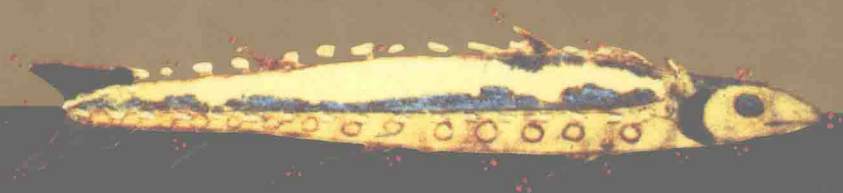


*Michael
Meade*



*Men and
the Water
of Life*

Initiation and the Tempering of Men

"Both male and female readers can welcome the abundance of story, insight, and argument Irish-American mythologist and storyteller Meade brings to this remarkable first book." — *Bloomsbury Review*

Men and the Water of Life

INITIATION AND THE TEMPERING OF MEN



Michael Meade



HarperSanFrancisco
A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers



HarperSanFrancisco
and the author, in association
with the the Rainforest Action
Network, will facilitate the
planting of two trees for every
one tree used in the
manufacture of this book.

Copyright acknowledgments begin on page 443.

MEN AND THE WATER OF LIFE: *Initiation and the Tempering of Men*. Copyright © 1993 by Michael J. Meade. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

Text design by Margery Cantor

FIRST EDITION

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Meade, Michael.

Men and the water of life : initiation and the tempering of men /
Michael Meade.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-06-250542-4

1. Masculinity (Psychology)—Cross-cultural studies.

2. Initiation rites—Cross-cultural studies. 3. Men—Folklore—
Cross-cultural studies. I. Title.

HQ1090.M4 1993

305.31—dc20

92-56405

CIP

93 94 95 96 97 ♦ HAD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This edition is printed on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standards
Institute Z39.48 Standard.

Men and the Water of Life





The salmon on the cover represents the Celtic "Salmon of Knowledge" that gains wisdom while swimming in the sacred pool amid the nine trees of knowledge. According to the myth, when the nuts on the tree are ripe, they turn scarlet. When the fish in the pool are struck by the falling nuts, they absorb the knowledge of the tree.

Whoever could catch a Salmon of Knowledge would be flooded with inspiration by one taste of it. The inspiration would reveal all that had happened in the past, whatever was transpiring in the present, and what was about to happen as well. The salmon was considered the oldest of animals and therefore the oldest ancestor. Within that salmon was the knowledge of how to release the son of the earth, who was trapped among the rocks at the bottom of the water, and the knowledge of how to stop a battle that has already commenced.

*This book is dedicated to my father,
who has gone ahead to the place of ancestors,
and to my mother, who has always insisted
that we came from a land of promise and holy wells.*

***Myth is the foundation of life; it is the timeless pattern,
the religious formula to which life shapes itself. . . .
Whereas in the life of mankind the mythical represents
an early and primitive stage, in the life of an individual
it represents a late and mature one.***

THOMAS MANN

Contents

Introduction 1

Part One: The Road of the Two Fathers

- | | | |
|---|------------------------|----|
| 1 | The Hunter and His Son | 27 |
| 2 | The King's Hut | 36 |
| 3 | The Two Slayings | 46 |
| 4 | A Fondness for Swords | 56 |
| 5 | Spirit Fathers | 68 |

Part Two: Moving the Mother

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|-----|
| 6 | The Boy and the Half-Giantess | 87 |
| 7 | The Spell | 101 |
| 8 | The Lizard in the Fire | 111 |
| 9 | Breaking the Spell | 121 |

Part Three: Ceremonies of Innocence

- | | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 10 | Recovering the Boy, Uncovering the Man | 137 |
| 11 | The Druid's Hut | 149 |
| 12 | The Land Below the Waters | 162 |

13	Bound for the Sacred	181
14	Conditions on the Soul	193

Part Four: The Land of Fire

15	The Burning Feather	217
16	Litima: The Inner Heat	233
17	Those Who Are Burning	246
18	Cooling the Fires	260
19	Leaping into the Cauldron	276

Part Five: The Water of Life

20	Breaking Down	297
21	The Territory of Brothers	306
22	Submission, Surrender	319
23	Men of Stone	335
24	The Effects of the Water of Life	351

Part Six: The Companions

25	Incurable Wounds	375
26	The Territory of the Ancestors	386
27	Conflict, Shadows, and Community	402
28	At the Wedding	423

	Acknowledgments	437
--	-----------------	-----

	Select Bibliography	439
--	---------------------	-----

The Forest of Stories

THE HUNTER AND HIS SON (Hausa, Africa)	23
THE SWEETNESS OF LIFE (Ronga, Africa)	70
THE BOY AND THE HALF-GIANTESS (Hausa, Africa)	85
THE LIZARD IN THE FIRE (Lope, Africa)	III
CONN-EDA (Ireland)	139
THE FIREBIRD (Russia)	209
THE WATER OF LIFE (Germany)	289
THE COMPANIONS (Universal)	365

INTRODUCTION



JUST AS MYTHS begin with origin stories, I want to begin this book by talking of beginnings—by describing the origins of this book in my own life and in the wider work from which it has grown. For over a decade, I have been working with men in workshops and conferences throughout North America, England, and Ireland. What is now called “men’s work” began for me when Robert Bly invited me to teach hand drumming and mythology at a workshop for men at the beginning of 1981. That workshop was one of the first gatherings of its kind, and I didn’t know what I was getting into. It was also the first of a long series of collaborations with Robert Bly, James Hillman, Terry Dobson, and many men now associated with this work. At that time, news of such events spread by word of mouth, and no one was sure how to name or describe these retreats. Most of the men attending had little or no experience with drumming, myths and symbols, or initiation and ritual. But that was due to change.

As interest in such events spread steadily, I had the opportunity to work with thousands of men of all ages and experience. At first, the groups consisted primarily of “white” men, although Etheridge Knight

frequently visited carrying poems and songs, black roots, scars, and wisdom. Eventually, men of all colors and many cultures were involved. Executives, ex-cons, priests, war veterans, doctors, healers of all kinds, students, craftsmen, professors, and artists of every description have now struggled joyously with drumming patterns, have wandered and labored in the "forest of stories," and have relived life's wounds as if they were all just waiting for the invitation to begin. There was a great surprise in the willingness of men to experiment in the study and practice of myth, music, emotional expression, and ritual forms—all of which I had been studying on my own for twenty years. Through these conferences, I felt as if a territory that had been lost was found again, as if a path had opened up that led from the present to the age-old grounds of the masculine psyche. And the path also led me back to the beginnings of my interest in myths and ritual.



When I was in high school, the divisions between the adult world and the world that my friends and I inhabited, between school and the street corners we claimed as our own, between weekdays and weekends, were sharp, full of oppositions, and unexplained. We were able to move through the daily world governed by teachers and family, but our real lives took place on a different plane, where all feelings and events were intensified. Each week culminated in the rituals of the weekend—our rites of attraction to and fear of gang wars on Friday night, costume-drama romances on Saturday night, and church on Sunday.

During the 1950s in New York City, local neighborhoods were being redefined as "turfs" by the gangs that lived in and roamed through them. This re-visioning and renaming made the streets the territory of youths, to be defended against adults, authorities, and outsiders of all kinds. We were in an unguided experiment that moved in and out of the realm of initiation and myth, although we didn't realize that. The gangs were named after royalty—the Dukes, the Crowns, the Kings, the Knights—or after animal totems—the Blackhawks, Sharks, Cobras. Their names alone separated them from the banality and predictability of daily life. Friday night was the time for "rumbles," for preplanned or impromptu battles with neighboring gangs. Whether or not there was an actual battle, the air was thick with expectation, testosterone, the ring of challenges and boasts, and the rhythms of back slaps, handshakes, and fast feet.

It was a baffling world of light and dark. One moment we were suffused with the warmth of friendship and thankfully contained in a band. Then we were a reckless crew animated by our symbolic name, walking our mythical turf. The next moment that world was torn open by enemies trying to cut into our territory, destroy our bonds, intimidate us, or defame our name. Our bodies and our imaginations leapt at the feelings of belonging to the gang, the more so because it was separate from parents, school, police, children—history itself! We had created a world that existed in the same physical space as the worlds of family and society but was somehow on a different plane. In some respects, this world coincided with the neighborhood, but its boundaries were not simply physical. You could enter it unawares and violate its rules unknowingly. You could threaten it by not recognizing it or by misusing its name. It was mythical and literal, imaginary and concrete at the same time. If those inhabiting this world had listed its characteristics, it would have sounded like something out of *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad*.

On Friday night, the gang would wander like the Fianna, the ancient Irish bands of warriors that guarded borders and broke boundaries. On Saturday, we gathered together to review the night before—what could have happened, what did happen, what would happen the next time. It was also time to get ready for the “heart of Saturday night.” There would be a dance, a party, or just hanging out—but somehow there was always music, and if possible in any way, girls, and if lucky, pretty girls, and if this was really “it,” sex. But if not actually sex, then talking of it, preparing for it, using the language of it, telling stories of finding it, of getting it, of losing it. And not just sex, but the romance of it, the imagination of it.

Music and dance were doorways to the rituals of desire. Ritual costumes had to be shaped from everyday clothes: unusual shoes, polished to shine the flashing feet; socks to match the shirt, as if to say we were subtle; contrasting pants, to say we were not. Hair was slicked up and back as if to show the speed at which our minds were moving, and shirts were open to the winds of summer or winter, for these were rituals of exposure and display. Wild and tentative dances led us into the mysterious world of girls, where slow songs and melodies softened the edges of the mind. Girls whose shapes had barely been visible hours ago were now voluptuous. Our world was no longer defined by the borders of our turf but by the inches between bodies and the extensions of time and space made through promises of “always,” “anywhere,”

"anytime," and "everything." The separations between boys and girls dissolved, and we entered a temple where a different dance was required. Instead of defending our turf, we now engaged in surprising rituals of self-revelation.

On Sunday, we told stories of what had or hadn't happened, could have happened or should have happened, except that now we were going to church. Sunday was God's day, the end of one week and the beginning of the next. It was the last day of creation. God rested; we paused. Retelling the events of Friday and Saturday was a way to mythologize what had happened. We embellished the facts, enlarging them to mythic proportions, and we got pulled into the mythic aspects of ourselves. Sometimes we hung around outside the church, making our myth as the faithful inside were reviewing theirs.

God was everywhere in his effect on this morning. The newspaper was a great, heavy summary of the creations and destructions of the week; stores were closed in honor or in fear of God. Another world appeared that belonged to a god who accepted silence and money, prayers and songs, excuses and sinners. Despite the dogmas and the preachings, we each met some god on our own, in some secret inner way. While we entered together the ritual of the church, what happened to each of us was uniquely cleansing, uplifting, downcasting, frustrating, damning, or ecstatic.

Into this temple were brought the aggressions of Friday and the delicate dance of Saturday, mixed with the aspirations and melancholies of the rest of the week, all wafting through the air of the church as if inhaled and exhaled on the breath of God. In my church, the father god was distant and hard to see; the young son was held by the mother herself; and all were surrounded by the bloody and pious confusion of saints. Our own confusions, joys, wounds, and losses seemed to be deepened by the steady rhythms and repetitions of the church rituals. The neighborhood and the turf, the gang and the family were all held together inside a world that had power by rite, by art, by movements repeated by ancestors, by secrets confessed, by births blessed, by deaths mourned, and by marriages celebrated. The past, the present, the wounds carried in and out, even the jokes we made about it—all were consecrated, whether or not we believed. Even if we mocked it, we knew that this world was sacred and that here we shared our souls with some god and some goddess.

Then Monday would come, and schoolbooks would rise up like barriers to the mysteries that absorbed us. School itself seemed to

deny the outer and inner intensities and violent complexities of the other realms we lived in. Occasionally, something was said or read in class that would cause the room to vibrate for a moment, and the boundary between the world of school and the worlds we mostly inhabited would dissolve. But most of the time, the rhythms, feelings, and purposes of our activities were contrary to those of family, school, and the routines of daily life.



On my own, I poured through books and newspapers looking for hints about these apparently parallel and separate worlds, searching for the links that connected them. I could find none. Apparently, these different and even antagonistic realms were to be experienced like classes in school. You went from literature to science to religion. When the bell rang, you simply switched realms. After school, you went home to family, and from family to gangs, to dances, to church. At church and in school, there were bells to let you know when to switch realms; the others had more subtle signals that had to be studied and learned. But there were no thresholds, no evident connections; one world didn't even recognize the existence of the others.

I found another world on my thirteenth birthday when my aunt gave me a copy of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, an anthology of Greek myths and legends. I was stunned by the stories, which I read and reread. The tales of gods, goddesses, and humans caught in extreme and mysterious situations seemed more like life than anything else I had heard or read. The stories seemed to explain what was happening within me as well as in the world around me. But they did not "explain" in the sense of making the events and meanings of my life plain and clear; rather, they mirrored the complications and dramas of the life I was experiencing. That book reshaped my mind. The stories gave a form to my internal life and opened a vast dwelling place within, where the imagination and emotions denied by family, school, and church were accepted. In many ways, I've never stopped reading that book.

Later that year, I was in a movie theater with a few friends. We were trying to be a "crew," a small, local gang. We were cool; we had a street corner where we hung out and some older guys to watch and emulate. One of our rules was that we couldn't pay to get into the movie theater; we had to enter some other way. The management of

the theater had set up elaborate defenses to try to keep us out or make us pay. On this particular day, we had walked along the train tracks, climbed a fence, slid down a hill, jumped from the top of a wall to the alley behind the theater, and tapped on the rear fire door until some kid had opened it, and we slipped in.

During the movie, I got up to go to the bathroom and suddenly found myself surrounded by six older guys. They escorted me to the bathroom, which was upstairs behind the projection room. They threw everyone else out and shoved me to the floor by the white urinal.

While one guarded the door, the other five stood over me. The leader held a sharpened monkey wrench in my face; the others held pipes. They were from a nearby neighborhood. I recognized the leader; he had a reputation for having put someone in a hospital and for carrying a homemade zip gun. His hand shook as he angrily accused me and my crew of calling his gang punks. Now he was going to show us what happened to anyone who challenged them. At first I was too startled to understand what he was saying. Then I realized that they had mistaken me for a friend who had recently tangled with them and got away. This was the payoff; they were going to mess me up.

As my eyes went back and forth between the sharp, curved edge of the monkey wrench and the mad eyes of the kid holding it, my mouth began to talk on its own. I hurriedly explained that I wasn't the one who had called them names. Why would I be fool enough to challenge them? They were older and armed, I said, and everyone knew they were tough. Our crew was just forming; we wouldn't challenge them. But listen, I went on; I know what happened. My friend was cursing you, looking for a fight. Now, there are things you don't know about him. He's crazy, I said. He does this shit all the time. His older brother beats him, and it makes him crazy. Actually, their father beats both of them, but the older one won't take it anymore, so my friend is getting beat up by his father *and* his brother. So he's crazy, and what he says doesn't make sense. It's like he's just going around yelling. It doesn't mean anything.

I was talking fast, and I could see the leader's eyes waver and the wrench drift a little away from my head. I kept talking. The more I talked, the more they calmed down. They got caught up in the story of this guy's family and forgot about messing me up.

They wound up letting me go. I was to tell my friend to apologize; they would be waiting outside the theater after the show. I walked

back to my seat, still in great fear. I told my friends. We crawled on the sticky floor of the theater, pushing everyone's legs out of the way. We got to the side door, burst through it, and tore down the alley. Before the movie was over, we were standing on our corner discussing what had happened, rehashing it, figuring out what to do next.

Someone once asked me how I became a storyteller, and this was the event that suddenly came to my mind. The tool that had been made into a weapon, the mistaken identity, the strange way in which I was as caught up in the story I was telling as my attackers were, and the way the telling of one tragedy had seemed to avert another—all these elements were compelling to me. But to my friends other parts were important: How did they surround you? Were they all in different aisles waiting for you? Would they have taken any one of us? What did the wrench look like? Who else is dangerous in that crew?

My friend was angry because I had talked about him and his family. He felt that this was just going to make his life worse. He wanted to go right back and have it out with them. We pointed out that he would die on the spot and that this would accomplish nothing. What happened next was strange. He went home instead and attacked his older brother, putting the blame back on him. If his brother hadn't beaten him, he said, he wouldn't have cursed that crew. The protective side of the older brother awakened, and he went out, got some of his friends, and they confronted the monkey-wrench gang. Those guys didn't want to mess with the bigger, older guys, so they agreed not to do anything. It was all over. We could even go back to the movie house.

The turns in these events left me a lot to think about. There seemed to be stories within stories, and strands woven together in a way I couldn't quite grasp. Our plan to get in and out of the theater without paying or getting caught by the manager reminded me of the story I'd read in the mythology book about Odysseus escaping the Cyclops by hiding under the sheep. But inside that was the story of my being cornered and threatened with death, and again inside that was the story of my friend and his family. That story wasn't actually the "truth" about why he had challenged the gang. My friend's brother probably hadn't hit him just before the encounter with the crew; he was carrying this rage all the time, most of us were. What I had told was a story of why my friend was so hurt and angry and maybe why they, too, were so touchy and felt they had to be armed. Facts, psychology, and myth were all mixed together, and all unfold-