

“Ritual, Conflict and Consensus: Comparing Case Studies in Asia and Europe”

An Anthropological Atelier by the

Institute of Ethnology, Slovak Academy of Sciences
and the

Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences

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Outline of Contents

Rituals may in some instances foster tensions and conflicts, while on other occasions they help to avoid and attenuate them. This collaborative anthropological atelier therefore will follow two main directions in the investigation of ritual, both related to van Gennep’s notion of transition/rites of passage: consensual aspects (Durkheimian tradition) and conflict/resistance-oriented dimensions (Gluckman’s conception) may either occur simultaneously, or they may each dominate a ritual at different times. In today’s world of transitions to multiple modernity, the significance of rituals tends to be increasing. The atelier’s contributors will address some among the phenomena related to that wider tendency: transitional crisis in economics, politics or society, contested ideological concepts, as well as the potential conflicts between personal/individual and social interests and developments. Rituals tend to provide some order and safety during insecure transition processes, and therefore they operate in many of these spheres for providing relative stability.

Abstracts

Keynote Lecture

Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka: Belonging in today’s reflective globality: F(r)ictions, frames and fragments in ritual communication

Social realities are described and perceived in two different ways, and both of them are important for our understanding of rituals. On one hand, social worlds are represented in the form of nations, ethnic groups, religious organisations and other distinct collective units. On the other hand, the social is increasingly seen as fragmented, flexible, individualised, or even atomised. Mobility, frictions, and conflicts create counter-narratives to those of collective boundedness, and of clear-cut boundary lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – boundaries that were celebrated in early modernity. The second perspective challenges the first one, and by doing so, renders a reflection on rituals in today’s globalised world necessary – since rituals are thought to strengthen communities and instigate belonging.

This tension is central to this presentation. It will inquire how to think about rituals under the conditions of mobility and rapid social change, as well as what contributions rituals make to these recent transformations. Starting with a recapitulation of seven important approaches to the study of rituals, this lecture then will discuss a recent Nepalese example of politicisation in political communication and its consequences in transnationalising societies and their rituals. The lecture will end with some general reflection on the importance of rituals in forging globality through performance and through reflexivity.

Session I: Cognitive mechanisms and ritual behaviour

Though social factors alone can explain certain developments of the style and content of ritual actions, they seem unable to explain the fact that rituals are performed. In order to address this question, we need to turn our attention to some of the fundamental cognitive aspects of ritual action to explain *why* ritual action or ritualization seems to be such a persistent phenomenon and *what* ritualised behaviour can accomplish for participants that non-ritualised actions cannot, in particular in situations of conflict and consensus.

Andre Gingrich: Hawtah and Hima: Ritual sites and borderline transitions in the highlands of south-western Arabia

South-western Arabia is morphologically structured by the Sarat mountain range of southern Hijaz, Asir, and the Yemeni mountains - each major mountain constituting the habitat of a tribal grouping. Hawtah and Himah designate sacrosanct areas which usually are identical with mountain summits. These sacrosanct areas are the topic of the present lecture in Budmerice. The discussion will focus on the significance of these ritual sites in the ancient and more recent past, and it will highlight their role for rituals of rain sacrifice and the granting of asylum. Integration of local social units, and simultaneously, opposition against equivalent or hierarchical social groups elsewhere, are two main motives and consequences of these Hawtah and Himah rituals. In the end, it will be discussed what kind of future these rituals and their sites may attain in a global present of multiple modernities. International initiatives seeks to transform Hawtah and Himah areas towards regional versions of global 'State Park' concepts, which is supported by some local forces while being opposed by others.

Eva-Maria Knoll: Medical Tourism: Reflections on the fusion of two powerful rituals in a complex world

The growth of patient mobility and of global supply and demand in medical services has lead to a fusion of two among the perhaps most powerful rituals of the present: the ritual of travel and the ritual of healing. Both are rites of passage and thus comparable with regard to ritual performance and ritual behaviour, as I will show in this presentation. They are informing and confirming personal trajectories – through the foreign and the unknown, in one case, or through the frightening situation of illness in the other. The travellers and the sick become excluded from those staying at home and from those who are healthy. Being subjected to a form of transformation, they subsequently are re-integrated as experienced traveller or as cured. Yet these intersections of medical treatment and tourism are contested and likely to cause conflict, since they entangle contradictory elements and divergent behaviour within one single ritual performance: tourists and patients, leisure and illness, consumption and healing.

Tatiana Bužeková: Cognitive Aspects of Transmission of Neo-Shamanistic Beliefs: Exegetic reflection in Neo-Shamanistic Rituals

Neo-shamanism or urban shamanism is a movement that has attracted many adherents in Europe and United States during the last decades. The increasing number of shamanism practitioners all over the world might indicate that the main features of shamanism – which are supposed to be equally characteristic for all cultures – are easily learnt and replicated in different cultural contexts. This phenomenon points to the cognitive processes underlying the transmission of a shaman's representations, including the working of memory mechanisms. According to Harvey Whitehouse's theory of modes of religiosity, the performance of religious rituals characterised by infrequent repetition and high arousal activates episodic memory and leads to spontaneous exegetic reflection. By contrast, religious practices with low levels of arousal are unlikely to be passed on. However, neo-shamanistic practices that tend to be rarely performed and do not involve high levels of arousal nevertheless survive in

the process of cultural transmission. One reason might be that during these rituals participants intentionally concentrate on the interpretation of their own past in terms of shamanistic concepts, in order to solve their problems in life. Thus exegetic reflection is not spontaneous but intentional. At the same time neo-shamanistic practices display other characteristics of the imagistic mode: diversity of religious representations, lack of orthodoxy and dynamic leadership, lack of centralisation and in some cases intense cohesion. The paper features the results of research of a particular neo-shamanistic group in Bratislava.

Session II: Ritual as means of social reproduction

We will follow the assumption that performative practices contribute to the production and reproduction of social structures as well as social norms. The existence of norms as prescribed or at least preferred rules of behaviour emphasizes group formation on the one hand, and the emergence of social distinctions on the other. Thus ritual as a specific kind of performative practice has a potential to facilitate consensus; on the other side, it might lead to social exclusion and hence might induce conflicts.

Michaela Ferencová: Ritualised practices and social reproduction: Outline of theories and possible research problems

Social structure is constituted by social behaviour guided by social norms that are often implicit and followed automatically by social actors. Hence, the existence of social structure requires consensus consisting in the wide acceptance of social norms that is achieved through their distribution among and between social actors. Consensus in social behaviour often leads to the formation of communities followed by the emergence of social distinctions. I assume that as a specific kind of performative practice and an occasion to distribute representations, ritual has a potential to reproduce social norms. Ritualised practices thus may facilitate consensus but also may function as means of social exclusion that can lead to conflicts.

The aim of my paper is to consider the possibilities of the anthropological study of social reproduction through ritualised performative practices. I will focus on the production, reproduction and distribution of social norms as well as on their consequences for the constitution of inclusion and exclusion, cohesion and distinction, consensus and conflict. This paper thus will not focus on any particular case study. Rather, its ambition lies in the formulation of research problems, and in considering appropriate research methods and theories that might contribute to the explanation of these processes.

Gebhard Fartacek: Local Sanctuaries, Pilgrimage and Ethnic Heterogeneity in Syria

Based on ethnographic field research, this paper focuses on questions of ethnicity and the cognitive construction of holy places in the Arabic Republic of Syria (ARS). „Kullna mitl ba'd” - we are all the same! This was the statement by many pilgrims when I asked them about the interaction of different ethnic communities at pilgrimage sites. In general these pilgrims emphasized that all holy places are commonly shared by members of various ethnic-religious groups (Christians, Sunnites, Alawites, Druzes, Ismailis). From an anthropological point of view this argumentation is reminiscent of the classical concept of “communitas” (Victor Turner). My research shows that communitas is nowadays more important as an “ideological way of thinking the sacred” rather than a “social fact”.

Helmut Lukas: Comparing Rituals in Continental Southeast Asia

Royal rituals in Laos before 1975 were dealing with interethnic relations between the politically dominant lowland people (the Lao) and marginalized ‘aborigines’, i.e. hill tribes such as the Kmhmu people. Despite the Kmhmu’s humble position in actual life, their roles in

myth and ritual make them essential to the kingdom. Because of their close relations to the local spirits, the royal rituals signified Lao recognition of the Kmhmu people as the first to tap the fertility of the land and as indispensable for the fertility and the welfare of the state. At the same time the rituals express the political primacy of the Lao people. These rituals thus indicate the contradictory and complementary relation between Lao ('immigrants') and Kmhmu ('aborigines'). American anthropologist Charles F. Keyes was among the first to suggest a comparative analysis of interethnic relations between hill and lowland peoples of Southeast Asia. He advocates the proposition that „hill peoples were incorporated into social systems dominated by the lowland peoples” and that these relationships „found symbolic expression in rituals involving both lowland and upland peoples“. In this paper this thesis will be examined by comparing case examples from Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Session III: Conflict and consensus as dimensions of rituals during the political, economic, social and ideological transition of society: Attention will be paid to the study of selected rites de passage (e.g. burials) in transitional society (e.g. post-socialist society, or developing market economies). Sometimes, rites de passage may only be performed in private domains. Quite often, however, they also involve the public sphere as well (e.g. local communities). Concrete ritual performance mostly results from convergent and divergent individual and social interests, which require negotiations between the parties involved. Such negotiations as well as the final ritual outcome may lead to consensus as well as tensions or even conflicts among participants. Furthermore, changes in rituals induced by transition processes in the society at large will be addressed. In addition to their relevance for economic and social transformation, this fascinating research field offers a possibility to investigate contested ideological concepts in post-socialist and post-colonial societies, especially the new revival of religiosity and its impact on the rites de passage.

Christian Jahoda: Rituals between conflict and consensus: Case studies of village festivals from Western Tibet

In the village communities of Western Tibet the celebration of festivals and rituals takes place in the framework of societies historically characterised by strong religious traditions. Mainly but not exclusively, these are variants of Tibetan Buddhism. In addition to this religious focus, other dimensions of great importance for all kinds of ritual practices and communal performances of social ceremonies (and in particular, accompanying processes of interaction, conflict and integration) are represented by the form of political and socio-economic organisation. How does the varying role of these factors shape and influence the relationships of social groups under different circumstances? How are these relationships expressed on the occasion of festivals and the performance of rituals (including formal speeches, songs and other forms of oral traditions)? This will be discussed on the basis of recent field research in border areas of Western Tibet.

Nina Lang: Ritual objects between conflict and consensus: Dealing with sacred artefacts in Mongolia

During the great communist purge in Mongolia in the late 1930's, people who did not fit the ends of the political rulers were killed, jailed or expelled. Together with them, non-conformist ideas and beliefs also had to officially disappear. In turn, this was partly the case as well with visible material culture that had to vanish from the public's surface, if it was not destroyed in the first place. The artefacts which this presentation will reflect upon are Buddhist ritual objects whose removals, traces and agency will be demonstrated and examined.

These artefacts unfold their meaning and power in practitioners' usage. The destruction of this powerful agency (or bond) may be felt like an act of violence that exceeds the mere body. For the followers of the communist party line, cutting this bond apparently was an important means to promote their own new ideas and ideals. What happened then to religious ritual artefacts in times of political oppression? And how were and are they dealt with since 1990?

Gabriela Kiliánová: Funeral in transition period: between consensus and conflict

During the communist regime's era, state authorities paid considerable attention to the rites de passage such as baptism, wedding and funeral. Ever since the 1950s (and throughout the 1960s and 1970s) state institutions in Czechoslovakia thus invested substantial efforts in secularizing the rites de passage. This was aimed at limiting the role and influence of the church in this sphere. As a result, rituals of birth and marriage became increasingly secularized, whereas funeral rituals resisted those changes. According to surveys, most burial ceremonies and funerals in Slovakia continued to be performed as religious rituals during the socialist period. Sometimes, those ritual actors developed interesting combinations of secular and religious ceremonies.

This paper will focus on the performance of funerals in post-socialist society. It will discuss the ritual's changes, as caused by the political, economic and social transition and the new revival of religiosity in Slovakia. According to Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlow, anthropological research too often takes symbolic consensus as a characteristic feature of ritual. These authors support 'the useful antidote' to such an approach. My paper will follow Humphrey's and Laidlow's suggestions: it will highlight the fragmented and divided desires, experiences and notions of meaning which a ritual might represent for participants even if they are united in one performance. Special attention will be paid to tensions and observable conflicts among ritual participants that result from the contested ideological concepts concerning the burial.