

## What use is ritual?

“You are not our king yet; for a little while we will do what we please with you. By-and-by we shall have to do your will”. Paul B. Du Chaillu describes the ceremony surrounding the elevation of a prospective “king in Gaboon”<sup>1</sup> and Victor Turner describes a similar rite called *Kumukindyila* among the Kanongesha of the Ndembu where the Chief-elect is reviled thus: “Meanness and theft are all you have! Yet here we have called you and we say that you must succeed to the chieftainship”<sup>2</sup>. In this essay I investigate what ritual is and what purposes it may be thought to serve based on the theoretical foundations of Robert Hertz, Arnold van Gennep, and Turner. I then relate this theory to contemporary analysis undertaken by Susan Wright describing the effects of ritual upon its participants in the resurrection of the Ironstone Mining Annual Demonstration day in West Moorside.

In the entry on ritual by Elizabeth S. Evans in *The Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology*, it is noted that “ritual” has slipped its original moorings in the elaboration of religious practice such that its contemporary usage in anthropology identifies “formal, patterned, and stereotyped public performances”<sup>3</sup>. For Durkheim, it was the heightened

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<sup>1</sup> Paul B. Du Chaillu, *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* (New York: Harper, 1868), pp.43-44; cited here from Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969), p.171

<sup>2</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969), p.101

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth S. Evans, ‘Ritual’, *The Encyclopaedia of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. David Levinson, Melvin Ember (New York, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1996), pp.1120-1124

reality of “collective effervescence” catalysed by the public performance of ritual which enables the construction and maintenance of social solidarity. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas developed Durkheim’s definition along lines which emphasised the role of ritual in affirming social stability through the public communication of symbols and categories. Nonetheless, Durkheim was integral to overcoming a sacred ritual / secular ritual categorisational dichotomy in anthropology by arguing that sacredness was the result of processes of sacralization and hence that nothing was inherently sacred until society worked to make it so. Thus Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger would describe in terms consistent with the discipline the rituals of nation-building and Raymond Williams would see in ritual the articulation of political power.

However defining ritual as “formal, patterned, and stereotyped public performances” does not help us to identify what might make ritual distinctive as distinguished from routine repetitive acts to which subjects attach no heightened significance. That Evans writes “Is ritual, in the end, something that we all know when we see it, but find it impossible to articulate or to definitively define?” suggests that those who use the term ritual to categorise a set of social phenomena are doing so from an approximate collective understanding of what ritual does.

Robert Hertz in his study of the rituals associated with death presents explanations of death rituals based on two elements out of a possible three in each case. The three elements by which he structures the first section of 'Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort' are the body, the soul and the living. Thus an explanation for rituals deriving from fear of the corpse could be adduced from consideration of the kinds of relationship being severed by death. Considering the living and the corpse, the death of an individual rents the social fabric and if the person held a position of power may destabilise society. Considering the soul and the corpse, the physical remainder of the decaying body is an unresolved and threatening intimation of further death that serves to characterise the transition of the soul to the afterlife as gradual rather than complete and thereby implies a contagion. Considering the soul and the living, the contradiction which must be resolved is that the social personhood of the deceased still exists in the self-conceptions of the living and in the configuration of relationship networks. Goody has noted how among the LoDagaa of West Africa the funerary service includes a method for redesignating the roles of friend or lover. It could be said of Hertz' description of death qua social phenomena as a "dual and painful process of mental disintegration and synthesis"<sup>4</sup> that rituals surrounding death serve to reorganise, distort

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Hertz, 'A contribution to the study of the collective representation of death', *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. Rodney and Claudia Needham (Aberdeen: Cohen and West, 1960), p.86

and reiterate time so that the discrete event of death occurs over a social time commensurate to the emotional and psychological management it necessitates.

Van Gennep's tripartite division of the phases of ritual into stages of separation, transition and reintegration identifies a trajectory common to rites of passage. The transitional stage is a liminal one in which the subjects have been taken out of quotidian life, separated from mainstream society and isolated. During this stage they will be divorced from conventional notions of time and space and will mimetically enact a facet of the crisis which precipitated the separation. In van Gennep's study of rites of passage relating to pregnancy, childbirth, initiation, betrothal, marriage and death, the spatial quality of the ritual trajectory of participants relative to society is also related to physical thresholds such as the limens separating social statuses from each other: doorways, gates and walls. In van Gennep's analogy, society is like a house in which the partitions between roles are thinner the more civilised the society – "In a semicivilized society, on the other hand, sections are carefully isolated, and passage from one to another must be made through formalities and ceremonies which show extensive parallels to the rites of territorial passage"<sup>5</sup>.

Whether in fact greater complexity in society would not conversely by definition

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<sup>5</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom, Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p.26

be concomitant with greater division of labour and thus imply a more marked separation of roles and specialisations does not fatally harm van Gennep's case. The house metaphor serves to illustrate the manner by which van Gennep conceives of ritual's general structure as necessarily serving to incorporate into established roles individuals who mature, age and die<sup>6</sup>. Van Gennep's sees rites of passage as, amongst other things, means by which society adjusts to the new status of the subjects just as the subjects are granted the transitional period within which to conceptualise their altered identity. Ritual here is then a function of the necessity of sustaining a prevailing social structure composed of transitory actors. As Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf argue, van Gennep's achievement was to resist the prevailing Victorian and ethnocentric inclination to see rituals as irrational survivals and instead to understand them as "simple, logical and universal"<sup>7</sup>.

Victor Turner builds upon van Gennep's tripartite structure and emphasises the liminal stage as the site of inversions which could serve both to elaborate and to challenge the social structure. Thus, for Turner, ritual can function as a source of change within society – during the mimetic stage the subject performs subversive acts which allows them to conceive of change as a possibility. Furthermore, in the context of rites of status

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Huntington, Peter Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p.9

<sup>7</sup> *ibidem*, p.11

elevation, Turner suggests that the ordeals and penances of ritual serve to interpose gaps – interstitial spaces of humility or poverty or weakness – between social positions, thereby enforcing the integrity of the structure. In order for an individual to rise to a higher status, the implication of ritual is that the individual “must go lower than the status ladder”<sup>8</sup>. The liminality of subjects during the mimetic phase, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, represents for Turner an admixture of structure and anti-structure. *Communitas* is the name Turner uses to describe society as a relatively undifferentiated community of “equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders”<sup>9</sup> as experienced during liminality. For him, it is contrasted with another model for understanding human interrelatedness – “society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of “more” or “less””<sup>10</sup>. Turner therefore suggests that at one level ritual is “a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society”<sup>11</sup>.

The re-enactment of the Ironstone Mining Annual Demonstration Day in an unnamed village in the West Moorside area in the mid-1980s is described by Susan Wright in the essay ““Heritage” and critical history in the reinvention of mining festivals

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<sup>8</sup> Turner (1969), p.170

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p.96

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ib.*, p.97

in North-east England'. Wright worked alongside a social worker recognised for her use of community-based events to develop communal identity and raise morale; and together they created a day of celebration based around the formerly-observed expression of regional unity which was the Demonstration Day. Part of this new ceremony involved the enactment of a folk narrative relating how the overman of the village had – in the heyday of the ironmine's influence over village life – patrolled the two rows of terraces with his wife, reprimanding housewives whose properties betrayed signs that they were less than house-proud. The parade organised with the villagers involved burning a model of the school which had been built by the overman and included the exclamation "And so we are going to burn the school, the last of their influence in the village!"<sup>12</sup>.

The effects of the ritual observed by Wright bear out some of the theoretical postulates described above. The sentiment of throwing off the vestiges of the overman's influence received little attention suggesting that the function of ritual here would not be to symbolically recalibrate the balance of power in the absence of someone long deceased. However, the quality of elaborating and challenging a relationship of power is perhaps helpful in understanding the popularity of the procession through the village. Moreover, the totemic aspect of the effigies of the overman and his wife should be noted for the

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Wright, "'Heritage' and critical history in the reinvention of mining festivals in North-east England", *Revitalising European Rituals*, ed. Jeremy Boissevain (London: Routledge, 1992), p.25

manner by which they came to represent the village. Wright emphasises this latter element, reporting that “One man said that he had caught his throat whilst watching the procession, as he hadn’t realized that the children could put on such a show”<sup>13</sup>. She presents ritual as a means for the enfranchisement of audiences as participants rather than spectators such that ritual may contain within itself a latent critique of established power structures and a restatement of the possibility of collective action. Here too perhaps we hear the echo of the rite of ““The Reviling of the Chief-Elect””<sup>14</sup>.

To conclude, rituals are formal, patterned and stereotyped public performances which can be thought to be of “use” when they can resolve social contradictions (for example following death); alter the social recognition of time in order to allow for the handling of a discrete event; induct and assimilate living individuals into roles which outlast them; elaborate, challenge and reassert the basis for social structure; or unite a mass of participants into an expression of solidarity.

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<sup>13</sup> *ib.*, p.26

<sup>14</sup> Turner (1969), p.100

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