

14. RITUAL

Today we move to new subject, ritual
We have problem of defining what we mean, identifying our subject
Not the most fascinating part of study but essential

True if make up fancy new jargon term such as schismogenesis
But even more so if the word comes from everyday vocabulary. Often everyday meanings are messy, even contradictory.
Words like power and justice turn out to be extraordinarily difficult
Whole books just trying to figure out

Sometimes, we may decide that a concept is bogus, as with totemism. Really nothing real thing there, artificial construct. (Fortunately useful things can come out of study of even bogus concept.)

Other times have strong feeling that something real out there, but very hard to get verbal handle on it. True of word ritual.

We have intuitive sense that some kind of actions that humans do different from others, more significant, have greater import.

Standard dictionary definitions of ritual:

“relating to, or of the nature of rites.” Like a lot of dictionary definitions, begs the question or passes it on: so what are rites? Endless definitional regress.

“the manner of performing divine service, or a book containing it”---i.e. religious action.

“a body or code of ceremonies”---then what are ceremonies?

“an often repeated series of actions”

So, except when the dictionaries just substitute one word for another (rites or ceremonies for ritual), there seem to be 2 primary criteria for defining ritual as a certain kind of action:

-actions in religion. That definition creates two problems: first, religion supremely hard to define, so have only exacerbated definitional problem. second, many non-religious actions seem like ritual, feel like ritual, probably should be included, but this definition excludes them.

-or action as that highly repetitive or stylized. Using this sense of word, psychologists sometimes call individual compulsive actions ritual. But lots of compulsive actions---beating head against wall---don't intuitively feel like rituals

-Definition I proposed (though not perfect) is: culturally standardized and in some way highlighted or foregrounded communicative, expressive action

Almost all action has an instrumental dimension: pound nail, herd cows, write paper.
And just about all action has an expressive, communicative aspect: how you pound nail says a lot about feelings or task.

What gets called ritual are those actions that seem most completely communicative and expressive.

There are various ways we have of setting them apart, indicating that they are ritual:

-exaggerated, elaborate, dramatized: a mass but not sight-seers strolling in church.

-stereotyped, patterned, invariable: a prayer but not man shouting obscenities.

-repetitive, redundant: 5000 bows in Japanese ritual vs. a political speech

But none of these things by themselves define ritual, and none of them set it aside from ordinary action. Can have action that do a million times (pound one million nails) but doesn't seem to be ritual. Or can have very casual low-key action that is ritual. These are instead various ways that ritual is marked off from ordinary action, ways of saying, "Hey, pay attention!"

Even further, ultimately to call something ritual is really not identifying something truly distinct like a chair or a car but rather identifying those actions that can most usefully be studied as communicative action. The same approach can be extended to *all* action., treat the obscenities or political speech in same framework.

Prehuman and human ritual

One of interesting things about ritual is that seems to have roots in animal world.

Many animals have exaggerated, repetitive, stereotyped behavior that is used to make key communication:

.e.g. among baboons, dominant animal bares fangs, adopts aggressive posture. Lesser animal signals that acquiesces by adopting submissive posture, often turning around, presenting rear end. Dominant animal mounts briefly, though no real sex. Ritual of dominance and submission. Much more economical than having animals fight it out every day to see who is top baboon.

Classic example, mating rituals, often very elaborate and dramatic.

So communication about very important things. Stands out from ordinary behavior.

Zoologists who study animal behavior (ethologists) call ritualization

Develop evolutionary models of how developed out of ordinary behaviors

Now we as humans have communicative possibilities with spoken language that animals do not (though learning that animals often have very complicated communication system)
We can say in words, "Well, of course you're the big man; please don't hit me."

But often we have to communicate things in ways that stronger and more persuasive than a simple declarative statement. If want to tell someone color of car that passed by, just say “green’.

But if want to convince someone that madly in love, it is notorious that words by self may not be enough (Say it with flowers.) More so if want to persuade someone that you are the chief or the king. Even more so if want to persuade that God is in his heavens, and all is right in the world, when in fact world seems a mess.

So there are many ways that we humans express things in action as well as words

Some examples

Give one example from savage group, my family.

For WASP Anglo-Saxons we are unusually cohesive. We feel as close to our second cousins as most people are to first cousins. Summer cottages near each other. Had family newsletter during World War II.

And we have own marriage ritual. Night before church wedding, at bridal dinner, couple jumps over a broom.

Custom found among African-Americans and in past among rural Irish. But we are neither.

Started in 1880s, with great grandmother, who decided to do. And have been doing ever since. All the couples who jumped broom at own weddings line up, jump in order, last is new couple. Then tie on ribbon embroidered with initials and date on broom. By now ribbons extend down most of broom, oldest encased in plastic. Can find ribbon for parents and grandparents. Broom is kept in box, shipped around country for weddings.

Very jolly occasion. People enjoy. Read horrible doggerel poetry. But also making serious points:

1. The family is concerned with every marriage. No couple just getting married for self.
2. Asserts solidarity of family. We are a group, we are important. Sometime behind laughter, other family finds a little intimidating.
3. Tells couple their marriage is not isolated. Shows them that they are in long line of couples: see it in the lining up and in ribbons.
4. tells in the in-law that they are being taken into family.
5. And until recently always mentioned that there was some sort of magic in broom, had never been a divorce. Implicitly tells couple that whatever happens in rest of society, not Ok in this family to ever divorce. Some years ago magic broken by a few divorces, but rate of divorce still very low.

So jolly fun ritual making serious points.

Another marriage ritual, from Kuna of Panama, who worked with:

Live in large extended family households, young man goes to live with wife's family, works with wife's father, follows his orders for next 15-20 years.

In marriage ritual:

Young man is unsuspecting, perhaps on street, group of friends grab him, carry him off. Today done in jest, but in past really did catch him. Marriage ritual called "dragging". They take him to girl's house. he is thrown in hammock, she on top. Swing hammock. He may be allowed to run out, then caught again.

Next day he goes to forest with father-in-law, cuts prescribed number of logs, paddle back to island village. Young man leaves canoe, returns to own home. Wife comes to fetch him, while father-in-law unloads logs.

So ritual dramatizes fact that girls' parents make choice, that boy is going to be married to in-laws as well as wife; that his father-in-law will be in control; but also that it will not be slavery, will cooperate with father-in-law.

Other marriage ritual makes different points, depending on society where appears: Ethnography of shepherds in Greece. Bride brought by kin towards groom's home. Daughter weeps to leave family. The families say hostile things, sometimes degenerates into brawl. Strong messages about relations between families etc.

Archaic European marriage ritual, esp. among upper classes. During wedding feast, couple led off, often up stairs to room on balcony, with lots of obscene comments, songs, etc. Sometimes huge noise made outside window. They "consummate" marriage. She was supposed to be virgin. Said that immediately afterwards bloody napkin was produced to prove her virginity. Says very clear things about all sorts of values and customs.

Ritual involves a paradox. Is expressive/communicative action, but often gets things done through that action. Communicating can be a kind of doing.