

THE THING ABOUT RELIGIOUS RITES AND PERFORMANCES

Gyorgy Henyei Neto¹

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to provide with new insights the discussion of anthropological questions of religion, focusing on the roles of myths and rituals on the human relationship with the environment, culture and heritage. By providing a deconstruction of concepts such as myths of creation and ritualistic performances, this work will discuss this human behaviours in spaces not primordially designated for sacred enactments. During the discussion, examples of ritualistic acts in public spaces will arise, mostly based on events occurred in museums and art exhibitions.

Keywords: ritual, myth, performance, museum

Anthropology of religion

Winzeler says that “most anthropologists working with religion in broader and comparative terms, most likely agreed that belief and ritual are bonded together...” (WINZELER, 2007, p. 145). By that, a wide and complete study on religion should assume the existence of both instances: the immanence of the myth and the imminence of the rite.

What is the rite and ritual then? Winzelerproposes a possible orientation. He claims that the rite is a sequence, more or less fixed, uniform, of actions and acts corroborating with the successful or unsuccessful manifestation of the sacred in a determined cultural reality. Taking this concept, we can notice the need for performance as a production of signs, manifesting the association with the mythical time, some pre-original act. The rite, as permanence of the original act, should be conducted in a systematic manner, rigid and without any major turbulences, having in mind that one is no longer in the common, or profane, time, but on the infinite *loop* of the sacred time, the time when the myth histories were still occurring. In a way, Winzeler sees the performance as something detached from myth, some other kind of language or means that allows people to reach the realms outside the physical world. Roy Rappaport, concerned with the usage of the term “ritual”, defines ritual as a “performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts or utterances not entirely

¹PhD candidate in Social Anthropology (University of Aberdeen - UK). (r01gh14@abdn.ac.uk)

encoded by the performers” (RAPPAPORT, 1999, p. 24). Even proposing that the ritual may be the whole gradient of performances, from the Roman Catholic mass, to animals mating dancing moves, Rappaport states that:

By noting first the ways in which religious and other rituals resemble each other it may be possible to distinguish them from each other more clearly later, and distinguishing religious from other ritual will be helpful in fashioning conceptions of the sacred, the numinous and the holy (RAPPAPORT, 1999, p. 25)

In other words, rituals are a broad and inclusive category that needs to be dealt with care and attention to no mingle subjective human activity to objective functional action, and then level human and animals based on the possibility of performing significant mechanisms of communication.

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro says that “the religion as cultural system”, concept used by Clifford Geertz, “presupposes an idea of culture as religious system” (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2011, p. 191). He questions the reduction of religion, by the anthropologists themselves, to a registry of symbols, a universal immanence, only sorting its name. Viveiros de Castro perspectivism does not poses a precise pathway to unveil the meanings of performances and beliefs of Amazonian natives; in some fashion though, this is exactly his intent, to show that it is not only the manners that differs from ours – westerners – but also the way of posing questions and thinking the world.

Performance, ritual and myth

Jack Goody recognizes the ritual construction of societies called “primitives” or “pre-logical” as “forms that reflect the creativity of the human being as an animal that uses the language in face of the world, bonded with tradition, but not totally limited by it” (GOODY, 2012, p. 09). The performance, in this case, is sort of a language, a tradition transmitted, permanence of cared construction to the group, making the act more than a simple symbolic instrument of actuation, but the actuatedmaking of the world. Being performance a language, the questioning of its meanings – and the meta-meanings above the terms – take the critical route of placing performance within the human relation with the environment.

The performance is part of the rite, but not every performance is rite. The act of swimming, the technical, mnemonic and traditional it might be, cannot be taken as a

comparative construction of human creativity along with a mass or a Sámi death drum rite. In the same manner, when we say that we are exercising the “ritual of brushing our teeth”, we are actually creating the comic metaphorical image of a serious reality.

By that, rites are inventions of culture, in the way that they create the counterpart of something that should be questioned. The mundane, profane time, must be questioned at a certain point. In that way, the ritual invents reality outside of conventionality, making sure that the symbols are integrated from the outside of convention, systems outside the profane, configurations that are apart from the objective configuration of the universe. The rites of passage, described and presented in this shape by Arnold van Gennep, present and in-conventionality, that allows the confirmation and the establishment of the stages of the invention of culture.

Van Gennep deals with the rites of passage, and makes that by distinguishing them in some categories, which in this case are not essential for the proposed analyses. Such categories deal much more with the final results of the process of invention than the proper construction of the counter-convention. The most interesting of Van Gennep’s analyzes is his positioning of showing the steps of the process of rituals. He claims that the “complete scheme of the rites of passage admits, in theory, the *preliminaries* (separation), *limits* (border) and *post-limits* (aggregation)” (VAN GENNEP, 2011, p. 30).

The isolation, or liminality, was also extensively studied by Victor Turner, who gave that special moment a value of *communitas*, a construction in a social environment in which exists a community of values and interests, significant and shared by those individuals in a limbo state, while perceiving this sentiment for a short, or at least pre-configured, period of time. In fact, there is a community configuration, the shared feeling of uncertainty, knowledge and teachings leading to the valorization of the assemblage. As Brian Morris analyzes, “Turner sees the *communitas* aspect of social life as being manifested in various social events and movements” (MORRIS, 1987, p. 254). Turner saw the liminal state as a status seeker, a place for one to mingle into an integrated mass of existence, of homogeneity and comradeship. As well as Turner, many other works dealt with Van Gennep’s trifold of ritualistic performance (cf. GLUCKMAN, 1962; BATESON, 2008; TURNER, 1967).

Mircea Eliade, one of the most important researchers on Religion, also deals with cyclic rites and the essential distinction between one time existence and the other. From Eliade’s studies, we can perceive that rituals are the promoters of an important symbolic

knowledge; it is not a shifting of status, but a remembrance of the original act, inserting the notion of cyclic time and the annual calendar, derived from the observation of the Sun, the moon and the stars. The myth of the eternal regress confers to the cyclic calendar the function to remember the original act, making profane time a different existence, in comparison with the sacred time. Eliade works with the concept of “hierophantic time”, presenting it both as “a time essentially different from the profane duration, preceding the first” (ELIADE, 2010, p. 314), and “the mythical time, now revived thanks to the intervention of a ritual, now *realized* by the pure and simple repetition of an act provided of a mythic archetype” (ELIADE, 2010, p. 314). The hierophant, taken here in a cultural perspective, can be understood as the representation of the original act, remembering the mythical time, in a symbolic configuration of the relationship between the sign and the meaning, the given and the invented.

Some authors recently pointed the social origin of the sacred-temporal rhythms – for instance, Marcel Mauss and Marcel Granet. It cannot, because of that, contest that the cosmic rhythms have played a preponderant role on the ‘revelation’ and the organization of those systems. One only needs to remember the importance of the religious valorization of the lunar or vegetal drama in the spiritual destiny of the archaic men. The ideas of rhythm and repetition, one we should come back on the course of this chapter, can be considered a ‘revelation’ of the lunar hierophants, irrespective of eventual exemplifications of rhythm and repetition on the frame of the social life as such. (ELIADE, 2010, p. 315)

Ritual as a communicative instance

Besides driving one into a new status of convergence within the group one dwells, Roy Rapport says that, in rituals and performance, “the effectiveness of signals is enhanced if they are easy to distinguish from ordinary technical acts” (RAPPAPORT, 1999, p. 50). In other words, rituals, to be considered of value and of “disturbance” of the common time, have to be of awkwardness, grotesque or bizarre. Then, it would be considered a breakage in the secular timeline, to refer to an existence that walks in a different pace.

Although being in a distinct pace, and that the laws that rule both existences are not congruent from one another, there is a communication going from the action to the goal the ritual is seeking to achieve. Rappaport separates the communicative feature of ritual performances in two wide fields: one of direct action, the other of reference and information on something. The latter is an action made from the suggestion of magic or super-human activity, but the action, the actual movement, makes the result come to happen, for it follows the laws of physics in the secular world; the former, although also having actions towards actual disturbances in the secular time, it refers to a spiritual path that the knowledge and the

making might follow. One example is of certain performances taken on labour and birth. Lévi-Strauss comments on a shamanic ritual during a birth. The actions made and the gestures of the shaman will meet both the physical and the spiritual afflictions. While the chants will make the new-born follow a safe path in a mythicized environment, which refers to a knowledge of body and spirit, the midwives still have their role in delivering the baby. The shaman is called to pacify Muu and its abusive action toward a normal activity on the human dwelling. When the secular and the mythic time meets, the ritual takes action to make the world in order again.

Lévi-Strauss wanders in his *Mythologies* both with myths informing on rites of passage and myths of origins, which points to what we can see as cyclic rites. He states that “the mythical thought only accepts nature with the condition to repeat it” (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 2004, p. 386). The myth of the gift of *manioc* or the origin of the fishing poison, for instance, gives the manioc planting and the fishing practice a significant meaning inserted in their technique pattern, ritualistic significance, that should be reproduced so the soil and reap are made in order. Those are rites that points, temporarily, to a success and efficacy, but do not input a transposition of one social position to another.

The rites of “success” or “fortune”, the ones which do not offer a new status or concentrates on the cyclic cosmology of natural symbols, are rites that, more than a remembrance or acting, are the proposition of a possibility that was made concrete in the life of an individual or group. As the main and more successful example of those rites of success, are the Naven ceremonies. Gregory Bateson analyzes them like a spiral staircase, first aiming for a distant perspectivism, exposing the bizarre of a strange performance, to soon after, investigate the symbols and moments of those ceremonies, been big parties or a little acting hidden from the public. Bateson analyzes the rites synchronically, not been preponderant on a cosmology of the myths, but focusing on the symbolic performance as the foundation of relationship and kinship networks among the Iatmul.

The occasions when the Naven is made are diverse and very frequent. The rites occur, as described by Bateson, when great realizations are concretized, such as the first time fishing, or the first murder of a boy; when not so grand happenings take part, but seen for the first time, as the killing of an animal or the planting of coconut or yam; when acts connected to the clan are made, like services relate to the role within the kinship network; when on the

ostentation at the presence of the classificatory mother brother (*wau*); and when of the passage of one status to another.

This last one could easily be confused with rites of passage. However, while rites of passage are those kept during the three stages described by Van Gennep, Naven made on the occurrence of status changing is more like a celebration, the commemoration for that passage. In other words, instead of the built of a universe, the Naven is the simple conscience of this new construction. Bateson himself states that “is should be very understood that the Naven ceremonies are not rites of passage, although they may celebrate or emphasize the fact that those rites had been realized” (BATESON, 2008, p. 75). Naven is celebrated by specific members of a kin network; the ego, within the structure, often relates and receives the ceremony acts from his mother brother, been that sometimes also classificatory mother brothers, such as the son of his MB or his wife, could be part of the performance.

Evans-Pritchard shows the ritual involving the oracles within the Azande’s symbolical and mythical reality (EVANS-PRITCHARD, 2004). The poison oracles are rites concerning the remembrance of tradition, but only points to a situation, occurred or in the means of occurring, confirming or not the certain suspicions. Therefore, the rites of success, as the *naven*, have much in common with the rites of fortune, such as the poison oracles of the Azande.

Performing in public or odd spaces

From the statements of religion and religious perception of performing, one would argue of the places of performing the ontologies of a particular tradition. The mass is conducted by a priest, the professional mythical performer and leader of the community body and voice response. The mass is taken inside the church. Then, a place constructed specially for the communication of men and God.

Simon Coleman and John Elsner works from a different perspective. Their paper follows the perception of ritualistic structure and the action and movement as important part of religion (COLEMAN; ELSNER, 1998). They work in Walsingham, a small gathering place of Anglo-Catholic pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is something quite interesting regarding the disposition of the catholic church of following rules and frame structures on the mass and the regular religious celebration. Pilgrimage, being a ritual in movement, seemingly stroll in the

park, is, according to Coleman and Elsner, a form of ironic reference regard ritual framework. They pose the possibility of deconstructing the necessity of a specific holy place to play the drama of the sacred. It is “a formal structure of ritual to be ironized” (COLEMAN; ELSNER, 1998, p. 50).

The suggestion of ironic perception somehow brings into discussion the theme of syncretism, and the multiple religious beliefs fused in one very heterogeneous reality. In pilgrimage, people will do and perform in ways they would not on churches or regular spiritual sites, bringing upon people a ludic element, where performance and movement are rather more touchable than the actual ritual and the meanings. Coleman and Elsner finally say that “ritual here seems to be about a temporary dwelling in an alternative role, a means of experiencing the world of a liturgical “other” without permanently crossing the boundaries into that world” (COLEMAN; ELSNER, 1998, p. 58). The thing about pilgrimage is mainly the performance and the possibility to engage in things one would not normally be willing to engage. Ritual and myth, then, can be without the supervision of one over the other, even being of the same flesh, blood, actions and movements.

Besides the pilgrimage and the ritualistic movement being pulled from the churches and bring to the streets and public open spaces, museums a means to engage and perceive religious performance outside the regular and expected. Muchas great religious temples, museums are, mostly, built to amaze and to drive people into a state of awe. Sharon Macdonald works with new religious movements and the possibility of museums and spiritual rituals share the same space (MACDONALD, 2005). Rather than looking for a progressive pathway, earlier suggested by Sir James Frazer, from magic to religion, and then concluding in the rationalization of science, what we see is an emergence of several distinct new approaches on the matter of religion and religiosity. Authors like Macdonald, Helmut Richard Niehbur and Daniele Hervieu-Légèr, among others, have had their research on the new waves of religious resistance to the mainstream institutions, named “big religions” – Christian, Judaism and Islamism – with new methods and presentation of believe, mostly through performance, movement and drama (NIEHBUR, 1992) (HERVIEU-LÉGÈR, 1999). One of the main arguments made is that, instead of becoming more secular, people rather prefer to engage and relate to their own ways of reach the ephemeral spiritual, the numinous etc.

“One of the most frequently discussed features of new religious movements” states Macdonald, “is their emphasis on ‘individuals’ and the ‘self’” (MACDONALD, 2005, p. 215). It is about a more personal approach to feelings and reactions than a search for social and cultural approval, when one is “choosing” a religion now. The ‘self-made’ religion works like a bricolage of appealing ways to promote one’s spiritual conceptions.

The museum can be seen as a gathering area for ritualistic and meaningful performance, and creating relational identity centred as beacons for people doing things together, as Susan Crane states:

Museums are flexible mirrors whose convex potential for multiple interpretations and participation (that is, by those who have either a kind of personal historical consciousness: as veterans and survivors, or as historians) will continue to make them appropriate venues for active memory work, either ‘on site’ or in the minds of those whose historical consciousness has been activated, nourished, challenged, and revived. (CRANE, 2012, p. 314)

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