

Rituals Kneaded with Societies, Societies Kneaded with Rituals: Social Regulation and Collective Rituals

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Although ritual has been a subject of interest in the social sciences since their inception, it remains a fruitful topic, rich in new insights. However, rituals have been primarily studied within social anthropology, religious studies and sociology. Only in the last few decades have psychologists begun to focus on rituals more significantly. In this context, the evolutionary and cognitivist approach, of which the work included in this volume is a sample, is novel not only for the empirical insights it provides but also for its scientific interdisciplinarity and integration. For an illustration, one need only look at two recent books on rituals written by renowned anthropologists Harvey Whitehouse (2021) and Dimitris Xygalatas (2022) to realize to what extent psychological research is being integrated into the study of ritual. It has long been characteristic of the social sciences that new approaches have meant a rejection of the previous ones. Thus, scholarly paradigms have changed almost like architectural or artistic styles over time. The cognitive-evolutionary approach, though, not only integrates science across disciplines but also integrates social scientific knowledge and theories throughout the history of the discipline. Hence, recent research informed by the insights of psychology or biology is directly related to the great names of anthropology and sociology, such as Émile Durkheim, Bronislaw Malinowski, Victor Turner and many others.

Three aspects of rituals are typically considered. (1.) Ritual activities are characterized by formality, stereotypy, rigidity, repetitiveness and redundancy. Unlike routines or habits, which can be changed over time, the particular activities included in rituals tend to be performed invariantly, or at least are perceived as such. (2.) Rituals are causally opaque and goal demoted. Unlike ordinary instrumental behaviour, the causal function of its components and their ordering cannot be inferred from rituals themselves, nor can it be inferred whether the ascribed effect has been achieved. This intrinsic opacity is accompanied by the aforementioned emphasis on rituals rigid performance, invariant repetition and retention of causally redundant items. (3.) Rituals are ascribed with symbolic meanings and culturally shared justifications that contrast with the pragmatic aspect of ordinary activities and that spring from and counterbalance their causal opacity (Boyer, Liénard, 2006; Sørensen, 2007; Watson-Jones, Legare, 2016; Hobson et al., 2018).

The ambiguity of rituals in terms of their physical causality constitutes a specific feature of rituals that makes them easily identifiable even to cultural novices and has also led scholars to search for a variety of non-instrumental functions. Hobson et al. (2018) identified three clusters of possible functions of rituals. First, rituals allow for the regulation of emotional deficits (that is, the reduction of undesirable emotional states and the achieving of desirable emotional states). It transpires that emotional deficit increases the rate of ritualization and, conversely, performing rituals reduces the emotional deficit. Malinowski's discussion of rituals among Trobriand fishermen is probably the most well-known example of the ritual reduction of feelings of anxiety, stress and insecurity (Malinowski, 1954; Lang et al., 2015, but see Talmont-Kaminski, 2013). Second, rituals appear to play an important role in preparing a person for a context that is motivationally relevant. They increase attention, enhance motivation and self-confidence, and offer a sense of competence. This includes, for instance, the rituals we see in sports (Hobson et al., 2018). Third, rituals enable social regulation. By creating bonds between ritual participants, they enable social signalling and the sharing of cultural knowledge (Ibid., 2018).

Naturally, the third function mentioned above – social regulation – is what has interested social scientists the most, especially in the context of collective rituals. Indeed, it is precisely in collective rituals that the nature of ritual as a social convention most invites a search for the functions of rituals. Many social anthropologists and sociologists have pointed to the central role of collective rituals in cooperative communities, in which they stimulate group cohesion through shared experience (Durkheim, 1964 [1912]; Rappaport, 1999; Atran, Henrich, 2010; Irons, 2001; Whitehouse, Lanman, 2014). Collective rituals have been seen as activities that integrate an individual with the communal social order. Functionalists have viewed rituals as mechanisms that help to establish or maintain social equilibrium by bonding group members, minimizing status differences or redressing social conflicts (Durkheim, 1964 [1912]; Malinowski, 1964). Van Gennep focused on how rituals transform individuals' social status (Van Gennep, 1909), while Edmund Leach argued that rituals also mirror and maintain social inequalities and hierarchies (Leach, 1954),

and Victor Turner claimed that different types of rituals organize the society either towards the *communitas* (levelled experience of togetherness) or towards rigid social hierarchies (Turner, 1969). Building on these classical theories of ritual, recent evolutionary and cognitive approaches view collective rituals as adaptive behaviours that promote cooperation and study their impact on individual prosocial behaviour.

Collective rituals function as indicators of group membership. People often have to rely on proxy identifiers of group membership, using externally observable similarities. Rituals, because they lack an instrumental function, are often group-specific behavioural patterns and, consequently, serve as a reliable indicator of group membership; thus, they mediate identity and affiliation and in turn affect selective cooperation (Watson-Jones, Legare, 2016; McElreath et al., 2003). As such, rituals can enable the creation of cooperative groups beyond everyday communities based on shared beliefs and values (distant coreligionists) (Uhrin, Bužeková, 2022, this issue), but also social splintering by fostering delineations of social borders between subgroups that can escalate up to the emergence of separate cultural groups (Bahna, 2022, this issue).

Rituals often take up costly forms that, from a practical point of view, appear wasteful. Evolutionary approaches in anthropology, psychology or behavioural ecology have in recent decades sought to understand these elements of human behaviour through costly signalling theory, which argues that such behaviours serve to reliably communicate features of actors that would otherwise be difficult to recognize reliably. This framework has been used to examine various domains of human behaviour, including the practice of religious rituals (Iannaccone, 1994; Irons, 2001; Shaver, Sosis, 2018; Sosis, 2000; Xygalatas, 2012). For example, one such hard communication quality is individual piety, which may indirectly indicate group commitment through adherence to groups' norms and values. An individual's willingness to invest personal resources in a costly ritual therefore becomes a visible manifestation of group-relevant qualities of individuals. Collective rituals hence can constitute a kind of arena where individuals intervene in favour of their social prestige (Xygalatas et al., 2021; Shaver, Sosis, 2014), but also can be a social technology that the community can use to maintain group cohesion by discouraging its members from cheating or free riders to join (Sosis, 2003; Sosis, Ruffle, 2003; Bahna, 2022). It should be noted here that the issue of costly signalling is not only a matter of extreme forms of rituals that require extraordinary costs in the form of resources, bodily hardship or self-sacrifice (Xygalatas et al., 2021), but also involves cases of low-cost high-frequency signals that are in many contexts more accurate indicators of group commitment, especially from the perspective of the receivers of the signal (Barker et al., 2019; Uhrin, Bužeková, 2022).

The very costliness of collective rituals is therefore being explained as mediating in-group cooperation, which as a group-level benefit leads to success in direct competition between groups. Besides that, the seemingly wasteful or non-instrumental costs of rituals are argued to be justified by creating a context that affects the probability of social transmission, functioning as what Joe Henrich labelled 'credibility-enhancing displays', even though not all credibility-enhancing displays

must be necessarily costly. When people evaluate what to learn, they relate to cues that indicate an individual's commitment to what he/she propagates. (Henrich, 2009). Such costs help the behaviours or ideas with which they are associated, on the one hand, to more easily achieve group-level distribution and, on the other hand, in an intergroup competition to motivate selective joining of new members into a given group or to cause selective imitation of such cultural elements by other groups (Richerson et al., 2016).

The social regulatory functions of rituals apply not only to those who actively engage in them but also to those who observe them. Hobson et al. argue that cultural schemas embodied in rituals are easier to remember and learn; rituals facilitate automatic imitation, thus promoting copying and sharing of normative behaviours; rituals signal important social intentions, making the ritual socially significant and thereby worthy of being imitated and shared with others; and rituals reinforce the value of cultural knowledge, reminding and motivating people to behave according to norms (Hobson et al., 2018).

One of the well-studied social regulatory functions of rituals lies in their ability to generate the experience of the fusion of the individual with group identity. Research shows that a sense of fusion with the group can be created through two mechanisms. The first is the perception of behavioural synchrony, which triggers feelings of similarity, trust and self-other overlap (Gelfand et al., 2020). Behavioural synchrony, as a cross-culturally universal element of collective rituals, in the form of prescribed movements, gestures, singing, chanting, dancing, etc. (Gelfand et al., 2020), has been found to have profound effects on later social interactions. Synchronous activities lead to helping behaviours, increase cooperation, foster mutual liking and relationships and trigger pleasurable feelings related to the functioning of the endogenous opioid system (Kokal et al., 2011; Launay et al., 2013; Reddish et al., 2014; Wiltermuth, Heath, 2009; Lang et al., 2017; Tarr et al., 2014). The second mechanism is the experience of emotional synchrony, in other words, the collective experience of intense emotions, which generates a Self that is merged with the group and is capable of motivating pro-group behaviours (Xygalatas, Konvalinka, Roepstorff, Bulbulia, 2011, Xygalatas et al., 2013; Fisher et al., 2014), including self-sacrifice (Whitehouse, 2018).

Harvey Whitehouse argues that the morphology of rituals, shaped by their frequency and emotional arousal, can define what type of social bonds are formed between participants, which ultimately has implications for the social organization of the group itself. Rituals that bind a community together based on a fusion of individual and collective identities through the experience of intense, but mainly dysphoric, emotions tend to promote the formation of small egalitarian communities. Conversely, rituals promoting group identification based on shared traits and semantic schemas tend to facilitate the formation of hierarchized social structures with established doctrine (Whitehouse, 2004, 2018, 2021).

This issue of *Slovenský národopis / Slovak Ethnology* does not, of course, provide space for all the above-mentioned roles that collective rituals play in social regulation.

Nevertheless, the five articles collected here illustrate the diversity of the approaches taken and the scope of the overall topic.

The first article of this issue at first glance is the least related to the topic of social regulation. **Peter Maño** and **Dimitris Xygalatas** (pp. 186–209) present an exploratory study of the emic motivations of ritual participation among Mauritian Hindus, comparing high-cost and low-cost rituals (see also Xygalatas, Maño, 2022). However, this contribution should be seen as a part of a cumulative research programme examining rituals in the Mauritian Hindu community, which more explicitly addresses the prosocial functions of these rituals (e.g., Xygalatas et al., 2013, 2021; Xygalatas, Maño, 2022). Here Maño and Xygalatas demonstrate that a crucial factor in ritual participation stems from the perceived efficacy of given rituals. High-cost rituals such as Kavadi or Maha Shivaratri are perceived to be more efficacious because of their high costs. Therefore, when stakes are high or some acute problems need solving, people prefer to resort to costly rituals. In contrast, the little-noticed but more frequent rituals like Holi are not regarded as life-changing events and there is no expectation to engage in exaggerated displays of devotion. Even though emic considerations regarding ritual participation do not reflect the social regulatory functions of Mauritian high-cost rituals (Xygalatas et al., 2013, 2021), this research hints at the possibility that social status differences influence the types of motivations and the resulting costs of ritual participation. This opens a new methodological challenge relating to the fact that even though the emic motivations do not semantically align with the social-regulatory functions of ritual participation, their inner pattern and social distribution may map onto them. For instance, it can be expected that acute needs are more frequent among individuals of low status (see Xygalatas et al., 2021).

The second article focuses on the signalling functions of ritual costs that are spread in frequent repeated participation rather than accumulated in a single high-cost ritual. **Michal Uhrin** and **Tatiana Bužeková** (pp. 210–227), in their ethnographic case study on the integration of new immigrants into a rural community in the west of Slovakia, show how in the case of religious signalling, old settlers prefer low-cost high-frequency strategies to high-cost low-frequency ones. They also show that the process of assessing individual prestige is highly complex and subject to iterative testing, with signals of piety through participation in regular rituals being only one layer of a complex process. In doing so, they make an important methodological point, namely that subtle signals and their efficacy in the context of a complex process of reputation building are relatively difficult to identify and require a longitudinal ethnography that is sensitive to the contextual nuances of social reality. Hence, in settings where extreme rituals are studied, subtle signals may remain unexplored or even unrecognized by researchers, which may bias the overall interpretation of extreme forms of costly signals. We believe this idea should be developed further and specific examples of costly signalling and their adaptive functionality ought not to be considered in isolation but in terms of what functional share of all the reputation-building mechanisms employed in a given setting they occupy.

It appears that the signal of commitment embedded in the costs of ritual participation is, from the point of view of the receiver, not just a matter of the signaller's willingness to expend the costs, but also an opportunity to test the signaller's endurance and reliability from a long-term perspective. In other words, the costs of the signal, which are theorized to increase the signal's honesty, are themselves subject to epistemic vigilance (Sperber et al., 2010). Such dedication to repetitive long-term ritual signalling is addressed in the two further contributions to this issue (Mentel, 2022, this issue; Bahna, 2022, this issue).

Andrej Mentel (pp. 228–247) presents an ethnographic case study from Bosnia in which he compares three different confessional communities (Sunni Muslims, Roman Catholics and Sufi dervishes) and explores the social bonding effects of their ritual traditions in comparison with differences in social networking beyond kin and neighbours. Mentel builds his argumentation on theories of behavioural synchrony in ritual and the emotional experience of social unity. He shows that among these three groups, the highest level of ritual synchrony (ritual singing and dancing) and emotional intensity can be seen among the members of dervish orders and corresponds with the highest level of investments in the religious community. It is also the dervishes who, to the greatest degree, extend their basic social networks with their ritual co-participants, members of their dervish order. It is also often the case that membership is the only reason to cooperate with members of the order, as it is usually detached from and prioritized over other pragmatic cooperative networks like neighbourhoods. In comparison, the Sunni Muslims and Roman Catholics, who did not engage in ritual behavioural synchrony to the extent and with such an intensity as the dervishes, did not create such strong cooperative connections with their co-ritualists.

Vladimír Bahna (pp. 248–272) introduces the historical case study of the Russian Old Believers and uses it to explore how different aspects of rituals and other components of religion (beliefs, social norms, taboos, etc.) can be complexly intertwined into a very resilient system. One of the most important elements, here again, is ritual synchronicity, which contributes to the experience of communal unity; however, unlike the example given by Mentel, in this case, it does not extend individual social networks by an additional layer but instead leads to the construction of the religious community as the sole criterion for kinship, neighbourhood, friendship or other cooperative relationships. Alongside ritual synchrony, there are bolt markers of group membership, numerous social norms that minimize contact with outgroups, costly expressions of religiosity and group identity, and a rich theology justifying both religious and social isolationism. In many ways, Old Believers are a prime example of how the various elements of religion can create a tightly knit system that promotes in-group cohesiveness and cooperation. Paradoxically, it is precisely in the Old Believer groups with the most intense expressions of in-group devotion that behaviours (e.g., collective suicide, excessive celibacy) that led to the collapse of these groups repeatedly occurred.

Jordan Kiper and Richard Sosis (pp. 273–296) offer a new model of totalitarian regimes built on similarity with religion. Drawing on Sosis's theory of religion as an

adaptive system of behaviours and ideas, in which ritual plays a central role (Sosis, 2019; Purzicky, Sosis, 2022), they argue that totalitarian regimes are something akin to quasi-religious systems in that they, like religion, link rituals and ideologies in order to regulate social behaviour towards the construction of group allegiances. Kiper and Sosis illustrate that totalitarian systems, unlike religion, fail to achieve cooperation and coordination beyond cadres or coalitions of enthusiasts because they over-sanctify power and overregulate meanings. As in several articles in this issue, one of the main points here is that the social regulatory potential of ritual (or religion, when we look from a broader systemic perspective), rests not just on the effects a ritual can have on participants as individuals and collectives but stems from the sustainability and longevity of these effects, which is itself a multifaceted problem.

Beyond the psychological findings that support the idea of the prosocial effects of rituals and on which all the articles in this issue build their arguments, the ethnographic and historical data they provide place these rituals in a broader social context. We believe that it is this context that is necessary to examine how rituals can be used for social regulation, as they are both ingredients and instruments of the social.

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