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G. RITUALIZATION IN MAN

Ritualization in man in relation to conceptual and social development

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It has become plain that the various contributors to this Symposium use the key term *ritual* in quite different ways. The ethologists are consistent with one another; Professor Hinde's definition will serve for all: 'ritualization refers to the evolutionary changes which the signal movements of lower vertebrates have undergone in adaptation to their function in communication'. Such a definition has no relevance for the work of social anthropologists. Unfortunately, although *ritual* is a concept which is very prominent in anthropological discourse, there is no concensus as to its precise meaning. This is the case even for the anthropologist contributors to this Symposium; for example, I myself use the term in a different way from Professor Fortes whose paper immediately follows my own. Even so certain major differences between the positions of the ethologist and the social anthropologist need to be noted. For the ethologist, ritual is adaptive repetitive behaviour which is characteristic of a whole species; for the anthropologist, ritual is occasional behaviour by particular members of a single culture. This contrast is very radical. Professor Erikson has suggested, by implication, that we may bridge the gap by referring to 'culture groups' as 'pseudo-species'. This kind of analogy may be convenient in certain very special kinds of circumstance, but it is an exceedingly dangerous kind of analogy. It is in fact precisely this analogy which provides the basis for racial prejudice wherever we encounter it. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that ritual, in the anthropologist's sense, is in no way whatsoever a genetic endowment of the species.

Anthropologists are in the main concerned with forms of behaviour which are not genetically determined. Three types of such behaviour may be distinguished:

(1) Behaviour which is directed towards specific ends and which, *judged by our standards of verification*, produces observable results in a strictly mechanical way...we can call this 'rational technical' behaviour.

(2) Behaviour which forms part of a signalling system and which serves to 'communicate information' not because of any mechanical link between means and ends but because of the existence of a culturally defined communication code...we can call this 'communicative' behaviour.

(3) Behaviour which is potent in itself in terms of the cultural conventions of the actors but *not* potent in a rational-technical sense, as specified in (1), or alternatively behaviour which is directed towards evoking the potency of occult powers even though it is not presumed to be potent in itself...we can call this 'magical' behaviour.

These distinctions commonly apply to aspects of individual acts rather than actions considered as wholes, but crude examples are: (1) cutting down a tree, (2) an Englishman shaking hands, (3) an Englishman swearing an oath.

The orthodox convention in anthropology, to which Professor Fortes still adheres, is to reserve the term *ritual* for behaviours of class (3) only and to call behaviours of class (2) by some other term, e.g. etiquette, ceremonial. For complex reasons which cannot be developed here I myself hold that the distinction between behaviours of class (2) and behaviours of class (3) is either illusory or trivial so that I make the term *ritual* embrace both categories.

Although swearing an oath can be a brief and simple action which all anthropologists would rate as ritual, a 'typical' ritual, as conceived by most anthropologists, would be a performance of a much more prolonged and complex kind...e.g. the whole sequence of operations surrounding the disposal of the dead. It is characteristic of such complex ritual sequences that they have a 'structure' which is in a crude sense analogous to a prose passage in that the sequence as a whole is self-segmented into elements of decreasing scale. Where, in a prose passage, we can distinguish successively paragraphs, sentences, phrases, words, syllables, phonemes, so in a complex ritual we can distinguish sub-sequences and ritual elements of different 'levels'. Professor Turner's paper provides some illustrations of this point. Professor Turner's paper also demonstrates the enormous complexity of the problems which face the anthropologist who seeks to interpret or decode the 'messages' embodied in a ritual sequence. One feature, however, is very plain and virtually universal. A ritual sequence when performed 'in full' tends to be very repetitive; whatever the message may be that is supposed to be conveyed, the redundancy factor is very high.

Here it is worth reflecting on a general point of communication theory. If a sender seeks to transmit a message to a distant receiver against a background of noise, ambiguity is reduced if the same message is repeated over and over again by different channels and in different forms. For example suppose that on a windy day I want to say something to a companion standing on a hill some distance away. If I want to make sure that my message has been understood I will not only repeat it several times over in different forms, but I will add visual signals to my verbal utterances. In so far as human rituals are 'information bearing procedures' they are message systems of this redundant, interference loaded, type.

From an ethologist's point of view an example of ritualized adaptation in *Homo sapiens* is the capacity for speech, but the evolutionary developments which resulted in this capacity took place a very long time ago and the findings of contempory anthropology have absolutely no bearing on the matter. Nevertheless, the relation between speech and ritual (in the anthropologist's sense) deserves close attention. When anthropologists talk about ritual they are usually thinking, primarily, of behaviours of a non-verbal kind, so it is worth reminding my anthropologist colleagues that (as I use the term) speech itself is a form of ritual; non-verbal ritual is simply a signal system of a different, less specialized, kind. To non-anthropologist readers I would simply say that the focus of interest in this paper is the relation between ritual as a communication system and ordinary speech as a communication system.

Professor Lorenz told us that the ethologists have two prime questions to ask about any ritual sequence. The philo-genetic question 'How come?' and the functional question

'What for?'. The enormous complexity of the ritual sequences which anthropologists have to study make any guesses of the 'How come?' type more or less absurd. Functional explanations of the 'What for?' kind may look more plausible. A very general, very plausible, functional proposition is that an isolated human society must be so organized and so adapted to its environment that it can survive. For the sake of simplicity let us then confine our attention to ultra-primitive human societies as they existed in their erstwhile self-sufficient economic condition.

One common characteristic of such primitive peoples is that they are illiterate. Another is that each particular primitive society seems to be very well adapted to the environmental conditions in which it exists. Thus the Eskimos, the Australian Aborigines, and the Kalahari Bushmen all manage to live quite comfortably in conditions in which an ordinary white man would find himself incapable of sustaining life at all. This is possible because these people are somewhow capable of transmitting from generation to generation an extremely elaborate body of information about the local topography, and its contents and how it may best be utilized. How is this achieved in the absence of any written documents or of any kind of formal schooling? In brief, my answer is that the performance of ritual serves to perpetuate knowledge which is essential for the survival of the performers. But this is altogether too slick. I need to explain how.

The first point to understand is an important difference between the kind of verbal classifications which we employ and those found in primitive society.

We act as if we believed that all the things in the world belonged to 'natural kinds'— I am not concerned here with the truth or falsity of this proposition but only with the fact that in our ordinary life we tend to assume that we can ask of any object whatsoever: 'What is it?', and that there is a unique particular correct answer to that question. In primitive society, on the other hand, it is broadly true that only things which are in some sense useful or significant to the speaker have names. With this limitation it is still possible for the classification of the things in the world to be enormously complex, but in general the vocabulary of primitive peoples is not cluttered up with concepts which are wholly irrelevant to the user—as is invariably the case with written languages.

Put in a different way one may say that when man attaches a particular category word to a class of objects he *creates* that class of objects. If an object has no name it is not recognized as an object and in a social sense 'it does not exist'. Thus the world of primitive man's experience contains fewer kinds of things than the world of our experience; but the fewer things all have names and they are all of social significance.

It is characteristic of many ritual and mythical sequences in primitive society that the actors claim to be recapitulating the creation of the world and that this act of creation is mythologized as a list of names attached to persons, places, animals and things. The world is created by the process of classification and the repetition of the classification of itself perpetuates the knowledge which it incorporates.

The next point I would emphasize is that although the languages of primitive non-literate peoples contain relatively few concepts which are purely abstract, this does not mean that primitive man is incapable of apprehending abstract notions. To take a case in point which is of cardinal importance to anthropologists the words Nature and Culture

are both high-level abstractions. The social anthropologist sees his task as being specifically concerned with what is cultural rather than natural. I think it goes almost without saying that concepts such as Nature and Culture do not occur in primitive languages, yet primitive people must still be aware of the distinction Nature/Culture, for a concern with the distinction between Man and non-Man must always have a central place in any system of human knowledge. But how? I only have time to provide a single illustration. Professor Lévi-Strauss has recently drawn attention to a group of South American Indian myths which constantly hark back to a contrast between raw meat and cooked meat on the one hand (that is a human—i.e. *cultural*—mode of transformation) and a contrast between fresh vegetables and putrid vegetables on the other (that is a non-human—i.e. *natural*— mode of transformation). Raw meat, cooked meat, fresh vegetables, putrid vegetables are all explicit concrete things, but placed in a pattern these few categories can serve to express the highly abstract idea of the contrast between cultural process and natural process. Furthermore, this patterning can be expressed *either* in *words* (*raw, cooked, fresh, putrid*) and displayed in a myth, *or* alternatively it can be expressed in *things* with the ritual manipulation of appropriate objects. *In such ways as this the patterning of ritual procedures can serve as a complex store of information.*

We ourselves ordinarily store our information by patterned arrangements of a small number of simple signs marked on paper or punched cards or computer tape. Primitive peoples use the objects which they employ in ritual in analogous ways—the message is not conveyed by the objects as such but by their patterned arrangement and segmental order. [Here again Professor Turner's paper provides some exemplification of what I mean.]

Non-literate peoples have every incentive to economize in their use of information storing messages. Since all knowledge must be incorporated in the stories and rituals which are familiar to the living generation, it is of immense advantage if the same verbal categories (with their corresponding objects) can be used for multiple purposes.

Broadly speaking the information which must be stored and transmitted from generation to generation is of two kinds: (1) information about Nature: that is about the topography, the climate, usable and dangerous plants, animals, inanimate things and so on; (2) information about Society: the relations of men to other men, the nature of social groups, the rules and constraints which make social life possible. These broad categories of 'information about Nature' and 'information about Society' belong to separate fields, and no great ambiguity is likely to be introduced if we express both kinds of information in the same kind of language. Australian totemism which has fascinated but baffled several generations of anthropologists seems to be a phenomenon of this kind. Australian aborigines classify the categories of human society by means of the same words which they use to classify the categories of Nature so that a group of human beings, a verbal concept, and a class of natural objects may all be thought of as representations of the same entity. It is only because we use words in a different way that we find this strange. For example, it makes sense in English to say: 'A kangaroo is a different species of mammal from a wallaby.' It also makes sense to say: 'A Londoner is a different kind of man from a Parisian'. But in English it does *not* make sense to economize with concepts and say: 'A kangaroo–Londoner is a different species-kind of mammal–man from a wallaby–

Parisian'. But it is only because of our linguistic conventions that this last sentence does not make sense—it is in no way ambiguous. The peculiarity of Australian totemic myths and rituals is that they constantly make condensed statements of precisely this kind. Since modern computers do the same thing I cannot really feel that our own normal mode of expression can properly be said to be the more highly developed; it merely takes up more verbal space.

A rather similar point is that in primitive society it is hardly possible to make any clear-cut distinction between information which is expressed in verbal form and information which is expressed in non-verbal action.

A generation ago Jane Harrison, Malinowski and others made a clear distinction between myth on the one hand and ritual on the other, and argued that ritual was the dramatization of myth, while myth was a recapitulation of the drama, but this seems to me too simple. 'Ritual' as one observes it in primitive communities is a complex of words and actions. There are doubtless some purposes for which it is useful to dinstinguish, within this complex, actions which are ritual, words which are spells, and words which are myth. But it is not the case that the words are one thing and the rite another. The uttering of the words is itself a ritual.

Educated peoples in our society have such a mastery of grammatically ordered speech that they can put *all* forms of information into words—and most of us tend to imagine that this is a normal capacity. But I think that Dr Bernstein will bear me out if I say that it is not. For ordinary non-literate people there are many kinds of information which are never verbalized but *only* expressed in action. Verbal utterance then consists of chunks of con-ventionalized and often wholly non-grammatical 'noise behaviour'. *In its proper context* the totality of the behaviour—words plus action—conveys meaning, but the meaning is conveyed because of what we know already about the context; if you record the per-formance on a tape and play it back, you will often find that what was said, taken by itself, was virtually gibberish.

This is true even of 'ordinary conversation' among intimates but it is much more true of ritual sequences. In any ritual performance some of the actors are likely to be novices but the majority will have participated in the 'same kind' of ritual many times before; indeed the stability of the form of the ritual through time is dependent on the fact that it is familiar to most of the actors. But while the familiarity of the actors makes it possible to reproduce past performances with little variation this same familiarity allows the combina-tion of words and actions to be drastically condensed without final loss of communication value...precisely as happens in the conversation of intimates.

One implication of this is that attempts to interpret the 'meaning' of ritual by anthropo-logical intuition must be viewed with great scepticism. This kind of interpretation has been very common in the past and we have had some examples put forward even in this Symposium. I would assert quite categorically that no interpretation of ritual sequences in man is possible unless the interpreter has a really detailed knowledge of the cultural matrix which provides the context for the rite under discussion. The gap between Sir James Frazer and Professor Turner is very wide and it seems to me that Sir Maurice Bowra has not fully appreciated this fact.

The distinction between condensed, action-supported, ritual utterance and fully grammatical ordered utterance does not lie between primitive man and modern man but between the thought of non-literate, partially verbalized man, and that of fully literate, fully verbalized man. Both types occur in our own society. In the latter mode concepts are apprehended as *words* which exist as distinct abstract entities capable of manipulation by themselves irrespective of any particular referent; in the former mode concepts lie in the relations between things, and between persons, and between persons and things, so that words are a kind of amalgam linking up things and persons. In this mode of thought the name of a thing or of an action is not separable from that to which it refers, and things and persons which belong to the same verbal category are thereby fused together in a manner which to us seems 'mystical' or 'non-logical'. I do not rate this as *primitive* thinking but rather as *economical* thinking. In primitive society the whole of knowledge has to be encapsulated into a memorizable set of formalized actions and associated phrases: in such circumstances the use of a separate word for every imaginable category (which is the normal objective of literate people) would be a thoroughly wasteful procedure.

These really are the main points I want to make in this brief paper:

(1) In ritual, the verbal part and the behavioural part are not separable.

(2) As compared with written or writable speech the 'language' of ritual is enormously condensed; a great variety of alternative meanings being implicit in the same category sets. This is also an attribute of mathematics. Primitive thought is transformational in the sense that mathematics is transformational.

(3) We tend to think this odd because of our own speech habits, but in fact our writable speech contains a vast amount of redundancy. This redundancy is valuable when, as is normally the case with us, we wish to convey information at a distance by means of speech alone without reference to context. In contrast the more condensed message forms which are characteristic of ritual action are generally appropriate to all forms of communication in which speaker and listener are in face to face relations and share a common body of knowledge about the context of the situation. In these restricted circumstances, which are normal in primitive society, the condensed and multi-faceted concepts to which I have been referring to not lead do ambiguity. In any event in ritual sequences the ambiguity latent in the symbolic condensation tends to be eliminated again by the device of thematic repetition and variation. This corresponds to the communication engineer's technique of overcoming noisy interference by the use of multiple redundancy.