Anglo-Saxon vocable, about which, in all conscience, I must leave my readers to guess. The emotional strength of that taboo is quite on a par with the primitive prohibition of the name of the deceased, for all that we, when mourning is over, may mention the name of a dead spouse with equanimity.

English is fantastically rich and sensitive in its vocabulary categories, but that is because of the peculiar historical experiences of the speakers of English. Genteel and obscene vocabulary categories are a direct descendant, culturally, of the Norman Conquest. The duchess perspires; the middle-class matron is in a rosy dew; but greasy Joan sweats as she keels the pot. Stomach began with the Greek word for "mouth," and then became the esophagus, but now seems to have settled temporarily at the midriff; but no matter—we have many variously colored alternatives: entrails, guts, insides, abdomen, belly, "Little Mary," "bread-basket," tummy, enteron, and coelem besides. The point to be made here is that because of their peculiar historical and philological origins, these words in English are actually gradations of a very fine sort on a gamut from the unexceptionable to the obscene. "Compassion," "sympathy," and "fellow-feeling" all mean literally the same thing, *feeling with* another. But compassion is lofty and abstract; sympathy is kinder, though still a bit formal; and fellow-feeling is downright friendly. What needs to be noted, however, is that the extraordinarily sensitive semantics and contexts of English in its vocabulary categories is a thing by no means to be taken for granted. The Hopi language, for example, has no "proper" versus "obscene" words.¹⁴ All words are on the same mundane, matter-of-fact level, with the exception, perhaps, of a vocabulary-category for "baby-talk," in which ordinary words are mutilated grammatically in stereotyped ways. In the absence of class differences, there are no "educated" versus "vulgar" vocabularies; and if certain matters are tabooed in discussion with certain relatives, they are categorically tabooed with *any* vocabulary. American Indians, in general, are much more sensitive than we are to the *who* in kinship situations; and whereas anything goes with respect to rough verbal or physical horseplay between a man and a woman who are in a kin-determined "joking relationship," those who are in "avoidance relationship" kin-wise will be inordinately shy and bashful in their relationships socially. For example, in one field situation among the Kiowa Indians, I had an old man as informant and his daughter-in-law as the only available interpreter. Since these are governed by a strict "avoidance-relationship," and since I knew almost no Kiowa, the old man talked off into space and not to his daughter-in-law directly, while she talked directly to me in English; in return, she appeared to be talking pointlessly to me in Kiowa (which the old man unofficially heard), after which he talked off into space again and the whole process began all over. Mary Buffalo told me, in high moral dudgeon, that "those Co-

¹⁴ See BENJAMIN LEE WHORF, *FOUR ARTICLES ON METALINGUISTICS* (1949).

manche got no shame," because the Comanche happen not to be possessed of some such taboo which the Kiowa had. Possibly we are doing no better than Mary Buffalo when we adduce as universals what are merely our own tribal taboos and obscenities. It is edifying to note, too, that it is precisely in such societies as have the taboo that we find "Coyote," in the funny stories told about him, shamelessly speaking directly to his daughter-in-law and indulging in "joking relationship" behavior or worse. It is funny because it is shockingly incongruous, or funny because it is prohibited—and plainly in the category of the obscene.

On the other hand, whatever our own reactions, the Aztec are not being obscene when they refer to gold as the "offal of the Gods."¹⁵ They are merely relating an etiological myth. Similarly,¹⁶

In the Brihadáranyaka Upanishad—one of the finest of the Upanishads—there is a passage in which instruction is given to the man who desires a noble son as to the prayers which he shall offer to the gods on the occasion of congress with his wife. In simple and serene language it directs him how—"when he has placed his virile member in the body of his wife, and joined his mouth to her mouth," he should pray to the various forms of deity who preside over the operations of nature: to Vishnu to prepare the womb of the future mother, to Prajapati to watch over the influx of the semen, and to the other gods to nourish the foetus, etc. . . . Yet the gross details of physical union were obviously not unclean to the writers of this and similar passages in the Upanishads.

On the contrary, the Hindus regard the Upanishads as the very highest flights of their religious and philosophical literature; and when it is realized that the worst fate that can befall a man is to die without a son to perform his rites and the cult of his soul after death, then we may guess how deeply serious and religious this language is in Hindu terms.

In the matter of nudity of the body or of body-parts in females, our male-dominated society is, perhaps understandably, ambivalent. Characteristically, in the case of a "living statue" display at the Chicago World's Fair, the law, with sensitive fidelity to the mores, decided that the exposure of both breasts was "obscene," but that the exposure of only one was "art," thus satisfying both church-goers and art-connoisseurs. Two decades ago, it was still being argued whether, with safety to public morals, the male torso might be exposed above the waist on bathing beaches; but for some centuries in our society, the ultimate obscenity has been the display of male genitals, or even their representation in painting and sculpture. Many Malayan and southeast Asiatic peoples are even more rigorous in this respect and do not permit the exposure of male nudity even before other males. The intensity of this repression is shown by the powerful projective sanction of the "evil eye" in which seeing the person does damage to him.¹⁷ But it is impossible to maintain that the

¹⁵ See PAUL RADIN, *THE STORY OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN* 104 (1927).

¹⁶ EDWARD CARPENTER, *INTERMEDIATE TYPES AMONG PRIMITIVE FOLK* 132-33 (1914).

¹⁷ A variant of this is found among the Atjehnese of northern Sumatra, among whom accidentally catching sight of a male nudity is considered "unlucky" to the viewer. See C. SNOUCK HURGRONJE, *THE ACHEHNESE* 42 (A. W. O'Sullivan transl. 1906).

total nudity in males of all ages among such people as the Nilotic Nuer can ever have any implication of obscenity to the Nuer themselves.¹⁸ Among the Kwoma of New Guinea, it is not lifelong nudity which is obscene, but the indiscreet public erection.¹⁹ A considerable number of people hide the penis, but not the scrotum, in a phallocrypt; the Sakai of Malaya, for example, slit the perineal T-band to cover the penis but expose a testis on each side.²⁰ At the other extreme, in Africa, we have²¹

. . . the prudish Baganda, who made it a punishable offence at one time for a man to expose any part of his leg above the knee [though] the wives of the king would attend at his court perfectly naked.

The total nudity of one sex but not the other is, of course, a commonplace in ethnological accounts, as is also nudity at one age but not another, or nudity of some status-group but not another, or in one social or religious context but not another.

Indeed, there is a scholastic discrimination of minutiae in obscene versus non-obscene nudity that approaches the precision even of English vocabulary-categories. The Etruscans and the classic Greeks (in particular the Spartans) regarded total public nudity of males in some contexts with complete unconcern. It was not the exposure of the penis which was obscene, but of the glans. Decorum demanded, therefore, that all men who had to show themselves naked in public, such as boxers, gymnasts, or actors, should wear a *ligatura praeputii*, or *kynodesme*, as is abundantly evidenced in Greek and Etrurian pottery. A similar discrimination is found among the Marquesans of Polynesia, though in other peoples, male infibulation has additional motives.²²

The total or partial nudity of the female body is quite as much a commonplace among peoples of the world. It may be didactically useful, perhaps, to emphasize the atypicality in obscenity-sense of our own tribe: in far and away the majority of peoples of the world and on all continents, the exposure of the breast in nursing a child is quite without any connotation of obscenity whatever, nor is permanent exposure above the waist in women. Indeed, in ancient India, uncovering the breasts was a sign of deference to men on the part of lower-caste women and a sign of respect to superiors. That such modesty-sense regarding the breasts is almost wholly European is indicated by the Marotse practice of covering the bosom with a mantle when a strange European approaches, though ordinarily this mantle is

¹⁸ See C. G. AND B. Z. SELIGMAN, *PAGAN TRIBES OF THE NILOTIC SUDAN* 17 (1950). Nilotics, like the Nuer, among whom the men go naked, dislike clothing; the Nuba-Fung peoples, among whom men also go naked, apparently do not actively dislike clothing. For those interested in nudity, the best summary of primitive materials is to be found in I EDWARD WESTERMARCK, *THE HISTORY OF HUMAN MARRIAGE* 418-54, 497-571 (5th ed. 1925).

¹⁹ See JOHN W. M. WHITING, *BECOMING A KWOMA* 49, 51, 75-77, 86-87 (1941).

²⁰ See N. ANNANDALE AND H. C. ROBINSON, *FASCIOLI MAYALENSIS* 32-33 (1903-1904).

²¹ I WESTERMARCK, *op. cit. supra* note 18, at 545, citing 2 H. H. JOHNSTON, *THE UGANDA PROTECTORATE* 771 (1904).

²² See generally E. J. DINGWALL, *MALE INFIBULATION* (1925); see also C. J. Eberth, *Ethnological Remarks*, in "Die männlichen Geschlechtsorgane," Bd. 7, Teil 2, Abteilung 2, *HANDBUCH DER ANATOMIE DES MENSCHEN* (1904); N. E. HIMES, *A MEDICAL HISTORY OF CONTRACEPTION* 320-31 (1936).

worn across the back; such behavior is a direct and clear artefact of European missionary attitudes.

Also, it is quite plain that modesty sense by no means always pertains to the genitalia. The famous story is told by Sir Richard Burton of a Moslem woman in Africa who accidentally fell off a camel. Her skirts were around her head, but her husband regarded the contretemps with equanimity. It was no matter that other men knew that his wife was female—for had she not kept her face covered? Curiously, among the Touareg, it is the men who are veiled and do not expose the face, even before other men in eating. A Haida Indian woman is embarrassed to be caught by a strange man without her labret or lower lip plug. Among many Negro groups in Africa, propriety requires the buttocks to be covered, not the genitals. Philippine Islanders and Samoans think it indecent for the navel to be exposed, though every other part may go uncovered. In China, it is an obscenity for a woman to expose her artificially deformed feet to a strange man. Foot modesty is probably a very ancient Asiatic pattern, for it is found also among the Siberian Koryak, and an Eskimo woman in her igloo may be stripped down to a tiny Bikini skin garment before strange men if only she keeps her boots on, since removal of the boots has a sexual connotation. Among the Canary Islanders, a people isolated perhaps from Neolithic to early modern times, it was immodest for a woman to expose her breasts or feet. The Koryak regard it as deeply sinful to look upon the face of a dead person. Ainu women cover the mouth when speaking to a man. Some of the body parts involved with modesty seem strange indeed. Rameses III (1198-1167 B.C.) boasted in one of his inscriptions that his rule was so successful that he had made it possible for an Egyptian woman to go anywhere she liked *with her ears exposed*, and no stranger would molest her. The Japanese have eroticized the nape of a woman's neck.²³

With respect to obscene or publicly prohibited *acts*, there is the same lack of universality in what we happen to regard as obscenity. We have already seen that public coitus, repeatedly attested to in firsthand accounts,²⁴ is by no means unknown in Oceania, though normative ethicists would make this perhaps the very first of obscenities "universally" abhorred by all peoples of the world. Nor among physiological acts is it only coitus that is obscene in public contexts. In some cases, *eating* is an obscene act when performed in the presence of other people or in public; and the same Tahitians who copulated in public would eat separately and

²³ See authorities cited in La Barre, *The Cultural Basis of Emotions and Gestures*, 16 J. PERSONALITY 49 (1947), reprinted in SELECTED READINGS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY 49 (S. H. Britt ed. 1949), also reprinted in PERSONAL CHARACTER AND CULTURAL MILIEU 487 (D. G. Haring ed. 1949). See also L. HOPF, THE HUMAN SPECIES 307-08 (1909); Cook, *The Aborigines of the Canary Islands*, 2 AM. ANTHROPOLOGIST n.s. 451, 470 (1900); WALDEMAR JOCHELSON, THE KORYAK 104 (Jesup North Pacific Expedition Pub. No. 6, 1908); J. BATCHELOR, THE AINU OF JAPAN 35 (n.d.); J. H. BREASTED, A HISTORY OF EGYPT 484-85 (2d ed. 1919).

²⁴ E.g., I C.P.C. FLEURIEU, VOYAGE AUTOUR DU MONDE PAR MARCHAND 172 (1787). For the Marquesas, see also the early voyages cited by LA BARRE, *op. cit. supra* note 1, at 344. The practice appears to be established especially for Tahiti (where it was reported by Captain Cook and numerous others), but it was also found in the Margonne and Caroline Islands and perhaps elsewhere.

privately. The Maldivian Islanders ate always in solitude, retiring for this purpose to the innermost part of the house and covering the windows lest passersby observe them; the practice is reported for other Oceanic peoples as well. Many of the "divine kings" in Africa and elsewhere, collected by Sir James G. Frazer in a volume of *The Golden Bough*,²⁵ never ate in public; perhaps some of the same reasons are involved in the fact that the Pope never dines in public, nor does an American admiral on his flagship.

The Manchus regard kissing in public by men and women as the utmost obscenity, almost as a perversion, although husband and wife as well as lovers may kiss each other stealthily since it has a shameful significance.²⁶ And yet,²⁷

On account of the Manchu system of class in the house, the frankest love intercourse can take place in the room, where several persons are sleeping. The people then show that they see nothing, hear nothing. The husbands of these women, if all regulations and customs are observed, are not shocked at all by their wives' unfaithfulness with their [the husbands'] young relatives.

Even more striking, from our point of view, is that among the same Manchu who regard public kissing with such horror, it is quite customary for a mother to take the penis of her small son into her mouth and to tickle the genitals of her little daughter in petting them in public.²⁸

Ceremonial dances not infrequently imitate the coitus of animals or of humans, often in the most sacredly religious of contexts. The coitus of animals is imitated especially in Siberia; of humans, perhaps most commonly in Africa and Oceania.²⁹ But what seems another curious inconsistency to us occurs among the classical Japanese. From the Héian period onward, and perhaps earlier, the Japanese have had the sacred *kagura* dance performed on the stage of a Shinto shrine at village festivals. In the early days, the sacred *kagura* was a naïvely erotic dance which "adopted so primitive a form of vulgar indecency that it could not be performed today."³⁰ Something resembling the ancient *kagura* may still be viewed in remoter Japanese villages, but western-acclimated Japanese authorities, with a sensitive attention to "face," attempt to keep these from the view of European visitors. Nevertheless, it is the same Japanese with their perfectly candid *kagura* dance who so vehemently object to the "obscenity" of public kissing³¹ that modern American movies must be drastically edited before showing to Japanese audiences.

²⁵ 3 JAMES G. FRAZER, *THE GOLDEN BOUGH* 116-19 (3d ed. 1919).

²⁶ See Shirokogoroff, *Social Organization of the Manchus*, J. NORTH CHINA BRANCH OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC Soc'y 101 (3d extra volume 1924).

²⁷ *Id.* at 151.

²⁸ *Id.* at 122.

²⁹ There are also transplanted instances in America. See Kahn, *Notes on the Saramaccaner Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana*, 31 AM. ANTHROPOLOGIST n.s. 468, 485 (1929).

³⁰ FOREIGN AFFAIRS ASSOCIATION OF JAPAN, *JAPAN YEAR BOOK 1939-1940*, at 813 (1939).

³¹ On the kiss, see A. E. CRAWLEY, *STUDIES OF SAVAGES AND SEX* 113-36 (T. Besterman ed. 1929). But it is the same Japanese, too, who abhor the public kiss, who were accustomed until very recent times to have studio photographs made of their little boys with the penis exposed outside the trousers.

This discussion has attempted to show, through comparative examples, the anthropological relativity of obscenity, whether in words, artistic representations, nudity of various parts of the body, or publicly prohibited acts. But it should be noted that we have largely included only those matters relevant to what we in our society would consider obscene. We perform with indifference a great number of acts (such as drinking milk, blowing the nose, eating a beefsteak, or holding food in the left hand) which various oriental peoples view with inexpressible horror. Nowhere can we find those absolutes which normative ethicists desire to discover in order to support their own tribal rationale through a naïve *consensus gentium*. There are no such human universals. Infrahuman animals lack "obscenity" as they lack "modesty," and the various tribes of men have widely varying concepts of both. All such notions are the artefact of culture and tuition. All that we can postulate of the social animal, man, is that he has the *capacity* for repression through socialization or enculturation, and hence can have very intense *reactions* to the prohibited or the obscene as defined by his society—but so far as any "universality" of descriptive *content* of these categories is concerned, this is wholly the prescription, cultural or legal, of his own social group or subgroup.