**ritual/礼(Lǐ)**

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In modern secular societies, permeated by a dominant naturalistic ontology or worldview, the term ritual evokes a symbolic form of behavior or communication, particularly directed towards gods or divinities. In these societies, rituals mark out a separate and sacred domain of reality, one that is divorced from the “really real” the material world ruled by the laws of nature and physics. In this secular and modern world, gods and spirits are fictions of imagination, playing a secondary role and leading an unobtrusive life in society; rituals are thus regarded as symbolic and expressive acts with no “real” effects on the world – at least not in the sense intended by the believers that perform them. If ritual has any effect, it is assumed, it is personal and emotional, subjective and inter-subjective.

In animist societies (such as the swidden farmers in the Amazon rainforest or the Montagnard peoples of Laos and Vietnam), by contrast, where almost every element and phenomenon in “nature” is regarded as alive and have soul and sentiments like yourself and also powers beyond and superior to your own – in these societies, gods and spirits are the rulers of reality, lords of life and death, governors of all the living – including humans. In such a reality – one in which millions of people live today –, to make a living involves not only mastering the everyday practicalities of life, of hunting and fishing, of cultivating your fields and collecting edible seeds and fruits in the forest; you must also master the “language” of the spirits, know how to communicate and socialize with animals and plants, the spirit lords of the forest and the mountains in order to obtain what you need for your living.

This communication and social interaction with gods and spirits, “we” – “modern”, literate and secular people – usually call ritual or magic or liturgy. To the people who live in the animate world inhabited by spirits, however, rituals are simply part of the everyday work of making a living; it forms part of what we would call economy, or politics, or social intercourse. It is, as it were, just another aspect of practical knowhow or common sociality.

Hence, in “non-modern” societies, and among “non-modern people” (that is, people assuming a reality ruled by gods and spirits – even if living in an urban modern-day setting), there is often no distinct word for what we “moderns” call ritual; they might instead simply call it “work”. Like manufacturing an object or carrying out any type of labor, a spiritual activity such as a “ritual” is simply an instrumental activity necessary in order to make a living. The same term may be used for arranging a wedding, building a house or carrying out an animal sacrifice.

This, for example, is true in large parts of Africa where witchcraft and sorcery beliefs are widespread and many educated urban people habitually consult a “féticheur” (healer) for help in achieving success in life or business, or to ward off the evil powers of sorcerers. Here, then, what the féticheur does is simply referred to as “work” (“faire un travail”).

Etymology. According to Chen Bisheng, the Chinese concept of “ritual” has many meanings depending on the specific context in which it is used – and, accordingly, expressed by several words (notably li and yi) – but all seem to refer to sets of specific procedures, ethical norms, laws and etiquette. Very generally, the concept can be translated as correct conduct or protocol – whether in close human relationships or referring to religious acts as offerings and sacrifices to the gods. But the concept also carries the meaning of rules, regulations and order, referring to the laws of the state and the order of society, nature and the cosmos at large. All of these meanings seem to be implicit in the ancient Chinese word/character yi (ritual/rite). This fact makes an interesting connection to Western cultural history by shedding light on the etymology of the word “ritual” in the ancient Mediterranean world – particularly associating it with the concept and institution of sacrifice.

Thus, the English word ritual is derived from the Latin noun “rituum” which seems to have been introduced rather late into English (mid-16th century) and at about the same time into virtually all Central and Northern European Germanic languages. Even though the word enters these non-Latin languages only a few hundred years ago – primarily to denote the correct way to carry out the church service – it is not clear which words it might have replaced. Thus, we do not know what, for example, the equivalent term might have been among the early Anglo-Saxons or early Germans. In Scandinavian religious terminology the word “blot” appears to have referred to the practice of blood sacrifice. In many Slavic languages, the word “obryad” is used to denote ritual – and also seems to be related to the concept of sacrifice/offering (but also signifying “order”/ “protocol”), suggesting a linguistic connection between the terms for ritual and sacrifice. These (and other related) words are all linked to the Latin “oblatus” – “to offer”.

Anthropologists tend to associate the concept of ritual with the “sacred”. On this account, ritual refers to a “sacred procedure” or performance – but it is worth noting that the Latin (ancient Roman) meaning of the term seems very close to the Chinese meaning: the “proper way”, or the “customary way” of doing something (implying the correct protocol to follow in important matters and situations; see Chen Bisheng). The Latin word is also related to the Sanskrit concepts of Rta, (“order, rule, truth, the principle of natural order”) and “artavan” (“he who is morally accomplished”).

The old Germanic religious ideas and practices provide an entry point into the pre-Christian meanings of ritual. Christianity arrived to the Germanic tribes via the expansion of the Roman Empire. The earliest forms of Germanic (and, indeed Celtic) religion are known through archaeological findings, such as deposited ritual objects – usually found in lakes and marches. These depositions trace back all the way to the Neolithic age. Hence, the Roman historian Tacitus speaks of the goddess Nerthus being worshipped “on an island in a lake”. In several bogs, wood figures have been found with strongly emphasized sexual features (suggesting that the worshipping around lakes was connected with notions of fertility). Large public offerings seemed to have taken place in centralized locations, and human sacrifice was common.

What makes it difficult for us to reconstruct the exact nature of European pre-Christian religious life outside the literary civilizations of ancient Rome and Greece is the fact that the Christianization of these lands took place with a focus precisely on the destruction of the native rituals and the places of worship, or an almost immediate appropriation of these places and practices for Christian worship. (Indeed, the wood from destroyed sacred groves or trees of the pagan tribes were often used to build the new Christian churches, cf. the sacred oak cut down by Saint Boniface when the saint was forcefully trying to convert the Saxons to Christianity.) Once the cultic places were destroyed/appropriated, non-Christian cultic worship disappeared almost instantaneously.

However, one of the greatest strengths of the early Christian missionaries was precisely the fact that they had little qualms in readily absorbing extant rituals amongst many different nations, and even of maintaining the sacrality of their sacred places by replacing their pagan mythic content with Christian notions and narratives. Certain sacred wells and springs, which had been worshipped continuously perhaps since the Neolithic times, continued to be worshipped, now with a story of a Christian saint attached to them. The pagan world-tree became the Christmas tree and the maypole, now associated with Christian holy periods (notably Easter and Christmas). By giving old rituals a new, Christian content, the missionaries facilitated the conversion precisely because ritual practices were generally considered more important to the lay people than the religious ideas associated with them.

Animal rituals and pre-linguistic communication. The classical philologist Walter Burkert traces ritual all the way back to non-human animals. Just like other theoretical speculations about the origin of rituals, his conjectures cannot be proven or disproven, but are certainly thought-provoking. He observes that the Greek “herms”, statue-steles with erect phalluses, and the practice of placing them at the borders of the city states, or to mark the place where a victorious battle against invaders took place, connect the herms to the fact that certain primates are known to station sentries at the borders of their territory, similarly with erect penises. He also compares the Greek ritual practice of offering of libations – the pouring of a liquid to a god on the ground to mark out the sacred space – with the habit of many primates and other mammals to mark their territory by urinating.

Now, there is no doubt that there are tangible similarities between human rituals and animal rituals (the term is used by ethologists and biologists) such as the spectacular courtship rituals of certain birds and mammals. The difference, of course, is that the former are cultural and the latter largely instinctive. These observations raise the further issue about proto-human and pre-linguistic communication – what Gregory Bateson called iconic communication by means of images and metaphors. As distinct from linguistic discourse, Bateson maintained that iconic communication is carried on beyond the discursive consciousness. Archaic human rituals could be examples of such iconic communication.

Apart from these speculations, it is clear that rituals have very ancient roots in human cultures. Religious scholars have debated about the relationship between myth and ritual in the formation and evolution of religion. Does myth precede rituals, or is it the other way round? A fair position on this issue is that rituals are very ancient and probably precede mythic narratives. However, over time they have come to be mutually supportive; myth adds meaning to ritual while ritual makes myth explicit and tangible. This mutuality between myth and ritual goes a long way in explaining their endurance in the history of humanity. Together they give people and cultures a measure of continuity and coherence in an everchanging and sometimes incomprehensible world.

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