

Symbolism and Ritual

- It's a huge topic, it could cover a whole course
1. Two examples:

a. Mariage ritual from the Kuna called "the dragging"

- i. Bride and groom would not choose each other, but their parents would arrange the marriage secretly. The groom's friends would traditionally surprise him and drag him down the street. (Now a days, they don't fight back so hard and they know ahead of time). His friends run down the street with him yelling, "groom! Groom!" and bring him to the house of his bride, and throw him in a hammock. They throw the bride in on top of the groom and swing the couple back and forth. Usually the groom runs out and then they have to drag him back. After a couple rounds of this they throw a burning brand in underneath the hammock with the couple in it and that's it for the day.

The next day, he and his future father-in-law go off to the forest by boat and chop down a certain number of logs and prepare them and then load them back into the canoe to bring it home. The groom goes back to his own house and the father-in-law brings the wood in. The bride then goes and takes the groom by the hand and brings him back to her house and they are considered married.

If the groom wishes to avoid this, he can run away to another village for 6 months.

For the most part, people think this ritual is great fun, but there are important messages being conveyed.

1. Households are made up of a senior couple and their daughter and their husbands. The whole work system is based on fathers-in-law exploiting the work of their sons-in-law.
2. But the fact that the son on law leaves the father in law to empty the canoe full of wood symbolizes that the man is not a slave, but he works in a partnership with the father in law.

b. A second example from Prof. Howe's family: Jumping the Broom

- i. The night before the church wedding at the bridal dinner, there's a broom that the couple jumps over. But the new couple jumps over

only after all the other couples in the family who performed this ritual at their own wedding.

It's an old tradition started by Prof. Howe's great grandmother. The broom is sent all over the country for various family weddings.

After jumping each couple ties a ribbon around the handle with their initials and the date. There are now so many ribbons on the broom that they've had to add an extension on to it. The oldest ribbons are encased in plastic. At the wedding, everyone likes to look through the ribbons and think back to the weddings that came before.

It sends all sorts of messages:

1. This is not something the couple does by themselves, the couple is entering a family in a long line of marriages.
 2. They also jump last in the line of couples.
 3. There's a stigma about divorce.
 4. It is sometimes overwhelming for the other family.
- c. Marriage rituals often send very important messages.

2. What is ritual?

a. It's hard to define and set boundaries.

i. 2 basic ways of defining ritual:

1. a kind of action connected to religion

a. but lots of interesting rituals that don't involve gods or spirits

2. a ritual is something very repetitive

a. Famous movie of rebuilding a shrine in Japan that involve bowing many many times

b. But repetition is not always the case

ii. You can also say that ritual is highly stylized, dramatic and separate from every day life

iii. But you can always find exceptions

1. The Nuer have many rituals that are performed so casually that you wouldn't notice them if you didn't know to look for it.
 - iv. Ritual is communicative, expressive action, often marked off from every day actions
 - b. As a species, we have this way of talking to our selves and reminding ourselves of values or traditions.
 - c. But animals also perform rituals
 - i. Baboons have ritualized ways of establishing power relationships
 1. The top baboon comes up behind the next baboon in the pecking order and pantomimes intercourse.
 - ii. Highly stereotyped activities in birds and mammals communicate all sorts of social relationships.
3. What do rituals do for us?
- a. Durkheim said rituals **reinforce the cohesiveness and solidarity of social groups.**
 - i. We can see this everywhere.
 - ii. Emphasizes the strength, boundaries and unity of the group
 1. Another Kuna ritual is for a girl's first period.
 - a. The young girl sits in a small tent and all the men on the community come to visit her and bring a

bundle of a specific kind of leaves and build an enclosure around her.

- b. While this ritual is allegedly about the girl, it is more about the men of the community coming together and showing their collective strength.

iii. VanGennap Flemish and French folklorist and anthropologist.

- 1. Wasn't allowed into Durkheim's and Mauss' group but he wrote a book called "The Rites of Passage"

- a. Insights into ancient Roman rituals that involved people walking through archways or doorways.
- b. Symbolized people moving from one world to another, from one social place to another, from one state to another.

iv. This almost seems too obvious.

v. You can look at the life of any people through the rituals they go through as they enter each stage of life.

vi. VanGennap caused us to realize that these rituals are performative.

- 1. It does what the person says it does:

- a. "I now pronounce you man and wife."
- b. "You are a graduate."
- c. "You are now a man."

vii. We have a conventional agreement that to do certain things is to actually make them happen

- b. Many rites of passage, however, are less performative than persuasive - they **persuade people to do or believe or feel something**
 - i. Erving Goffman did a book on closed institutions such as monasteries, the army, prison, and insane asylums.
 - 1. All have initiation rituals that they don't often recognize as ritual
 - 2. Entering the army involves having your head shaved and standing around naked for hours waiting for a physical.
 - 3. Going to prison getting a mug shot and a number
 - 4. Going to an abbey and getting a whole new name
 - ii. These are strikingly similar to initiation rites in many "primitive" societies
 - c. Another function is that rituals **reinforce crucial values** that people have realized are incredibly important for discipline
 - i. Classic example is soldiers.
 - 1. You need to get them to put themselves in harm's way.
 - 2. All sorts of ways, rituals and beliefs to create warriors.
 - d. **Consolidate power**
4. The assumption is that rituals are good for everybody.
- a. But often rituals benefit some more than others.
 - b. Rituals are made up and sometime to the detriment of others

6. One of the problems with ritual, we're not sure what's a ritual and what's not. What is our subject matter? Some rituals are clearly marked off from other actions, others are much less so.
 - a. Rite of passage for bomb makers was to witness a nuclear test. This is a problem for new bomb makers.
 - i. Serves to convince the bomb makers that everything is safe and that they have the whole thing under control
 - b. The answer to the problem of identifying ritual has been to say, let's not worry about the definition of ritual
 - c. There may be some clear-cut cases, but there are many things you can analyze as a ritual, even if the people within it don't recognize it as such, we can still ask:
 - i. What moral values is it dramatizing?
 - ii. What message is it sending?
 - iii. How is it setting boundaries?
 - iv. How is it letting people in and out or groups or roles?
 - d. We use this frame of ritual and use the framework to analyze many other aspects of life.
 - e. Classic example: Clifford Geertz article, worked in Bali.
 - i. He and his wife were getting frozen out of the culture.
 - ii. Wandered in to see a cockfight that the police came to raid the fight.

- iii. The Geertz's ran away with all the other people and had to hide in someone's house.
- iv. After that point, they were accepted into the community.
- v. Looked at cock fighting and what is symbolized:
 - 1. There is something about being a man in a Bali village and going to a cockfight.
 - 2. In everyday life, no one challenges anyone else. It is a very polite society.
 - 3. In a cockfight, all bets are off. There are huge bets and people identify with the animals, getting fiercely competitive.
- vi. In this way Geertz treated a non-ritual in the same framework as ritual