

Robert J. O'Donnell

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The Meaning and Function of Ritual

The study of the subject of ritual in human life would encompass a long stretch of humankind's history and a wide variety of current societies and settings. This examination of ritual will aim at applying "the meaning and function of ritual" to college and university fraternities and sororities. This exploration will clarify the important role of ritual in Greek life and will deal also with the damage done by abuses, i.e. forms of hazing, sometimes surrounding, but not part of authentic ritual.

Most people have frequently participated in rituals, sometimes without even realizing it. In the context of our societies, crowds of fans engage in organized cheers and gestures at a football game. Families celebrate birthdays with a party cake and a familiar song. Weddings and funerals are natural ritual settings, whether in traditional forms or current less formal patterns, which are nonetheless rituals. Rituals are a central part of the life of fraternal organizations, especially in their initiations.

What exactly is ritual? Why do we perform rituals? What do they mean, especially for participants? Evidence exists for the emergence of ritual among the earliest human species. Neanderthal graves have been found in which bodies may have been intentionally buried and were interred with flowers (Solecki 324). The emergence of language, though primarily functional at first, endowed humans with a capacity to create symbols, words designating objects, vocabulary for abstract concepts, and songs for memory and hope. Being innately

social, human groups could muster these symbols not only for mundane uses but to foster group identity and solidarity, and from this was ritual born even if we can't exactly identify its first appearances. A recently uncovered archaeological site in Turkey, Göbekli Tepe, dated to 30,000 B.C.E., has been clearly identified as a "cult site," with evidence of gatherings of early modern humans, sacred pillars and structures, and animal sacrifice (Urbanus 26-33).

DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF RITUAL

Definitions of ritual in social science have been fluid in the last 150 years of analysis among anthropologists, sociologists, and scholars in other fields such as religious studies. Ronald Grimes summed up the classical social science perspective on ritual:

The usual scholarly view is that ritual is: (1) repeated (for instance, every Sabbath); (2) sacred (related to the holy, of utmost significance); (3) formalized (consisting of prescribed, unchanging movements such as bowing or kneeling); (4) traditional (not being done for the first time, claiming an ancient history or authorized by myth); and (5) intentional (nonrandom actions, done with an awareness of some reason or meaning). (*Beginnings* 60)

Grimes notes that this definition was too narrowly derived from "liturgical," i.e., religious, ritual studies. The scholarly consensus is solidly with him on this observation. So, broader definitions of ritual have been proposed such as that of Richard Rappaport: "I take the term 'ritual' to denote *the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers*" (24). The words and gestures of a ritual, even allowing for adaptation and variation, are not wholly in the command of its current practitioners. In many

cases, it is expected that a ritual performance strictly follow its “encoded” official or traditional form.

As intentional and formally repeated patterns of words, actions, and symbols, rituals are fundamentally an aspect of human community life. Yes, there can be more private rituals, for instance family traditions at Thanksgiving or in visiting a family grave. Even these reflect the family as mini-community and often these rituals are shared by many others in society and originate beyond a particular family. Individuals may be said to have their own solo rituals, a baseball player’s good-luck moves, for instance, but these individual rites can be chalked up as superstitious habit and may be changed by the person who invented them. Ritual in its full sense is the possession of and expression of a community, “encoded” by it. Fraternal organizations have very prescribed initiation rituals, now often committed to writing or printing to preserve and define their ritual traditions.

Catherine Bell fleshes out the definition of ritual with an exposition of “Characteristics of Ritual-like Activities.” Bell names and describes these characteristics: Formalism, Traditionalism, Invariance, Rule-Governance, Symbolism, and Performance (138-159). There is considerable overlap and interrelatedness among these categories. Formalism entails a style of speaking and acting that set rituals apart from the most of the speech and gesture patterns of daily life. The tendency to present a ritual as “identical to or thoroughly consistent with older cultural precedents,” reflects a traditionalism that may include costumes and vocabulary from the past. Think of judicial robes and legal vocabulary in court settings. The invariance of ritual embodies the assumption and even obligation that prescribed words and gestures will be followed as inherited or given by authority. Rules govern how rituals are to be enacted and with the expectation that they will be performed so as to impress their meaning and significance upon

participants or an audience. Symbols are a key aspect of ritual – objects and images, and associated words -- that point beyond themselves to a deeper or wider meaning for a group or the public. Bell cites the example of Neil Armstrong's touching the surface of the moon in fulfillment of the American quest to land on earth's satellite and as the first human being to do so, with "one giant leap for all mankind" and planting an American flag (157).

Rituals are thus formal and regular patterns of action (gestures, words, symbols) that are, if not rigidly invariable, at least basically the same across time and geography, with allowances for development and reasonable adaptation. They are not the invention of an individual or subgroup and are not supposed to be subject to arbitrary change or variation by them. So, ritual procedures need to be carefully transmitted, perhaps orally (as in early cultures) or in writing (the "Book"). Their transmission and performance may be entrusted to specially endowed or chosen individuals, such as shamans or priests. They may or may not be secret, that is, kept from the knowledge of those outside the group. National or widespread cultural rituals are usually public. Religious rites have had some elements of secrecy across the ages, but less so in the modern world. Small clan or tribal groups, fraternities and sororities, and some other social organizations keep at least some of their rituals secret or very private, increasing the sense of solidarity among members ("only we really know") and more clearly separating insiders from outsiders ("they don't know"). One of the drawbacks of practices of secrecy is that unfounded rumors and accusations about what groups really do in their rituals can be spread.

THE PURPOSE OF RITUAL

Ritual consists of regular formal patterns enacted by a community to express or solidify its unity (including bringing in new members), to articulate its basic values and perhaps their origins, and

to move its members to live those values. Ritual may be said to express and embody the “culture” of a community, organization, or society. Culture in this sense is not primarily about the so-called “high culture” of art and music. Culture embraces much more, including ritual. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings ... and inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form” (89). The role of culture in a society or group is, according to Geertz, to “communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life.” In briefer terms, culture can be defined as the meanings (beliefs) and values that inform a people’s way of life, to which can be added the symbols and behaviors that embody those meanings and values. Rituals are among the major symbols and behaviors that express who we are, what holds us together, what we believe, and how we are expected to act. Therefore, rituals do not exist in isolation. They come from a society or community and ideally influence and shape the ongoing non-ritualistic behavior of a group and its members.

RITUALS OF TRANSITION AND INITIATION

Human ritual making has spanned millennia and cultures across time and space. It is not surprising then that a great deal of variety has emerged in the elements, particular pieces, of ritual performance. We would not expect them to all be the same, given their different purposes, peoples, and cultures. In broad outline, ritual has served as rites of purification, reconciliation, divination (future-telling), offering and exchange, magic, sacrifice, and consecration, reflecting the wide and varied meaning and functions of ritual. In this study, what social scientists have called rituals of “transition” or “initiation” are most relevant. A deeper examination of these ritual elements will also make clear why some behaviors, i.e., “hazing,” – in the military, sports

teams, and fraternal groups – are in fact the antithesis of the meaning and purpose of initiations or any other authentic ritual.

What elements are embodied in such rituals of initiation or transition from one life stage or social role to another? These particular kinds of rituals include birth and marriage rituals, transition into adulthood, and such role-taking rituals as coronations, knighting, ordination, and, of course, initiation into membership in a group. The full spectrum of ritual expressions is quite wide but with notable similarities across categories of groups: gathering together of members, a special setting for the ritual, the arrangement of the group (as in a circle or line), introduction of candidates, prescribed words and discourse, instruction of the candidates, special clothing, particular songs, physical symbols, bodily postures and gestures, oath taking or commitment, welcome of new members, and celebratory eating and drinking,

If the elements of ritual in the following specific descriptions resemble those of particular current groups, that is because key anthropologists and sociologists have put their finger on common dimensions of ritual, not because the organization's rites or secrets have been revealed. Such rites and symbols are not likely to be absolutely unique. After all, modern fraternities have inherited a good deal of both directly from the Masons, and indirectly through the Masons from medieval orders and guilds, religious ordinations, and tribal initiations into manhood.

SPECIFIC ELEMENTS OF INITIATION RITUALS

Crossing the Threshold. A particular common initiation ritual element is the “crossing of a threshold,” a literal and symbolic movement into the orbit of the initiating community. This also often includes the necessity for a sponsor or entrance guard to vouch for and present the candidate. “When we speak of rites of *passage*, we are implicitly invoking the spatial metaphor.

The image is that of a person passing between two adjacent spaces” (Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone*, 104). Grimes cites the pattern of male tribal initiations in which boys are taken out of the village, undergo initiation steps, and then returned, “crossing the threshold” of their village now as men. The dramatic entrance of a bride-to-be through the doors and into the church in a traditional wedding ceremony is another such passage.

Sponsorship. As for sponsorship or control of the candidates’ entry into their new state, in Masonic ritual, for example, it is the duty of a “Deacon” to accompany the candidate in departing and then re-entering the Lodge for initiation and guiding the candidate in its first steps (Smith 29). In Catholic and other ordinations to the ministry, the candidate for ordination is presented by a presbyter to the Bishop (or Presider) who inquires as to the suitability of the person for ordination. The presenting priest responds: “After inquiry among the people of God and upon recommendation of those concerned with his training, I testify that he has been found worthy” (*Ceremonial* 160).

Trials and Testing. At some point, especially in tribal initiations into adulthood, the candidate may have to face or endure a trial or testing. Such tests were a formal and expected part of the ritual, not an unregulated add-on and were mostly related to the adult tasks of the group, e.g., jungle or forest tracking, hunting, overcoming fear, and enduring the pain of combat. In many puberty or manhood rituals, circumcision is a daunting yet essential element. Tribal elders take care to oversee these trials, accompanying the candidates or discretely tracking them from afar in the jungle or forest. The aim of these rituals is to bring new members into the male fellowship of the tribe or clan, not to endanger or kill off the next generation. In the aftermath of adolescent circumcision, the healing of the young men is carefully attended to (Schloss 75). Entry into

womanhood has its own different but parallel steps but has frankly been much less studied given the male predominance and bias among classical researchers.

HAZING

In contemporary groups, the ability to endure danger, pain, or injury has no essential connection to a candidate's capacity to function as a good contributing member of a Greek or other organization. Inflicting such danger, distress, pain, or injury constitutes "hazing" and is illegal in most relevant jurisdictions. The N.C.A.A. defines hazing as "any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers, regardless of the person's willingness to participate" (*Initiation Rites and Athletics* 8). Elizabeth J. Allan and Gennaro DeAngelis reflected on this definition:

Anthropologists have long studied initiations and rituals as important elements of any culture. Hazing, however, carries a much more specific meaning and involves humiliating, degrading, and/or abusive behavior expected of someone to become a member, or maintain one's full status as a member of a group. By its very definition, hazing excludes many positive group initiations that are not demeaning, humiliating, illegal or physically dangerous (64-65).

Such hazing has been condemned by contemporary Greek organizations and is a criminal offense in most jurisdictions. At most, it might prove the candidate's masochistic desire to "belong." The candidate's desire and ability to be an effective brother or sister would be better proved by attendance at required meetings, knowledge of the group's history, prompt payment of dues and fees, and willingness to take part in fraternal life activities and chores. In the military

and in sports, boot camp and practices are what ready soldiers and athletes for their team roles, not enduring abuse, which both the military and sports worlds have been at pains to eradicate.

In some tribal rituals, a particular physical mark such as a cutting or branding may be given to denote membership, sometimes involving bloodshed since blood was a particularly powerful and even magical symbol in many of these societies. These elements were an expected and prescribed part of tribal ritual, not simply some rogue or sadistic custom, and could be a means of establishing identity and distinguishing friend from foe. However, modern scientific cultures do not believe in some magical power of blood. Group belonging is now signaled by badges and pins, shirts and membership cards and the like, not with bodily-injurious markings. Such ritual steps are not acceptable in modern fraternal ritual and are illegal instances of hazing in most groups' societies.

All that hazing accomplishes is deterring good candidates, showing candidates' irrelevant ability to handle sadistic treatment. It can leave an often long-lasting sense of disunity in the ranks, and prompt a chain of sadism begetting sadism under the rubric of "they did it to me, so I'll do it to you" (Allen and DeAngelis 79). Hazing contradicts that stated "culture" of a group which emphasizes true team cohesion or brotherhood and sisterhood. Analyzing "hazing" in the context of athletic teams, Jay Johnson and Margery Holman recommend initiatory challenges and activities that actually demonstrate and strengthen needed abilities and team spirit (Johnson and Holman 160-170).

FURTHER RITUAL ELEMENTS

Sharing Group Wisdom. Articulating and conveying the wisdom of a group and the requirements of membership is a regular part of what is conveyed to one being initiated. In tribal male

initiations, the young boys removed from the village are taken to special huts or places where they will be tested and instructed in the lore and law of their group. The ascetical practices – fasting, silence, and isolation - imposed on the candidates at this time are not an end in themselves. “The physical ordeals have a spiritual goal—to introduce the youth into the tribal culture. Ethnologists have been impressed by the intense interest with which novices listen to mythical traditions” (Eliade 16). Myth and history together convey the “culture” of their tribe, its deepest meanings and values, crucial to their future adherence to the community and its way of life. The “lectures” in Masonic and other fraternal rituals accomplish the same end (Smith, 34). In Roman Catholic ordinations to the priesthood, the ordaining bishop reads a prescribed instruction and prayer conveying the origin and meaning of the ministry into which the men are about to be ordained (*Ceremonial* 160).

Symbols. Physical and verbal signs which convey a meaning beyond their literal shape or definition come from the broad world of symbolism. Their meaning further conveys the wisdom imparted to and commitments expected from newly initiated members of a group. Christian ordinations have a “laying on of hands” to signify and bestow incorporation into ministry. (*Ceremonial*, 161). Medieval knighthood was similarly sealed with the “accolade” or “dubbing” of the candidate on the shoulders with a sword by his already knightly or royal superior and bestowal of a sword of his own (Broughton 294). Swords themselves have indeed been a common symbolic element in the rituals of many later fraternal groups which now have no real military function. Masonic symbols include a “sword pointing to a naked heart” as a reminder that “justice will sooner or later overtake us” (Duncan 127). In many initiation rituals, welcoming the neophyte has included bestowal of certain vesture or piece of clothing. Medieval knights were vested in a white robe during their vigil before being knighted, then were robed

with outer garments, such as an ornamented yet practical “jupon” or tunic, for example, after their dubbing (Boughton 294, 276). Newly-ordained priests are vested with the priestly stole and chasuble (*Ceremonial* 162).

Death and Resurrection. Symbolically enacted “death and resurrection” is a recurring initiation ritual motif. In some Christian ordinations, the candidates “prostrate” themselves, i.e., lie flat facedown on the floor during a chant or prayer, then “rise” to come forward for the ordination proper (*Ceremonial* 161). Masonic Ritual of the Third Degree recounts the legend of the slaying of Hiram Abiff (Grand Master Architect of Solomon’s Temple) with the candidate taking the role of Hiram Abiff in being slain but then “raised up” by the hand of the local Grand Master at the conclusion of this recital (Lester 160-178).

Oaths. Confirmations of loyalty or obedience have been part of certain initiation rituals. Masons make a promise or oath to preserve the secrets of Freemasonry and follow its ways, rules, and the personally given commands of higher officers (Lester 152-153). In Roman Catholic ordinations of priests, the candidates make a promise of obedience before and to the bishop and/or other legitimate superiors (*Ceremonial* 160). Inaugurations and coronations likewise involve oaths of fidelity to the requirements of the office or role being assumed.

In summary, these and similar initiation ritual elements are important for what they dramatically symbolize, for the mutual commitment of the new member and group, and as a manifestation of the spirit and culture of the initiating community. As such, these initiation rituals are about more than particular individuals, more even than the local initiating community. They sum up and convey the meaning and values of the entire community as it incorporates new members.

OTHER SCHOLARLY STUDIES OF RITUAL

Studies of ritual have ranged far and wide, well beyond the aims and needs of this paper. The contributions of some scholars may, however, have particular relevance to the “what and why” of ritual in fraternities and sororities.

Victor Turner. A British cultural anthropologist, Victor Turner, offered a relevant study of “rites of passage” or initiation. Though largely based on studies of life transitions, for example, boyhood to manhood, or entry into a marriage in traditional cultures, Turner’s work can be readily applied to other initiation processes. Initiates move from their old identity, through a transitional state, to a new identity and bond of community. They may be physically separated from their previous identity-community (e.g., boys from a village of women) to cross over to a new one (a man among men), a transition marked by testing and instruction. Turner put a great deal of emphasis on the “liminality” of candidates for initiation as they go through their transition to membership. Liminality is a state of being “betwixt and between,” the old identity being shed and the new one being assumed. It can be characterized by a degree of ambiguity (“Am I in or out?” “Will I be accepted?”) and disorientation. Turner emphasizes that this state of liminality creates a sense of *communitas* or emotional bonding that is fundamental to the new identity to be achieved (94-95). While in one sense, a community of equals may be modeled in ritual initiation, this does not preclude a special role for leaders or instructors (“Wise Ones”) guiding the initiate to complete membership in the group.

Mary Douglas. Another British anthropologist, Mary Douglas, focused on analyzing forms of organization of societies. Her earlier work on “taboos” and categories of “clean and unclean” in societies did raise the issue of the ritual marking of such boundaries. “Clean and unclean” might be extended to “insider and outsider” and the bodily rituals that mark persons or groups as such.

(*Purity and Danger* 104)). One of her contributions was to point out that insider-outsider distinctions might be reinforced by some less than grand, more daily rituals, shared by members. Think of special handshakes or salutes, for instance. Douglas also elaborated and developed an analysis of organization according to a “grid-group” theory (*Natural Symbols* 64-65). Grid is the dimension of differentiation of roles and authority; it is the structure that tells you who you are and how you are to act. Group deals with the degree to which people identify with each other, personally and often face-to-face. Though not the main point of Douglas’ work on groups, ritual could be seen to promote both grid and group solidarity. But what kind of solidarity might this be, for example in the world of Greek organizations? Ritual can promote interpersonal group solidarity, e.g., in a local chapter, even if it is not done with great attention or seriousness. Ritual, done seriously and attentively, however, can also link local members to the larger organizational “grid.” It can convey that they are part of something larger than themselves and their local chapter, with a venerable and meaningful tradition. That others, elsewhere, are doing more or less exactly what they do ritually reinforces this bigger-than-us perspective. The content of ritual, well performed and largely self-explanatory, can remind members that they are entrusted with a heritage nurtured by others before them and to be passed on to future members. In short, ritual, when taken seriously and accurately, reinforces a larger than local sense of solidarity, whether in a church, civic community or fraternal organization. Close if not slavish adherence to official ritual should preclude additions or variations that contradict the fundamental meaning of rite (e.g., hazing or mockery) or trivialize it. Ritual tells new and continuing group members who they are and what their community convictions and standards are. In this sense, ritual should flow from regular life and flow back into it, even as these are distinct in tone and time.

One further implication of Douglas' grid-group analysis points to the contemporary challenge of extreme individualism, when weak identification with other group members and weak concern for a group's norms – both weak group and weak grid -- combine to undermine an organization's health and make it harder to recruit and keep committed members.

Claude Levi-Strauss. A noted French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, viewed myth (stories that convey meaning and values) and ritual as mutually-reinforcing cultural symbols, one verbal, the other not entirely so, and often combined together. (Such is the case for patriotic or religious plays or pageants.) Ritual expresses and reinforces, even creates anew, who we are and what we stand for as a group or community. Levi-Strauss located the source of these symbol systems not in social structures but in the human mind itself, with given, even universal patterns of thought and perception. He particularly stressed “binary” patterns, rooted in the very structures of the mind, in myth and ritual: light and darkness, us and them, life and death, new and old, and so on. (22-23). These patterns and motifs are, of course, regularly present in ritual.

CLOSING REFLECTION

Modern societies tend to be less ritualistic than earlier ones. Some, like that of the United States, value informality to a high degree. But the human inclination toward and need for ritual is still there, whether in Remembrance Day or Arlington Cemetery ceremonies, a royal wedding, a soccer match or football game, or in families and fraternities. When it comes to ritual, a group or community should do it, do it well, and discover anew who they are and what they stand for.

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