

# Culture, Thought, and Social Action

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*An Anthropological Perspective*

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## A Performative Approach to Ritual

In commemoration of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, one of the great founders of social anthropology, I shall take as my point of departure certain passages not from the pages of his mature, lean, and lucid essays but from some casual and inconclusive yet thought-provoking musings in his octopodous work *The Andaman Islanders* (1964), first sketched out in 1908 in a thesis, then revised and extended in 1913, and finally published in 1922. They relate to the improbable subject of dancing, a topic on which he briefly scintillated but to which, as far as I know, he virtually never returned in his subsequent writing.

Limiting himself to treating dance as "a form of social ceremonial," Radcliffe-Brown notes the unexceptionable fact that "the essential character of all dancing is that it is rhythmical," and that this rhythmical nature of dance enables "a number of persons to join in the same actions and perform them as a body" (p. 247). From there he proceeds to suggest something more complex, something that can be extrapolated from dance to most cases of collective ritual: "Any marked rhythm exercises on those submitted to its influence a constraint, impelling them to yield to it and to permit it to direct and regulate the movements of body and even those of the mind" (p. 249). Fixed rhythm and fixed pitch are conducive to the performance of joint social activity. Indeed, those who resist yielding to this constraining influence are likely to suffer from a marked unpleasant restlessness. In comparison, the experience of constraint of a peculiar kind acting upon the collaborator induces in him, when he yields to it, the pleasure of self-surrender. The peculiarity of the force in question is

that it acts upon the individual both from without (as a collective performance) and from within (since the impulse to yield comes from his own organism).

The next theme of interest is that in the Andaman Islands, dancing is always accompanied by song; indeed, every song is composed with the express intention of being sung at a dance (p. 334). Here Radcliffe-Brown not only draws our attention to the use of multiple media in ritual, but even goes so far as to suggest a motor or visceral theory of the effects of song and dance. Some very dubious speculation on the co-origins of music, dance, and song is followed by a pioneering foray into how dance and song engage the faculties: dancing not only brings into play the muscular system of the dancer, creating in him a condition of physical tension, but also engages two chief senses, that of sight to guide the dancer in his movements and that of hearing to enable him to keep time to the music. Radcliffe-Brown offers this hypothesis of visceral effect: "Recent psychology [note that "recent" here is no later than 1914] shows that what are called the aesthetic emotions are largely dependent on our feeling the music as movement, the sounds appealing not to the ear only but to stored-up unconscious motor images." Similarly, dance—even the simple dance of the Andaman Islanders—creates in the dancer "partly by the effect of the rhythm, partly by the effect of the harmonious and balanced tension of the muscles, a direct appeal to that motor sense to which the contemplation of beautiful forms and movements makes only an indirect appeal" (p. 250). It would be nice to imagine that Radcliffe-Brown's abortive visceral theory prefigures Lévi-Strauss's more elaborate and scintillating excursus on how music makes its effects (*The Raw and the Cooked*, 1970), except that Radcliffe-Brown sees both dance and music as creating effects in the same way.<sup>1</sup> Be that as it may, Radcliffe-Brown broached many decades ago the tantalizing question of how and with what effects different media are frequently combined in ritual, a question that has received little systematic attention in anthropology, in spite of all the obsession with ritual in our time.<sup>2</sup>

### The Problem

The macro-problem I shall grapple with here is the dual aspect of rituals as performances. On the one hand, it can be said in general that a public ritual reproduces in its repeated enactments certain seemingly invariant and stereotyped sequences, such as formulas chanted, rules

of etiquette followed, and so on. On the other hand, every field anthropologist knows that no one performance of a rite, however rigidly prescribed, is exactly the same as another performance because it is affected by processes peculiar to the oral specialist's mode of recitation, and by certain variable features such as the social characteristics and circumstances of the actors which (aside from purely contingent and unpredicted events) affect such matters as scale of attendance, audience interest, economic outlay, and so on. It is therefore necessary to bear in mind that festivals, cosmic rituals, and rites of passage, however prescribed they may be, are always linked to status claims and interests of the participants, and therefore are always open to contextual meanings. Variable components make flexible the basic core of most rituals.

But because this duality of ritual cannot be examined all at once, I want to probe in the first part of this discussion the basis for the formalized dimension of ritual, and to take the question of contextual meaning subsequently. Rituals tend to take a certain form wherever and whenever they occur in human societies. In making this statement I am quite aware of the variable ideological and symbolic designs of societies and of the pitfalls of approaching the variability of cultural conceptions with a pretentious set of analytic concepts drawn from a parochial Western experience. I am, for instance, aware that Balinese life, so suggestively painted for us by Bateson and Geertz, is more ritually patterned, more suffused with aesthetic values than contemporary American life, and that English society during the time of Jane Austen was more "conventionalized" than it is today. I am aware that within a single society, as well as between societies, rituals can vary in their degree of formalization, in their openness to context and contingent demands and meanings, and in their use of multiple media—words, music, dance. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that human beings everywhere commonly structure certain events which they consider important in a similar way, events which we can recognize as *ritual*, and that there are good reasons why they should do so.

How then do we recognize ritual in general terms by its form?

### Identifying Ritual

Anthropologists cannot in any *absolute* way separate ritual from nonritual in the societies they study. But *relative* contrastive distinctions (rather than *absolute* distinctions) help to distinguish between certain kinds of social activity. For example, although symbolic ele-

ments surround the activity of a scientist conducting an experiment in a laboratory—he may wear a white coat and observe a certain etiquette with his colleagues—yet there is a difference between the scientific experiment and a Roman Catholic mass with regard to the way words and acts are implicated, “verification” procedures invoked, and results interpreted.

Although neither linguistically nor ostensibly can one demarcate a bounded domain of ritual (separated from other domains) in any society, yet every society has named and marked out enactments, performances, and festivities which one can identify as typical or focal examples of “ritual” events. They constitute paradigmatic instances of the phenomenon I want to focus on here.

In the Thai language the prefix *pithi*, usually translated as “ceremony,” demarcates certain events. *Pithi taengan* means marriage ceremony, *pithi phaosob* means cremation rites, and *pithi wajkhru* means the ceremony of honoring one’s teacher. Again the prefix *ngan* signifies some kind of festivity, and can label a temple fair (*ngan wat*) or a feast at home (*ngan hano*). Although differentiating ceremonies or festivities from other events to which these labels are not attached, these examples do not differentiate “religious” events from “nonreligious,” for in no Thai *pithi* or *ngan* is some feature of Buddhism or the supernatural not invoked.

Consider the following expressions in the English language: graduation ceremony, church service, prayer meeting, Republican Convention, communion rite, football match. The words “ceremony,” “service,” “convention,” “meeting,” “match,” and so on mark the events as being of a particular kind. Indeed, these events appear to share some features—an ordering or procedure that structures them, a sense of collective or communal enactment that is purposive—devoted to the achievement of a particular objective—and an awareness that they are different from “ordinary,” everyday events.

Some examples from India and Sri Lanka illustrate another feature associated with rituals, especially those of a festive kind—namely, the charged use of certain vehicles and devices of communication as a mode of experiencing and activating the extraordinary and extramundane. The word *lila* in North India means “play,” and as such labels games and dramas. But *lila* is also used to describe one of the great cycles of religious festivals, the Ram Lila, at which the epic Ramayana is enacted. In this context, *lila* means no “ordinary” play, no “ordinary” theater, but communicates the fact that the gods and the divine are becoming *activated and manifest in this world*, and thus stands for an intensified *experience* of the divine, characterized by a height

ened use of many media of communication and a charged and expectant mass participation. The Tamil equivalent for such a religious festival is *thiruvilayādal*, and in neighboring Sri Lanka festive rites performed for gods are called *deiange sellama*, "the play of the gods." And it is perhaps not too far-fetched to say that the Tikopians express in a different idiom, immortalized by Raymond Firth, "the work of the gods," a similar sense of prescribed communal activity and an intensified experience during the ritual cycle when their gods initiate and regulate the cosmic round of activities.

We can of course find similar examples in the ancient Greek world, where ritual, festival, and play belonged to a paradigmatic set (in the Saussurean sense). A brief reference to Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* is apposite here. Asserting the refreshing proposition that "play activity is the basis of civilisation" (as a view of contest it is at least a nice antidote to Konrad Lorenz's attributing the same role to aggression), Huizinga enumerates many features characterizing "play" in the classical Greek period, of which the following are examples: play constitutes a stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own ("limitation of time"); it also takes place in a marked-off space, the playground and ritual stage sharing this "limitation of space"; it assumes a fixed, culturally ordained form, constituted of "elements of repetition and alternation (as in a refrain) [which] are like the warp and woof of a fabric"; it is a "contest for something" as well as a "representation" of something . . . it "creates order, and is order," and in an imperfect world it brings temporary perfection. All these characteristics fit like a glove the examples of ritual I earlier cited.

But Huizinga himself saw that there were elements of tension, uncertainty, and chanciness of outcome in play, a feature which Lévi-Strauss, continuing the challenging comparison between ritual and play,<sup>3</sup> singles out as the distinctive difference between them. In a famous passage in *Savage Mind* (1966) Lévi-Strauss remarked, "All games are defined by a set of rules which in practice allow the playing of any number of matches," while ritual is played "like a favoured instance of a game, remembered from among the possible ones because it is the only one which results in a particular type of equilibrium between the two sides" (p. 30). "Games thus appear to have a disjunctive effect: they end in the establishment of a difference between individual players or teams where originally there was no indication of inequality. And at the end of the game they are distinguished into winners and losers. Ritual, on the other hand, is the exact inverse; it conjoins for it brings about a union . . . or in any case an organic rela-

tion between two initially separate groups, one ideally merging with the person of the officiant and the other with the collectivity of the faithful" (p. 32).

Although no anthropologist will take Levi-Strauss's formulation to be true of all rituals known, yet his comparison helps one understand how the Trobrianders (in Jerry Leach's marvelous film *Cricket in the Trobriands*) have transformed the English competitive (and ritualized) game of cricket—a "rubbish" game from the Trobriand point of view—into an elaborate formalized *kayasa* display, where not an outright win but a near equivalence of exchange (with the host team enjoying a slight edge) is the outcome.<sup>3</sup> The Trobriand transformation of a competitive game that evolved in an individualist Western society to a near-balanced reciprocity of formalized display and exchange does hint at a general, if not universal, feature of ritual: ritual usually specifies in advance not only the procedural rules but also the sequences of events, and in this sense stands in stark contrast to the unpredictable and unequal outcomes of sports (as they are understood in our time), with the jubilation of victory and the humiliation of defeat, all too well known in soccer and other sports today.

Obviously such ritual enactments as various forms of divination, astrological consultations, and mediumistic sessions do not predict their outcomes in advance, yet their ordering is very different from the uncertainties of a game. For they have as their aim the enabling of the client to effect a cure or a reconciliation, to make a decision, to avoid a danger, and in this sense the object of the exercise is to make a fruitful exchange between the occult and the human via the mediation of the officiant, a fruitful conjunction that will help produce an orderly, ongoing social existence.

Following is a working definition of ritual which highlights the features I have touched upon:

Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). Ritual action in its constitutive features is performative in these three senses: in the Austinian sense of performative, wherein saying something is also doing something as a conventional act; in the quite different sense of a staged performance that uses multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively; and in the sense of indexical values—I derive this concept from Peirce—being attached to and inferred by actors during the performance.



## The Integration of Cultural Account and Formal Analysis

The above definition insists on ritual's being a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication—that is to say, its cultural content is grounded in particular cosmological or ideological constructs. The definition also insists on ritual's portraying certain features of form and patterning, and using certain communicational and semiotic vehicles. Can a "cultural account" and a "formal analysis" be fused in one and the same analysis? Can the formal features of ritual in general be reconciled with the particular cultural contexts in which rituals are created and enacted? Are they not conflicting analytical frames? I hope to demonstrate that cultural considerations are integrally implicated in the form that ritual takes, and that a marriage of form and content is essential to ritual action's *performative* character and efficacy.<sup>5</sup>

At first sight this theoretical aim seems daunting, because it appears as if the battle lines have already been drawn between two schools of thought, the neo-Tylorians and the proponents of a semiotic theory of ritual. The neo-Tylorians (for example, Horton) conceive the critical feature of religion, and therefore of (religious) ritual, as being belief in, and communication with, the "supernatural" world or a "transtemporal" other world. In contrast, the semiotic school views the category "ritual" as spanning sacred-secular, natural-supernatural domains, and as having as its distinctive feature a tendency toward certain forms and structures of "communication."

My view is that we can liberate ourselves from the limitations of the neo-Tylorian natural-supernatural dichotomy by first recognizing that all societies have cosmologies which in their *several different classificatory ways* relate man to man, man with nature and animals, and man with the gods and demons and other nonhuman agencies. The inevitability of the cosmological perspective was graphically stated by Wittgenstein in this aphorism: if the flea were to construct a rite, it would be about the dog. We must also clearly realize that cosmological conceptions are not merely—or even importantly—to be understood in terms of the subjects' stated "beliefs," as the neo-Tylorians tend to do, but are most richly embedded in myths, rituals, legal codes, constitutional charters, and other collective representations. Moreover, when beliefs are taken to be prior to ritual action, the latter is considered as derivative and secondary, and is ignored or undervalued in its own right as a medium for transmitting meanings, constructing social reality, or, for that matter, creating and bringing to life the cosmological scheme itself. In other words, ritual's performative and creative as-

pect as an enacted event tends to be lost sight of in neo-Tylorian discussions.

Thus, while we must grant the importance of cultural presuppositions, of cosmological constructs, as anterior and antecedent context to ritual, we must also hold that our understanding of the communicative aspects of ritual may not be furthered by imagining that such a belief context adequately explains the form of the ritual event per se. But the clue for synthesizing this seeming antinomy has already been revealed, in the fact that cosmological constructs are embedded (of course not exclusively) in rites, and that rites in turn enact and incarnate cosmological conceptions. The integration of cultural account and formal analysis is revealed in this mutuality: if a society's major rituals are closely associated with its cosmology, then we can legitimately ask *what* a society seeks to convey to its adherents in its main performances, which leads us to ask why certain communicational forms are chosen and used in preference to others as being more appropriate and adequate for this transmission.

By "cosmology" I mean the body of conceptions that enumerate and classify the phenomena that compose the universe as an ordered whole and the norms and processes that govern it. From my point of view, a society's principal cosmological notions are all those orienting principles and conceptions that are held to be sacrosanct, are constantly used as yardsticks, and are considered worthy of perpetuation relatively unchanged. As such, depending on the conceptions of the society in question, its legal codes, its political conventions, and its social class relations may be as integral to its cosmology as its "religious" beliefs concerning gods and supernaturals. In other words, in a discussion of enactments which are quintessentially rituals in a "focal" sense, the traditional distinction between religious and secular is of little relevance, and the idea of sacredness need not attach to religious things defined only in the Tylorian sense. Anything toward which an "unquestioned" and "traditionalizing" attitude is adopted can be viewed as sacred. Rituals that are built around the sacrosanct character of constitutions and legal charters or wars of independence and liberation, and that are devoted to their preservation as enshrined truths or to their invocation as great events, have (to borrow a phrase from Moore and Myerhoff) a "traditionalizing role," and in this sense may share similar constitutive features with rituals devoted to gods or ancestors.<sup>6</sup> No wonder an American sociologist—Bellah—has coined the label "civil religion" to characterize some American national ceremonials.

Thus, suppose we say that the main and critical points of articula-

tion in many (if not all) cosmologies<sup>7</sup> are (to give a few examples): the insistence on unquestioned acceptance of conceptions that cannot be subject to the criterion of independent validating experience, the promise held out that the committed members will experience a greater cosmic reality and truth if they will suspend doubt and simply follow the prescribed practices; the postulation of a relation between life and death, between a "this world" and an "other world," between the realms of gods, ancestors, humans, and creatures of nature; the predication of a morally evaluated hierarchy of all creatures that make up the cosmos, and the transactions between them, both desirable and undesirable, deserved and undeserved; the enshrinement of events of sacred beginnings and climactic events. Supposing we say this, then certain corollaries necessarily follow which inflect and mold ritual action, which has for its objective the communication with and mediation between these culturally distinguished agents, levels, domains, and events which compose the cosmology.<sup>8</sup>

### Formality, Conventionality, Stereotypy, and Rigidity

This dynamic nexus between such cultural constructs and ritual as a mode of social action generates the set of features which in my definition I referred to as formality, conventionality, stereotypy, and rigidity. If cosmological constructs are to be taken on faith and considered as immutable, then it is a necessary corollary that the rites associated with them be couched in more or less fixed form, be transmitted relatively unchanged through time, and be repeatedly enacted on ordained or crisis occasions. Moreover, especially in cosmic rites, but also in many rites of passage and in curing cults of mediumistic possession, the cosmogony is repeatedly enacted and the archetypes constantly reiterated in order to achieve the double feat of projecting concrete present time into mythical time (Eliade, 1959: 20) and bringing the superior divine realm or moments of beginning into the present human world to achieve a cleansing and a charging with moral potency.

These objectives and constraints directly shape certain features of form in ritual as a medium, features which by a happy convergence of ideas more than one anthropologist have in recent times identified.<sup>9</sup> In some respects, of course, these recent discussions return to Malinowski's treatment of magical language as a distinct mode, separate from ordinary speech. For example, Rappaport (1971, 1974) enumerates a conjunction of features as distinctive of ritual, such as formality

(including stylization and repetition), invariance of liturgical form which generates sanctity (the quality of unquestionable truthfulness), and certainty of meaning. Bloch (1974) makes a similar identification. Moore and Myerhoff in a more recent work (*Secular Ritual*, 1977) refer to ritual as a "traditionalizing instrument" and single out repetition, stylization, ordering, evocative presentational style and staging, and so forth as formal features which enable ritual to imitate the rhythmic imperatives and processes of the cosmos and thereby to attach permanence and legitimacy to what are actually social constructs. Moore and Myerhoff make the telling observation that even in the case of a newly invented ritual (or a ritual performed only once), the ritual is constructed in such a way that "its internal repetitions of form and content make it tradition-like" because "it is supposed to carry the same unreflective conviction as any traditional repetitive ritual" (pp. 8-9).

I want to begin my commentary by elaborating the point that the formalization of ritual is linked to ritual's being *conventionalized* action, and that this conventionality in turn psychically *distances* the participants from the ritual enactment. This very fact puts in jeopardy the usefulness of the intentionality theory of meaning for understanding ritual.<sup>10</sup> Let me explain.

Rituals as conventionalized behavior are not designed or meant to express the intentions, emotions, and states of mind of individuals in a direct, spontaneous, and "natural" way. Cultural elaboration of codes consists in the *distancing* from such spontaneous and intentional expressions because spontaneity and intentionality are, or can be, contingent, labile, circumstantial, even incoherent or disordered.

If for the purposes of exposition we draw a crude distinction between "ordinary" communicational behavior and "ritual" behavior (accepting of course that both kinds are equally subject to cultural conventions), then we could say (forgetting the problem of insincerity and lying) that ordinary acts "express" attitudes and feelings directly (for example, crying denotes distress in Western society) and "communicate" that information to interacting persons (the person crying wishes to convey to another his feeling of distress). But ritualized, conventionalized, stereotyped behavior is constructed in order to express and communicate, and is publicly construed as expressing and communicating certain attitudes congenial to an ongoing institutionalized intercourse. Stereotyped conventions in this sense act at a second or further remove; they code not intentions but "simulations" of intentions. People can act meaningfully in stereotyped ways because they have "learned to learn" (in Bateson's sense of deuterolearning)

and because the enactment of ritual is the guarantee of social communication. Thus, *distancina* is the other side of the coin of conventionality; distancing separates the private emotions of the actors from their commitment to a public morality. In a positive sense, it enables the cultural elaboration of the symbolic; but in a negative sense it also contributes to hypocrisy, and the subversion of transparent honesty.<sup>11</sup> The whole point about a vigorous culture as a social product is that it is capable of elaborating several orders of conventionality, superimposing and interweaving them, and juxtaposing several dimensions of meaning.

This of course means that any theory of ritual as directly modifying sentiments, as enabling persons to "act out" their aggression or frustration and thereby reach a cow-like, placid state is too simplistic and naïve. Radcliffe-Brown himself, at certain points in *The Andaman Islanders*—for example, in his discussion of the peace-making ceremony (p. 238)—viewed ritual as replacing aggressive feelings with those of "friendship and solidarity."<sup>12</sup> But he clearly saw that the objective was not achieved directly; for example, he commented that Andamanese ceremonies "are not spontaneous expressions of feeling; they are all customary obligations to which the sentiment of obligation attaches" (p. 246).<sup>13</sup>

Suzanne Langer (1951) saw very well how formalization in ritual involved the adoption of conventionalized gesture as opposed to improvised action, and how critical the phenomenon of psychic distancing of the participants was. She noted that ritual, usually bound to set occasions, is a "presented idea"; ritual as symbolic activity involves "conceptions" rather than an immediate relief of feelings, which may or may not take place. Ritual, Langer continued, was a culturally constructed expressive act, "expressive in the logical sense"—that is, "not as a sign of the emotion it conveys but a symbol of it; instead of completing the natural history of a meaning, it denotes the feeling, and may merely bring it to mind . . . when an actor acquires such a meaning it becomes a *gesture*" (pp. 123–124).

In other words, Langer's point was that ritual's distinctive characteristic is not the evoking of feelings in an immediate psychological sense, not the inducing of a catharsis in the Aristotelian sense, which it may or may not do, but the "articulation of feelings," and "the ultimate product of such an articulation is not a simple emotion, but a complex permanent attitude. This attitude, which is the worshippers' response to the insight given by the sacred symbols, is an emotional pattern, which governs all individual lives. It cannot be recognized through any clearer medium than that of formalized gesture." Ritual

is not a "free expression of emotions" but a disciplined rehearsal of "right attitudes."<sup>14</sup>

All of a piece with the elaboration of the formalized gesture is the development together with ritual of what Hymes has called the "polite style," as opposed to the normal unmarked colloquial and slang. The polite style, the style of rhetoric, the use of superior forms of address and pronouns and of inflated vocabulary, comes to be preferred in important, serious ceremonies. "The style becomes a formal marker of occasions of societal importance where the personal relationship is minimized" (Ervin-Tripp, 1972: 235). I might add that where, as in many complex serious ceremonies, slang and low comedy—the indicators of "vulgar" persons—are introduced at certain points, these "crude" sequences make their import by unfavorable comparison with, and subordination to, the high style associated with the refined, the honored, and the high-ranked *persona*.<sup>15</sup>

If we push this line of thought far enough, a certain conclusion follows: when quintessential rituals are enacted, their meanings retreat further and further away from an "intentional" theory of communication and meaning, as developed by philosophers of language.<sup>16</sup> We can keep aside as more or less irrelevant the Gricean theory of intentional meaning, because in conventional ritual like marriage the immediate intentions of the officiating priest or of the bride and groom do not explain the meaning and efficacy of the rite itself (or the unintended meanings). Whether a man is marrying because he has made the girl pregnant, or whether the ceremony is being performed by a fallen, drunken priest (of the sort so powerfully depicted in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*), is immaterial to the validity of the sacrament performed, provided certain conditions are satisfied (the priest has been ordained into his office, the couple are not marrying bigamously, and so on).<sup>17</sup> Thus, if we postulate a continuum of behavior, with intentional behavior at one pole and conventional behavior at the other, we shall have to locate formalized ritual nearer the latter pole. Although this leaves intentionality as such behind, there is a strong temptation to adopt and adapt the Austinian notion of performative acts and the Gricean notion of conventional (and nonconventional) implicature in this scheme for understanding the social meaning and efficacy of ritual.

At this point I can conveniently introduce the first of the three senses in which I consider ritual to be performative. This first sense obviously derives from Austin's well-known notion of the performative utterance, in which the saying of the illocutionary speech act is "the doing of an action"; this act, "conforming to a convention" in "appro-

priate circumstances," is subject to normative judgments of felicity or legitimacy and not to rational tests of truth and falsity.

Adapting Searle (1969)<sup>18</sup> for my purposes, I can say that rituals as performative acts may be subject to two different sorts of rules, *regulative* and *constitutive*. This distinction is not watertight, but it does afford some analytic mileage. Regulative rules regulate (perhaps "orient" is a better word) a preexisting activity, an activity whose existence is logically independent of the rules— as, for instance, when dinner-table manners regulate the eating of food. Constitutive rules constitute (and also regulate) an "activity the existence of which is logically dependent on the rules" (pp. 34–35), as in the case of the rules of football or chess.

To Austin's classical examples of constitutive acts, such as greeting, baptizing, naming a ship, and marriage vows— all of which are created and understood within the bounds of the conventions themselves— one can add several anthropological examples: the installation of a Tallensi chief, Ndembu circumcision rites, Lodagaa mortuary rites, a Japanese tea ceremony, a Catholic Mass, and a multitude of cosmic rites and festivals which are self-constituting events and of which there are several classic descriptions.

To these classic constitutive ritual acts, whose very performance achieves the realization of the *performative* effect, can be attached two kinds of *perlocutionary* (functional) consequences. There are certain constitutive rites in which certain *perlocutionary* effects are presupposed by the illocutionary force of the acts and actually take place: when a Tallensi chief is properly installed certain results must imperatively follow upon his exercise of the powers of office. The valid performance of Lodagaa mortuary rites must imperatively lead to the distribution of the rights and duties and property of the dead man to his declared heirs (Goody, 1962). But there are also constitutive acts which, although they realize their performative dimension, may yet be uncertain of realizing their expected perlocutionary effects. A classic example is curing rituals in cases of spirit possession, which, though performatively valid, may or may not induce a cure in the patient, traffic with the supernatural being notoriously uncertain.

The way to account for people's continuation with "magical" rites that empirically may produce false results is a classic anthropological chestnut that has exercised, to give a few examples, the minds of Tylor, Frazer, Evans-Pritchard, and, more recently, Horton. Against this main-line tradition, I earlier submitted that it might be misplaced to judge such rites solely against the perspective and truth canons of Western scientific rationality, for as constitutive and persuasive acts

they cannot be "falsified," though individual instances of them may be declared normatively infelicitous or illegitimate (see Chapter 2). If anthropologists insist on seeing magical rites as acts launched by the actors to achieve practical results by suspending the laws of motion and force as we understand these laws in modern physics, then obviously such acts must be declared false. But insofar as anthropologists are open to the proposition that magical rites are conventional acts which should also be examined within a performative frame of social action, then a new horizon opens for viewing the logic of such purposive acts and the canons for their validity from the actors' point of view.

But this performative view also faces fuzzy instances which it must situate within its framework. Where curing rites are intertwined with the use of herbal and other medicines and practical health care (as in many traditional societies), it may make sense to view the ritual component as having a strong "regulative" character. In such cases, an improvement in medical techniques may render the older rites *obsolete* rather than proving them false or wrong. An example is the virtual disappearance of the rites addressed to the smallpox goddess in Sri Lanka in the face of the dramatic success of Western medicine in eradicating smallpox. Another frequently observed fact can also be cited in this context. Curing rites, divinations, rain-making rites—all promising an empirical result but not falsifiable on that account—are prone to proliferate, compete with rivals, and come into and go out of fashion quickly, depending on their alleged results. But rival cults do not seek so much to "disprove" as to outbid one another, and usually a great number of redundant cults coexist and are simultaneously resorted to by clients.

Certain special considerations apply to that second class of performative ritual acts which I have called *regulative*, in the sense that they orient and regulate a practical or technical activity, and address themselves to the aesthetic style of that activity, or act as its diacritical features, without actually constituting it. The procedures for rice cultivation among the Kachin, which may entail ploughing in certain directions or allocating different roles to men and women, regulate or orient cultivation without constituting it. Again the Trobriand canoe-making ritual or agricultural rites, interwoven closely with practical technical acts of boat building or gardening, do many things such as organizing labor, encoding aesthetic values and mythical associations, timing the work phases, and providing an anticipatory statement about the success to be achieved in Kula or yam harvests to be distributed as *urigubu*—yet these rites supplement and regulate the technical activity which is a separate strand in the coil.<sup>19</sup>



Thus, regulative rituals have two characteristics. By themselves they can be seen to have a "constitutive" element; but they are in fact interwoven with practical activity, and therefore the constitutive element does not exhaust the whole amalgam, which is canoe building or gardening in Trobriand terms. Second, the expected perlocutionary effect of the rites may happen uncertainly, but this does not undermine their performative validity.<sup>20</sup>

### The Application of Information Theory to Ritual

I have so far explored some of the conditions that contribute to the formalization, conventionalization, and distancing of ritual as a medium of communication. One set of features that frequently accompanies the foregoing in most complex rituals consists of various kinds of abbreviations and elisions which are referred to in the literature as *condensation* and *fusion*. A second set consists of repetitive and recursive sequences which tend to be labeled *redundancy*, a labeling that derives its reason by association with information theory. In actual fact condensation and redundancy are linked, dialectically related processes that produce intensification of meaning as well as the decline of meaning.

Information theory has been promiscuously invoked by analysts of ritual, an invocation that is further compounded by different "readings" of the theory that are then applied to the interpretation of ritual. It is necessary therefore to make a few preliminary clarifications even at the risk of sounding pedantic.

Information theory (Cherry, 1961; Miller, 1951) relates strictly to communication engineering, which is concerned with the technical problem of making the most economical use of the capacity of a transmission channel (or, to put it another way, of transmitting the maximum number of messages through the channel in the shortest possible time). In this technical science, the notion of "information" has a precise statistical meaning. The amount of information carried by a unit in a code is a function of the probability of its occurrence; in fact, information content is inversely proportionate (and logarithmically related) to probability.<sup>21</sup>

Other concepts that are central in information theory are "noise" and "redundancy." "Noise" refers to any interference in a channel that affects the correct reception of signals. The use of "superfluous" symbols to make sure that the message will be received correctly is known as redundancy. Redundancy is considered a necessary vice in information theory; some degree of it is thought to be desirable be-

cause of the interference upon the medium or channel of unpredictable physical or other disturbances, which would lead to a distortion or obliteration and loss of information.<sup>22</sup> "Redundancy, like the unemployed worker, is unproductive, but only when the message is to be sent through a perfect noise-free channel to a perfect receiver" (Corcoran, 1971: 33).

Messages can be repeated in many ways. They may be transmitted over several channels simultaneously, permitting the recipient to compare the several received messages and arrive at the correct message. More often it is necessary to use a single channel several times in a row, in which case either the entire message may be relayed and then repeated, or one section of the message may be repeated before proceeding to the next section.<sup>23</sup>

At first sight the fact that ritual has various features of redundancy and high probability of occurrence invites an application to it of information theory. But there are good reasons against a literal and limited application of that theory to ritual as communication.

The passage of new information as such from one person to another is only one aspect of social communication, and in ritual, which is formalized and predictable, this aspect may be subordinate and of little relevance. But one should not think that because most rituals are not concerned with transmitting new information, they therefore lack any referential, propositional, and analogical meanings at all.<sup>24</sup> A further limitation is equating information as such (in the technical sense) with the concept of "meaning."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the various ways "meaning" is conceived in anthropology are a deadly source of confusion.

Social communication, of which ritual is a special kind, portrays many features that have little to do with the transmission of new information and everything to do with interpersonal orchestration and with social integration and continuity. The orchestrational and integrational aspects of the communicative process (Birdwhistell, 1970: 86-87) includes many operations: the "phatic" feature which keeps the communication system in operation, the certainty of message which eases an interpersonal anxiety or affective lesion, the battery of linguistic and other cues which act as triggering mechanisms and context markers, the regulative etiquette which orders what is considered as proper communication between persons in equal or asymmetrical statuses—these are a related set. Another set relates to features that cross-reference and link particular messages to enable their comprehensibility and reception as larger totalities, and features that relate the particular context of communication to the larger cultural context (s) of which it is a part. Here one can also appropriately invoke

and apply to ritual Jakobson's enumeration of functions of verbal communication—referential, poetic, phatic, emotive, conative, and metalingual, all of which in varying proportions are served by verbal communication. The coding of emotive elements in ritual speech through prosodic features of intonation and stress, emphatic vocal prolongations, and so forth, and the supplementary use of paralinguistic features such as kinetic movements and gestures, whether conventionally required or unconsciously manifested, are familiar indices that reveal the emotional attitudes of the officiants and participants. In Thailand one has only to compare the still, emotionless, detached postures of the Buddhist monk and the convulsive, overwhelmed movements of a spirit possessed medium to realize instantly the different involvements being communicated. But rituals may also convey the metalanguage function of definitional, glossing learning, as for instance manifest in certain initiation and mystery cults whose initiates are "taught" mysteries and identities and given new knowledge from which they were previously excluded.<sup>41</sup> Examples of such teaching of the cultural code in graduated terms are the Baktaman (Barth, 1975), who progressively introduce initiates into the secret mysteries, and the Bemba, who in their Chisungu rite use mnemonic devices and songs for teaching young girls (Richards, 1956).

These things notwithstanding, I wish to elucidate and underscore one understanding of "meaning," defined not in terms of "information" but in terms of *pattern recognition* and *configurational awareness*. A hallmark of the arts and crafts—poetry, painting, dancing, music, pottery design, and so on—is the reduction of the random by restraint (as Bateson put it)—indeed, the creation of recognizable patterns and unanticipated tensions and outcomes, by means of redundancy and recursive loops. And of course a prime aesthetic censor which prevents the deterioration of art forms into degenerate banality is *controlled modulation*. One recognizes, in this characterization of meaning in terms of pattern recognition, a positive characterization of the role of redundancy in art forms. The antithetical image of this positive projection of meaning as pattern is the communication engineer's postulation of unpredictability and low probability of occurrence of an item as constituting its high information content.

I must now introduce a certain amount of rigor into the discussion of what I mean by "redundancy" in ritual. Those who have done detailed studies of complex rites and ritual cycles are keenly aware of various kinds and patterns of repetitions that occur, sometimes causing boredom with their seemingly insistently unvarying recurrence, and sometimes subtly stimulating a sense of creative variation and at-

tentive expectation. In this chapter I can only barely suggest the dimensions of the problem, locate some of the meaningful patterns, and urge the need for a closer analysis of them before one indulges in gross generalities. There are, just to enumerate at random, repetitions of the same sequence, both within a long rite and between a series of related rites. But there are many rites in which redundancy, rather than being mere tedious repetitions of the same thing, can be demonstrated to be interesting and complex in the work it does.

A standard example is "parallelism," the pairing of couplets, which Robert Lowth identified and made famous in the second half of the eighteenth century as being characteristic of Hebrew poetry, and which more recently Jakobson (1966) analyzed in his work on Finnic and Russian oral traditions.

Parallelism in its more general sense refers to the poetic artifice of "recurrent returns" at the semantic, syntactic, and phonemic levels of expression, and in its specific canonical sense refers to a compositional device wherein "certain similarities between successive verbal sequences are compulsory or enjoy a high preference" (Jakobson, 1966: 399). Parallelism expresses mainly a relation of symmetry, the two halves of the pair being slightly distinguished from each other by syntactic or semantic variations or slight differences in function or by other substitute devices.

In a recent survey Fox (1977) enumerates the occurrence of canonical parallelism in its various forms and patterns, and reports its widespread occurrence in both literate and oral cultures distributed in time and space, in as diverse instances as Hebrew, Vedic, Chinese, Dravidian, and Mayan poetry, in the ritual language occurring in Vietnam, Mongolia, and Hawaii, and among the Todas, the Walbiri of Australia, the Navaho, the Kachin, the Thai, the Buang of Papua New Guinea, the Merina of Madagascar, the Rotinese of the outer Indonesian Islands, and the Chamulas of the Chiapas Highlands of Mexico.

What is of particular interest here is that parallelism is a pervasive device and idiom of formal speaking, chanting, and singing, and of greetings, farewells, petitions, and courtship overtures. Especially throughout the world's oral traditions, it is a "speech form or language stratum reserved for special situations: for the preservation of past wisdom, for the utterance of sacred words, for determining ritual relations, for healing, and for communication with spirits" (Fox, 1975: 127-128).

The question of why such a language form should be considered appropriate for formal occasions, especially as a component of ritual language, could be approached from many angles.

Let me briefly allude here to the creative role of the "formula," a

term applied by Lord (1958), and Parry before him, to “repeated word groups” that express an essential idea, in generating and producing an actual recitation as performance. The Slavonic singer of epic poetry has in his possession “basic patterns of meter, word boundary, melody,” and he is adept at using these compositional devices: “the linking of phrases by parallelism, [the] balancing and opposition of word order,” and the substitution of key words (Lord calls this paradigmatic operation a “substitution system”). Lord has eloquently stated that “for the oral poet the moment of composition is the performance.” He has demonstrated how the oral poet, whose basic capital is a stock of memorized formulas, varies and ornaments his songs, lengthens or shortens them, according to the demands and character of the audience and other situational circumstances, and how in fact he preserves the tradition by the constant recreation of it. Indeed, such a dynamic performative approach should refute the overly simplistic view that, because oral specialists say and believe their sacred words are fixed and invariant, their actual renditions are reproductions of an invariant text. It surely cannot be the case that, although guided as well as constrained by sequencing rules and other prescriptions regarding language expression, the political orator—including those in the Merina and Balinese instances (Bloch, 1975)—produces set congealed speeches.

In ritual, too, not only would the outputs of different specialists allegedly performing the same rite be different in certain respects, but the outputs of the same specialist—especially if he is not confined to the recitation of a written sacred text—would be variable at separate performances of the same rite. Indeed, complex rites, and long recitations, usually have some sequences more open than others, more open in terms of structure and more open to new contents. Even in the Trobriand case, Malinowski remarked that in the main body (*tapwana*) of the spell—which in content was constructed by combining and varying action words with metaphors and metonyms—there was a certain amount of freedom regarding the order in which words were uttered, whereas words were not liable to “even the smallest alteration” in the first part (*u’ula*) of the spell, which was usually a recitation of ancestral names that established the magician’s charter. Thus, in summary, let us suppose that whatever the permissible features of creativity and variability in the “production” of rites as performances, such features 1) function on a base or core of stereotyped or conventionalized formulas and “substitution systems” and/or 2) can to some degree be accounted for in terms of contextual demands and indexical factors.

Whatever the importance of these compositional considerations, I

have yet to tackle here why *ritual language* resorts to, and how it exploits, redundant and patterned devices, of which parallelism is an example. An ethnographic illustration opens a window onto the problem by revealing why a certain people views a particular linguistic construction as an effective communication device with the divine. The Chamulas of highland Mexico consider formal ritual speech as “heated” discourse (in comparison with the “cool” discourse of ordinary times). Heated discourse is an intensified medium which serves to establish contact with the higher holy entities, which are themselves symbols of cyclical heat, a principle of great importance in Chamula thought. This ritual speech, rendered with voice modulations from higher to lower pitch with great regularity, is constructed in pairs, and multiples of pairs, which enter into numerous combinations in “song,” “prayer,” “language for rendering holy,” and sometimes “true ancient narrative,” as these genres are distinguished by native speakers.

From the point of view of text or discourse construction, the “stacking” (as Gossen calls it) of the parallel couplets one after the other enables the performers to extend texts, give them embellishments (within stylistic bounds), explore nuances of multivocal meanings; and from the point of view of performative efficacy the structure of the entire recursive recitation may be seen as an iconic analogue of the cycles of creations of the cosmic order in their temporal and spatial regularity and cumulative effect.

I would like briefly to recall the structural pattern of the Trobriand spells in order at least to confront, if not solve, the basis for the Trobriand view that their magical spells are “verbal missiles” launched by man as “magical power towards the entities or forces which they were meant to affect” (Malinowski, 1935, vol. 2: 248–249). At least part of the explanation for the “creative metaphor of magic” and its persuasive potency lies in the verbal construction of the spell, the mode of its recitation, and the physical manipulations which accompany it. As Malinowski put it: in the main part of the spell (*tapwana*) “several key words are repeated with inventory expressions” in such a way as to produce the effect of “rubbing” the verbs of action into a succession of dazzling metaphors drawn from diverse sensory domains, or into the enumerated parts of the object—whether it be a tuber or a yam house— assembled as a whole through step-by-step metonymic recitation. The contours of this magical operation have already been described (see Chapter 1; also Nancy Munn, n.d.), but here I want to suggest the mechanisms by which this kind of redundant rhetoric “generates” the magical missile. The formulaic pattern of the Tro-

briand spells insistently introduces a variety of metaphorical expressions or metonymic parts into a stereotyped stream of repeated words intoned with modulations of speed, loudness, and rhythm, thereby foregrounding them as well as telescoping or fusing them into an amalgam that is given motion and direction by compelling illocutionary words of command and persuasion or declaration. Malinowski's characterization of this process as a "rubbing" effect is felicitous, for indeed in Trobriand magic the verbal creation of force is made more realistic and operational by using substances (which themselves have metaphorical associations named in the spell) metonymically, so that a transfer of effect is made through blowing, rubbing, smoking, and various tactile manipulations. The cross-linkages in this art are manifold, and combine to produce an arrow-like thrust.

The Trobriand formulaic structure and ritual operations are by no means idiosyncratic. The spell symbolism and structure of the Melpa-speaking people of Mount Hagen in New Guinea are remarkably similar as described by the Stratherns (1968). Michelle Rosaldo (1975), with the Trobriand precedent in mind, has suggested that the effectiveness of the magical spells of the Ilongot of Northern Luzon, Philippines (who are hunters, headhunters, and swidden agriculturists), "depends on the fact that they invoke images from a number of diverse areas of experience and that these images, in turn, are re-grouped and organized in terms of a small set of culturally significant and contextually desirable themes," and that this "new organization," the creative product of the spell, itself depends on "the repetitive and formulaic quality of magic" (p. 178).

One upshot of these analyses is that the ordering and the pattern of presentation of the ritual language, physical gestures, and manipulation of substances is the *form* of the ritual: form is the arrangement of contents. Therefore I think Rappaport (1974) is mistaken— in the same way that McLuhan is mistaken— in thinking that the "surfaces of ritual" whose features are stereotypy, liturgical invariance, and so on can be dealt with apart from the symbolism of ritual or, as he puts it, "the relations among the symbols that may appear in rituals." If then the neo-Tylorians err in accenting beliefs to the detriment of the ritual action, there is one extreme semiotic school that supposes that form can be tackled apart from the presentation of contents and the interpretation of symbolism.

Let us now review another order of redundancy which consists of recurrences that are not simply mechanical in their appearance but occur in *recursive* fashion to start new sequences or combine unit acts into different "syntactic" sequences within the same rite.

There are in all complex rites discernible "sequencing rules" and "co-occurrence restrictions." Sociolinguists in the United States have shown that almost all kinds of speech events constitute forms of discourse with their own sequencing rules: telephone conversations have their predictable sequencing (Schegloff, 1972; see also Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974: 696-735); therapeutic discourses have their coherent sequencing (Labov and Fanshel, 1977).<sup>28</sup> Since ritual discourse is in fact a more conventionalized event, one should not be surprised to find that it has even more conspicuous sequencing rules. Moreover, because the rituals I am focusing on are considered public, serious, and festive by the actors, various "co-occurrence restrictions" and "bound relations" in the proceedings are to be expected, precisely because on the one hand the communication reflects and realizes cosmological and liturgical concepts and principles, and on the other hand that same communication is between persons in "status marked situations" of authority and subordination, of competence and eligibility, of "power and solidarity" (to repeat the famous phrase from Brown and Gilman, 1960)—persons variously called priest, officiant, patient, communicant, addressor, and congregation. In other words, if ritual events are performative acts (in a much stronger sense than ordinary speech acts, which also do something with words), then the connections between the unit acts and utterances of the ritual, the logic of the rules of obligatory sequences of the ritual acts per se, cannot be fully understood without realizing that they are the clothing for social actions; and these social actions cannot in turn be understood except in relation to the cosmological presuppositions and the social interactional norms of the actors. Once again, the form and content of ritual are necessarily fused, and the problem here is to devise a conceptual system that sees the message "as both itself internally patterned and itself a part of a larger patterned universe—the culture or some part of it" (G. Bateson, 1972: 132).

There are two more general points to be made regarding the study of redundancy and patterning. The notions of sequencing rules and co-occurrence restrictions have to do with horizontal relations, the linear syntagmatic connections between actions and utterances as they unfold from beginning to end. The classical framework in the anthropological study of rites in this mode is of course the tripartite scheme of Van Gennep—segregation, liminal period, and reaggregation—and Mauss's earlier scheme for sacrifice—entry, act, and exit. This scheme, if employed mechanically, can mask certain perceptions. For example, there are certain rituals of curing which are patterned



into two halves, the second half being a repeated but stronger and more potent version of the first half. Or again there are both cosmic festivals and rites of affliction which have internal recursive loops, and shifts in the media emphasized, and a combined pattern of progressions and reiterations, whose subtleties are not revealed by a prior commitment to the tripartite straitjacket as the point of departure. A generative syntactic approach, or a pointillist dissection, or a configurational approach devoted to seeing how the whole is built up from, but is also greater than, the parts—all these perspectives will concentrate on how lower-level units build up into or fuse into higher-level units and processes, how different media are made to converge, and how total experiences are produced.

In other words, the horizontal relations and connections dynamically act upon one another to constitute the *vertical* dimension by which higher-level integration is achieved by “the interplay of variation” (T. Turner, n.d.), by the dialectic of paradigmatic “oppositions” and syntagmatic “contrasts” (Jakobson), and by the condensation of messages sent through “the switching of metaphoric and metonymic modes” to produce a “single experience” and a single “message” (Leach, 1966, 1976). Thus, the second sense in which I see ritual as performative is as a dramatic actualization whose distinctive structure including its stereotypy and redundancy has something to do with the production of a sense of heightened and intensified and fused communication. The objectives of such intensification have been variously phrased: as the submission of persons to a compelling “constraint” (as Radcliffe-Brown put it), or as their transportation into a supranormal, transcendental, “antistructural,” “numinous,” or “altered” state of consciousness, or as a euphoric communion with one’s fellow beings, or as subordination to a collective representation. If such is the case, then anthropologists have to delve deeper than they have done so far into the manner of interplay of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the ritual, and the manner in which media such as chants, songs, dance, music, verbal formulas, and material gifts are employed in the service of heightening communication. These media may, according to cultural definitions, be considered “heated,” “compelling,” “forceful,” and “pleasing” to demons and deities; and at the same time they may be seen as making certain kinds of impacts on the officiants and participants as both senders and receivers of the message.

The media may, especially in their repetitive and/or punctuational use, serve to initiate and leave sacred time or to enter and leave supranormal states. The employment of certain musical instruments for this purpose has been aptly noted by Needham (1967). Another clas-

sical example is the verbal formulas of Buddhist meditational exercise by which their mindful repetition is held to enable the achieving of the detached mental state of "one pointedness of mind" (Maha Boowa, 1976), or the *mantra* of Hinduism which "are now mainly regarded as aids or means to meditation and concentration" or as "instruments of therapy intended to bring about a change in mental state" (Staal, 1975: 27-28). Whether or not they are literally meaningful<sup>29</sup> (some are and some are not), the prime value of these repeated sayings is their therapeutic value as "focusing" mechanisms. But their efficacy is of an intriguing sort. I previously referred to ritual's formalism as enabling the "distancing" of actors, and participation in it as engaging not raw emotions but "articulated" feelings and gestures. In a similar vein it makes sense to suggest that the repeated verbal formulas as "supports of contemplation" or transporters into a trance state perform these functions not by a direct assault on the actor's senses and inflicting an immense psychic toll on him or her, but by a more indirect conventional illocutionary employment of them as instruments of passage and as triggering mechanisms.<sup>30</sup>

It is time now to give some ethnographic body to these pontifications, and at least to illustrate some of the complexities suggested. Sinhalese exorcism rites have been amply documented (for example, Wirz, 1954; Pertold, 1930; Gooneratne, 1865; Kapferer, 1977; Obeyesekere, 1969) and provide a good example of the employment of multiple media and the devices of redundancy. Their study will perhaps give some clues as to how ritual attempts to persuade its clientele, and reveal what some of the patterns and positive effects of redundancy in its various forms might be.

### A Sinhalese Exorcism Rite

In the southwest low country of Sri Lanka, there is an elaborate set of beliefs and cults concerning illnesses that are believed to be caused by demons.<sup>31</sup> The demonic attack is referred to as a "manifestation" (the Sinhalese term is *dishtya*, a look cast upon the victim). The attack itself takes place because the victim is in a vulnerable situation on account of bad *karma*, planetary influence, or sorcery. The entry of the demon is forced and therefore involuntary on the patient's part, and this alien resident dislocates the host's capacity for normal communication with his fellow beings.

The theory of cure presupposes a Buddhist pantheon in which gods are superior to demons, and in which the Buddha as the supreme en-

tity has delegated powers to demons to indulge their crass cravings on the condition that they leave their human victims when appropriate gifts are made to them in an appropriate state of mind. In the exorcism rite gods, as benevolent agents, are invoked by the officiants to act together with them in the expulsion of the demons. Part of the dynamic of these transactions lies in the Buddhist notion that demons and humans as well as some of the gods (especially those who belong to the *kama* realm of form and desire) are capable of bettering their futures in the cycle of rebirths by meritorious conduct.

The exorcism rite which I am describing is addressed to Mahasohona Yakkha, the Great Cemetery Demon. In theory, there are a number of major demons who (with their retinues) can individually cause diseases in which they specialize. These demons have horrifying names such as the Blood Demon (Riri Yakkha), the Sorcery Demon (Suniyam Yakkha), and so on. But usually, although a ceremony is performed for one demon as the major disease agent, many other demons are also addressed and propitiated because they all act in concert.

The curing ceremony, which lasts from sunset of one day to the dawn of the next, is a "public" occasion in many senses of the word. The definition and contour of the illness are public knowledge; the patient has to make a public rejection of the introjected agent, witnessed by the local community of kin and neighbors, whose failure to attend may lead to suspicion of sorcery against them. This rejection is made normatively desirable because the ritual represents the demons as gross and loathsome, confined in the cubicles of space and time and desire as the lowest form of life in the Buddhist cosmos. The demons and their acts of indulgence of their gross desires are represented with maximal sensory intensity, and this representation dovetails with the less obvious cathartic enjoyment of the spectacle by the human participants and spectators. The ritual itself is best understood as a system of meaning to which the patient is made to relate existentially and attain his own cure according to his lights.

Given these cosmological and therapeutic concepts and conditions, the task of the ritual is to create the demonic "other reality" and to achieve its manifestation in the human world—in that very village compound prepared as an arena for the invasion and retreat of the enemy without that has become the enemy within. The demons' presence is commanded by *mantra*; they are attracted by offerings of food, fire display, whirling convulsive dance, praise songs, flattery, and smutty jokes. When surfeited, they are sent away. As William James once remarked, the notion of the devil enriches our lives, provided we

have a foot firmly placed on his neck. In this seduction, the main officiant offers successive surrogates of the patient, including himself, and tricks the demons (who are not very bright) into believing that they have made off with their human victim. Paralleling this adventure is the other journey by which the patient, by suggestion and ultimately by self-awareness, is made to recognize the disease inside him and to reject it as loathsome.<sup>32</sup>

With this introduction, I shall get down to the nitty-gritty of how this ritual employs multiple media and redundant structures and sequences.

According to native account, meticulously documented by Michael Egan, the Mahasohona Samayama is divided into eleven major named sequences, and these sequences in turn are divided into named sub-sequences. In these circumstances the analyst cannot ignore the society's fine-grained attention to segments and their subdivisions that are combined in various ways to produce dramatic twelve-hour outcomes.<sup>33</sup>

The major sequences are:

*Divination—performed at the beginning*

- (1a. Preliminary silent prayers to Buddha and the gods)
  1. *Kalu Yakkha* (Black Demon) *Pideniya* (offering)
  2. *Dapavilla* (to lie down and offer body, then rooster, to many demons)
  3. *Mahasohona Natanava* (dance to Mahasohona)
  4. *Mangra Pela-Pāliya* (a procession in honor of God Mangra—comic sequence)
  5. *Mahasohona Pideniya* (offering to Mahasohona)

*Divination—performed in the middle*

6. *Dera Hava* (reclining on a stretcher, a mock funeral)
7. *Sanni Yakkha Pideniya* (offering to Disease Demon)
8. *Avatara* (manifestation or apparition of the Demons—the most dramatic sequence in the rite)
9. *Daha-ata Paliya* (eighteen-part sequence in which gifts are brought by a messenger of the gods and are given to demons: low comedy)
10. *Suniyam Yakkha Pideniya* (offering to the Sorcery Demon)
11. *Mahasohona Baliya* (the effigy of Mahasohona to which illness is transferred)
- (11a. Final prayer)

Here is a nonexhaustive listing of some of the sequencing patterns and bound relations (co-occurrence rules):

1. The rite as a whole is divided into two halves. There is an augury taken at the very beginning (by reading the pattern produced in a pot of boiled rice), and another taken at the middle (between sequences 5 and 6) to check on the effect achieved to that point. The second half of the rite is in a sense an amplified version of the first.

The first half consists of the invocation of gods and demons, their propitiation, the "consecration" of the patient's offerings (in the sense that they are identified with him or her by being passed over his or her head). There is much recourse to multiple media, and there is a buildup to a climax which consists in the fearsome creation and manifestation of the demons on stage by means of furious whirling dance and sensational play with fire and resin; then follows the offering of the officiant himself as a corpse to the demons, followed by a substitute live rooster whose head is bitten off on stage.

The second half of the rite is the *avatara*, or manifestation of the demons—the officiant, seeing the devils come physically, becomes them himself, and rushes headlong into the cemetery at the village's edge, where, changing his role again, he shakes them off and commands them to remain in their natural habitat. After this fearsome collective dispelling of the demons, there follows a second expulsion of them in a comic mode. Since they have already been vanquished, there can now be a second sendoff in a masked play in which they are fearlessly and derisively represented as loathsome clownish savages. This last phase of ordinary low speech and banter, a marked descent from the language of invocations and praise songs, is an apt prelude and transition to the everyday world.

Thus, the second half of the rite is an amplification of the first half in the sense of featuring speeded up dance and spectacle, and evoking stronger emotions of fear and revulsion. But it is also its mirror image, in that while the first half coaxes the demons to come from the other realm to be realized in human company, the second half moves from their energetic manifestation to their unceremonious ejection.

There is thus also a triadic structure of three watches<sup>34</sup> embedded in the dual division. Propitiation of demons in the early part of the night leads to their manifestation at midnight, and manifestation is followed by their satiated departure in the small hours of the morning.

Why should sensational dancing and fireplay become, at the climactic moment of demon manifestation, the dominant medium of communication, surpassing language? Because, to extend Radcliffe-Brown's thesis further, dance is a superb vehicle for realizing the

sense of force and power through "ritual gesture," through physical motion that gives the illusion of the conquest of gravity, and through movements that create spatial tensions between the dancers. Thus, humanly created and unleashed movements become the manifestation of forces outside and beyond the performers, and beget the illusion of emotions and wills in conflict.

2. Tension alternates with relief. There are actually two comic interludes nicely and significantly spaced in the rite. Sequence 4 near the beginning is a *perahera* procession mounted on behalf of God Mangra, who rules over the demon Mahasohona; sequence 9 near the end is the smutty and repulsive masked play at the demons' expense. Curiously, the praise of the gods is staged as a farce, all kinds of mistakes being committed in the protocol. In fact, the two balanced comic phases stand in a relation of inversion. The gods' procession is farcical not because the gods are funny but because humans are clumsy when they presume to create and represent the divine realm; but the demonic farce is at the cost of the demons, who are represented as uncivilized when compared with the more refined humans.

3. Right through the ritual an *invariant sequencing* rule is followed—namely, the gods have to be propitiated before the demons. Although the rite's main concentration is on the demons, this sequencing rule is dictated by the hierarchical rules of the pantheon.

4. As stated earlier, there are demons other than Mahasohona who are considered to play a collusive role in the illness. The most frequent sequence in the entire rite (amounting to four of the eleven sequences) is called *Pideniya* (offering). And apart from this sequence which is devoted to Mahasohona (sequence 5), virtually identical sequences<sup>35</sup> are devoted, at spaced intervals, to the Black Demon (sequence 1), to the Disease Demon (sequence 7), and to the Sorcery Demon (sequence 10).

5. This commonest *Pideniya* sequence, extremely repetitive and additive from one point of view, is in fact internally composed of all the verbal genres of speech and song that appear, and all the media that are exploited, in the entire rite. It begins with *mantra* (spells) that "command" the demonic presence, then shifts to invocations of gods and demons (accompanied by dancing), which have for their purpose the consecration of the patient's offerings. Then follow songs of praise and flattery (*kavi*) couched in lyrical prose and addressed to the gods and demons; next follows a fire dance to please the demons, concluding with food offerings. The following *pideniya* is addressed to the Black Demon, and the recognized subsequences are:

1. *Mantrima*: spells which contain a reference to the origin myth of the demon, relating how the demon was subjugated, and which state that by the power of that act the officiant is giving an offering and commanding the demon's submission.
2. *Kannalavva*: invocation of the God Mangra, who controls the Mahasohona demon, by means of song to the accompaniment of drums; the officiant circles the offerings over the patient's head while the audience acclaims the consecration by shouting *aiboo* ("long life").
3. *Yaddina*: invocation of the demon in question (similar to 2 above); the origin myth of the demon is sung, and to the accompaniment of drums the officiant dances and waves offerings over the patient's head.
4. *Ata Kona Kavi* ("eight-sides" poem): a song that summons the demon from the eight directions of the universe.
- 5,6,7. *Kavi*: songs of praise of many kinds, sung to the demon. The officiant dances and sings, and the lyrical poem recounts the life of the demon and asks him to bestow blessings on the invalid. A second song directly refers to the idea of *varam* (delegated and conditional power to harm), the reason for making offerings, and the necessary efficacy of that act by analogical transference from the original myth. A third song requests the demon to depart from the patient's body.
8. *Natanava*: the *edura* dances a frenzied dance of whirls and leaps to the accompaniment of drums, to please the demon.
9. *Mal Bulat Dīma Moona Pisa Damīma*: the officiant takes offerings of flowers and betel to the invalid, touches the invalid's fingertips and face, and offers his gifts with prayer to the demon, to the accompaniment of public acclaim.

All the verbal forms enumerated have as their substantive ground a pool of mythical stories of origin, but they clearly display a *progression* embodying different principles of literary composition and *logic of persuasion*, from command to invocation, to praise, followed by a shift to a kinetic and visual medium (dance), and then finally to food, which appeals simultaneously to taste, smell, sight, and alimentary needs.

All the verbal forms, moreover, reiterate in one way or another the proposition "Because then . . . therefore now"; this proposition is doc-

trinal and cites a primeval precedent by which the demon became bound to the Lord Buddha's authoritative act and must submit now when that precedent is recalled and enacted; it is a presumptive proposition that derives its legitimacy from an ethical principle, which is axiomatic for the Buddhists and which Mauss declared to be universal: if a gift is given with good intentions, that act must be reciprocated. But true to the ritual format, this ethical proposition is incorporated in the wider elocutionary and illocutionary constructs of command, invocation, or flattery.

While the *Pideniya* as a microcosm encodes the full variety of forms and media exploited in the entire rite, there are other effects achieved *between sequences* by means of *accenting* different modalities, by making one of them dominant in turn while the others are subordinate.

There is, for instance, an attempt to create a *staggered effect in adjacent sequences*: in sequence 5, words (in the form of invocations, *mantra*, praise songs) dominate; in sequence 6, which is a mock funeral, offerings of betel, flowers, food, human corpses, and roosters dominate; and in sequence 8 (demon manifestation) frenzied dance and physical manipulations dominate. Here we see, then, the modalities of speech, dance, and food being juxtaposed and brought into relief serially.

Or again, not surprisingly, the primary demon, Mahasohona, is the focus of attention in three of the eleven major sequences, but each of these concentrates on a particular mode and thus a *cumulative* effect on the demon is sought. He is danced to (*natanava*) in sequence 3, he receives offerings (*pideniya*) in sequence 5, and the illness is transferred to a clay image of him (*baliya*) in sequence 11.

Finally, let me briefly highlight the variety of sensory acts that in a complementary manner achieve the same performative outcome. For example, a set of paradigmatic acts is engaged in to *attract and please* the demons: the blowing of a whistle to summon them; the burning of flaming torches that illuminate the offerings; the sacrifice of a live bird, and the offering of smoked foods that are considered polluted; the singing of *kavi* and dancing.

A contrastive paradigmatic set of acts is thought to overcome and dispel the demons: the throwing of fire and flames at them, the stroking of the patient's body with limes and their cutting, the pointing of the *igaha* wand (Isvara's metal-tipped arrow), the recitation of spells.

This by no means complete analysis shows how some structural features of a ritual—the sequencing rules, the recursive as well as cumulative repetitions, the interplay of variations, accentuations, and



progression of sensory modalities by opposition and contrast—how all these redundant patterns fuse into one configurational totality, one cumulative experience, one superimposition of successive sequences.

### Ritual Involution

But there is more to the extensive use of redundant structures in this Sinhalese ordeal of the night than a creation of a totalized sensory experience. There is in the whole construction unmistakable evidence of what I call *ritual involution*, a seeming overelaboration and overprolongation of ritual action woven out of a limited number of “technical” devices and stylistic complexes. One must confront not only peasant inventiveness but also peasant tedium.

From New Guinea to the northwest coast of the United States, societies have manifested and still manifest this feature: the longer a rite is staged and the grander the scale of the ritual’s outlay and adornment, the more important, the more efficacious the ceremony is deemed to be. The psychology and logic of this extension in time and elaboration in space to the point of inventive exhaustion, aesthetic overstylization, and pecuniary bankruptcy has exercised the interpretative ingenuity of many an anthropologist. Let me review some of the explanations of ritual redundancy, looked at from this perspective of ritual involution.

Stanner (1958–59) has remarked thus on the New Guinea cargo-cults’ manifestation of exaggerated elaborations: “not only is the valuation of the cargo exaggerated; every element has a consonant augmentation,” and the components of the cult take on a “larger than life” appearance. Stanner interpreted this factitious elaboration in terms of an “inordinate valuation” that the participants put upon the cargo; therefore they acted beyond themselves in a futurist sense, in a situation where the desires were extreme and the wealth promised by novel means was great. To this motivational feature of inordinate valuation, Stanner added a *social transactional* factor: the ritual acts are really “incomplete transactions” with the supernatural, and “we are dealing with a one-sided subjective valuation, with expressive-persuasive rather than manipulative conduct.”

Mike Egan (n.d.) sought an answer for the Sinhalese exorcism ritual’s repetitive length in somewhat similar terms, from an external observer’s point of view. Using the language of cybernetics, Egan speculated that the Sinhalese healer, the *edura*, while controlling the technical processes of input as into a computer, received no informa-

tional feedback concerning the progress of the operations. "Thus, what is lacking in ritual techniques is any sort of direct and immediate empirical feedback from the occult about the effects the ritual techniques are having on them, and in consequence the *edura* (as control mechanism) lacks the necessary information for knowing when to stop one set of operations and start another." Furthermore, the *edura*, motivated to succeed, tries to achieve his objective in as many ways as possible. Egan concluded: "The *edura*, then, can be compared to an individual stranded on a desert island with only a radio transmitter, but no receiver."

Imaginative and ingenious as these comments are, they seem to me to illuminate only part of the truth. From the point of view of the actors, it cannot be said that there is no feedback from the supernatural—for mediums of gods do become their emissaries and speak in divine tongues, patients do become possessed by spirits and experience their expulsion as a reality, a congregation feels it has received grace from a priest's sacramental act. All this feedback happens because the senders of the messages are also their receivers acting within a context of accepted axioms and meanings. Nor is it adequate, it seems to me, to treat a culturally structured collective representation from the motivational perspective of a single individual officiant as if the phenomenon can be explained in terms of an individual consciousness and motivation. A single officiant, even a single culture or society may be mistaken, but to say that so many societies should persist in futile converse with the supernatural is to contribute to the slogan "All religions are illusory." Finally the frustrations of a sender of messages who receives none from the supernatural cannot explain the complex creative patterns of redundancy that I revealed earlier.

This brings me to another challenging attempt to explain redundancy and stereotypy as structural features of ritual—that of Maurice Bloch (1974). Because Bloch's essay is important, I feel it necessary to state my objections strongly in the spirit of critical appreciation rather than of fierce denunciation. Bloch's assertion that "religion is the last place to find anything 'explained'" contradicts the role of complex cosmic schemes that many religions have constructed to explain fundamental existential problems, including those of theodicy, as Max Weber so eloquently taught us. Starting with the proposition that ritual language is a medium wherein syntactic and other linguistic features of articulation are reduced, Bloch ends up by arguing that ritual speech, being predictable speech, has no propositional force at all. Starting with the argument that formalized speech is nonlogical in the (limited logical positivist) sense that it admits of no alternative

formulations for establishing truth value, Bloch concludes that ritual speech has “no semantics.” Again asserting that “with increasing formalization (of speech) propositional force decreases and illocutionary force increases,” that the two types of meaning vary inversely, he, I think, misinterprets the tenets of linguistic philosophers like Searle (1969)—namely, that in speech acts the propositional locutionary aspect is usually present but is embedded within the illocutionary act, not that there is an inverse variation between them.<sup>36</sup> Finally, lumping ritual speech (such as formal oratory, intoned spells) together with song and dance, Bloch sees in song “the total lack of individual creativity” and in dance a complete control of body movements; he then concludes that “art is an inferior form of communication.”<sup>37</sup> Bloch’s answer to ritual involution would be that since ritual lacks propositional or logical meaning, all ritual can do to persuade is to repeat itself for emphasis over and over again like a broken record.<sup>38</sup>

The ultimate inspiration for Bloch’s view lies in seeing formalized modes of communication as the handmaid (perhaps even a basis?) of political authority, and in the further extrapolation that religion is an extreme form of political authority. Formalization in a *political action context* becomes an engine of power and coercion, because it admits of no argument, and of no challenge to authority, except by total refusal to accept the conventions of authority. Formalized communication, concludes Bloch, which is common to both traditional authority and religion, serves to “hide reality.”

My quarrel is not with a Marxist formulation as such but with that kind of formulation which sees a prior “real world” of “brute facts” that religion, as a mystification, seeks to hide, as if there are some privileged orders of institutional facts which have a presymbolic or precultural existence; see Sahlins (1976) for a critique of such assumptions. Moreover, for me, the exciting kind of analysis is that which sees ritual involution not so much as a diabolic smoke-screen but as an ideological and aesthetic social construction that is directly and recursively implicated in the expression, realization, and exercise of power.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, I suggest that in addition to all the answers so far given for the phenomenon of ritual involution, a powerful impulse for it lies in the fact of ritual’s duplex existence, as an entity that symbolically and/or iconically represents the cosmos and at the same time indexically legitimates and realizes social hierarchies. I think functionalism in all its guises— I include here the old-fashioned and some of the neo-Marxist and ecological versions—fails to comprehend fully the message of ritual in a double sense: that there is on the one hand an

ontological and experiential constraint that leads to formalization and archaism through the performance of cosmological archetypes, and, on the other hand, a social constraint that allocates to persons in ranked positions and relations of "power and solidarity" a differential access to and participation in a society's major rites, and a differential enjoyment of their benefits. Let us see now how in actual analysis the two constraints operate, so that we can combine the semantic and pragmatic frames of analysis.

### Indexical Symbols and Icons as Duplex Structures

How is ritual directly and recursively implicated in differential relations of power and status? I would like to examine this question in terms of the Thai classical ceremony of topknot cutting (now virtually obsolete). I shall employ the concepts of *indexical symbol* and *indexical icon* in the following ways.

A most useful notion that has emerged from Peirce's three-fold classification of signs (symbol, icon, and index) in relation to the objects they signify is the concept of *indexical symbol* as proposed by Burks (1949), or alternatively *shifter* as labeled by Jakobson (1971), following Jespersen.<sup>40</sup> The main point about *indexical symbols* or *shifters* is that they have a duplex structure, because they combine two roles: they are symbols which are associated with the represented object by a conventional semantic rule, and they are simultaneously also indexes in existential pragmatic relation with the objects they represent.<sup>41</sup>

By extension, then, an *indexical icon* also possesses two dimensions of meaning—by iconically representing an object according to a conventional semantic rule of likeness, and by being existentially linked to it as well. Thus, the concepts of *indexical symbol* and *indexical icon* are useful for showing how important parts of a ritual enactment have a symbolic or iconic meaning associated with the cosmological plane of content, and at the same time how those same parts are existentially or indexically related to participants in the ritual, creating, affirming, or legitimating their social positions and powers. The duality thus points in two directions at once—in the semantic direction of cultural presuppositions and conventional understandings and in the pragmatic direction of the social and interpersonal context of ritual action, the lineup of the participants and the process by which they establish or infer meanings. The sense in which I imagine actors to infer *indexical* meaning is similar to Grice's formulation of "conversational implicature," in that by saying or enacting something a certain meaning is

*implicated*, which can be readily understood (conventional implicature) or is capable of being “worked out” (nonconventional implicature), given certain contextual features and certain communicational understandings.<sup>42</sup>

### Variants of the Topknot-Cutting Ceremony in Thailand

The topknot-cutting or tonsure ceremony in Thailand is old, and was performed widely until the early decades of this century. (The principal source for this discussion is Gerini, 1976.) The ceremony was performed for boys in their early teens before they were initiated as Buddhist novices (*samanera*), and for girls before the onset of puberty, it being considered a disgrace if they had not undergone it. Both Buddhist monks and Brahman priests officiated at the ceremony, the monks reciting the Pali *paritta* chants of blessing and protection from danger and being ceremonially feasted, and the Brahmans being the actual officiants supervising the haircutting of the youths, their aspersion, and other rites, concluding with the disposal of the hair by setting it adrift on water.

The tonsure rite considered in its semantic symbolic aspect had a constant characteristic: the rite *whenever* performed and for *whom-ever* performed followed certain obligatory sequences and used certain ritual articles called “the implements of the *mandala*.” The origin of the tonsure rite is associated with certain myths, principally the stories of the tonsure of his elder son, Khanda Kumara, by his divine father, Shiva. And the symbolism of various sequences of the rite is quite clear.<sup>43</sup> I want to refer here only to the actual site of aspersion: it is said to represent Mount Kailasa, where god Shiva resides and where the initial archetypal tonsure took place.

The level of meaning that I want to focus on concerns not the stable underlying semantic structure of the ritual, but the *variation* in lexical usages, in the structure of the site of aspersion, and in the *scale* of the ceremonies (pertaining to their magnificence, their duration, the number of officiants participating, the place of staging, and so on) for it is these *indexical* features which directly show how interpersonal aspects of rank and privilege are validated and enacted by the symbolism and requirements of the ritual itself. This *indexicality* is the third sense in which ritual can be seen as performative.

As regards rank, it is sufficient to note that the first division in traditional Thailand was between commoners and nobility<sup>44</sup> on the one side and royalty on the other, and that the royal princes and princesses

undergoing the tonsure were divided into three grades: the highest, *chao fa* princes and princesses (children of the reigning king by princesses of *chao fa* or *phra ong chao* rank); the intermediate, *phra ong chao* (children of the king by mothers who were not princesses); and the lowest, *mom chao* (children of the princes of the above two ranks by mothers holding the rank of *phra ong chao* and *mom chao*, or by concubines). For the sake of simplicity I shall hereafter refer to them as Grades A, B, and C.

There was first of all a linguistic variation in the names by which the ceremony was called by different status groups.<sup>42</sup> The tonsure ceremony for the commoners and nobility was called *kan kon chuk* (forelock shaving) or *kan tat chuk* (topknot cutting); for the Grade C royals it was called *kesa kanta* (*keca kan* = cutting hair); and for both grade A and B royals it was called *sokan*, a word probably of part Khmer derivation, Khmer being since Ayuthaya times the fashionable court language. Additionally we may note that while the commoners referred to the hair that was cut as *chuk*, the court referred to it as *chula* or *moli* (both derived from Pali).

The ceremony for commoners and nobility was staged at their homes while that for all the royals was held usually in the royal palace, including the palace of the "second king" *uparat*.

The actual duration of the rites varied by rank. In the case of the commoners and nobility the proceedings occupied two days<sup>43</sup> with the hair being sent afloat normally on the third morning. In striking contrast were the festivities for a prince of the highest grade (*chao fa*), which stretched the same sequences over seven days: "Of the seven days the first eve is devoted to the preliminary rites of consecration of the site; the first, second and third to the rehearsal of the same Buddhist texts, attended on each occasion by the candidate in state. The forenoon of the fourth day is appointed for the tonsure; the afternoon of the same day and of the two immediately following (5th and 6th) being assigned to the *Somphot* or propitiation of the *Khuan* (spirit essence) and consecration of the neophyte by the waving of the lighted tapers round his person. Finally, the morning of the seventh day is reserved for the rite of floating away the severed hair. This terminated the festival" (Gerini, 1976: 65).

In between fell the festivities for a prince of Grade B: "The pageant has only four days, the eve and the first three being occupied as before, the ceremonies concluding on the fourth or tonsure day, in the afternoon. The solemnities of the 5th, 6th and 7th days are omitted" (p. 64), though of course the hair was disposed of in the usual way.

One item in the ritual itself was a focus of much attention and was a

carrier of much meaning of an iconic-indexical sort. This was the place of aspersion, which consisted of a construction that was said to be an iconic representation of Mount Kailasa. But the representational constructions used in the ceremonies differed in the physical likeness they bore to the cosmological mountain, ranging from simple canopied platforms to an elaborate man-made hill.

The commoners and nobility made at one end of the hall in the house a square five-storeyed platform surmounted by a flat or pyramidal canopy. All Grade B and C royals were bathed on top of a permanent stone hillock, some ten feet in height, situated by a pond, within the precincts of the royal palace. But the aspersion of the Grade A princes of the highest order took place with much pomp, entertainment, and procession on a specially built Kailasa hill. A spectacular example of such an artificial mountain was the one constructed by King Chulalongkorn in 1892 for the tonsure of his son and crown prince, Vajiravudh. The forty-foot hill constructed of bamboo covered with gold, red-gold, and silver tinsel had on its summit a gilt pavilion decorated with colored glass and tapestries. And the artificial mountain was embellished with rare specimens of ferns and calladium to represent the rare flora of the mythical mountain.

It is clear that these variant representations carried two kinds of meaning simultaneously. The more the constructions resembled Mount Kailasa itself, the more efficacious, auspicious, and potent were deemed the effects of the ceremony for the candidate and his family. This instrumental or performative effect was at one end pegged to iconic (and metaphoric) likeness, but the fruits of the ritual were at the other end firmly pegged to social rank, for the details pertaining to the scale, magnificence, and splendor of the rite were diacritical privileges of rank and barred from use by socially inappropriate persons. The linguistic variants, the differences in duration from two to seven days, and the variant representations of the sacred mountain tell the same story of the belief in greater instrumental potency of scale and duration of ritual and of the mutual implication between ritual forms and social privilege. The greater the scale and the longer the ceremony, the more frequent the redundant recitations, the more numerous the cohorts of priests, the greater the outlay and distribution of wealth and food, and the larger the publics entertained, edified, and educated in the human relevance of a cosmic vision. These facts clearly bespeak a ritually involuted society where the domains of religion, polity, and economy fuse into a single total phenomenon, and where truth claims and normative canons are conflated, appearance transformed into reality, "is" made into "ought," solidarity and power

brought into accord however uneasily, and the institutional assimilated to the natural.

Having documented the symbolic and indexical (conventional) meanings of the tonsure rite, I shall now allude to a historical instance of a “nonconventional implicature” (whose emergent meaning, however, once recognized and routinized, changed the status of the enactment to a conventional symbolic index for later times). That the rule of succession in the traditional Siamese kingdom was notoriously ambiguous and unstable is well known, as was the frequent occurrence of rebellions and usurpations. Although in traditional times, well into the mid-nineteenth century, reigning kings did hold grand tonsure rites for their highest *chao fa* princes (especially the prince who by birth was most eligible to be a future king), the concept of an undisputed crown prince and future heir did not emerge in Thailand until after the mid-nineteenth century, when King Mongkut so marked out the future King Chulalongkorn.<sup>17</sup> The factors that made possible this undisputed succession were historical developments whereby in the course of the nineteenth century, while other south-east Asian kingdoms were swallowed by Western imperial powers, the Bangkok dynasty secured more and more centralized patrimonial power *pari passu* with colonial contact, and with the ensuing expansion of the rice trade after the Bowring Treaty (1855). What I am interested in here is the additional, probably unprecedented, meaning that King Mongkut managed to impart to the tonsure ceremony of his son, Prince Chulalongkorn, in 1866. He made one major change in the ceremony: customarily a representative of the king acted the part of God Shiva and received the prince on the summit of Mount Kailasa and aspersed him. This custom of the king’s representative substituting for him as a temporary king was analogous to Hindu practice, in which the permanent deity was believed to remain inside the temple and a secondary, movable deity was taken out on procession. In the case of real kings, whose heads were notoriously uneasy, their confinement within the palace was a protection against assassination and the gaze of impure commoners.

King Mongkut broke precedent by himself personally taking the part of God Shiva and aspersing his son. This innovative step (which he repeated in other cosmic rites)<sup>18</sup> had three implications. There was the “modernizing” motive by which the king, to impress the foreigners, allowed himself to be seen by his people in public without their having to cast their eyes down on bended knee; there was the political statement of the king’s increased exercise of power and personal sense of security which enabled him to emerge in public, for a king



confined to his palace relies on the dubious eyes and ears of his favorites; and there was the ritual motive, in that the king's personal presence in this tonsure and his acting as chief officiant marked the occasion as special and made the rite especially efficacious for the initiate.

In addition, in the course of the festivities Mongkut invested the prince with new titles, crowned him with a magnificent coronet (a coronet, but not of such splendor, was traditionally put on a prince's head), and all but pointedly announced to his court that his son was the crown prince and heir to the throne. This was the emergent implicature riding upon a traditional ceremonial form, some details of which were not so much changed as amplified and given a special stress. Thereafter the practice became customary, and in the next reign King Chulalongkorn himself staged an even more lavish tonsure ceremony for crown prince Vajiravudh<sup>49</sup> in 1892, by which time the ceremony was publicly understood as the occasion for presenting to the court the crown prince and heir to the throne. Thus, emergent meaning once recognized usually becomes conventional meaning, and is incorporated into the existing framework of conventions.

The foregoing example makes possible a statement about "emergent" meanings in conditions of historical continuity. Emergent meanings ride on the already existing grids of symbolic and indexical meanings, while also displaying new resonances. Although he stretches or transforms or even violates particular customs or norms, the innovator is not attempting and is not viewed as acting to upset the overall framework of customs. King Mongkut was enlarging the institution of kingship, not wrecking it, and the significance of his substitutions and elaborations in the tonsure ceremony was readily inferred and acquiesced in by his courtiers. At the next round they became conventional customs.

### The Limits of Inventiveness and the Freezing of Styles

With this analysis of the Thai haircutting ceremony as an example of how symbolic or iconic and indexical meanings may intertwine in a helical process, let me return to the issue of ritual involution and confront the conditions in which there can be a decline of meaning.

I can think of three related symptoms of ritual involution in its negative decadent aspect:

1. One occurs when a complex rite seems to repeat certain sequences and actions to the point of compulsive tedium, so that even

when all the dimensions of performative force and meaning have been taken into account, a creative exhaustion seems to have been reached.

2. A second symptom might occur when the same (or a similar) rite is repeated in many contexts and situations as a primary mode of achieving results.

3. A third clue might be the reliance placed by a society upon a limited set of ritual modes, such that its entire corpus of rites appears to be composed of certain standard actions, idioms, and symbols. Thus, an unmistakable ritual style crystallizes and affects the layout of the rites with regard to entries into and exits from sacred time, and the "rhetoric" of persuasion employed in the propitiation of superiors and the powerful. In certain extreme conditions of ritual involution a limited number of stable complexes may be used again and again, for all kinds of purposes, seemingly with little relation to the logic of their composition.

An actual instance of ritual that appears to portray the three symptoms of involution listed above will allow me to carry the discussion further.

Thai mortuary rites that are performed in Bangkok today for the *affluent* are a good example. Soon after death the corpse is brought to the *wat*, ceremonially washed, and placed in an elaborate coffin in a *sala* (hall) lavishly decked with flowers and wreaths. There, on seven consecutive nights, four monks intone for one and a half hours each time precisely the same collection of Pali chants called *suad phra apitham*; moreover, at each recital the monks have to chant the same collection of chants four times in succession. After seven days the corpse is stored for fifty days or one hundred days, at which point elaborate cremation rites are held, accompanied by chanting; and in between the storage of the corpse and the final cremation anyone might (if he wanted to make more merit for the dead) sponsor additional chanting by monks every seventh night as well. Even this doesn't exhaust the amount of repetitive chanting monks are called upon to do at the death of the rich and elevated. This deliberately stereotyped and unvarying performance clearly signifies that the more times the monks chant the same sacred verses, which alone are appropriate for the occasion, the more potent is the effect of making merit for the deceased as well as for the living sponsors. This performative logic is evident to the Thai, for they are acutely aware that if the dead person was poor, his or her kin can afford only three nights of chanting in all, followed by cremation on the third day. Thus, the scale of the repetitious chanting is not only a pointer to the degree of performative potency but also an indexical pointer to the social status, affluence, and rank of the deceased and

the bereaved. But this duplex structure of meaning alone does not exhaust the implications, for Thais also have recourse to almost identical and unvarying chanting by monks (who are feasted and given gifts) at those numerous, almost uncountable occasions when merit is made and blessings sought—at housewarmings, at the foundation of a business enterprise, at the opening of Parliament, on a return from a trip, before a couple are married, in order to dispel bad luck, to celebrate a birthday, to commemorate a dead person, and so on.

The development of circumscribed ritual styles—to the point of banal predictability—has to be understood in part at least in relation to the dominant ethical and normative preoccupations of the actors in question. A key to the reiteration may be found in the wider cultural definition of what kinds of existential problems are felt by a society to be recurrent and important, and why a certain ritual style is considered efficacious. The Thai, for instance, are so preoccupied with the fruits of merit making and well-intentioned giving that their frequent recourse to monks seems monotonously inevitable. Thai Buddhists seek contact with their monks because by reason of their ascetic life these monks are seen to acquire virtues and energies they can transfer to the laity imprisoned in desire and sensory gratification. Thus, ritual formalization in this case is closely related to the native theory of charisma.

Such a native understanding of performative potency clearly militates against a simplistic application of linguistic theory. It is tempting to say that ritual incantations repeated again and again on the proper occasions carry no semantic and referential information as such, and can have only functional, “indexical” uses. Such an inference is all the more persuasive when the ritual speech is in a sacred language largely not understood by the congregation, or in a high style laced with archaic expressions and weird vocabulary. But it is also relevant to point out that such recitations by appropriate officiants are believed by the actors to be powerful in themselves, irrespective of their unintelligibility and predictability (see Tambiah, 1970: ch. 12), and that this conception of power is related to understandings and valuations of the superiority of the monk’s salvation quest and the powers it enables him to acquire, and the belief in the quality and efficacy of the semantic truths coded in the sacred Pali words, even if they are not literally understood.

There is, however, an entirely different factor that contributes to the phenomenon under discussion.

Ritual circumscription and involution may also be rooted in a tendency pertaining to the *ritual medium per se*—namely, the processes

of *condensation* and *fusion*, which are the other side of the coin of redundancy. Configurational patterning and meaning intensification, the positive features of redundancy in its creative aspects, are so dialectically bound with the processes of meaning condensation and fusion, that the more a rite becomes formalized, conventionalized, and repeated the more it also seems vulnerable to the *rigor mortis* of meaning atrophy.

Condensation and fusion can be approached from seemingly different theoretical perspectives, but they all seem to point to the same conclusions. A structuralist might be prone to hold up the image of a palimpsest: meaning as achieved not merely through the combined use of metaphor and metonym, but more so through the double switching and transformation from one mode into the other and back again (see, for example, Leach, 1976: 25). Thus, all varieties of ritual may be seen as involving multiple condensations; and since different sensory channels are used simultaneously, the participants "pick up all these messages at the same time and condense them into a single experience which we describe as 'attending' a wedding, or 'attending' a funeral" (p. 41).

Suzanne Langer (1953, ch. 10), who represented another tradition of symbolic interpretation, coined the phrase "the principle of assimilation" in order to explain the fusion that takes place when words and music are brought together in vocal music. She argued that in song, whether it be choric or operatic, "when words and music come together . . . music swallows words; not only mere words and literal sentences, but even literary word-structures, poetry." In this instance music is the "commanding form," and words "are no longer prose or poetry, they are elements of the music" because "song is music." In a general sense, then, assimilation, fusion, and condensation relate to the mutual effects and outcomes—such as the relations of domination and subordination between modes conjoined, erasure or loss of meaning of originally different modes, the blurring of boundaries between separate modalities through their mixing.

The "texture" of ritual is also the subject matter of allegedly "pragmatic" approaches which argue that ritual is best understood not in terms of a multilevel analysis (that is, how lower-level units make up higher-level units as adopted in descriptive linguistics) but in terms of its being experienced by participants as made up of fused higher-level entities or whole chunks as single events. One writer has called them "praxemes" (C. Bateson, 1974).<sup>50</sup> Many processes contribute to this fused numinous experience. One is the addition of meaning through the cumulation of similar or related connotations. This needs little

elaboration in the face of Victor Turner's rich treatment of "condensation" of meaning. A second is the atrophy of the meaning of components and their "coefficient of weirdness" (to use Malinowski's expression) because of their archaic character: the freezing of ritual language makes it drift out of meaning and makes it insensitive, as Maurice Bloch has remarked (1974), to the processes of historical linguistics. A third process, already referred to, is the blurring of boundaries between separate units or modalities through the mixing of modalities.<sup>51</sup> A final feature contributing to the sense of total fused experience is the hyper-regular surface structure of ritual language: the poetic devices such as rhyme, meter, assonance, and alliteration generate an overall quality of union and a blurring of grammatical boundaries (as is already implied in Jakobson's discussion of the poetic function).<sup>52</sup>

If one picks and ties together into a single bouquet the flowers and weeds found in the garden patch of ritual—invariant form attached to archetypal cosmic truths, constitutive convention-bound acts, predictability and stereotypy, intensification of meaning and its condensation, the duplex structure of indexical symbolism or indexical iconicity and the tendency toward atrophy of meaning, creative use of multiple media and the stagnancy of an exhausted style—and if one views both the fragrant and the fetid as being characteristic of ritual action, one must conclude that ritual oscillates in historical time between the poles of *ossification* and *revivalism*. All the substantive features which nourish the formalism of ritual also conspire to empty it of meaning over time. Cosmological ideas, because they reflect the epistemological and ontological understandings of the particular age in which they originated, and because they are subject to the constraint of remaining accurate and invariant, are condemned to become dated over time and increasingly unable to speak to the minds and hearts of succeeding generations facing change and upheaval. During these periods of ossification, rituals may increasingly lose whatever semantic meaning they previously had and may carry primarily indexical meanings which derive from rules of use and from pragmatic or functional considerations.

But one should guard against attributing to all ritual the priority of functional pragmatics over semantics. For in periods of religious revivalism or when new cults are forged by charismatic leaders, there is a deliberate attempt to coin new doctrinal concepts and mold new rituals bursting with meaning attached to the contents of the acts per se. In such times of promise and hope the semantic meanings of words uttered and object-symbols and icons manipulated matter terribly, and

the esoteric lore of doctrine and rite is taught with punctilious care to disciples. And the ambitious aim—so solemnly cultivated by the Quakers—is pursued to breathe meaning and fervor into each article of faith and each act of communal worship. But these enthusiasms of revivalism can be relatively short-lived. For the most part between messianic hope and indolent routine, the rituals of ordinary times carry both symbolic or iconic and indexical meanings in different mixes, and the participants too understand these meanings in varying measure, according to their lights, interests, and commitment.

One task, then, is to specify the conditions under which rituals—which ordinarily convey both symbolic or iconic and indexical, referential and pragmatic meanings—take opposite turnings: to the right when they begin to lose their semantic component and come to serve mainly the pragmatic interests of authority, privilege, and sheer conservatism; and to the left when committed believers, faced with a decline of referential meaning but with a surfeit of manipulated “implicatures,” strive to infuse purified meaning into traditional forms, as often happens during the effervescence of religious revival and reform. Such a dynamic view might make it possible to transcend the seeming dissonance between two perspectives: the approach which sees redundancy as contributing to pattern emergence, and the use of multiple media as resulting in message intensification; and the other approach, which, wearing the garb of realism, sees in formalism and redundancy a decline of semantic meaning, and the sovereign presence of power buttressing itself with ritual speech, and the exploitative strategies of priestly castes building castles out of esoteric knowledge. The concepts of indexical symbolism and indexical iconicity might serve as a bridge for studying the dynamic interrelation between these two kinds of meaning.