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Chapter 6

Ritual Theory, Rites of Passage, and Ritual Violence

Introduction

Rituals have many functions, both at the level of the individual and for groups or societies. They can channel and express emotions, guide and reinforce forms of behavior, support or subvert the status quo, bring about change, or restore harmony and balance. Rituals also have a very important role in healing. They may be used to maintain the life forces and fertility of the earth, and to ensure right relationships with the unseen world, whether of spirits, ancestors, deities, or other supernatural forces. The succession of a culture's most deeply held values from one generation to another may be facilitated by means of ritual. Rituals are also intimately connected with violence, destruction, and scapegoating. Above all, they are dramatic. Rituals can be seen as performances, which involve both audience and actors. Ritual is not, however, a universal, cross-cultural phenomenon, but a particular way of looking at and organizing the world that tells us as much about the anthropologist, and his or her frame of reference, as the people and behavior being studied. This does not mean that as a category ritual has no explanatory or interpretative value, but we would do well to beware universal, essentialist interpretations of actions defined by the anthropologist as "ritual." The first section of this chapter, "What is Ritual?," explores this theme, looking at the concept of ritual and its functions, and at some of the significant debates and developments in ritual studies.

As an example of ritual the second section looks at the writings of Arnold van Gennep on *rites of passage*. Van Gennep used the term "rites of passage" (*rites de passage*) for transition rituals, marking a change of status, whether of persons or seasons, collective or individual. Rites of passage are commonly associated with initiation rituals, but the framework developed by van

Gennep was applicable far more widely. He argued that all rites of passage have a threefold structure. The first stage is that of separation from the previous state, place, time, or status. There follows a middle stage, which is neither one thing nor the other, before the final stage of reintegration, but in a transformed condition. This basic pattern can be discerned within almost all rituals, particularly if they mark some type of transition or movement (from winter to spring, from alive to dead, from single to married, from child to adult, and so on).

Arnold van Gennep's ideas on rites of passage have been taken up and developed by Victor Turner. Both Victor Turner and his wife Edith worked among the Ndembu in Central Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, and Victor Turner published numerous books, focusing in particular on Ndembu rituals. Victor Turner looked closely at the middle stage of a rite of passage, borrowing van Gennep's term "liminal" (from the Latin *limen* or "threshold"). He explored the nature of liminality for Ndembu neophytes in an initiation ritual, as well as for other groups, such as pilgrims or university students, who are also regarded as being in a liminal state. Liminality can become extended indefinitely, as for monks and nuns who do not seek to reintegrate into the world they left. Typical of the liminal state, according to Turner, is "communitas," a communal bond that results from the social leveling and shared experience of liminality. Bruce Lincoln, in his study of women's initiation rituals, argues that both van Gennep and Turner drew heavily on male initiation for their model of a rite of passage. He suggests that women's experience does not fit easily into this pattern, and proposes an alternative threefold structure of enclosure, metamorphosis (or magnification), and emergence. Lincoln concurs with Audrey Richards, in seeing female initiation as a primary means by which a society persuades or coerces women to conform to its demands.

The final section of the chapter explores the concept of *ritual violence*, including Freud's psychoanalytic notion of patricide by a "primal horde," and the influential thesis of the intrinsic violence of sacrifice expounded by the French scholar René Girard. Maurice Bloch coined the term "rebounding violence" to describe the processes in a rite of passage. He looks in particular at the way in which the return from liminality to structure, armed with the power gained through communion with the divine or supernatural forces, can be the prelude to actual violence. Even when violence is not a product of a rite of passage, there is, argues Bloch, at the very least the notion of moral conquest. The victory of the supernatural world over the world of nature and human beings is commonly symbolized by the consumption of natural products (food and drink), or the conquest of women or neighbors (through sex or warfare). Victor Turner pointed out that crisis and fear can encourage a sense of communitas, and the use of fear as an aspect of ritual is developed by

Harvey Whitehouse in his study of male initiation rites in Papua New Guinea. The invocation of fear in initiands is a powerful way of inscribing meanings on the body and mind at its most receptive and vulnerable.

What is Ritual?

Definitions

Finding a definition broad enough to include the wide variety of human activities we might wish to describe under the heading "ritual," while still preserving some explanatory value, is not altogether straightforward. Bobby Alexander emphasizes two facets of ritual: performance and transformation.

Ritual defined in the most general and basic terms is a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context within which the everyday is transformed. (Alexander, 1997, p. 139)

One of the best known definitions of *religious* ritual is that given by Victor Turner, who describes it as:

prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technical routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical (or non-empirical) beings or powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effects. (Turner, 1982, p. 79)

This definition is, however, rather static, whereas Turner's own work demonstrates the dynamic nature of religious rituals. An alternative definition is found in Alexander's statement that:

Traditional religious rituals open up ordinary life to ultimate reality or some transcendent being or force in order to tap its transformative power. (Alexander, 1997, p. 139)

Alexander stresses that all ritual, including religious ritual, is grounded in the everyday, human world.

So many examples of ritual escape from any but the broadest of definitions, however, that anthropologists sometimes fall back on the "I know one when I see one" approach, or, as Talal Asad (1993, p. 55) states (rhetorically and somewhat ironically), "Every ethnographer will probably recognise a ritual when he or she sees one, because ritual is (is it not?) symbolic activity as opposed to the instrumental behavior of everyday life." A fundamental problem in seeking to define a ritual stems from the basic assumption that

what we identify as ritual in Western societies (often in a liturgical or ceremonial setting) can be regarded as a cross-cultural category with parallels elsewhere. There is not, however, a single type of activity called "ritual" that is instantly and universally recognizable, but there are certain forms of behavior that fall into the category identified as such by Western observers. If anthropologists manage to agree on what constitutes a ritual, this does not mean that the purpose or function of a ritual is self-evident.

Single explanations of ritual behaviour, however satisfying to the observer, seem to me to deny the nature of symbolism itself and its use in human society to express the accepted and approved as well as the hidden and denied, the rules of society and the occasional revolt against them, the common interests of the whole community and the conflicting interests of different parts of it. The use of symbols in ritual secures some kind of emotional compromise which satisfies the majority of the individuals who compose a society and which supports its major institutions. (Richards, 1982, p. 169)

Audrey Richards's warning, first published in 1956, not to look for a single or simple explanation of ritual, is well placed, not least because rituals are multifaceted. Rituals commonly involve participants in physical movement or action, passive and active modes of communication (verbal and non-verbal), esoteric and exoteric knowledge, often in the context of heightened emotional states. Reactions to ritual acts cannot be predetermined. Regular attendance at a place of worship, for instance, may reveal a wide range of possible individual responses to a liturgy, from boredom, anger, and frustration to elevation, joy, the intensity of mystical communion, and a sense of unity with fellow worshippers. The individual may inwardly assent to or dissent from the ritual process. Commentators often stress the formulaic aspect of ritual – a ritual is not simply a spontaneous event created by an individual on the spur of the moment. What, however, about the family burial of a pet rabbit? Spontaneous prayers and actions, and accumulation of symbols (a flower, a memorial, a tree planted), may dignify the committal of the deceased animal. Mere routine – the daily repetition of eating, dressing, and so on, is usually distinguished from (religious) ritual, but Quakers stress the "sacrament of the everyday," the sanctity of every small action, and many other Christian traditions also seek to turn all actions into religious acts through conscious intent by directing them or dedicating them to God.

S. J. Tambiah stated that the difference between ritual and nonritual is relative rather than absolute, and suggested the following working definition:

Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often

expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). (Tambiah, 1979, p. 119)

The notion that ritual is concerned with symbolic communication is relatively recent. The first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1771) defined "ritual" as "a book directing the order and manner to be observed in celebrating religious ceremonies, and performing divine service in a particular church, diocese, order of the like," whereas a "rite" "denotes the particular manner of celebrating divine service, in this or that country" (Asad, 1993, p. 56). Asad points out that for medieval monastics the performance of a rite – that is, following a set of instructions or "ritual" – was itself a Christian discipline, an ascetic practice and virtuous act, comparable to the scribal copying of Gospel manuscripts. The symbolic "meaning" of praying the divine office (the singing of the psalms as laid down in the ritual) or scribal calligraphy was not an issue. The practice itself was what mattered. Not until the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, published in 1910, did modern definitions appear, incorporating the work of Tylor, Lang, Frazer, Robertson-Smith, Hubert, and Mauss. Asad points out that in this entry "ritual is now regarded as a type of routine behavior that symbolizes or expresses something and, as such, relates differentially to individual consciousness and social organization" (Asad, 1993, p. 57).

The idea that ritual symbols must "mean" something is, as we have seen, central to current anthropological interpretations, but not, however, necessarily shared by an anthropologist's informants. As Asad illustrates, the ethnographer can find himself or herself acting as both *analysand* and *analyst* – both identifying ritual symbols and interpreting them. Alfred Gell (1975, p. 211), for instance, in his interpretation of the *ida* ritual among the Umedas of Papua New Guinea, admits that:

Among my Umeda informants I found none willing to discuss the meaning of their symbols – to discuss their symbols as symbols "standing for" some other thing or idea, rather than as concrete things-in-themselves. In fact I found it impossible to even posit the question of meaning in Umeda, since I could not discover any corresponding Umeda word for the English "mean," "stand for," etc. Questions about symbols were taken by Umedas as questions about the *identity* rather than the *meaning* of a symbol: "what is it?" not "what does it mean?" (Cited in Asad, 1993, p. 61)

The lack of an insider (emic) interpretation of ritual symbols does not in itself invalidate the attempt to look for correspondences between ritual action, social structure, myths, beliefs, and so on, but should alert the

anthropologist to the possibility that the action itself, rather than any symbolic meaning, may be the point for participants.¹

There have been many attempts to say what a ritual is and what it does. One version is what Catherine Bell (1997, p. 94) describes as "a pragmatic compromise between completeness and simplicity." Bell identifies six categories of ritual action:

- 1 Rites of passage of "life crisis" rituals.
- 2 Calendrical and commemorative rites.
- 3 Rites of exchange and communion.
- 4 Rites of affliction.
- 5 Rites of feasting, fasting and festivals.
- 6 Political rituals.

Needless to say, these categories overlap in practice, and do not actually take us any further in understanding the purpose, function, mechanics, or efficacy of the ritual process. We can similarly identify three broad theoretical approaches to the study of ritual, which Bell describes as:

Ritual as the expression of paradigmatic values of death and rebirth; ritual as a mechanism for bringing the individual into the community and establishing a social entity; or ritual as a process for social transformation, for catharsis, for embodying symbolic values, for defining the nature of the real, or for struggling over control of the sign. (Bell, 1997, p. 89)

Ronald Grimes (1982) prefers to identify various ritual "modes," rather than adopt a checklist approach. These modes include ritualization, decorum, ceremony, liturgy, magic, and celebration. The emphasis on each mode will vary from one ritual to another according to its function.² These approaches are not necessarily contradictory, and demonstrate both the diverse nature of rituals themselves and the different interests of theoreticians and observers.

Instrumental versus expressive approaches to ritual

The debate between the *intellectualists* who, following Tylor (1871), view religion as a means of explaining the universe, and the *symbolists*, following Durkheim (1976), who see religion as a symbolic language that makes statements about the social order (see chapter 1) has had a significant impact on ritual studies.³ Representatives of the intellectualist school include the historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1907–86) and anthropologist Robin Horton. Eliade gives priority to myths in explaining cosmogonic

events – how the world, gods, and humans came into being. Ritual is a re-enactment of this primal myth, bringing the past continuously into the present (Eliade, 1989, pp. 85ff).⁴ Horton adopts a rather different position, but nevertheless one that also sees religion and ritual primarily as explanatory devices. Using examples from the Kalabari of Nigeria and from elsewhere in Africa, Horton compares an “animistic” personalized model of the world with a Western scientific, impersonal model. Both are “true” for their adherents and adequately account for the way things are. Horton criticizes symbolists (specifically John Beattie and Maurice Bloch) for their inability to accept that taking religious beliefs “literally and seriously as means of explanation, prediction and control of the world” (Horton, 1994, p. 361) can account for the power of a ritual to move and transform its participants.

Horton clearly regards the symbolist approach as unnecessarily reductionist, denying the reality and therefore the power of rituals. The symbolist approach assumes that the form a ritual takes, and the beliefs it expresses concerning the transcendent, are effective because they are also making statements about (symbolize) and mirror society.

In practice most scholars identified as “symbolists” are interested in both the expressive and explanatory value of ritual. In Clifford Geertz’s classic study of a Balinese cockfight, for example, the symbolic equivalence of the fighting cock with both the social and sexual status of its male owner is established (“cock” works in Balinese much as in English, with equivalent punning and *double entendre*). The cockfight is “about” social hierarchy, economic exchange, group solidarity, and rivalry. It is also, however, a means by which the Balinese male explains himself to himself. In Geertz’s words, “In the cockfight, then, the Balinese forms and discovers his temperament and his society’s temper at the same time. Or, more exactly, he forms and discovers a particular facet of them” (Geertz, 1993, p. 451).

Another so-called “symbolist,” Maurice Bloch, looks at circumcision rituals in Madagascar (1986). Bloch traces the historical, social, and symbolic aspects of Merina ritual, but also its ability to address basic questions about what it means to be human. Because a ritual is not fully a statement and not fully an action (Bloch, 1986, p. 195), it allows its message to be simultaneously communicated and disguised. As ritual action is not open to normal discursive processes of argumentation and contradiction it is able to convey a paradoxical message. For Bloch the key message (at least in initiatory rituals) is that death is better than life. Rituals attempt to overcome mortality by entering and absorbing or being absorbed by the transcendent.

The reason the ritual does its ideological job is that it carries at its core a simple and general message, which can be recovered and used for almost any type of

domination. It is that this life is of little value, that it must be rejected, as far as is possible, and exchanged for the still transcendence where time has been vanquished by order and where therefore the relevance of birth, death and action has disappeared. It is only by this argument that power and violence can be made to appear necessary and desirable, and this applies to any power and violence that become indissolubly linked. (Bloch, 1986, p. 195)

Bloch bases his understanding of ritual on a universal biological process. Rituals play on the themes of vitality and mortality. They link time and transcendence. These processes are evident in rites of passage, which can be seen as the archetypal ritual process, encompassing in their simple threefold structure a pattern underlying all rituals. Bloch (like Durkheim) is therefore dealing with both local symbolic interpretations and fundamental explanatory facets of ritual.

Ritual as performance

We have noted that a ritual is in some sense a performance or cultural drama, but in what sense, and does this mean that it is in effect theater? One obvious difference between ritual and theater is that a ritual performance does not just repeat a received script, but is “a mode of action taken by real and familiar people to affect the lives of other real and familiar people. Participants in ritual may be ‘acting,’ but they are not necessarily ‘just pretending.’ They are ‘enacting,’ which contradicts neither the notion of belief nor the practice of theatrical acting” (Alexander, 1997, p. 154). Sir James Frazer and other nineteenth-century scholars of the “Cambridge School” believed that Greek tragedy (and the Western theater descended from it) had its origins in ritual. This view has been discredited by a total lack of empirical evidence, but this does not mean that ritual, theater, and other expressive genres, such as games, sport, dance, and music, do not have much in common. Performance theorist Richard Schechner (drawing heavily on the work of Victor Turner) has attempted to look at the links between these various types of performance, noting that play, games, sports, theater, and ritual all share several basic qualities. They involve a special ordering of time, a special, non-productive value attached to objects, and often a special place set aside in which to perform (Schechner, 1994, pp. 6–16).

Whether a performance is to be classified as ritual or as theater depends (according to Schechner) on its context and function. At opposite ends of a continuum we have “efficacy” (the ability to effect transformations) and “entertainment.” If the purpose of a performance is to be efficacious then the performance is a ritual. If its purpose is to entertain, then it is theater,

EFFICACY	←→	ENTERTAINMENT
Ritual		Theater
results		fun
link to absent other		only for those here
symbolic time		emphasis now
performer possessed, in trance		performer knows what he or she is doing
audience participates		audience watches
audience believes		audience appreciates
criticism discouraged		criticism flourishes
collective creativity		individual creativity

Figure 6.1 Efficacy and entertainment as associated with other facets of performance.

Source: after Schechner (1994, p. 120).

although no performance is purely one or the other. Both efficacy and entertainment are associated with other facets of performance, which Schechner (1994, p. 120) sets out as in figure 6.1.

The boundaries between ritual and theater are not fixed and static. Schechner takes examples of ritual dances from Highland Papua New Guinea in order to trace the movement of performance along the continuum from efficacious ritual to theatrical entertainment. At Kurumugl in the Eastern Highlands this process can be seen in the ritual dancing, pig killing, and meat exchanges between villages. Formerly, the dancers were warriors who were transformed into allies by means of the performance. While the economic and social functions of the ritual have been preserved, the outlawing of intertribal warfare has moved the performance further toward the entertainment end of the spectrum. For the present, however, it remains efficacious in maintaining social relationships by alternating obligations between groups. The visiting dancers incur a debt of meat to the hosts that must be repaid at some future date when they have accumulated enough pigs to hold a dance in turn.

As in all rites of passage something had happened during the performance. The performance both symbolized and actualized the change in status. The meeting at Kurumugl – killing pigs, dancing, giving–taking the meat – was the process of changing the valence of the relationship between hosts and invaders. This process was the only one other than war recognized by all the parties assembled at Kurumugl. Dancing and giving–taking the meat more than symbolized the changed relationship between hosts and invaders, it was the change itself. (Schechner, 1994, p. 118)

This type of ritual, which effects change and in which failure can have disastrous consequences (in this instance, warfare), is semantically heavily

loaded – it really matters what happens, and whether the ritual “works.” At the opposite extreme we may find rituals that appear to be devoid of meaning. Frits Staal (1989), for instance, has argued that Vedic rituals in India have retained their structure but lost their meaning. They have become action for its own sake, and as such more akin to play than efficacious action. Ritual performance may continue to function as a means of boundary maintenance between castes without the symbols themselves being resonant with deeper meanings for the actors.⁵ Both extremes are represented in rites of passage. Celebrating a birthday, for instance, does not in and of itself make a person older. It merely acknowledges the fact and gives occasion for a party. A circumcision ritual or giving birth may, however, effect a change of status, turning a child into an adult. In both instances the body is accorded a symbolic significance, linking physical and social transformation with a particular event.

Rites of Passage

Rites of passage (*rites de passage*) mark the transition from one stage of life, season, or event to another. Everyone participates in rites of passage, and all societies mark them in various ways.

The term “rite of passage” is often used to refer to “life cycle” or “life crisis” rituals, concerned with a change of status in the lives of individuals and groups. Rituals surrounding birth, initiation, marriage, and death would be typical examples of these life crisis rituals. Arnold van Gennep, however, thought of rites of passage in much broader terms, as a universal structuring device in human societies. He included seasonal festivals, territorial rituals, sacrifice, pilgrimage, and indeed any behavior, religious or secular, that displayed the same basic threefold pattern of separation, transition, and incorporation.

Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) has been described as “an outstanding scholar but unsuccessful academic” (Barfield, 1997, p. 221). He was born in Germany, and briefly held a chair in ethnography at Neuchâtel in Switzerland, but spent most of his life as an independent scholar in France, where he became known as the father of French folklore studies. As a prominent critic of Durkheim (particularly his focus on the social to the exclusion of the individual) it was impossible for van Gennep to aspire to an established academic post. Although van Gennep accepted

Durkheim's primary division of the sacred and the profane, he eschewed his distinction between magic and religion, regarding magic as the practical and religion as the theoretical aspect of a single magico-religious complex. His interests were broad, and his ideas often ahead of his time. Van Gennep's work on totemism and taboo, for instance, anticipated that of Lévi-Strauss, in viewing totemism as a means of classification rather than an early form of religion. He is best known in the English-speaking world for his 1909 study *The Rites of Passage* (first translated into English in 1960). Van Gennep looked at a wide range of customs not in order to amass data, but to see if he could discern their underlying structure. The basic threefold pattern of a rite of passage proposed by van Gennep (separation, transition, and incorporation) has been widely taken up and elaborated within many disciplines, including anthropology and religious studies.

The threefold structure of a rite of passage

Van Gennep noted that life does not proceed at a uniform rate, and that human experience is composed of stages and life crises, such as birth, puberty, marriage, childbirth, and death. There are periods when not much seems to happen, and other times when our lives seem to undergo a dramatic change, after which nothing is quite the same as before. The birth of a child or death of a parent, for instance, can bring about an irrevocable change in circumstances. Calendrical festivals mark seasonal changes, from the winter solstice and Christmas, through the spring equinox, Easter, midsummer, and so on. Agricultural cycles often form the basis of religious calendars and holidays (holy days), but the two do not necessarily coincide. Events such as journeys, or changes in status, are often marked by ritual, whether of national significance (like a royal coronation) or individual (like an eighteenth or twenty-first birthday party). As van Gennep noted:

Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man's life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined. (van Gennep, 1960, p. 3)

The three stages of a rite of passage are given a variety of terms, all of which are intended to suggest the movement from one state to another. Van Gennep used two parallel sets of terms:

separation → transition → incorporation or reaggregation
preliminal → liminal → postliminal

Liminal: Latin *limen*, meaning "threshold."

Each stage has its own characteristic type of ritual. The first stage is concerned with separation from the previous state or situation and is marked by rituals that symbolize cutting or separating in some way. A novice monk or new recruit to the army, for instance, might have his hair cut short or his head shaved. A girl experiencing her first menses may be secluded in a special hut away from the rest of the community. A Muslim will ritually wash away all pollution, marking a break with ordinary space and time, before entering a mosque for communal prayer. The second stage is that of transition or marginality. The individual is neither one thing nor another, but "betwixt and between." Rituals characteristically mark this sense of ambiguity and confusion or disequilibrium. Normal rules of behavior may be suspended or exaggerated. Inmates or initiates may be required to wear a uniform, stripped of clothing, painted, or in some other way marked out as different, special. Certain rules on speech and movement may be imposed. Insignia or symbols are frequently used didactically to reinforce any verbal teachings. The third and final stage is that of incorporation or reaggregation, when the individual, in a life cycle ritual for instance, is reintegrated into society, but in a transformed state. Van Gennep also used the term "liminal" to highlight the performative, dynamic element of a rite of passage. The crossing of a threshold, real or symbolic, temporal or physical, is a key element in all rites of passage.

Not all three stages are equally well developed in every ceremonial pattern. The middle or liminal stage in particular can be elaborated or extended almost indefinitely. It is also possible to focus on the boundaries between stages and see the threefold pattern repeated at every stage. Van Gennep gives the example of betrothal, which forms a liminal period between adolescence and marriage. An act of betrothal will itself exhibit rites of separation, transition, and incorporation. In the West a couple may, for instance, begin the process of separating themselves from parental influences and hold a party for friends and family in which they are the hosts. Special clothes may be worn and gifts given to the couple. The woman may wear an engagement ring (a common symbol of being bound to someone). They are reincorporated into society with a new status – publicly recognized as an "engaged couple."

If one looks at marriage, these three stages are again visible. We could represent this diagrammatically as in figure 6.2. A "traditional" Western

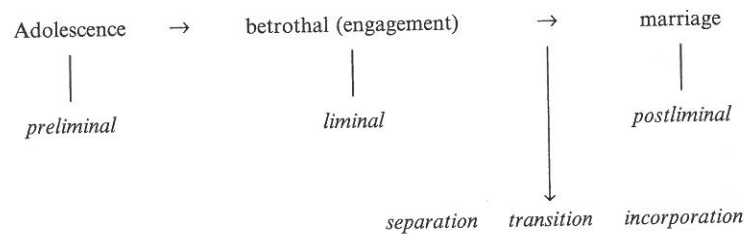


Figure 6.2 Elements of a traditional Western marriage.

marriage might include the elements shown in figure 6.3. The actual detail can and does vary enormously. What van Gennep sought to prove is that in whatever rite of passage one might wish to consider this same basic threefold structure is discernible.

Each rite of passage has its own specific aspects that are not centrally concerned with passage and transition. A marriage ceremony, for instance, takes fertility as its main theme. In a Western Christian wedding the words of the minister or priest usually allude to children as a prime reason for marriage.⁶ The custom of throwing rice or rice paper over the bride and groom as they leave the church has its origins in fertility rituals. The wedding cake in white, representing the body of the bride in her matching white dress, is cut by the bride and groom as a symbolic slicing of her virginity, while the top tier of the cake may be kept for the christening of the as yet unborn child, symbolically present at the wedding feast.⁷ At a funeral separation is symbolically marked and rituals are likely to be directed toward helping the deceased to make a safe and complete transition to the next world.⁸ The

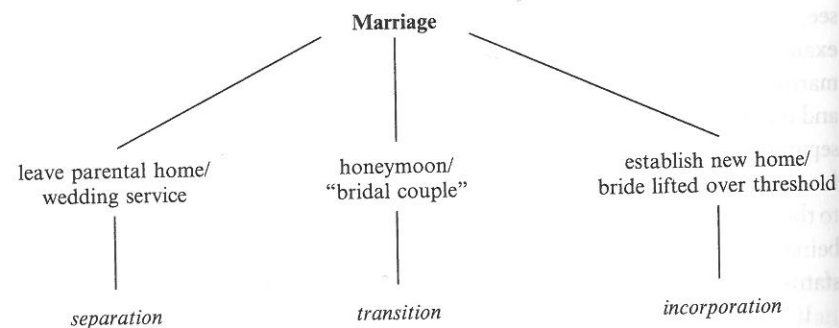


Figure 6.3 Elements of a traditional Western marriage.

focus may be on preventing the dead from haunting the living. Someone who has suffered a "bad death" (such as accident, suicide, or in childbirth) among the Bangwa of Southwest Cameroon will be buried on the far side of a stream or river to prevent his or her restless spirit from crossing back to the old compound in order to harm the living. Clothes or possessions may be burnt or discarded. Gypsies in Britain, for instance, will burn the trailer and possessions of someone who has died. Rites of passage surrounding childbirth are likely to contain rituals that stress protection. Special words and actions are performed to guard and strengthen the child. Gifts may be given to encourage it to stay and to make it welcome. The child may be given a protective amulet or cord. These specific aims will differ according to the purpose of the ritual and run alongside the threefold structure of a rite of passage.

In the second chapter of *The Rites of Passage* van Gennep pays particular attention to territorial passages and notes the importance of the threshold (*limen*) as the place which mediates between one physical space and another and between one social state and another. Whether it is carrying the bride across the threshold of the marital home, making the sign of the cross with water from the stoop at a church entrance, or removing one's shoes on entering a mosque, the crossing of the threshold is duly acknowledged. Van Gennep's interest in crossing from one stage or place to another can be seen in his description of the status of the stranger. Society is likened to a house divided into rooms and corridors. The inside constitutes, for its members, the realm of ordinary, everyday existence that is secular or profane. What lies outside is the realm of the unfamiliar and sacred. Strangers come from the outside, unknown (sacred), to the inside (profane) realm, and whether hostile or friendly they must be domesticated and contained. This is often achieved through offering hospitality, which in many societies is a highly formalized ritual act. The stranger is anomalous, neither insider nor outsider, and has the potential to bless or to threaten due to his or her ambiguous status.

Rites of incorporation or reaggregation in the third stage are often a mirror image of the first stage. Clothing removed during the initial rite of separation will be replaced, the believer who makes the sign of the cross with holy water on entering a church will do the same on leaving. The worshiper or initiate goes back into the world, but changed. One is not exactly the same as the person who embarked on the rite of passage. Rites of passage are processual dramas, not merely circular events. They mark the passing of time, as well as continuity with past traditions and generations.

Van Gennep formulates the general maxim that it is the first time that counts. Rites are more elaborated the first time a stranger enters a house or village. The birth of a first child (especially a son) is often marked by more elaborate rituals

than the birth of subsequent children. A girl's first menses may be marked by ritual, and a first marriage tends to be a grander affair than subsequent weddings.

As a summary of his work on rites of passage van Gennep came to three general conclusions:

- 1 Beneath the multiplicity of forms a characteristic threefold pattern emerges. This recurs in all rites of passage and within different stages of a rite of passage.
- 2 The middle or transitional (liminal) stage can acquire a certain autonomy within a ceremonial whole.
- 3 The passage from one social position to another is identified with a territorial passage, such as the entrance to a village or house.

These points are summed up in the following statement:

For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and to rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross: the thresholds of summer and winter, of a season or a year, of a month or a night; the thresholds of birth, adolescence, maturity, and old age; the thresholds of death and that of the afterlife – for those who believe in it. . . . Our interest lies not in the particular rites but in their essential significance and their relative positions within ceremonial wholes – that is, their order. . . . The underlying arrangement is always the same. Beneath a multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: *the pattern of the rites of passage*. (van Gennep, 1977, pp. 189–91)

Victor Turner

Van Gennep had noted that the middle stage of a rite of passage could acquire a certain autonomy, an idea that proved especially fruitful in the work of Victor Turner.

Victor Turner (1920–83), Scottish born and English trained (under Max Gluckman in Manchester), spent most of his professional life teaching in the United States (at Cornell, Chicago, and Virginia). Victor Turner and his wife Edith carried out fieldwork among the *Ndembu* of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) in the early 1950s, and in 1957 Victor Turner published his first major work on the *Ndembu*, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*. Although trained in the

British structural-functionalist tradition, Turner's experience with the *Ndembu* led him to focus on religion, ritual, and symbols, key elements of social cohesion in an unstable society, fractured by matrilineal descent and virilocal residence (descent was traced through women and residence through men). The power struggles between various family and village heads led Turner to develop an emphasis on social drama rather than social institutions. This interest in performance and in performative aspects of ritual remained a feature of Turner's subsequent writings. Following their conversion to Roman Catholicism, Victor and Edith Turner researched and published an influential work on Christian pilgrimage, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), that also used van Gennep's model of the rite of passage. Pilgrimage is described as "liminoid" or "quasiliminal," possessing parallels to the liminality of "tribal" rites of passage.

Turner developed his analysis of the middle stage of a rite of passage, most particularly in *The Ritual Process*, first published in 1969. Following her husband's death, Edith Turner (1921–) went back to Zambia and took part in a healing "tooth ritual," *Ihamba*, described in Victor Turner's *The Drums of Affliction* (1968). Her account of the *Ihamba*, described in *Experiencing Ritual* (1992), provides an interesting commentary on changing fashions in the anthropology of religion. The analysis pays much greater attention to insider (emic) accounts of the ritual, while Edith Turner herself is less concerned with maintaining a "scientific objectivity" than experiencing at first hand the spiritual healing power described by the *Ndembu*.

Victor Turner coined the term *communitas* (the Latin for "community") to describe the unstructured, egalitarian, human relatedness which he saw as typical of the middle, liminal, stage of a rite of passage. The use of the Latin term was intended to distinguish the ritual bonding of the rite of passage from the geographical, spatial connotations of a physical community. Rites of passage are seen as a movement from *structure* to *anti-structure* and back once more to structure. *Liminality* is anti-structural, "betwixt-and-between." This stage of a rite of passage may be fleeting or extended indefinitely, as in the case of pilgrims or religious communities who seek to live permanently outside the normal structures of society.

Key Turnerian terms

Liminality: the middle stage of a rite of passage; anti-structural, ambiguous, creative.

Communitas: spontaneous, immediate, and concrete relatedness typical of bonds formed between people in the middle, liminal stage of a rite of passage.

Normative communitas: the egalitarian model of relatedness typical of the

liminal stage of a rite of passage, normally requiring time and a degree of institutional support to enable *communitas* to flourish, e.g. initiation rituals.

Spontaneous (or existential) *communitas*: a quality of relatedness that is most likely to arise in anti-structural situations, in the "interstices of the social structure." Unplanned and spontaneous, as might occur between strangers thrown together in a crisis or at an event that generates high emotions.

Ideological *communitas*: specifically formulated rules and regulations governing how people should live in harmony; developed in literate and complex societies. The outward form of the internal existential *communitas*, as in monastic communities.

Apocalyptic *communitas*: the apocalyptic mythology, theology, or ideology of "communitas-like" movements (anticipating future disaster or a catastrophic end to the world).

Liminoid/quasi-liminal: analogue of liminality characteristic of "post-industrial revolution" cultures (e.g. theater, ballet, film, music, art, poetry, and pilgrimage), which stand outside the mainstream and which possess transformative potential.

State: relatively fixed or stable condition, including legal status, profession, office, calling, rank, or degree.

Structure: systems of rank, office, organization, and hierarchy used to order society.

Anti-structure: egalitarian, unstructured, undifferentiated social relations.

Temenos: sacralized enclosure (often used for neophytes).

Sacra/sacerrima: the "most sacred things" usually exhibited in the most intense liminal moments of a rite of passage. They may be interpreted by cosmogonic myths.

Neophyte/initiand: person undergoing initiation. Compare *passenger* or *liminar* – the ritual subject.

Liminality

Turner's theoretical understanding is grounded in his knowledge of Ndembu ritual. From a description of the installation of a senior Ndembu chief, Kanongesha, for example, Turner (1991, pp. 102–6) draws out the following attributes that apply to liminality more generally. First of all, both the chief and his wife are dressed alike and referred to by the same term. Similar sexlessness and anonymity achieved by using the same clothing and terms for male and female initiands can also be seen in many Christian baptismal rites and in the Bwiti Cult of Gabon (Fernandez, 1982). The chief, like many other neophytes, is expected to remain silent and to adopt a servile posture,

representing submission "to an authority that is nothing less than that of the total community." The community in turn "is the repository of the whole gamut of the culture's values, norms, attitudes, sentiments, and relationships" (Turner, 1991, p. 103). A third aspect of liminality is the use of ordeals and humiliations that "represent partly a destruction of the previous state and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges" (Turner, 1991, p. 103). The neophyte is reshaped or molded physically and psychologically so that society's values can be inscribed on his or her body and mind. The Ndembu chief is expected to abstain from sexual relations during the rituals. In societies in which kinship is a major structuring factor, sexual relations symbolize ordered society, whereas the "undifferentiated character of liminality is reflected by the discontinuance of sexual relations and the absence of marked sexual polarity" (Turner, 1991, p. 104). Particularly in the case of installation to high office, but also in other situations, the initiand may be chastened and reminded of his or her worthlessness. The chief remains "one of the people" and must be instructed to serve rather than to pursue his own ends. The initiand is enjoined not to overstep his or her office, while values of human kindness are emphasized, often backed by divine sanctions. "The powers that shape the neophytes in liminality for the incumbency of new status are felt, in rites all over the world, to be more than human powers, though they are invoked and channeled by the representatives of the community" (Turner, 1991, p. 106).

The main characteristics of liminality and liminal *personae* are summed up by Turner in the following passage:

Liminal entities are assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (Turner, 1991, p. 95)

Communitas and social structure

Turner developed the notion of a dialectic between *communitas* and structure. A rite of passage normally involves a movement from structure to anti-structure and back into structure. *Communitas* emerges "where structure is not," and is therefore commonly, but not exclusively, associated with the liminal stage of a rite of passage. *Communitas* does not refer to a territorially based community, but to unstructured and egalitarian bonds between people.

Communitas has an aspect of potentiality, generating symbols and metaphors. Its products are art and religion rather than legal and political structures.

Communitas breaks through in the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edge of structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or "holy," possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency. . . . Liminality, marginality and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art. These cultural forms provide men with a set of templates or models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man's relationship to society, nature, and culture. But they are more than classifications, since they incite men to action as well as to thought. Each of these productions has a multivocal character, having many meanings, and each is capable of moving people at many psychobiological levels simultaneously. (Turner, 1991, pp. 128–9)

Neither structure nor anti-structure can exist in the absence of the other. Structure has a cognitive quality and consists of a set of classifications that provide a model for thinking about and living in a social and physical environment. Communitas, on the other hand, has an existential quality, involving the whole person in relation to other whole human beings.⁹ If either structure or anti-structure is overemphasized there is likely to be a corresponding reaction and a move in the opposite direction. Such swings can be seen in many historical and contemporary movements. Turner cited the example of medieval Franciscans. Saint Francis (1182–1226) was radically anti-structural, rejecting wealth, status, and all the normal comforts of life. He sought to live in a small egalitarian community of like-minded men, dedicated to mendicancy and poverty. Within his lifetime, however, the swing toward structured hierarchy had already begun. The Franciscan Order that he had founded split, and the ownership of property and use of money, rejected by Francis, crept in.

Turner's understanding of structure and communitas bears the imprint both of the hippie movement ("flower power") and radical student protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s, with their demands for anarchic, global, non-hierarchical modes of relating, and of the academic Marxism that was influential in some social science faculties at this time. The Weberian understanding of the "routinization of charisma" is also apparent in the following statement:

There is a dialectic here, for the immediacy of communitas gives way to the mediacy of structure, while, in *rites de passage*, men are released from structure

into communitas. What is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic. Exaggeration of structure may well lead to pathological manifestations of communitas outside or against "the law." Exaggeration of communitas, in certain religious or political movements of the leveling type, may be speedily followed by despotism, overbureaucratization, or other modes of structural rigidification. (Turner, 1991, p. 129)

One of the most striking manifestations of communitas is that displayed by millenarian religious movements, whether of Christian origin or among the so-called "cargo cults" of Melanesia (in which people abandoned their homes and destroyed their crops and property in preparation for the arrival of European goods or "cargo").¹⁰ In his influential study of medieval millennial thinking, Norman Cohn had referred to the people attracted to apocalyptic theologies, which emphasized the imminence of Christ's second coming, as the uprooted, poor, and desperate masses who had no place in mainstream society. They were the landless peasants and unemployed urbanites living on the margins of society.¹¹ Turner draws a series of parallels between the properties of liminality in the rituals of small-scale societies and these millenarian movements. Homogeneity, equality, and anonymity are emphasized, with an absence of property, or communal rather than individual ownership. Property rights stand for structural distinctions, and it is not uncommon for the followers of a millennial prophet to be instructed to destroy goods so as to get nearer to the required state of communion. (One could point to the early Christian community with their common property, waiting for the imminent destruction of the present order and the return of Jesus Christ to save the faithful.)

Members of millenarian movements are often reduced to the same status level – with the likely exception of their prophet or leader. They often wear the same unisex clothes and emphasize either sexual continence or sexual promiscuity, both of which have the effect of destroying ties of kinship (structure) by liquidating marriage and the family. There may be a disregard for personal appearance, accompanied by an ethic of unselfishness and total obedience to the leader and his or her sacred instruction. There is a maximization of religious, as opposed to secular, attitudes, with an emphasis on the transcendental nature of the community and its teaching. The sometimes violent or self-destructive logic of this form of extended communitas is developed by Maurice Bloch (discussed in the following section).

Women's initiation rituals

Bruce Lincoln regards van Gennep's and Turner's models of rites of passage as essentially masculine, with less salience for women, and therefore less

universal than claimed. For Lincoln, ritual is "a coherent set of symbolic actions that has a real transformative effect on individuals and social groups" (Lincoln, 1991, p. 6). Most rites of passage, including male and female initiation rituals, "transform people, replacing old roles, statuses, and identities with new ones" (Lincoln, 1991, p. 6). According to Lincoln, however, women's initiation rituals do something more. As with other rites of renewal, they claim that "the cosmos itself is transformed along with the initiand" (Lincoln, 1991, p. 6).¹²

Five examples of women's initiation chosen by Lincoln in *Emerging from the Chrysalis* (1991) are arranged along a continuum displaying various degrees of coercion and control over women. When compared to male initiation, the emphasis on territorial passage is absent or much reduced. Women usually remain in or near their domestic dwelling throughout the period of the ritual. The women are usually initiated singly – so there is no opportunity for the bonding or *communitas* characteristic of the shared experience of male initiation. Whereas nudity is often a feature of male initiation – a leveling and humbling necessary before a new status can be achieved, women have no independent status to gain. The emphasis is more often on dressing and decoration than on stripping. There is usually little in the way of practical knowledge that initiands gain. What they learn is the attitude to adopt towards such tasks, rather than their actual content. Most girls have learnt from their mothers and other women how to procure and prepare food, look after children, and so on. As a married woman the initiand will continue to do these things, but must learn to do them willingly. Instead of separation, liminality, and incorporation, as the typical stages of a rite of passage for female initiands, Lincoln proposes an alternative structure:

enclosure → metamorphosis/magnification → emergence

In the original (1981) version of *Emerging from the Chrysalis*, Lincoln posed the question: who initiates women? If it is men, then initiation is something imposed on women from outside. He concludes, however, that it is society, or "the totality of the social order" (Lincoln, 1991, p. 93), that carries out the initiation, with men and women playing different roles.

All the rites we have examined are open to men and women, and both sexes take active parts in all of them. It is society as a whole that acts, and thus the initiand experiences both the repressive force of men (who may cut her, rape her, or simply force her to run, work, or stay up all night) and the support of her fellow women (who may dress and adorn her, bring food to her, or keep vigil with her). (Lincoln, 1991, p. 93)

Among the Tukuna of the Northwest Amazon, for example, the men impersonate demonic beings and seek to terrify and assault the initiand. The women dress her and parade around her singing and tapping her with leaves.

Later, most of the girl's hair is pulled out by a group of women seated around her, but the first and last locks are taken by her father's brother, who stands above her. The women are thus identified with the initiand: they sit as she sits, forming a group, and all of them have suffered what she now suffers. In contrast, the man is the instigator of the ordeal, and the only one who can put it to an end. He is set above the initiand, physically as well as hierarchically. What he does, he does as an individual rather than as part of a group, and never will he experience the pain he inflicts. (Lincoln, 1991, p. 93)

Lincoln describes the female initiand as the battleground on which antagonism between the sexes is enacted. Wider social tensions are, as Girard (see below) suggests, focused on a scapegoat. In the case of conflicts regarding female roles, the victim is the girl who is to be made into a woman. In his original conclusion, however, Lincoln put a positive gloss on women's initiation rituals. Women learn how to accept socialized cultural roles, however unfavorable for individuals they may be, and are better able to bear their lot with good grace. The meaninglessness and numbing repetitiveness of so many female tasks, which do after all engage with the continuation of life through procreation and provisioning, are elevated to a cosmic plane.

Such a sense of meaning is the greatest benefit that any ritual can bestow, and it is the ultimate function of all ritual to invest life with a deeper meaning than animal survival. A sense of meaning elevates life above boredom, mindlessness, and despair. It makes even the harshest existence worthwhile and bestows dignity on all of one's actions, however trivial they might otherwise seem. Whether the cosmos is renewed as a result, as is claimed within rites of women's initiation, is difficult for us to assess. But one can certainly say that a world in which individuals and societies find meaning in creative action is a very different world from one in which this has ceased to be the case. To this extent, rituals do live up to their claims, and the universe is made richer by their faithful performance. (Lincoln, 1991, p. 108)

In his afterword to the 1991 edition of *Emerging from the Chrysalis*, Lincoln is more critical of the actual or implicit violence of women's initiation. Feminist scholarship has highlighted the political dimensions of ritual, and Lincoln describes his own thinking as having become more materialist and less romantic. He is certainly more aware of the links between politics, religion, and other aspects of social structure, stating that:

I have come to view as immoral any discourse or practice that systematically operates to benefit the already privileged members of society at the expense of others, and I reserve the same judgement for any society that tolerates or encourages such discourses and practices. By these standards few, if any, rituals of women's initiation fare very well, and looking back, I fear that in some measure I was myself seduced by the elegant structures, well-wrought symbolism, and complex ideologies that are found within these rituals. (Lincoln, 1991, p. 112)

Women's initiation is about producing productive workers, docile faithful wives, nurturant mothers, and so on. Lincoln no longer regards society itself as a monolithic category, but as a series of competing interest groups. Critiquing his earlier conclusions, Lincoln concludes that:

women's initiations, as practised by "society as a whole," have not always served women very well. More specifically, at those points where the collective interests of women *as women* diverge from those of "society as a whole," these rituals not only serve the latter interests, but make it very difficult for women to struggle against them. (Lincoln, 1991, p. 117)

If rituals are one way in which a society renews and reproduces itself, resisting and disrupting rituals can, suggests Lincoln, become a valid site of resistance. Alternatively, new rituals can be constructed that present an alternative pattern of gender relations. While these are projects with which Western gay, lesbian, and feminist interests engage, it should not be forgotten that for most women and disadvantaged groups opportunities for resistance may be limited and the costs high. Sudanese women, for example, often insist on their daughters' circumcision even when living in Western countries in which the practice is illegal. This may be a rational choice in view of the loss of status within the community from which an uncircumcised woman would suffer. Ellen Gruenbaum has noted that within the Sudan some women "have embraced systems of power based on social class privilege or on racial or ethnic discrimination, even though this requires accepting gender subordination" (Gruenbaum, 1998, p. 74), a subordination that may include severe "pharaonic" circumcision with all its attendant health problems. The alternative, forgoing male economic support or community membership, may be impossible for a woman if she is to survive.

Lincoln's conclusions (see below) are, however, pertinent, pointing as they do to the sociopolitical dimensions of ritual and the underlying violence rituals embody. This is not to say that his earlier responses are invalid – the production of meaning and endowment of the everyday with cosmic significance remains an important aspect of many people's experience.

I have tried to suggest three things. First, that rituals are involved not only in the construction of persons, but also in the construction of categories of persons, and in the construction of the hierarchic orders in which categories and persons alike are organized. Second, that such processes are not neutral, but have their victims, as well as their beneficiaries. And third, that those victims have means – creative and powerful – to react against the processes that victimise them. Among these are the disruption of existing rituals and the creation of novel rituals, to which one might add the critical study of ritual forms, with particular attention to their social contexts and consequences. (Lincoln, 1991, p. 119)

Ritual Violence

The linking of religion or ritual with violence may seem shocking to believers in a wholly loving and good God, in whose name the rituals are performed. For contemporary secularists, on the other hand, religious rituals are superstitions, and religions may be seen as responsible for most if not all the irrational, negative, and inhumane acts that people perpetrate on one another, on non-human creatures, and on the environment. Rather than adjudicate between these two extreme positions, this final section examines some of the evidence for the association of ritual with violence and the explanations for such a connection.

The Oedipal sacrifice

For Freud, religion is to society what neurosis is to the individual – an unresolved tension between the desire for pleasure and self-preservation on the one hand, and the demands of an ordered society on the other. It is this conflict, constantly re-enacted, that gives rise to civilization, although part of the tragedy of humanity is that civilization is based ultimately upon a delusion.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, qualified as a medical doctor in Vienna (Austria) in 1881. It was an interest in neurosis and its causes that led to Freud's exploration of the human mind, developing his key notions of the *unconscious* and *libido*. According to Freud, the motive force behind most of our actions lies not in conscious reasoning, but in the desires, fears, instinctual drives, and repressed, sublimated, or displaced thoughts and experiences that lie below the surface in the unconscious mind. One of the strongest of these drives is the *libido*, or psychosexual energy. The *libido* is an expression of an individual's

life force and desire for pleasure and self-affirmation. Genital sexuality is one, powerful, form of this energy, but by no means its only expression.

Other key Freudian concepts include the following terms:

Id: the unconscious instincts driven by the "pleasure principle."

Ego: the conscious self that interacts with the external environment, representing the "reality principle."

Superego: an internal regulator or conscience – the internalization of parental values and expectations.

Fundamental to Freud's theories of human behavior and the origin of religion is his understanding of child sexuality and the *Oedipus complex*. In Greek myth Oedipus unwittingly fulfilled a prophecy that involved killing his father and marrying his mother, leading to the destruction of his native Thebes. Freud used this myth as a metaphor for a stage both in child development and in human social evolution. At about the age of four a boy becomes aware of his own sexuality. He perceives his father as a rival for his mother's love and wishes to kill him. He also fears castration by the father (thus becoming like the mother, who lacks a penis). The resolution of this conflict involves separation from the mother and identification with the father.

Influenced by Frazer (and Darwin), Freud believed that human society was originally patriarchal, with a powerful male jealously guarding his female(s) from other males. At a certain point the excluded younger males (brothers) joined together and killed their father so as to gain access to the women. The consequences of this action are worked out in a series of essays in his book *Totem and Taboo* (first published in 1913), in which Freud sees this original Oedipal action as the origin of the incest taboo (the men desired to have sex with their sisters and mothers but were prevented from doing so by guilt and fear of retribution from the murdered father), totemism (the father remained symbolically present in the clan totem animal or object), exogamy (because of the incest taboo totemic clans looked for women outside their own group), sacrifice (by means of which men sought to assuage their guilt for the original murder), religion (the totem/father is accorded sacred status, thus regaining his authority), and ultimately civilization itself (social life depends upon these self-imposed rules, elevated to the status of divine commands, if human beings are not to destroy one another).

Both religion and higher forms of culture (such as art) are therefore the result of displaced instinctual energies, which may find positive expression in the creative impulse, but which can also be restrictive and destructive. Although many Freudians have interpreted the notion of the primal Oedipal murder allegorically, Freud himself seems to have believed in an actual historical event. He sought to explain not just how individuals and societies

think and act – the contours of the mind – but how and why they arrived at that point.

Freud's ideas have been extensively criticized. The emphasis on male sexuality, for instance, has been rejected or refashioned by feminist scholars. Anthropologists have pointed out that there is no evidence for the early forms of society imagined by Frazer and Freud (among others). Australian Aboriginal clans, with their totemic exogamous systems, were taken as exemplars of Freudian theory, but the case for the presupposed evolutionary sequences has never been demonstrated. Nevertheless, Freudian terminology has become part of the Western mental landscape, and whether or not anthropologists and others explicitly subscribe to Freud's ideas, their influence is ubiquitous, particularly where scholars are looking for universal explanations for human behavior or searching for the origin of religion and ritual.¹³

Violence and the sacred

One of the best known proponents of the view that violence is always implicit in and, indeed, lies at the heart of ritual is the French scholar René Girard, who puts forward an essentially functionalist, psychological argument. In his book *Violence and the Sacred* (1992), Girard argues that "In many rituals the sacrificial act assumes two opposing aspects, appearing at times as a sacred obligation to be neglected at grave peril, at other times as a sort of criminal activity entailing perils of equal gravity" (Girard, 1992, p. 1). Violence is universal, with easily recognizable physiological signs. When the object of violence is out of reach it is deflected onto a surrogate victim, something or someone closer to hand. Girard regards ritual sacrifice as "society seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a 'sacrificeable' victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect" (Girard, 1992, p. 4). Sacrificial substitution entails a degree of obfuscation.

Its vitality as an institution depends on its ability to conceal the displacement upon which the rite is based. It must never lose sight entirely, however, of the original object, or cease to be aware of the act of transference from that object to the surrogate victim; without that awareness no substitution can take place and the sacrifice loses all efficacy. (Girard, 1992, p. 5)

Sacrifice is therefore the community offering up a substitute for itself – protecting itself from its own violence. The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony, and reinforce social bonds within the community. For Girard, this insight formed the basis of all cultural behavior.

If once we take this fundamental approach to sacrifice, choosing the road that violence opens before us, we can see that there is no aspect of human existence foreign to the subject, not even material prosperity. When men no longer live in harmony with one another the sun still shines and the rain falls, to be sure, but the fields are less well tended, the harvests less abundant. (Girard, 1992, p. 8)

Following van Gennep, Girard sees religion – notions of deities, gods, or spirits – as the sacred, external to the mundanity of human society. Human violence is projected onto this sacred realm “out there,” which can be neither fully unleashed nor ignored. To come too near the sacred (to the violence inherent in human society) is to risk getting burned. Too great a separation generates a backlash – the deflected violence demands acknowledgment and accommodation.

The outcome of this relationship [with the sacred] is as follows: although men cannot live in the midst of violence, neither can they survive very long by ignoring its existence or by deluding themselves into the belief that violence, despite the ritual prohibitions attendant on it, can somehow be put to work as the mere tool or servant of mankind. The complex and delicate nature of the community's dealings with the sacred, the ceaseless effort to arrive at the ordered and uninterrupted accord essential to the well-being of the community, can only be expressed . . . in terms of optimum *distance*. If the community comes too near the sacred it risks being devoured by it; if, on the other hand, the community drifts too far away, out of the range of the sacred's therapeutic threats and warnings, the effects of its fecund presence are lost. (Girard, 1992, p. 268)

Girard is a literary scholar rather than an anthropologist. Although he draws widely on ethnographic, as well as classical, material to support his thesis, it would be fair to say that the examples are selected to illustrate the theory, rather than the theory arising from the ethnographic data. Anthropologists and other scholars looking at the links between sex and violence have also, however, noted the role of displacement. The perpetrator of violence is frustrated by his (or her) lack of ability to control others, particularly their sexual behavior, which jeopardizes a carefully constructed identity dependent on a self-image of power and authority. “Thus it is the perpetrator of violence who is threatened and experiences thwarting” (Moore, 1994, p. 153). If masculinity is predicated upon control and power, it is more vulnerable than femininity. In societies in which a dominant discourse of masculinity includes the superiority of men over women, children, and “nature” (as in most if not all human cultures), the reassertion of masculine values is achieved by the deflection of violence onto these weaker victims to hand.¹⁴

Rebounding violence

Maurice Bloch has also elaborated van Gennep's ideas on rites of passage. For Bloch a key feature of ritual is what he calls “*rebounding violence*” or “conquest.” Bloch focuses on the notion of *vitality* and its transformation. In a rite of passage (indeed, in almost any ritual situation), the individual or group puts aside its ordinary vitality (energy, life force, power) in order to take on a superior, transcendental vitality – typically made available in the middle stage of a rite of passage. This is a “conquered vitality obtained from outside beings, usually animals, sometime plants, other peoples or women” (Bloch, 1992, p. 5). The final stage of a rite of passage involves a return to the mundane (“structure”) but empowered by the divine. This return may lead to actual violence, “because the recovered vitality is mastered by the transcendental” (Bloch, 1992, p. 5). Bloch (1986) gives examples of “rebounding violence” that occur in the circumcision rituals of the Merina of Madagascar, which can lead to the violent wounding of children, symbolic violence against women, and physical aggression directed toward those perceived as enemies. Like Lincoln, Bloch argues that rituals can serve to maintain the status hierarchies of a society, and, in line with Girard, proposes that human violence is displaced onto a transcendental power figure. A ritual will “feel right” because it reinforces a cultural message already familiar to participants, but also because it contains two key propositions: “(1) Creativity is not the product of human action but is due to a transcendental force that is mediated by authority, and (2) this fact legitimates, even demands, the violent conquest of inferiors by superiors who are closer to the transcendental ancestors” (Bloch, 1986, p. 189). If the elders, priests or power-holders in a society can identify themselves as key mediators of these transcendental forces they are able to justify their dominance.

For Bloch, the universal structure of a rite of passage is linked to the nature of human beings as biological and social animals. He argues that rituals involve a reversal of the normal processes of life, the progression from birth to maturation and eventually death. Rituals postulate the existence of a transcendental world or source of metaphysical power that lies beyond material existence and therefore negates death. Human beings can “borrow” or be conquered or consumed by some of this transcendental power via the ritual process, transforming themselves in the process.

These irreducible structures of religious phenomena are ritual representations of the existence of human beings in time. In fact this ritual representation is simple transformation of the material processes of life in plants and animals as well as humans. The transformation takes place in an idiom which has two

distinguishing features: first, it is accomplished through a classic three-stage dialectical process, and secondly it involves a marked element of violence ... or of conquest. (Bloch, 1992, p. 4)

Instead of human vitality being seen as the goal of life, ritual looks "beyond" or outside ordinary existence. Weakening and death lead to successful existence, as "by leaving this life, it is possible to see oneself and others as part of something permanent, therefore life-transcending" (Bloch, 1992, p. 4).

Bloch argues, interestingly, that in the case of millenarian movements the participants fail to enter the third stage of rite of passage, that of re-entering society imbued with the divine. Their rejection of the world is such that they undergo the classic rituals of separation from the world of structure, submitting themselves to the violence of that renunciation and submission to the divine. Having become "more like gods," there is, however, a refusal to take up their place in society once more, and such movements may become nihilistic and, as with the Heaven's Gate members, participants may eventually commit suicide in a definitive rejection of reproduction and ordinary vitality.

Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner maintain a predominantly positive view of a rite of passage. For Turner especially, liminality and *communitas* convey the notion of potentiality, transformation, and solidarity. This is a rather different perspective from that of Maurice Bloch (perhaps a reflection of the differences between the optimistic counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s and a more cynical view of globalized violence of the 1980s and 1990s). Lincoln (1991) demonstrates this changing perspective in the different editions of *Emerging from the Chrysalis*. Turner and Bloch are interested in using history to help understand the mechanisms of symbolic structures, and are aware of the political implications of ritual. According to Bloch there are at least three "alternative avenues of legitimate practice" available through the symbolism of rebounding violence:

(1) the assertion of reproduction; (2) the legitimization of expansionism, which itself takes one of two forms: (a) it may be internally directed, in which case it legitimates social hierarchy or (b) it may be externally directed and become an encouragement to aggression against neighbours; (3) the abandonment of earthly existence. (Bloch, 1992, p. 98)

Bloch is interested in the continuity of rituals over time, and in the ways in which they incorporate and normalize violence, rather than the pedagogical dynamics of ritual. The mechanisms by which rites of passage, and in

particular male initiation rituals, transform the initiands is a theme taken up by Harvey Whitehouse.¹⁵

Rites of terror

The violence of many male initiation rituals in Papua New Guinea has been well documented. The violence is not merely gratuitous, but can serve a psychological and social purpose. Harvey Whitehouse has utilized the concept of "flashbulb memories" to explain the way in which information can become imprinted on an individual's long-term memory if it was communicated while in a state of profound emotional shock, or accompanied by a peculiar emotional intensity. While fear may block access to certain parts of the brain (it is difficult to learn Latin verbs or mathematical equations while numbed with terror), where the information conveyed is of immediate interest and associated with intense relationships, the feelings, emotions, and content of the initiatory experience may be retained throughout life.

Whitehouse (1996) uses the example of Baktaman initiation in Papua New Guinea, in which everyday understandings are turned on their head. Baktaman men see themselves as involved in a continuous war with wild pigs, but in the initiatory rituals a wild pig mandible is placed among the *sacra* (the sacred objects) of the men's house.

When a Baktaman novice first realizes that he is (in some sense) being made into a virile, aggressive pig – a warrior and a father – he is not only struck by the absurdity of his previous assumptions about pigs, but he associates this revelation with the terrifying and agonizing experience of being beaten with stones, whipped with nettles and dehydrated almost to the point of death. It is this combination of cognitive and emotional crises that produces the distinctive mnemonic effect. (Whitehouse, 1996, p. 710)

While this is hardly an emic explanation (Whitehouse is hypothesizing that the initiates are struck by the absurdity of their previous knowledge concerning wild pigs), it does go some way to accounting for the vividness of the initiatory experience, and the importance of ritually acquired embodied knowledge over simple verbal instruction. Human groups commonly devise violent rituals for their members as a means of cementing group loyalty, implanting esoteric knowledge, and initiating transformatory experiences. Whether we are talking about street gangs in Los Angeles, a Native American vision quest, a New Guinea initiation, or the fasting and asceticism associated with the Roman Catholic pilgrimage to Lough Derg in Ireland,¹⁶ initiates will be familiar with the ordeals and emotional intensity involved in the rite of passage.

Conclusion

This chapter follows Arnold van Gennep in regarding the threefold structure of a rite of passage as a basic patterning of all ritual behavior. Rituals attempt to enact and deal with the most central and basic dilemmas of human existence – continuity and stability, growth and fertility, mortality and immortality or transcendence. It is the potential of rituals to transform people and situations that lends them their power. A ritual may create a docile wife or a fierce warrior, a loving servant or an imperious tyrant. The ambiguity of ritual symbols and the invocation of supernatural power magnifies and disguises human needs and emotions. Because rituals are performed, sometimes in terrifying circumstances, the messages they carry act at a psychobiological level that includes but exceeds the rational mind. Symbols and sacred objects are manipulated within ritual to enhance performance and to communicate ideological messages concerning the nature of the individual, society, and cosmos. Far from being an epiphenomenon of religious behavior, rituals are fundamental to human culture. They can be used to control, to subvert, to stabilize, to enhance, and to terrorize individuals and groups. The study of ritual can indeed provide a key to an understanding and interpretation of culture.

Notes

- 1 See Staal's (1989) discussion of Vedic rituals as empty of meaning (discussed at the end of this section).
- 2 For a discussion of ritual types and modes see Alexander (1997). Pascal Boyer (1994, chapter 7) outlines a cognitive approach to ritual, based on "ritualised religious episodes" that are central in transmitting and affirming religious beliefs.
- 3 Another way of approaching the history of ritual studies would be through the so-called "myth and ritual school." Some scholars have seen myth as prior to ritual, which is the acting out of the myth, while others claim that rituals create "reality" and are therefore concurrent with or antecedent to myth. For a discussion of the relationship between myth and ritual see Patton and Doniger (1996) and Segal (1998).
- 4 Eliade believed that "archaic" and contemporary simple societies share the same mental structures, and although he drew on anthropological material for his examples, these are as decontextualized as those in Frazer's *Golden Bough*.
- 5 Durkheim (1976, pp. 34–5) made a similar observation, noting that a rather mechanistic view of ritual was by no means confined to Vedic religion, and that it is not uncommon to find "practices which act by themselves, by a virtue which

- is their own, without the intervention of any god between the individual who practices the rite and the end sought after."
- 6 In the Church of England liturgy for the "Solemnization of Matrimony," the minister gives as the first reason for marriage "the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name" (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 302).
 - 7 See Charsley (1992).
 - 8 *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a text instructing the soul of the deceased in their passage from one existence to the next, is one of the most developed examples of a transition liturgy.
 - 9 Turner frequently refers to the Christian theologian Martin Buber (1958) and his description of an "I-Thou" relationship between the believer and God.
 - 10 These "cargo cults" provide examples of syncretic millenarian thinking that combines Christian and traditional themes. See, for instance, Worsley (1970), Burridge (1971), Lawrence (1971), Wilson (1975), Trompf (1991), and Swain and Trompf (1995).
 - 11 Cohn (1978). See also Cohn (1995). In *The Coming Deliverer: Millennial Themes in World Religions* (Bowie, 1997) I argue that millenarian thinking is actually part of orthodox teaching in all soteriological religions (which look for a coming savior). Whether this teaching is activated or not will depend largely on the degree of marginality experienced by particular groups, and the level of investment they have in mainstream society.
 - 12 See Strathern and Stewart (1998, p. 249), who describe a correspondence between the body and cosmos in rituals from the Mount Hagan area of Papua New Guinea.
 - 13 For an anthropological assessment of Freud's thesis see Fox (1967).
 - 14 This argument is put forward and illustrated by most of the contributors to Harvey and Gow (1994).
 - 15 For an excellent summary and critique of Bloch's description of the Orokaiva initiation ritual (described in chapter 2 of *Prey into Hunter*; Bloch, 1992), see Whitehouse (1996, pp. 704–8).
 - 16 The pilgrimage, known as "St Patrick's Purgatory," involves both sleep deprivation and fasting.

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