

Introducing The Anthropology of Ritual



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Body Rituals of the Nacirema

- ‘Body Rituals of the Nacirema’ was a satirical paper published by the anthropologist Horace Miner in 1956.
- “Discusses the curious body ritual of that complex, mysterious, and diverse American ethnic/cultural group known as the Nacirema.”
- Nacirema - American.
- Presentation of everyday activities - such as brushing teeth - as an external observer trying to make sense of them - what is the purpose, function, meaning of the activity?
- Where do we draw the line between everyday activities and ritual activities?
- What is the difference?
- ‘Ritual’ may well depend on perspective.



Body Ritual among the Nacirema

HORACE MINER
Faculty of Chicago

THE anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which different peoples behave in similar situations that he is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs. In fact, if all of the logically possible combinations of behavior have not been found somewhere in the world, he is apt to suspect that they must be present in some yet undiscovered tribe. This point has, in fact, been expressed with regard to this organization by Malinowski (1944: 71). In this light, the magical beliefs and practices of the Nacirema present such unusual aspects that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go.

Professor Linton first brought the people of the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago (1936: 115), but the culture of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Great Lakes and the Tennessee of Illinois, and the Gulf and Atlantic of the Americas. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east. According to Nacirema mythology, their nation was organized by a culture hero, Yagobawa, who is otherwise known for two great feats of strength—the throwing of a piece of soap across the river Pa-To-Mac and the chopping down of a cherry tree in which the Spirit of Truth resided.

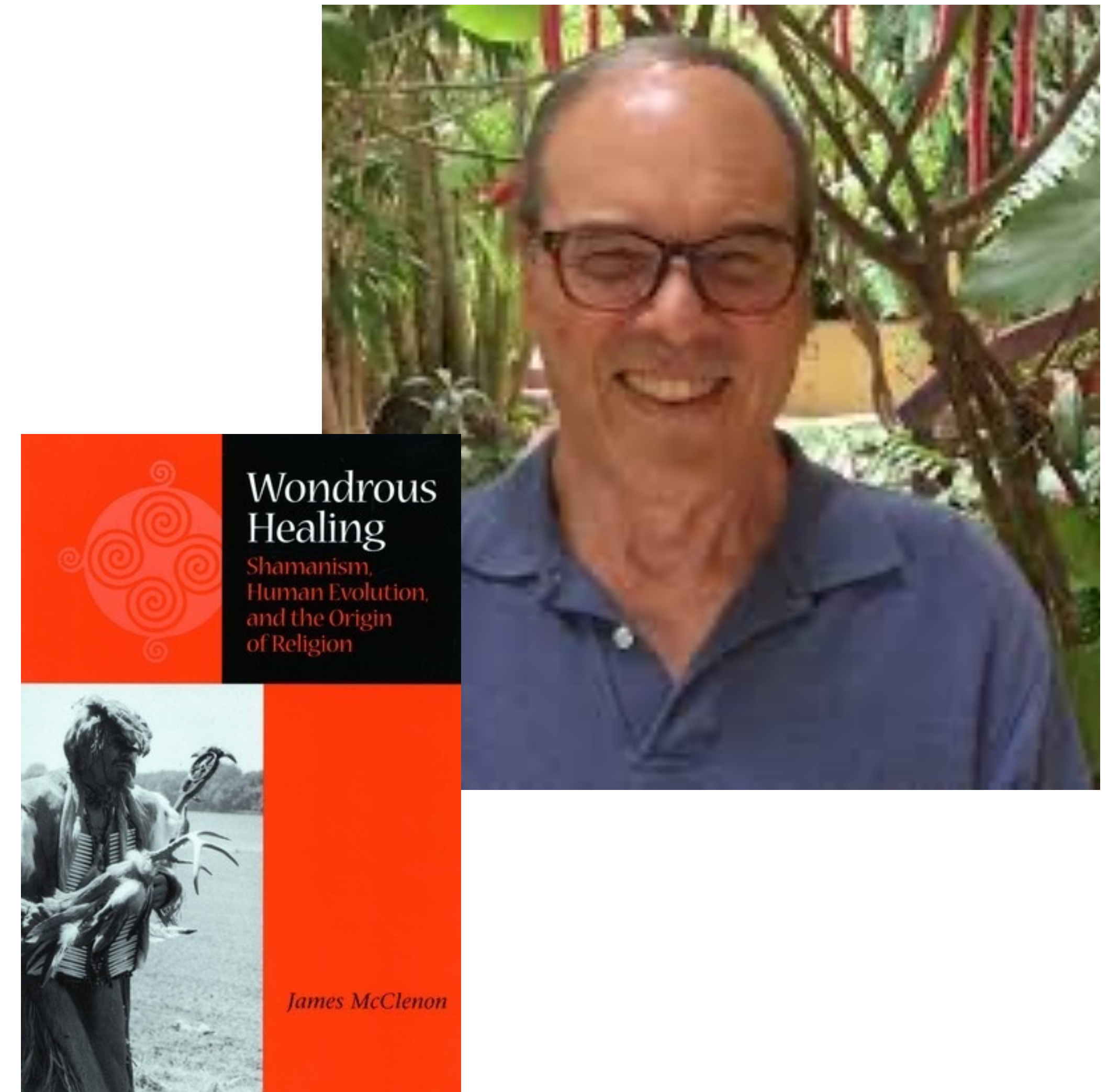
Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed magic economy which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people's time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of their labor and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which form as a dominant concern in the minds of the people. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremonial aspects and associated philosophy are unique.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its normal tendency is to debility and disease. Encouraged in such a body, man's only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of the powerful influences of ritual and expensiveness. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their homes and, in fact, the splendor of a house is often related to its number of such ritual centers in possession. Most houses are of waste and daily construction, but the shrine rooms of the more wealthy are walled with stone. Poorer families limit to the rich by applying poverty plaques to their shrine walls.

While each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. The rites are normally only discussed with children, and then only during the period when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to establish sufficient

Ritual Healing Theory

- A theory proposed by sociologist James McClenon in 1997.
- Evolutionary theory suggests that ritual performs a physiological function in healing.
- “Ancient primates probably used rudimentary rituals to alleviate social stress. Hominids are assumed to have devised more complex rituals, producing therapeutic altered states of consciousness (ASC). At some stage, Homo sapiens devised shamanic/hypnotic therapies, coupling ASC with suggestion. Because such practices were effective, these rituals selected for genotypes associated with hypnotizability. With increased frequency of these genotypes, religious sentiment, myths, and ideologies justifying ritual became possible” (McLenon, 1997).
- Might there be more to ritual than just interpretation? Does ritual actually do things?



Overview

- Ritual Origins.
- Ritual Theories.
- Experience and Beyond.
- Conclusion.

Ritual Origins

Ritual

- Etymology: The English word ritual derives from the Latin *ritualis*, "that which pertains to rite (ritus)."
- *Ritus* was the proven way of doing something, or "correct performance, custom."
- Scholarly definitions: there are many.
- "What the term "ritual" means, with its multiple connotations, depends greatly on its community of users, on whether they are psychiatrists, ethnographers, theologians, liturgists, neurologists, or simply committed atheists. The questions it inspires can be approached by hermeneutic interpretation, evolutionary explanation, and neuropsychological experimentation (Turner, 2015).
- Elements of ritual - performance, symbolism, tradition, participation...



Non-Human Ritual

- Evidence of pre-human ritual, e.g. burial of the dead amongst Neanderthals.
- “Various Neanderthal cultural remains can be interpreted as related to symbolic activities: burials, ornaments, pigments, unusual objects that do not fall within the technical sphere (wings, feathers, raptor claws), and more recently, the frequentation of deep underground environments which implies freeing of oneself from trepidations about darkness and relies on the discovery of unknown or even dangerous environments” (Jaubert, Maureille & Peresani, 2022).



Non-Human Ritual

- Chimpanzees recently observed conducting ‘post-mortem ritual activities’ with recently deceased, e.g. gently cleaning the body.
- “In particular, the reported corpse handling in chimpanzees may suggest that chimpanzees have evolved in complex social organizations conducive to the emergence of post-mortem affiliation¹⁰. In other words, chimpanzees may form long-lasting social bonds (e.g. see refs 11 and 12) that continue to influence their behaviour once the bonding partner has died. Like humans, chimpanzees may not treat deceased conspecifics carelessly, but instead handle corpses in a socially meaningful way – i.e. as social beings instead of inanimate objects – especially when this group member is a close associate, as in the reported case” (van Leeuwen, 2017).



Chimp ‘Temples’

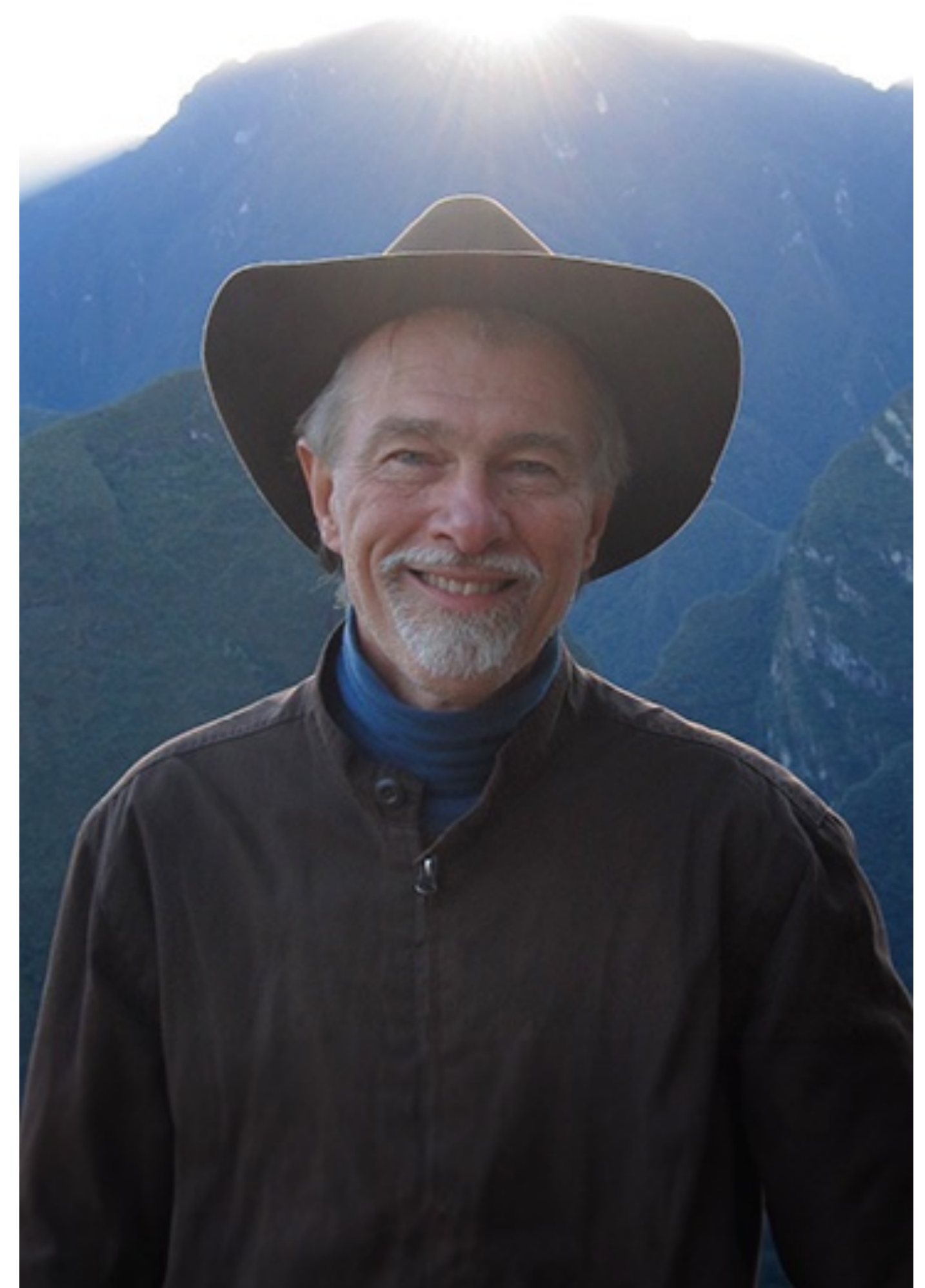
- Recent discovery of Chimpanzee sacred/ritual site:
- “We found four populations in West Africa where chimpanzees habitually bang and throw rocks against trees, or toss them into tree cavities, resulting in conspicuous stone accumulations at these sites. This represents the first record of repeated observations of individual chimpanzees exhibiting stone tool use for a purpose other than extractive foraging at what appear to be targeted trees. The ritualized behavioural display and collection of artefacts at particular locations observed in chimpanzee accumulative stone throwing may have implications for the inferences that can be drawn from archaeological stone assemblages and the origins of ritual sites” (Kuhl *et al.*, 2016).



Evolutionary Benefit

- Ritual likely serves an important evolutionary benefit, which would explain its cross-cultural prevalence.
- Michael Winkelman:

“[...] the foundations for religious phenomena are derived from our innate psychosocial and cognitive structures. Biogenetic structural perspectives indicate the evolutionary precedence of ritual—a system of behaviour—to the supernatural beliefs in myths. Human rituals originated in functions of primates’ ritualised displays that serve as a system of social communication and coordination. The integrative displays in primate societies and the ritualised behaviours for group unification among great apes reveal the pre-adaptations for human ritual. These include the endorphin-mediated bonding elicited by grooming that was extended in hominin evolution with synchronous behaviours such as group chorusing and dancing that co-opted the mechanisms of the endogenous opioid system to bond larger groups” (Winkelman, 2019).
- Rituals help with healing, and an individual physiological level.



Extreme Rituals

- Not all rituals are geared towards personal healing, and some even involve self-mortification (e.g. causing harm to the self).
- Dimitris Xygalatas *et al.*, point out that:

“Extreme rituals entail excessive costs without apparent benefits, which raises an evolutionary cost problem [...]”
- Conducted study that:

“[...] examined two rituals that were part of the annual Hindu festival of Thaipusam, one of the most widely celebrated religious festivals the world over: a low-ordeal ritual involving singing and collective prayer [...] and a high-ordeal ritual [...] involving body piercing with multiple needles and skewers, carrying heavy bamboo structures, and dragging carts attached by hooks to the skin for over 4 hr before climbing a mountain barefooted to reach the temple of Murugan.”
- They found that those who engaged in more painful forms of ritual practice were more giving.
- “These results suggest that costly displays of group commitment (though apparently wasteful) may be conserved because they intensify pro- social behaviors and attitudes among the wider community [...]” (Xygalatas *et al.*, 2013).



Complex Phenomena

- Fiona Bowie writes of the importance of ritual in human society, she explains how rituals:
- “[...] channel and express emotions, guide and reinforce forms of behaviour, support or subvert the status quo, bring about change, or restore harmony and balance [...] The succession of a culture's most deeply held values from one generation to another may be facilitated by means of ritual” (Bowie, 2006, p. 151).
- They are complex phenomena that have multiple points of intersection with other aspects of human culture, society and experience.



Theories

Functionalism

- Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942).
- For Malinowski, supernatural beliefs developed out of a need for psychological stability in an unpredictable world.
- To illustrate this point Malinowski considered the performance of fertility rituals amongst the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea, with whom he conducted fieldwork.
- Malinowski suggests that these rituals serve the important function of *reassuring* the individual that they have done all that is within their power to ensure a good harvest, especially once all practical and technological methods have been applied.
- Ritual serves a psychological function.



Structural Functionalism

- A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955).
- Drew on Durkheim's sociological interpretation to develop what he termed the structural-functionalist approach to understanding social systems.
- For Radcliffe-Brown it was not the beliefs of a society that were important, rather it was their rites and rituals - what people do - because it is the performance of rituals that brings the social group together.
- Indeed, he suggested, contrary to the approaches of psychological theorists (who tended towards the position that rituals developed from specific supernatural beliefs), that it was the performance of essential rituals (such as the burial of the dead), that were ultimately explained and given meaning by the development of supernatural beliefs.
- For Radcliffe-Brown, the origins of religion can be seen in the necessary rituals performed by human groups: ritual comes first, followed by explanatory beliefs.



Victor Turner

- Defined ritual as “a *transformative* performance revealing major classifications, categories, and contradictions of cultural processes” (Turner, 1985, p. 251).
- Rituals can tell us about a culture - what it values, its cosmology, preoccupations, etc...
- Rituals are also ‘effective’ - they do things, and are not simple performances.
- Turner was influenced in his ideas about performance by the work of the performance theorist Richard Schechner.



Performance

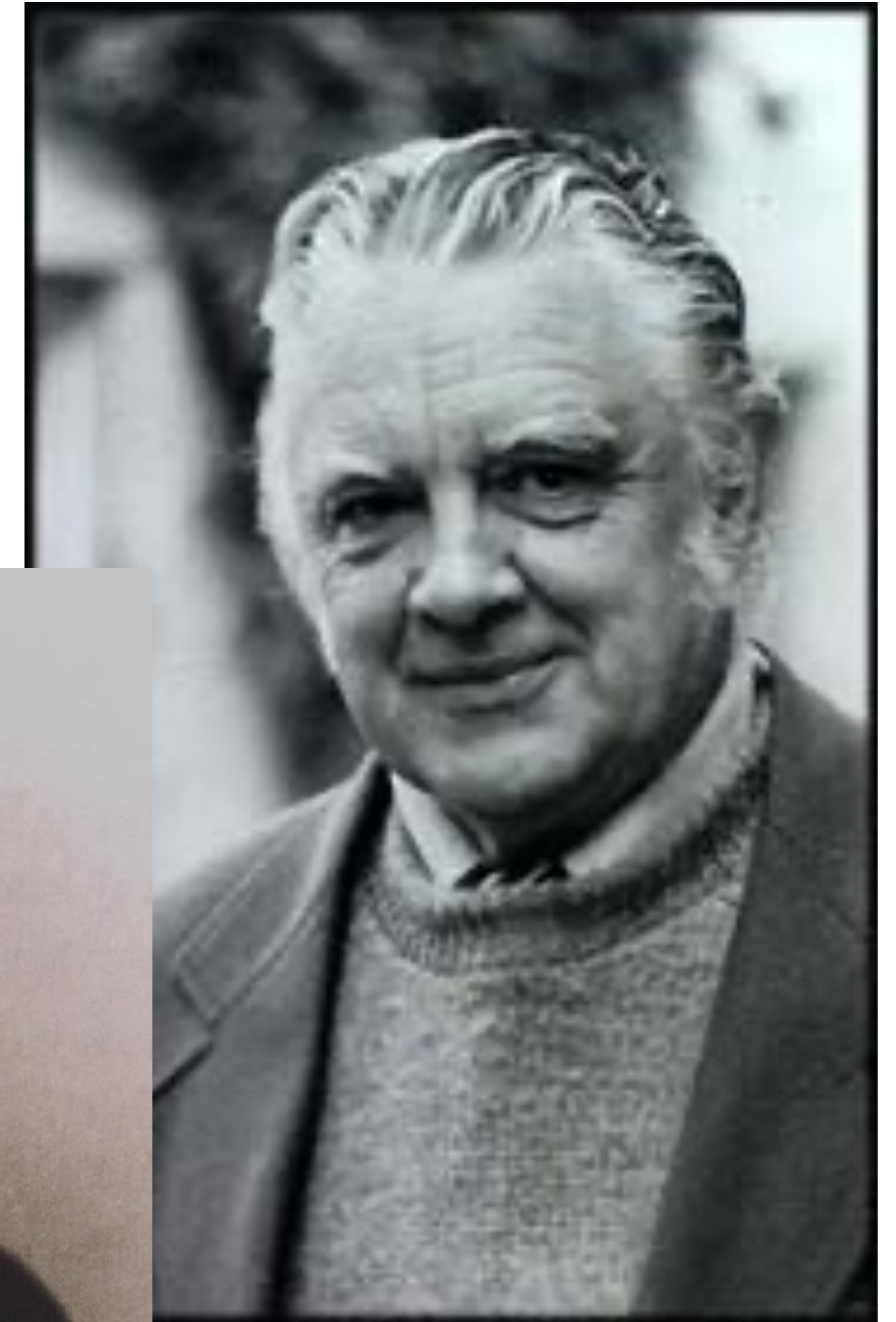
- Richard Schechner:
- “When, in western theatre, we speak of an actor “portraying a role,” using a metaphor from painting where the artist studies a subject and produces an image of that subject, we slide away from the main fact of performance: that the “portrayal” is a transformation of the performer’s body/mind – “the canvas” or “material” is the performer” (Schechner, 1988, p. 175).
- Schechner called this the ‘Efficacy-entertainment braid’ - conceived as a continuum along which performances may be classified, according to whether their function is for efficacy (to affect change/transformation in the world), or purely for entertainment.
- It can be both.



Ritual Structure

- Drawing on the work of Arnold Van Gennep, Victor Turner emphasised the functional structure of ritual for social integration, and in providing a structure for the life-course.
- “Rites of Passage” - demarcation of different points in the life-course and different social roles and statuses.
- He identified a three-part ritual structure:

“[...] rites of passage theoretically includes preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and post-liminal rites (rites of incorporation) [...]” (Van Gennep, 1908, p. 11).



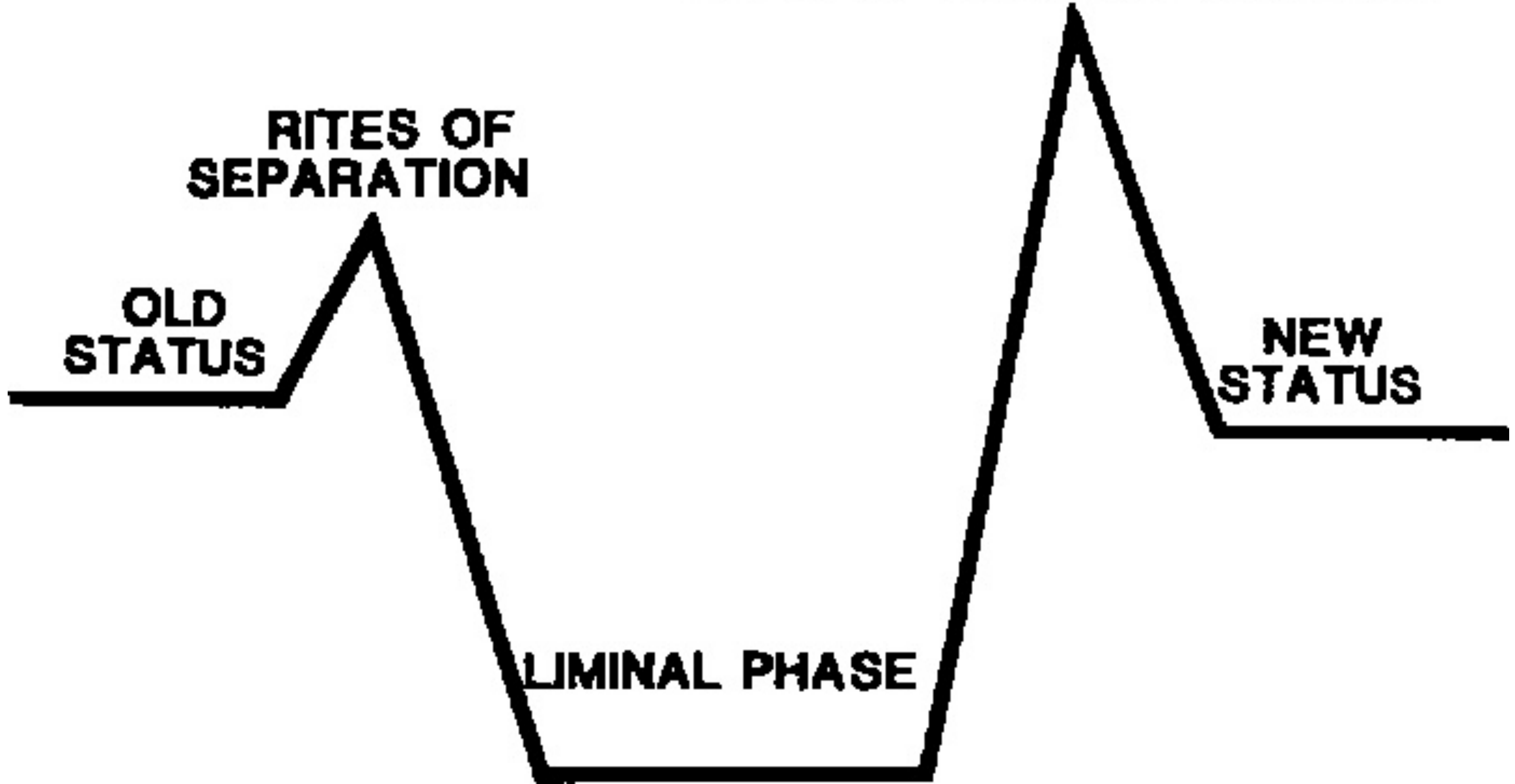
rites of reincorporation

rites of
separation

old
status

new
status

liminal phase



Liminality and Communitas

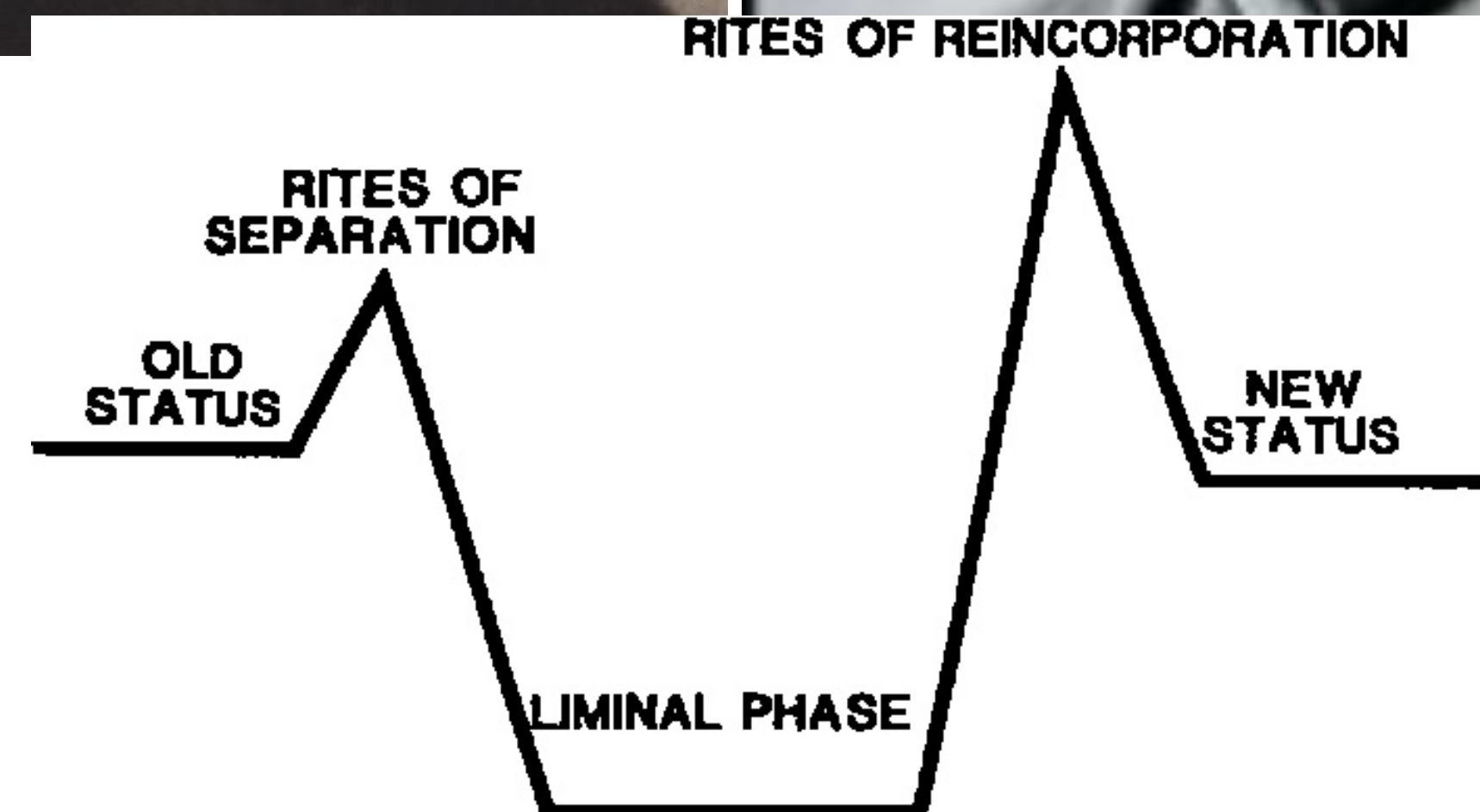
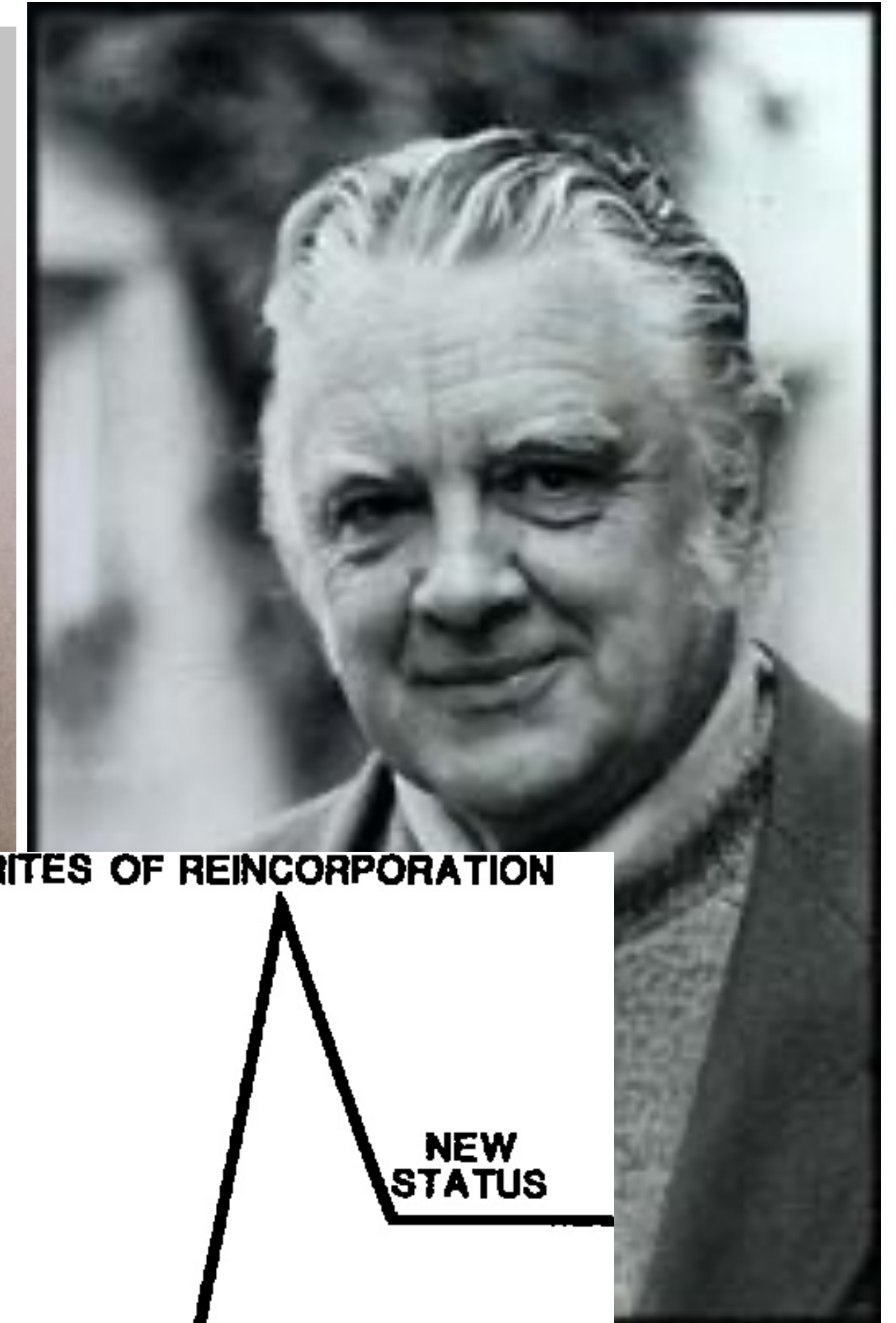
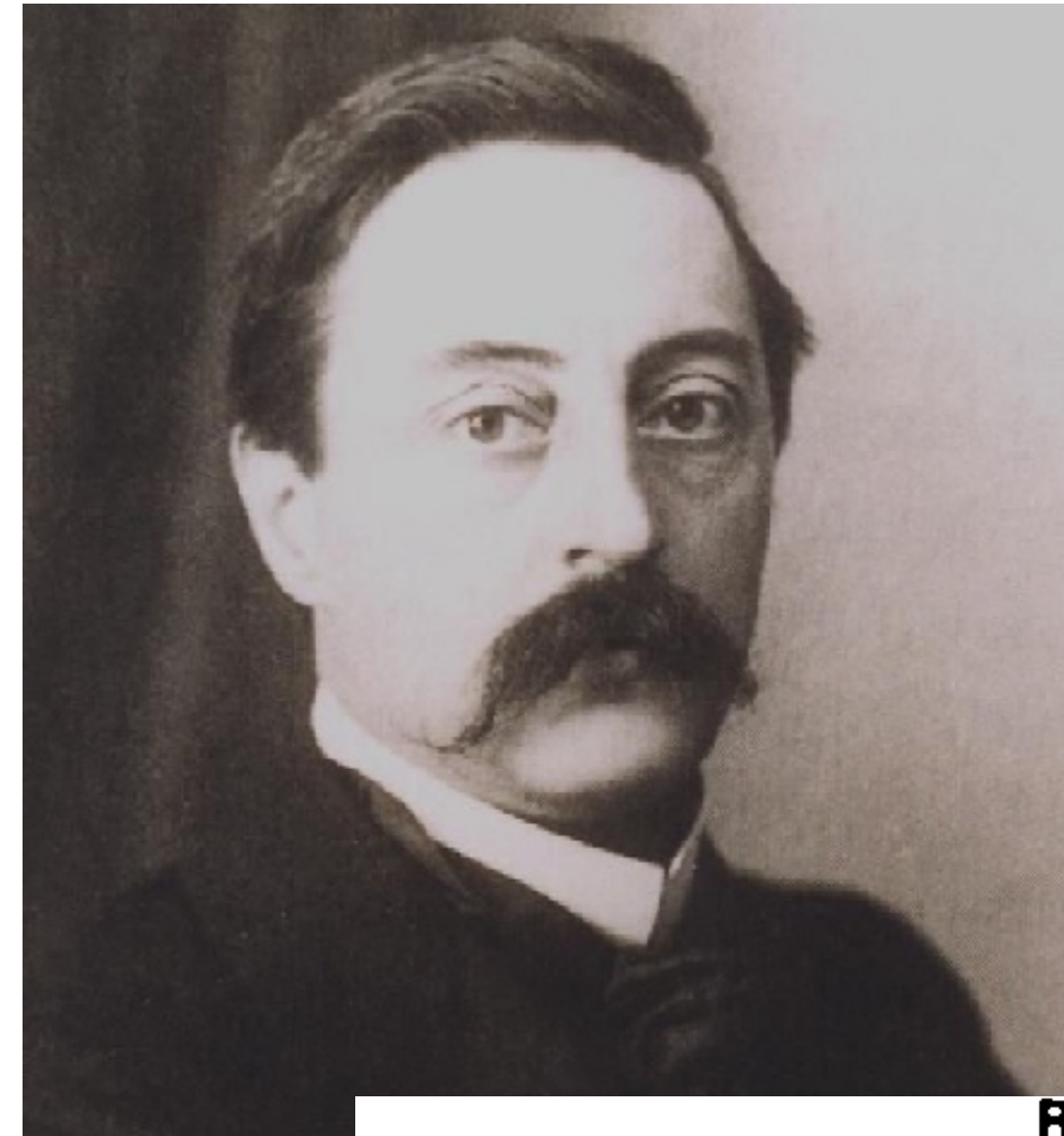
- **Liminality:**

“The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon” (Turner, 1969, p. 95).

- **Communitas:**

“We are presented, in such rites, with a "moment in and out of time," and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties” (Turner, 1969, p. 96).

- This feeling of ‘communitas’ persists after the neophyte has been reintegrated following the ritual - a sense of bonding and community.



Experience and Beyond

Edith Turner

- “I describe exactly how this curative ritual reached its climax, including how I myself was involved in it; how the traditional doctor bent down amid the singing and drumming to extract the harmful spirit; and how I saw with my own eyes a large gray blob of something like plasma emerge from the sick woman's back. Then I knew the Africans were right, there is spirit stuff, there is spirit affliction, it isn't a matter of metaphor and symbol, or even psychology” (Turner, 1993, p. 9).



Edith Turner

- “Again and again anthropologists witness spirit rituals, and again and again some indigenous exegete tries to explain that the spirits are present, and furthermore that rituals are the central events of their society. And the anthropologist proceeds to interpret them differently. There seems to be a kind of force field between the anthropologist and her or his subject matter making it impossible for her or him to come close to it, a kind of religious frigidity. We anthropologists need training to see what the Natives see” (Turner, 1993, p. 11).



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- Ritual needs reinterpretation from an outsider perspective.



Symbolism

- A standard view of symbols is that they are ‘representational,’ that is that they ‘signify’ something, e.g. a belief, idea, concept...
- Edith Turner:

“[...] there is a difference between (1) representational symbols, (2) spirit triggers to actuate the climax of the ritual - sometimes a series of jolts, and (3) sacramental objects that *are* the numinous - they *are* the spirit, and do not stand for it. Such an object is the tooth that afflicts the Ndembu sufferer. (It is unfortunate that the word “symbol” so strongly connotes “representation.”)” (Turner, 1992, p. 17).
- Ritual is not just geared toward the reinforcement of human social relations, but also establishes relationships with the non-human world of spirits, deities, etc.
- “Wherever invisible transhumance beings and/or powers are regarded as the first and final causes of perceived phenomena and processes, such entities may be regarded as crucially involved in social dramas, both as causes of untoward events and as providers of remedies for them, if approached by the proper cultural means - including divination, ritual, prayer, sacrifice, spells, and other magical procedures” (Turner, 1985, p. 218).



Ceremony

- Enables the establishment of ‘real’ relationships with the non-human.
- Robin Wall Kimmerer:

“Ceremonies are a form of reciprocity that renews bonds between land and people and focuses intention, attention, and action on behalf of the natural world, which is inclusive of the spiritual world...” (Kimmerer, 2018, p. 31).
- Ritual interaction with the living world in order to establish relationships.



Conclusion

- Ritual is a deep-rooted phenomenon, that has likely served important evolutionary functions.
- They can be understood from the inside and from the outside - outside (etic) perspectives often focus on the functional aspects of ritual - what it does - while insider (emic) perspectives might also include personal experience as well as the notion that rituals are 'spiritually' effective.
- There are psychological (in terms of stress reduction, wellbeing), physiological (in terms of healing), and sociological (in terms of social-cohesion and integration) functions of ritual.
- Rituals help to structure and explain the life-course, e.g. rites of passage.
- There is a ritual structure - separation, transition, reaggregation - that seems to be a cross-cultural phenomenon.
- Rituals are effective performances, they bring about change - change in the individual, socially, spiritually, ontologically...
- The experiential aspect of ritual is also important, e.g. the experiences had in ritual settings - they reinforce ritual structures, demonstrate efficacy.
- What is the implication of experience?
- Rituals - ceremonies - can provide a structure to connect with the non-human world.

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