

Initiation Rites and Rituals in African Cosmology

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Abstract

This essay is an analysis of the rituals in African cosmology. It will deal with a comprehensive interpretation of ritual and their meaning or meanings. This essay starts with a definition of ritual and its comprehensive interpretation. This is followed by a discussion of several approaches to the study of ritual. The discussion then turns to an analysis of two classic types of rituals. The first type are those rites that are connected to the human life cycle-such as birth, marriage, and death-and to human crises-such as illness. These rituals often reflect a distinctive structure that is analyzed and illustrated in rites associated with birth, puberty, and initiation into a religious vocation. A second classic type of rite is associated with fixed points in the yearly calendar and is connected either with the changing of the seasons or with the commemoration and rehearsal of a momentous historical event.

Introduction

According to Ring, Nancy C. (et. al) (1998) rituals are found in introduction community and are a primary means of social communication and cohesion. The English word rite derives from a Greek word **dromenon** meaning a thing done to achieve a specific end. If a symbol is a meaningful sign, a ritual can be called a significant action. Rituals according, to the Penguin Dictionary of religions: A rite is a specific ritual action or practice, including physical movements and any accompanying words.

Ritual, on the other hand is, often communal, consisting of prescribed actions performed periodically and or repetitively. Ritual is a form of giving confidence in the face of dangers.

Distinction between Rituals and Rites

We can say that in modern English there is no clear distinction between rituals and rites. Rituals are activities which has a definite Religious element. A ritual is a link established between present moment and original reality. The word ritual refers to symbolic action, which focus a certain kind of power through the use of natural signs and symbols. Rituals range from simple gestures such as bowing or shaking hands, to elaborate ceremonial dramas, such as the coronation of the traditional chief, modern chief etc.

The Confucianist sage Hsun Tzu (1967) spoke of the significant role of ritual in the following memorable words:

When rites are performed in the highest manner, then both the emotions and the form embodying them are fully realized... Through rites Heaven and Earth join in harmony, the sun and moon shine the four season's process in order... and all things flourish. Men's likes and dislikes are regulated and their joys and hates are made appropriate.

Those below are obedient, those above are enlightened, all things change but do not become disordered; only he who turns his back upon rites will be destroyed. Are they not wonderful indeed.

A Religious Ritual

A religious ritual can be defined as an agreed on and formalized pattern of ceremonial movements and verbal expressions carried out in a sacred context. One of the interesting things about religious ritual is that they can serve as condensed symbols. Rituals are capable of expressing and communicating several levels of meaning in societies. Moreover, the meanings or functions of a ritual may not be manifest or obvious but only latent or hidden to the participants themselves.

We can say that ritual is the very heart and soul of religion and that ritual must be viewed as both prior to and more fundamental than either myth or doctrine. Many scholars like Olson Alan M. (1980) was among the first to hold this view and to insist that myth is merely an explanation of ritual and, therefore, of secondary importance. Emile D. (1965) reinforced this perception of ritual as constituting the essence of religion, and it remains a fundamental conviction of his followers at the present time. Ritual) however: plays a central role in the life of religion.

It is critical to point this out because modern generation and secularised culture are likely to approach religion intellectually- that is, see it as a system of beliefs and to undervalue the bodily and behavioural aspects of religious life.

Ritual is primordial and universal because:

- It appeals to the whole person.
- Weaving together bodily gesture, speech, and the sense- the sight of colours and shapes
- The sounds of chants or mantras
- The tactile feel of water and fabric,
- And the smell of incense or the aroma of symbol foods

Through its appeal to bold movement,

- Verbal chants and responses,
- And our multiple senses.

Ritual is symbolic in the most profound sense, for it brings together the mind, the body and the emotions and at the same time, binds us to a community of shared values.

Meaning or Meanings of Ritual in African Cosmology

Rituals are symbolic, routine, and repetitive activities and actions through which we make connections with what we consider to be the most valuable dimension of life. They are often associated with a significant events or places in our individual and communal lives. Rituals set aside specific times and places and provide us opportunity to ponder their meaning and to connect emotionally.

Mbula (1983) observed that rituals were performed during socialization, marriage ceremonies and at the time of the death of a member of the family. Initiation rituals were part of the education of the young people. In some societies, like the Gikuyu, the rites introduced the youth to age grades. The rituals were necessary as they made the young man or woman part of the society. Initiation rituals were very important because it was during these rites that the young people were educated in the ways of their people. The bedtime rituals between parents and children were done by way of story telling among others they were useful in the a parent-child bond and affirming of family.

Ritual actions enable us to maintain continuity with significant persons and events from the past, In the African cosmology families build shrines on the burial sites of those considered to be Ancestors, deceased prominent members of the family or community, to honour their spirits and to seek their favour in the ongoing life of the community.

Rituals, further commemorate significant events in the life of our communities and provide a means for renewing the meaning of those events among us. Rituals can be exciting and dramatic, engaging all of our senses. Rituals help us individually and communally to make sense of life's transition, providing some structure to ease movement from the familiar to the unknown. Becoming an adult is a significant event in our lives. We move from the familiarity of dependence and the protection of childhood to assume the mantle of responsibility in the adult world. This symbolizes that we have developed the generosity to provide for others. Like all symbolic action, our rituals can have different meanings depending upon the context or our experiences. Religious ritual expresses our deepest understanding of the world.

Bell C. (1992) looks at theories of ritual and how they function in academic discourse. Bell questions whether ritual should be associated with action rather than thought. Instead, she sees ritualization as always strategic and hence political. Driver (1991) argues for a theological reclamation of ritual's transformative capabilities. He argues that ritual has the ability to evoke moral and social transformation because of the way both changes things and is subject to change. Emile D. (1965) maintains that ritual and belief are what constitute religion. He contrasts the religious realm, the sacred, with the secular realm, the profane. Because of this dichotomy, he defines ritual in a way that makes it fundamentally religious.

Types of Ritual in African Cosmology

There is no agreed-on typology of rituals, one reason being that rituals often overlap both in form and in meaning.

1. Rituals, however sometimes are differentiated by whether they are:
 - Corporate
 - Domestic
 - Personal

2. Another possible contrast is between rituals based on the cycle of nature and the seasons e.g.
 - Agricultural festivals or celebrations of the New Year,
 - And those rituals that commemorate or re-create a historical or mythological event e.g. the birth of Christ or the Jewish Passover, birth of Religious leader.
3. Another type of ritual consists of non periodic rites connected with the human life cycle or rites of passage, these include: Rituals associated with such events as:
 - Initiation into adulthood
 - Marriage and
 - Death.

We can also distinguish these non-cyclical rites of initiation and passage from other occasional rituals associated with the "life crisis" of an individual or community e.g.

- Healing rites or
- Rainmaking rites.

We can classify rituals into two principle forms:

- Non periodic life-cycle and life crisis rites and
- Periodic festivals based on calendar-fixed seasons or historical events.

In summary there are many types of religious rituals. Some occur at significant moments in the life of the individual or community. They tend to be chronological: the key actors in the ritual engage in such rituals only once in their lifetime. Some religious rituals, however, are more cyclical: they occur periodically in the course of a year. Researchers do not agree on any one type; instead they use a variety of typologies and classifications. As with any typology, there is the danger of oversimplifying.

Non Periodic Life-Cycle Ritual in African Cosmology

In this essay we have found out that the significance of rituals connected with critical events in the life of individuals was brought to the attention of scholars by Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of passage*. Van Gennep (1960) noted that there are numerous rituals that accompany life's stages and crises:

The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages... so that man's life comes to be made up of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to higher class, occupational specialization, and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another.

What life-cycle rituals do, according to Van Gennep is:

- Help individuals through the difficulties of such critical transitions.
- As well as assist in accepting significant changes in the status or
- The loss of their members.

Mircea Eliade (1958) contends, that

- The individual passes "beyond the natural mode-the mode of the child-and
- Gains access to the cultural mode: he is introduced to spiritual values".

Thus Victor Turner and Mircea Eliade have given greater attention than does Van Gennep to the sacred symbolism of these rites, which reveal the most profound values of a community. Van Gennep called attention to the striking fact that rites of passage often reveal a common pattern, consisting of three distinct elements:

- Separation,
- Transition, and
- Reincorporation.

Separation

This stage removes individual from their old status. This is often shown by actual physical separation from other members of the society or by simulation of death itself. It is therefore marked by symbolic behaviors or actions that stress the separation or detachment of the individual or group undergoing the rite from a previous status. In some traditional African religions Magesa (1998) observed that the heads of newborns are shaved to symbolize the cutting off of anything bald-shaved off with the old hairs-and the Separation of the baby from its mother's womb.

Transition: (The Marginal or Liminal)

This stage is frequently marked by some form of statelessness, a kind of limbo. During this time, the initiate-whether an adolescent girl or an elder, grieving son-is prepared for her or his new station. Turner (1969) has developed Van Gennep's insight into the three stages of life-cycle rites by giving special attention to the transitional, or **liminal (limen, signifying threshold in latin)**, stage and its social and religious significance. Turner sees societal life as a process involving successive periods of structures differentiation; he calls communities or the spontaneous bond of communion between members of a society. Life-cycle rites exhibit this alternating process in the life of both individuals and groups.

The liminal, or threshold, stage is a transitional one, and thus, according to Turner it represents antistructure. It is likened to being in the wilderness to darkness, and to death. In the liminal stage, the initiate is stripped of his status, symbolized by uniform dress, loss of rank, and submissiveness. This phase is ambiguous: The person no longer possesses the old status but the new status has not been conferred. The behavior and actions clone in this phase prepare the person for her /his new status.

The **liminal** phase is crucial because during this phase the person is outside of the structures of ordinary life and potentially exposed. The stage is set for new experiences of the sacred. According to Turner the neophytes typically are removed, secluded darkened, hidden, without rank or insignia, in terms of social structure, neophytes are invisible. The person is, in the words of Victor Turner, “**betwix and between**”, neither here nor there, **or may even be nowhere**. No longer a child and not yet an adult. It is a state of progressive movement, a becoming. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified.

A rite of the African Ndembu tribe, undertaken for the installation of their chief, is a good example of Turner's understanding of the role of **liminality**. The Ndembu chief is in fact, a condensed symbol for the tribe itself because he represents its territory, its community, and its fecundity. But before the chief-elect can be installed he must be stripped of his status and reduced to that of the commonest tribesman. The Ndembu liminal rite begins with the construction of a hut known as the **Kafu**, which means to die and it is here that the chief-elect dies from his commoner state.

The chief to be is clad in nothing but a ragged waist cloth and is led. With a ritual wife, to the **Kafu** as if they were infirm. In the hut, they sit crouched in a posture of shame and submissiveness and undergo a tirade of rebuke and humiliation by fellow tribesmen. In connection with this Turner says:

Be silent! You are a mean and selfish fool, one who is bad-tempered. You do not love your fellows... Meanness and theft is all you have! Yet here we have called you and we say you must succeed to the chieftainship. Put away your meanness, put aside anger, give up adulterous intercourse, give up immediately.

Anyone in the tribe wronged by the chief-elect is entitled to revile him during this **liminal** period.

The chief, by being ritually stripped of his status, is being prepared to facilitate the achievement of **communities**, the sense of sharing a common humanity, a profound fellow feeling required of a chief. Turner points out that the elevation to a new status must be preceded by such a status reversal. In a real sense, the first must be last before becoming first. By so doing, human communion and fellow feeling are achieved.

Turner says, the attainment of **communitas** is considered holy or sacred because it **breaks through the interstices** of structure and transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern that institutionalized relationship.

Reincorporation

This stage according to Van Gennep signals the passage to a new status or to normal social life, often symbolized by wearing of new attire, a ring, or other forms of insignia. But rites of passage do not conclude in the **liminal** stage; they also include the rites of incorporation back into a structured society, **revitalized** by the experience of **communitas**. Turner argues that it is only the achievement of a sacred communion that makes ongoing social life possible.

The communal significance of the birth can be seen in the separation and naming rituals attached to it. Because the family's continuation is dependent upon the survival of the child, families separate their children from contact with others for a period of time and say prayers to insure the survival of the child. The naming of the child in some instances reflects the belief that the ancestors, important persons in the life of the family are often reborn into new children. This is significant because ancestors are spiritually potent and can provide help to the community. A family presents the names of the ancestors to the child until the child stops crying. When this occurs, the family chooses a name that reflects the belief that this ancestor has been reborn in that child.

The cutting away of the foreskin of the penis or the removal of the part or the entire clitoris allows blood to be spilled and connects the individual with the ancestors and the community. The young people are gathered together, circumcised by an adult skilled in the procedure, then separated from the community for a period of instruction on the responsibilities and expectations of the religious and sexual adulthood.

During this time they are often dressed alike, representing their commonality and liminal status. At the end of the training period, the whole community welcomes them back with a public ceremony celebrating their new status.

Life Cycle Rites

In this essay we have confined examples of life-cycle rites to three:

- Social puberty (initiation into Adulthood)
- Rites of initiation into special societies or vocations, and
- Marriage and funeral rites.

Social Puberty

Initiation rites are among the most important religious rituals and include not only initiation into adult status in society but also entrance into secret societies and admission to a special vocation, such as the:

- Enthronement of a king or
- The ordination and consecration of a nun, priest or Bishop.

Social Puberty (Initiation into Adulthood)

In primal societies, transitions to adult status often coincide with physical puberty or sexual maturity. However initiation into adulthood does not always take place at the time of physical puberty, especially in the case of boys.

Nevertheless, social puberty rites have to do with the transition from the asexual world of childhood to an adult society that is differentiated by sexual roles. Rites marking the transition to adulthood reveal a rather common pattern in which the initiates are socially isolated and their behaviour restricted:

- Undergo certain ordeals to test their ability to take on their new responsibilities,
- Are instructed in the secret knowledge of the community and
- Shown the sacred objects,
- Finally are given the insignia of their new status and formally recognized as having made the transition.

It is worth noting that this pattern can be recognized in the contemporary college fraternity, initiations as well.-

Isolation and restricted behavior are common to the initiation rites of both girls and boys. Ordeals are a somewhat more typical feature of rituals for boys, although girls often do undergo such ordeals as fasting, sitting motionless and even whipping. Boys frequently are required to prove their physical powers and their hunting feats. Another feature of puberty rites is the physical mutilation of the body, which marks the separation from childhood and incorporation into adult life.

In the case of boys, this often involves circumcision or sub incision, a slitting of the underside. In some societies, a ritual act, called clitoridectomy, is performed on girls. It often involves a painful excision of the clitoris, part of the female genital organ.

It is interpreted as an act of purification and initiation into adult membership. Other means of signaling incorporation include removing a front tooth, filing teeth to points e.g.

Akamba in Kenya, piercing ear lobes and the septum for the insertion of ornaments, tattooing, and scarifying the body, ornamenting, the body with special clothing and bracelets, and hair cutting and dressing.

Another important component of puberty rites is the instruction of the adolescents in the tribal law and in the sacred knowledge of the community. Mircea Eliade (1958) says: In this religious perspective, initiation is equivalent to introducing the novice to the mythical history of the tribe; in other words, the initiated learns the deeds of the supernatural beings, who in the dream times, established the present human condition, and all the religious, social, and cultural institutions of the tribe. All in all, to know this traditional lore means to know the adventures of the Ancestors and other superhuman beings when they lived on earth.

The ordeals and instruction of the young are frequently accompanied by a dramatic ceremonial and dance-including the use of frightening masked figures and bull-roarers, which emit a roaring sound when whirled through the air-all intended to impress on the adolescents a sense of the **tremendum** the sacredness of the occasion which they are never to forget.

Vocational Initiation Rites

In many societies, there are, in addition to the usual social puberty rites, initiation ceremonies for special groups or fraternities that consist of an elite class of persons who have demonstrated that they possess a special capacity to understand the sacred mysteries or are gifted with unique spiritual powers. Membership in a sacred society often cuts across tribal or social boundaries, and entrance can involve a series of rites extending over several years.

Marriage and Funeral Rites

As a holy estate marriage is hedged around by numerous taboos and customs, such as the throwing of rice or grain at the bride to ensure her fertility, the seclusion of the bride and the groom for a period, the changing of clothing before the marriage, and the tying of knots and the exchange of rings to strengthen the marriage bond.

Funeral rites also reflect the threefold patten of separation, transition, and reincorporation. For most religions, death is viewed as a threshold leading from one mode of existence to another, a liminal period before rebirth to a new status. Similarly, mourning rites represent a time of separation and transition for the deceased's family and friends.

The greater the role played by the deceased in the community- a ruler, for example- the more elaborate and extended are the funeral surrounding death is legion, and their features depend to a considerable degree on the society's attitude toward the role of the deceased in the after life state. Fear of the dead often means elaborate rites of purification or efforts to appease and to placate the spirit of the dead. The body may be removed from the house by special means to ensure that it will not return, or a stake may be driven through the corpse for the same purpose.

Life Crisis Ritual in African Cosmology

This is another non-periodic type ritual. It is the kind undertaken to meet specific crisis in the life of an individual or a community, such as illness, miscarriage, failure in the hunt, or drought. Understandably, the concern for health is of particular urgency and all religion especially those in non-literate societies-have rituals that invoke or ward off supernatural powers as a means of curing disease.

The primal societies, it is generally believed not only that health is supernaturally given but also that disease is often dealing with illness. The loss of soul or evil possession is left to work of religious professionals: diviners, medicine men, shamans, exorcise, and priests, since it is often believed that they posse's special ecstatic powers for dealing with the supernatural, including witchcraft and demons.

The shaman is uniquely able to undergo altered states of consciousness and to leave his body and travel to the other world of the spirits, and thereby to serve as intercessor and healer. The word shaman is Siberian, and it is in the northern regions that shamanism can be in its classic form. American Indian religious life. Mircea Eliade (1964) remarks that Shamans.

Are predominantly the anti demonic champions; they combat not only demons and disease, but also the black magicians.

There can be doubt that for primitive thought confession acts as real purgation an elimination of evil matter in the patient's body. The state of taboo which the Agikuyu of Kenya describes as **thahu** is called **thavu** or **makwa** by their neighbours the Akamba. A person in this condition gets sores all over his body. Before the elders can cure the disease they must first diagnose its cause by questioning the sufferer about all that he has done open confession is thus essential. This fact gives a great value to the belief in **Makwa** for however secretly a breach of custom may have been committed; it will not fail to require an open confession.

Among the Baganda a child would contract a sickness, characterized by nausea and general debility, if the mother had committed adultery either before its birth or while she nursed it no cure was possible unless the guilty parties confessed their guilty and underwent at the hands of the medicine man. A special ceremony of cleansing.

The medicine man added some of the woman's chest and on the chest of her children, this was supposed to neutralize an evil that had attached itself to her or them. No Baganda woman might visit a well while she was menstruating, if she did so, the water would dry up. She herself would fall sick and die, unless she confessed her fault and the medicine man made atonement for her.

Douglas Mary (1985) observed that rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience. So they are positive distributions to atonement. By their means symbolic patterns are worked out and publicly displayed. Similar healing rituals are found in most tribal societies.

Disorder and chaos threaten the meaning and order we have created in our lives through the inevitable life crises we encounter. To counter their effects we develop various rituals to help us cope and to get us through. African communities developed rituals aimed at helping individuals and communities deal with human and natural calamities, such as an accident, a sudden illness, a drought, a death or war. In African cosmology there is a balance or harmony in human life and in the universe. Crises, whether natural or human in origin, reflect a break in that balance. A fundamental way to restore the balance is through ritual activity. The rituals seek to restore the harmony in the world and, in so doing (4, bring an end to the affliction suffered by the community or the individual.

In many African communities the practice of divination, using certain signs to understand the cause or cure of an affliction, is a common practice. When a catastrophe or problem emerges unexpectedly, we often **ask why is this happening to me?** We want to know what we did. The African believe that most individual and communal misfortunes are a result of moral problems within the community. A diviner's task is not to tell the future but to scrutinize the past and to disclose the spiritual and moral causes for the crisis.

By asking a series of questions of the people involved, the diviner seeks to construct a picture of the events and the relationship involved that led to the misfortune. Because each relationship in the Akamba life carries certain moral responsibilities, the diviner is able to identify potential moral conflicts that might be the source of the crisis. In addition, the diviner uses a guard filled with approximately twenty pebbles which symbolize relationships, problems, and motives common to Akamba society. By shaking the guard, certain pebbles rise to the top and these provide clues which the diviner uses to discern the cause of the crisis.

Calendar or Seasonal Rituals and Their Significance Periodic (Cyclical) Rituals

Periodic rituals are rituals that celebrate seasons in the year or commemorate specific historical events. As with all rituals, there are often several layers of meaning, attached to them. All over the world, from time immemorial, societies have marked the seasons and important events in the cycle of the year with public rituals. These seasonal and calendar rites are closely associated with the rhythmic changes of nature.

Gaster (1961) rightly observes that, for the ancient community, life is not so much a progression from cradle to grave as it is a series of leases annually or periodically renewed. These leases on life follow a more or less uniform structure that Gaster describes in terms of four principle movements.

- First comes rites of **mortification**, symbolizing the state of suspended animation which ensues at the end of the year, when one lease of life has drawn to a close and next is not yet assured.

- Second comes rites of **purgation**, where the community seeks to rid itself of all noxiousness and contagion, both physical and moral, and of all evil influences which might impair the prosperity of the coming year and thereby threaten the desired renewal and vitality.
- Third comes rites of **invigoration**, whereby the community attempts by its own concerted and regimented effort, to galvanize its moribund condition and to procure that new lease of life.
- Last comes rites of **Jubilation**, which bespeak men's sense of relief when the New Year has indeed begun and the continuance of their own lives...is thereby assured.

New Year rituals also have multiple levels of meaning. They are rituals of thanksgiving and gratitude for all that the sacred has provided. But they are also periods of penitence and renewal, full of recognition of past wrongs and promises to change in the year ahead. The festivals and celebrations provide an opportunity **to reflect, to take stock and to redirect one's life**. The rituals associated with Easter have various religious and secular meanings. The specifically religious dimensions include the rituals associated with Holy Week, Good Friday, and Easter morning. Easter also includes rituals associated with spring and the birth of new life. In agricultural societies, rites connected with planting, the first fruits, and the harvest are universal. On the other hand, in historical religious such as Judaism and Christianity, fixed calendar rites as Kenyatta day in Kenya and independence days in any country, serve to commemorate and represent archetypal historical events. Even some these rites-Christmas and the Jewish Passover, for example trace their roots to the annual cycle of the seasons.

Seasonal ritual is always directed to securing the well-being of both the community and the individual. It tends to follow a common ritual structure in which the evil, pollution, and eclipse of life's vitality, connected with the older year, are mortification and Lenten austerities and rites of emptying (kenosis), followed by rites of revitalization, or the giving of new life, fertility, and prosperity.

Sacrifice in Seasonal and Calendric Rituals

Calendric and seasonal ritual includes ritual acts of sacrifice. The religious intention or purpose of presenting offerings and sacrifices is that. Innumerable human emotions can be expressed in these actions. Including **fear, guilt, adoration, gratitude** and **homage**. Offerings signify a **simple bargain** or exchange.

Taylor (1958) believed that sacrifice evolved through three stages: **Gift giving, homage, and abnegation, or renunciation**. Gift giving clearly can express the giver obligating the receiver (god) to act in kind. Taylor saw the same rule at work in homage. The person seeks to gain the King's or the god's goodwill and protection. Renunciation, however, expresses only self-denial and Taylor believed, is free of crudely practical motives. He therefore considered such acts of renunciation as expressing higher forms of sacrifice. Taylor's first function of sacrifice is propitiation. To propitiate means to cause to become favorably inclined to appease or conciliate another. From the dawn of human life, offerings have been made to propitiate the spirits or gods, to achieve their favour, and minimize their hostility.

The second important purpose of the securing of a social bond. Among the Akamba sacrificial rites were often accompanied by sacred feast or meal. The meal served to establish a covenant, or a mystical union, between the god-symbolized by the sacrificial elements consumed- and those participating in the meal.

The ritual also strengthens the bond between the members of the community itself. A third and most important, function of sacrifice is expressed by the term expiation-the making of amends or atonement-for defilement transgression. According to this view, sacrificial rites of expiation assume some offence against the sacred or divine. In their most primal form rites of expiation are directed at the removal of pollution, release from which, it is believed, can free the community and the individual from deadly contagion.

What is of critical importance to expiatory rites, however, is the belief that life can be restored not simply by ethical good works but only by costly self-sacrifice. Life must be offered in order that life may be preserved. Moreover, the focus of attention is not on the individual but rather on the transgression that affects the entire society. The community is defiled, and reconciliation needs to be effected. The defiled and sinful life therefore must be offered, sacrificed and destroyed so that new life might be given.

The way in which corporate purgation and atonement is usually achieved is through the community's representative, or scapegoat. The word scapegoat has in recent times, come to refer to someone who is blamed for someone else's errors and who bears the burden of the blame, but this is a distortion of its original intention. Both primal societies and the ancient world shared a more profound sense of corporate personality the belief that one person, perhaps the king or a totem animal, can represent the entire tribe or nation and can thereby be its sin bearer.

Gaster (1974) Points To The Real Function Of The Scapegoat As Representative:

The essential point about the scapegoat is that it removes from the community the taint and impurity of sins which have to be openly confessed.

There is no question of transferring to it either blame or responsibility; the sole issue of how to get rid of the miasma of transgression which one freely acknowledges. Yet there can be no assurance that every single person will indeed undergo that process; latent impurity may therefore remain.....There is thus only one method of securing clearance, namely, to pronounce a comprehensive blanket confession of sins and to saddle the comprehensive taint upon some person, animal or object which will be forcibly expelled and thereby take it away.

The representative is the sin remover, and expiation usually involves the offering the sacrifice and death- of the victim, which removes or covers the pollution and sin. So acts of renunciation, the covering or purging of impurity or sin, the strengthening of the bonds of community, and the warding off of violence are deeply human in every society.

African Rituals as Sacraments

It will be helpful to conclude this analysis of African rituals with a brief consideration of ritual as sacrament. By so doing, we can summarize some of the most salient characteristics of African rituals. **Broadly speaking, all religious ritual is a sacrament** in that it concerns the presence of the sacred or holy. Sacraments make use of temporal things- words, gestures, and objects- for a spiritual purpose, to make manifest the sacred or the supernatural. **A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.** Sacraments do not, like symbols, simply signify or represent the sacred; they also work. Effective action is essential to sacraments.

Underhill (1957) underlines this point:

The water cleanses, the bread and wine feed, the oil anoints, the imposition of consecrating hands conveys new character, the marriage act unites; and all this in the interior and spiritual as well as in the exterior and natural sense...

A valid sacrament, therefore, always leaves the situation different from what it was before. Sacraments, like initiation ceremonies, are performative in the sense that they actually accomplish something; they change the status or condition of the participants. In many sacramental religions, such as Roman Catholicism, the efficacy of sacramental rites is not fundamentally dependent on the individual's subjective condition or feelings. The sacrament functions, according- to Catholic doctrine, **ex opere operato (by the work worked)**; THAT IS, the rite itself has a causal power or efficacy beyond its subjective or psychological effects.

Douglas M. (1970) registers this performative character of sacraments in her comments on the Roman Catholic Eucharist. Symbolizing, she writes:

Does not exhaust the meaning of the Eucharist. Its full meaning involves....sacramental efficacy... The crux of the doctrine is that a real, invisible transformation has taken place at the priest's saying of the sacred words and that the eating of the consecrated host has efficacy for those who take it for others.

Sacraments do, of course, have profound psychological and sociological effects, as do all rituals. The function of catharsis, or the clarification and purification of the emotions in ritual action, should not be underestimated. Nor should the wider sociological effects of sacraments be minimized in the least. Sacraments like rituals, bring attitudes and beliefs to a heightened state of consciousness, thereby strengthening these convictions and, in turn, fortifying the community. Sacramental rites are performative, but related to this is their repetitive character. Sacramental action must be undertaken periodically at certain specified times of the season, the life cycle, or the liturgical calendar. The habitual, recurrent, and rhythmical character of sacramental ritual is crucial to its effect.

Another characteristic of sacraments is the meticulous accuracy of their performance, which is often considered essential to their efficacy. Therefore, the form of a sacramental ritual becomes fixed and conventional.

Departure from the traditional way can cause anxiety as to whether the rite is actually achieving its effect. For this reason, sacramental rites are the most conservative aspect of a community's religious life and can be a source of weakness if the rituals become too conventional and routinized and lose their vitality and relevance. This is the cause of periodic antiritual protests by religious prophets and puritans against the dead monotony of formal liturgical routine, of going through the paces.

Such forms of antiritualism are probably a sign that certain deadness has, indeed, set in. But authentic ritual is neither lifeless nor unfeeling; quite the contrary, we have seen that it engages both individuals and communities at the deepest levels of their being. We can conclude, then, by calling to mind that ritual structure makes possible a wordless channel of communication. Put another way, ritual can represent or create a structure of meaning that is capable of binding us together; of reviving our sense of participation in a larger human, even cosmic, drama; and of restoring us to genuine **communitas**.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Striking feature of many rites is the offering of a sacrifice. The various purposes of sacrifice are discussed and particular attention is given to rituals of atonement for defilement, transgression or sin-and the critical role-played by the sacrificial representative-or scapegoat-as sin remover. The paper concludes with a discussion of rituals as a sacraments and how sacraments reflect some of the most characteristic features in societies.

Mbiti J. S. (1969) Says whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. t1/4 fs, The individual can only say I am because you are and since you are therefore I am. This is very applicable to rituals regardless of the type of rituals we are dealing with. Ritual accomplishes something or reinforces the belief or behaviour by the very fact of its periodic repetition. The philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach said, Man is what he eats, i.e. we become what we habitually do.

From this discussion of African ritual, we can see the tremendous use of ritual activity to help participants find meaning, order, and relationships in their lives. Rituals encompass every facet of life, from daily practice and annual celebrations to significant transitions and crises in the lives of individuals and communities. These symbolic actions re-enact and make conscious religious understanding of reality and enable participants to make their lives meaningful by connecting to their perceptions of the ultimate ordering of life. Symbolic action, however, is but one form of significant ordering action.

The significance of rituals is essentially to renew in perpetual basis a kind of pre-existing, act of god. The rituals are to revitalize (strengthen) the forces of life that are threatened by degradation. Uzukuu (1988) says rites of passage are a way of expressing the aspiration of a community. Through them, society hands on cultural values and beliefs to the young generation for transmission to posterity. It is in and through this ritual action that the being of the community comes to manifest realization.

Recommendation

This paper makes a deliberate recommendation that;

Rituals should be taken seriously because: They are symbolic, routine, and repetitive activities and actions through which we make connections with what we consider to be the most valuable dimensions of life. They are often associated with significant events or places in our individual and communal lives. Rituals set aside specific times and places and provide us opportunity to ponder their meaning and to connect emotionally.

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Ritual actions enable us to maintain continuity with significant persons and events from the past. Rituals, further, commemorate significant events in the life of our communities and provide a means for renewing the meaning of those events among us. Rituals help us individually and communally to make sense of life's transitions, providing some structure to ease movement from the familiar to the unknown.

Moreover, although rituals have formalized patterns, they are still subject to change. Ritual actions often adjust to changes in values or worldviews. Religious ritual is a significant action. It expresses the connection with our perception of intimacy or the sacred in the universe. Religious ritual expresses our deepest understandings of the world.

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