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# Rethinking Ritual

Peter McLaren

*Chapman University*, [mclaren@chapman.edu](mailto:mclaren@chapman.edu)

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# Rethinking Ritual

## **Comments**

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**R**ECENT WORK BY STUDENTS of contemporary ritual (or “ritologists,” as Ronald Grimes calls them) supports the notion that ritual is an important variable not just in tribal culture but also in modern industrial culture. I’m referring to studies that have been undertaken by such ardent ritual exegetes as Roy Rappaport, Barbara Myerhoff, Ronald Grimes, Robert Bocock, Sally Falk Moore, and Richard Schechner. Grimes has begun the important work of consolidating research on ritual; he has taken a field of scholarship which was doggedly parochial and helped to expand it into a protoscience of its own. (1) The work of these academicians, and others, has convinced me that ritual — when critically understood — can serve as an exceedingly profitable aid in the analysis and evaluation of contemporary cultural forms.

From whatever disciplinary perspective (e.g., anthropology, liturgical exegesis, sociology, semiology), and with whatever theoretical equipment (e.g., structuralism, comparative symbology, phenomenology, hermeneutics) ritology is making serious inroads into the traditional preserves of cultural studies. Many contemporary “ritologists” could be described as symbolic consociates of Victor Turner (since they work largely under the spell of the Turnerian vulgate whose doctrines are composed of a “processual” explanation of ritual). These scholars persist in probing the cultural core of ritual, stripping ritual of its derisory religious connotations, making the topic conceptually exciting to scholars from a wide variety of aca-

\*Peter L. McLaren is Special Lecturer in Basic Teacher Education at Brock University in St. Catherine, Ontario.

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demic backgrounds, and creating an unprecedented interest in ritual in general. Highly important and significant studies are now being penned by scholars other than Turner and their work has developed to the extent that it may be considered more than just footnotes or adjuncts to Turner's seminal work.

Yet much mainstream sociological and anthropological work has either ignored or discredited the idea that ritual studies may fittingly serve as a unique conceptual prism — or set of lenses — through which hitherto unprecedented insights may be made into an understanding of modern, industrial life.

### Misconceptions Surrounding the Term Ritual

Long-hallowed by repeated liturgical and anthropological use, the term ritual is tantalizingly ambiguous and continues to prove troublesome to scholarly commentators. And while conflicting schools of thought remain at daggers drawn, the term ritual has not ceased to provoke the most alarming connotations among laymen. This long-standing definitional problem is no doubt caused by a strong oscillation between various poles of anthropological and lay explanations of ritual — poles which have often been merged, interrelated, intermixed, or cross-referenced. Veiled by ambiguity, the one word "ritual" has frequently been substituted by what a number of commentators have distinguished as routine, habit, schedule, or superstitious behavior. Because of the wide-ranging use of the term ritual, it is not surprising that we find a variety of definitions, or as often as not, no explanation at all of what ritual means. As a "catch-all" phrase for anything repetitive or habitual the term ritual has been diluted and trivialized to such an extent that it has become common cultural property and continues to present serious problems for the scientific examination of social relations. And psychoanalytic tradition has preferred a rather distasteful view of ritual, conflating the term with symptoms of private pathology, idiosyncrasy, and neurosis (a view which first emerged from Viennese consulting rooms at the turn of the century). These conceptions have done little to enhance the reputation of ritual as a process of noteworthy social significance. Some of the misunderstandings surrounding ritual stem, at least in part, from varying undifferentiated explanations of the nature and significance of ritual which have caused the concept to be solely connected to vital religions, or restrictedly defined, as in the stillborn image of somebody perfunctorily going about simple routine such as washing one's hands. Scholars and laymen alike have overemphasized its picayune and superficial nature (e.g., as synonymous with artifice or empty gesture).

Within the literature on ritual there exists a theoretical skepticism

regarding the appropriateness of applying conceptual advances gathered from anthropologists studying rituals in preindustrial societies to societies existing in complex industrial settings. It would not be surprising to find some researchers posing as a cavil what I offer as a statement (i.e., that ritual scholarship can provide a useful analytic instrument for the study of contemporary social settings) because they question whether theories of ritual that have developed over the years from studies of small-scale, monolithic, subsistence level or “prediscursive” societies can be applied to large-scale, pluralistic, technologically advanced or “hyper-discursive” societies where rituals have supposedly languished. In addition, ritual’s trail of supernatural associations, a condition resulting from the preponderance of anthropological investigations of religious ceremony, has surrounded the term in a miasma of mystification — as if ritual belonged to a feretory along with holy relics or vials of a martyr’s blood.

In view of these misperceptions of ritual, it should come as no surprise that a sociological hypothesis that conceives of ritual honorifically, as more than a cultural artifact or a peepshow in an anthropological circus, tends to ruffle the academic feathers of those regnant lords of quantitative research who couch social process in algorithmic terminology, who flinch at the sound of the word “symbolic,” and who regard the term “performance” as the *bête noire* of contemporary social science.

The analysis of ritual in the social sciences labors under various theoretical handicaps. “Ritual,” laments Mary Douglas (1973), “has become a bad word signifying empty conformity. We are witnessing a revolt against formalism, even against form.” (2) The grievous imbalance which exists in favor of preordinate studies in the social sciences, has not only discouraged researchers from deferring to the conceptual richness of ritual, but has impaired respect for associated disciplines as well. Thus, mythology, dramaturgy, thaumaturgical arts, and folklore — which are not easily studied in quantitative terms — have, up to and including the present day, frequently been abjured as topics of serious inquiry, branded as unnecessary scholarly accretions, shunned as otiose relics or peripheral additions to serious “hard” research, and consigned to the realm of social insignia — gargoyles perched upon the structural foundations of the social order. As Guy Davenport (1982) so sardonically puts it: “The arts can look after themselves; they are used to neglect and obfuscation.” (3)

Many of the conventionalized and sloganized renderings of ritual not only do violence to the work of contemporary ritologists, but continue to prejudice the use of ritual as an important variable in scientific research.

Lurking around the edges of the anti-ritual arguments posed by the

scholarly *gloseur* is a penumbra of doubt in the efficacy — or even in the existence — of ritual in a post traditional, postmodern world. In some scientific circles rituals are overwhelmingly regarded as existing only in putatively diminished, debilitated, or denatured forms, denuded of their presymbolic plenitude; they are regarded as innocuous, part of a bygone era — leftovers perhaps from some former vaunted age of ritual replete with golden idols, smoking cauldrons, and the proverbial sacrificial virgins. Rituals have supposedly retreated in our society to the periphery of culture to serve as ancillary appendages to the forces that created them — a position any ritologist worth his salt would find defamatory. The analysis of ritual has been banished from serious scientific consideration by objections from anthropologists hostile to the ambiguity of the term, and who are apt to dismiss it as “useless” in that it fails to adequately articulate social activity in modern, secular society. To scholars of this ilk, investigations of ritual are tolerated as long as they are limited to anthropological studies of more compact and unified societies than our own. To suggest to critics of this persuasion that rituals widely exist in today’s society would be taken as a cavalier assertion or a jejune attempt to mix religion and science. Contemporary self-fulfillment in a beleaguered and ritually deplete society appears the sole preserve of poor desymbolized souls insulated through superstition from the bold realities of the modern world — participants who bide their time in the milieu of make believe: churches, synagogues, cinemas, or theaters. Like alchemy, feudal lords, or women’s bustles, rituals are supposedly anachronistic in the twentieth century. Because of the standard assignment of ritual to the occult, the mysterious, and the ineffable, some critics still associate it with images of hooded Rosicrucian adepts, e.s.p.-equipped spoon benders, joss sticks, and other cultic paraphernalia — recrudescing symptoms of a spiritually impotent age where man is chained to a soulless postmodern body, is steeped in restlessness and anomie, and is in need of some fancy symbolic props to assuage his emotional emptiness. But rituals do not serve solely as some type of sacerdotal stilts or metaphysical protheses that celebrants can spiritually strap on in their frantic scramble towards the divine. Anthropologically sterile conceptions such as these continue to fetter the study of ritual in conceptual shackles. A sociological perspective which dismisses rituals as residual, as epiphenomenal, or as aberrational subcomponents of the social structure is less than an adequate explanation; it is at best a half truth and at worst falls short of a necessary understanding of modern ritualized life. Indeed, the concept of ritual has been mired in so many unwarranted assumptions that it creates more confusion than illumination. Hence, we must come to the crucial decision of determining just what a ritual is.

### What A Ritual Is

A ritual is not simply an arcane idea preserved in the breviary of the parish priest, a formula from man's occult heritage kept alive by antiquarian interest and the august weight of tradition, or mysterious gestures and invocations revolving around the consumption of tiny white wafers and chalices full of wine. On the contrary, rituals are constitutive of everyday human life, including secular activities. (4) Rituals possess a primal validity: we are ontogenetically constituted by ritual and cosmologically informed by it as well. None of us stands outside of ritual's symbolic jurisdiction. Rituals are not confined to a compact proscenium or church chancel; they are natural social activities found in, but not confined to, religious contexts. As organized behavior, they arise out of the ordinary business of life. Religious rituals are always and everywhere present in modern industrial life: their orbit of influence permeates all aspects of our existence. We are all inveterate ritualizers and ritual employing beings. We do not have to wait for ecclesiastical edict or royal or school board fiat before partaking of ritual actions.

The term "ritual" is as much concerned with the mythic and symbolic repertoire of our common metropolitan existence as with doctrinal pronouncements, *litterae divinae*, reliquaries containing particles of the "true cross," denominational affiliation, or the ecclesiastic politics associated with organized bodies of religious worship. Many scholarly perspectives on ritual sheer away from recondite questions pertaining to ultimacy, awe, and eternity or involvement with ancient artifacts, figurines, inhumations, or middens. Instead, they refer to the sacrality inherent in mankind's own ordinariness and everyday life. (5) Skorupski (1976) remarks that we need "to be set free from the strait-jacket of 'ritual = sacred = symbolic' versus 'practical = profane = instrumental' and the contortions to which this simple-minded opposition leads." (6) The notion of ritual "may surround any field of behavior and itself does not give birth to religion any more than it gives birth to art or to social organization." (7)

Lincoln (1977) suggests that, as I research and compose the details of this essay, I engage in a ritual process: that of footnoting or "the invocation of the ancestors." Footnoting is, in effect, "a way of demonstrating anamnesis, the conquest of forgetfulness, for in the footnote we preserve the memory of our forebears and pay honor to their achievements." (8)

Engaging in a ritual is also evidenced in participatory fieldwork. "The fieldworker," Schechner (1982) informs us, "like the theatre director, like performers in workshop-rehearsals, goes through the three-phase Van Gennep mapped out as the preliminal rites of separation, the liminal rites of transition, and the postliminal rites of

incorporation.” (9) Even the words I am using to formulate my arguments are themselves part of a ritual event. For, as Richardson (1980) notes, the graphic form and power of the word “is as much a power of our profession [anthropology] as is the shaman’s spirit helper.” (10) Ronald L. Grimes (1982) writes that “Pen and paper are power objects, fetishes, theorizing and observing are ritual gestures laden with ideology.” (11) Following a formulation by Kenneth Burke, Richard J. Martin (1974) describes the practice of sociology as ritual form of secular prayer. He writes that “It is through secular prayer that a sociologist builds his character – his integrity of style, his consistency of purpose, his identity as a sociologist.” (12)

A group’s or community’s rituals become, *inter alia*, the symbolic codes for interpreting and negotiating events of everyday existence. Psychological, sociological and anthropological investigations have uncovered various dimensions to ritual which locate it at the very nodal point or nerve center of human organization. (13) Rituals are more than mere signs or symbols in some kind of sociocultural semaphore. On the contrary, they form the warp on which the tapestry of culture is woven, thereby “creating” the world for the social actor. Rituals suffuse our biogenetic, political, economic, artistic, and educational life. Our entire social structure has a preemptive dependence on ritual for transmitting the symbolic codes of the dominant culture (the codes refer to forms of stored information or sets of rules governing information). It is no exaggeration to claim – as the perdurability of rituals attest – that ritual serves as the pivot of the world: the hinge of culture, the linchpin of society, and the foundation of institutional life such as that found in schools. Notably, rituals are both part of the natural order of things (as in the ritualization of animals) and the consequences of human action (as in the rules and routines of classroom life). They are intrinsically connected to the function of the institution of schooling and classroom life is rife with ritualized activity. Rituals are keys to understanding the essential constitution of classroom life.

Rituals are not created *ex nihilo*. The seeds of ritual do not float about in some sanctified ether or waft of incense; the roots of ritual do not tunnel through the cultural soil of an idyllic prelapsarian garden or emerge from the sterile moisture of a laboratory petri dish. Rituals thrive in the world of lived experience; they germinate in the loam of human foibles and a desire for survival and transcendence; they grow conjuncturally out of the cultural and political mediations that shape the contours of groups and institutions serving as agencies of socialization. Rituals are ensconced in the framework of both private and institutional life; they are embedded in the socially conditioned, historically acquired, and biologically constituted rhythms and meta-

phors of human agency. Rituals tend to sprout anywhere men gather in groups, yet their florescence becomes the most intricate and textured in the religious life where men cultivate rituals as dramas of the divine. While the concept of ritual stretches from Canaanite priest-kings to Cargo cults, rituals remain as inalienable a fact of modern secular society as the proliferation of highrise buildings, freeways, neon lights, acid rain, "born again" televangelists, or family trips to McDonald's. (It is interesting to note that anthropologist Conrad P. Kottach has undertaken a brief ethnography of the Big Mac and offers us stimulating evidence that eating at McDonald's is a ritual event—a ritual that is grounded in the "clean cut" value system of suburban churchgoers.) (14) Rituals serve as both the pillars of support for urban social structure and the substratum which supports those very pillars; that is, rituals are attributes of both the infrastructure and superstructure of society. In their absence both familial and corporate structures would collapse. They provide for contemporary man dimensions to his existence which have been termed symbolic, holy, mythic, or poetic. However, they do not appertain exclusively to the domain of the *logos*; rather, they are situated more specifically in "the realm of gesture, of external and corporeal manifestation." (15) Ritual "belongs to the domain of incarnation, of the visible, the temporal, and the spacial." (16)

The human personality is born out of and sustained by ritual (Erikson, 1966). A ritual transforms itself into a type of psychosocial vessel in which the catalytic action of symbols and root paradigms promotes the fermentation of world views. Rituals are the generative forces by which we, as social actors, adjudicate our instinctual conflicts with our surrounding culture; at the same time they are the articulating mechanisms of social control which literally "put us in our place." Rituals may be fluid or static, inflexible or adaptive; often they are rubricized into unservable, unbridled dogma by ecclesiastical courts or described by sociobiologists as permanently fixed through genetic programming via epigenetic rules. Ritual lies in the motional world; it "thematizes" its milieu through "mindful" bodily gesture. Ritual symbols often point beyond themselves and yet participate in that to which they point (Brenneman et al., 1982). However, engaging in rituals is not a process that just happens to us; it is a process in which necessarily we are actively and daily involved. Rituals constitute, to a great degree, the major semantic networks, cultural contexts, and ideational domains through which attempts are made to regulate social life and keep it from slipping into what Sally Falk Moore calls "a flux of indeterminacy." (17) Rituals frequently serve normative functions, governed by categorical imperatives or "oughts," that are rooted in the psychic structures of social actors

through the process of continuous socialization. The cultural forms which constitute our industrial life are tacitly shaped in terms of, and therefore dominated by, the parabolic and nondiscursive contexts provided by ritual symbols and metaphors. Yet regardless of how copiously human nature lends itself to the ritualizing process, we seldom become consciously aware of its structuring effects on our perception and behavior.

According to Grimes (1982), a ritual is a form of symbolic action composed primarily of gestures (the enactment of evocative rhythms which constitute dynamic symbolic acts) and postures (a symbolic stilling of action). Gesture is formative; it is related to everyday action and may oscillate between randomness and formality.

The astute critic of ritual might feel that there is a tautology embedded in the notion of ritual as an enacted metaphor or symbolic act. Such a critic, claiming that my position on ritual begs the question, might arguably retort: "If ritual is a form of symbolic behavior, and if all behavior is symbolic, doesn't it follow that all behavior is ritual behavior?" Ritual so conceived serves as a type of blank check on which almost any explanation of social and cultural process can be written. Moreover, I may be accused of using circular theories to advance my argument, resulting in little theoretical rigor but with an evocative rhetorical appeal. I would begin to untangle this Gordian knot by claiming that not all symbolic behavior is ritualized behavior. Symbols, in order to be considered ritualistic, *must evoke gestures* (Grimes, 1982). Next, I would argue that not all ritual meaning is symbolic. Within a ritual, the relation between a signal and its referent may also be the indexical or self-referential (Rappaport, 1980). Finally, I would point out that, in searching through the dossier of ritual behavior, we discover that rituals do more than simply inscribe or display symbolic meanings or states of affairs but *instrumentally bring states of affairs into being*. To argue that ritual simply reflects or mirrors meaning in an *ex post facto* manner is to trip philosophically over the same stumbling block that has impeded many students of ritual. Furthermore, to hold such a view is to separate the medium of ritual from its message. Rituals do not merely reflect — they *articulate* (Delattre, 1978). By ignoring this aspect of ritual, we are mortgaging our understanding of contemporary cultural forms.

Ritual gestures are always concerned with the genesis of action; they "constitute a class of mediating action which transform the style and values of everyday action, thereby becoming the very ground of action itself." (18) Rituals may be considered as gestural embodiments of the inner cognitive or affective states of the performers. Grimes claims that gestures are metaphors of the body: they display the identifications which constitute the performer. In addition, they

generate corresponding thought and feeling patterns as well as reinforce particular values. Rituals may be equally considered as the gestural embodiments of the dominant metaphors of the social structure.

The tendency to perceive ritual as simply a routine is a bowdlerization or corrupted usage of the term ritual which has invaded public discourse since the advent of high technology. Properly speaking, however, a routine may be a genuine form of ritualized behavior. That is, a routine is more than a ritual surrogate; a habit, more than a psychoanalytic stepchild. But while routine or habitual actions do fall under the morphological umbrella of ritual, they must necessarily be considered as paler, less authentic, more "wraithlike" forms of ritualization. "Habituation," says Grimes, "is the bane of ritualization...imposed on the form of ought-filled, unmindful, heteronomy, and then the secret of this imposition is glossed over." (19) Some scholars treat routines and habits as subspecies or subrealms of ritual. Barbara Myerhoff (1977), for instance, distinguishes ritual from habits and customs by their utilization of symbols; rituals are said to possess a significance beyond the information transmitted. While they are described as accompanying routine or instrumental proceedings, ritual symbols are said to point beyond themselves, endowing routines and customs with a larger meaning or greater significance. (20)

A ritual may be conceived as a series of encoded movements that oscillate between excessive randomness (high entropy) and rigid structure (high redundancy). High entropy means that there are a wide variety of ways that an energy system may be arranged. This echoes Turner's concept of antistructure. Rigid structure or redundancy means that there are few possible ways of arranging a system; Sally Falk Moore refers to this feature as the process of regularization. (21) Ritual gestures with high redundancy amplify the uniformity and symmetry of social process. Ritual actions high in entropy tend to draw our attention to the tenuousness and arbitrariness of social life (as in the carnival or rites of inversion).

### **What a Ritual Is Not**

Nonritual action is a form of "gestural noise" in which entropy is so high that all possible meanings for the gesture are equally probable. Gestural noise results from random movements lacking in predictability, syntax, codes, or patterns of meanings. Gestural noise is similar to Brennehan et al.'s "first-form of bodily awareness, a form in which body consciousness is so close to itself that, like the serpent eating its own tail, it consumes itself." (22) Such movements are "self-possessed," "premeaningful," and "presymbolic;" they are also

“sporadic, compulsive, and lack the rhythm that is the basis for a symbolic, and later, a meaningful gesture.” (23)

Ritual gestures, on the other hand, are more self-reflexive; they possess within themselves a tendency to place greater stress upon the “pointing beyond” function of the symbol. That which is pointed to soon becomes the “meaning” of the gesture and gains greater importance than the gesture itself. (24)

Rituals that betray a greater randomness or variance than formal liturgies carry with them a greater freight of information—that is, they allow a great deal of uncertainty to be resolved by participants. Nascent rituals are composed of gestures which are frequently encoded by the performers themselves; the codes are made up or improvised as the ritual transpires. Nascent rituals are more idiosyncratic and less static than formula liturgies. In the more punctilious formal liturgy, participants conform to a series of acts which they themselves do not encode (Rappaport, 1978). Actions which transpire at both poles on the continuum of gesture—pure entropy (gestural noise) and pure redundancy (invariance)—convey no information (that is, if we agree with the communications theorists who say that information is the reduction of uncertainty between two equally likely alternatives). Unlike gestural noise, a formal liturgy may still be considered ritual because (following Rappaport) although it contains little or no information, its informationlessness due to invariance conveys a sense of certainty, unquestionableness, and sanctity.

### Conclusion

Despite the fact that industrial life creates a very different ambience than that which was created say, at Delphi or Stonehenge, rituals should be acknowledged as part of the contemporary cultural garment; it must avoid being trapped in a reductive misidentification with cultural artifice—a perspective that subsumes ritual under the rubrics of conceptual cosmetic or “epiphenomenal slag.” Clearly, rituals are more than socio-cultural embellishments, more than irrelevant, theoretical toys created so that anthropologists and academic exegetes can amuse themselves while studying exotic cultures.

If current misconceptions surrounding ritual remain as unrecognized and unconscious as they have hitherto, they will continue to serve as serious impediments to further research into contemporary social life.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The last ten years have been particularly prolific in innovative studies of contemporary secular events. Ronald Grimes tells us that the term “ritual studies”

was possibly first used at the Ritual Studies Consultation during the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in 1977.

While one hesitates to burden the syntax of ritual discourse with yet another neologism, Grimes' term "ritology" – meaning the study of ritual – is a fecund one given the conceptual orientation of this paper. Grimes, however, acknowledges that the word is "a bit of rhetorical magic." For a further discussion of ritology, see Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings In Ritual Studies* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982).

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15. Raimundo Panikkar, "Man as Ritual Being," *Chicago Studies*, 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1977), p. 9.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Barbara Myerhoff and Sally Falk Moore, "Introduction," in *Secular Ritual*, Barbara Myerhoff and Sally Falk Moore, eds. (Amsterdam: Royal Van Gorcum, 1977), p. 19.
18. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, p. 61.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
20. Barbara Myerhoff, "We Don't Wrap Herrings in a Printed Page," in *Secular Ritual*, pp. 199-200.
21. See Sally Falk Moore, "Epilogue: Uncertainties in Situations, Indeterminancies in Culture," in *Symbol and Politics in Communal Ideology: Cases and Questions*, Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, eds. (Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 210-239.
22. Walter L. Brenneman et al., *The Seeing Eye: Hermeneutical Phenomenology in the Study of Religion* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), p. 112.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 113.