

## Ritual Design Reflection: Beginning

### **Aims and Goals**

As the designers of the beginning of the ritual, our aims were two-fold. First, we set out to challenge existing norms of classroom protocol. We wanted to explore ways to become “unstuck” and break out of the assumed (and often taken for granted) practices we carry out everyday. In order to move away from these norms, we had to observe our existing classroom routines and identify these norms. Ideas that immediately came to mind when thinking about classroom protocol included: being indoors, sitting down as a collective group while facing the professor at the front of the room, and conversations regulated by a moderator (i.e. the professor).

Our second objective was to experiment with new social structures that deviated from the traditional power dynamics between faculty and students. While 21A.00 is an improvement in this aspect compared to other lecture-oriented classes at MIT, we strove to further deconstruct power structures. We set out to establish, from the start of the ritual, that all voices and ideas were seen as equal and to manifest this concept in the execution of our ritual.

### **Key Moments and Context**

The primary anthropological tool that we leveraged to fulfill our aims was symbolism. Each design choice we made was driven by intention. We focused on how participants of the ritual would interact with three areas: the outdoors environment, their personal belongings, and the provided course shirts.

Moving the class from the indoor classroom to an outdoor space not only challenged the usual class environment, but it also served to highlight the bridge that anthropology builds

between us as students and the world around us. By embedding us within the world that we live in, we sought to distance our course from Malinowski's observational, "tent" anthropology and approach Van Gennep's ethnographic rite of passage: "[we] must stop, wait, go through a transitional period, enter and be incorporated" (Johnson 1984: 108). Our "transitional period" can be thought of as the semester's learning, before transforming with an altered perspective on the world and becoming re-incorporated with the world. The immersion of our ritual in the outside world enforced that the knowledge and tools we've gained in 21A.00 can be taken with us even after the semester ends, shaping our actions and perspectives beyond the classroom.

We used the backpacks and other personal belongings that participants brought in to represent each individual's personal pre-existing assumptions about anthropology, culture, and equality. Each participant was instructed to leave their items behind for the duration of the ritual. This act served as a metaphor for each student coming into the discussion and classroom with an open-mind, leaving behind instilled ideas in the same way that Graber and Wengrow encourage readers to think beyond Hobbes and Rousseau's frameworks.

The shirts served as a totem and as a symbol of ideas. Each member of 21A.00 was given a shirt, creating collective representation by differentiating the group as a "clan" with a unique identity and set of values. When participants first arrived, they were instructed to retrieve a shirt and hold it in their hands before exchanging shirts with peers they spoke with. The exchange of shirts was an acknowledgment to the process of exchanging ideas via class discussions. The two forms of shirt-wearing were also imbued with symbolism; wrapping a shirt around one's neck indicated the commencement of knowledge being absorbed, while wearing the shirt indicated knowledge becoming learned and internalized. A further dimension to the shirt as a symbol was the relationship between agency and structure. While the symbolism of absorbing knowledge via

wrapped shirts was an agentive decision on us designers' part, it was also a choice made to meet the structural need for clearly signaling the end of the beginning.

## **Behaviors**

The actual execution of the ritual demonstrated the complexity involved in designing for a group. Because this was the first time we were performing the ritual after incorporating the feedback given after rehearsal, there was a lot of uncertainty among participants. For instance, no one knew when and how to exactly start the ritual, even though the script had included steps for the beginning. The amount of live coordination and instruction that occurred during the ritual opened my eyes to the extent to which knowledge is passed down across generations and enforced by groups. Synchronization in rituals requires a large quantity of accepted norms to be built into cultures and social structures.

Another unanticipated behavior among participants was the collective effervescence that occurred during the conversational portion of the beginning. One reason we had provided discussion prompts was out of concern that conversations would be unstimulated. Contrary to our belief, people not only seemed lively and excited as they spoke with one another, but they had to be cut off in order to keep the ritual on track.

Interactions between ritual participants and the surroundings was another behavior that we had underestimated during planning. Several individuals passing by would slow down to try and determine what we were doing. This distinction highlighted how rituals create social cohesion and identity: we who know what is occurring and "others" who do not.

## **Emotional and Tangible Outcomes**

While our ritual attempted to subvert the notion that we are "stuck", it also demonstrated the challenges of becoming "unstuck". For instance, the food portion of the ritual was initially

designed to experiment with wealth and resource distribution. However, minimal exchanges among the groups occurred. Personally, I found it difficult to break out of the idea of property ownership—I was intimidated about going to other groups asking to “barter” because the idea seemed so foreign. This self-limitation captures the difficulty of exploring alternative lifestyles, a recurring theme that we saw in *Nomadland*.

I also experienced and observed the schismogenesis described by Graeber and Wengrow (2021: 57). From our embracement of class shirts to the clearly defined eating circles formed from artifact categories, people (myself included) very quickly identified with a label of some kind to create social solidarity.

This project led me to gain a greater appreciation for the ritual design process. In addition to all the thought invested in creating meaningful symbols and actions, I recognized the difficulty of uniting multiple stakeholders. Each design group (e.g. beginning, middle, end, etc.) seemed to have its own perception of the ritual’s objectives. Even when we were able to reach a consensus on the objectives, each group had distinct ideas of how to reach these objectives and celebrate uniform values. The same symbols can be interpreted in numerous ways across heterogeneous populations, leading me to wonder how “universal” symbols and rituals such as a birthday cake and song came to become universal.

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