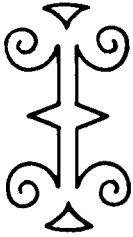


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Gilbert Lewis

Excerpt

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## A QUESTION OF INTERPRETATION

A sentence of Nadel is quoted from time to time to be criticised for the limit he set on interpretation: he wrote, 'Uncomprehended symbols have no part in social inquiry, their social effectiveness lies in their capacity to indicate; and if they indicate nothing to the actors they are from our point of view, irrelevant, and indeed no longer symbols (whatever their significance for the psychologist or psychoanalyst)' (1954, p. 108). Nadel can be understood to limit 'symbol' to those situations where the relationship between something and what it stands for is intended, conventional and can be put by the actor into words. It points up the distinction between the communication of meaning to people within the society (actors) and items of social behaviour or belief which express in an indirect or obscure fashion some principle, value, conflict or problem occurring in that society. Expression is not the same thing as communication. You can express your feelings to a stone, yet it is unmoved. You could also, like the mystic Henry Suso (Huizinga 1965, p. 148) eat three-quarters of an apple in the name of the Trinity and the remaining quarter in commemoration of 'the love with which the heavenly Mother gave her tender child Jesus an apple to eat' and unless you or Henry Suso told me, I would not, though I watched you twenty times, discern your symbolism or even that what you did was symbolical.

There is little consensus about the definition of the word 'symbol' or about the distinctions between sign, symbol, and other candidates for inclusion in this complex. But we trade often in such words, especially 'symbol'. They are convenient for they allow us to float over the troublesome issue of whether we speak of expression only, or also of communication, and, if the latter, whether that communication was between actors within the society, or from these people, unwitting, to the ingenious and deductive mind of the anthropologist.

Hard, fascinating problems of interpretation are often posed by actions or beliefs which the actors do not explain enough to satisfy the anthropologist's curiosity. He goes on to say they are expressions of something else: they have another meaning. But his curiosity is selective, both according to the theories which preoccupy him and his individual leanings: one anthropologist may be ready to accept at face value the reason given by the native actor when another

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finds it inadequate and proposes a more devious, his deeper, explanation. As Leonardo said of the blot of paint on a crumbling wall, 'You may see whatever you desire to seek in it.' With brilliant imagination, another has perceived, and perhaps seduced many a dazzled reader to see too, the imagined social institutions of a Caduveo Golden Age, drawn in patterns on a woman's face (Lévi-Strauss 1955, p. 203). There in brief lies the problem of selection and interpretation.

These reflections were prompted by two things connected with my findings in the field which I mention now. I worked among the Gnau, a people living in the West Sepik Province of New Guinea. On certain occasions Gnau men secretly and apart from women cut their penises to make them bleed. The first time for someone to do this was during his puberty and on this first occasion he did not cut his penis himself in the new style with a sliver of glass or broken razor blade but instead was cut – stabbed or bored into is more accurate – with a sharp awl of cassowary or wallaby bone. On other and subsequent occasions men cut themselves and most prefer now to use the bottle or the razor rather than the bone. The Mountain Arapesh, a people who live about seventy miles away, also bleed themselves. Margaret Mead reported at length on this (1970, part II) and wrote that the penis-bleeding was equated with menstruation. Even more to the point, she quoted Hogbin on another people of the island of Wogeo, which is off the Sepik coast, who refer to incision and bleeding the penis as men menstruating; indeed Ian Hogbin has called his latest book *The Island of Menstruating Men* (1970). But the Gnau when asked directly whether to bleed from the penis was like menstruation, answered, 'No, it is not like menstruation.' The first point, then, which interested me was what significance to attach to the finding that Gnau men did not equate their similar practices of penis-bleeding with menstruation, while some other peoples in the area, or at least their ethnographers, did so equate it.

The second point emerged from reading accounts of puberty and initiation from elsewhere in the Sepik. I found some close parallels to various Gnau rules and practices in these accounts. In some instances, a reason was given for a custom which the Gnau shared, but for which they gave no reason but tradition, that it was the right thing to do, one that their forefathers had taught them. In a few cases, elements of the reasoning which the other people used were also stated by the Gnau, but they did not overtly link the custom and the reason. When I chanced on an explanation which fitted, it was tempting to infer the link which would enable me to put some practice or belief, seeming before isolated and wayward, into place according to the logic of a system. Two examples may make what I have in mind plainer.

The Gnau have complicated food prohibitions about kinds of animal. Among many prohibitions for which I collected no reason but custom was a rule forbidding young people to eat any of the eleven kinds of fish in their rivers except for one. In Whiting's account (1941, p. 68) of the Kwoma, he notes that the

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Kwoma prohibited fish to young men for the months which followed initiation, for the reason that they bled their penises into a stream where fish might eat the blood, and since a man must not ingest his own blood, he must not eat fish, which could have eaten this blood, until he was sure that his blood had flowed far beyond his country into the great Sepik river. Like the Kwoma, the Gnaou bleed into water. In addition the girls have their buttock scars cut over river boulders at initiation so that the blood flows into the river and, as with the Kwoma, an individual (but male *or* female) must not ingest his or her own blood – it is one of the cardinal Gnaou rules regarding blood.<sup>1</sup>

The second example concerns bleeding induced from the mouth and chewing betel and areca nut. Mouth-bleeding was done by the Gnaou after homicide, in the major male initiation rites called Tambin, and at a culminating rite of hunting by which a man, usually in his middle or late thirties, who had shown his prowess at hunting, became entitled to full knowledge of hunting magic and entitled as well to chew areca nut with lime which makes the betel juice bright red. Neither women nor young men were allowed to use lime. The Gnaou explained their cutting of the men's tongues and gums as something to make them fierce or 'teethed men' (*baningətasel*). To chew betel with lime was the privilege of men; they said if young men did so it would interfere with their success in hunting. Women chewed areca nut with ash as the young men did, until their reproductive life was over<sup>2</sup> and they had grandchildren, when the women too were allowed to chew with lime and spit bright red. As with smoking, where permitted use exactly paralleled the use of lime with areca nut, I obtained no particular explanation of why women should be forbidden lime except on grounds of custom and privilege. Privilege, scarce lime and selfish pleasure seemed adequate to explain the rules which favoured senior men without looking for some recondite symbolic explanation.

However a number of other peoples in the Sepik (Kwoma, Wogeo, Iatmul) also bleed men's mouths and the other sources mention it as part of the male initiation ritual. On Wogeo, the island of 'menstruating men', bleeding the tongue is the cruellest stage of initiation which precedes the time when a man first incises his penis. Hogbin, guided by his Wogeo information, explains that tongue-bleeding is done at puberty; it is, he says, 'in a sense a youth's first artificial menstruation, corresponding with the initial menstruation of a pubescent girl. The tongue is selected for the bleeding because hitherto he will have absorbed the worst of the pollution orally with mothers' milk . . . In a few years, when he is sufficiently mature for sexual intercourse, the penis will be the agent whereby

1 I was able to ask them, in 1975, whether the taboos on fish had anything to do with bleeding into streams or water, and they answered 'No'.

2 The Gnaou have a phrase *wap wutaləm wutaləm* which they use of a woman whose reproductive life is coming to an end or has ended; she has had many, many menstrual periods, and they are ending now. *Wap wutal* refers to something which has been hung up out of reach or put on a shelf high up.

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contamination is transferred. Accordingly in later life this is the organ that receives menstrual treatment' (1970, p. 114).

The Gnao do use occasional similes between copulation and eating, between mouth and vulva; a woman teased another who was slow at her work, 'You go on sitting there and teeth will come up in your vulva!' and female images are made in which the vulva is painted red and open and is lined by two rows of white Job's Tears seeds just the way the mouth and teeth of the figure are represented. But neither they nor I produced the simile which Abelam men do, so Anthony Forge tells me, who liken the blotches of red juice they spit on the ground to menstrual blood. The old women among Gnao may, like men, chew the areca nut with lime and spit red, and they no longer menstruate.

In both these examples, it seems possible to play with logic of a kind, and place an isolated observation in a context to which it had not seemed previously to belong. Tidiness, order and system please (as in Stephen Daedalus's version of Aquinas, *ad pulcritudinem tria requiruntur – integritas, consonantia, claritas . . . Pulcra sunt quae visa placent*), and they tempt one to select what will fit, rather than to remark what would not fit if one were as ingenious as a sceptic finding evidence to contradict the proposed system. There is certainly this hazard in the appeal of order, but if we discount it for the moment, the question remains of saying what use it is to suggest, by comparison within an area, possible or perhaps tendentious links of this sort; to find them where the people concerned ignore them, do not know them. A student of diffusion and survival might well be able to show a constellation of elements in the Sepik rituals of puberty and initiation which commonly recur, though variously assembled, sometimes with, sometimes without, the same interpretation. He might study the distributions of the elements because he was interested in their dispersal. Or another might follow Lévi-Strauss, with a hypothesis about how the human mind works, which justified or indeed required this manner of comparison to develop or test it (Lévi-Strauss 1958, ch. XI). Alternatively, a justification for comparison might be that a grasp of the common elements over a wide area enables one to discern the particular stresses, gaps or reformulations which are dependent on, or consistent with, the particular social constitution of one society compared with others in that area. To know what is ignored, *not* done or *not* recognised by one people, when other peoples around them do recognise it, may be to gain an illuminating perspective on those whom you have studied.

Expression in any medium draws on choice or selection from a limited set of possibilities; the more precisely you know what possibilities there are and what are the limits of the system, the more exactly you can understand the significance of a particular selection or performance, or of a departure from convention. You appreciate fine shades of expression in an actor, a piece of music or a painting, as you know well the conventions for restraint or flourish, say, in some gestural or artistic style. The analogy from interpreting expression in an artistic medium parallels quite closely the problems facing an anthropologist

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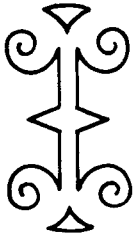
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when he wishes to assert that some ritual action, or some other behaviour, expresses a principle or value or a contradiction which is unstated, unrecognised by those who act, and is not directly apparent from the bald description of what happened. Gombrich (1960, 1963) has exposed with convincing wit and care the gross limitation to interpretations of artistic expression which are based on, or assume, a theory of natural signs or, as some name it, intuitive natural resonance. For my purpose, I would have you note especially his comments on the image in the cloud, and on how possible it is at some level of association to assign almost anything towards one or another pole of almost any clear dichotomy – his choice was ping or pong. Indeed, if it were not for this, how else could Osgood measure his semantic differentials? Gombrich argues that expression, and its interpretation, depends on choice and selection within a particular context and structure. The human body and its parts may be ‘natural’ symbols used to express things which we can guess to some degree intuitively, but only because we share with those we study some perceptions of the form, the senses and the limitations of our common frame.

*chapter two*

## PROBLEMS OF RITUAL IN GENERAL

**To begin with**

Let me begin by summarising how I shall develop the argument of this chapter. I shall seek to relate the problems of defining ritual to problems of understanding the symbols and expressions of other people. Part of the argument is on questions of interpretation in which the anthropologist may think it right to go beyond what his informants tell him.

The attempt to set ritual apart from other kinds of activity and define a clear boundary round it has not gained general support. I put first the reasons why no adequate case can be made for separating ritual sharply as a special kind of action distinct from others. To avoid these objections, others have put forward the view that ritual is an aspect of many actions, not a kind of behaviour. The ritual aspect of behaviour is its expressive, symbolical or communicative aspect. By this view, the identification of ritual comes to be inextricably bound to the ability to recognise expression, symbol and communication. In some cases, the people who perform these behaviours do not or cannot put into words what they express, symbolise or try to communicate by them. Then if the anthropologist makes an interpretation, he is the only one who has been able to put that interpretation into words. If he had not done so, then perhaps neither he nor we nor the people who performed it should have distinguished that aspect of the action. But that aspect is required for the identification of ritual according to this second view. And sometimes we feel almost sure something is ritual before we know or can think of any meaning for it.

Some people are quick to see the point of a joke, others are slow. Some see a suggestiveness about it which others miss. Some have fertile, inventive and daring imaginations; others more stolid remain earthbound, literal, and poetry is lost on them. But even such earthbound, prosaic people do sometimes see more than meets their eyes and they can be taught how to understand a symbolism or expression seen by others but not natural, familiar or intuitive to them. With effort and attention they can learn to see it, just as someone could learn from an expert by dint of patience and application how to interpret the tracks

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of animals in the snow. Or someone might learn to accept the meanings for his dreams which, though perhaps patent to his psychoanalyst, seem at first so strange to him that he would ridicule and deny such an understanding of himself. The point is that the ability to see or respond to symbols and expression varies with the cast of individuals' minds, their flair, their learning and interests, and the degree of attention they choose to give to something that presents itself to them. And anthropologists are in no way exempt from such human variations. If the anthropologist needs to be able to recognise symbol, expression or communication to identify ritual, must he then count towards ritual only whatever contains the symbols comprehended by the people and stop there, or go on and add whatever in the things he witnessed happened to feed his fancy; or are there other reasons by which to guide his attention and control his search and efforts at interpretation, if he would go beyond the part explained by the people?

If ritual may be the expressive or communicative aspect of almost any action, it becomes difficult to identify an unknown as this view makes the potential field for ritual encompass almost all behaviour. This seems odd on first acquaintance. To those who have not tried to work out a definition of ritual and not tried it against objections and the difficult test-cases, as to those who have not tried to fathom the technicalities of anthropology, 'ritual' and 'rites' are words of common speech that are readily enough applied to some conspicuous kinds of performance, for example, ones to do with religious worship. Even those anthropologists who rack their brains to define it agree that certain kinds of performances are ritual if anything is. There is a central area of general agreement; it is the periphery and the boundaries that are in dispute. I take the central area first, where there would be easy general agreement, and try to see what there is about such kinds of performances which make for this immediate, intuitive recognition. If it is possible to see what leads to this response in the central area where there is general agreement then we may be able to unravel some of the difficulties that lie towards the periphery. At this stage in the argument I am concerned with what produces such an immediate response in the anthropologist. He recognises the peculiar fixity of ritual, that it is bound by rules which govern the order and sequence of performance. These are clear and explicit to the people who perform it. It is a form of custom. The fixity, the public attention, the colour and excitement or solemnity that go with such performances are what catch the anthropologist's attention. He responds to this peculiar quality in ritual performances. It can guide him as to where to concentrate his efforts at interpretation. It may be present in great or small degree. For the time being it is the anthropologist who concerns me and the effect of the peculiar quality of ritual on him. At a later stage in this section I will return to the effect this quality has on the performers and participants.

I emphasise this quality so that the horse shall go before the cart and not the cart before the horse. The anthropologist would like to identify and interpret the symbolism in ritual. But this is often the hardest part of his work, the part



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he last understands and only after much effort and learning. He does not witness a performance and say to himself, 'Ah! this stands for that, and this for that, etc. Therefore these are symbols, therefore I have seen a ritual performance.' What he says is more likely to be, 'This is odd. This is ritual. Why do they do it like that? There is more to this than meets the eye. I must try to find out what.'

The alerting quality is variable, a matter of degree. Sometimes one may be unsure whether it is there or not. This fits with our immediate recognition that there is a central area which we nearly all would clearly recognise as ritual and then more and more doubtful instances peripherally. Ritual cannot be demarcated by a clear boundary from other kinds of custom. The numerous attempts to classify and distinguish different kinds of custom (for instance, into etiquette, ceremony, magic, religious ritual, etc.) appear to be attempts at distinguishing ideal types of custom from the standpoint of their chief intention or address. These genres of custom are formulated as ideal types. So we often find that an actual particular example does not fit surely or securely into just one such genre or category. But recognition of the chief intention or address in the custom is nonetheless important for a just and proper interpretation.

From this discussion of where to search and where to make an effort to interpret, I go on to the grounds by which we may come to understand expression and representation. I borrow many of my arguments from writers on aesthetics where the problems of interpreting the silent objects of art offer parallels to the problems which face the anthropologist who would go beyond what his informants tell him. In developing these issues, I come back to the performers and participants and discuss the peculiar quality of ritual from their point of view. A ritual may not be explained by the performers. Or the anthropologist may sometimes be told a great deal about it. Ritual performance may aim at clear, explicit symbolism or aim at mystery. I look at some of the methods by which mystery or clarity is achieved and suggest some guides for finding out what is aimed at.

Throughout this section, I try to maintain the distinction between expression and communication. I stress that if we wish to speak of communication proper, an intended and successful imparting of information is required. To liken ritual to communication by code or language gives some insight into it. But this simile, I think, has been taken to distorting lengths. It is more accurate to look on ritual as a performance, like a play, which is responded to in various ways: communication is only a part of it. To seek to explain ritual as though it were language or code, with methods appropriated (or misappropriated) from the disciplines that deal with them, carries the risk that we shall miss some of what is distinctive to ritual. Ritual is not exactly like language; it is not exactly like communication by means of a code nor can it be decoded like one. The complexity and uncertainty about a ritual's meaning is not to be seen just as a defect – a code too obscure, too hard to decipher, too easily garbled. It can also be a source of



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that strength, evocative power, resilience and mutability which may sometimes sustain and preserve ritual performance.

**Ritual is hard to define just as art is**

The word 'ritual' like the word 'art' does not have one commonly agreed definition; nor, if we resolve to avoid the uncertainty entailed by using it, is it easy to find a better or a satisfactory substitute. We find we have to use it and in many circumstances we do not doubt that we use it rightly even though it is hard to say exactly what it rightly means. Ritual and art pose some similar problems. We are sometimes uncertain how to distinguish a ritual act from a technique or a game; and we are sometimes uncertain how to separate an art from a craft or an amusement. So we may choose to say there is a ritual aspect to many actions; and we may choose to see artistry in many artefacts. What are those aspects that we point to by calling them ritual or artistic? Are they something to be found either in the action itself or the object itself as facts presented by it (which we either see or are blind to), and separable both from the intentions of those who do the action or make the object and from the interpretations of those who behold them? If fact cannot be in a clear way separated from interpretation, must we then decide on the presence or absence of these peculiar aspects by means of the purposes of those who do the actions or who make the objects, or by some recognition and interpretation on the part of those who behold them?

It has been argued (Collingwood 1938, p. 5; Tatarkiewicz 1963) that the Greeks of antiquity did not distinguish art from craft, and had no concept of art as we employ it; it has been argued that the Dobuans did not distinguish between what resulted from magical, and what from technological, ability in the accomplishment of their various ends (Fortune 1932, pp. 97–8). But we speak of the achievements of Greek art or of Dobuan technology and sometimes distinguish them from those of Greek crafts or Dobuan ritual. As for the beholder's part it could happen that as we walked along some familiar street we were asked to stop and look again at one house in it, and to recognise it as a work of art; or as Firth did with the turmeric paint-marks in Tikopia (1951, pp. 24–5) we might stop to look at something seen before and passed over casually, and recognise it for a ritual act. We might attend to something closely and see that the action we had taken no previous notice of had a ritual aspect, and that the house we had passed by, seeing it only as a habitation, was also an artistic achievement.

As with art so with ritual: they have both been likened to language and held to express or to communicate. With both there are performers (makers and doers), performances (action, objects, media) and beholders and interpreters. Is it just this expressive, communicative aspect that we point to when we say we recognise

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a ritual aspect in some action or an artistic aspect to some object? Or is this not enough?

Despite these parallels, we feel no temptation to substitute 'art' or 'artistic' for 'ritual' in most of the contexts where either one or another of the words occurs. What then do we mean by the word 'ritual'? If 'ritual' refers either to a particular kind of behaviour or a particular aspect of it which demands special attention for its description and analysis, we must first decide what kind or aspect this is to be, and learn to recognise it so that we can know where to exercise this attention, lest otherwise our efforts be misplaced and futile.

**Ritual refers to conduct or performance but not just any kind**

It is common now to find in an anthropological piece written in English that the word 'ritual' appears as an adjective used for convenience instead of 'magical' or 'religious', having the sense of either or both, avoiding the cumbersome 'magico-religious', and evading an otherwise forced decision which may be impossible to make that some belief or some action is either 'magical' or it is 'religious'. Goody (1961) discusses the attempts to differentiate magic from religion. He shows that 'ritual' has been used quite often as an adjective of compromise. When it is so used, it may 'designate the whole area of magico-religious acts and beliefs' (Goody 1961, p. 158). Such adjectival use is undeniably convenient: but it is a special kind of use in which ritual is made equal to exactly what 'magico-religious' is held to mean. Certain kinds of idea or feeling (belief, value or sentiment) are by such usage as rightly called 'ritual' as are certain kinds of behaviour or action.

But this goes against our traditional and unreflecting application of the word to conduct rather than ideas and feeling. It is odd to note how 'ritual' rather than 'rite' is the noun in common usage now in English; I think the reverse used to be the case for French. It is a word we apply essentially to performance. 'Ritual is not synonymous with the whole of a religious or magical system. It is, so to speak, the executive arm of such systems' (Fortes 1966a, p. 411). And indeed wherever the focus is primarily on defining the word 'ritual', we find action or behaviour made part of it.<sup>1</sup>

1 (a) Enfin les rites sont des règles de conduite qui prescrivent comment l'homme doit se comporter avec les choses sacrées' (Durkheim 1912, p. 56).

(b) 'a kind of patterned activity oriented towards the control of human affairs, primarily symbolic in character with a non-empirical referent, and as a rule socially sanctioned' (Firth 1951, p. 222).

(c) 'Ritual denotes those aspects of prescribed formal behaviour which have no direct technological consequence' (Leach 1964).

(d) 'When we speak of "ritual" we have in mind first of all actions exhibiting a striking or incongruous rigidity, that is, some conspicuous regularity not accounted for by the professed aims of the actions. Any type of behaviour may thus be said to turn into a "ritual" when it is stylized or formalized, and made repetitive in that form' (Nadel 1954, p. 99).