
The ritual form

It is possible, and may even be preferable, to avoid general definitions of religion any more specific than the loose characterization offered in the first chapter – that for purposes of this book the term denotes the domain of the Holy, the constituents of which include the sacred, the numinous, the occult and the divine, and also ritual, the form of action in which those constituents are generated.

Such a sketchy representation – a verbal equivalent of pointing – is sufficient to indicate the region to be explored, its very vagueness suggesting the indefiniteness of the shape and extent of the territory religion occupies and the haziness of its boundaries. The concept of religion is irreducibly vague, but vagueness is not vacuity, and we know well enough what people mean by the term to get on with things.

The situation is very different with respect to religion's elements. For one thing uses of these terms, particularly "holy" and "sacred," vary widely, and "numinous" is less familiar than the others. For another, these conceptions both participate directly in and are the specific objects of analysis, whereas "religion" is simply the domain within which these analyses are conducted. As such our understandings of them must be much more specific than our general understanding of the term "religion." Because one of the main goals of this book is to develop a fuller grasp of the nature of religion, that is a better grasp of the Holy and its constituents, they will not be defined *a priori*. We will rather work toward them. It is sufficient for now to say that in this book the term "sacred" signifies the discursive aspect of religion, that which is or can be expressed in language, whereas "numinous" denotes religion's non-discursive, affective, ineffable qualities. The term "occult" refers to religion's peculiar efficacious capacities (it will concern us least) and

“divine” will signify its spiritual referents. The term “holy” (in common usage as well as in the work of many analysts often a synonym for sacred, which in turn, usually has wider and vaguer meaning than it does in this work) is distinguished here from “sacred” and will be reserved for the total religious phenomenon, the integration of its four elements which, I will argue, is achieved in ritual. This inclusiveness is apt, for the word “holy” probably shares its derivation from the Old English *halig* with the word “whole” as well as with “healthy” and “heal” (see American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd ed., 1992, Oxford Unabridged Dictionary, Partridge 1983: 292, 804).

Because the Holy and its elements are generated in and integrated by ritual, they will be approached through ritual, to whose introduction this chapter is devoted.¹

1. Ritual defined

I take the term “ritual” to denote *the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers*. This definition, being extremely terse, demands elaboration and discussion. Before discussing its specific features (performance, formality, invariance, inclusion of both acts and utterances, encoding by other than the performers) several general comments are in order.

First, this definition encompasses much more than religious behavior. Psychiatrists, for instance, have used “ritual” rather similarly conceived, or the closely related if not synonymous term “ceremony”, to refer both to the pathological stereotyped behaviors of some neurotics (Freud 1907), and to certain conventional, repetitive but nevertheless adaptive interactions between people (Erikson 1966: 337). In sociology and anthropology “ritual” and “ceremony” may designate a large range of social events, not all of which are religious, or may denote the formal aspects of such events (e.g. Bell 1992, Firth 1967b, 1973, Goffman 1967, E. Goody 1972, J. Goody 1961, Grimes 1990, Kertzer 1988, La Fontaine 1972, Leach 1954: 10ff., Moore and Meyerhoff (eds.) 1977), and application of the term has not been restricted to human phenomena. Ethologists have used it, virtually interchangeably with “display,” to designate behavior they have observed not only among other mammals but also among reptiles, birds, fish and even members of other phyla (Bell 1992, Blest 1961, Cullen 1966, Etkin 1964, Grimes 1990, Hinde 1966, Huxley 1914, 1966, Wynne-Edwards 1962).

One may ask whether we observe, in the use of a common term by

anthropologists, theologians, psychiatrists and ethologists, nothing more than a label stretched to cover phenomena of such diversity that little is gained from attending to whatever similarities may prevail among them, or whether the use of a single term for such widely differing phenomena as the courtship dance of fiddler crabs (Crane 1966) and the Roman Mass recognizes significant commonalities underlying their undoubted differences. Surely, some of the differences among instances of the general class "ritual" are both obvious and important. No one would be hard pressed to distinguish the genuflections of Catholic priests from the gyrations of impassioned crustacea, and it would be absurd to regard the former as no more than a mere complexification of the latter, or to minimize their differences in any other way. At the beginning, however, it may be more useful to attend to what is common to a class, or possible class, as vague or vacuous as these resemblances may seem, than to emphasize what may distinguish its members from each other, as striking as these differences may be. Prior attention to similarities does not preclude subsequent attention to differences, and it may help to place those differences in proper perspective. By noting first the ways in which religious and other rituals resemble each other it may be possible to distinguish them from each other more clearly later, and distinguishing religious from other ritual will be helpful in fashioning conceptions of the sacred, the numinous and the holy.

Our definition, then, encompasses not only human rituals, but also those stylized displays reported by ethologists to occur among the birds, the beasts and even the insects. Yet, as inclusive as this definition may be, not all behavior plausibly called "religious" fits comfortably within its terms. All manner of moral acts may be understood by those performing them and by the communities within which they occur to be innately religious, or at least to be informed by religious principles. There is little point, however, in attempting to force alms-giving or the avoidance of adultery, or all acts of respect for one's father and mother into the definition's mold. Not even all devotional acts are easily or properly encompassed by it. Some people experience what they take to be naked encounters, i.e., meetings unmediated by ritual, with what they understand to be the divine (James 1961[1902]: 42). We may ask, of course, whether they would have, or even could have, such "direct experiences" if they had not participated at other times in rituals which provided meaning for, or even in some way invoked, the later experience, or if they had not at least been told of them by others who had. But that is another matter, and as all ritual is not religious, not all religious acts are ritual. I

will, nevertheless, argue that ritual as defined here is the ground from which religion grows.

2. The logical entailments of the ritual form

Certain features often associated with ritual are notably absent from our definition. First, the term “symbol” does not appear. Whereas ritual is often taken to be a symbolic form (see, for instance, Tambiah 1985[1979]: 128, Moore and Myerhoff 1977: 13, 14 *passim*) it is not entirely or even essentially so if “symbol” is taken in Peirce’s sense, as it was in the first chapter. That ritual is not entirely symbolic is one of its most interesting and important characteristics, for through ritual some of the embarrassments of symbolic communication (notably the two vices of language, lie and the confusions of Babel) may be ameliorated.² We will first return to this matter at the end of this chapter and will continue to do so throughout this work.

Secondly, this definition obviously does not stipulate what ritual is “about” or what it is “for.” It is neither substantive nor functional, but gives primacy to the sensible features common to rituals always and everywhere, the features that may, in fact, lead us to recognize events as rituals in the first place. As such it can claim a reasonably close correspondence both to what I believe to be a universally, or near universally recognized (if not always lexically marked) category of action, and also to popular English usage. At the same time, stipulating as it does a number of specific features, it can claim, as our loose characterization of religion cannot, considerable analytic utility. As such the definition conforms to what Kapferer (1983: 194) suggests are requisites for an adequate definition of ritual.³

It not only privileges ritual’s obvious (i.e., perceptible) elements, none of which is in and of itself unique to ritual, but also tacitly stipulates enduring relations among these features, each of which may itself vary in some degree. It implies that the term “ritual” designates, as stated in the first chapter, a *form* or *structure*, and I will argue that, although none of the elements constituting this structure is unique to ritual, the relations among them are. To put this a little differently, ritual is a unique structure although none of its elements – performance, invariance, formality and so on – belongs to it alone. That the structure of ritual is peculiar to it is not immediately apparent in the definition and we shall better distinguish it from other formal performance forms later in this chapter.

The significance of the observation that our definition of ritual is

formal, rather than substantive or functional, is not merely taxonomic. It is clear that ritual, as a form of action may have and in a trivial sense inevitably has social and material consequences (that may or may not be “functional”). To define ritual as a form or structure, however, *ipso facto* goes beyond the recognition of such effects for, as sets of enduring structural relations among specified but variable features or elements, ritual not only can claim to be socially or materially consequential, but to possess *logical entailments* as well. *I will argue that the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers logically entails the establishment of convention, the sealing of social contract, the construction of the integrated conventional orders we shall call Logoi (singular: Logos, see chapter 11), the investment of whatever it encodes with morality, the construction of time and eternity; the representation of a paradigm of creation, the generation of the concept of the sacred and the sanctification of conventional order, the generation of theories of the occult, the evocation of numinous experience, the awareness of the divine, the grasp of the holy, and the construction of orders of meaning transcending the semantic.* These and other secondary entailments derivative from them inhere, as it were, in the form which we have defined as ritual and will reveal themselves as we unpack that definition, particularly in chapter 4 and later chapters.

3. Ritual and formal cause

I have stated that the conception of ritual proposed here is neither substantive nor functional, but assertions like “social contract is embodied in or is intrinsic to ritual’s form or structure”, or that “it is in the nature of ritual to invest its content with morality” may sound very much like simple functional statements. In fact, they are not, and it is important to make the nature of the argument clear before entering it, particularly since I have been seriously misunderstood on this matter in the past. Those who are not interested in such matters may wish to move directly to section 2.4.

This is a specific point on which I believe that I have been seriously misunderstood. Maurice Bloch, for instance (1986: 4ff.), seems to think that my analysis of the Maring ritual cycle constituted a functional-ecological theory of ritual in general. It did not. At the time of writing I really was not concerned with ritual as such, but with what I took to be ritual’s functions in a particular system. In fairness to him, his misunderstanding was probably at least in part my fault. In the final paragraph of *Pigs for the Ancestors* I asserted

that if we are to understand what is uniquely human we must also consider those aspects of existence which man shares with other creatures. This conviction has led me to set religious rituals and the beliefs associated with them in a frame of reference that can also accommodate the behavior of animals other than man. It is this frame of reference that has exposed the crucial role of religion in the Maring's adjustment to their environment. (1968: 241-2)

It did not occur to me that this, or perhaps other statements or observations about Maring ritual in particular, could possibly be construed as *specifically* ecological propositions about ritual in general. We can, after all, cite without difficulty many instances of rituals that have nothing whatsoever to do with ecological or political relations. Similarly, Catherine Bell in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992) indicates that she may share Bloch's misunderstanding (unless I misunderstand her) when referring to my approach to ritual as "ecological rationalism" (p. 108). I will only mention that Bruce Kapferer (1983) has denounced as "functionalist" various definitions and conceptions of ritual offered by Moore and Myerhoff (1977), Rappaport (1979d [1974]), Tambiah (1985[1979]), Lévi-Strauss (1981) and Bloch (1973). His reasons for indiscriminately bagging them together and then labeling them "functional" are unclear. In describing them he asserts that in them "Ritual is characterized as action which is markedly formalized, stereotypical, repetitious, etc. Such definitions are narrow, obscurantist, often misleading and beg the nature of analysis . . . They constitute in the . . . definition the phenomenon to be understood . . ." (p. 193). It is difficult to see how formality, stereotypy and repetitiveness even imply function, nor does he explain how their use in definition constitutes the fallacy of affirming the consequent. I think he is simply wrong.

It would be not so much wrong as utterly banal to commit the fallacy, complementary to the example just offered in which the specific is universalized, of making a formal causal statement where a final causal statement may be called for. The latter might be illustrated by an attempt to account for the division of labor in nineteenth-century France by invoking Durkheim's assertion that organic solidarity is intrinsic to the division of labor. Along the same lines, the observation that the formation of alliances (in the English as well as the French sense) is virtually entailed by exogamy is not, in the first instance, a functional (final causal) assertion, but a formal causal one.

Our argument, then, is essentially formal causal, or structural, although subsidiary discussion may take other forms.

4. Form and substance in ritual

That our definition specifies neither the contents nor the purposes of ritual requires further comment. First, concerned as it is with what is *common* to, say, the Catholic Mass, the Plains Sundance, rites of passage in the deserts of Central Australia, Papua New Guinea curing rituals and human sacrifice in Aztec Mexico, with what, this is to say, is *universal* to ritual, the unlimited content and innumerable purposes of the world's rituals could not and should not have been brought into the definition. This obviously does not mean that the invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances of which rituals are composed are without purpose or signify nothing (or even, contra Maurice Bloch (1973: 74) are devoid of "propositional force," an assertion with which I heartily disagree). In human rituals the utterances are usually predominantly verbal, that is, are expressions in words, and as such are symbolically (and often otherwise) signifying, and the acts, in being formalized, are, *ipso facto*, invested with meaning. It could be said, as Tambiah has (1985: 143) in what he took to be disagreement with me but was not, that "the ordering and the pattern of presentation of the ritual language, physical gestures, and manipulation of substances is the *form* of the ritual: form is the arrangement of contents" (emphasis his). I would put the relationship between ritual's form and substance a little differently. The formalization of acts and utterances, themselves meaningful, and the organization of those formalized acts and utterances into more or less invariant sequences, imposes ritual form on the substance of those acts and utterances, that is, on their significata. At one and the same time such formalization constitutes the specific forms of *particular* rituals and, reciprocally, *realizes* the *general* ritual form in specific and substantial instances. In the absence of specific substantiating instances there could no more be a general ritual form than there could be a general mammalian form in the absence of camels, woodchucks, sperm whales, or other species that realize or embody the set of features that together distinguish the class mammalia from, let us say, reptiles and birds. In *all* ritual performances there is a substantiation of form and an informing of substance, and I therefore fully agree that it would be an error to ignore either form or substance in the analysis of *any* ritual and have never suggested otherwise.

Form or substance. We come now to what may be a genuine disagreement between Tambiah and me, although it again may be a matter of his misunderstanding of my proposal. If he could misunderstand, anyone could misunderstand, and it may, therefore, be clarifying to go a little

further into this matter than I have in earlier treatments. He continues from the last quotation as follows:

Therefore I think Rappaport (1979d) is mistaken – in the same way that McLuhan is mistaken – in thinking that the “surfaces of ritual” whose features are stereotypy, liturgical invariance and so on can be dealt with apart from the symbolism of ritual or, as he puts it, “the relations among the symbols that may appear in rituals.” (1985: 143)

I have already agreed that form and substance are inseparable in any performance of any ritual. But it is one thing to say that form and substance are inseparable in practice and another thing to say that they are analytically indistinguishable. They are, it seems to me, both as inseparable in practice and as conceptually distinguishable as, let us say, sentence forms – declarative, inquisitive, imperative – are from the particular statements, questions, or commands that they shape.⁴

“That they shape.” It seems at the least possible – even inarguable – to propose that the ritual form is not a neutral medium that adds nothing to the contents, symbolic or otherwise, encoded in its relatively invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances. It is important to note that it is in respect to its symbolic depths that ritual is least distinctive. That Leach (1954: 13ff.) could declare that “myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, they are one and the same,” a dictum which, by only slight extension, would seem to assert that ritual signifies neither more nor less than what is signified by the references symbolically encoded in its acts and utterances, a view made more explicit by La Fontaine (1972: xvii): “In this book ritual actions are seen as exemplifying in another medium the cultural values that find expression in statements which we call beliefs and which are elaborated in narratives or myths.” I disagree.

It would be well to reiterate that I am raising no objections to symbolic, structural, or any other form of analysis of ritual’s contents. I am only insisting that to view ritual as no more than an alternative symbolic medium for expressing or accomplishing what might just as well – or perhaps better – be expressed or accomplished in other ways is, obviously, to ignore that which is distinctive of ritual itself. It seems apparent, and few students writing today would disagree, that ritual is not simply an alternative way to express any manner of thing, but that certain meanings and effects can best, or even *only*, be expressed or achieved in ritual. Inasmuch as the substance of rituals is infinitely various, this must mean that these meanings and effects follow from ritual’s universal form. This form, moreover, cannot lie hidden in symbolic depths where all rituals differ from all others and each awaits

its particular culture-specific exegesis. It must lie at or near ritual's "surfaces", in, that is to say, relations among the *perceptible* features by which ritual is recognized as such and by which it has been defined here. Several summary comments are in order.

First, relations among perceptible features constituting the ritual form (most importantly perhaps, the relationship of performers to their own performances of invariant orders that they themselves have not encoded) are, it should now be clear, distinct (although not separated) from relations among elements (largely symbolic) constituting the particular substance of any and all rituals. *The ritual form, to say the least, adds something to the substance of ritual, something that the symbolically encoded substance by itself cannot express.*

Secondly, it follows from these observations that the contents of a ritual may be no different from the contents of, say, a myth, and that ritual form and substance are inseparable but distinct, that ritual form relates to ritual content as "frame" (Goffman 1967), or "context marker" (Bateson, M.C. 1973), or "metamessage." *If, in contrast to the infinite variety of ritual contents, the ritual form is universal, then it is plausible to assume that the metamessages intrinsic to that form are also universal.*

Thirdly, if certain meanings and effects are entailments of ritual's form and only of that form, then *ritual is without equivalents or even, for some purposes that will later become apparent, satisfactory alternatives.* This may go a long way toward accounting for the ubiquity of ritual, a ubiquity that approaches universality: no society is devoid of what a reasonable observer would recognize as ritual.

Fourthly, the gravity of ritual may also contribute to its ubiquity. Although ritual's contents may be concerned with matters as trivial and inconsequential as the doings of tooth fairies, that which can be expressed in or achieved through the ritual form, for instance the entailments enumerated in section 2 above, are neither trivial nor inconsequential but, on the contrary, are requisite to the perpetuation of human social life. *I therefore take ritual to be the social act basic to humanity.*

Although the contents of ritual will not be ignored in this book, it will mainly be concerned with the unique entailments of ritual's form, the crucial nature of which will be uncovered as we proceed. We can now turn from general comments about the ritual form to each of the several features constituting that form.

I have already noted that no single feature of ritual is peculiar to it. It is in the conjunction of its features that it is unique, but it is convenient

to begin by discussing each of its elements separately. The unique ways in which they relate to each other and the implications and entailments of these relationships will unfold later in the chapter and throughout the book.

5. The first feature of ritual: encoding by other than performers

First, our definition stipulates that the performers of rituals do not specify all the acts and utterances constituting their own performances. They follow, more or less punctiliously, orders established or taken to have been established, by others.

This feature seems to run afoul of a simple and obvious problem, namely that seemingly new rituals do appear from time to time and that, unless we agree to their divine origin, human agents must be implicated in their invention. This difficulty could be escaped by simply acknowledging that although the conditions of the definition hold for an overwhelming preponderance of performers, they do not for occasional innovators. Such a qualification would do little or no damage to the argument to be developed in this book, but it would beg issues of origins.

It may first be noted that the role of deliberate and calculated invention in the establishment of rituals, particularly religious rituals with which we will be almost exclusively concerned, is problematic and probably effectively limited. Conscious attempts are sometimes made to cut new rituals from whole cloth, but they are likely to strike those witnessing them to be forced or even false. Those present may fail to become performers or participants because they may not know what is expected of them, because the expectations of the inventors may not be in accord with the impulses of the potential performers or because they may be reluctant to undertake formal, stereotyped, solemn or, possibly, grotesque public behavior unless it is sanctioned by time and custom, that is to say, by previous performances. A ritual which has never been performed before may seem to those present not so much a ritual as a charade. Rituals composed entirely of new elements are, thus, likely to fail to become established (the test of establishment being that they be performed again on categorically similar occasions). Rituals composed entirely of new elements are, however, seldom if ever attempted. "New" rituals are likely to be largely composed of elements taken from older rituals (Turner 1973: 1100). There is still room for the rearrangement of elements, and even for discarding some elements and introducing others, but invention is limited and the sanction of previous performance is maintained.⁵

A near contradiction is entailed by the human invention and introduction of new rituals when rituals are understood by performers to be ordained by the divine, or at least understood to be sanctified by association with it. Authors of change in religious ritual sometimes claim, however, that they are not inventing liturgy but merely reforming it, or they escape contradiction by claiming that they are merely divesting the ritual of the inconsequential, profane or evil accretions of time and error, returning to it the purity that prevailed in more righteous days. In other instances individuals introducing new rituals disclaim responsibility for authorship altogether. They declare, and their subjective experience may convince them, that the new ritual was revealed to them by spirits or gods in dreams or in visions (Mooney 1896: 14 and many after him, e.g., Munn 1973).⁶

6. The second feature: formality (as decorum)

Next there is formality. Formality, i.e., adherence to form, is an obvious aspect of all rituals. It is often, but not always, through the perception of their formal characteristics that we recognize events as rituals, or designate them to be such. Behavior in ritual tends to be punctilious and repetitive. Ritual sequences are composed of conventional, even stereotyped elements, for instance stylized and often decorous gestures and postures and the arrangements of these elements in time and space are usually more or less fixed. Rituals are performed in specified contexts, that is, they are regularly repeated at times established by clock, calendar, biological rhythm, ontogeny, physical condition, or defined social circumstance, and often they occur in special places as well. What is true of humans is true of other animals. As the faithful of a certain persuasion congregate at a certain church at 10:00 am on Sunday, so do the starlings congregate on a certain tree at dusk. Some comments and qualifications are in order.

First, although the performance of many rituals demands decorum, and although the concepts of "formality" and "decorum" are overlapping, they are not synonymous, nor does formality necessarily entail decorous behavior. The greeting behavior of teenagers for example, is formal in that it is stereotyped, but it is not particularly decorous, and the formality of some rituals, as Roger Abrahams has emphasized (1973), may subsume or even specify, comic, violent, obscene or blasphemous behavior. Clowns have important roles to play in the rituals of the Tewa (Ortiz 1969) and other American Indians, in Sri Lanka (Kapferer 1983) and elsewhere; and the *Arioi* society of the Society Islands violated

food taboos, performed what Captain Bligh and others took to be obscene dances, and gave themselves to what both missionaries and explorers report as heterosexual debauchery and sodomy within the sacred precincts (*marae*) in the course of certain of their ceremonies (Bligh 1937, Ellis 1853: 319–325, Van Gennep 1960: 83f.). Self-mortification was encouraged in the rituals of many American Indians (e.g., J. Brown 1971: 92ff., Jorgensen 1972: 177ff., Radin, 1923: 98, 471) and torture played a central role in the rituals of others (e.g., Wallace 1972: 30ff.).

Secondly, and more important, it would be incorrect to impose a simple dichotomy upon all behavior in an attempt to distinguish the formal, stylized or stereotypic from the “informal” or spontaneous. There is surely a continuum running from highly spontaneous interactions in which the behavior of each of the participants is continually modified by his or her interactions with the others, in which great choice of action and utterance is continuously available to them, and in which stylization is slight, to those elaborate rituals in which the sequence of words and actions, through which the participants proceed with great caution and decorum, seems to be fully, or almost fully, specified. Abrahams (1973) has suggested that for heuristic purposes we may recognize a number of levels of increasing formality and decreasing spontaneity commencing with (1) the stylized words and gestures that intersperse ordinary conversation and acts, through (2) the “everyday ceremoniousness” of greeting behavior, stylized expressions of deference and demeanor and the like, to (3) “self-consciously patterned formal interactions” of some duration. We may think here of the rather rigid or even invariant procedures of the courtroom, in accordance with which the variant substance of particular cases is presented in orderly fashion. The range of utterances considered to be in order is restricted, but sufficient opportunities are provided for the litigants to describe the particulars of the dispute. Indeed, the very rigidity of the procedure represents an attempt to insure that full and coherent accounts of more or less unique events will be presented to those who must judge them. The invariant procedural aspects of litigation are, so to speak, subservient to their variant substantive aspects. In (4), events of yet greater formality, such as inaugurations, coronations, dubbings, marriages and the like, there is an inversion of the relationship between the variant and the invariant. The invariant aspects of the event become dominant or, to put it a little differently, themselves become operative. Such stylized acts as crowning and anointing are those which transform a prince into a

king; the recitation of traditional vows and the ancient act of placing a ring on another's finger transform the affianced into the wed; traditional words and the application of holy water transform a human infant into a Christian. These formal elements themselves are the main points of the events in which they occur – coronations, marriages, baptisms. This is not to say that there is no room for novelty. It is customary, for instance, for presidents and monarchs to make speeches when they are elevated to office, and many clerics insist upon preaching to those whom they have just joined in wedlock. Their remarks vary from one occasion to the next (although it is of interest that the scope of what it is appropriate to say on such occasions is rather narrowly limited to the general, the vacuous, and the inspirational), but their speeches do not in themselves effect the transitions toward which such events are directed. They are mere embroideries, elaborating events the main purposes of which are effected by more or less invariant formal acts and utterances, such as oath taking, anointing or exchanging rings.

Finally, there is (5), the category that subsumes the most formal of all events, those in which almost all aspects of performances consisting of fixed sequences of stylized and stereotyped words and acts are rigidly specified, and opportunities for performers to introduce new information into the sequence are few, themselves formalized, and narrowly defined. This most highly formalized category of behavior is, perhaps, largely occupied by religious rituals. To put it in the converse, religious rituals tend to concentrate toward this formal end of the behavioral continuum, although stereotyped allusions to supernaturals appear in the “everyday ceremoniousness” of such expressions as “godspeed,” in the courtroom oath, and in the oaths and anointings of coronations.

Several points are to be made here. First, it may be useful to make a distinction between ritual, the formal, stereotyped aspect of events in general, and rituals, relatively invariant events dominated by their formal components. Be this as it may, it is not necessary to distinguish ritual radically from other events by imposing an arbitrary discontinuity upon the continuum of formality at any point. I will simply note that the phenomena with which this study is concerned lie toward the more formal, less variant end of the continuum, rituals sufficiently elaborate to include what may be called “liturgical orders”: more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances of some duration repeated in specified contexts. The term “liturgical order” will be extended to include not only the sequences of words and acts providing form to individual rituals but also, following Van Gennep's (1960[1909]) concerns but not

his terminology, to the sequences of rituals that lead their participants around the circles of the seasons, along the straight paths that depart from birth and arrive at death, through the alternations of war and peace, or along the dream tracks crossing Australian deserts. It will also, on occasion, denote the corpora of particular traditions in their entirety (e.g., the Maring liturgical order).

7. The third feature: invariance (more or less)

Although invariance is inevitably generated by, or is a logical entailment of, formality understood as conformity to form, it is of such consequences that I have given it explicit recognition in the definition. Its profound significance will be developed later, especially in chapters 4 and 8. Here it is necessary to emphasize that the definition does not characterize ritual as invariant but as “more or less” invariant. This qualification is only in part meant to recognize the obvious: that imprecision is unavoidable in even the most punctilious performances, that, although the congregations performing them may not be fully aware of it, liturgical orders do change through time, that various elements of liturgical orders are differentially susceptible to change (a matter to be explored later in this chapter and in chapter 8) and, finally but most importantly, the details of no ritual are ever specified to such a degree that there is no room for some logically necessary or deliberate variation.

As far as logical necessity is concerned, for two or more performers to perform the “same” ritual there is obviously and unavoidably variation in performers. Performer A and performer B are two different people. That this is tautological does not make it trivial inasmuch as performance has entailments for the performers that will be explored in chapter 4.

We come here to the deliberateness of variation. There is the possibility of, or even the necessity for, some choice to be exercised by performers even within the most invariant of liturgical orders. For instance, the Mass includes the ministration of communion, but participants may or may not choose to receive it. Jewish liturgy includes a series of acts connected with bringing forth the Torah from the ark in which it resides. These acts honor those performing them, but the liturgy does not specify who is to be so honored. Among the Maring of New Guinea, certain rituals require the sacrifice of pigs, but the number to be killed is not stipulated. In addition to possibilities for variations in performance itself, there is the most fundamental of all choices, always open to the potential participant, at least as a logical, if not always viable possibility: whether or not to participate at all in a ritual which is occurring. Although this

last point seems obvious to the point of being trivial, it is a matter of great importance and will be considered in a later chapter. Finally, there are, with respect to some rituals, possibilities for variation with respect to where and when to perform them, or whether to perform them at all.

In sum, there are possibilities for, and even demands for, variation within the most invariant of liturgical orders. What may vary, the significance of such variation, and the relationship of the variant to the invariant will be explored in the next two chapters.

A last point concerning formality leads to another of ritual's defining features. Whereas there is no ritual without formality, all that is formal is not ritual. Much of graphic and plastic art and music elaborates repetitive, rhythmic, stylized patterns and so does much architecture. Rituals may, and frequently do, call for the manipulation of special paraphernalia, and they are often convened in special places. These things and places may have abstract characteristics formally similar to those of ritual, and they may be indispensable to the rituals with which they are associated. We may think here of the cruciform plan of the Cathedral, the crucifix on the altar, and the act of crossing oneself. It may be that they are properly regarded as components of rituals, or even said to be "ritualized," a term sometimes applied to the apparently "useless" organs that many species of animal wave, vibrate, expand, or suffuse with color in their displays (Blest 1961). But they are not themselves rituals, for performance is as intrinsic to the notion of ritual as is formality.

8. The fourth feature: performance (ritual and other performance forms)

Unless there is a performance there is no ritual. This is obvious in the case of fleeting greeting rituals which serve to order ongoing interaction, but it is no less true of elaborate liturgical rituals. Liturgical orders may be inscribed in books, but such records are not themselves rituals. They are merely descriptions of rituals or instructions for performing them. There are, in our possession, records of liturgies performed in the temples of Sumer and Akkad (e.g., Hallo and Van Dyck 1968, Jacobson 1976), but they are no longer enlivened by performance. Liturgical orders are realized – made into *res* – only by being performed.

It may seem unnecessary if not downright absurd to emphasize what seems not only to be an obvious aspect of ritual, but intrinsic to its very conception. It is important so to insist, however, because of a point already touched upon. Ritual is not simply one of a number of more or less equivalent ways in which the material embodied in liturgical orders may be expressed, presented, maintained or established. It may be, as

Leach (1954: 13ff.) would have it, that “myth *implies* ritual, ritual *implies* myth,” but they are not, as he proposed, “one and the same.” “Myth regarded as a statement in words” does not, contrary to Leach, “say the same thing as ritual regarded as a statement in action” (1954: 13). Much of what is “said” *in* ritual is, of course, “said” in myth or in lawbooks or in theological treatises or, for that matter in novels, drama and poetry, but, to reiterate an assertion made earlier, there are things “said” *by* all liturgical rituals that cannot be said in other ways. They are in part expressed by the special relationship between the liturgical order performed and the act of performing it. The act of performance is itself a part of the order performed, or, to put it a little differently, the manner of “saying” and “doing” is intrinsic to what is being said and done. The medium, as McLuhan and Fiore (1967) would have it, is itself a message, or better, a meta-message. We shall return to this matter in a later chapter.

It is not, however, useful to consider all formal performance, even those composed entirely of highly invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances, to be ritual. Ordinary usage would not have it so and there is no advantage in departing from ordinary usage here. Some scholars would distinguish “ceremony” from “ritual” and, although ritual and some forms of theatre resemble each other in some respects, they differ importantly in others. Athletic contests bear some similarity to both theatre and ritual, and both theatre and games have sometimes been associated with ritual. There are yet other events – some political conventions, festivals, carnivals, demonstrations – that share features with rituals. In sum, ritual is one member of an extended family of performance forms, to some of which it seems on the face of it to be more closely related than to others. The matter is too complex to do more here than note some of the distinctions that have or can be used to distinguish major types from each other.

The forms most closely related – if, indeed, they should be distinguished at all – are “ceremony” and “ritual.” Firth (1967b: 13), Gluckman and Gluckman (1977: 231), and others do make this distinction. Gluckman and Gluckman, referring to an earlier publication by one of them, state that the term “ritual” was stipulated “to cover actions which had reference, in the view of the actors, to occult powers: where such beliefs were not present, it was suggested, that the word “ceremony” be used.” Firth’s distinction is slightly different.

Ceremonial I regard as a species of ritual in which, however, the emphasis is more upon symbolic acknowledgment and demonstration of a social situation than

upon the efficacy of the procedures in modifying that situation. Whereas other ritual procedures are believed to have a validity of their own, ceremonial procedures, while formal in character, are not believed in themselves to sustain the situation or effect a change in it. (1967b: 13)

There is little or no real difference between Firth and Gluckman. The sets each would distinguish as ritual and as ceremony would come close to coinciding. Of greater interest: they would probably come close to matching those placed in levels 4 or 5 in Abraham's continuum of formality. Be this as it may, it seems to me that the distinction, although it can be made and although it may in some contexts be useful, is of dubious general value because expressions "acknowledging or demonstrating social situations" may themselves constitute actions sustaining or changing those situations and, furthermore, the nature of the efficacy of such actions – whether or not they are occult – is often left unclear, perhaps deliberately.

Distinctions between theatre and ritual are more salient. The first stands on a difference in the relationships of those present to the proceedings themselves. Those present at a ritual constitute a congregation. The defining relationship of the members of a congregation to the event for which they are present is *participation*. Those present at theatrical events include, on the one hand, *performers* and, on the other hand, *audiences*. Audiences and performers are more or less radically separated from each other, always in function, almost always in space, often clearly marked off by raised stages, proscenium arches, curtains and so on. The performers perform – dance in ballets, sing or play instruments in concerts or, in the form most important to us, drama, they "act." The defining characteristic of audience in contrast to performers on the one hand and congregation on the other is that they do not participate in the performance: they *watch* and they *listen*.

To say that all those present at a ritual are participating in it is obviously not to claim that they all have the same or equivalent parts to play. Their roles may, in fact, be highly differentiated. There are obvious differences between initiators and initiates in rites of passage, and distinctions among performers can become very complex.

Gluckman has used the term "ritualization" to refer to the assignment of ritual roles to individuals in conformity to their secular relations and statuses. Thus, in the Naven rituals of the Iatmul, to cite a classic example (Bateson (1958: 6ff. [1936]), mother's brother (*Wau*) and sister's son (*Laua*) play roles defined by their kinship relationship to each other, and roles are assigned to participants in the coronation of English kings

on the basis of their general social statuses. The situation is not essentially different in rituals in which secular status differences among congregants are not emphasized or are even deliberately softened. Thus, Catholic usage clearly recognizes differences in the participating roles of those present in stating that the priest presides at the Mass whereas the Congregation celebrates it.⁷ Obviously, the priest has much more to do than do his parishioners, but their participation, and this seems true of all ritual, requires of them something more than, or better, other than the open passivity or receptivity of Western audiences. Congregations may be called upon to sing, dance, kneel, respond in liturgy or kill pigs in particular ways at particular moments in ritual performances. Such acts, in addition to expressing whatever particulars they represent, indicate to performers that they are indeed participating in, and not merely watching, the proceedings. The significance to them of their own participation will be taken up in chapter 4. For now it is sufficient to propose that such significance is absent from the relationship of audiences to the performances they attend. To go a little farther, the members of congregations may leave the ritual with their statuses in some way formally transformed. The social status of members of the audiences are never so transformed by dramas, although they may be deeply moved by them.

Certain qualifications or clarifications are in order before proceeding. First, the distinction between audience and congregation is not always behaviorally obvious. In a good many rituals, for instance in the Sinhalese demon exorcisms of which Kapferer (1983) writes, congregations may spend much of the time watching clowns and other performers. This spectator-like behavior obviously does not preclude acts constituting participation during other moments in the liturgy. To put this in the converse, participation is definitive of congregations, but the roles played by various members of most congregations are not all equal, and therefore certain participants are likely to become, at particular times during the ritual, objects of audience-like attention for other participants.

Second, it sometimes happens that some of those present, for instance, tourists watching a Plains Indian Sundance, are not participants but, rather, stand in an audience-like relationship to the performers. I say "audience-like" because it is questionable whether or not audiences are properly so-called when performances are not directed toward them as such. The anomolousness of their presence is often experienced by both "visitors" and their "hosts" as awkwardness, embarrassment, resentment or shame, and may even degrade the event from the status of ritual to mere mimicry of ritual.⁸

Third, there are interstitial forms, performances that, lying as they do between culturally recognized forms, derive their peculiar force from their very ambiguity. Passion and mystery plays, positioned between drama and ritual, provide instances, and in recent decades deliberate attempts have been made to draw audiences into the performances of some western dramas (see Schechner 1985). Success has been limited, perhaps because it is very difficult to transform audiences composed of strangers whose status as such is protected by rules of etiquette to such a degree that to address a person in an adjacent seat is regarded as forward, into congregations. Congregations are usually composed of people who know each other but even if they don't they can make certain assumptions about each other from the mere fact that they are participating together in a liturgical order with which, in contrast to the situation of an audience watching a drama, they are usually thoroughly familiar. They can assume that they stand on common ground and as such are members of a common community. This assumption is often reinforced formally by the requirement, or at least expectation, that congregants greet their neighbors in formulaic manner: "peace be with you," "*shabbat shalom*", etc.

Further differences between ritual and drama are, perhaps, made clearest by reference to those dramas which are, within the western tradition, most closely related to ritual, the tragedies of ancient Greece. Aristotle informs us (*Poetics*, chapter 4, McKeon 1941: 1458) that both tragedy and comedy emerged out of ritual, tragedy, more particularly, out of the *Dithyramb*, a spring celebration associated with Dionysus. Jane Harrison (1913) at the beginning of this century noted that the word "drama" is derived from *dromenon* ("thing done") an ancient Greek term for ritual. (Other authorities, e.g., Partridge (1958), derive its root *dra-* from *dran*, to do act, make). By Aeschylus' time (525–456) drama had become more or less distinct from ritual but continued to be performed in association with it. Greek tragedies, like ritual, could be said to be composed of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances encoded by other than the performers, but the two forms are invariant in rather different senses. A ritual displays or even flaunts its invariance, for in its very invariance it manifests or represents a *specific* order to which individuals *ipso facto* conform in performing them. Once performers commence their performances the only choices available to them are the narrow and formal options the performed order specifies: to take communion or not, to sacrifice one pig or two. To "choose" to act in ways other than those specified by the ritual's order is at best mean-

ingless and as such constitutes noise, but is more likely to be disruptive and as such constitutes blasphemy.

Dramas, to be sure, are also invariant orders in the sense that the actor's utterances and movements are scripted in advance of their performance by others, i.e. playwrights. But the invariance that is intrinsic to the scripting of tragedies is not meant to represent or underwrite the propriety of any specific order in any simple or straightforward way (although it may finally do so). In tragedy invented⁹ characters are presented in problematic situations, situations in which, as Gluckman and Gluckman (1977: *passim*) have pointed out in a discussion of *Antigone*, it is as if the outcome (although scripted prior to any performance) is represented as uncertain, and hinges on choices represented as open to them even though the world remains in the God's control. The proper order of the world, as ordained by the Gods, is established in invariant liturgical orders. The stuff of tragedies arises from the near inevitability of the destruction of fallible humans making choices, the consequences of which they cannot foresee, in worlds constituted by ritually ordained orders, elements of which may be in contradiction (in *Antigone* between obedience to the Gods and to the king and duty to and concern for kin). This is to say that that which is represented in ritual as the proper order, or the only order, or order itself is represented as problematic in drama. To put it yet differently, ritual specifies an order, tragedy reflects upon that order and, when it is successful, evokes the reflection of the individuals composing the audience. We uncover here the essential difference between the invariance of ritual and the invariance of drama. In ritual invariance is not only visible but emphasized for it, in *itself*, in all its punctilious repetitiveness represents the propriety of whatever is encoded. The invariance of drama in contrast, is kept hidden beneath the illusion of novelty and spontaneity that gives virtual life to the dilemmas the drama represents. Invariance here is simply part of the machinery producing an illusion, an illusion of the possibilities of variation.

Another difference between ritual and drama comes to the surface here. The problems raised, illuminated and engaged by drama in general and tragedy in particular may well be the most profound facing humanity. Nevertheless, those who act in dramas are, as we say, "only acting" which is precisely to say that they are not actually taking action but only mimicking action. The tendency of Western drama toward "realism", that is, a performance style *simulating* the "informal" behavior of everyday life, underlines this point, which is also implicit in drama's

English language synonym, “play.” Ritual, in contrast, is “in earnest”, that is, it is understood by performers to be taking place in the world, even when it is playful, entertaining, ludicrous, obscene or blasphemous, or even when, perhaps especially when, its actions are highly stylized, as in postures of submission or in the recitation of formulae.

That actors are “only acting” in dramas does not mean that they or the scripts they perform are not serious nor that they do not effect the world outside the play. Of course they do, but as Gluckman and Gluckman (1977: 231) put it, their enactments in themselves are not understood to affect directly the world’s events. They may affect the world but the manner in which they do is essentially different from the ways in which ritual achieves its affects, a matter to be discussed later in this chapter and developed further in chapter 4.

Athletic contests resemble both ritual and drama sufficiently to warrant brief consideration. For one thing the relationship of those present to the event differs from those prevailing in either ritual or theatre. As in theatre, athletic contests separate performers from spectators, and there is often a third category of person present, namely officials, referees, umpires and the like, who represent, apply and enforce the rules of the game. Unlike theatre audiences, however, spectators are not required to attend passively to the proceedings. They are expected to be partisan and to express their preferences loudly (mainly through cheering their own teams, but also by baiting the opposition) and visibly (through wearing the colors of their teams, through gestures and movements associated with cheering, and so on). In more elaborated American performances such expressions of partisanship are in some degree formalized, being called for and coordinated by another subsidiary category of performances, cheerleaders, who are sometimes reinforced at football games by marching bands.

In the active nature of their participation “fans” at certain athletic contests resemble congregations more than they do audiences, but differ from typical congregations in frequently being raucous and always being in high degree spontaneous. No matter how frenzied their support of their team may be, however, it is clear to fans that they themselves are not participating in the game. They and their actions are already separated from what goes on on the playing field, and in this they resemble audiences more than they do congregations. Unlike theatre audiences, however, who understand that their attitudes and feelings cannot affect the outcome of the simulated events they witness, fans typically feel that their own actions can affect the outcomes of the actual

event – the game – which they watch. In this respect there is some resemblance to ritual, the performances of which are taken to affect the state of the world, but the efficacious principles are understood to be different. Fans are not assisting in the proceedings as a Roman Catholic congregation used to be said to assist in the Mass, but are giving *support* to their teams, simply encouraging them or, perhaps, even inspiring them. In this the relationship of fans to the teams they support may be the reverse of that of audiences to actors in drama. Whereas the actors' performance may inspire or otherwise inform the audience, the behavior of the fans may inspire or otherwise motivate the athletes.

Another frequently remarked upon distinction between athletic contests and both ritual and drama has been implicit throughout this discussion. The actions of rituals are usually (not always) preordained, and although the outcome of dramas are represented as uncertain they are also, in fact, preordained. The outcomes of athletic contests are, in contrast, really uncertain. Whereas the invariance of ritual orders may constitute a way to impose order on a vagrant and unruly world, and the invariance hidden in drama may be in the service of posing perennial and possibly irresolvable questions about such orders, the invariance of the athletic contest is confined to its rules and does not penetrate directly to the play itself. If there are messages intrinsic to Western athletic contests they do not need to be elucidated through deep reflection, nor are they primarily concerned, as ritual typically is, to specify agreed upon orders, although they tacitly do so when "played by the rules." The messages emphasized concern the values of skill, courage, strength, determination, cooperativeness, competitiveness, loyalty and victory. There is also honor paid to "fair play" and "sportsmanship", and if there is anything like dramatic dilemma represented it is in the possibility of contradiction between victory and "playing fair"; if there is anything like tragedy involved it is in the near inevitability of defeat. The difference in this respect between *Antigone* and the Rose Bowl is not entirely in the gravity of their subject matters but in the relation of those present to them. *Antigone* represents the defeat of mortals and asks its audience to reflect upon defeat. The Rose Bowl does not represent victory or defeat. It itself, in its nature, *presents* both victory and defeat and thus itself provides the materials for such reflection, or to practice such reflection on a matter of no enduring importance to very many people. It's entertainment.

Victory and defeat lead to the contrast between games and rituals made by Lévi-Strauss in the first chapter of *The Savage Mind*.

Games ... appear to have *disjunctive* effect: they end in the establishment of a difference between individual players or teams where originally there was no indication of inequality. And at the end of the game they are distinguished into winners and losers. Ritual, on the other hand, is the exact inverse; it *conjoins* for it brings about a union (one might even say communion in this context) or in any case an organic relation between two initially separate groups, one ideally merging with the person of the officiant and the other with the collectivity of the faithful. In the case of games the symmetry is therefore preordained and it is of a structural kind since it follows from the principle that the rules are the same for both sides. Asymmetry is engendered: it follows inevitably from the contingent nature of events, themselves due to intention, chance or talent. The reverse is true of ritual. There is asymmetry which is postulated in advance between profane and sacred, faithful and officiating, dead and living, initiated and uninitiated, etc., and the "game" consists in making all the participants pass to the winning side ...
(1966: 32; *emphasis his*)

As Stanley Tambiah (1985[1979]: 128) has remarked, no anthropologist would take this brilliant comparison to be true of all rituals but it does shed light on such occurrences as the transformation of cricket into a ritual display by the Trobrianders, or to cite an example Lévi-Strauss himself addresses, the Gahuku-Gama of New Guinea reported by Read (1965) who, in playing football, play as many matches as necessary to even the score. "This", says Lévi-Strauss, "is treating a game as a ritual" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 31) but it would be better to say that Trobriand Cricket and Gahuku-Gama football are instances of an intermediate form between ritual and games, one that derives its peculiar force from the achievement of the conjunctive ends of one, ritual, through the disjunctive procedure of the other, athletic contest.

There may also be forms intermediate between athletic contests and theatre, for instance gymnastics and high diving, which seem to be, essentially, displays of strength and skill integrated with an aesthetics of the body rivaling that of ballet. It may be suggested that such events differ from the frankly theatrical performances of circus acrobats and trapeze artists mainly in their contextualization. If the performance takes place in a theatre or circus the performers are entertainers or artists. If a competitive structure is imposed upon it the performers are athletes. It is unclear, however, that such intermediate forms as gymnastics/acrobatics can claim, as can mystery plays or Trobriand cricket, special forces of their own.

Finally, and a little different, ritual, theatre, athletic contests and other forms that could, possibly, be taken to be members of the same extended family, like carnival, are sometimes associated with each other in time and space. The tragedies of Ancient Greece were performed at the spring

festivals honoring Dionysus, passion plays were performed at Easter, Carnival has a place in the Christian liturgical calendar, and the Olympic games were held in honor of Zeus every fourth year in the Altis at Olympia. Other Greek games held in other places also honored gods: Apollo at the Pythian games at Delphi, Poseidon at the Isthmian games at Corinth (Croon 1965: 181, 112). Their association suggests for one thing that both drama and games were sanctified by their association with ritual. Of greater interest, in the instances noted here, at least, games, drama and ritual are not, as it were, equal partners in their association. Protracted ritual cycles set the contexts within which both drama and athletic contests take, or at least took, place. Their encompassment proposes that they are in some sense subordinate to ritual, that is, that their significance derives at least in part from the ritual orders of which they are part.

9. The fifth feature: formality (vs. physical efficacy)

Because the definition of ritual offered in this chapter's beginning is very terse some of its terms are required to carry heavy, or even double, loads. "Formal" has, so far, subsumed decorousness, punctiliousness, conformity to form, repetitiveness, regularity, and stylization. The term "formal" is also meant to contrast with the "functional" or, to be more precise, with the physically efficacious. That ritual is "in earnest" does not mean that the formal action of ritual is instrumental in any ordinary sense. It is not. Many scholars would agree with Homans' observation of long ago, "ritual actions do not produce a practical result on the external world – that is one of the reasons we call them ritual" (1941: 172), and would take lack of material efficacy to be one of ritual's defining features.¹⁰ It is worth plowing some old fields here.

Two main lines of thought, at first sight competing but ultimately converging, have elaborated the theme of ritual's lack of material efficacy. The first was clearly enunciated by Leach years ago. He would distinguish, in activity generally, two interwoven strands one of which is materially instrumental and one of which is not. Writing of the people among whom he worked in Highland Burma he says:

In Kachin customary procedure the routines of clearing the ground, planting the seed, fencing the plot and weeding the growing crop are all patterned according to formal convention and interspersed with all kinds of technologically superfluous frills and decorations which make the performance a Kachin performance and not just a simple functional act. And so it is with every kind of technical

action; there is always the element which is functionally essential, and another element which is simply the local custom, an aesthetic frill. (1954: 12)

Leach would include within the category ritual, then, the locally specific, formal, technologically superfluous “frills and decorations” informing procedures that may also include a component or aspect which he labels “technique.” “Technique has economic material consequences which are measurable and predictable; ritual on the other hand is a symbolic statement which ‘says’ something about the individuals involved in the action” (p. 13). This view accords with the continuum of formal behavior proposed by Abrahams, and also with the distinction made earlier between ritual and rituals, for it does not insist on the separation of ritual behavior from everyday technological activity and it recognizes that even highly formalized liturgical rituals may have technical components.

From certain points of view a Kachin religious sacrifice may be regarded as a purely technical and economic act. It is a procedure for killing livestock and distributing the meat, and I think there can be little doubt that for most Kachins this seems the most important aspect of the matter . . . But . . . there is a great deal that goes on at a sacrifice that is irrelevant as far as butchery, cooking and meat distribution is concerned . . . and it is these other aspects that I describe as ritual.

(1954: 13)

The other general view, which initially appears to differ from the first more than it actually does, takes seriously the understanding, made explicit by some people at least, that when they perform a ritual they are not simply “saying something” about themselves but “doing something” about the state of their world. That such an understanding is frequently entertained by performers is implicit in the terms some people use to designate some of their rituals, or even rituals in general. For instance, the ritual cycle in accordance with which Tikopian society is organized is called “The Work of the Gods” (Firth 1967a), the fundamental rituals comprising the annual cycle of the Tewa Indians are referred to as “works” (Ortiz 1969: 98ff.), the Maring of New Guinea frequently refer to rituals as *raua kongung*, literally spirit work (the word *kongung* also being used for garden work, etc.), *dromenon*, a Greek term for ritual, meant “a thing done,” according to Jane Harrison (1913), the term “liturgy” is derived by way of *leitourgia*, public service from the Greek *leos* or *laos*, the people or the public, and *ergon*, work or service, and the English term “service” connotes more than talk. But only a portion of what is done *in* rituals and little or none of what is done *by* ritual is accomplished through material techniques directly affecting physical causal processes, and Goody (1961) once characterized ritual as “a

category of standardized behavior (custom) in which the relationship between means and ends is not intrinsic.” If ritual (in contrast to technique) does anything at all it doesn’t do it by operating with matter and energy on matter and energy in accordance with physical laws of cause and effect, but by focusing agencies or forces of another sort upon whatever is to be affected.

This difference is likely to be understood by the actors who, although they may not make a clear distinction between what is natural and what is not, know the efficacy of spells to be different from that of spears. Terms like “supernatural” and “preternatural” have been used to refer to the non-physical agencies posited by people and invoked by them in their rituals. But Fortes, for one, (1966) objected that the term “supernatural” is an artifact of literate cultures, and claimed that the actor, in tribal societies at least, sees the world as composed of the patent and the hidden – or occult – which present themselves in mixed sequences and which are interwoven into a unified reality. He took this distinction to be wide-spread, or even universal. The patent can be known in the last resort by sensory experiences and it conforms to the regularities of material cause. The occult presumably, cannot be so known nor does it so conform. Ritual, in his view, is distinguished from non-ritual, not only by the analyst but by the actor as well, in that it derives its efficacy from the occult, and not the patent.

While Fortes claimed that the distinction between the occult and the patent reflects a general folk distinction, he as an analyst derived the occult from “the unconscious (in the psychoanalytic sense) forces of individuals’ actions and the existence of their social equivalents, the irreducible factors in social relations ...” (1966: 413). Questions concerning folk notions of the bases of occult efficacy and the suggestions of anthropologists concerning the occult’s foundation in what they take to be reality will arise from time to time later and need not be considered in detail here. In some – probably very few – instances effects for which the occult is credited are, in fact, achieved through obscure physical causal processes, which may even be hidden from the performers themselves (see note 10), but such processes do not provide a plausible basis for a general analytic theory of occult efficacy, nor do they seem to be sufficiently common to have lead to world-wide or even widespread acceptance of the idea of the occult. One large and rather heterogeneous body of analytic theories would derive the occult from the affective force and persuasiveness of ritual performance¹¹ and we may note in passing that some students would take some sort of systematic relationship to the

emotions to be an aspect of all ritual.¹² Whether or not this is the case it is indubitable that emotions are regularly stimulated in many rituals, that these emotions may be strong and they may seem persuasive. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to take them to be a source of ritual's "power" or of the participants' ability to bring about the states of affairs for which they strive, also a source of ritual's actual, as well as putative, efficacy.

But perhaps not the only source, for it might well be asked how inchoate emotions could possibly lead to well-defined acts and ends. Other analytic theories would found the occult upon features of language, particularly as it is used in ritual, and we may note that all human rituals include words or acts informed by, and equivalent to, words. Inasmuch as the acts and ends of ritual are not related to each other through the operation of physical principles their relationship cannot be physically self-evident. If it cannot be perceived it must be specified, if it is to be conceived at all, and the specification of the imperceptible is contingent upon symbols in Peirce's sense, that is, on words. This contingency pertains even when an effect is achieved through such physical metaphors, or icons, as sticking pins into images. That the act is, in fact, a representation, and not simply a way to park pins, and that a particular person is the target of the attack must be stipulated, at least implicitly, by words. This is to say that the verbal specification of the relationship of act to effect is an important component of the act itself. This view accords nicely with the near universal attribution of magical or creative power to words and to certain acts informed by words. Finnegan (1969), for instance, invokes J. L. Austin's (1962) theory of performativeness, something to which we shall return in chapter 4. Tambiah (1973) and Fernandez (1974) speak of metaphorical predication. Tambiah has argued in a more general vein that it is the perception of certain characteristics of language that has brought about the elevation of the word as supremely endowed with mystical power.

There is a sense in which it is true to say that language is outside us and given to us as part of our cultural and historical heritage; at the same time language is within us, it moves us and we generate it as active agents. Since words exist and are in a sense agents themselves which establish connection and relations between both man and man, and man and the world, and are capable of "acting" upon them, they are one of the most realistic representations we have of the concept of force which is either not directly observable or is a metaphysical notion which we find necessary to use.

(1968: 184)

There is also style. Ritual utterances are not "mere words," but frequently possess special characteristics – stereotypy (Bloch 1973),

weirdness (Malinowski 1965[1935] II: 218ff.) and repetitiveness – that may enhance their seeming force, and so may the often noted emphasis upon propriety and precision in uttering them. We shall return to these matters later.

The views of occult efficacy as founded upon word or upon emotion are neither exhaustive nor, for that matter, mutually exclusive. The point of importance here is that if the occult efficacy of ritual rests in whole or in part upon words (both in folk and analytic theory) then the distinction between ritual as communication and ritual as efficacious action breaks down. This is not to claim that all rituals, even those for which efficacy is claimed, are deemed by those performing them to possess occult efficacy, but simply to take efficacious ritual to be a sub-class of a larger class, ritual, itself one of many modes of communication. Leach (1966) stated, or perhaps overstated, this or a similar point when he asserted that the distinction between communication behavior and behavior potent in terms of cultural conventions (rather than instrumental or physical terms) is trivial.

10. Ritual as communication

In taking ritual to be a mode of communication some of its strangest features – the separation in time and space of some rituals from daily life, the grotesque quality of some ritual postures and gestures, the weirdness of some ritual utterances, the exuberant elaboration of some objects and structures used in rituals – become clear. The effectiveness of signals is enhanced if they are easy to distinguish from ordinary technical acts. The more extraordinary a ritual movement or posture the more easily it may be recognized as a signal and not a physically efficacious act. Among animals ritual gestures seem to be based largely upon instrumental movements like those of walking or nesting or feeding, but ritual imposes what has been called a “typical form” on those movements. Their scale may be exaggerated, their tempo changed, or they may be elaborated in other ways (Cullen 1966: 365). Instances of ritualized elaborations of functional movements and objects are also to be found among humans (e.g., processional paces, the wielding of swords of state), although many of the artifacts and gestures of human ritual probably have nothing to do with forms of technical activity.

Special time and places may, like extraordinary postures and gestures, distinguish ritual words and acts from ordinary words and acts. In ritual’s time or place, words and acts that may be indistinguishable from those of everyday sometimes take on special meaning. (Think here of “I

do.”) The designation of special times and places for the performance of ritual also, of course, congregates senders and receivers of messages and may also specify what it is they are to communicate about. In sum, the formality and non-instrumentality characteristic of ritual enhances its communicational functioning.

It may be objected that a view of ritual as communication comes up against the fact that many rituals are conducted in solitude, and that to refer to solitary actions as communications events is to dilute the meaning of “communication” to the point of meaninglessness. The subjective experience of private devotions is however one for which the term “communication” is appropriate, for in such rituals the performers presumably do feel themselves to be communicating with spiritual beings.

Moreover, given the extent to which in solitary rituals various parts of the psyche ordinarily inaccessible to each other may be brought into touch, and given the extent to which the emotions of participants may respond to the stimuli of their own ritual acts, it is reasonable to take ritual to be auto-communicative as well as allo-communicative (Wallace 1966: 237ff.). Auto-communication is, I will argue, of utmost importance even in public rituals. In fact, *the transmitters of ritual’s messages are always among their most important receivers*, a matter to be elaborated in chapter 4.

To understand ritual to be a mode of communication does not restrict its scope. On the contrary, it entails an expanded notion of communication. It is possible to distinguish, although not to separate, two large classes of natural processes. First, there are those in which actions achieve effects in simple accordance with the laws of physics, chemistry and biology, through the direct application of matter and energy to whatever is to be effected. Secondly, there are those in which transmitters achieve effects by informing – representing form to, transmitting form to, injecting form into, more simply transmitting messages to, receivers. In this view, which is in accord with certain developments in linguistic philosophy (Austin 1962, O’Doherty 1973, Searle 1969, Skorupski 1976) over the past few decades and anthropology (Finnegan 1969, Bateson 1972b, Rappaport 1979, Silverstein 1976, Tambiah 1985) as well as information and communication theory and cybernetics (Bateson 1972, Wilden 1972), communication includes not only simple “saying,” but also the sorts of “doing,” in which the efficacious principle is informative rather than powerful.¹³

Although we may recognize that even efficacious ritual is a mode of communication it may be well to recall, if only to dispense with it, Fortes' (1966) warning, in response to Leach's (1966) mistaken suggestion that speech be construed as "a form of ritual" with "non-verbal ritual [being] simply a signal system of a different less specialized kind," that "it is but a short step from the notion of ritual as communication to the non-existence of ritual *per se*." To say that ritual is a mode of communication is hardly to suggest that it is interchangeable with other modes of communication. It is a special medium peculiarly, perhaps even uniquely, suited to the transmission of certain messages and certain sorts of information.¹⁴

11. Self-referential and canonical messages

There seem to be two broad classes of messages transmitted in human ritual. First, whatever else may happen in some human rituals, in all rituals, both animal and human, the participants transmit information concerning their own current physical, psychic or social states to themselves and to other participants. As Leach put it, ritual serves to express "the individual's status in the structural system in which he finds himself for the time being" (1954: 11), but the status of groups as wholes, as well as individuals, may also be communicated (Rappaport 1968: 23 *passim*). I shall refer to this class of messages as "self-referential."

In some human rituals, and perhaps in all animal rituals, there is no more. When one male baboon presents his rump to another he is signaling submission, when the other mounts he signals dominance. The message content of the ritual is exhausted by information transmitted by the participants concerning their current states and relations among their current states. The ritual is self-referential and self-referential only. The same can probably be said of such stylized human gestures as bowing, saluting and tipping one's hat to what used to be called "ladies."

We come here to a radical distinction between some human rituals and all animal rituals. In some human rituals the sum of the self-referential information transmitted among the participants does not exhaust the message content of the ritual. Additional messages, although *transmitted* by the participants, are not *encoded* by them. They are found by the participants already encoded in the liturgy. Since these messages are not encoded by the performers, and since they tend toward invariance, it is obvious that these messages *cannot in themselves* represent the performers' contemporary states. For instance, the words and acts comprising the Roman Mass (some of which have remained unchanged for more

than a millennium) do not *in themselves* represent or express the current states of those uttering and performing them. In recognition of the propriety with which they are invested and surrounded and of their apparent durability and invariance I shall refer to this class of messages as “canonical.”

In distinguishing between the canonical and the self-referential we are, among other things, recognizing a distinction between the significance of what is encoded in the invariant orders of liturgy on the one hand and the significance of the acts of transmitting those invariant messages on the other. That the *Shema*, the Ultimate Sacred Postulate of the Jews, may not have changed in 3000 years (Idelsohn 1932) is one thing, that a particular person recites it on a particular occasion is another. The *Shema* remains unchanged, but those who utter it, and thus place themselves in a certain relationship to it, continue to change as circumstances change and as generation succeeds generation.¹⁵ We will discuss this relation later, especially in chapter 4.

Whereas the referents of self-referential messages, i.e., the current physical, psychic or social states of individual participants, or of the body of participants as a whole, are confined to the here and now, the significata of the canonical are *never* so confined. They always include, in words and acts that have been spoken or performed before, orders, processes or entities, material, social, abstract, ideal or spiritual, the existence or putative existence of which transcends the present. The self-referential represents the immediate, the particular and the vital aspects of *events*; the canonical, in contrast, represents the general, enduring, or even eternal aspects of *universal orders*. Indeed, its quality of perdurance is perhaps signified iconically – its sense is surely conveyed – by the apparent invariance of its mode of transmission.

We may recall that even the most invariant of liturgical orders make room for some variation. The Canon of the Eucharist, for example, has remained more or less unchanged for over a millennium, but who receives communion varies from one Mass to the next, the rituals commencing the *kaiko* festivals of the Maring people of Papua New Guinea proceed in conformity to well-established orders that include pig sacrifices, but the number of pigs to be offered is not specified, nor is the time when the ritual is to be performed or who among other groups will be invited to attend. Furthermore, individuals always have (at least logically) a choice as to whether to participate in rituals that are being performed. We see here that self-referential and canonical messages are not transmitted in separate rituals but that their strands are interwoven throughout all

liturgical orders. We further see that *the canonical stream is carried by the invariant aspects or components of these orders, self-referential information is conveyed by whatever variation the liturgical order allows or demands.*

12. Symbols, indices and the two streams of messages

In considering differences in the ways in which canonical and self-referential messages are transmitted we are led back to fundamental semiotic matters broached in the first chapter. Most important: the relationship of signs to that which they signify differs between the two message streams. Canonical messages, which are concerned with things not confined to the present in time or space, which may even be conceived to stand outside the time-space continuum altogether, and whose significata may be, indeed, usually are spiritual, conceptual or abstract in nature, are and *can only be* founded upon symbols (i.e., signs associated by law or convention with that which they signify) although they can employ, secondarily, icons¹⁶ and even make limited use of indices.¹⁷ In contrast, the transmission of information concerning the *current* state of transmitters, being confined to the here and now, may transcend mere symbolic signification and be represented indexically. This is of considerable importance given the vices, discussed at length in the Introduction, to which symbolic transmission is prone: those of lie and of Babel. The use of indices in ritual to convey self-referential information may circumvent some of their disruptive possibilities.

An index, to recall Peirce's phrase, is "a sign which refers to the Object it denotes by being really affected by that Object" (Buchler 1955: 102). This seems clear enough, but differences between indices and the other Peircean signs – icons and symbols – and differences among various forms or instances of indices may not be as straightforward as this most simple of Peirce's several characterizations of the index would suggest. Some commentators, notably Arthur Burks (1949) has argued, with justice, that Peirce became confused in discussing the index, but to make matters yet more complicated, in my view, Burks, in attempting to clarify and correct Peirce, in his turn made matters yet more confused.

Because a close reading of Peirce and such later writers as Burks, Jakobson (1957) and Silverstein (1976) would indicate that my understanding of indices differs more or less subtly from any and all of theirs, as well as from aspects of Peirce's conception, a discussion of this class of sign and its relationship to the others is warranted, if not requisite if my usage is to be justified. The matter is, however, too intricate to dispose of briefly and has, therefore been exiled to an Appendix to this chapter.

Here it is only necessary to make my own usage clear. I am following, as literally as possible, the simple conception Peirce formulated in the sentence just cited. Thus, a rash indicates (is an index of) measles, the rustling of the peacock's spread tail fan indicates his sexual arousal, the weathervane indicates the wind's direction, the Rolls Royce or sable coat indicates the wealth of its owner, May Day parades indicated the strength of Soviet armaments, or aspects of that strength, the March on Washington of November 15, 1970 indicated the size and social composition of opposition to the war in Viet Nam.

There is, obviously, considerable variety among these examples. For instance, the rash indicating measles is what might be called a "natural index," or "symptom," for it is simply a natural effect of a cause which, although it can be read to denote a disease, probably did not emerge or evolve as such and certainly was not deliberately "transmitted" as a sign at all. The peacock's fan and its display is also, presumably, a natural effect of his sexual arousal, as intrinsic to it as his tumescence, but it may not have evolved as a sign. The March on Washington was what is called a "demonstration", an event in which the strength of a political position is not simply asserted, reported, or recounted, but *displayed* and thus *demonstrated*. Although important differences distinguish these instances from each other all of them are comfortably subsumed under a conception of the index as a sign which is caused by, or is part of, or, possibly, in the extreme case, is identical with, that which it signifies. To put it differently, they are perceptible aspects of events or conditions signifying the presence or existence of imperceptible aspects of the same events or conditions.

"Events" or "conditions." Given the relationship of indices to that which they denote they are, as it were, tied to such events and conditions, and cannot *genuinely* occur in their absence. This implies, and we have been so instructed by Figan and other apes, that indexical communication does offer some limited possibilities for deceit.

Opportunities for falsehood are, however, multiplied by magnitudes and the consequences of falsehood made more comprehensive and grave by the symbol, which allows the lie to be elevated from the "proto," to the "true" level. But the hospitality of the symbol to lie is in some degree overcome, or at least ameliorated, in ritual by eschewing its use in favor of indices in the transmission of self-referential information, information concerning the current states or conditions of the transmitters. We may note here that, although some indices can be falsified – accomplished actors can weep when they do not grieve, apes can feign indices of alarm and thus alarm others, Rolls Royces can be rented, borrowed or stolen –

and although some indices can be misconstrued – the driver of the Rolls Royce may be the chauffeur and not the owner, slurred speech may be the effect of drunkenness rather than stroke – ritual relies heavily on indices that are virtually impervious to falsification and resistant to misinterpretation. It is of wry interest that when humans wish to make themselves more than ordinarily credible they may leave behind the subtleties of language and communicate in a manner more closely resembling that of the speechless beasts.

I do not claim that all self-referential messages transmitted in ritual are indexical, but that some of them are patent. When, for instance, a Goodenough Islander (Young 1971) or a Siuai of Guadalcanal (Oliver 1955) gives away large numbers of pigs, seashells or yams in a competitive ritual feast he is not simply *claiming* to be a man of influence, importance, prestige or renown – a “Big Man” – he is *demonstrating* that he is. The amount that he gives away, furthermore, may be a more or less precise index of just how big he is, inasmuch as that amount is “really affected by” that which it signifies – his influence, prestige, authority, industry, renown, all of which, alone or in combination, are attributes of “bigness.” Thus, when Soni of Turonom village, a Siuai *muminai*, or Big Man, gave away thirty-two pigs valued at 1,920 spans of cowrie shells one day in 1937 he indicated to 1,100 witnesses (Oliver 1955) just how big he was, at least in relative terms – slightly bigger than a man who could give away thirty pigs, considerably bigger than one who might have managed twenty-five.

It may be well to call attention here, although the matter will be more fully discussed in chapters 3 and 5, to an inversion, in the illustration just offered, of the qualities verbal humans usually expect in signs and their significata. As language users we are accustomed to the sign being relatively insubstantial and the signified substantial, as, for instance, in the relationship of the word “dog” to an animal that it denotes or designates. It may be suggested that in instances in which claims are made concerning valued states or qualities themselves devoid of essential physical properties (e.g. prestige, worth, valor, “bigness”) the sign *must* be substantial (e.g. thirty-two pigs given away) if it is to be credited. If the sign for such qualities were not substantial it might be discounted as mere words: vaporous, boastful, “hot air.”

Be this as it may, the indices of ritual are usually if not always at least in part substantial. As such they are very resistant or even impervious to falsity. That Soni was able to dispose of thirty-two pigs was, in the Siuai case, all that finally mattered. That some of the pigs were his own, but

others borrowed may have been of interest to some of his witnesses but was beside the point. If he were not wealthy enough to have thirty-two pigs of his own to give away he was influential enough and creditworthy enough to borrow what he needed or powerful enough to coerce others into providing them.

The indexicality of other cases is less patent, but more interesting. Among the Maring, a people occupying a domain in the Jimi and Simbai Valleys of Papua New Guinea, men would signify, by dancing at the *kaiko* festival of another group, that they would give their hosts military support the next time they went to war. There is surely no intrinsic or causal relationship between dancing and fighting, particularly dancing *now* and fighting *later*, but the dance is nevertheless indexical. What it indicates is not fighting in the future, but, rather, a *pledge undertaken in the present* to fight in the future. Such conventional acts as pledging and swearing oaths are, of course, symbolic at least in the sense that they would be impossible to conceive or denote in the absence of language. That dancing signifies pledging is also conventional. Some other act, like raising one's right-hand or even, possibly, some verbal formula like "I swear" or "I pledge" could, conceivably, do as well (in chapter 5 I will, however, argue that acts do better than words in such matters). Nevertheless, dancing does not simply symbolize the Maring man's pledge. It indicates it because the conventional act of pledging is understood by the Maring to be *intrinsic* to, an aspect of, the conventional act of dancing. To dance is to pledge. In terms that will be more fully discussed in chapter 4, dancing at a *kaiko* is a "performative" (Austin 1962), a conventional act bringing into being a conventional state of affairs. Inasmuch as dancing brings a pledge into being it cannot help but indicate it.¹⁸

We note in this instance an indexical relationship between two conventions, dancing and promising. We also note that in this case it would be impossible for deceit to hide within a cloud of vagueness or ambiguity because there is no ambiguity or vagueness. To dance is to pledge and that is that.

But that is not the end of the matter. The case of the Maring dancer not only illustrates indexicality, but its limitations as well. Dancing may indicate a pledge of support, but a pledge of support obviously does not in and of itself honor that pledge. To put this a little differently, to pledge is to undertake an obligation, but it is one thing to undertake an obligation now and another to fulfill it in the future. Fulfillment of the pledge is not an ineluctable effect of the pledge as the pledge is of dancing.

The indexical transmission of self-referential information is, thus, only a partial antidote to the problems generated by falsehood and its corollaries, those of establishing credibility and establishing credence. What may make Maring hosts confident that their guests will honor in the future the pledges that they are undertaking in the present is another matter relating to other aspects of the ritual. We shall return to this question later, only noting now that *this confidence*, such as it is, *is contingent upon the association of the indexically transmitted pledge with messages borne by the liturgy's invariant canon*.

In sum, two classes of information, then, are transmitted by ritual. All rituals, both animal and human, carry self-referential information, information concerning the current states of the participants, often if not always transmitted indexically rather than symbolically.¹⁹ The second class, the canonical, is concerned with enduring aspects of nature, society or cosmos, and is encoded in apparently invariant aspects of liturgical orders. The invariance of a liturgy may be an icon of the seeming changelessness of the canonical information that it incorporates, or even an index of its actual changelessness, but canonical messages rest ultimately upon symbols.

There is a self-referential component in all rituals, but it might seem that in some rituals its significance is so far outweighed by the grandeur of the canonical that it appears trivial, as, for instance, in the case of the Mass. Consideration of this matter must be delayed until chapter 4, but it may be well to assert – or reassert – now that in all liturgical rituals, and most clearly *in all religious rituals, there is transmitted an indexical message that cannot be transmitted in any other way and, far from being trivial, it is one without which canonical messages are without force, or may even seem nonsensical*.

If it is the case, as I have claimed, that some self-referential messages are dependent for their acceptability on their association with the canonical, and if canonical messages are without force, or even sense, unless accompanied by certain self-referential messages ritual is not merely a mode of communication in which two sorts of information maybe transmitted. *It is, rather, a very complex form in which the two classes of messages are dependent upon each other*.

Appendix

Peirce, as well as others following him, characterized the index in a number of slightly, but nevertheless significantly, different ways. His simplest formulation, relied upon in the main text, defines the index as “a

sign which refers to the Object it denotes by being really affected by the Object” (Buchler 1955: 102).

He also defined it as

a sign, or representation, which refers to its object not so much because of any similarity or analogy with it, nor because it is associated with general characters which that object happens to possess, as because it is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the sense or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign on the other hand . . .

(Buchler 1955 107)

We will only note here that there are some differences between these characterization of indices (particularly the first) and those of Burks for whom an index is a sign “in existential relation with its object (as in the case of the act of pointing)” or “a sign which determines its object on the basis of an existential connection.”

Subsequently (p. 108) Peirce elaborates by telling us that

Indices may be distinguished from other signs . . . by three characteristic marks; first, that they have no significant resemblance to their objects; second that they refer to individuals, single units, single collections of units, or single continua; third, that they direct attention to their objects by blind compulsion.

Here are some of Peirce’s examples.

I see a man with a rolling gait. This is a probable indication that he is a sailor. I see a bowlegged man in corduroys, gaiters and a jacket. These are probable indications that he is a jockey or something of the sort. A sundial or a clock *indicates* the time of day . . . A rap on the door is an index. Anything which focuses the attention is an index. Anything which startles us is an index in so far as it marks the junction between two portions of experience. Thus a tremendous thunderbolt indicates that *something* considerable has happened, though we may not know precisely what the event was. But it may be expected to connect itself with some other experience.

. . . A low barometer with a moist air is an index of rain; that is we suppose that the [forces] of nature establish a probable connection between the low barometer with moist air and coming rain. A weathercock is an index of the direction of the wind; because in the first place it really takes the self-same direction as the wind, so that there is a real connection between them, and in the second place we are so constituted that when we see a weathercock pointing in a certain direction it draws our attention to that direction, and when we see the weathercock veering with the wind, we are forced by the law of mind to think that direction is connected with the wind. The pole star is an index, or pointing finger, to show us which way is north. A spirit-level, or plumb bob is an index of the vertical direction.

(Buchler 1955: 108–109)

Two comments are in order before proceeding. First, I believe that the statement of his first “characteristic mark” would be improved by

modifying it to say that indices *need* have no significant resemblance to their object. As it stands it is not entirely consistent with all of his examples. "A . . . plumb bob is an index of the vertical direction" in part because its line, by virtue of the law of gravity must itself be vertical. As such it resembles, to say the least, its object, the vertical direction. Much the same can be said about the weathervane's direction.

It is striking how different some of these signs are from others. The North Star, for instance, and the finger pointing north, both seemingly understood by Peirce to be indexical equivalents of synonyms, not only for each other but, no doubt, for compass needles as well, are radically different in their relationship to their Objects. The act of pointing a finger in a particular direction in response to the question "which way is north?", a deliberate act on the part of the signer, is not really affected by its object, the direction north, but, at best, by the direction the signer believes to be north, a very different matter. I said "at best." It is possible for a signer to point, quite deliberately, to what he believes is south when asked for the north.

In contrast, the Pole Star happens to be at or near the zenith at the North Pole. As such it stands in a static spatial (not what most of us mean by "dynamical") relationship to the North Pole and therefore cannot help but indicate north to whoever has knowledge of the relationship and can find the star.

There are yet other differences. Some of Peirce's examples make clear that the objects of at least some indices can be very vague (as in his account of the thunderbolt), and that others can easily and plausibly be misunderstood or mistaken. I may construe the rolling gait of the man I see to indicate that he is a sailor but in reality he may be a drunken attorney or a stockbroker suffering from a central nervous disorder. Others, in contrast, like the plumb-line attaching the plumb-bob to the tripod are close to perfectly clear and difficult or impossible for a normal person to misunderstand.

Further problems vex this list. It may be, for instance, that both sundials and clocks indicate the time of day but they do so very differently. The sundial's shadow is a product of the intervention of its style between its face and the sun. The sun's position is what is meant by "time of day", at least during the daylight hours, and thus the position of the shadow on the face is, inarguably, "really affected by" its object, the time of day. It is, in contrast, difficult to see how the positions of the clock's hands are "really affected by" or are in "dynamical connection" to the time of day. That they are not is to be inferred from the fact that

there is often disagreement between clocks in the same place at the same moment. Peirce, then, left many important distinctions among indices (and between them and other sign types) unremarked. As Arthur Burks put it many years ago “A study of Peirce’s theory of signs is difficult not only because of the unusually fragmentary character of his writing on this subject but also because of the presence of certain inconsistencies and confusions” (1949: 675).” Burks cleared up some of these inconsistencies and confusions but, I believe, introduced others. These need brief discussion.

First, he misconstrued what Peirce meant by the term “interpretant” or at least uses it in a very different sense from Peirce. For Peirce an interpretant is an aspect of the sign itself:

A sign, or *representamen* is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. *That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign . . .* (Buchler 1955: 99, *emphasis mine*)

Burks, in contrast, uses the term “interpretant” to denote the “somebody who is addressed, and not the sign created in his or her mind.” This is clearly indicated in the following:

A sign represents its object to its interpretant symbolically, indexically, or iconically . . . Consider . . . the word “red.” The word “red” is a symbol because it stands for the quality red to an interpretant who interprets it in virtue of the conventional linguistic rule of English establishing the meaning of this word.

(1949: 674)

Two problems are raised. First, in the disappearance of interpretant as an aspect of the sign, or more precisely, the refraction of the object through the “something” which stands for that object, an important question concerning the nature of indices is dissolved without being resolved. It is the question of disparity between the object and the interpretant. The object of the rolling gait in Peirce’s first example is “sailor” but, as I have suggested, the interpretant (in Peirce’s sense) could have been “drunk” or “cerebral palsy” instead. Peirce does not seem to me to have expressed himself very clearly on this matter and Burks’ apparent misinterpretation doesn’t help.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it may be that Burks’ use of the term “interpretant” to designate the “somebody” who does the interpreting is a response to the near absence from Peirce’s formulation of any discussion of senders and receivers as such, that is, the encoders and decoders of signs, and of distinction between these agents (although he does mention the “intelligence using [signs]” [Buchler 1955: 98] and of

the “somebodies” who are “addressed” by signs, that is receivers or decoders). His is a theory of signs and not of communication. Although it is reasonable to take the position that no theory can, or even should, aspire to account for everything, neglect of senders and receivers in the case to hand makes problems for the theory of signs, even narrowly defined, particularly with respect to the nature of the relationship of signs to objects. Pointing a finger, as we have seen, does not relate to the direction north in the same way that the Pole Star does. Pointing a finger toward the north requires a conscious agent to do the pointing (transmitting of the message) in every instance. The relationship of Polaris to the North Pole, in contrast, once it was *discovered* could stand forever as an indication of the direction north. That is, a conscious transmitter is not required every time someone looks to Polaris to locate north, nor is a conscious transmitter required every time a compass is consulted. Once it was *invented*, the compass, like Polaris, could forever indicate the north (when corrected for deviation and deflection). There are differences, however. That Polaris indicates the direction north is a convenient spatial happenstance. That a compass indicates north is the result of a “dynamical connection” between magnetic needles and the magnetic North Pole. It is, this is to say, a function of the operation of universally operating “forces of nature.” In sum, if indices are by definition “really affected by” their objects or significata, neglect of the agencies engaged in encoding and transmitting them (not necessarily the same) and the agencies receiving and interpreting them will necessarily neglect important differences among them.

This leads to what I take to be Burks’ most serious confusion, which is based upon his attribution of a “basic confusion” to Peirce.

Peirce confuses the cause–effect relation with the semiotic relation. Thus he says that . . . a weathercock is an index of the direction of the wind . . . but a weathercock is not a sign in the sense of Peirce’s definition – the interpretant does not use the weathercock to represent or denote the direction of the wind. What the interpretant does is to infer the direction of the wind from the weathercock’s position, on the basis of his knowledge that this position is the effect of the wind.

(1949: 679)

First, I do not think that Peirce’s inclusion of weathercocks, barometers, spirit-levels and the like among indices is the result of any confusion of the causal and the semiotic, or of anything else, for that matter. Although he did not develop an adequate taxonomy of indexical forms, the conflation of the causal and semiotic seems *in its essence* to characterize one of the index’s basic classes, the class that seems to me to be the “purest” or

most fundamental of all indices. Let us call them "True Indices." A "True Index" is one in which there is a perfect correspondence between the sign-object relationship and either an effect-cause or part-whole relationship. That is, a True Index is a sign that is either an effect of, or an aspect of, or a part of its object.

It may be useful to distinguish two subclasses of True Indices. First there are what might be called "natural indices" or "symptoms." They include the dark cloud that indicates rain, the rash that indicates measles, the star Polaris that indicates north, the rolling gait that indicates "sailor."

Secondly, there are what may be called "Constructed Indices." They include the weathercock that indicates the wind's direction, the barometer that indicates air pressure, the plumb line that indicates the vertical, and the rap on the door indicating the presence of someone or something (a raven, maybe) seeking the attention of an occupant, a presentation of thirty-two pigs indicating bigness, dancing indicating pledging and so on. They differ from natural indices most fundamentally, of course, in that they are deliberately constructed and employed by humans to indicate whatever they do indicate.

As deliberate constructions Constructed Indices are *in their very nature* semiotic, and as such they differ from natural indices which are, simply, perceptible aspects of phenomena the presence of which may indicate to observers aspects of phenomena that are "really affected by," "in existential relation with," or in "dynamical" relation with other less perceptible aspects of those same phenomena. (A dark cloud is not in its nature a sign of rain or of anything else, although it can *serve* as a sign.) Constructed Indices nevertheless qualify as True Indices in that the relationship of sign to object among them is, no less than among Natural Indices, that of effect to cause or as part or aspect to whole. That is, signs constituted as Constructed Indices are caused by or are parts or aspects of their objects. This may hold, as we have seen in the main text, even when the object is a convention, like pledging or bigness, and when the sign is a convention, like a presentation of pigs or participation in a dance.

That the constructed index is in its nature semiotic whereas the natural index is not proposes another difference between them which may sometimes be of considerable importance. To put it in ordinary language natural indices are usually more diffuse, less focused than constructed indices. What the thunderbolt indicates is, according to Peirce, vague, what the rolling gait indicates is ambiguous, what the rash indicates may

be very general as well as highly ambiguous, and what the dark cloud indicates – the likelihood of rain – is uncertain. In contrast, what is indicated by the weathervane and the plumb-line and the thirty-two pigs is not in the least vague, ambiguous, general or uncertain. They are as specific as it is possible to be: the weathervane indicates wind direction and wind direction only. The plumb line indicates no more and no less than verticality. The gift of thirty-two pigs specifies how “big” the donor is.

It is useful to put this in Peirce’s terms. His conception of the sign is not limited to the three elements so far discussed, namely the sign (or sign vehicle) the object and the interpretant. It also includes a fourth: “The sign ‘stands for . . . [the] object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen’” (Buchler 1955: 99). Thus, the plumb-line suspended from a beam next to a post does not indicate whether the post is made of oak, but only that it is vertical. Similarly, the weathervane does not indicate the wind, but only the direction of the wind. Verticality and direction are the grounds of these indices, and it may be suggested that constructed indices *always* have a ground whereas natural indices may not, or at least not definite ones.

We can now return to what I take to be Burks’ confusion. Burks as we have seen disqualifies weathervanes, plumb-lines and the like as indices or, for that matter, signs of any kind, on the grounds that they do not represent or denote the direction of the wind, etc., but are used by their interpreters to *infer* such things. I am neither a philosopher nor a psychologist, but would suggest, first, that the logical distinction between inference and interpretation may be clearer than the behavioral distinction in particular cases; secondly, that in instances in which the conclusions to be drawn from the state of a device are limited to one (e.g., that the plumb-line is vertical, that the direction of the wind is the direction in which the weathercock points) there is a simple and straightforward indexical relationship between the sign and the object; thirdly, and related, if those who use the weathervane take its direction to indicate the wind’s direction then it is an index, regardless of what their mental operations might be, unbeknownst to themselves; fourthly and related, even if it could somehow be demonstrated that every time a farmer observes his weathervane he commences an inferential process, it would be so short, informal and unconscious that it would hardly deserve to be called “inference” and would be experienced as indication. Indeed, if inference is, by definition, the drawing of conclusions from

premises then in the case at hand the conclusion "The wind is northwesterly" is virtually identical with the premises (1) The weathercock points in the wind's direction, (2) The weathercock points northwest; fifthly, one of the main points of such devices is to reduce or eliminate the need for inference which is in its nature more open to error than are True Indices. It could also be argued, sixthly, that even if one wished to consider the conclusion "The wind is northwesterly" an inference from premises constituted by the weathercock and its position, indication and inference are not mutually exclusive. An index, it could be said, constitutes a premise. Furthermore, indexicality is an aspect of the relationship between the sign vehicle and the object whereas inference is an activity of the interpreter of the sign.

Although I believe Burks to have been mistaken with respect to such devices as weathervanes it may well be that inference plays a much more important role in the interpretation of natural indices. To interpret the rolling gait of the man I see as indicative of intoxication, nervous disorder or a maritime way of life requires the interpreter to take other indications (dress, location, speech, etc.) into consideration and to infer from them all, in light of each other, what the sign does, in fact, indicate. Inference may also be important, of course, in "secondary interpretations" of whatever is indicated by a constructed index. A barometer, for example, indicates atmospheric pressure, no more, no less. It does not indicate what tomorrow's weather will be although we may infer from such an indication (with a degree of reliability that is unclear or uncertain) that it will rain or that the sun will shine. That tomorrow's weather is not fully predictable from either the dark cloud or the barometer reading does not, however, disqualify either from membership in the general class of signs that Peirce called "indices," and I respectfully suggest that it was Arthur Burks and not Charles Sanders Peirce who was confused in this regard.

In sum, two types of indices, the natural and the constructed have been distinguished, and I have further proposed that they are subclasses of a more inclusive class, here called "True Indices." The label "True Index" seems appropriate for two reasons: first it distinguishes its members as a class from certain mixed forms alluded to by Peirce (Buchler 1955: 108) and discussed further by Burks (1949), Silverstein (1976) and others. Secondly, the label recognizes that when a sign is the effect of a cause it cannot help but indicate that cause and as such cannot help but be true, although its object can be misconstrued or misunderstood by a receiver. Inasmuch as a degree of ambiguity inheres in silence I will make explicit

that the omission of the finger pointing north from the class of True Indices was deliberate. We will return shortly to the matter of index and truth. First, a brief discussion of mixed forms is necessary.

Peirce (Buchler 1955: 108) noted that “it would be difficult, if not impossible, to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality.” I believe that this is an overstatement, but it nevertheless proposes, reasonably enough, that the terms “index”, “icon” and “symbol” should be taken to be possible *aspects* of signs rather than labels for necessarily *separate* and *distinct* signs. Whether it would be difficult or impossible to instance “absolutely pure” types need not be discussed here. It does seem to me that most of the examples of True Indices already adduced would come reasonably close to indexical purity, but even if they don’t there is reason to believe that pure indices do exist, if it is the case as I, following others, have argued (in the last chapter for the most part) that animal communication is largely indexical and, with the *possible* exception of minor use in a handful of intrahuman species, totally devoid of symbols.

The situation is different with respect to icons, we may note in passing. As noted above, iconic actions, like sticking pins into an image of a victim, rests upon the use of symbols – ultimately words – to specify that the image is a representation of a victim, the pins a representation of occult attack and who, precisely, the victim may be. Burks took Peirce to task on this point.

Peirce . . . failed to recognize that since any sign embodies or exhibits a number of qualities and relations, some symbolic means is required to communicate both the fact that a sign is an icon and the respect in which it is iconic, and so also failed to see that there can be no pure icons. (1949: 676)

The assertion that there “can be no pure icons” seems plausible with respect to humans, but if animal communication is also taken into consideration it may not hold. The primary questions are, first, whether such phenomena as genetic mimicry (e.g. the edible moth that looks like an inedible one to knowledgeable birds) and such activities as honeybee dancing (which seems to indicate, iconically, the distance and direction of pollen sources) are to be regarded as iconic and secondly, if they are is their iconicity contingent upon indexicality? These questions need not be addressed here, but it is worth noting that we may be observing in such cases a stage in the evolutionary emergence of icons, whether out of indices or not is another matter.

Although we can, I believe, find instances of both pure indices and pure symbols, signs possessing both symbolic and indexical properties

play an important, or even indispensable part in human communication. Such signs were recognized by Peirce and have been further and more elaborately discussed by Burks (1949) Jakobson (1957) and Silverstein (1976) among others. I need not attempt to summarize these complex discussions here. Suffice it to say that words can be, and often are, used indexically. The word “this” for instance, can indicate something in the immediate environment in precisely the same way that pointing a finger can. As such it is an index, but inasmuch as “this” is a word it, like all words, is a symbol. “A symbol is a Representation whose Representative character consists precisely in its being a rule that will determine its Interpretation” (Buchler 1955: 112). This is simply to say that referential meaning of a symbol is conventional.

The range of word types that commonly serve as indices, according to Peirce and following him, Burks and Silverstein, include time and place references and various forms of pronoun. The possibility of indexical relations between symbols or symbolically constituted phenomena becomes more or less clear in these discussions. Thus, for instance, Silverstein tells us that

a distinct nonreferential bifurcation of lexical items into complementary indexical sets was widespread in Australian Aboriginal speech communities. As described by Dixon (1971) for Dyirbal . . . there is an “everyday” set of lexical items, and a “mother-in-law set” which had to be used by a speaker only in the presence of his classificatory mother-in-law or equivalent affine. In other words, the mother-in-law vocabulary, totally distinct from the everyday one, indexes the specified affinal relation between speaker (X) and some “audience” – not the socially defined addressee (Y) – in the speech situation. As such the switch in vocabulary serves as an *affinal taboo index* . . . maintaining and creating sociological distance.

(1976: 314–15)

We see here an indexical relationship between two forms, *both of which are essentially symbolic*, a special vocabulary and an affinal taboo.

This instance can be distinguished in a fundamental way from the instances of indexical relations between conventional signs and objects earlier discussed – dancing and pledging, pigs and social bigness. In the latter instances the signs and their objects are absolutely inseparable – to dance is to pledge, to give away thirty-two pigs is to be big. The signs in these instances are really affected by the Objects because they, in fact, effect the Objects. Inasmuch as this is the case it is impossible for them to be false. I therefore place them in the category of True Indices.

The Dyirbal case is different. The connection between the Object – the presence of the mother-in-law – and the sign – use of the special