

Working, moving, visiting On the quality of everyday rituals

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If rituals are by definition phenomena that are set apart from everyday routines, how are we to understand the concept of “everyday ritual”? This paper suggests that everyday rituals could be defined as instances of behaviour that are so closely connected to ordinary tasks and duties that they seem to be more like parts of these routines than contrasts to them – while, at the same time, they are discernible by formal criteria as units in their own right. This definition is tried out on three examples of activities, concerning working, moving and visiting. It is further argued that though rituals are very interesting objects of study, they are not necessarily any more meaningful than other forms of behaviour.

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Accepting the invitation to discuss everyday rituals, I said it was irresistible because the topic is so difficult. There are several reasons why I find it difficult. First, the field of ritual theory is vast enough to make you feel that whatever you pick out to discuss, you will be simplifying matters unduly. Next, though I find the study of rituals very rewarding, I have often wished to question something that seems to me to be an implicit proposition in this field, namely the idea that rituals are better or more interesting objects of study than other forms of human behaviour. I will try to spell out my doubts in this matter in the end of the paper.

Basically, though, because I am an ethnologist, I welcome the opportunity to reflect seriously upon the category of “everyday ritual”. While “everyday” and “ritual” are both part and parcel of the standard toolkit of ethnologists, their combination into the concept “everyday ritual” seems to me to have been less fully discussed, and less well theorised. In the following, therefore, I will begin by sketching out a basic perspective on “ritual” and “everyday”, and then propose a working definition of “everyday ritual”. Next, this definition will be put to the test in connection with three examples of activities that may or may not be perceived as everyday rituals.

Premises and perspectives

Two books have been particularly important for my understanding of rituals. The first is “Secular Ritual” (Moore & Myerhoff 1977), in which anthropologists discuss how the concept of ritual can be rethought and used outside its traditional religious context, and the second is Handelman’s “Models and Mirrors: towards an anthropology of public events” (1998). Handelman does not himself embrace the term ritual, but it is obvious that what he is trying to alter by means of his book is our thinking about the activities that most of us are used to recognising as rituals, of one kind or another. What he suggests, basically, is that the study of those phenomena ought to focus closely on the various techniques for presentation and action that are at work in events of different kinds, with potentially very different implications.

A basic element in the definition of ritual, according to the perspectives represented in the above works, is that it is something set apart from ordinary, everyday life. Rituals take place at special times, in particular spaces, and consist of activities that differ from ordinary behaviour. The prime aspect of this difference seems to be that they stand out as more clear-cut,

more spectacular and more impressive than ordinary behaviour – and thereby as more imperative as well. As rituals draw their participants (of various kinds and degrees) into particular ways of acting and perceiving, these ways tend to be accompanied by special ways of feeling, thinking and relating to the world. Such connections between ways of acting and ways of understanding are discussed in fine detail in the essay on social memory and bodily practices by Connerton (1989). Admittedly, Connerton's reasoning has a certain bias towards ritual behaviour that is supportive of the social order, but we should expect connections of a similar kind to be present in all kinds of ritual settings – albeit with different characteristics and a variety of potential outcomes.

The above premises can serve as a useful point of departure for studying all kinds of rituals, religious as well as secular ones, but they are most urgently needed in the context of secular ritual theories. As long as rituals were understood as communication with divine or supernatural beings, they could be identified very much according to the ideas they articulated, that is, according to their religious content. When efforts were first made to look for ritual behaviour outside the religious domain, scholars had to rely on other, more general features for the purposes of identification and definition. Hence the focus on forms, or ways, of acting. As Bradley put it recently, rituals “are more easily identified as *actions of a specialised kind* than they are as propositions about the world” (Bradley 2005:33; references omitted, italics added).

How, then, should we think about the “everyday” character of rituals? In ordinary language, everyday tends to denote an ongoing flow of routine activities. One instructive dictionary explains it like this: “You use *everyday* to describe something which happens or is used every day, or forms a regular and basic part of your life, so it is not especially interesting or unusual” (*Cobuild English Dictionary* 1995). Everyday activities, then, are those that are repeated over and over again in a monotony that is only occasionally punctuated by something special, by something that is by definition more exciting, whether in a tragic or an amusing way. Likewise, “everyday” tends to refer more to work than to leisure, even though an ordinary week for an ordinary human being tends to include hours of rest as well as spells of work, in a manner that is often very predictable. This is a purely common-sense description, but it corresponds fairly well to certain lines of thought in phenomenological philosophy as they have been modified and incorporated into sociological

theory. In such traditions of thought, “everyday” refers primarily to a certain way of being in the world, to an outlook on life in which the individual is wide-awake and fully attentive to the surrounding tasks and activities (Berger & Luckmann 1967:21). The everyday life of an individual, then, could be viewed as a personal (yet also basically intersubjective) universe of demands and duties to be attended to with a high degree of consciousness and eagerness to act. From time to time, though, the individual might withdraw into a separate enclave characterised by some other form of consciousness or a different attitude towards the world. Theoretical thinking, or doubt, is one such alternative, and daydreaming and other kinds of mental escapes are others. This variation between moods and attitudes has been summed up in terms of “multiple realities” (Schutz 1973:207ff), and the various separate enclaves have also been identified as “finite provinces of meaning” (Schutz 1973:230), each characterised by its own “cognitive style” (Schutz 1973:232).

Against such a back-drop, it would seem reasonable to identify rituals as finite provinces of meaning, as special occasions on which particular moods prevail and the reality of everyday life is temporarily bracketed. Many ritual studies, no doubt, are premised and motivated by such lines of thought, or very similar ones. But such a stance would pose a problem for us here, since it would make “everyday ritual” a blatant contradiction in terms. The more you stress that rituals are constituted by being set apart from everyday routines, and by being in radical contrast to everything that has an everyday quality, the harder it becomes to envisage a kind of ritual that is firmly embedded in such routines, or shares vital characteristics with everyday behaviour. Nevertheless, I believe that this is how we ought to think about everyday ritual: as an activity that is so closely connected to ordinary tasks and duties that it seems to be more like a part of these routines than a contrast to them – while remaining discernible on formal criteria as a unit in its own right. Furthermore, although more tentatively, I would also suggest that everyday rituals may have an element of cherishing the routines that they are a part of, or refer to. But since this definition is in the nature of a suggestion, let us test it out on three examples.

Working

The setting of the first example is a small bakery in Stockholm, where I worked as a shop assistant in the late 1970s. The baker was old enough to be my

father, and very kind. The shop was run by his wife, of the same age, and a couple of retired ladies from the neighbourhood. I was the first young girl they had employed, and they did so with a certain hesitation, looking at my school reports and saying the bakery was really nothing for me. We took turns in the shop, working alone on Monday – Thursday, and in pairs on Fridays and Saturdays, the busiest days. My working hours were 8 am–1 pm, with the sole exception of Wednesday, when I was always on the afternoon shift, from 1 to 6 pm. Almost every Wednesday I made a little extra effort to scrub the floor in the bakery itself, and as far as I remember, the baker never failed to appreciate this. The neighbourhood was a quiet one, inhabited mostly by elderly people who had raised their families in small apartments during the 1930s and 1940s. The majority of the customers were regulars, people living nearby, or employees at a couple of local companies who came to fetch buns and biscuits for their coffee breaks and had their purchases recorded in small notebooks for payment later. Young customers were seldom seen.

The little piece of ritual behaviour that I have in mind consisted of a formalised conversation which the baker and I performed roughly twice a week. When I arrived on Monday morning, one of us would say: "So, it's Monday again". The other would reply: "It is always the same" (or, in Swedish, more poetically: "*Det är aldrig annat*"). Saturday mornings, we repeated the same phrase, but changing the name of the day.

Why should we consider this a ritual? I think we could do so because of the utmost repetitive character of the conversation – and the meaningfulness behind it that still makes me cherish the memory. I was fond of the baker, and of the time we spent together. We shared a microcosm that was, at least on weekdays, quiet and calm and sometimes boring. I enjoyed it because of this character, and because of the friendly atmosphere that could be sensed between us. I cannot know for sure what the baker felt and thought. But I think he enjoyed those days, too, because when, after about fifteen months, I began to study full-time and reduced my work in the bakery to once or twice a week, I heard him say to a visitor on the last day of my ordinary schedule: "It's quite a pity, it is the last day we have the girl here. Of course, she'll come back. But it won't be the same". And it never was. As our full, circular weeks, repeating themselves over and over again, shrunk to five hours twice a week, some of the magic was lost. And I guess this was so because our lives drifted apart, too, as I moved further into my studies, away

from the routine job that they had predicted I would not keep for long.

Thus monotony and repetitiveness are crucial factors for the identification of a ritual quality in this first example, along with my intense feeling that our conversation had a deep existential meaning that both of us were aware of in one way or another.

Moving

The next example is quite the contrary. It is drawn from "Nomads of South Persia" (Barth 1980), based on fieldwork carried out in the spring of 1958 among the Basseri, living in southern Iran. The focus of the book is mainly on their social organisation and subsistence activities (cattle breeding), but there is also an appendix, entitled "The ritual life of the Basseri", where Barth reflects upon what he calls their "poverty of ritual activities" (Barth 1980:135). There were few actions, he noted, that seemed to be informed by beliefs, and those ritual elements that did exist seemed to occur "without reference to each other, or to important features of the social structure" (Barth 1980:135). In brief, if you came to the Basseri expecting to have vital aspects of their culture or social structure highlighted by a system of rituals, you were bound to be disappointed. It seems to be characteristic of the author that he used this experience as an opportunity to question his own expectations of ritual and those of his fellow anthropologists. In the course of his reasoning he made very much the same claim as Bradley did many years later, that it would be unwise to draw a sharp dividing line between the technical and the symbolic aspects of actions, and, likewise, it would be unwise to expect the symbolic aspects to be expressed only in very special forms (Barth 1980:147). There is no reason, he wrote, "why the very forms of an act which reflect the technical imperatives may not *also* be vested with central and crucial meaning in a symbolic system or context" (Barth 1980:147, italics in the original).

Returning to his field material with these propositions in hand, it became clear to him that the economic adaptation of the Basseri – that is, "camping and herding and travelling" (Barth 1980:147) – was invested with a very special meaning for them, and that this fact was made particularly clear in the context of what he calls the "great migration". This term refers to the journey, lasting 9–10 weeks, by which the entire group moved together from the lowland plains up to their pasture areas in the mountain district. Barth lists

several arguments for his claim (Barth 1980:148–149). First, time and space were interpreted among the Basseri according to the limits set by this migration (another way to put this, I think, might be that migration contributed strongly to the shaping of their perceived reality, just as many rituals do). Secondly, when the Basseri talked about their history, recalling the end of a period when they had been forced to be sedentary, they described this in terms that gave priority to the experience of moving at the expense of the subsistence activities that necessitated moving. Furthermore, some of them took part in the great migration even if they did not have to do so for practical reasons. Some took very few animals with them, others none at all. If migration had been just a practical activity connected with having herds, the people who had no animals would not have had to join in. But they did, apparently for other, potentially more existential reasons.

The most fascinating part of Barth's reasoning, in my opinion, is the point at which he sets out to measure the people's emotional involvement in the migration, by checking and noting at what time in the mornings, and at what speed, they came out of their tents, gathered their animals, packed their belongings and set out (Barth 1980:149). He claims to see a pattern here: "Tension – if indeed this is what is being measured – builds up progressively within shorter cycles of 3–6 days, before it is broken by a day or two of camping and rest, followed by a new cycle of build-up" (Barth 1980:152). Once the people had reached the summer pastures, the tension was eased and the tempo changed. By then, too, the group had started to disperse over vast areas.

What we meet up with here is a practical, technical activity, which seems at the same time to be invested with a heavy load of existential meaning. This quality is manifested by the ways in which the activity shapes people's perceptions of time and space, by the way in which they talk about it, by their eagerness to participate in it, and by their emotional involvement in it. And the latter is revealed not least by intensity, hurry, and excitement. Admittedly, Barth never states that this migration constitutes a ritual, and he certainly does not use the concept "everyday ritual". What he does conclude is that the great journey seems to be for the Basseri what anthropologists have often expected rituals to be for other people: "The Basseri differ from many people in that they seem to vest their central values in, and express them through, the very activities most central to their ecologic adaptation." (Barth 1980:153).

Visiting

My third example brings us back to calmer and more sedentary surroundings: a village of some 650 inhabitants in northern Sweden, referred to here by the fictive name of Keskijärvi. I did fieldwork there in the 1980s, for a total of a little more than half a year, for a dissertation that was by and large a questioning of the status of the place as a community (Blehr 1994).

What I want to draw attention to here is a practice of informal visiting, presented by the villagers as a local institution. The visits in question were acted out as follows: a person walks up to the house of a relative or friend. He might knock very lightly on the door and enter the house without waiting for a reply, or he might just as well walk straight in. He goes into the kitchen and takes a seat, preferably on a piece of furniture close to the door. He does not remove his coat. Small talk is exchanged, and after a while, he is offered coffee. This should not be done too fast. I was told that if the host or hostess produced coffee too soon, this was a rude demonstration of the fact that he or she did not want the visit to last very long. When coffee is served, the guest will take his jacket and cap off. Visits may vary in length, but the coffee cups will be filled at least twice or three times. When the guest is leaving, there are no elaborated phrases of goodbye and seldom any specification of when the parties might meet again. Most likely, it will happen before long.

As a fieldworker, I became interested in those visits for several reasons. One was that they were pointed out to me – a stranger from the south of Sweden – as a distinctive trait of local culture: here in the north, we go visiting, whereas down south, they (that is, people like you) do not. People in the south of Sweden, villagers claimed, did not care about each other, and did not visit each other, unless they were sent invitation cards. These cards, metaphorically speaking, depicted the southerners as stiff, formal, and upper-class, everything that a villager ought not to be.

Furthermore, visits were formalised in their own low-key mode. You had to act in a particular way to perform an informal visit: you had to choose the right door to knock on lightly, behave properly once you entered, and leave at the right time. And the little detail that people came and left with few comments or greetings seemed particularly important to me, as a materialisation of the continuous and trusting nature of their relationships. I reflect upon form here partly from my own experience, as it was thrilling to try to master the manners of a local visitor. It could be highly

enjoyable when I occasionally succeeded in being in the proper place in the proper way, having coffee and answering questions and sharing information in ways that resembled those of the villagers. At the same time, it is embarrassing to think of how I must have violated the local codes when I came in too soon, went to the wrong house, stayed too long, or used this local form of being together for purposes that were mine alone.

The ritual quality in this case can be described as a combination of repetitiveness, conventionalised behaviour and meaningfulness. Meaning was expressed, as in Barth's case above, by the actual visiting, but also verbally. By proudly describing visiting as a local practice, the villagers seemed to me to be articulating their own feeling of being at home in a universe that they knew, mastered and, in a way, loved. To most of the inhabitants, then, Keskijärvi was this local universe. Contrary to this, however, some people who had moved into Keskijärvi from small hamlets in the surroundings referred to it as an anonymous place, where people did not visit, and portrayed their own places of origin as communities where people went visiting. To them, their real local home was another place, to which they would happily return whenever they had a weekend off. In a broader national perspective, though, native villagers and incomers alike could unite in using informal visits as an emblem of regional and social identification.

Second thoughts: on rituals as vehicles of meaning

The above examples give some idea of what everyday rituals might be like and how they may be connected with, or embedded in, the processes of everyday life. There are no doubt many complications left to discuss. For archaeologists, the most obvious one might be that none of the activities discussed above is likely to leave material traces, or that it would most certainly be impossible to distinguish their potential material remnants from traces of activities lacking any ritual quality. But I will leave those reflections to one side here and return instead to the question of ritual and meaning.

As stated initially, I do find it worthwhile to study rituals of all kinds, everyday and not so everyday. Since rituals can say something to people, do something with people and make people do things, they must be vehicles of meaning, and should indeed merit our scholarly interest.

My second thought is simply this: to what degree

does this make rituals different from other instances of social interaction? Does not every piece of social activity say something to people and do something with people? Does not everything that is said and done convey meaning – to the persons involved, and to scholars observing their actions or the traces of these actions?

One example will do. In his book on rituals and domestic life in prehistoric Europe, Bradley discusses how patterns of housing seem to recur in ceremonial contexts (Bradley 2005:41ff). The thrust of the argument seems to be that prehistoric rituals reused, or referred to, constructions, artefacts and habits from the domestic sphere, and that this contributed to a certain kind of ritual power. This is certainly so, but at the same time, my imagination spins off in another direction: what about the experience of living in a house – in an ordinary domestic dwelling? Does not this very living leave its imprint on our bodies, our habits, our skills, our thoughts, and our outlook on the world?

I should admit that when I first reflected upon this, my body was inside a house that is not quite ordinary, a dark timber cottage with its heavy walls blackened from the smoke of an open fireplace that was once located on the former earthen floor. Its windows are very small and its doorways very low. Living in that house, if only during vacations, means a lot to me. It forces my muscles to work and changes my body into something stronger and more sinewy than my life in the city can produce, and it grants me a more acute sensitivity to temperatures, whether too low, too high or pleasantly in-between. Perhaps in the long run it will also harm my eyes, since the sources of light are so tiny. In sum, the experience of living, performing and acting in that house contributes very much to my (late modern) construction of my self, exactly as much, I would say, as my participation in rituals of all kinds, from the grandest and most spectacular to the more humble and tiny ones. Perhaps you would like to counter the argument by saying that the experience of living in a timber cottage is not an everyday one for a city dweller in our time. You would be right to a certain extent, but in a way it is. I have stayed for long enough in that house over the years for it to produce its own routines and repetitions, to form an alternative everydayness. It is a privilege if you are inclined that way, and sometimes rather monotonous as well.

This is not meant to detract from the value of Bradley's argument. I am sure that the migration of items from the domestic, or everyday, sphere into a ritual one is just as crucial as he suggests for the workings of ritual. What I want to question is merely the over-

arching and less explicit assumption that because rituals are carried out with more emphasis, they are also more heavily charged with meaning. Though Bradley wants to question the sharp division between the ritual and the domestic/technological sphere, he seems to continue to insist that there is another division, between more or less meaningful actions. To me, this seems akin to reproducing the essence of a difference that he wants to erase, albeit in a more sophisticated manner.

So, to sum up: we may very well study rituals because they are attractive to us as vehicles of meaning, but we should beware of thinking that they are necessarily better or more effective vehicles than non-ritual activities. And we should also beware of believing that they are in any way easier for us to analyse than non-ritual activities, because they are not. There may always be room for multiple understandings of a ritual, and the question of what it does, or did, to its participants is always an open-ended one. Rituals can repeat things we hear every day, or state something that is seldom mentioned outside the ritual context. They can assert ancient ideas, or try to have novelties accepted. They

can force people into compliance, or stir them to rebellion. And whatever a ritual is intended to say and do, its design can never thoroughly determine participant experience – which is, after all, the most important locus at which ritual meaning is created.

English language revision by Malcolm Hicks.

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