

Ritual

Ritual is of crucial significance to all human societies, and since the 19th century it has been a major focus for anthropologists interested in the study of religion. There are numerous definitions of ritual, but nearly all emphasize repetition, formality, the reliance upon symbols, and the capacity to intensify bonds within a community. Ritual is action. Anthony Wallace highlights the elevated role of ritual when he labels it the primary phenomenon of religion: "Ritual is religion in action; it is the cutting edge of the tool. Belief, although its recitation may be part of the ritual, or a ritual in its own right, serves to explain, to rationalize, to interpret and direct the energy of the ritual performance. . . . It is ritual which accomplishes what religion sets out to do" (1966: 102). While rituals encapsulate ideas central to a culture and are often closely tied to myths, they are intended to bring about specific ends.

Through ritual, religion is able to impress on people a commitment to their system of religious beliefs. Participants in a religious ritual are able to express group solidarity and loyalty. History abounds with examples of the importance of the individual experience in religion, yet there is no denying the overwhelming effect of group participation. Some anthropologists believe, along with Malinowski and other early functionalists, that ritual helps allay anxiety. Through the shared performance of group dances and ceremonies, humans are able to reduce the fears that often come when life's events threaten their security and sense of well-being.

Are all rituals religious? Early anthropological theorists assumed that all ritual was sacred in nature, most likely because they dealt with societies in which many aspects of daily life held sacred significance. More-contemporary writers have noted, however, the ritual nature of ceremonies and actions that do not clearly invoke spirits or deities yet still express the fundamental beliefs, values, and social foundations of a group. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff call such actions *secular rituals*, highlighting their nonsacred status yet also drawing attention to their powerful, multifaceted meanings (1977). One example is a birthday party celebrated at a senior citizen center, as documented by Elizabeth Colson. Although the party was clearly secular, it transformed participants into a community honoring their common characteristic, age (1977).

Most introductory textbooks in anthropology divide religious ritual into rites of passage and rites of intensification. Rites of passage mark transition points in the lives of individuals—for example, birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Rites of intensification occur during a crisis for a group and are thus more important in maintaining group equilibrium and solidarity. They are typically associated with natural phenomena, such as seasonal changes or a lack of rain, but other events, such as impending warfare, could also trigger a rite of intensification. Whatever precipitates the crisis, there is need of ritual to lessen the anxiety that is felt by the group.

Although the division of rituals into this twofold scheme is useful, it does not adequately represent the variety of ritual occurring in the world's cultures. Wallace, for example, has outlined five major categories of ritual (1966: 107–66):

1. *Technological rituals*, designed to control nature for the purpose of human exploitation, comprise three subdivisions:
 - a. Divination rites, which help predict the future and gain hidden information
 - b. Rites of intensification, designed to help obtain food and alcohol
 - c. Protective rites, aimed at coping with the uncertainty of nature (for example, stormy seas, floods, crop disease, and bad luck)
2. *Therapy and antitherapy rituals* are designed to control human health. Curative rites exemplify therapy rituals; witchcraft and sorcery, antitherapy.
3. *Ideological rituals*, according to Wallace, are "intended to control, in a conservative way, the behavior, the mood, the sentiments and values of groups for the sake of the community as a whole." They consist of four subcategories:
 - a. Rites of passage, which deal with role change and geographic movement (for example, marriages)
 - b. Rites of intensification, to ensure that people adhere to values and customs (for example, Sunday church service)
 - c. Taboos (ritual avoidances), courtesies (positive actions), and other arbitrary ceremonial obligations, which regulate human behavior
 - d. Rites of rebellion, which provide a form of "ritualized catharsis" that contributes to order and stability by allowing people to vent their frustrations
4. *Salvation rituals* aim at repairing damaged self-esteem and other forms of impaired identity. Wallace sees three common subdivisions in this category:
 - a. Possession, in which an individual's identity is altered by the presence of an alien spirit that occupies the body (exorcism is the usual treatment)
 - b. Ritual encouragement of an individual to accept an alternate identity, a process similar to the ritual procedure shamans undergo upon assuming a shamanic role
 - c. The mystic experience—loss of personal identity by abandoning the old self and achieving salvation by identifying with a sacred being
5. *Revitalization rituals* are aimed at what can be described as an identity crisis of an entire community. The revitalization movement may be seen as a religious movement (a ritual) that, through the help of a prophet, strives to create a better culture.

Regardless of the typological system used (and anthropologists have proposed others in addition to Wallace's), in practice the various types of ritual frequently overlap and may change over time.

It is similarly difficult to pinpoint the meaning or significance of ritual, particularly for all participants. This may vary between cultures, over time, and even between individuals in a given setting. Fiona Bowie writes (2000: 154–55):

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 worshipers. 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 commitment of the deceased animal.

There is no reason to assume that the multiple experiences of ritual felt by people in the industrialized West are any less a part of ritual participation than those of people in less developed parts of the world.

Some contemporary anthropologists have found it fruitful to compare ritual to theater or drama and to interpret ritual as a kind of cultural performance. It is intriguing to consider the possible parallels between ritual and other forms of enactment, including prescribed physical movements and actions, scripted communication, the use of special costumes or props, and the demarcation of sacred space as a kind of stage. Outwardly, the similarities between ritual and theater may appear strong, but the differences become clearer if one considers the goals and internal experiences of participants. "Participants in ritual may be 'acting,' but they are not necessarily 'just pretending'" (Ibid.: 159). Taking part in a ritual can have consequences for participants. For example, some rites of passage deliver an individual into a new stage of life, with new rights, responsibilities, and privileges.

Like other aspects of culture, ritual changes over time. In the contemporary West, there are myriad examples of new and revised ritual traditions, including national commemorations intended to intensify patriotism. The African-based holiday observance Kwanzaa was invented in 1966 by Maulana Karenga, a professor of black studies. Originally intended as a substitute for the European-based customs of the Christmas season, Kwanzaa has grown in acceptance and popularity among diverse communities of Americans. Feminist and New Age movements have experimented with the creation of new forms of ritual expression, often drawing upon participants' own interpretations of non-Western religions and myths. These experiments have resulted in various self-help guides to creating one's own rituals, as well as programs such as those designed to take high school students on rites of passage modeled after the vision quests of Native North Americans. Such borrowing has been controversial, and some Native American groups have begun to protest the use of their myths and rituals by outsiders, however well intentioned. Catherine Bell writes,

The ubiquitous dynamics of ritual appropriation are historically complex and politically charged, especially when socially or politically dominant groups appear to be mining the cultural traditions of the less powerful, taking the images they want and, by placing them in very new contexts, altering their meanings in ways that may sever these images from their own people. (1997: 240)

Whether we consider long-standing, highly formalized sacred rituals or the more inventive attempts to enact values in a ritual way, it is clear that ritual serves two functions: Ritual teaches participants—as well as anthropological observers—about the social arrangements and values of a community yet also helps construct and create those very arrangements and values.

In the five articles in this chapter, we encounter a range of rituals and possible interpretations. Building upon the seminal work of early-20th-century anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, Victor W. Turner scrutinizes one phase of rites of passage as they are practiced around the world. The works of both Van Gennep and Turner have been highly influential in anthropology, and their focus upon rites of passage has undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of that phrase among the general public.

While Van Gennep and Turner emphasized the structure and process of rituals, Michael Atwood Mason's article documents a Santería initiation with an emphasis on bodily experience.

Continuing in the intellectual vein of Victor Turner, Barbara G. Myerhoff's analysis of Huichol rituals explores how myth and symbolism create a sacred realm distant from everyday reality.

Thomas J. Csordas's article compares rituals that respond to abortions, as carried out in the Charismatic Renewal movement in North America and in Japan. Csordas is particularly interested in how ritual "works" and in the construction of culture-specific emotions and disorders.

In the final article, Deborah Kapchan explores the ritual application of henna and tattoos art among women in Morocco.

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Suggested Readings

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