

I. Introduction: some notes on ritual

One may envision the task of an ethnography as opening a culture to readers, unfolding it, revealing it, providing not only a sense of surface form and rhythm, but also a sense of inner connections and interactions. If this is one's vision of the task, certain ways of launching upon it will be more powerful and effective than others. One could of course begin with the standard categories – kinship, economy, politics, religion – yet this approach is problematic, not only because the categories are externally imposed but because they are undynamic. They do not carry one into an experience of the interconnections that must be at the heart of the discussion.

One could also proceed by way of, to borrow a phrase from Kenneth Burke, “the representative anecdote,” the little vignette of social life actually observed, that was for the field-ethnographer, and will ideally be for the reader, especially revealing of important cultural dynamics. One recalls, for example, the incident of the disturbed Javanese funeral described by Geertz (1957b), where the corpse could not get buried for the politics of the situation. The episode raised problems of religious and political interpretation for all present, Javanese and ethnographer alike. As in this example, the incidents that are used as representative anecdotes in ethnography generally involve breakdown or conflict, moments where the rules are called into question, or contradictory rules are invoked, where “reality bargaining” (Rosen) is called into play. The very uncertainty of the situation, the very unpredictability of the outcome, serve to bring to the foreground cultural “stuff” that is normally so taken for granted as to be almost inarticulable.

One could also approach the presentation through what Singer has called “cultural performances,” rituals or other culturally formalized events that the people themselves see as embodying in some way the essence of their culture, as dramatizing the basic myths and visions of reality, the basic values and moral truths, upon which they feel their world rests. One recalls here Warner's superb account of the Yankee City tercentenary celebration where, in something like an anthropologist's dream, the natives constructed a parade of floats dramatizing forty-two carefully selected (and highly interpreted) events in the town's history. In this event, as Warner says, “the citizens of Yankee City collectively state what they believe themselves to be” (89). Less spectacularly, every society has some major ritual events,



Mingma Tenzing, his wife Pasang Hlamu, and their son Ang Tsultim

activated by culturally defined life crises, or geared to the rhythms of the calendar, that are for its members deeply meaningful, and that can reveal to us the sources and forces of meaning in its culture.¹

Both approaches — through representative anecdotes and cultural performances — can provide powerful entrée into the workings of a particular society. The choice may ultimately reflect more the intellectual style of the ethnographer than the intrinsic superiority of one or the other approach, although one could argue that cultural performances have the advantage of being selected, as it were, by the culture rather than by the observer. In any case, this book in fact works through formal cultural performances, utilizing three Sherpa religious rituals and one recurrent formal secular event to “open” Sherpa culture to the reader. Such an approach to a culture through what may be called its formal statements, its moments of greatest self-display, thus requires further comment.

To say, as I did above, that such performances — generally rituals — dramatize basic assumptions of fact and value in the culture is to summarize what is actually a far more complex point. More specifically and accurately, such “fundamental assumptions” are actually constructed, or reconstructed, and their fundamentality reestablished, in the course of the rituals themselves. Rituals do not begin with the

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eternal verities, but arrive at them. They begin with some cultural problem (or several at once), stated or unstated, and then work various operations upon it, arriving at “solutions” – reorganizations and reinterpretations of the elements that produce a newly meaningful whole. The solutions (and the means of arriving at them) embody the fundamental cultural assumptions and orientations with which we are partly concerned.

Equally important, however, are the problems from which the ritual departs. By this I do not mean the problem of curing illness, or turning boys into men, or whatever the stated purpose may be. Rather I mean the conflicts and contradictions of social experience and cultural meaning that are encoded in, and alluded to by, the ritual symbolism. Such issues are of course linked, perhaps arbitrarily, perhaps not, to the stated concern of the ritual. The Sherpa rite of atonement, for example, utilizes symbols of the family, and we must ask why a sense of sin is culturally tied to, and takes meaning from, family organization (and vice versa). The Sherpa rites of exorcism utilize symbols of wealth and poverty, and we must ask why the demons that are exorcised, and the defilements that are cleansed, derive meaning from inequities in the economic and political structure (and vice versa). The symbols of the rituals, in other words, lead us toward discovery of structural conflict, contradiction, and stress in the wider social and cultural world.

These points determine the organization of this book. After a general ethnographic chapter, each subsequent chapter begins with a brief description of a cultural performance. Following the description, the rite (or in one case secular event) is then dissected, and some of its symbolic elements are used as leads or guides into exploring problematic structures, relationships, and ideas of the culture. The first half of each chapter, in other words, consists of ethnographic description, but description constrained by the ritual context in which the problematic phenomena were signaled. Thus, for example, the issue of status ranking is highlighted at secular parties, since everyone must sit in rank order. In this context (Chapter 4) I thus explore a range of problems posed by the status hierarchy in secular social relations. When in the following chapter I consider exorcisms, on the other hand, the issue of status arises again, signaled by the symbols of wealth and poverty in the ritual. In this context, then, I explore the relationship between the status hierarchy on the one hand, and religious ideology and institutions on the other. The use of multiple ritual “lenses” is thus not only a device for getting at different problems in the culture, but also serves – Rashomon-like – as a perspective shifter, a way of seeing different aspects of any given institution, which may be problematic in different ways in different contexts, or for individuals in different social locations or at different stages of life.

If the first half of each chapter is a ritual-guided ethnographic account, the second half returns to the action of the ritual and asks what sorts of solutions to the problems, what sorts of experience of them are systematically constructed over the course of the event. Here we are in the realm of symbolic analysis as such, analysis of the semantic mechanisms by which the symbols and meanings are interrelated

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and moved toward the conclusions and resolution of the rite. If, loosely, the first half of each chapter is paradigmatic, a description of the universe of elements upon which the ritual will operate, the second half is, again loosely, syntagmatic, an analysis of the narrative or discursive organization of these elements constituting the movement of the ritual from formulation of problem to experience of solution.

This dimension of the analysis in turn raises the question of what ritual does, not as a heuristic device for us, but as a certain sort of event and experience for the society and the people. The traditional answer to this question for anthropology has been in functionalist terms, stressing the ways in which ritual shores up and stabilizes existing structures, reinforces norms, and contributes to the reproduction of the system. The very concept of ritual, within this view, embodies notions of accommodation, reconciliation, mediation. Ritual generates or regenerates a given view of the world, and engenders commitment to existing institutional structures and modes of social relationship. Ritual restores equilibrium, however unstable or antagonistic it may be. A ritual that shatters one's world view and one's social relations is either not a ritual as the term is normally used, or else is in the service of some other system of meaning and relationships to which it delivers one.

Certainly such assertions are not "wrong," and certainly ritual plays an important role in keeping the system together. But the functionalist perspective, as has by now been well explored, has a number of problems. One of the most troublesome is that it is so broadly applicable that it tells one virtually nothing. Any element of social process can be shown, through ingenious argumentation, to play a role in the restoration of equilibrium and the validation of the status quo. This is particularly the case when the analysis is confined to a body of synchronic data, where long-range trends of change are not visible, and where it is never clear whether even the most apparently "contradictory" elements may not be working to the advantage of, rather than tending to undermine, existing structures. It is always possible to show, and it has always been a standard functionalist line of analysis to show, how apparently "dysfunctional" elements of the social process really serve the system by providing outlets for pressures and resentments built up within existing structures.

More modern varieties of functionalism, careful to avoid this particular analytic cliché, but still concerned to understand how the status quo is sustained despite evident inequities and contradictions, focus upon the ways in which various elements of the system – especially "ideology" and ritual – mediate contradictions or in other ways function to 'mystify' the workings of the system to actors embedded in it. I do not actually deny the (limited) validity of these neofunctionalist orientations, and some of my interpretations will arrive at points consistent with such a perspective.

Yet however subtly, insidiously, and pervasively Sherpa religion and ritual may serve to "mystify," and hence perpetuate, contradictory and oppressive social structures, this perception cannot be the starting point of an analysis of these phenomena. Whatever latent functions religion may perform for the system and the status

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quo, it is first and foremost a system of meanings – goals, values, concerns, visions, world constructions – and we cannot know in any nontrivial way what it does – or how it does it – until we know what it says. Precisely the same may be said of ritual. Within ritual, by definition a situation removed from the normal processes of social life, what we find is primarily manipulation of consciousness, of, by, and for actors, through symbolic objects, constructions, and arrangements. These objects and arrangements embody cultural, and especially religious, meaning, conveyed to actors over the course of their participation, and realized by actors as they achieve appropriate structures of consciousness. The ritual process is in the first instance a matter of meaning creation for actors, whatever latent functions it may perform for the system at large.

Now of course most meaning arrived at by actors in ritual is already “there,” the historically developed and socially rooted body of conceptions and orderings of consciousness that we call “culture.” The ritual process, then, is a matter of shaping actors in such a way that they wind up appropriating cultural meaning as personally held orientations. At the same time, however, because cultural orientations are, at the abstract level, diffuse, general, somewhat unsystematic, and often mutually contradictory, it is in ritual that they receive the shaping and systematization that render them more directly relevant to and reflective of the realities of actual social life. Ritual, then, is a sort of two-way transformer, shaping consciousness in conformity with culture, but at the same time shaping culture in conformity with the more immediate social-action and social-structural determinants of consciousness in everyday life.

I am, however, primarily concerned with the first aspect of the process, the shaping of consciousness that takes place in ritual, what Godfrey Lienhardt called “the control of experience.” The terms “consciousness” and “experience” pose some difficulty for anthropologists, implying as they do some sort of access to actors’ psychological states. It seems incontrovertible that the ritual intent is to affect psychological states, facilitated by a variety of well-established dissociation-inducing mechanisms – music, dance, rhythmic chant, verbal repetition, incense, and the like. Yet to be on the safe side of this question of psychological imputation, I could simply say (and can easily show) that there is a restructuring of *meaning* in ritual, leaving aside the question of whether all or some or none of the participants actually experience this as a genuine reorganization of seeing and feeling. I shall, however, maintain the position of assuming a more permeable boundary between what happens “out there” in the public process of the ritual, and what the participants actually experience in going through it, or more accurately, in going through hundreds of performances of it over the course of a lifetime. Ritual may be, to adapt a phrase from Geertz, “a story they tell themselves about themselves” (1972: 26), but it is rarely “just a story”; assuming any degree of engagement in the symbolic process on the part of the participants, it is also a felt experience they undergo. I would argue further that any ritual worth its salt makes nonengagement difficult, at least for the duration. People of course need not attend, and when they

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do, it may be for reasons (sheer custom, keeping up social standing, lack of anything better to do, etc.) quite extraneous to the intent of the rite. Yet once they get in the door, as it were, I shall assume that the process is powerful enough to engage them and draw them through the transformations of meaning/consciousness that the ritual embodies.

This particular view of ritual, as restructuring actors' perceptions, feelings, and interpretations of their world through various processes of symbolic/semantic manipulation, is assumed in a number of important anthropological studies.² One, however, both describes and demonstrates the process with particular clarity, and parallels most closely the approach I shall be taking in this book: Godfrey Lienhardt's monograph, *Divinity and Experience*. As a way of both contextualizing and forecasting my own analytic intentions, then, I shall summarize his discussion here.

Lienhardt provides detailed analysis both of the particular symbolic elements and the overall narrative progression of a series of Dinka rituals, showing the symbolically manipulated movement from defined problematic states to subtle resolutions. The resolutions in turn are realized, as he says, as reorganized subjective *experiences* of the problematic elements, reorganized relationships between self and situation. Lienhardt shows, in other words, how ritual creates a transformation of subjective *orientation* to the "facts" of the situation. I shall quote him at some length, for at the time I read these passages, many years ago, they were a sort of revelation to me, a powerful reorganization of my own (intellectual) experience of ritual:

The practice called *thuic* involves knotting a tuft of grass to indicate that the one who makes the knot hopes and intends to contrive some sort of constriction or delay. . . . No Dinka thinks that by performing such an action he has actually assured the result he hopes for. . . . This "mystical" action is not a substitute for practical or technical action, but a complement to it and preparation for it. The man who ties such a knot has made an external, physical representation of a well-formed mental intention. He has produced a model of his desires and hopes, upon which to base renewed practical endeavor. (283)

As Lienhardt says, the action of *thuic* is relatively trivial, yet

the principle involved . . . is similar to that which obtains in symbolic action in situations which, by their very nature, preclude the possibility of technical or practical action as a complete alternative. (ibid.)

Lienhardt thus applies the same principle to the analysis of a series of other rituals, culminating in the analysis of the mortuary ceremonies of the masters of the fishing spear, who are buried alive lest they die a natural death and take the vitality of the society with them.

. . . the ceremonies described in no way prevent the ultimate recognition of the ageing and physical death of those for whom they are performed. This death is recognized; but it is the public experience of it, for the survivors, which is deliberately modified by the performance of these ceremonies. It is clear also that this is the Dinka intention in performing the rites. They do not think that they have

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made their masters of the fishing-spear personally immortal by burying them before they have become corpses, or, in some accounts, by anticipating their deaths by ritual killing. (313–14)

Or again:

The Dinka know, as we have said, that the master dies. What they represent in contriving the death which they give him is the conservation of the “life” which they themselves think they receive from him, and not the conservation of his own personal life. The latter, indeed, is finally taken away from him by his people so that they may seem to divide it from the public “life” which is in his keeping, and which must not depart from them with his death. . . . The human symbolic action involved in the “artificial” burial must be seen to transform the experience of a leader’s death into a concentrated public experience of vitality . . . (316–17)

And as a summary statement:

The symbolic actions . . . thus re-create, and even dramatize, situations which they aim to control, and the experience of which they effectively modulate. If they do not change actual historical or physical events – as the Dinka in some cases believe them to do – they do change and regulate the Dinka’s experience of those events. (291)

Lienhardt’s discussion implicitly embodies an approach to ritual (and other aspects of cultural process) later articulated more explicitly by Clifford Geertz. And while Geertz tends to be less interested in analysis of narrative sequence – in movement “from problem to solution” – than Lienhardt was or than I will be, he provides both an overall view and a number of specific concepts that lead us more systematically into the process of cultural analysis. It will be useful, then, to sketch the outlines of his approach here.³

The fundamental assumption running through Geertz’s work is that human beings constantly generate models of their own situation, in order to orient themselves and hence function in an effective and satisfying manner within it. A “culture” is the system of such publicly and collectively subscribed-to models operating for a given group at a given period of time – the terms, forms, categories, images, and the like that function to interpret a people’s own situation to themselves.

The shape and content of any particular symbolic complex may be said to be a product of two distinct factors, and it is thus in terms of these factors that it must be analyzed and understood. These are, *first*, the actual social, historical, natural, and psychological realities operating in the society at the time; and *second*, the (conscious or unconscious) strategic (what some would call “ideological”) orientations encoded in the ways in which the symbols select and interpret those realities. An example of a relatively conscious source of “strategic bias” in a particular symbolic construct might be the “interests” of the subgroup putting forth that particular construct; an example of a relatively unconscious source of bias might be the tendency of a group to define its reality in contradistinction to that of a neighboring group. In general, it is at least fair to say that the “ethos” of a culture, its particular style and bias in construing reality, is the product of complex historical development and is only partly amenable to synchronic explanation.

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Geertz's "model of/model for" distinction (1966) refers to the two dimensions of analysis noted above. The "model of" aspect refers to how cultural symbols "catch up" and attempt to render intelligible the immediate problems of social structure, economic structure, kinship, ecology, and the like – not to mention the more existential dilemmas of suffering, evil, and bafflement – in a given society. And the same symbolic models that "represent" the complex realities of the group also cast them in a certain light, interpret them, in ways that – the "model for" aspect – shape attitude and even action toward "evidently" reasonable congruence with the definitions of the situation. As Kenneth Burke, discussing poetry and other "critical and imaginative works," succinctly put it: "[They] size up the situation, name their structures and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude toward them" (1957: 3).

The important thing to understand is that any given cultural/symbolic complex is both a "model of" and a "model for" – these are two aspects of a single process. As a group represents its situation to itself and to the outside world, it uses terms and images that select and emphasize some aspects of that situation, that distort or ignore others, and that, in the process, permeate the entire structure with certain moral and affective orientations. As actors participate in or employ such constructs, their attitudes and actions become oriented in the directions embodied in the form and content of the construction itself; the construct – the model, if you will – makes it difficult for them to "see" and respond to the situation in a different way. Such cultural models, further, are *a priori* neither conservative nor radical – they may be anything from templates for simply regenerating the system as it is presently constituted, to revolutionary programs that depict the situation in such a way as to reveal its evils and exhort people to destroy it. Culture is *always* biased – selected, partial, interpreted – but both the source and the direction of bias are precisely among the key, if not *the* key – problems of cultural analysis.

From this general view of the cultural process, then, a series of analytic questions flow. First, and definitely first: What are the problematic realities of the culture to which the symbolic construction under analysis is addressing itself (i.e., what is it a model of)? Second, what strategic orientations toward those realities are embodied in the construct (i.e., what is it a model for)? (An adequate account on the first question should provide clues to the *sources* of the biases revealed in answering the second.) And third, very simply: How does it work? How, in its peculiar construction, does the symbolic construct accomplish its task in a powerful and convincing way, so that its respondents in fact accept it as an accurate rendering of "reality," and adopt its implied orientation of attitude and/or action? It is the third question that actually demands the execution of symbolic analysis as such, an analysis of semantic structure and process that seeks to reveal how the problematic phenomena have been portrayed and interrelated, by means of various semantic devices, so as to have cast the situation in the light in which it in fact emerges.

These analytic questions are, I think, clear enough, and they provide an overall framework for the approach I shall be taking. There is, however, no simple recipe

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for analytic procedure. The actual details of method, as will be seen, vary from case to case. The rituals I will be analyzing themselves use a variety of symbolic mechanisms in formulating problems and fashioning solutions, and my analyses will follow their contours as closely as possible. No single interpretive scheme is used, no attempt is made to reduce all ritual process to Freudian psychodrama, structuralist mediations, or any other totalizing approach one might name, although elements of many are drawn upon.

One final point. The reshaping of consciousness or experience that takes place in ritual is by definition a reorganization of the *relationship* between the subject and what may for convenience be called reality. Ritual symbolism always operates on both elements, reorganizing (representations of) “reality,” and at the same time reorganizing (representations of) self. The experience of each dimension depends upon the experience of the other: A certain view of reality emerges from a certain experience of self; a certain sense of self emerges from a certain experience of reality. In the case of Sherpa Buddhist rituals, much of the symbolic action consists of attempts to translate external “reality” – social and natural conditions – into “self,” subjective psychological states. Quite faithful to Buddhist orthodoxy in this respect, many Sherpa rituals manifest this psychologizing movement or progression, and it is to this point that I shall return in the conclusions.

2. The surface contours of the Sherpa world

Nepal is certainly one of the more romanticized places on earth, with its towering Himalayas, its abominable snowmen, and its musically named capital, Kathmandu, a symbol of all those faraway places the imperial imagination dreamt about. And the Sherpa people, the subject of this book, are perhaps one of the more romanticized people of the world, renowned for their mountaineering feats, and found congenial by Westerners for their warm, friendly, strong, self-confident style.

What there is about the Sherpa world that conduces to such a style is probably impossible to isolate, although it has variously been attributed to their glorious mountain environment, their Buddhist religion, or, by the Sherpas themselves, to the especially pure water found exclusively in the Sherpa region. In any case, in buoyant, outgoing social style as well as in robust physical type, they resemble their own racial, cultural, linguistic, and religious cousins the Tibetans, and differ substantially in both style and physique from the South Asians and the Chinese, the two major groups that bracket the greater Tibetan culture area.

It has been fairly well established that the Sherpas migrated into their present location in Nepal from the Khams region of eastern Tibet about 450 years ago.¹ It is not clear why they left; harassment by marauding Mongol tribes, or religious persecution by the reformed Tibetan Buddhist sect have been suggested, although it seems equally plausible that there was some local upheaval in the feudal social structure. In any event, they made their way, a journey of some 1,250 miles, to north-eastern Nepal, where they settled in the then uninhabited region in the general environs of Mount Everest.

Nepal at that time was not the unified polity it is today. The Sherpas were left to their own devices, and they spread over the area they now inhabit. Although gradually they came to have an ethnic identity separate from the Tibetans, and to develop a dialect not mutually intelligible with the Tibetan spoken just over the border (“just over the border” meaning a seven-day trek over a 19,000-foot pass), they continued to be oriented toward Tibet as a source of social, economic, and religious influence. A second influx of immigrants apparently came into the Sherpa area from the immediately adjacent part of Tibet about 150 years ago, and became incorporated as Sherpas. Tibetan immigrants who did not come to be considered Sherpas also continued to settle in the Sherpa area, and now form a substantial pro-