Dialogue between an anthropologist and a horticulturalist

We see a man working in his garden; with a pointed stick he digs the dirt around a tuber. The meaning of his action seems clear: the man wants to dig out the tuber, no doubt in order to eat it. We convince ourselves that such an action fits the purpose, that it is “rational,” and that it corresponds to what we would do if we found ourselves in the same situation. But in a flash, the man kneels, murmurs a few words on a leaf of the plant, and then spits on it.

Our reaction is now totally different. The action seems bizarre and incomprehensible, it no longer corresponds to our expectations, nor with what we would do in the same circumstances. Speaking to a plant as if it could hear? Spitting on it? We are tempted to label such actions “irrational.” If the man belonged to our own culture, we would not hesitate: we would think the sun has gone to his head. But sophisticated anthropologists that we are, we have a ready answer to the doubts we have fleetingly entertained: the man has just performed a ritual act.

* * *

The opposition to which we refer is a canonic one in “current anthropology.” Thus, for example, Edmund Leach distinguishes between “rational-technical” and “magical (or ritual)” behaviors, describing the first one as a behavior “which is directed towards specific ends and which, judged by our standards of verification, produces observable
results in a strictly mechanical way,” and the second one as a “behavior which is potent in itself in terms of the cultural conventions of the actors but not potent . . . in itself” (Leach 1966: 403, emphasis in original).

Yet, in purely “objectivist” terms, this opposition between “ritual action” and “rational-instrumental action” is by no means such a secure criterion of distinction as it might first appear. Indeed, a seemingly “ritual” action may also produce “observable results” according to “our standards of verification.” Must we conclude that if a shaman effectively cures a sick person his action is no longer ritual, while it is if he fails? To this criticism one could object that if the shaman is successful, then his action must include some component that is capable of acting “in a strictly mechanical way.” However, even admitting that this efficacious component (for example, medications) is identifiable and that the entire efficacy of the shamanic treatment depends on it, an irreducible fact still remains: such a component does not exist concretely as an autonomous entity, but only as part of the entire process of the shamanic cure. Moreover, it is the entire process that makes the treatment socially acceptable and therefore enables it to function. The efficacy of the ritual cannot, therefore, be reduced to a chemical mechanism because the therapy presupposes social and ideological relations, as much in a modern hospital as in a sorcerer’s hut.

To ferret out in the shamanic cure a “non-ritual” component only means revealing that the category of “ritual” is a creation of the observer, the reification of a term in the “rational/irrational” opposition. Such a reification is based on a value judgment that fails to consider the concrete social context in which the action takes place. Therefore, even a definition of “ritual” as a mere aspect of more complex actions—a definition later proposed by Leach (1968)—does not fundamentally resolve all the problems raised by an “objectivist” definition of ritual. Particularly questionable is the assimilation of certain processes that can be analyzed in the rite according to our criteria of causal effectiveness (for example, a chemical process, and so on) to an alleged “rational/operative” dimension. In fact, the correlation between end and means here is not intentional, but purely casual. In reality, a more correct way to account for the relation between “causally efficacious” phenomena and the totality of the ritual action is perhaps the following: symbolism casts over the world such a vast network of relations that some real causal connections remain trapped
in its net. These contribute, no doubt, to perpetuating the existence of the ritual, but they can be defined neither as “real infrastructure” masked by an “ideological superstructure” (the “ritual superstition”), nor as the technical-rational “dimension.” Rather, such phenomena confirm a more general law: each discovery of real connections takes place thanks to schemes and procedures that are complex, redundant, and even incoherent. The scientific attitude (one that develops only under certain social and cultural conditions) consists of weeding out—once the awareness of the discovery has matured—all those representations that are useless to the discovery’s canonic conceptualization, which allows its most effective learning, transmission, and utilization.

As Ernst Gombrich writes: “Most technical inventions carry with them a number of superstitions, unnecessary detours which are gradually eliminated through short cuts and a refinement of means” (1959: 331). Unlike scientific thought, “savage thought” is not grounded in a criterion of effectiveness. Therefore, it does not eliminate the “complications” and “superstitions” that are considered such only when the complexity of mental processes, and of processes of discovery, is retrospectively negated.

Some of the difficulties raised by an “external” definition of rite can be avoided by resorting to indigenous definitions. Not all cultures, however, draw an ideological distinction between “ritual” and “non-ritual” actions. In general, where such a distinction seems to be in place, the category that the anthropologist is tempted to translate with the term “ritual” is more comprehensive than what he or she means by the term and, in fact, includes all strictly codified behavior. In Hawaii, for example, the term kapu refers not only to prohibitions, but to every positive regulation as well, be it ritual or non-ritual.

At any rate, the agnostic recourse to indigenous categorization is not sufficient: it does not explain why such-and-such a categorization, and not another one, is in place, nor why certain actions are performed in one way but not another.

What has been said briefly above should be sufficient to suggest that elaborating a theory of ritual cannot depart from a typology of forms of actions defined a priori and ethnocentrically. In fact, such a strategy predetermines the results, since definitions already contain implicit theories. It is therefore necessary to consider first the theories of ritual behavior from which definitions like Leach’s derive, and then to proceed to a reformulation of the entire problem.
Before beginning this unavoidable discussion, however, I would like to invite my readers to reflect on their reactions to this introduction and on the apologue that opened it. If they are still perplexed and wondering “What is he getting at?” it will mean that their attention has already been awakened. Furthermore, since this discussion will lead to the conclusion that rites (as well as myths) must, in order to function, begin by increasing the level of attention beforehand, it is hoped that readers will recognize, in the experience of reading the present article, an analogue to the article’s subject, and will smile in retrospect at having been subjected to a rite of passage: namely, the narration of a short myth about what constitutes a “rite.”

**Theoretical reason or practical reason?**
The first anthropologists who attempted in the nineteenth century to provide a scientific explanation of ritual action adopted two contrasting approaches that have been perpetuated up until this day.

According to some, ritual acts are the translation, at the level of action, of beliefs that depend on intellectual processes and preoccupations. Whereas magical and religious beliefs aim to explain natural phenomena, rites aim to control them. In other words, whereas belief is an erroneous science, rite is an illusory technical action. Such an approach, which has been labeled “intellectualist” (Evans-Pritchard 1933), is associated with the names of Tylor and Frazer, but it is also found, modified, in theorists such as Lévi-Strauss (1962) and Horton (1967, 1973)—even if, unlike their predecessors, they attribute a certain theoretical validity to belief and ritual by demonstrating important analogies between “scientific” and “savage” thought.

A second approach, associated with the name of William Robertson Smith (1889) and definable as “functionalist,” ultimately takes for granted the cognitively illusory character of beliefs while maintaining that they are born and perpetuated in order to fulfill not a theoretical or technical need, but rather a “practical” one (either moral or social). Thus, for example, animal totemism (that is, the idea that some degree of kinship-type relationship exists between a certain animal species and a social group) is not the result, according to Robertson Smith, of an erroneous zoology, but rather of social practices. Members of a clan gather periodically to reaffirm their solidarity. On these occasions they have a feast and sacrifice certain animals in order to eat them. In the long run, the collective consumption of these animals becomes associated with the group’s status of maximum solidarity.
The commensals believe that, by eating the flesh of the animal, they absorb a substance identical to that of their group. From here, it is a short step to believing that the substance of the group is constituted by that of the animal that nourishes it. But whoever speaks of “common substance” speaks of “kinship” inasmuch as the animal comes to be conceived as a “relative” or an “ancestor” of the group that it “regenerates” socially when it is eaten during a feast.

The belief in some degree of kinship between certain species and certain groups is due, therefore, to social and not theoretical reasons, and the rites associated with this belief (for example, the totemic meal) do not constitute a way to control nature, but rather serve to reproduce within the group the belief that allows it to constitute an organic entity.

Religious representations are, therefore, motivated by their social functions, namely, by what contributes to make them exist in the world of “practice.” Such a result is the “true” referent of a representation. Its validity is practical, not theoretical.

It is possible that Robertson Smith’s conception was influenced by the Kantian idea according to which the validity of moral judgments does not depend on their “truth” or “falsity,” like that of theoretical judgments. Practical reason and intellect have different criteria of validity.

At any rate, the Kantian influence is clear in Émile Durkheim, who—in his polemic against the intellectualist school—insists on the fact that the persistence of religion could not be explained if its representations were totally illusory. Both for Durkheim and for Robertson Smith, the reality to which the religious belief refers and that ritual aims to reconstitute in each individual’s conscience is the moral and social world: “Religious interests are only the symbolic form of social and moral interests” (Durkheim [1912] 1947: 316). The religious representation is not to be taken literally; it is explained by what it makes people do, rather than what it says. Thus if the apparent function of rituals is to reinforce the “bonds attaching the believer to his god,” their real function is to reinforce the “bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member, since the god is only a figurative expression of the society” (ibid.: 226).

Durkheim maintains that religious representations are caused by a state of collective effervescence (corresponding to ritual action); that they represent this state in a more or less reified form (totems, ancestors, and gods are in fact “personified rites” [ibid.: 279; cf. 295]); and
that, by representing this state of effervescence to their consciousness, they prompt its reproduction.

Because ritual effervescence coincides with a state of maximum cohesion in society, religious representations—by reproducing the ritual actions that generated them—reproduce, in fact, society itself: this would be their true function.

It is clear that Durkheim tends to identify arbitrarily three types of relations between religious representations and society: causal, functional, and symbolic. His theory is based, however, on a petitio principii: indeed it presupposes the society whose existence it ought to explain (Lukes 1972: 480–81; cf. Valeri 2001 [see Appendix II, this volume]). The theory contains, moreover, another problem: on the one hand, in order to explain the discrepancy between the literal referent of representations (which concerns natural and transcendent objects, and so on) and their supposed referent (the group that produces them), Durkheim has to admit that the consciousness of this second referent was already in place at the beginning, and that it was subsequently lost. On the other hand, his theory obliges him to maintain that this symbolic referent continues to exist because it is the precondition for the social function of representation.

Part of the difficulty derives from Durkheim’s extremely vague and confusing use of the term “symbol.” He does not distinguish, for example, between the semantic and pragmatic aspects of symbols. It is possible to claim that a religious representation is an index of a certain group, to the extent that that group makes use of it; but this does not mean that a representation in a more or less reified form represents the group, as Durkheim would have us believe.

* * *

We have briefly discussed Durkheim’s account of religion in terms of “practical reason.” It should now be added that he also attempts to transcend the Kantian dualism between the gnosiological and the practical through recourse to two hypotheses. On the one hand, he claims that the categories of the intellect, as well as the religious representations from which they derive, are produced by society and are even representations of it. On the other hand, in order to explain how these categories allow one to know nature, he claims that the structure of society is homologous to that of nature as, ultimately, society is part of nature and indeed produced by it. If the perception that society has
of itself (some kind of collective self-reflection) precedes the perception of nature, it is because the structures that society and nature hold in common would be more easily discernable in society (Durkheim 1912, conclusion; cf. Durkheim and Mauss 1903).

In the “strong” form it has taken in Durkheim’s writings, the attempt to elaborate a sociology of knowledge appears to have failed. However, in its “weak” form—one which is based on a “charitable” interpretation of Durkheim’s thought (as Gellner 1962 has defined it)—the idea that the necessary character of intellectual categories is due to the intervention of society, rather than to some mysterious force hidden within the intellect, ultimately proved to be a fruitful one, as both Gellner (ibid.) and Horton (1973) have shown and as Thomas Kuhn’s (1970) theory indirectly demonstrates.

In spite of all its flaws and contradictions, or perhaps because of them, Durkheim’s work still remains the point of encounter and conflict between functionalist and intellectualist interpretations of beliefs and rituals. But the failure of this attempted reconciliation explains why, in the long run, only the strictly functionalist aspect of his theory had a lasting influence.

At this point, it is necessary to discuss the later functionalist developments of Durkheim’s theory, both because they have contributed to highlighting important aspects of ritual behavior, and because they have created some not inconsiderable conceptual problems which we should now clear away.

**The functionalist approach**

**Radcliffe-Brown: Ritual and social order**

The elaboration of the functionalist aspect of Durkheim’s theory is indebted most of all to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. His explanation of Andaman ritual (Radcliffe-Brown 1922) is ultimately grounded in the observation that rational activity, either instrumental or moral, only constitutes one part of social behavior (ibid.: 88). Man also has emotional behavior (he loves, hates, suffers, rejoices, fears, and so on) which is socially regulated and utilized. The relations among the various social roles are therefore associated with specific emotional attitudes, or, at the very least, with the external signs of such behaviors—so that, for example, a son is expected to carry a feeling of respect toward his father, or at least display such feeling.
Every aspect of the social system and every natural phenomenon that somehow influences the existence and structure of society becomes an object of socially regulated feelings. Rituals are the means that permit collective expression of these feelings; in so doing, they reproduce them in individuals and, facilitating their apprehension through imitation, permit their transmission from one generation to the next (ibid.: 233–34). In brief, the function of rituals is “to maintain and to transmit from one generation to another the emotional dispositions on which the society (as it is constituted) depends for its existence” (ibid.: 234).

This theory obviously presupposes that emotions and their meaning pre-exist their regulation (cf. ibid.: 246; an analogous thesis is found in Wittgenstein 1953; cf. Skorupski 1976: 78). The ritual regulates them in the sense that it leads to the association of certain natural feelings with certain “artificial” (i.e., social) situations. The imitation of prescribed feelings can effectively produce them (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 241, 239); but man has this truly human characteristic: he can dissimulate, he can intentionally reproduce the external signs of certain internal feelings even in absence of these internal states. As moralists and religious reformers have never grown tired of repeating, ritual is concerned with the “exterior,” not the “interior”; it is a matter of form, not substance. It could be argued, however, that these forms in fact constitute the substance of social life, that the enthusiasm, the sincerity of feelings are uncertain, not reproducible at will, and cannot therefore constitute the permanent basis of social relations. Such relations can be developed precisely because signs exist independently from internal states, and because the performance of the signs is a stronger concern than the real presence of the states that are allegedly signified.

There are two classes of ritual behaviors: those regulating interpersonal relations and those regulating relations between society and nature (in particular, certain animal and plant species). If a behavior whose validity is associated with social relations is extended to relations with certain natural species, this is because such species partake of the moral universe. Indeed, society attributes a certain value to them. It is this value to society—and hence, indirectly, society itself—that constitutes the true object of ritual behavior, both when this behavior concerns a natural object and when it concerns a person.

This theory is a reformulation of Durkheim’s claim that society, by adoring that which it holds sacred, adores itself. However, whereas for
Durkheim believes that the natural objects that "symbolize" society are arbitrarily (or randomly) chosen and have value only *qua* signs, for Radcliffe-Brown this choice is not arbitrary, and their value is not simply emblematic.

Ultimately, this value is determined by a combination of utilitarian motives (the importance of certain animal species for the diet of a given society, the difficulty of capturing them, and so on) and intellectual ones (associations among species due to associations among their properties—although the ultimate referent of these associations tends to be a certain "utility"). As the famous fifth chapter of *The Andaman Islanders* testifies, Radcliffe-Brown takes into account both motives without, however, managing to reconcile them in a satisfactory way. Sometimes Radcliffe-Brown's analyses anticipate with great finesse those of the structuralist method; at other time they are either grossly utilitarian or tautological (cf. Leach 1971: 41; Lévi-Strauss 1985).

At any rate, the theory of the value of ritual behavior as expression of the social value of certain objects and interpersonal relations is defective, as it forces the theorist to reify society. Indeed in order to explain the fact that two qualitatively heterogeneous objects (for example, a certain animal and a certain social role) still give rise to a ritual behavior, Radcliffe-Brown assumes that they are quantitatively identical, that is, that they have the same quantitative value for society. But in order for society to become the yardstick for measuring the relative value of each and any object, it must be substantialized (i.e., become the substance of value).

Furthermore, it is necessary to assume that this substantialized society is always present in the consciousness of those individuals who enunciate value judgments, or else that such judgments (whose function is to guarantee the survival of society) impose themselves through a process of natural selection.

In reality, a good number of the concrete analyses of Andaman rituals offered by Radcliffe-Brown (cf., for example, 1922: 261) show that both the utilization of certain phenomena during rites or the formation of ritual behaviors around them depend more on the qualitative than on the quantitative or utilitarian aspects of these objects. For example, certain natural species attract attention because their position within an ensemble of natural relations seems to correspond to the position of a certain role in social relations. Thus the former may become the metaphor for the latter.
Reading *The Andaman Islanders*, one has the impression of a conflict between Radcliffe-Brown’s sensitivity to the more properly cognitive and semantic aspect of ritual and the theoretical framework that he adopts, which is dogmatically functionalist and evolutionist. Ultimately, analysis in terms of meaning always turns into analysis in terms of function: an acknowledgement of the action of intellectual processes is obliterated by the implicit recourse to the evolutionist model of natural selection. Even worse, at times a ghost seems to wander through the pages of the book—that of a personalized society which calculates utility in a way worthy of a stockbroker in order to generate and manipulate behaviors necessary to its survival.

The reduction of interpretation in terms of meaning to an interpretation in terms of function is mirrored by the tendency to treat “function” and “meaning” as if they were interchangeable terms. Such a procedure can appear legitimate only for the analysis of certain rituals. For example, in the Andaman wedding ritual the spouses’ embrace signals their transformation into husband and wife: “The ceremony brings vividly to the minds of the young couple and also to those of the spectators the consciousness that the two are entering upon a new social relation of which the essential feature is the affection in which they must hold one another” (ibid.: 236).

In other words, by displaying in public for the first time the reciprocal emotional behavior that is prescribed between husband and wife, the couple is socially recognized as such. From then on all the community members will follow—in their behaviour toward the two persons—the prescribed rules for dealing with a married couple; it is indeed this collective recognition that effectively makes them spouses. In this case, then, the ritual obtains its social effect by representing it: function and signification coincide.

But in many other rituals, the postulated social referent is absent from indigenous consciousness. Radcliffe-Brown would therefore have to admit that in these cases meaning does not reflect function, but is a rationalization, a secondary formation whose value is not cognitive, but “practical.” It reproduces behaviors necessary to society, without, however, representing its true object.

This notwithstanding, Radcliffe-Brown still maintains that the ritual “signifies” the social relation that it has the function of perpetuating. As we will see, he bequeaths to his successors this confusion between signification and function, between the indigenous point of view and the point of view of the observer.
The Manchester school: Ritual and conflict

Radcliffe-Brown’s theory of ritual disregards the tensions and conflicts that exist in social life and that are a product of its functioning. In fact, according to this theory, rituals mechanically reproduce the social structure by organizing individuals’ emotions according to the “needs” of society (ibid.: 234).

While accepting the postulates of functionalist theory, Max Gluckman complicates it by ascribing to ritual the function of reproducing social equilibrium in situations of potential conflict. Indeed he claims that ritual expresses not only those feelings that correspond to the established social order, but also those that are in conflict with it. By “symbolically” unleashing these feelings, however, ritual allows their elimination or neutralization and thus, ultimately, the unchanged reproduction of social order. This theory would also explain why certain social situations generate ritual behaviors while others lack them.

Ritual behavior would develop both in those societies where social order is accepted by all but conflicts with individual aspirations (Gluckman 1963) and in those societies where the same people perform different social roles. Indeed, in order to distinguish one role from another, it is necessary to resort to special behaviors (that is, rituals) that signal which role is performed by which individual in a given situation. These behaviors generally represent the role in question in an exaggerated form (Gluckman 1962).

In the first case, then, ritual behavior would constitute the formation of a compromise. The formalized (and therefore controlled) expression of a morally forbidden but socially recognized behavior would allow its neutralization (Gluckman 1963: 127). Thus, for example, in a famous, though much debated (cf. Beidelman 1966; Smith 1979) essay, Gluckman (1963) attempts to demonstrate the existence of “rites of rebellion.” In some monarchies of southern Africa the king is, once a year, ritually insulted and rejected. In this way, the hostility that has accumulated against him is released. The ritual revolt would prevent real revolt and be the index of a consensus over the acceptability of the monarchical institution, but of a dissensus over the individuals who fulfil the duties of the king.

On the other hand, in those societies in which dissensus pertains to the institution of monarchy and in which it is admissible to change the social structure, one finds not only “rites of rebellion,” but actual rebellions (ibid.: 129).
More interesting and complex are the developments that a disciple of Gluckman, Victor Turner, has given to these rather rough ideas. It should be noted above all that Turner was the first scholar to provide truly satisfactory descriptions of ritual actions. In fact, he did not limit himself to taking accurate records of the most important rituals of the Ndembu (a people of Zambia) but also studied them in their social context and, most importantly, questioned his informants systematically about the meaning they attributed to each of the ritual actions and symbols. The information that he collected, together with his own interpretations, led him to distinguish three components of meaning in these symbols: the “exegetic” or “interpretive” meaning, the “operational” meaning, and the “positional” meaning (Turner 1968: 17).

The first of these meanings is the one drawn from his informants’ words; the second one is implicit and is revealed by the use made of the symbol; and the third, finally, depends on symbols that are adjacent to it in a given spatio-temporal context. The following example will clarify the relations among these three components of meaning.

The dominant symbol of the initiation rites for young women (nkang’a) is a young tree of the species called mudyi. The female initiate must lie down at a mudyi tree’s feet during the first day of the rite. This act symbolizes that she “dies” as a girl and is born as an adult. The exegetic meaning of the tree is the following: it represents the maternal milk and, therefore, the matrilineage that “nurtured” the girl. This symbol thus has two poles of reference: it refers, on the one hand, to organic and physiological phenomena (milk, breastfeeding, and so on), and, on the other hand, to social norms and values (matrilineage, customs, and so on). According to Turner, this polarity is found in the main symbols used during Ndembu rituals. The organic pole evokes illegitimate “feelings and impulses” (ibid.: 18), such as infantile, regressive associations with maternal milk, whereas the social pole evokes their opposite, that is, moral imperatives. Turner assumes that the emotions aroused by the organic referents of these symbols are “borrowed,” so to speak, from their ethical referents, although he does not explain how such a transfer takes place and how it is possible. Turner seems to associate it with the mechanism of “sublimation”: “The emotions, which, as psycho-analysts have shown, may often be connected with illicit and socially reprobated impulses, . . . are purified by their association with morality and law. It is as though the ‘energy’ of virtue flowed from organic and primitive sources, though the original goals of the drives were altered. It is as
though the infantile pleasures of breast-feeding were associated with
the correct performance of one’s duties as an Ndembu tribesman or
member of a matrilineage” (ibid.: 18–19). This thesis is summarized
in a single sentence: “The obligatory is made desirable, and the desir-
able allowed a legitimate outlet” (ibid.: 19).

The various ways in which the *mudyi* is used in different contexts
constitute its “operational” meaning. For example, in another phase
of the *nkang’a* ritual the *mudyi* tree is used operationally as a symbol of
femininity in opposition to masculinity (ibid.), or as a symbol of the
daughter’s separation from her mother, and so on. Through an analy-
sis of these operational symbols Turner deduces that the *mudyi* tree
symbolizes not only certain principles of Ndembu social organization
but also the conflicts that are aroused by enacting such principles.

As for the positional meaning, it seems to consist of a particularly
concealed component of the symbol, which is revealed by a symptom:
its regular association with another symbol. So, for example, “the
regular association of the forked *chishing’a* pole, representing hun-
manship and virility, with a ring of twisted grass which encircles it be-
low the fork, may well represent a Ndembu belief, repressed in the
unconscious, in basic human bisexuality” (ibid.: 81–82).

These examples show that if the “exegetic” meaning of the symbol
is obviously a conscious one, both the operational and, especially, the
positional ones can be unconscious.

More precisely, Turner distinguishes among three levels of signif i-
cation: 1) the manifest meaning, which is fully conscious and il-
lustrated by indigenous exegesis; 2) the latent meaning, of which “the
subject is only marginally aware but could become fully aware” (81),
and; 3) the “hidden” meaning, which is completely unconscious and
which Turner connects to infantile or even prenatal experiences (81).

This treatment of ritual symbolism explains how it is possible for
individuals to assimilate social rules. Indeed, it is not by chance that
most rituals considered by Turner serve the function of curing affli c-
tions that are the symptom of a conflict between individual and soci-
ety, between instinct and law, and so on (cf. Smith 1979: 109–10).

Yet, by acting on individuals in a collective context, rites also act on
society as a whole, bringing it back to a state of equilibrium (Turner
1968: 267–68). From this perspective, ritual is for Turner (cf. 1957:
122–25) what it had been for Gluckman, namely a device aimed at re-
establishing order in a situation where normal “juridical” devices are
insufficient. Using a typically functionalist argument, Turner therefore
assumes that ritual is generated by its function, that is by a “need” of society. Ritual furnishes Ndembu society with a service equivalent to what a more complex political system could provide: therefore, it “may be regarded as a magnificent instrument for expressing, maintaining, and periodically cleansing a secular order of society without strong political centralization and all too full of social conflict” (1968: 21).

In this sense, the presence of rituals within a society is interpreted by Turner as the index of a structural contradiction that the social organization cannot resolve with “rules” and procedures that are properly political—that is, ultimately, “rational.” He claims, for example, that Ndembu rituals are all dominated by a “basic contradiction,” which is the conflict between the principle of virilocal residence and the principle of matrilineal filiation (ibid.: 279–83, 201; 1967: 4–6; 1969: 81–84).

It is not possible to discuss here whether such a contradiction really exists and whether it has the effects attributed to it by Turner. However, it should be noted that: 1) the approach adopted by both Gluckman and Turner leads them to search for contradictions where they do not necessarily exist. This tendency results from the thesis that ritual is necessarily the expression of a contradiction; 2) The thesis that ritual is the Ersatz of a real resolution of these contradictions requires additional explanation: if there is a real “contradiction” (it would be better to say conflict [cf. Colletti 1975]) between matrilineage and patrilocality, how can the two institutions continue to coexist? What forces prevent harmonization between rules of filiation and rules of residence? 3) Numerous ritual events described by Turner do not seem to confirm the thesis that ritual realizes a kind of organic unity allowing the transcendence of social conflicts (cf. Turner 1968: 197). In fact, a rite, like any other social occasion, may also generate or precipitate conflict (for an example cf. ibid.: 231); 4) The “purgative” model of ritual necessarily implies the idea that this event is accompanied by definite feelings and their transformation (ibid.: 235).

However, aside from the fact that it is difficult to evaluate the emotions actually felt by participants in a rite, it is well known that ritual often consists of a series of purely “formal” acts separated from emotions even as they represent them. Indeed, as has been already highlighted, the presence of internal states’ external signs does not guarantee the real presence of these internal states.
More plausible is Turner’s idea that the efficacy of ritual depends on its “dramatization” or “representation” of an empirical conflict. In fact, the representation is efficacious in and of itself inasmuch as it allows conflict to be brought to light (and thus collectively recognized) and clarifies its nature, while also relying on rational methods in order to establish responsibilities, sanctions, reparations, and so on. The importance of the “cognitive” aspect of ritual is attested by the Ndembu idea that ritual “unmasks,” “reveals,” “makes public what is private and hidden,” and so on (ibid.: 190–91; 1975: 110–11).

* * *

In The ritual process Turner develops further the idea that a functional relationship exists between ritual and social structure, and tries to interpret it as a relationship between two different states of society and even as the organization of society according to two opposing but complementary principles (Turner [1969] 1977: 126–27).

Society normally possesses a structure, which is to say—according to Turner—a system of roles that are often organized hierarchically. At times, however, society takes the form of a relatively undifferentiated and egalitarian community. These moments of undifferentiation reproduce “an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society (Turner [1969] 1977: 97). In other words, societas presupposes communitas: the former differentiates and articulates the social bond that the latter creates. Because excessive differentiation runs the risk of eroding the very base of the social bond, it is necessary to reproduce periodically the communitas through ritual acts. The dependency of societas on communitas is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that the assumption of any role, and political roles in particular, requires rituals characterized by the passage through an undifferentiated stage associated with the values of the communitas. It is from the communitas that the role attains its ultimate sacredness and legitimacy (ibid.: 96–111).

The notion of communitas derives directly from Robertson Smith’s and Durkheim’s idea that ritual renews the social bond by establishing a “communion” whose effects also reverberate in the “secular” world (i.e., Turner’s “structure”). In this sense, it represents nothing new. Another aspect of Turner’s theory brings him, however, closer to Arnold Van Gennep (1909) rather than to Robertson Smith or Durkheim. This is the idea that the state of undifferentiation and communitas...
is connected to liminal situations, that is, to the passage from one state to another. This liminal phase has a transformative function, not merely a reproductive one (cf. Turner 1969: 128).

Turner’s theory, thus formulated, is often perplexing. When he opposes societas to communitas as “structure” to “antistructure,” as “cognition” to “affectivity” (ibid.: 128–29), as a device for satisfying “organizational and material” needs (ibid.: 129, 132) to a kind of élan vital (the reference to Bergson [1932] is obvious here), or as “constriction” to “freedom” (1969: 133), he distorts the kernel of truth that his theory contains.

The phenomena classified under the label communitas appear to Turner as characterized by “lack of structure” because he does not transcend the juridical notion of structure elaborated by Radcliffe-Brown, Meyer Fortes, and Gluckman. In reality, ritual sets in motion structures that can be defined at a more abstract level than normative and empirical structures, the only ones that Turner takes into account; and it is only in contrast with the latter that the former appear to be “non-structural” (cf. T. Turner 1975: 654, 657).

**Conscious or unconscious meaning?**

We have seen that one of the presuppositions of the functionalist approach is that the efficacy of ritual depends on its “symbolic” nature—so much so that a recent interpreter (Skorupski 1976) has called this approach “symbolist.”

However, we have also seen that the notion of “symbolism” is used in a rather vague way. In particular, we have come face to face with a problem to which we must now turn. Durkheim and his functionalist successors claim that ritual symbolizes social structure; but this symbolic relation does not correspond to the letter of a rite, nor, therefore, to the meaning attributed to it by those who perform it. Durkheim bypasses the problem or “resolves” it in evolutionary terms: the relationship, originally symbolic, has been reified. Nevertheless, he continues to define the relationship between religious representation and society as “symbolic.” As we have seen, this implies an unwarranted identification between the products through which society “reifies” and “estranges” itself on the one hand and the “symbols” on the other.

Such confusion is also found in Durkheim’s successors. Radcliffe-Brown is aware of the difficulties raised by relating indigenous interpretation to that of the observer, but he ends up claiming that the
latter simply clarifies what is only implicitly present in the former. In other words: if the observer’s interpretation were explained to a native, the latter could not but admit that it reveals the implications of what he does and says. As we have seen, however, not all of Radcliffe-Brown’s interpretations can be conceived as simple “explications” of the presuppositions and implications of meaning that the Andamans attribute to rituals.

By introducing the notion of “unconscious meaning” next to those of “manifest meaning” and “latent meaning,” Turner seems to be able to resolve the problem of the relationship between indigenous interpretation and the interpretation of the observer.

In reality, though, the notion of “unconscious meaning” raises considerable problems. Turner and his followers place among the unconscious meanings of ritual both sociological and psychological elements of a Freudian type. However, whereas Freudian theory justifies the unconscious character of psychological elements through a theory of psychic apparatus that explains why they are removed from consciousness, an equivalent theory does not exist for the alleged unconscious elements of a sociological nature. The Durkheimian-functionalist theory, therefore, does not provide a criterion for distinguishing between those elements that effectively bear unconscious “meanings” and those that are arbitrarily postulated as such by the interpreter.

The absence of such a criterion, and of a theory that would allow it to be established, is particularly evident in some “semiological” analyses of ritual, of which a recent book by Alfred Gell (1975) constitutes an extreme and eloquent example. It is convenient here to consider this study briefly and compare it with an interpretative position opposed to it, in the hope that the proverbial clash of opinions will let us glimpse at the truth.

Gell has observed a ritual of great complexity, called the Ida, among the Umeda of New Guinea. However, he was not able to obtain from his informants an exegesis of the ritual, which indeed does not seem to exist. Nevertheless, he claims to have been able to reconstruct the unconscious meaning of the ritual. This unconscious meaning would be constituted by a variety of elements pertaining to Umeda society.

In order to justify this reconstruction of the unconscious “semantics” of the ritual, Gell utilizes two arguments. The first is the methodological argument. If the analysis is able to reach a level at which
the material to be explained appears perfectly coherent, to the point that there “is a quasi-predictive relation between the parts of the system” (1975: 212–13), then one can be certain that the model is true. The “empirical” proof of this argument would be constituted by the fact that an element of new observation can be reconciled with the system. That is, it appears as the logical consequence of the principles of the system. The second is the “ontological” argument. In order to justify the fact that the meaning thus reconstructed is not “verbalized” by the informants, Gell proposes the following hypothesis: what is “communicated” through non-verbal symbols cannot be communicated through verbal symbols (an hypothesis also accepted by Forge [1965] for a society close to the Umeda one). Thus, the impossibility of expressing the rite in words would be part of the very nature of the rite’s meaning—an idea that conveniently justifies the discrepancy between the “meanings” singled out by Gell and the accounts of informants, who appear to know nothing of these meanings.

The first argument is a familiar one. Dumézil, for example, has claimed that “in the speculative disciplines coherence is but one basic quality of reasoning which does not guarantee the truth at all. The empirical sciences, however, are different, for in that case the problem is one of classifying empirical data in their variety and diversity and according to their own nature” (1948: 18). As this excerpt demonstrates, the argument is based on the presupposition that phenomena that occupy the empirical sciences (among them anthropology) are logically coherent. It would follow that the logical coherence of the model elaborated to explain these phenomena would itself be a guarantee of its truth.

Even accepting that the phenomena to be explained are coherent, however, nothing guarantees that the coherence of the *explanans* coincides with the coherence of the *explanandum*. On the other hand, if one does not admit the intrinsic coherence of the *explanandum*, then the coherence of the *explanans* not only fails to guarantee validity but generates a paradox: the more the model presents its object as a coherent system, the less it is true (cf. Bourdieu [1980] 1990: 250).

All this simply demonstrates that the criterion of coherence is not a guarantee of validity. Any fact may be broken down into elements such as to render it compatible with a given model; but the existence of those elements and the validity of the model are not in this way demonstrated. Analogously, I could reduce a ritual to the “meanings” that are compatible with a coherent model; but I will not thereby have
demonstrated that such meanings exist—all the more so if I am not able to single out the interpreter for whom they exist. Without this, the alleged meanings are made to exist in and of themselves, in some Platonic universe, as if just waiting for an anthropologist to discover them (cf. Lewis 1980: 145).

Let us now turn to Gell’s “ontological” argument. Even if we admit that non-verbalized messages exist, this does not suffice to prove that a non-verbal behavior actually bears a message; it might even be devoid of meaning. In any case, Gell’s argument leads to paradoxical results for the kind of analysis it is supposed to justify. An example will clarify why.

Let us consider music. If it is true that music communicates messages that cannot be expressed in words, then either it is not legitimate to translate music into verbal messages or one can describe verbally only the evocations aroused by the musical phrases, evocations that are vague and changeable depending on the listener. A music critic who takes his or her own personal experience of music to constitute the musical content itself, or, worse, who presumes to describe its semantic-referential content (“this phrase describes the sheep, this other one the fauns”), is considered, rightly so, to be engaging in an arbitrary operation. Yet, it is precisely to the latter operation that Gell subjects the Ida ritual!

The intrinsically contradictory character of Gell’s position becomes even more evident when he gives his principle a much “stronger” form, claiming that the symbols of the ritual are “symbols of a ‘transcendent’ reality which cannot be grasped except through the symbol itself” (1975: 214, emphasis in the text). Gell explains neither what this “transcendence” is, nor how the above mentioned claim—derived from Jaspers and Schutz—might be compatible with his semiotic analysis. Nevertheless, he believes he can infer from this the observer’s right to describe and explain these symbols from the outside. But if it is true that ritual is constituted by experiences of the “transcendent,” then a conclusion opposed to Gell’s would seem necessary: the observer can only attempt (if it is even possible!) to immerse himself in that kind of experience and evoke it for his readers. The claim to reconstruct “objectively” from outside the meaning of symbols that have been defined a priori as untranslatable and that can be understood only through personal experience (i.e., only subjectively) is an absurdity pure and simple, and in any case is based on the assumption that the observer has direct access to the same transcendent-
ence that the Umeda can experience only through symbols (i.e., “unconsciously”).

In direct, if tacit, opposition to Gell’s, Gilbert Lewis’ analysis (1980) of the ritual of the Gnaou of Sepik (New Guinea)—a population that is culturally akin to the Umeda—privileges the indigenous interpretation of the rite.

Lewis criticizes the semiological point of view, according to which the ritual can be understood as a communicative code comparable to Saussurian *langue*. In fact, in order to recognize true acts of communication in the ritual, it is necessary to locate the following elements in it: 1) a communicative intention and a sender animated by this intention; 2) a vehicle for communicating; and 3) a receiver who actually receives the message being communicated (ibid.: 18–19).

It is easy to observe that the presence of these three factors is not always found in ritual acts: one could even argue that it is rare that actors in a rite have a communicative intention and that spectators are able to recognize real messages in it. At any rate, different rituals and even different sections of the same ritual are considerably at variance on this point. Therefore, one cannot reduce the problem of the interpretation of ritual to the search for the supposed “code for the transmission of the information.”

According to Lewis, the signs used by ritual are not communicative as much as they are expressive: in other words, they are mostly symptomatic or indicative (for example, blushing which betrays the one who blushes) and, therefore, they do not presuppose a code in order to be interpreted; instead, they may be the object of different interpretations, that are subjectively variable. Above all, these signs are complex stimuli which produce complex effects—not just intellectual but also emotional, sensible, and so on. They act in fact on the totality of persons.

The prevalence in rituals of expressive symbolism over communicative symbolism allows us to explain—more efficiently than with a semiological model—ritual’s efficacy (i.e., the fact that it has certain effects on participants) (cf. ibid.: 116, 118).

In the concrete analysis of Gnaou rites proposed by Lewis, such a theoretical approach generates a certain tension between two opposed tendencies. On the one hand, the refusal to superimpose arbitrarily meanings that are meaningful only to the interpreter over those actually perceived by the natives themselves leads Lewis to adhere as much as possible to the letter of the indigenous exegesis. But, on the
other hand, he cannot but realize that the indigenous exegesis itself requires an interpretation (cf. Sperber 1975: 17–50). Furthermore, the distinction between communication and expression and, correlativelly, between meaning and evocation creates in and of itself a large field (that of “evocations” or “reactions” produced by either expressive or involuntary signs) of which, by definition, one cannot argue that the indigenous interpretation furnishes an adequate image. This vast field indeed transcends the capacities for verbalization and analysis of the Gnau people.

Consequently, Lewis is forced in his interpretation to invoke a set of traits that would exist implicitly in ritual (1980: 142) and thus to resort to the principle adopted by Forge and by Gell: ritual allows the expression of what cannot be expressed in words (ibid.: 24).

If Lewis recognizes the importance of implied meaning he nevertheless refuses to take into consideration the possibility that some “unconscious meaning” may be present in a rite. But recognizing the fact that the relation between representation and its non-conscious conditions (psychic, social, economic, cultural, and so on in nature) cannot be defined as a symbolic one in the absence of an effectively documented interpretant (cf. Peirce 1897) does not warrant ignoring the role these conditions can have. Rather, such conditions orient representations in certain directions, block access to others, create resistances or censures against recognition of certain facts or interest in others, and so on.

Taking this into account is necessary in order to explain why representations may have a certain structure and a certain content, and ultimately why they may be compatible with a certain social or psychic situation as well as why they may be functional in relation to the given situation.

* * *

Let us discuss a concrete example, namely the ritual to which Lewis devotes a good part of his analysis. On various ritual occasions, Gnau men open a wound in their penis and let it bleed; in particular, when, in the course of a boy’s puberty rites, his penis is wounded for the first time, the maternal uncle or, in his absence, an equivalent relative, opens a wound in his penis and lets the blood that gushes bleed on the body of his nephew (1980: 78). The Gnau people maintain that this ritual permits the young man to free himself from his own “bad
blood” and to acquire his uncle’s “good blood” in exchange (ibid.: 178). The ritual of the penis’ artificial hemorrhage is a male secret: no woman must know it exists.

It should be noted that the father can never provide blood from his own penis to his son. The only exception is the ritual in which he smears the face of his first born with his own blood at the moment of birth. Also, younger brothers cannot give blood to older brothers, whereas older ones can give blood to the younger brothers. These differences would seem to be explained by the Gnau theory of conception, according to which every man and every woman possess a certain reserve of blood that is used to generate offspring. When a son is born, he has already received his share of paternal blood; the remaining amount of blood, none of which that son is entitled to receive, must be used to generate more sons. A father, therefore, may not sprinkle his son during rites (ibid.: 176). This theory justifies the fact that relationships within a consanguineous group are determined by birth and cannot be modified by voluntary donations of blood from the father to one of the sons.

According to Lewis, this theory also explains why, within the group of brothers, the ritual donation of blood from the penis may occur only in order of seniority and not in the opposite order. Yet the resort to this rule is not completely satisfactory: for example, the Gnau older brothers do play a “paternal” role in their relations with younger ones and from this point of view transferring blood from the former to the latter would have to be forbidden. At any rate, such a transference represents an alteration of the order of distribution of agnatic blood among consanguines, and as such should be forbidden by virtue of the same principle, according to which the father cannot modify the distribution of his blood among his sons. Moreover, it is not clear why an older brother would have to donate blood to a younger brother, blood that belongs to his own sons. The fact that the rules of blood donation may harmonize with the order of seniority is not enough to eliminate, thereby, the contradictions that exist among some of these rules. Furthermore, it remains to be explained why the father donates blood from his penis to his oldest son at the moment of his birth: indeed, according to the indigenous theory of conception, the older son has already received his share of paternal blood.

It appears, then, that the indigenous ideology does not explain coherently and completely all the rules. Most particularly, it does not explain why the ideal donor of blood is the maternal uncle. This not-
withstanding, Lewis accepts this ideology as if constituting a sufficient explanation.

The main problem, however, is posed by the very existence of the ritual. Why do Gnau men frequently open a wound in their penis and let it bleed, sometimes on one of their relatives?

First, it should be noticed that this ritual is common in the Sepik area and that different populations explain it in different ways. The natives of the Wogeo Island, for example, claim that men need these periodic haemorrhages in order to free themselves from the pollution generated by sexual contact with women. Similar ideas exist among the Abelam (Forge 1965). According to these populations, the artificial hemorrhage from the penis is the equivalent of the natural hemorrhage of women (cf. Hogbin 1970: 88, n. 102). It was thus not wrong of Hogbin, the ethnographer who described Wogeo culture, to title his book *The island of menstruating men*.

Based on these observations, some scholars have interpreted this ritual as the expression of the unconscious desire to menstruate on the part of men, that is to say, to take on the feminine power of procreation. Supposedly, men are envious of this power, and the ritual reveals a latent hostility against women, who indeed are not allowed to take part in it. In essence, this ritual would be sort of male revenge.

But according to Lewis, Gnau do not make the association between the loss of male blood and female menses—on the contrary, they energetically deny it when it is proposed to them (1980: 110–11). Their interpretation of the ritual is completely different: mature men give their blood to younger relatives so that they may grow and become strong (ibid.: 178). This interpretation would be based on the “implicit” idea (i.e., one that is not “explicitly” formulated by the Gnau) according to which blood is associated with life (ibid.: 180); by giving blood, one gives life. For Lewis, the indigenous interpretation would be adequate, and it would be arbitrary to search beyond it.

Lewis’ conclusion, however, is not convincing, because the native interpretation is not completely coherent and does not explain all the facts. In the first place, there seems to be a contradiction between two justifications for these hemorrhages: according to one, hemorrhages allow for the elimination of “bad blood”; according to the other, they serve to transfer “good blood.” Why is the blood “bad” for the one who gives it and “good” for the one who receives it? The first justification for the hemorrhage implies, at any rate, that blood is not always associated with life, as Lewis claims; on the contrary, it is the loss of
blood that seems to promote life. But there is also a more serious problem: the indigenous theory (or Gnau people’s claims that Lewis considers as such) does not explain the most typical aspect of the ritual: if it is only the blood that matters, why does it have to be extracted from the penis? This question is not a frivolous one, all the more so in that the operation is painful, and at least for the initiates a cause for anguish. It should also be noticed that, whereas, in extraordinary circumstances, a woman may be present in all the other rites that are normally reserved to men, the operation on the penis is the only one that women are not allowed to attend in any instance (cf. ibid.: 182). This could constitute a point in favor of the thesis that there exists an unconscious association (unconscious because repressed from the consciousness) between male hemorrhage and female menstruation. Indeed, the prohibition regarding women would be interpreted as the *conditio sine qua non* so that the story that men tell themselves (“we are also able to menstruate, to give our blood to the children”) is not destroyed by the presence of those who in this context represent the reality of the difference between the sexes. Lewis could rightly object that such an interpretation is too conjectural; it is somewhat bolstered, however, by the origin myth of female menstruation: Gnau in fact believe that men, not women, originally menstruated, but that they transferred this nuisance to their female companions with a trick (ibid.: 124). It could be added that through another trick (the rite itself) men periodically re-appropriate their lost prerogative and in the rite, the original trick to which women fell victim is repeated in another form: excluded from the rite, they will never be in a position to apprehend that the transfer was not complete and that men continue to menstruate, though now only when they want to.

If one admits even the partial validity of this interpretation then the Gnau people’s denial of the connection between the artificial hemorrhage of the penis and the natural hemorrhage of the vagina does not have the incontrovertible value of proof that Lewis attributes to it. Such a denial could instead be interpreted as a defence against an association repressed into the unconscious of which the myth (even more than the ritual) would constitute the symptom.

One could cite other signs in support of the theory that unconscious psychic formations have an influence on conscious acts and representations whose existence they help to explain. However, it is not necessary to belabor this point nor to decide here which interpre-
tations of the ritual wherein men provoke a hemorrhage of their penis is most adequate. The point is only to show concretely that Lewis’ “phenomenological” and, at times, “literal” approach is not satisfactory because it does not take into account the internal contradictions of ideology, nor the tension between ideology and rules nor, finally, the very existence of the ritual.

In conclusion, the two approaches discussed here both appear to be inadequate. Whereas one ignores the unquestionable existence of unconscious aspects of the ritual, the other disregards completely the conscious interpretation (or lack thereof) and interprets the ritual entirely as an unconscious process of communication.

Without ruling out the existence of unconscious aspects in communication—or, better, “intuitive” or “subliminal,” as Jakobson (1970) calls them to highlight that they can be potentially accessible through psychological reflection and thus are not completely unconscious—it should be emphasized that the possibility of inferring information from an unconscious behavior does not turn this behavior ipso facto into a “message.” In fact, the information is deduced through inference by the observer, not communicated by the person being observed (cf. Lyons 1968: 413–15).

The distinction between “communication” and “inference” allows us to formulate an approach that does not arbitrarily reduce ritual to the single matter of communication but recognizes its cognitive dimension. The following pages are dedicated to illustrating such an approach.

**Communication or invention?**
The preceding considerations have shown that when ritual is regarded either as a purely communicative mechanism or is made out as the mere enactment of beliefs we quickly find ourselves at a dead end.

Without wanting to deny either the existence of communicative aspects in ritual or the fact that it reflects certain beliefs, we would like to formulate an alternative hypothesis: considered from a cognitive point of view, ritual does not mainly look like a code for the transmission of pre-existing messages, but rather, like a mechanism that allows people to obtain new information. In other words, ritual is, in aggregate, potentially a creator of knowledge.

In order to understand this hypothesis, it is necessary to discuss a few existing relationships between the communicative and ritual process. We have already noted that true communicative acts involve
both the intention to communicate and the possibility to choose among alternatives that are known both to the sender and recipient of the message (cf. Gombrich [1962] 1985: 61; Cherry 1961). Not only is the actual presence of these conditions not demonstrable in each and every rite or aspect thereof, but it is not even always possible to single out a sender, or, in other cases, the sender is only imaginary (gods, ancestors, and so on, who can also function as imaginary recipients).

Like the communicative process, the ritual process is based on expectations and projections: the addressee of a sentence “feels” more than he or she actually “hears,” because his or her anticipations and expectations constitute the schema with which he or she analyzes aural impressions—choosing some of them as pertinent, interpreting others as mere noise, or integrating them with components that are not actually uttered, but whose occurrence is predicted by analysis of the context.

In the ritual process, however, the element of anticipation and projection becomes predominant with respect to what is effectively received. This is due to the absence of a true process of communication, in which the presence of alternatives known to both the sender and the receiver allows them to keep their projections and anticipations under control. In particular, the sender can adjust his messages in accordance with the recipient’s reactions in such a way as to correct those interpretations that do not correspond to the communicative intention.

This element of control is certainly weaker in those one-sided communicative situations where feedback is not possible: films, paintings, and ritual representations cannot be changed in function of the spectator’s reactions. One could even claim that those who produce these types of messages deliberately utilize communicative one-sidedness in order to stimulate to the utmost the spectator’s projections.

This effect is even more likely when it is not possible to single out in a ritual a sender, a receiver, or a true communicative intention, or when such an intention appears to be only marginal.

In effect, the rite appears then as a collection of signs, although without offering the code that allows for a full interpretation of those signs. On the one hand, it looks as if it is endowed with meaning; on the other hand, it seems devoid of any apparent sense. This contrast powerfully attracts attention and is tantalizing; it may stimulate a
search for meaning in what is ordinarily meaningless but is “put in quotation marks” as if it possessed it. This can then prompt people to “play” with the rite’s signs, to establish homologies and oppositions, to reunite things that are normally kept separate, and to separate things that are normally conjoined.

The permanent inadequacy existing between stimulus and answer, as mechanism of provocation, would then constitute not so much an indication that the rite involves “unconscious statements” (Gell 1975: 213), but rather a structural aspect of the rite, one that allows it to function as a means to transcend given meanings and rules. This is particularly true when the rite puts in quotation marks elements and aspects of daily life that are fundamental but at the same time problematic. By reducing the distances among them, reordering them, breaking the barriers that keep them separate from ordinary perception, and stimulating the perception of new relationships among them, the rite allows people to reflect on the fundamental constituents of experience and to derive from them, if not a clear meaning, at least the sense of interconnectedness that results from manipulating them in the same context.

This reflexive work stimulated by the rite can be realized more or less consciously; it can lead to an actual objectification; it can produce reinterpretations, criticisms, reforms, and so on; or it can simply contribute to the learning of structures and social codes, and, therefore, to their reproduction and reinforcement. But it can also remain an unrealized potentiality. Indeed, the degree of actualization varies considerably according to the rites, the circumstances, the presence or absence of other means and situations for the learning and objectivation of structures, and so on. It is precisely for this reason that it would be misleading to identify the rite as a proper metalanguage, a “code of a superior order,” collectively constituted. If this were the case, then the whole community would have to be aware of this particular status. On the contrary, the rite is simply a situation that favors reflection because it works by destructuring and restructuring everyday life, and it continues to be efficacious by virtue of the fact that it is not a specific code that can be learned once and for all. The rite is therefore a constant stimulator and potential bearer of new information, an instrument for reinvesting with meaning the world constituted by and crystallized in social experience.

Because it stimulates the subject’s projective tendencies and plays with expectations, paradoxes, and obscure areas of experience, the
rite tends to make evident both the contradictory or unclear aspects of external experience (i.e., of society and nature), and the problematic or obscure zones of subjects’ internal experience.

At times, these two blurred and subversive levels of experience are put directly in relation to each other: certain rites trigger a real psychological acting out in which, as a response to a collective expectation, elements of the experiences of certain individuals come to be projected upon incomprehensible elements of social experience in order to give them meaning. This happens, for example, in rites involving spirit mediums, shamans, and (to a lesser degree) oracles. In these rites, all that is problematic seems to be mobilized in an attempt to provoke a certain “spark” or a certain unexpected mediation which may allow the rite to restructure, correlative, collective and individual experience, and give meaning to both. Society utilizes no differently the “creativity” of an artist.

In other kinds of rites, these projective, combinatory, and even “ludic” aspects are more strictly regulated. This is particularly true for feasts, in which a certain controlled destructuring of the everyday has the purpose of reconstructing it in the collective consciousness, reinforcing its meaning through a play of “back and forth” between the internal order of the subjects and the external order of reality.

Finally, there exist rites where the playful aspect is reduced to a minimum and which reproduce normative structures by representing them in a highly ordered and formalized way, in contrast with the relative disorder of their realization in the everyday world. Even in these cases, however, a ludic element still contributes to giving meaning to the rite in a way that recalls the relationship between a “score” and a “performance.” It is an interpretive, essentially “musical,” and often virtuosic game where what counts is the ability to follow the rules in spite of their difficulty and indeed because of their rigidity. The meaning of the rite lies then not in its semantic significance, but in doing it by the rules, adjusting one’s behavior to the requirements of the “text” while at the same time leaving some room for embellishment, interpretation, and invention.

This subtle dialectic between freedom and rule, between individuality and collectivity, becomes then a powerful imaginary scheme for the experience of the relationship between reality and desire, between the social and the individual. The victory of the individual over the norm, within the victory of the norm over the individual, is a pleasing experience of an essentially aesthetic nature.
In these cases, the rite offers an experience quite similar to the one offered by an aesthetically satisfying interpretation of a very well-known musical piece—one that has come to be accepted matter-of-factly, as a tradition, without too many questions about its meaning. What then attracts a person either toward the “temple of music” or the temple where the rite unfolds (and are they really different?) is ultimately the opportunity to live an experience that could be called “temporal,” i.e., a kind of confrontation and—herein lies happiness—a possible reconciliation between traces left in the memory by past performances and impressions of the present performance, which settle upon older ones much as a saline solution orders itself upon its corresponding crystal. Discovery and memory are thus reconciled in the flux of time, which, mastered at last, seems headed on a clear course toward an unknown but secure direction.

A scene from a film comes to mind: an old Dogon man contemplates, as he beats the rhythm of the music with his hand, the rite he attended sixty years earlier. A voice asks him: “Are you happy?” “Yes, I am happy.”

**An example**

We have seen that the ludic, projective, and meaning-creating aspect of ritual is not present in the same measure and in the same fashion in all rites. Considering the entire ritual system of a society, one observes that rites of different types have complementary functions within that system. Moments of formality, of physical or verbal constraint, and so on, alternate with relatively unstructured moments of playful exploration, whose purpose is to stimulate the objectification and apprehension of mental and physical schemes of *habitus* which inform everyday life but which do not appear clearly to consciousness. Both methods are often employed to reproduce the fundamental schemes of social life, and thus transmit them from one generation to the next and to reinforce them within each individual.

Here, briefly, is an example of the complementarity between these two opposite kinds of rites. The rituals in question were performed in Hawaii each year until the end of the eighteenth century and, in a modified form, until 1819. The year-long ritual cycle consists of two principal phases: the first marks the transition to the new year and lasts four months; the second takes place during the central part of the year and lasts eight months (Malo 1951; Ţi 1967; Kamakau 1976). During the latter period the men gather in the temples four times a
month (for a total of eight days a month) to offer sacrifices and prayers. These rites are extremely complex and require an extraordinary formality, bodily control, and level of attention. Each period spent in the temple ends with a rite (hono) during which the participants must seat themselves in the order of their rank and remain motionless for several hours while listening to the priests’ prayers. Anyone who moves is immediately sacrificed to the gods. This rite represents in the clearest way the hierarchical structure of society, which is reproduced in the period spent in the temple.

The ritual period of eight months begins in the main temple with the inauguration of a sovereign on whom all the other temples depend. The rites performed on this occasion last ten days and involve human sacrifices. It is impossible to summarize them: suffice it to say that, given the extremely complicated prescriptions, performing them properly is a real achievement, a triumph for the sovereign and for all of society. These rites constitute the fullest example of the ritual type where the ludic element (when it can actually manifest itself at all) is limited to the performance. Social laws and schemes are superimposed on it in a particularly clear-cut, rigid way.

On the other hand, the situation is much more fluid and the ludic element reigns supreme in the rites of passage from one year to the next. The term “ludic” is to be taken literally in this case, for among the gods who receive cults on this occasion is the “god of games” (Akua pā‘ani) who presides over games, feasts, and dances accompanying the passage in each district of another god, Lono makua (Lono the genitor). It is possible to demonstrate that the “god of games” is in fact the transformation of Lono makua. The latter has a threatening aspect: he returns annually to enforce his rights over the land cultivated by men, but he is neutralized by offerings and thereby sent back into the ocean. The neutralization of Lono makua means the temporary neutralization of the law imposed from outside and of the schemes that constitute the basis of society and thought.

These schemes, however, are imposed anew on consciousness through the spontaneous process of the game, set free by the rite. In fact, the ludic process has the same result as the non-ludic one in force during ordinary rites: both help, ultimately, to reinstate the normative structures of society.

During the festival of the new year, dance, mime, and theater, mostly of a comic character, take place. Concretely, these often involve fictitious behaviors that imitate normal behaviors, thus allowing
people to reflect on the latter, to objectify them and to place them at a
distance. In addition to mime, theater, and dance, fake combats also
take place (war is forbidden at this time of year, while it is common
during the rest of the year; indeed it provides most of the victims for
the human sacrifices).

The rigid social hierarchy is loosened, if not neutralized, during
the festival of the new year; even the fundamental opposition between
the sexes loses most of its strength. They join freely, “experimenting”
with unusual and even forbidden interpersonal combinations. Some-
thing similar happens at the conceptual level: jokes, comedies, and
other representational activities reshuffle normal concepts and rela-
tionships.

The laughter that accompanies all these behaviors functions as a
psychological frame (cf. Bateson 1954). It announces that the calling
into question of normal hierarchies and established schemes is not
real, but a mere game. But it is this game that generates the possibility
of understanding the reason and necessity of the usual social order,
and thus of freely accepting it. Also, this game generates ideas and
new combinations that could be translated into the normative order.
This creative aspect of the feast underlines its temporal context. In
fact, the feast takes place in the period following the first rising of the
Pleiades after sunset, which was also the moment when the cosmos
began to take shape and to differentiate itself from the original state of
chaos (Beckwith 1951: 58). It thus seems that the ritual game repeats
in consciousness the process of formation of the cosmic order.

However, laughter also demonstrates that this ideology of the feast,
according to which the social order can be freely reproduced and
learned through the game, is, in part, a fictitious one. Indeed, the fact
that the violation of normal relationships is laughed at manifests pre-
cisely the distancing of this violation and, therefore, the constant pre-
scence, at the heart of the feast, of a norm that the feast does not
produce, but rather presupposes in order for it to function.

The fact that the norm is presupposed and, therefore, the exis-
tence—from the perspective of the feast—of a residue of “non-sense”
and violence, is revealed by the way in which the king puts an end to
the new year’s rites. He arrives from the sea, conquers the gods of the
feast during a fictitious battle in which he emerges victorious, disman-
tles them, and deposits them in his main temple, where he offers sac-
rifices. This rite signals the beginning of the return to the cult’s
ordinary religious period, in which norms are imposed by authority
and in which the free interplay between internal and external order is reduced to a minimum.

However, the ordinary period of rituals benefits from the capital of sense and consensus built up during the feast. Thus, the anti-ludic aspect of the temple rite presupposes the ludic aspect of the rite of the new year, much as the latter, in turn, assumes the former. This demonstrates that it is possible to establish the meaning of a given rite only by considering it within the entire social system of which it forms a part. In this way, one realizes that playful and creative elements exhibited during the Hawaiian ritual year are balanced with other elements that are rigid, formalized, and imposed by authority. Such a complementarity does not coincide, however, with the one described by Victor Turner between *communitas* and *societas*. This instead is the complementarity between two cognitive experiences. During different moments of the ritual cycle, inverse importance is assumed by the combinatory faculty exploring all possibilities and the authority deciding among the various alternatives. Even the feast of the new year, which seems related to Turner’s *communitas*, ultimately contradicts his scheme and the hierarchy that Turner establishes between the two terms of the opposition. Indeed, as we have seen, the feast presupposes the very norm that it is instead supposed to found (i.e., *societas*, to use Turner’s terminology), and the authority of thought over society is revealed as encompassed by the authority of society over thought.

**Efficacy upon society and efficacy upon nature**

The preceding considerations on ludic and aesthetic aspects of ritual account for ritual’s potential cognitive efficacy. This, however, remains implicit, and it is not normally conceptualized by indigenous ideology. It may be inferred from the aesthetic judgments expressed by participants in a ritual (“it is beautiful,” “it is pleasant,” “we are happy,” and so on), as well as from the effects that the perception of form and schemes objectified within the ritual has on their performance in social life.

Another type of efficacy is more directly present in indigenous consciousness. It is commonly held that the rite has a certain effect and aims to produce a certain result: it can make an individual move from the status of “adolescent” to the status of “adult”; transform two “engaged” individuals into a “married” couple; move a man from the status of “private citizen” to “chair,” “head,” or “priest,” and so on. In
other cases, it is held that the rite may also have results that, from our point of view, are not exclusively social: for example, the rite of passage from the status of “adolescent” to “adult” may be conceptualized as an act that either makes the subject grow (in a biological sense) or causes him or her to become prosperous. Other rites aim to modify or influence “natural” processes: to provoke rain, to stop an epidemic, to make the crops grow, and so on.

In order to account for this particular aspect of ritual behavior, it is good to start with those rites whose efficacy is not supposed to transcend social relations (thus, with those ties that may properly be called “ceremonies,” see Valeri 1977 [Chapter XI, this volume]). These rites still exist in modern societies, a good example being provided by civil marriage. When the judge pronounces a formula of the kind “I now pronounce you man and wife,” the engaged couple effectively become husband and wife. In this case, then, we have a linguistic act that is not simply communicative or declarative; by virtue of the declaration, it transforms the social relationship between two individuals. The word thus produces an effect on reality, owing, naturally, to a collective convention: the formula “I now pronounce you man and wife” is uttered by the right person in the right situation, it has the effect of transforming x and y into husband and wife.

The linguistic act that produces this kind of effect is called “performative,” and the element within it that is capable of producing real effects (and not simply communicative ones) is called the “illocutionary force” (cf. Austin [1955] 1962, Searle 1969). (Of course, performative acts are not necessarily linguistic: for example, laying a crown on a man’s head turns him into a king.) It is true, therefore, that in some cases saying is doing, and that certain rites have real, not just imaginary, effects. These apparently magical effects of rites are, however, not in the slightest way magical. It is not a force intrinsic to language or visual images that explains their power, but rather the power of society over itself—the power to make a decision and to recognize its effect (cf. Bourdieu [1980] 1990: 188). The person who, by simply pronouncing a formula, transforms what is enunciated into a reality exercises a power that has been accorded to him by society and that ceases the moment society takes it back from him.

Even though this illocutionary use of language or any other symbolic expression is not magical, it is possible to discover in it the roots of magic in a proper sense. Indeed, the idea of the real efficacy of certain declarations, orders, and so on, when pronounced by certain
people, can be extended from a sphere in which a decision is sufficient to produce the desired effect to another in which the decision is either not sufficient or totally powerless. To say “You are healed” cannot have a real effect because the bodily processes that determine the state of illness or health do not depend on an arbitrary act of collective will; they are not a fact of convention, but a fact of necessity. This seems obvious to us because we are used to radical oppositions between “social rule” and “natural law,” “freedom” and “necessity,” “society” and “nature,” “human” and “nonhuman.” However, all these distinctions (which are always anyway fragile) are the result of a slow process of discovery, not the result of immediate facts of experience. On the contrary, the primary tendency is to “anthropomorphize” nature or—no less important—to “naturalize” society. When angry, we kick on object and break another; if a tile falls on our head, we insult it, and so on. Such behavior does not mean that we believe material objects can feel and hear, or suffer, but indicates that our immediate, uncontrolled reactions cause us to treat material objects as we would treat someone who has hurt us and who may thus become the target of our vengeance.

On the other hand, the fact that certain cultures extend the validity of performative acts beyond the real limits of their validity does not however imply that they totally confuse nature and culture. It only means that the borderline that they establish between these two domains is not as clear as the one that we have established.

At any rate, it can be claimed that wherever religion exists, there exists at least one area in which a certain indistinctness between nature and society is kept in force. Indeed, the element common to all religions is the idea that natural processes depend to some extent on moral order. Disguised under the idea of man’s dependence on forces that transcend him—and that are generally located in nature (whether in the skies or in the forest matters little)—religion in reality expresses the idea that nature is dependent on a human order. This is an idea of nature that has it behaving according to rules or morality, a nature that punishes evil with lightning and rewards the righteous with abundance. From experience of the efficacy of the word to which society delegates its authority over itself, society derives the idea that this authority extends to a nature populated by human images, by social and moral projections such as ancestors, gods, evil and beneficent wills, and so on.
Ultimately, this confirms that Durkheim’s theory of religion contains a kernel of truth: in order for a rite to be considered efficacious, it is necessary to experience the real force that society exerts over its individuals, as well as—it should be added—experience the effect that this force has over the natural world through its effect on human will. Indeed, that part of nature that depends, through labor, on human will is effectively modified by the collective acceptance of an order, a formula, and so on. In such a case, the formula functions as a performative—efficacious not only on social relations, but also on the part of nature that, being under man’s control, is, by virtue of this, part of society.

In the end, nature in its entirety, inasmuch as it is known, categorized, and felt, is in some sense part of society. The mistake of religious (or magical) ideology lies in taking humanity’s gnosiological appropriation of nature as a practical appropriation. Both the reification of concepts and the humanization of nature result from this confusion.

**Convention and experience**
The previous discussion should demonstrate that, if performatives are a matter of convention, interpretable in terms of practical reason, the sphere of their application is, in contrast, not purely conventional, but depends on a certain knowledge and experience of the world. Whereas in the Western world we have learned to confine these acts to an area in which convention is indeed efficacious, in other cultures this sphere is not so clearly distinct from nature.

In actual experience, the extension of performatives to nature encounters a *resistance* that has to be taken into account: the gap between the ritual’s claim and the events that actually happen can be filled in by interpretation, which points to factors that enable one to justify the rite’s failure without abandoning belief in its efficacy (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937). However, the power of interpretation to neutralize the disproving of experience is not unlimited, as is explicitly or implicitly posited from Frazer forward (cf. Wittgenstein [1931–48] 1979: 17e–18e).

These observations prevent us from recuperating, by means of the theory of performatives, the Durkheimian-functionalist theory according to which ritual acts—inasmuch as they are produced by a social “convention”—refer exclusively to this convention, to the act, and, therefore, to the actors who produce them (cf., for example, Tambiah
1973: 221), and can thus be interpreted in terms of practical reason only. Such a thesis does not take seriously the fact that ritual acts make predictions that can be confirmed or denied by experience (cf. Lloyd 1966: 178–79; Skorupski 1976: 61, 158, 181), or else it implicitly adopts a theory according to which experience would be wholly conditioned by a certain conceptual form and thus always unable to contradict it. This latter conception was popularized by Lévy-Bruhl ([1910] 1985) and persists even today in more refined forms (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937), as, for example, in Tambiah’s theory of the persuasive use of analogy in magical actions (1973).

Let us consider an example proposed by Tambiah in order to illustrate his theory. In political rhetoric one can encounter the following analogy: an employer is to his employees as a father is to his sons. The point of this analogy is the transference of a certain quality (love, respect, and so on) from one relationship to another. The analogy should evoke in the workers the idea that they are like children, and it should lead them to assume an attitude of childish dependency in relation to their employer (ibid.: 211–12).

However, one could argue against Tambiah that the analogical transference would never be accepted by the workers if their experiences contained facts that contradicted it. The formula is efficacious not so much for the persuasive effect of the analogy per se but because it is proposed against a background that—like a screen that makes visual illusion possible (cf. Gombrich 1959: 228, 276)—protects it from those experiential signs (for example, the employer’s real behavior) that would contradict its suggestions. In such cases, the “screening” action is due to the employer’s control of the means of information and of the instruments for interpreting the experience made accessible to the workers. Nevertheless, the experiences that deny the analogy are never completely suppressed, and may be reactivated in other situations.

The necessity to screen experience so that formulae, magical or political, may be effective, shows that experience is not totally conditioned by conceptual form. On the contrary, it preserves a certain degree of resistance, and thus of autonomy. This is why practical motivations for the rite, when its efficacy is extended to nature, may not disregard knowledge of nature itself, that is, the properly gnosiological dimension.
Game, art, and rite

Our discussion thus far suffices to demonstrate not only the multivalent character and extreme complexity of ritual acts, but also and above all the fact that the category “ritual” in the way it is commonly used does not have a theoretical justification. In fact it includes behaviors that fall into other categories: for example, ludic and aesthetic behaviors.

It is not by chance that these phenomena are so often found in “rituals.” Indeed, it could be argued that what is specifically ritual, or at least one of its fundamental aspects, is nothing but a particular variant in a family of phenomena that also includes games and art.

All three of these phenomena are marked by the presence of a “psychological frame” (cf. Bateson 1954: 184–93), or by metacommunicative signals that oppose actions “in a frame” or “in quotes” to ordinary actions (Valeri 2001 [see Appendix II, this volume]).

The psychological frame communicates that it includes a representation of action or a “fiction,” an action that does not belong to the same ontological level of that which it represents and is opposed to.

Among the most common means used to “frame” ritual are “formality” of behavior, a fixed and repetitive character to gestures, colors, scents, special decorations, noise (or, in contrast, complete silence), the utilization of special languages or special levels of a language (Van Gennep 1908), music and special instruments, and so on. Naturally, all these means can have (and generally do have) other functions within ritual, but their presence suffices to identify certain events as rituals.

As we have seen, the frame signals that what it encompasses is “fictitious,” “representative,” and so on. Yet, the frame has the effect of isolating impressions produced by representations from impressions generated by the real world, which remain outside. In this way, the frame can also function as a screen against those experiential signs that contradict the “reality effect” of the images that it encompasses, when those images are particularly evocative. Thus, paradoxically, the frame assumes two contradictory functions: one signals that what it contains is fictitious; the other causes its fictitious character to be forgotten. The relative importance of the two aspects of the frame’s functioning allows one to differentiate between game, art, and rite.

In a game, the evocative power of what is framed is never so great as to obliterate the message “This is a game.” If, however, the player identifies too intensely with the game, the latter stops being just a
game and may become a craze and sometimes a rite, as the superstitious acts of the most avid players demonstrate.

In art, the illusory effect of representations is more intense than in games. In fact, artistic images trigger the projection of mental images, fulfill expectations and desires, and, as such, are “integrated” by the spectators, who unconsciously add to them what is missing in order for them to appear real (cf. Gombrich 1959: 277).

Abandonment to the illusion is, however, kept under control. The frame’s two opposed modes of functioning alternate regularly and quickly: one moment it concentrates the viewer’s attention on what it contains (the representation), at the same time blocking the eye’s movement toward what lies outside it (reality), yet a moment later it pushes attention outside what it circumscribes (for example, beyond the picture). In the first moment, the viewer yields to the image and its power; in the second, the image recovers its illusory character through confrontation with the reality outside the frame.

Aesthetic pleasure is produced by the sense of control that derives from this quick and regular oscillation: indeed, abandonment to the power of the image is always followed by the experience of being able to oppose it, of directing our eyes back to reality and breaking the spell. Thus, we are dealing with a pleasure that derives from control over the illusion experienced by voluntarily yielding to it, knowing full well that awareness of the illusion can be recaptured at will.

It is truly the power to resist the power of images that is absent from ritual proper. In rituals, images, words, and gestures are perceived as identical to reality and consequently associated with the humiliating experience of dependency, which indeed is the religious feeling par excellence (cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 175–77).

Obviously, the situation in which a complete illusion is achieved—in which the ability to “put in quotes” is completely obliterated—is only an extreme case. An analysis of magical rites, for example, would be able to show that an awareness of the fictitious and, at any rate, “less real” character of ritual practices may be inhibited, but is never absent altogether, and indeed it influences belief, giving it its deepest form: “It is not true, but I believe it; I don’t believe in it, but it is true” (cf. Mannoni 1964 1969). At any rate, one may speak of ritual experience when the balance between the two functions of the frame—between making people aware of the fiction and providing a screen against reality—is altered in favor of the latter.
The theory presented here allows one to account for the fact that an aesthetic experience can be transformed into a ritual one and vice versa. Oscillations from one type of relationship between representation and reality to another are found in the course of a single symbolic action as well as in a diachronic dimension. Indeed, what transfers a given action from the sphere of ritual to that of art or games, and vice versa, is not its intrinsic qualities as much as the variable effects that these properties possess in different contexts and upon different spectators. What yesterday was a rite is today a simple “festival” set up for the aesthetic pleasure it gives; we know of some children’s games that were once rituals; when transported from the church to a museum, a sacred image becomes mere “art,” although it used to be part of a ritual experience. In sum: the mode of experiencing an image depends on its power within a given culture. Belonging as we do to a civilization in which generalization in use of images has been accompanied by an extraordinary enhancement of the ability to control them and to keep them at a distance, in other words by an unprecedented growth in the specifically aesthetic sphere, it is difficult for us to imagine the disconcerting power that images have long exercised over humans.