An adequate definition of the concept of “ceremonial” would require discussion of at least three other terms: “ritual,” “religion,” and “symbol.” All these notions are used in an imprecise and elastic way in the anthropological and historical literature because a universally accepted theory of the phenomena that they designate is still lacking. For a long time, the terms “ritual” and “ceremonial” were used as synonyms, or nearly so, with a certain preference for “ceremonial.” In more recent years they have been distinguished among some scholars, but most of them criticize this distinction, especially the content attributed to each term, and prefer to utilize the notion of “ritual,” giving it an extremely broad meaning.

From 1922, with the analysis of ceremonies of the aborigines of the Andaman Islands (Bay of Bengal), A. R. Radcliffe-Brown set the terms of debate, distinguishing three levels of social behavior: 1) the “moral customs” by means of which relations among individuals are regulated by principles of “good” or “bad” conduct; 2) the “utilitarian” activities in which a goal is obtained through some “technical” means, interpretable in terms of “rationality,” and finally; 3) “ceremonial” activities, which have no utilitarian end and which are distinguished by moral customs because they stand in no immediate relation with the effects that the action of one person has on another person. For Radcliffe-Brown, ceremonial is a means of maintaining social order. Influenced by Émile Durkheim and A. F. Shand, he thinks this order depends on an accord among the sentiments of the members of a group, that is, on an organized system of emotional tendencies polarized around certain objects that have social value. “Ceremonial” is the instrument with which these collective emotional states are produced, and without which they could not exist (Radcliffe-Brown 1922).
Ceremonies that constitute a ceremonial system are therefore symbolic acts, expressive of social structure, and as such are not intelligible in terms of relations among means and end—hence in “rational” terms. The theory of Radcliffe-Brown implies that it is impossible to distinguish—as he himself notes—between ceremonial, art, play, dance, etc. All these behaviors, insofar as they are social, are fundamentally the same thing and it is arbitrary to separate them conceptually. The term “ceremonial” thus has an extremely broad significance. From ceremonial Radcliffe-Brown distinguishes partially only magic, which for him has a nonsocial or anti-social dimension.

The successors of Radcliffe-Brown have attempted to distinguish various categories of ceremonial, almost always utilizing “ritual” and “ceremonial” as synonyms. They are preoccupied above all with opposing the various categories of rituals in terms of belief. Certain formalized behaviors (etiquette, for example) can be defined as ceremonials or rituals, but are not associated with religious beliefs. Thus S. F. Nadel (1954: 99) feels the need to distinguish between a general sense of the term “ritual” (that is, “extremely formalized action”) and a religious sense.

Establishing that certain expressive behaviors are “irrational” and others only “nonrational” (as Pareto had shown), Monica Wilson (1957: 9) has sought to give content to the distinction between “ritual” and “ceremonial.” For her “ritual” is a religious action whose end is to obtain benefits from a supernatural power. Symbols and concepts would be used in ritual, subordinating them to “practical” ends (abundant harvests, success, recovery, etc.). “Ceremonial” would instead be an elaborated and conventional form of expression of feelings, not limited to religious occasions.

Jack Goody (1961), for his part, proposes a tripartite classification among ritual, religion, and ceremonial, which moves away from those of his predecessors. “Ritual” is a category that designates a formalized behavior (a “custom”) in which the relation between end and means is irrational or nonrational. Magic is an example of this, since, according to Goody, it has a pragmatic end which its procedures do not lead to. His category “religion” instead corresponds to the category “religious ritual” of Nadel and to the category “ritual” of Wilson: it is a behavior that has as its addressee a personalized, mystic power. Religious behaviors can be irrational (for example, according to Goody, many forms of sacrifice and prayer) or nonrational (for example, certain feasts). The definition of “ceremonial” is negative: it designates a
“category of ritual” that is neither religious nor magical, that neither presupposes the existence of supernatural powers nor has practical ends; it can, however, have certain “ends”—the (ideological) points of view of actors—and certain “latent functions” from the point of view of the observer. Examples: the ceremony of civil matrimony, ceremonies of “settlement” in politics, and so forth.

That which for Radcliffe-Brown was a collection of phenomena of its own nature, the “meaning” of which consisted in expressing and perpetuating the social structure, is for Goody a series of distinct phenomena, founded on diverse “beliefs.” In particular, he rejects the idea that religion is definable simply as a reflection of the social structure, since it requires an illusion: the belief in supernatural beings. Ritual and ceremony, on the other hand, do not necessarily imply this illusion and therefore have quite little in common with religion and the “sacred,” by contrast with what Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown thought.

Max Gluckman (1962) has elaborated a more complicated classification than that of Goody, in which the opposition between ritual and ceremonial has a meaning related to that given it by Wilson. Like Radcliffe-Brown, Gluckman gives to the term “ceremonial” a very broad meaning, namely: every organization of action which is not specifically technical or recreational, and which expresses social relations by means of particular behaviors that symbolize them. At the heart of the category “ceremonial” he distinguishes between “ceremonious” behavior and “ritual” behavior. “Ritual” refers to mystic notions not derived from experience and therefore from those of “common sense.” Without mystic notions, ceremonial behavior is “ceremonious.” Thus, for example, the parade for the anniversary of the October revolution is for Gluckman a “ceremonious” behavior, while the procession of Corpus Christi is “ritual.” Both, however, have common functions from the social point of view.

The opposition between “ceremonious” and “ritual” permits Gluckman to formulate the following hypothesis: 1) the more important the segregation of roles in the social structure and less important the recourse to “ritual,” the less “mystical” ideas are linked with ceremonial behaviors; 2) the more roles are undifferentiated and superimposed, the more recourse to ritual is necessary in order to separate them.

The opposition between “ritual” and “ceremonious” behavior is therefore, in reality, the opposition between two phases of social evo-
Gluckman puts tribal societies in which roles (for example, those of the father, the uncle, the chief, the priest, etc.) are confused within the same person or undifferentiated, and must therefore be separated in a fictitious way on certain ritual occasions so as to avoid and resolve eventual conflicts between roles and produce an equilibrium that is sanctioned by belief in a “prosperity” ensured by the ancestors or the gods; on the other side he puts modern societies, in which roles are separated in reality, though often in permanent conflict, and exercised in distinct spheres of social life and in relation to different individuals in each one. However even in modern society there are situations and institutions in which the networks of relations intersect and become confused and in which therefore recourse to the ceremonial sometimes becomes necessary. A study by Elizabeth Bott, cited by Gluckman (1962), shows that in the city of London, when the network of kinship relations in a family tends to coincide with the network of relations of neighborhood, friendship, and work, the roles of husband and wife tend to be ceremonially distinct, or [defined] in terms of “custom.” That, in turn, permits the conjugal relationship—which otherwise risks being “submerged” in the others—to be kept distinct.

Ceremonial—religious or not—tends to appear above all in moments in which an individual passes from one role to another (for example: matrimony, investiture in a political or administrative task) and must therefore be “separated” symbolically from his or her preceding role and “aggregated” to the new role; or when the passages concern the calendar of a whole society (ceremonies of passages from one year to another, etc.). These ceremonials presuppose “spectators,” who are members of the social group which represents itself or modifies its own internal relations or its relations with the individual who passes from one role to another.

According to the theory represented by Gluckman, two aspects therefore characterize ceremonial: 1) it distinguishes, using particularly impressive symbols, the categories that risk appearing confused in social life; 2) it represents by means of metaphors associated with social relations that which those relations ideally ought to be and the values that they imply. In this way, by “dramatizing” the social structure, ceremonial acts upon real relations so as to modify or readjust them (cf. Nadel 1951).

Ceremonial phenomena therefore are “theatrical” phenomena and are not fundamentally different from aesthetic ones, even if they have
a more directly social dimension than artistic phenomena in modern society. With ceremonial, society stages itself, representing its values, its lines of fission and its contradictions. The actor in a ceremony legitimates his status by “playing” his part according to a prescribed model and in a symbolic situation: this holds whether for the ritual installation of a sacred king or a priest, or for the “ceremonious” (Gluckman) or “ceremonial” (Wilson) behavior of anyone who gives or receives a greeting, takes off his hat, or carries food to his mouth with a fork instead of a knife.

If formally and functionally “ceremonial” and “ritual” are therefore the same thing, why distinguish them? The authors cited above justify the distinction in terms of belief: ritual or religious ritual imply belief in a supernatural sanction; they refer to mystic notions “not verified by experience.” Ceremonial would instead be only nonrational and would do nothing but “dramatize” the social structure.

But it is easy to counter that even ceremonial behavior implies emotions and mixed notions, as well as recourse to a “mystique,” which is not lesser than that of “primitive” religious rituals. In ceremonial, notions like that of “charisma,” attributed, for example, to a person who has a certain status, are expressed in a more or less conscious way (similarly for the notion of the opposition of the sexes and above all for the mixed and emotional ideas of “honor,” “shame,” and “appearance”). R. H. Lowie even thinks that ceremonial behavior may reflect some “essentially nonrational nature of man,” an “end in itself,” justified by the need for aesthetic satisfaction and social stability (cf. Lowie 1930: 314).

The classificatory distinctions and subdistinctions therefore risk losing sight of the fact that we are in the presence of a unitary phenomenon. In fact, any social behavior entails a relationship to norms: as such it has a “ritual” or “symbolic” or “ceremonial” dimension, whatever one wants to call it, which communicates the relationship to those norms and the position within the social system of the one who is acting. From this point of view, every form of communication, even spoken language, has a “ritual” dimension. But if it is true that the opposition between sacred and profane does not coincide with that between “ritual” and “pragmatic” (by contrast with what Durkheim and his school claimed), it is therefore also true that one cannot limit oneself to formulating a definition that ignores ideological differences between the various levels of ritual communication. In no society are all systems of communication put on the same level and considered
equivalent. The ideological code in which each type of “communicative” behavior is inscribed must therefore be considered part of this behavior.

The opposition between “sacred” and “profane,” between “religious” and “nonreligious,” is pertinent in many societies and gives rituals a value and a different status. No believer would be disposed to admit that the ritual of the mass is a phenomenon of the same nature as that which consists in removing one’s hat in a house. The two phenomena are conceptualized in a different way and have a different significance for a social subject. Naturally both forms of behavior are associated with vague and even mystical notions; they are not explained and accepted in “rational” terms. However, in terms of consciousness, they are lived and valued differently: they signify and communicate in a different way.

The code chosen for social communication is therefore an important element of the message; it communicates something in and of itself. In this sense, unless one decides that religion is a negligible form of “rationalization” of the social structure and is not a pertinent object of sociology, it is necessary to introduce some distinctions into the vast field of “ritual.”

In every ritual situation, communication among the real “actors” happens by referring to an imaginary “actor,” but one who serves to sanction the content of the communication and gives it a specific form. In religious ritual, communication among real actors takes place in an indirect way—that is, it passes through god, or an ancestor—who is the imaginary receiver and emissary in the communicative process. By communicating with god, men communicate in reality among themselves. The reference to the imaginary even exists in nonreligious ritual, but communication happens directly among real persons; it does not pass through god. The imaginary intervenes as a sanction and a guarantee of the content of communication and of the position of everyone in the channels within the system of communication, but it is a more abstract and less personalized entity whose function is only regulative.

Imaginary entities of this type are “honor,” “shame,” “appearance,” “tradition,” “opportunity”: they are vague notions with which men hurry to justify their nonreligious ritual behavior. Let us propose to identify this last with “ceremony.”

The notions that intervene in ceremonial ideology all have something in common: they refer to social prestige, to recognition of the
intrinsic value of a person or group; they confer a legitimacy on their status, their titles, their roles. In order to indicate this legitimacy, many societies utilize the notions of “honor” or equivalent notions, all of which for convenience we will call “honor.” Since this notion is familiar to us but we use it in a vague way, we will be able, by clarifying it, to understand the presuppositions of ceremonial behavior by starting from our own experience.

The notion of honor and ceremony
The notion of honor utilizes the ideal personality that a society associates with individual roles, and with the individual in general, as a yardstick for judging the value and rank of everyone (cf. Peristany 1965). This is characteristic of societies or of sectors of social life in which personal relationships predominate. When relationships are personal, they tend to take a codified, ceremonial form and to be sanctioned by honor or by dishonor. Honor expresses itself by means of pride, which is authorized by possession of a certain status, by a certain social identity, and more generally by the correct use of rules that govern behaviors in which symbolic content is preponderant.

But the pretension to honor and status must be ratified by the community; it requires a consensus. This consensus can be constantly up for discussion, and social approval can diminish and with it honor—the prestige that accompanies it. Honor, “appearances,” “fame” are hence always submitted to the tribunal of public opinion. Anyone who pretends to honor must show himself worthy of it by complying with prescribed forms of behavior, indeed accentuating them; from this comes the importance of the “point of honor.” The dependence of honor on consensus and public opinion makes it such that it can be acquired and lost, so that every pretension to honor and status implies necessarily a faith in whoever already possesses that status and that honor. Honor is then acquired by being made lost to someone else: one’s own honor implies the dishonor of others. As Julian Pitt-Rivers has noted, the emblematic personality of the code of honor is Don Juan, who seeks honor in its defiance or acquisition by dishonoring others through their women (in Peristany 1965: 33). The man of honor is one who insults his fellow creature with impunity and who is not himself insulted with impunity: he is in perpetual defiance; he is always on stage. In Renaissance Italy the offender acquired honor that he had removed from the offended: “to take away” honor meant “to remove it for oneself“ (cf. Bryson 1935: 85).
In its extreme forms, this competitive ideology implies an individualism which, however, is always moderated by the necessity of taking stock of public opinion, by the necessity of following a code and of representing it in its own act—of acting “ceremonially.” The insult, the “denial of honor,” and so forth, therefore follow minute codes, which cannot be violated with impunity without provoking dishonor.

In some societies, honor and its connected ceremonials have a less mobile and personal character. Personal honor would have to legitimate precedence but it is precedence that gives personal honor, since no one can challenge anyone who precedes him in the hierarchical order, at least to acquire the necessary power. The king, for example, is above challenges to honor; he cannot be dishonored. The affirmation of the king’s honor is one of the themes and principal objectives of all ceremonies of the court.

In societies wherein hierarchy is hereditary or more fixed, defiance of honor is limited to persons who belong to the same social rank. In relationships of inequality, honor is created and perpetuated by ceremonies of acceptance on the part of the inferior, of the precedence of the superior one. Honor then consists in “sticking to one’s proper place,” in being legitimately, by common consensus, in a certain position of status.

The necessity of the challenge, or its hereditary character, assures a certain permanence to the hierarchical distribution of honor. This permits it to function at a political level. Anyone who has honor can in fact, without losing it, violate a certain number of rules of honor if no one can either succeed in contesting him in a challenge or “putting him to shame.” Honor therefore requires the power to keep it. But at the same time honor gives power, because it permits the one who has it to violate certain rules without being disapproved of. There are rules for violating rules, and these rules are fundamentally “political.” The political enters into conflict with honor, and therefore only the man of honor—the man who does not risk losing his honor—can utilize it.

Hence a conflict, but also a complementarity, between honor and power, which explains why political power is often exercised by means of control of ceremonies. One is then dealing with a power that expresses itself through personal charisma, in which norms appear as facts of experience: the honor of a person is seen, felt, manifested. The ceremony of honor is expressed in fact, as Pitt-Rivers has noted, by means of a corporeal symbolism: honor is an “aura,” which circles
the body of the man of honor and defines an inviolable, “sacred” space; the head of the man “honored,” the man “of respect”—symbol of his individuality—is the place of maximum concentration of his “sacredness,” of his personal charisma, his “personality.” Ceremonies frequently involve his head, which is uncovered and bowed; the man of high status walks “at the head,” “at the fore”; he is “at the head” of a social group, and so forth. The installation of an individual in a position of honor is made by means of rituals focused on his head: the imposition of a crown, of a headdress, etc. The head of a person of rank cannot be touched with impunity; in Polynesia it is the object of a particularly rigorous taboo.

In all these ceremonies there is at play not so much reference to a “god” who transcends social relations as the “divinization” of one of the partners in the relationship: the partner in whom the legitimacy of power and honor—and thus its sanction—is manifested as a fact of experience. If the touch of the French and English kings cured scrofula, the touch of the Polynesian chiefs produced sickness or death. In all these ceremonies, status is ratified by means of a test (Does charisma exist or not? Does the individual who carries out a task carry it out legitimately?), which directly concerns the persons and their powers, without which the relationship would need to pass through a third, imaginary person (a god).

It is naturally difficult to draw a clear distinction between “religious” rituals and “nonreligious” rituals. Even in Europe, attempts to lead ceremonies of honor back into the bosom of religion and to sanction the human hierarchy in divine terms have not been lacking. In one and the same society, two different ritual languages can coexist and interfere with one another. But in relations in which the ideology of honor dominates, there is only one god, one sacred thing: the person and his value, his charisma. Everyone possesses a bill of honor, of fame: everyone is therefore, in his way, a “person.” But this can be so for him only insofar as he “represents” his own honor, his own value, on occasions and in relationships in which it is put to the test; and only insofar as he incarnates in his own behavior an ideal and normative personality accepted by society—insofar as he transforms the rules that govern society through deeds that assume a symbolic value in others’ experience. The person is then a person. The “ceremonial” ideology, the ideology of honor and of fame, divinizes the man without necessarily referring to an imaginary god who is not already incarnate in the man himself.
Some ceremonies
We may now seek to show through some examples how all the behaviors called “ceremonial” are more or less narrowly tied to the ideology of “honor,” “fame,” and “glory,” and reflect it in their structure. From what has been said up until now, it emerges that the existence of ceremonial behaviors is more likely in hierarchized societies in which a competition for honor and rank exists. The examples that follow illustrate this thesis.

Hierarchy is often manifested in linguistic “ceremonial” forms, that is, in forms in which the lexical or stylistic choice depends on the hierarchical context and rules of social interaction. Linguistic behavior must then be expressive of the range and relationship of each partner: it is thereby “ceremonial.” One of the most impressive examples of the ceremonial functioning of the linguistic is offered by the Javanese language, in which sometimes “the simplest conversation seems to be a grand ceremony” (Geertz 1960: 254).

In Javanese there exist three linguistic levels: ngoko, madya, and krama, called “stylemes” by Clifford Geertz. Every styleme is characterized by its own lexical forms. Furthermore, there are “honorific” terms, partially independent of the lexical triads of the three stylemes. These terms refer to persons, parts of the body, objects of property, human actions. They are utilized, in general, in ngoko and in krama. The rules are quite complicated, but suffice it to say that a Javanese person can choose among at least six linguistic levels:

1) the lowest level;
2) the lowest level with honorifics at an inferior level;
3) the lowest level with honorifics at a superior level;
4) the middle level;
5) the superior level;
6) the superior level with honorifics at a superior level.

For example, the phrase “will you eat rice now?” is executed this way at level 6): menapa spanjenengan bade dahar sekul samenika?; and this way at level 1): apa kowé arep mangan sega saiki?

The linguistic choices depend on the relative social position of the speakers, the place in which they are speaking, the occasion, the sub-
ject of their conversation, their sex, their age, their occupation, their wealth, the family to which each of the speakers belongs, and finally their attitudes and individual idiosyncrasies. Roughly speaking, ngoko is spoken among rural people or among any persons who share intimate relations and the same status among them, or by a person of an elevated rank when speaking with a country person. It is the first form learned by children, but it is utilized only up to a certain age when addressing their parents. Madya is used among city people who do not have relations of friendship, and sometimes by city people when they speak with strangers of their same class or with their superiors. Krama is used among aristocrats who do not have intimate relations. Honorifics are used by differentiating even more minutely the social position of the speakers and their relations.

The system is extremely complicated, but it permits the status and “honor” of everyone to be expressed. It also permits challenges to status, the inflicting of offense or dishonor by using inappropriate forms. It thus has an important “ceremonial” dimension because it communicates not only at the semantic level, but also at the “pragmatic” one. Every linguistic exchange confirms or restructures hierarchical relations among speakers, communicates their “honor.”

Language is also used ceremonially in other societies, but not necessarily at the lexical level. Among the Māori (New Zealand) speeches are the principal component of hui, that is, of all ceremonial gatherings that happen in marae (“temples,” gathering places) on occasions of matrimony, funerals, inaugurations, acts of submission, arrivals of guests, etc. The hui are “ceremonies of encounter” in which the status and honor of groups that meet one another are expressed and put to the test in a challenge that consists of oratorical duels and presentations of gifts (cf. Salmond 1975). The main preoccupation of Māori is the acquisition and preservation of mana (prestige, honor, etc.). The hui permits everyone’s mana to be manifested and occasionally modified. The greater the distance between groups that meet one another, the more perfectly executed, formalized, and complicated the ceremony must be. The crucial moment is an oratorical challenge between the two parties. Speeches must follow precise rules: if they are violated, the orator and his group lose “face.” Sometimes the challenge is manifested in a more direct way, with a feigned violent attack (wero) against a person of high rank who enters into the ceremonial ring.
The orators are specialists who know myths, genealogies, and so forth, but they are also consummate actors. The public judges them, attributes honor and prestige to them, confirms or lowers their rank.

In the ceremonial sequence there are moments in which what counts is fidelity to traditional texts and rules, and others in which the sequence of arguments to be treated is prescribed but the way of treating them is not. The personal mana of the orator can then manifest itself more easily. But in both cases language functions as a ceremonial, because it does not have as its principal function communication at the semantic level. What counts is not what is said, but how it is said. The mode of speaking and the choice of arguments express the pretension to a certain status, which the orator seeks to have legitimated by the public. Ceremonial is essentially a game in which the rules are used in order to make the adversary lose. According to Anne Salmond, there are three possible strategies: 1) to make use of the option, permitted by the rules, which is most appropriate to the situation of encounter (social distance among parties, unforeseen events, etc.). The choice of one possibility rather than another is indicative by itself of a certain judgement of rank relative to the parties and of the value of each of them; 2) to oblige the adversary to violate a rule. For example: an orator can utilize certain songs that the adversary had intended to use in his speech and which, once his turn has come, he will no longer be able to use. Being short of material, he risks having violated the prescribed sequence and being “shamed”; 3) deliberately violating a ceremonial rule, but with such brilliant results as to steal away the applause of those present. He who shows himself to be above the common rules is greatly honored.

The case of the Māori shows that ceremonial has the same structure as a game: it carries a challenge and a regulated conflict, but the adversaries utilize the rules by obtaining honor and prestige and by drawing dishonor and shame down upon their adversaries. Ceremonial expresses and sanctions status, but at the same time makes possible its modification.

Classic examples of ceremonial behavior, in which the challenge and acquisition of honor are closely associated, include the potlatch of the Indians of the northwestern coast of North America (Canada). It consists of ceremonies in which groups of persons, as numerous as possible, are invited to attend a feast wherein the host affirms a pretension to status or assumes hereditary privileges. The assumption of the title of status or privilege is validated by the guests who receive
gifts commensurate with their status. If the gifts are insufficient or poorly distributed, then a consensus is not created and the host ‘loses face.’

Some potlatches are given at critical moments of existence: on occasions of birth, adoption, accession of a child to puberty, matrimony, death. Another type of potlatch is that given in the guise of reparation for ritual errors; to ‘save face’ when events of bad luck occur which diminish the prestige of a group or an individual (the overturning of a canoe, wounding of a member of the family, birth of a deformed son, etc.). A third type of potlatch, the most important, consists of competitive ceremonies, of rivalry or vendetta, in which an individual or a group seeks to make an adversary lose face by crushing him under the weight of prestations.

Potlatch is essentially an exchange of goods in which value is measured by a ‘monetary unity’: the blanket. It is also accompanied by oratorical contests. However, as in language utilized ceremonially, information is not transmitted at the semantic level, and thus the exchange transcends its economic function and expresses the status of those who participate in it. What is ceremonially communicated are not just words and objects but, by means of words and objects, relations among members of society.

Boas defines potlatch as ‘the method of acquiring rank’ (1966: 77). As has been seen, in order to obtain rank it is necessary to accumulate wealth so as to distribute it among the greatest possible number of persons. Wealth gives honor, but only insofar as it is ceded to others. The life of a Kwakiutl is a ‘career’ in which names, privileges, and titles successively change and, above all, one makes ‘a name’ as a generous man. From adolescence boys compete among themselves in the system of gifts and counter-gifts, and are incited by their parents to beat their rivals. Individuals, clans, chiefs, and tribes seek to ‘crush’ one another reciprocally (one of the ceremonies is called precisely ‘crushing the name of the rival’), according to complex ceremonial rules. The recipient of a gift cannot refuse it, but must instead reciprocate after a certain amount of time with one hundred percent interest, if he does not want to ‘lose face.’ Every prestation is therefore a challenge, but certain prestations have a directly competitive and conflictual character. In this case a rival is invited (with his clan or tribe) to a feast, and they are given a great number of blankets. The guest must accept them, but cannot do so before having placed on the heap of blankets an equal quantity plus interest of one hundred percent. A
similar procedure is utilized when a canoe is given to an adversary. In both cases the challenged must validate his own rank and his own name by responding adequately to the challenge: otherwise he loses and it is the adversary who increases his status.

The most complex form of challenge is the acquisition of a copper plate. Copper plates are used along the whole north Pacific coast, divided into two sections: on the bottom there is a part in the form of a “T,” and on the top an engraved part (the “face”) with a figure that represents the emblem of ownership. The copper plate represents the value of an enormous quantity of blankets: it is worth as much wealth as was spent on the feast in which it was obtained. The more times it has been sold, the greater its value; one copper plate that bore the significant name “all plates were ashamed to look at it” was worth 7,500 blankets.

The capacity to acquire a copper plate is therefore a sign of great distinction. Copper plates are always sold to rivals and often to enemy tribes. Not accepting the acquisition of it equals a recognition of the incapacity to pay for it, and this casts a shadow over the “name” and “honor” of the tribe or clan.

Rivalry has its strongest expression in the destruction of property. Potlatch is thus an exchange of destructions, or of goods destroyed, which proceeds until one of the rivals abandons the match and recognizes himself as beaten, as inferior: his name “is broken,” that of the victor is raised.

The challenge to break a copper plate is one of the most feared. A chief can break one of them and give the fragments to the rival. If he wants to keep his prestige intact he must in turn break a copper plate of equal or superior value, and offer it to his adversary with the fragments received shortly beforehand. The adversary can then pay him again with the destroyed copper plate. If, however, the challenged one tosses his copper plate into the sea, he acquires a superior prestige, for he shows himself so rich as to disdain compensation. He who succeeds in acquiring all the fragments of a destroyed copper plate on one of these occasions, and thereafter the dispersed bits in the exchanges, can reconstruct it and thus give to it an immense value since each destruction immediately symbolizes passages of enormous quantities of wealth.

On other occasions, potlatch is associated with exchanges of direct offenses to throw discredit onto the rival: during the feast, the guest is put beside the hearth and risks being roasted by flames that leap out of the enormous quantities of fish oil that the challenger puts on the fire. The challenger provokes the challenged with songs, which tease
the challenged and proudly exalt the challenger’s own ancestors and his own clan. Finally he offers an enormous spoon full of oil to the guests: if they accept it and drink the contents, he recognizes himself as having been beaten; if he refuses it, the competition continues.

If some particulars surrounding the development of potlatch have been given, it is because the institution perfectly illustrates all aspects of ceremonial: the acquisition of honor by means of a challenge and of the defeat of the rival; the idea that the challenge allows one to put the contenders to the test and to reveal their intrinsic value, thus justifying their pretenses to honorability, their relative rank; the role of the spectators and of public opinion, which functions by judgements; the necessity for the chiefs to make a continual display of their value, of their wealth, of being good actors always on the scene, of “representing” and incarnating certain ideal personalities.

It does not seem, on the other hand, that potlatch has a true and proper religious dimension or that this is even important. The ancestors and the gods can intervene, but as emblems, as motives for pride and challenges among the living. The latter can sometimes impersonate ancestors, by wearing masks of them, but only because the man of rank must incarnate the ideal personality symbolized by his ancestor. Legitimately wearing the mask means being a person, giving proof of a value equal to that of the ancestor. In the ceremonial of potlatch, the “mystical” sanction is immanent in the human relationship: it is the charisma, the honor of the parties, recognized by a public whose approval was won by force of gifts, not by that of the gods. The “gods” of a ceremonial are the men who are “gods” for other men.

* * *

The opposition between “ceremonial” and “religious ritual” remains an ideal because it is difficult to find, in the majority of cases, a “pure” type of ceremonial or religious rite. The intermixing of the two forms of ritual is frequent; they are distinguished more by their conceptualization in certain cultures than by a radical difference in their procedures. To fail to recognize this ideological difference in societies in which it appears important would mean precluding understanding of the specific characters of numerous ritual behaviors and the ideology of “honor” and “prestige,” which puts the accent on the intrinsic value of persons rather than on the rank obtained by the privileged relation with an external “god.”