

## THE RITUAL AS A PROCESS

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The ritual process is complex. The following lines intend to be a guide to enter the world of the ritual and its implications. This brief approach will invite us to reflect on the place the symbolic occupies in our modern society.

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To a greater or lesser extent we all have had experiences that invite us to think that there exist at least two ways of being in the world and hence of representing it. It is not in vain that there exist manifestations such as the musicality of poetry, the imagination of child play, or the harmonious sensation of a musical piece. These manifestations being real and lived as non tangible realities offer a vision of the world that is different to that offered by manifestations such as a military harangue or the cleaning of the vehicle.

We feel that there exist at least two ways of being in the world, of representing the world. At the risk of simplifying excessively we are going to name these two ways “aesthetic” and “instrumental”. We understand by “aesthetic” what Kant pointed out in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) when he defined it as “a purpose with no aim” and by “instrumental” the attitude that pursues an aim.

The aesthetic attitude or the “aesthetic way of contemplating the world” is generally opposed to the *practical* attitude. The genuine real estate agent who contemplates a scenery thinking only of its monetary value is not contemplating it aesthetically. To do so we have to “perceive it for perceiving it”, with no other intention. We have to savour the experience of perceiving the scenery itself focusing on its perceptive details instead of using the perceived object as a means for some other end.

Naturally, we could object that even in the aesthetic contemplation we do not observe something “for itself” but for some other reason, for example, for the pleasure it gives us. We would not continue to pay attention to the perceived object if to do so was not pleasant for us. According to this, will not enjoyment be the aim in the aesthetic case? (Hospers, 1982:99-100<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> Hospers, J.: ‘Fundamentos’. In Beardsley, M. y Hospers, J., *Éstética: historia y fundamentos*. Cátedra, 1982.

Each of these ways of *being in* and *representing* the world responds to two different ways of thought, that is, two ways of understanding and explaining the relations between the elements that form everyday life.

When based on one of those two ways we understand life as a transcendent reality, that is, as alien to the creative and modifying capacity of the human being, as different to its most immediate reality –the *natural* one- we name this way “religious”, and the reality which it refers to as “sacred”. At the same time we name “rational” the way of thought that understands and explains reality **from** and **in** the human dimension (not transcendent), and we name that reality “profane”.

As these two ways of understanding and explaining life are not exclusive, that is, they are not contrary but complementary, the different cultures have developed **cultural expressions** that manifest not only the coexistence of both, but also the necessary juxtaposition of the realities to which they make reference: the sacred and the profane.

Amongst these cultural expressions, the sacrifice appears as a means for the communication between the profane and the sacred by means of a victim (Hubert and Mauss, 1899) and, following our approach, as an affirmation of the necessary juxtaposition of realities.

These cultural expressions take the form which in anthropology we call **ritual**.

### **IMPORTANT**

Although rituals predominate in the sphere of the sacred most of the ones we perform in our western culture are of a secular character.

It would be more precise to point out that the way of understanding we have called “religious” is the one that manifests itself through the ritual. From this perspective the sacred is the transcendent reality that man experiments and that is accomplished by means of the ritual.

Lévi-Strauss (*The Savage Mind*, 1962) underlines that the sacrificial rite establishes a relation between two polar terms in which at the starting point (sacred-profane) there exists no relation whatsoever. The sacrifice, the sacrificial rite achieves the binding of both polar terms through a series of successive identifications that give sense to the process itself.

The **ritual** is then the form that the cultural expression takes that manifests the juxtaposition of those two realities we have named sacred and profane.

⇒ An event, act, or action that is repeated regularly.

- ⇒ It responds to a context, that is, it is done every time the circumstances that produce it are repeated.
- ⇒ It shows a relation with the supernatural.
- ⇒ Particularly elaborated by distinctive acts or operations: trance, sacrifice, transubstantiation, metamorphosis...
- ⇒ Rigidity in the forms.
- ⇒ It has a determined sequence and it is known by all participants.
- ⇒ It has a sense that is accepted by the group and is coherent with the implementation.
- ⇒ It produces a change of nature (ontological)
- ⇒ It is sanctioned by tradition.

The central criterion is the formality (Moore and Myerhoff, cit. Cruces, 1999:515<sup>2</sup>) and the traditionalising virtue that communicates to the actors the social and cultural perpetuation of the group. Six **formal** characteristics of the ritual moment:

1. repetition (of occasion, content, and form).
2. actuation (in the theatrical sense of playing a role).
3. stylization (or extraordinary character of the behaviour).
4. order, sequence.
5. presentational and evocative style (provoking a certain mental state).
6. group dimension.

### **IMPORTANT**

The rite is inscribed in such manifestations and is generally the principal (peak, central) moment around which the ceremonial display is organised, which can be then named as **ritual**.

To sum up, the ritual is “the staging of more or less invariable sequences of formal acts and speech that are not coded by the participants” (Rappaport<sup>3</sup>),

Although it would be important to distinguish it from other manifestations with symbolic meaning such as festivities, ceremonies, or celebrations, the notion of ritual has extended like an “oil stain” (García, 1999:505<sup>4</sup>) until it means the

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<sup>2</sup> Cruces Villalobos, F.: ‘La problemática del concepto de ritual en el estudio de las sociedades contemporáneas’. En S. Rodríguez Becerra (Coord.), *Religión y Cultura*. Junta de Andalucía/Fundación Machado, 1999:513-528.

<sup>3</sup> “The performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers”. Cit. en Boissevain, ‘Tourism as Anti-Structure’, *Euromed Working Paper* (43), 1986:3.

<sup>4</sup> García García, J.L.: “La religión como sistema público: conocimientos, creencias y prácticas”. En S. Rodríguez (Coord.), *Religión y Cultura*. Junta de Andalucía/Fundación Machado, 1999:501-512.

“formalised ways of behaviour in which the members of a group or community participate regularly (Giddens<sup>5</sup>)

Although already in the descriptions of the XIX century the category “ritual” appears as a refuge term for those stereotyped and recurrent behaviours in which the relation means-ends is not explicit nor obeys a clear instrumental rationality. (Cruces, 1999:514)<sup>6</sup>

### IMPORTANT

Ritual is thus a term that refers to the aesthetic dimension as a way of understanding and explaining a reality that although it is transcendent it does not belong to the world of the supernatural, to the world of which we properly qualify as “sacred”.

Hence, in the **plane of the profane reality**, but in its aesthetic dimension, we call “ritual” the process by means of which two periods are binded.

We understand by “period” a lapse of time that has a natural or culturally determined duration and that in any case has a cultural sense of its own. Thus, for example, although the seasons are realities determined by nature, each culture gives them a different meaning.

The binding offered by the ritual manifests the continuity of the group in time and hence it embodies the historic sense of life in community.

We could declare that the ritual is a process that structures daily life. By means of the ritual the necessary meaning is generated so that the sequence of moments that form the daily reality does not appear as strange, brazen.

### IMPORTANT

The ritual offers a cultural logic to the whole of moments that mark the social life, the mere existence of the group. Hence its importance.

In this way the ritual has a principal functionality: **to manifest the coherence of the group and individual events.**

If we take the existence of an end as the reason of being of the ritual act, then to analyse this instrumentality and to understand the “process” we must take into account the relation that we intend to establish between both periods.. In a way,

<sup>5</sup> A. Giddens, *Sociología*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1998:738

<sup>6</sup> Cruces Villalobos, F.: ‘La problemática del concepto de ritual en el estudio de las sociedades contemporáneas’. En S. Rodríguez Becerra (Coord.), *Religión y Cultura*. Junta de Andalucía/Fundación Machado, 1999:513-528.

the “ritual” is like a grammar that through successive identifications gives sense to the process in itself and explains the connection between the periods (Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 1962).

Thus, different types of “processes” will appear that are more or less elaborated, depending on the nature of the relation that we want to establish culturally.

Because above all the “ritual” is a means of communication and influence.

- 1) By means of the “process” we **communicate** with:
  - a. the supernatural world: liturgical celebration, ceremonies...
  - b. the social and cultural environment: festivity, play...
- 2) By means of the “process” we **influence** the occurrence of events:
  - a. magic.
  - b. pleas, promises...
  - c. revolution.
  - d. votes.

Magic: consists in shared knowledge, beliefs, and practices, even initiatory, born of the need to act on the impersonal forces to manipulate or to captivate them in order to make use of them (Mauss, 1902).

Pleas, promises...: in the sphere of “religion” we also try to influence supernatural beings so that they act in a beneficial way.

Revolution: the revolutionary process acts directly on the social and political order and consequently conditions the development of events.

Elections: a political ritual that around the rite of the introduction of the ballot paper in the ballot box trusts in the value of the vote and the possibility of change.

### **Functions**

- ⇒ They unite and separate individuals
- ⇒ They give social identity
- ⇒ They solve conflicts
- ⇒ They produce conflicts
- ⇒ They mark ages
- ⇒ They distinguish genders
- ⇒ They construct social spaces and times
- ⇒ They mark territories
- ⇒ They express traditional values
- ⇒ They promote changes

That is... there are hardly any aspects of social life left that are not affected by the ritual.

What is interesting is to see to what extent the celebration of a “ritual” obtains an enhancement or weakening of the consequence that is **attributed** to the rituals, different to what, for example, is achieved by daily coexistence.

The question we must answer is: what has the “process” that does not have a good talk after a meal, for example, when diminishing family tensions.

For this purpose it may be more convenient to work on the process character of the ritual than on the actions that compose the “ritual” and to emphasise the ritual time, not as a time in which the sacred is manifested, but as a time different to the ordinary, in which the rules of the everyday life are not in force: festivity time.

Both times (sacred and festivity) are similar in appearance as both break the everyday structure but **we must not mistake them**.

The symbolic time symbolises the ritual repetition of the creative act of the gods. It is the time of the origin (*in illo tempore*) and the participants become contemporaneous of the mythic event (M. Eliade).

On the other hand, the festivity time (profane) is a moment that breaks the everyday life and in which the community manifests itself through the aesthetic and emotional action.

In this context of festivity time, the value of the ritual as a process lies in that it is a moment (space-time) in which the symbolic is manifested in secular contexts.

Let us analyse some of the most known types of rituals:

### **Rites of passage or life cycles.**

The rites of passage (Van Gennep: “are the rites that accompany any change of place, state, social position, age”) have a simple structure that succeeds according to a universal logic: separation, liminality (*no man’s land*), aggregation.

The first phase (of separation) comprises the symbolic behaviour by which is expressed the separation of the individual or group, either from a previous fixed point in the social structure, or from a set of cultural conditions, or from both.

During the intermediate *liminal* period (from *limen* “threshold”) the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous as it crosses a cultural environment that has little or none of the attributes of the past or future state.

In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation) the step is performed. The ritual subject, be it individual or collective, is again in a relatively stable state, and because of this it has rights and obligations.

During each of the three phases a series of procedures (rituals) are performed that produce transmutations, because the rituals perform a change  $\Rightarrow$  they manufacture new persons and/or different contexts. For example, matrimony means a change of status, while the decease implies a change of régime that is both ontological and social.

The attributes of liminality and consequently of liminal persons are necessarily ambiguous. People escape from the system of classification that normally places us in a certain situation or position in the cultural space.

Liminal beings are not in one place or another; they do not have status, property, distinctions, clothing that indicates their rank or position in a system of kinship; to sum up, nothing that distinguishes them from the rest of the neophytes or initiates. A peer amongst peers.

As a general rule, an intense comradeship and equalitarianism develops amongst neophytes, and the secular distinctions of position and status disappear or end up becoming homogeneous  $\Rightarrow$  a modality of social relation: *communitas*.

A model of human interaction that arises in a recognisable way during the liminal period is that of the society as a community, or even communion, without structure or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated of equal individuals who submit themselves to the generic authority of the elderly who control the ritual.

Through that situation of liminality, in the *communitas* the due recognition is given to an essential and generic human bond, without which *no* society could exist.

The *communitas* is opposed to the legal-political character of the structure; in this sense it is anti-structural.

“Furthermore, the structure normally has a character that is pragmatic and of this world, whilst the *communitas* is often speculative and generates philosophical images and ideas..”(Turner, 1980:139)

“The spontaneous *communitas* is surrounded by something “magical”. From a subjective point of view it communicates the sensation of an unlimited power, but this untransformed power cannot be applied directly to the organisational details of the social existence and does not create a substitute for lucid thought nor for sustained will. On the other hand, the structural action does not take long in becoming arid and mechanical if those who participate in it do not submerge themselves periodically in the regenerating abyss of the *communitas*.” (Turner, 1980:145)

That anti-structural attitude is very similar to that ludic modality that R. Caillois names *ilinx*: “I call *ilinx* –from the Greek name whirl of water- all attempt to destroy for an instant the stability of perception and of causing the lucid conscience a kind of voluptuous panic”. (Cit. en Mandly, 1989:27<sup>7</sup>)

In a later work (Turner and Turner, 1978<sup>8</sup>) distinguished between liminal situations and liminoid situations. The first are obligatory and appear mainly in religious contexts. The second are optional and characteristic of secular spheres, such as those that are predominant in our modern society, for example, leisure time. This difference allows us to apply his approach to the explanation of secular phenomena, as it explains the *licentious* behaviours due to the anti-structuralism that also possesses the liminoid time.

### INTERESTING REFLECTION

It is not strange that westerners feel touched and dispirited in the face of certain painful rituals of puberty. But the system with which they substitute them may not have a clear advantage as for eliminating the pain and suffering. The passing from child to adult in advanced industrial societies is not marked by any ritual. Nobody can be sure of when adult age begins. Consequently, young boys or girls must go through a prolonged period of stress –known as adolescence- that is marked by high rates of accidents, suicides, and by the existence of an anti-social behaviour. Which of the systems is more cruel) (M. Harris, 614)

### Seasonal rites

The cyclic rites make reference to the agricultural productive cycle and they manifest themselves through celebrations of a community character: carnivals, New Year’s Day...

### Occasional rites

Individual life: military service, graduation...

Family life: celebrations, ceremonies... During these rituals the person sees how the group offers him/her a collective scenery.

Collective life: draught, war, plague... In these the individual is called upon as a social actor

<sup>7</sup> Mandly Robles, A.: ‘Andalucía: el valor de lo sagrado como cualidad estética’. En VV.AA., *La Religiosidad Popular: Antropología e Historia*. Anthropos/Fundación Machado, 1989:215-230.

<sup>8</sup> Turner, V.W. y Turner, E.: *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. Basil Blackwell, 1978.

## Body rites

Amongst the sonacirema, for example, “they feel a great fascination for the mouth, whose state they believe has a supernatural influence in all social relations. They believe that if it were not for the mouth rituals their teeth would fall, their gums would bleed, their jaws would become reduced, their friends would leave them, and they would be rejected by their lovers. They also believe that there exists a close relation between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual ablution of the children’s mouths that implies an improvement of their moral character. The daily body ritual includes a mouth ritual. Apart from the thoroughness in the care of the mouth, this ritual implies a practice that is repulsive for the non-initiated. They told me that the ritual consists in inserting a small handful of pig’s hairs in the mouth together with certain magical powders and moving them with a series of very formal gestures.” (A. Giddens, *Sociología*. Alianza Editorial, 1998:50-51)

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