
UNIT 2 RITUALS AND SYMBOLISM

Contents

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Symbols and Social Life
 - 2.2.1 Ritual
 - 2.2.2 Key Symbols
- 2.3 Functional Study of Rituals
- 2.4 Rituals of Liminality
- 2.5 Rituals as Protest and Change
- 2.6 Rituals as Communication
- 2.7 The Nature of Rituals
- 2.8 Summary

References

Suggested Reading

Sample Questions

Learning Objectives



After reading this unit, you would be able to understand the:

- typology of rituals;
- relevance and functions of rituals; and
- continuity and dynamism of rituals.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall discuss the significance of rituals as the performative aspect of religion. We shall define rituals, discuss their functional aspects and see how they operate as vehicles of symbolic communication. To be able to describe rituals in a symbolic frame, we will also understand what symbols mean, how they operate within human social life. The student will thus gather understanding of the utilitarian as well as abstract nature of rituals.

2.2 SYMBOLS AND SOCIAL LIFE

Human life consists of a series of symbolic communications that enables us to weave a meaningful world around us. If we reflect, there is almost nothing in our lives that is not symbolically constructed – our language, our relationships, our material culture and the environment. Everything is made meaningful by us and not by any intrinsic property that it may have, but by the meaning bestowed on it by the cultural system.

According to Clifford Geertz (1973), sacred symbols instil deep emotional moods in people that in turn may lead to strong motivations for action. Even in the present day world when humans have made great advances in the field of science, the

most extreme forms of action and even wars are undertaken for the sake of religion.

Geertz (1973) has given his theory of thresholds to explain this deeply motivating power of religious symbols. Humans look towards religion to overcome three critical thresholds of every human's life experience, the threshold of reason or the limits of analytical ability, where on so many occasions we are left only with the question, "Why?". It may be when a loved one dies an untimely death or some event not foreseen takes place. The second is the threshold of suffering; religion does not give us relief from suffering but only a support to enable us to bear it. Thus, every religion in its own way tries to explain the reason for suffering thereby giving the sufferer a psychological strength to bear it, it may be one's *karma* or it may be a promise to inherit the kingdom of heaven. The third threshold is that of evil or the lack of explanation of not only why evil exists but that it also gives good dividend. The explanation of why the evil and corrupt prosper in this world can only be given by religion and nothing else. It is only when we are told about the separation of Satan from God or about bad *karma* leading ultimately to a bad return even if it is in another world that most people feel committed to leading a moral life.

The power of rituals, therefore, lies in the strong impression they make on the minds of people. They evoke awe, commitment and a sense of accomplishment. Rituals are enactments that without apparently accomplishing any instrumental end, nevertheless, have been analysed as having multiple functions and serving several ends. Let us first see how we can define ritual.

2.2.1 Ritual

A ritual is first of all a performance and to be socially meaningful, it must have a public content. In other words, as Spiro (1966) points out, the private rituals of the compulsive neurotic do not qualify to be studied by anthropologists, they are the subject matter of psychologists. Thus, even if a person is performing a ritual individually, he/she follows a pattern that is publicly recognised and followed, like a Hindu woman blowing the conch shell and lighting a lamp under the *tulsi* (basil) tree in the evening. Every culture prescribes a format for performance of rituals that must be followed by everyone whether or not the ritual is actually performed publicly. In other words, there is both public recognition and approval within any culture for any ritual that is performed. Yet, rituals are rarely seen to have an instrumental function. As Gilbert Lewis puts, the rituals are a "category of standardized behaviour in which the relationship between the means and the end is not 'intrinsic', i.e. is either irrational or non-rational" (Lewis 1980:13).

Edmund Leach has defined rituals as culturally defined behaviour that can be regarded as a form of social communication, such a view of ritual as a cognitive category has been taken up by other scholars such as Rappaport (1999). Mircea Eliade (1987) and Rudolph Otto (1958) who have emphasised the sacred dimension of rituals, in that rituals express an encounter with the supernatural and, therefore, have a numinous character that sets them apart from the ordinary actions of the world. Eliade (1987) has emphasised upon the bodily aspect of ritual, in that the bodily movements and the ritual status given to it recreate the cosmological conceptions and give meaning to them. Thus, rituals often recreate the archetypical conceptualisations by which people give meaning to the world and rituals recreate the cognitive dimensions like in Totemic rituals. The primordial relationship with

the totemic ancestor is recreated and gives meaning to the existing relationships, such as clans and ecological relations.

Eliade divides rituals into two types, the confirmatory, that is those that recreate existing world views, and transformatory, that is those that bridge gaps and serve to renew the world order when it is threatened by internal or external conflicts. We shall take up these aspects in the later part of the unit.

Rituals also must have a structure, in that they follow a given script and adhere to some very stringent rules and regulations. They also follow a time frame and are usually repetitive or occur at specific designated points in a life cycle or natural processes, like a birth or an eclipse. The structure also includes a designated space and time, spatial organisation, personnel, their ritual status and a material infrastructure. Most of these have no apparent rational content and, if any explanation exists, it is always mythical, like the myths associated with rituals, such as pilgrimage to Mecca or Sabarimalai or the myths associated with Totemic or annual rituals like Dussehera. The verbal dimensions of rituals likewise have no specific meaning and, especially as Bloch points out, are not comprehended by the lay public, and because of their mystical and authoritative rendering serves to establish the power of the ritual specialists. However, to many analysts the rituals have symbolic significance in that they convey both condensed and elaborated meanings, either encapsulating dense meanings like in the Christian mass or elaborating social scripts in a manner in which the entire social normative structure is presented as a social drama as in the Ramayana or similar story enactments. Here, it is highly relevant to take a look at what Sherry Ortner has defined as Key Symbols.

2.2.2 Key Symbols

According to Ortner (1973), a key symbol is that which plays a central role in any culture. From the point of view of the anthropologist, a key symbol can be identified if it is prominently and publicly displayed in many places, if it frequently occurs in conversation, or is referred to in public discourses, events and occasions, and, if it plays a central role in language, in the form of metaphors and tropes. The Key symbols can be of two types: the Summarizing Symbol and the Elaborating Symbol.

Summarizing symbols are those in which a wide range of meaning is condensed and which evokes a range of emotions when encountered. The summarizing symbols are both multidimensional and multi-vocal, like the Christian cross, the Nazi swastika, the Hindu swastika (with its opposed meaning to the Nazi symbol), the Japanese chrysanthemum and the various national flags. The elaborating symbols are those that expand and clarify symbolic meanings to the audience; they are again of two types: key scenarios and root metaphors.

The former refer to enactments, or narratives that simplify and chalk out lines of action or values that are contained in the key symbols that in turn are interconnected to the world view and values contained in the culture. Let us take, for example, the enactment of the Ramayana, where through a narrative all possible values contained in Hindu society are worked out clearly. For instance, the story of king Dasarath inadvertently killing Sravan Kumar indicates the inevitability of the *karma* cycle, as you sow so shall you reap, at the same time the same story upholds the virtue of filial devotion. The life of Rama designated as the most perfect man (*purushottama*), indicates the values and virtues of a son, a mother, a wife, a brother, a servant, a friend and so on through the various episodes and sub-plots.

Root metaphor is a metaphor or central symbol that may be used in various situations and various occasions serving as both metaphor and simile to indicate the multidimensional aspects of any culture. A good example of a root metaphor is the Bible for the Christians, where we find that biblical references are found in every aspect of western culture, like considering the number thirteen as inauspicious or keeping Sunday as a holiday. The cattle among the Nuer can be taken as another example of a root metaphor. The daily routine of the cattle set the time for the Nuer daily activity, the colour of the cattle set the metaphors for Nuer aesthetics and relationship with cattle set the norms for Nuer emotions.

Thus, these symbols both manifest themselves in rituals and also make the enactment of the rituals meaningful to the participants. The functions of rituals have been understood by various scholars in various ways.

2.3 FUNCTIONAL STUDY OF RITUALS

Foremost among the functional interpretation of rituals is the work of Emile Durkheim, whose work *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) set the stage for functional analysis from the earlier emphasis on evolution. Durkheim showed how the totemic rituals establish within the participants a sense of oneness with the sacred totemic ancestor, thereby creating a consciousness of the sacred as within and not outside of the self. It is because of this that the people belonging to a clan claiming descent from a common totem feel a sense of solidarity with each other and also a sense of commitment to the norms governing the totem, thereby establishing a stable society that has internal coherence and a sense of morality that upholds the very sentiments out of which the society is forged, namely the system of clans. Thus, Durkheim was led to comment that God is nothing but society writ large. He also showed how the totemic rituals led to a harmonious relationship between humans and nature where humans were committed to preserving some parts of nature that was important to them. Every time the totemic rituals were performed all the values became reemphasised and reaffirmed, thus the repetitive nature of rituals was to recreate the collective sentiments of the people, a process necessary for the survival of society.

Durkheim also gave a name to certain kind of rituals that are universal and which perform a very significant function, namely the rituals associated with death, that he calls *Piacular* rituals. In every human society, death rituals are very important and among the most elaborate of all life cycle rituals. The reason given by Durkheim is that *piacular* rituals enable human beings to overcome any sense of guilt that they may have with respect to the dead person and also to overcome grief. By the time a mourner has exhausted himself or herself by performing all the elaborate rituals, he/she feels that they have not only done as much as they could for the dead person but also undergo catharsis to come to a sense of closure and overcome grief to carry on with day to day living. Thus *piacular* rituals perform a social function of returning the mourner to normalcy and rehabilitate him or her as a functioning member of society.

Reflection and Action

Critically assess *piacular* rituals. Do you agree with Durkheim's view?

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown followed Durkheim to give a structural-functional analysis of collective rituals that uphold the social structure by reinforcing sentiments and also by the emphasis given to socially important aspects like food, relationships and events that reintegrate these within the social fabric so that society remains

harmonious. Radcliffe–Brown used the term social solidarity to denote this stage of harmony. He introduced the terms ritual value and ritual status to describe the symbolic significance of collective rituals.

He showed the significance of taboos or prescriptions and prohibitions in creating a ritual status and thereby giving a ritual value to an object that could be anything, including a person. This ritual value is nothing but a social value necessary for maintaining necessary sentiments essential for social reproduction and solidarity. Thus, the rituals and taboos surrounding a puberty ritual have many functions. They emphasise the sense of responsibility that a child who is becoming an adult must feel in order to fulfil his or her role in society. Thus contained within the puberty rituals are many messages that initiates future roles and responsibilities, like fertility, being a good husband or wife, etc. Also he showed that for the Andaman Islanders, for example, the enhanced ritual value of some food created through taboos is to show the value of conserving such rare and precious foods in the environment; in other words, to have a respectful attitude towards them. The value of rituals such as *couvade*, where the husband of a pregnant woman simulates the symptoms of pregnancy and pretends to go into labour pain, instils the importance of fatherhood in the man, who may not otherwise feel it, as he is not physically pregnant like his wife. Such is also the function of various taboos imposed on various kin of the unborn child, who through the practices of avoidance and many constraints put on their actions begin to realise the importance of the social relationships that they have with the coming child. In other words, Radcliffe-Brown put forward the hypothesis that rituals by their restrictions on action create anxiety that is just right to make a person realise the importance of a relationship. While in this analysis importance is given to the function of rituals for social structure, in the analysis of B. Malinowski rituals have been seen in the perspective of their function for individuals.

In a sense Malinowski's analysis is opposite to that of Radcliffe-Brown as it explains rituals as relieving rather than creating anxiety. All human beings have certain amount of rational knowledge about tasks that they are required to do, but in spite of even the most extensive knowledge and skill, a certain degree of uncertainty prevails for all the tasks that we undertake. The role of rituals is to take care of this grey area of uncertainty that no amount of skill or knowledge can cover, take for example the failure of space missions, such as the *Challenger*, in spite of the best material and intellectual resources to back it up. Therefore, one is not surprised when one hears of space scientists offering rituals at Tirupati or otherwise invoking supernatural help for their missions. The more dangerous the result of failure, the greater is the anxiety. For example, in his study of the Trobrianders, a seafaring community of the Pacific islands, Malinowski showed that when they are fishing in back waters, or otherwise safe zones, the fishermen perform little rituals, but they always perform elaborate rituals when they are venturing out in the deep sea or on any long distance voyage where the risk factor is high. The performance of rituals can be rationalised by the positive mind set or confidence it builds up in the individual, who feels satisfied at having done all that he or she could do, to take care of all the aspects, including those that are beyond human control and which only the supernatural can take care of.

In his famous work, *The Coral Gardens and their Magic*, (1935) Malinowski has also shown how the rituals performed by the magician help to regulate agricultural work and imposes a rational time schedule that actually helps in the scientific management of productive activities. Once activities are projected as sacred duty there is greater compliance and less chances of people defaulting.

2.4 RITUALS OF LIMINALITY

The concept of liminality in rituals was introduced by Van Gennep (1909) and elaborated by Victor Turner and Edmund Leach. A liminal period is 'a betwixt and between' period where normal life and time stands still or is reversed. According to Van Gennep, who analysed the role of lifecycle rituals for individuals and for society, these rituals such as those of birth, puberty, marriage and death, mark stages of transition in an individual's life, where a person makes a transition from one status to another. Beginning from birth where one enters society as an individual and has pre-existing relationships like with one's parents, aunts and cousins, etc. The birth of a child also changes the status of many others too, from being husband and wife a couple become parents, and some may become grandparents, aunts and uncles, etc. In the same way, social statuses change with marriage and even with death. Puberty rituals make an adult member out of a child. According to Van Gennep, every such ritual has three stages, a stage of separation, a liminal stage and a final stage of incorporation. Thus, in the first stage an individual is removed from normal life, often giving up on normal daily activities, is surrounded by taboos and often enters a ritual status of sacredness. For example, just before getting married a person may take leave from work, a girl is not allowed to go out of the house, and they are treated like special people. In India, girls and boys may be given oil baths, confined to the house, surrounded by relatives and restrictions placed on activities, dress and food. This is then the liminal period when a person is kept away from society. Sometimes they may be physically hidden away, almost a person is kept away from normal day to day activities. Thus, they are in society but not a part of it, this is the betwixt and between situations when one is suspended as it were in social space and time. After the transition is made, say, for example, one gets married one gets back to ordinary life and comes out of the liminal period. This is the ritual of incorporation, like, for example, a new bride may be asked to cook a dish in her in-law's house, thereby incorporating her into the daily routine of everyday life.

Almost all life cycle rituals, rituals that mark life stage transitions, are marked by these three stages. Edmund Leach has used the concept of liminality to describe what he calls the marking of structural time, or intervals where important social events mark the oscillations of time, from one period to another. For example, harvest rituals mark the interval between one agricultural cycle and another. Thus, time begins with one sowing and ends with the reaping of the crop, then going back to a new season of sowing. This sowing-reaping-sowing cycle is marked at each phase by a ritual. Leach calls this oscillating time as against the concepts of lineal time and even cyclical time.

Since this kind of liminality is compared to the swinging of a pendulum, there is a sense of reversal, where ordinary life is reversed or stopped, a typical example being a carnival celebrated during harvest festivals and such annual cycles as the coming of spring. For example, during the festival of Holi in India, we find that all social norms are reversed, people perform revelry where normal social distances are abandoned. The young people take over and the old look on indulgently. In the festival of Gajan as described by Okos Astor, the strict observances of caste norms of purity and pollution are abandoned. Such rituals have also been analysed as having a cathartic effect, where hostilities and inequalities are abandoned and the injustices suffered in every day life are acted out in reverse. For example, in one kind of Holi celebrations in India, the women take brooms and beat men, who are not supposed to protest. This is a reversal of usual role play where women

may be subjected to abuse by men in a patriarchal set up. Thus, at least on one day in a year the role reversal allows women to vent their pent up resentment.

Reflection and Action

Discuss liminality taking cues from the works of Van Gennep and Leach.

2.5 RITUALS AS PROTEST AND CHANGE

In situations of change and oppression, people may resort to some kinds of rituals to register their protest and also to address the injustice they feel they are subjected to. Jean Comaroff's (1985) work in colonised South Africa among the Tshidi is a classical example of the interpretation of the use of rituals to express both contradictions and transformation. Thus, as Comaroff puts it, while in the 19th century the Tshidi expressed their universe, their collective values and predispositions through the symbolic management of their bodies in ritual, by the twentieth century under the impact of colonial rule and the influx of capitalism collective rituals themselves became arenas of contestation of the 'real' and the 'valued' and was an effort to transform the world. Thus, the church in Africa combined biblical symbolism with African nationalism. The "Zionism" that was constituted, was in opposition to Protestant orthodoxy and the rationalist dualism inherent in it that had constituted the 'scientific' world view of the West. It was replaced in Africa with the use of the Church to reconstruct a holistic community by which to resist the imposition both of a colonial and a capitalist market dominated social order. These Zionist organisations were composed mostly of illiterate congregation as well as leaders who were viewed more as healers than priests. Rather than follow the bureaucratic organisation of the Christian Church, the Africans followed a more personalised relationship in tune with their own social organisation. The rituals were marked by special dresses where the men wore gleaming white skirts following the Tshidi colour code, where white represents active power (Zion) and black represents normative control. Thus, the Zionist rituals emphasised the regenerative and active exercise of power, therefore, representing resistance, rather than the usual normative function, of the church.

As a result, while the people in the third world often accepted Christianity from the colonisers, they used it in opposition to orthodox Christianity in a way that their rituals were a protest and symbolic communication of opposition to the imposition of the market and global industrial culture.

Hence, the rituals enable the performers to act upon an external source of power to construct themselves as moulded but not in a determinate way. Therefore, rituals can manipulate and present a difference that serves to give strength to a self constructed and dissenting identity.

2.6 RITUALS AS COMMUNICATION

The cognitive dimension of ritual as communication was made explicit in the works of many scholars, of which Roy Rappaport is one of the foremost. He identifies both form and structure in ritual and is of the opinion that the ritual form is a distinctive and unique mode of expression that cannot be conflated with any other medium. Although, in essence, a ritual is, according to him, an invariant sequence of formalised acts and utterances, the substance of which distinguishes a specific ritual from a generalised form. Thus, the form is what distinguishes ritual as a general category, while the substance of this form is the substantial instances, say the initiation ritual of a particular tribe or the rain making ritual of a community.

Consequently, while the ritual contents can be infinite, the ritual form is a generalised universal that defines the ritual. The ritual form is “frame” (Goffman: 1967) or meta message. Also, while no single feature of ritual, such as invariant sequence, formalisation, stylisation, etc., are unique to it, the combination is unique and is found only in ritual. Another important feature of ritual is that the performers follow more or less a given blueprint and innovations, if any, are on an existing pattern. Completely new rituals are very rare.

The performative aspect of ritual emerges as the most important, as the meaning communicated through performance cannot be conveyed by any other means. Yet theatre is also a performance but what sets ritual apart from theatre is that those who are present at a ritual are all participants, even if they appear as spectators; but in a theatre (especially the conventional ones) the separation of performer and audience is radical. Moreover, a ritual is not really efficacious, only assumed to be so. For example, a rain making ritual does not actually produce rain. Yet, rituals are often taken by the performers to be means of producing a result, of altering the world, of making an impact upon the universe.

The power of ritual as communication lies in its uniqueness in conveying meanings that are powerful, being clothed in the aura of the supernatural or the sacred. It is the very formality and non-instrumental nature of ritual that contributes to its power of communication. But this communication can only be received by the community of believers, or for whom the message is meaningful. It does not have a universal scope, and meaning conveyed is not encoded by the performers but by the participants. Thus, tourists who form an audience for a performance of ritual are not receivers of any message for they are not a part of the system of meanings shared by the participants, both as performers and as audience.

Let us take, for example, the performance of Ramlila in Ram Nagar, as described by Schechner (1987). The cosmological dimensions of space, the use of that space by the local ruler and by the audience that belongs to that culture and system of meanings is very different than if one were to enter that space as an outside tourist. The audience participates as performers of story as it unfolds, they are the subjects of the king Rama, they are the part of the army of Rama, and they are the members of the king's court and so on, as they move within the symbolic space of the performance.

Lewis (1980) has also described rituals as vehicles of expression, where all three parties to the communication, the emitter, the message and the recipient are involved in a system of symbols, where the meaning conveyed may be both public and private, and not self evident, thus, to him, rituals express more than what seems apparent or represent something other than what is manifest. It is their very ambiguity that invests rituals with deeper significance and meaning, that cannot even be conveyed by linguistic usage, as much of it is in the emotional content, what Geertz has distinguished as ‘perception’ and ‘disposition’.

2.7 THE NATURE OF RITUALS

While ritual is usually seen as action and dichotomized from thought, it is at the same time, especially as a tool of cognition or communication, seen as integrating thought and action. Thus, the ritual in its communicative or functional dimension is often seen as communicating or transmitting some values, norms or principles. It may also, as Schechner has shown for the Ram Lila, transmit values, such as nationalism, or the power of the king, spatial integrity and social hierarchies.

Victor Turner (1969) has shown how rituals may provide a creative space for the creation of an anti-establishment or anti-structural space that communicates a criticism of the established social norms and values. Thus, ritual may act either way both to functionally establish values and to create a situation by which the tensions of oppression are released. According to Clifford Geertz, ritual is also a point of entry for the observer, for, while the participants perform, those observing them think. Here, the role of the theorist also becomes clear for it is the scholar who creates a meaning system that is his/her own construction, not necessarily that of the performer. For example, the analysis of ancestor worship rituals of the Tsembaga, have been analysed by Roy Rappaport as a negative feedback system where the rituals act as a thermostat to regulate the human environment relationships. Such is, of course, the way the performers look upon their rituals. Thus, the communicative dimension of the rituals is different for the community of participation and for the outside observer.

Bell (1992: 31) makes a three level classification of rituals, 1) ritual as a separation of activity and thought, 2) ritual as a fusion of thought and activity, and 3) one “where the dichotomy between a thinking theorist and an acting actor is simultaneously affirmed and resolved”. However, critical thinking would see this as an imposed hierarchy where the analyst is privileged over the actor. For example, Levi-Strauss’s analysis of ritual is his own and not the actor’s view.

A more subjective point of view, like that of Marcus and Fischer, suggests that rituals can be read like a text, as they are public performances. Through ritual the ordinary acts become special and communicate the significance of the situation. The knowledge of converting something to a ritual is a socially acquired knowledge that is present in all of us. Thus, an ordinary tea party can become a birthday party when someone brings in a cake and candles and every one sings “Happy Birthday”. It is a shared system symbols, a socially acquired knowledge when put in practice makes it a ritual.

2.8 SUMMARY

Rituals may appear to be meaningless in a rational framework yet on analysis as presented in this unit, we find them not only to be full of symbolic meaning but also linked to practice. Rituals may help to maintain existing structures of society or they may challenge them. They may appear in many forms and sometimes be a script for reading the deep seated values of society. They merit in all instances of a study of any society, deep and focussed attention on both their symbolic and performative dimensions.

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Sample Questions

- 1) Give a broad definition of rituals as described by various scholars.
- 2) Describe the role of rituals in maintaining social order.
- 3) What are taboos? How do they help maintain social relationships?
- 4) What is liminal phase in a ritual? What is its significance?
- 5) What do you understand by dynamism of rituals? Explain with examples.

