Death Ritual: Anthropological Perspectives *Milton Cohen*

INTRODUCTION

In all societies, when a person dies, family, friends, and neighbors respond in structured, patterned ways to the death. Cultural guidelines determine the treatment and disposal of the body and prescribe a period of mourning for close relatives. Death ritual, like much of human behavior, is an expression of a cultural blueprint, of attitudes, values and ideals passed down by parents, and their parents, which an individual learns as a member of society.

The analysis of mortuary practices provides rich data on the behavior of kin and community. It leads to people's notions of gods, souls, witches, spirits and afterworlds. It promises access to their belief and value systems, to their conceptions of the social and moral worlds. It informs that ritual has consequences for both the individual and society.

This paper focuses on death ritual from an anthropological point of view. It begins with an account of earliest ritual, at least 100,000 years ago, and follows with descriptions of mortuary practices in more recent context. Two outstanding works are then reviewed: Rites of Passage by Arnold Van Gennep, and "Collective Representations of Death," an essay by Robert Hertz. While Hertz deals exclusively with death, Van Gennep treats death as one of a number of life cycle crises which command ritual observance. Next, a functional approach to explain mortuary ritual is offered. Finally, the concept of deritualization and its consequences for modern society are considered.

Ritual: A Definition

Ritual is behavior; it is "religion in action" (Wallace: 102). It is personal and private behavior, as it is social. A sick patient praying for strength to endure pain and the soldier praying for protection while undergoing bombardment exemplify solitary ritual.

Ritual may involve sacred or secular symbols. It is "stereotyped communication ... which reduces anxiety, prepares the organism to act, and (in social rituals) coordinates the preparation for action among several organisms... "(Wallace: 236)

Ritual generally requires a sacred context, says Lessa, although the prime requisite is that it be attended by sentiments, values, and beliefs which transcend the utilitarian. Behavior is ritualistic if it is habitual, socially sanctioned, symbolic and without any practical consideration. (Lessa 1971)

Gluckman emphasizes the social attributes of ritual and the importance of supernatural sanction in enforcing conformity. Ritualization refers to the performance of prescribed actions with the expectation that the behavior will "express and amend social relationships" and help to secure mystical "Blessing, purification, protection and prosperity" (Gluckman: 24).

Early Death Ritual

Death ritual is at least as old as our Neanderthal predecessors who lived in Europe and the Middle East from 100,000110,000 years ago, and may even reach back to Peking Man, almost one-half million years ago.[2] Wallace describes the ritual handling of the human body by the Neanderthals. They buried their dead in caves, depositing the body in the earth with great care. The legs were usually flexed or contracted tightly against the body, and the head was frequently pillowed on the arm. Grave goods were often placed with the deceased. A child's body was surrounded by a circle of ibex horns; a young man was buried with a hand ax, a flint scraper, and an assortment of animal bones; an old man was buried with an entire bison leg, tools, and lumps of red ocher. Burial with tools may have been related to the belief that the dead man required these implements for his journey to the other world. Red ocher may have symbolized blood, life and rebirth.

A human specimen unearthed by Solecki in Shanidar in the Zagros Mountains of northeastern Iraq was discovered in soil which contained fossil pollen of prehistoric flowers. Perhaps the mourners had covered the corpse with flowers as part of a mortuary ceremony. The flowers may have been symbolic of rebirth, an expression of magic by irritation (Swartz and Jordan: 336-337).

Cro Magnon, successors to the Neanderthal, occupied southern Europe and the Mediterranean littoral from about 40,00010,000 years ago. They buried their dead in the mouths of caves in flexed or sleeping positions with grave goods and personal ornaments. The bodies were heavily painted with red ocher. Animal bones and skulls found near many of the graves suggest the possibility of funerary feasts. Wallace described Cro Magnon implements manufactured from human bone: shallow cups made from human skulls; human teeth pierced threading on a cord and incised with ornamental designs. These objects may have been used in a magical ritual "to control, to secure the good will of, or to acquire the virtues of the departed... "(Wallace: 228).

Ritual Practices

Death ritual begins when a person stops breathing, or is otherwise identified as dead. Treatments of the body, disposal of the remains, and the behavior of close kin and others for a specified period of mourning are spelled out by society.

The body may be washed, anointed, shaved, combed, painted or perfumed. It is left naked or dressed, covered with a shroud, and sometimes adorned with jewelry. The mouth, nose, vagina, urethra and rectum may be stopped up, perhaps to prevent evil spirits from invading the body. Today it is intended to check the seepage of body fluids.

Coins or weights are placed on the eyelids to keep them closed, to keep the corpse from "staring" at the living.

As the death is announced, family, friends and neighbors draw together. People express grief: they weep, wail, scream, sing dirges, beat the breast, tear the hair, or otherwise mutilate themselves. The closest kin effect changes in costume. They wear white, black or red, or paint their bodies; they rend their clothes; they cover their bodies with ashes or dirt; they cut their hair, or let it grew, altering their normal appearance.

At a death vigil preceding the burial (or other form of disposal), mourners sit with the corpse. Originally the intent may have been to ensure their presence if the dead stirred and tried to return to life; or if he attempted t: identify the witch responsible for his death. Perhaps living wished to protect against a spirit attack, or to assist the poor soul, recently separated frog: its bodily home.

Inhumation was probably the most widespread disposal pattern. Originally earth burial might have been designated to protect the living from contamination, or to prevent wild animals from molesting the body, or, as a sympathetic rift, to promote rebirth. The position in the ground varied: prone, supine, lateral, sitting, or flexed. Often the dean person was interred with grave goods, e.g., ornaments, tools, or weapons. Among some groups, a body was temporarily buried, exhumed after a specified time, and then reinterred in a second burial.

Lessa describes cremation as an ancient and widespread ritual, standard among the Hindus. He lists several motives: unwillingness on the part of nomads to leave their dead behind; fear that the dead might return; a desire to free the soul for departure to the afterworld; to protect against wild beasts, or evil spirits; a desire to provide warmth and comfort in the afterworld. (Lessa 1971: 761).

Exposure to the elements was practiced by the Eskimos probably out of necessity, as they were unable to dig in the frozen ground. The Plains Indians wrapped the dead person in a blanket or robe, and lashed the body high in a tree, or set it on a raised platform. The Parsees of India, descendants of the ancient Zoroastrians of Persia, traditionally left the corpse in "towers of silence" where vultures and other birds of prey would strip the bodies of flesh. Contact of the impure corpse with the sacred elements, earth, fire, and water, was thus avoided.

All societies prescribe a period of mourning for close relatives and other kin of the deceased. A beginning and an end are specified. The duration depends upon tire relationship with the dead: the closer the connection, the longer the mourning period. The mourners are segregated physically from other members of the group. During the mourning period, society permits, or requires, an expression of grief. The depth and duration vary from group to group and are contingent *On* kinship connection. Widows must deny themselves food, ornamentation, and amusement for an extended period. Normal activities are curtailed, or set aside, until all obligations have been fulfilled. Ritual purification is required before the mourner can resume normal social relations.

Among the lugbara of Uganda, lineage sisters must wash in the nearest stream after the burial; then they can mingle with others. (Middleton: 67).

HERTZ: COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH

The Indonesian ritual of double burial is embedded In a complex of ides, sentiments, and values which assume the interrelationship of the body, soul, bereaved, and society. These links are emphasized in an intermediary period, a transitional stage between a first and second burial. Although the ceremonies appear to focus on the disposal and transformation of the body, they also involve the destinies of the soul and survivors.

Using cultural data on the Dayak of Borneo, Hertz describes their activities at dean. The body is washed, the eyes closed, and the orifices plugged with coins or beads. The corpse is placed in a sealed coffin, except for an opening which allows the drainage of putrid matter into the earth. sometimes the fluids are collected by the mourners for ritual use. A sealed container is used, they say, to guard against the escape of evil power. The body is temporarily buried in a deserted place in the forest.

Between this first, or provisional disposal, and the final burial, an extended period elapses, ranging from eight months to six years, an average of two years. This span is required, say the Dayak, to allow the decomposition of the body and the drying of the bones. Fear and pity are characteristic during this intermediate stage. All attempt to avoid the contagion of the corpse; its evil power can strike down the living. The dead man's clothing and possessions are destroyed, his house and trees destroyed, and the streams he fished in, tabooed. Yet there is concern for the welfare of the body, too. To protect against evil spirits, his eyes are closed, the orifices plugged, a vigil maintained, and gongs beaten. His relatives bring his usual meal twice a day until the final ceremony, sit with him, and treat him as if he were still alive.

The soul, like the body, is undergoing transition. The Olo Nhaju believes in a dual soul. The corporeal remains with the body until the final burial, while the "marrow of the soul", the essence, wanders incessantly, unable to enter the homeland of the dead until the completion of the ritual duties by the survivors. The soul lives marginally in two worlds. It belongs neither to the afterworld, nor can it resume its existence on earth. In this condition, it may seek revenge against its kin, especially if they fail to fulfill their ritual obligations. But the living show concern for the soul, too. Treated as an intruder in both worlds, destined to wander indefinitely, the living ensures a favorable outcome by meeting their responsibilities.

The mourners, like the body and soul, are in a precarious state. Ritually charged and dangerous, they no longer can live as others do. They do not dress, adorn themselves, or eat the same foods as their neighbors. They may not leave the village. The mourners are shunned, not only by men, but also by the spirits. "They are forsaken, not only by man, but also by protective spirits: as long as their impurity lasts, they cannot hope for any help from the powers above" (Hertz: 38).

The final ceremony frees the participants in death. This collective celebration involves not only the mourners, but the entire group. The long intermediary period allows the family to accumulate the large store of foodstuffs necessary to accommodate the many guests attending the great feast. Often a number of families will pool their resources in a collective observance.

For the Dayak, the final ceremony has three objectives: to give a final burial to the remains of the deceased; to ensure the successful removal of the soul to the land of the ancestors; and to free the living from their mourning obligations, permitting them to return to normal social life.

To begin the final ceremony, the corpse is exhumed and brought back to the village. If the bones are not completely bare, the bits of flesh are removed, wrapped in a new cloth and placed in a coffin. For several days, the family celebrates by dancing, eating, singing and drinking. Sacred vases and other family treasurers enjoyed by the dead person during his lifetime are brought to accompany him on this journey. The bones are then removed to their final sepulture, a small, ironwood house raised on high posts.

The transfer of the remains from the initial burial site to the final resting place liberates the deceased. "It liberates him from the isolation in which he was plunged since his death, and reunites his body with those of his ancestors" (Hertz. 55).

The final service ends the travail of the soul, releases it from the grip of death, gives it peace, and ensures its entrance into its new home with other ancestral souls. Priests and priestesses arrange this spiritual transport. Reciting magical incantations, beating the drums, using their strange Mowers, they invite the celestial spirits to return to earth. They will carry back to the afterworld a boatload of waiting souls, sacrificed animals, and treasures displayed at the final feast.

Practices during this final ceremony also affect the survivors. Human sacrifice and the taking of heads are essential elements. Victims are chained to a sacrificial post. The mourners dance around them, poke them with spears bringing screams of pain; the louder the better, for the heavenly souls welcome this. When the victim drops, he is beheaded, his blood collected by the priestesses, and sprinkled on the living "to reconcile them with their deceased relative" (Hertz: 63). This act of sacrifice "desacralizes the living, gives peace and beatitude to the soul of the deceased and (probably) regenerates his body" (Hertz: 63). After the sacrificial ceremony, the relatives of the dead purify themselves by washing in the river.

The final ceremony completes the separation of the dead from the living, and ensures the soul entry into the community of the sacred ancestors. The livings are freed from their mourning obligations. They return to normal activities, and resume their interrupted social relations. The celebration marks the end of a perilous time." …the dark period dominated by death" is over, "a new era begun" (Hertz: 56).

A number of themes emerge from Hertz's work. First, death is not an event, but a process. When respiration stops, the body receives a temporary burial. A transitional period between the initial disposal and the final burial provides the time for the decomposition of the body, the purification of the bones, the journey of the soul, and the liberation of the mourners. During, the intermediary period, the link between the living and the dead continues. Mourners visit the dead, speak_ with him, and bring his meals. He remains a member of the group until the final ceremony.

A second theme concerns immortality, a cycle of life, death and rebirth. For the Olo Ngaju, "death is not a singular event occurring only once in the history of the individual, it is an episode that repeats itself endlessly and that merely marks the passage from one form of existence to another" (Hertz: 61). Life and death are inextricably interwoven. As death follows life, life springs forth from death. Death is the seed which brings life. Death is not a mere destruction, but a transition. As the old body dissolves into nothingness, a new body begins to take form. Transformation is the order of things.

Finally, the Dayak conceive a reciprocal relationship between the living and dead. Both depend upon each other, the living for protection and largesse, and the dead for periodic offerings, respect, and commemoration. Mutual care and concern are the essential ingredients in a proper relationship.

VAN GENNEP: THE RITES OF PASSAGE

For Van Gennep, rituals performed at death resemble those played out during other critical periods in the life of the individual, e.g., at birth, social puberty, or marriage. rife is a journey, the individual a passenger. Along the way, the individual confronts periodic challenges which he must manage if he is to move to the next social station. To help the person cope with these crises, society has developed ceremonial responses which Van Gennep labeled the "rites of passage."

All rites of passage follow a standard pattern. A rite of separation is followed by a rite of transition and concludes with a rite of incorporation. These themes of separation, transition, and incorporation mark every life cycle ceremony, although each is differentially emphasized depending upon the group and the occasion. Rites of separation are important in death, transition in death, pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation, and incorporation in marriage.

Separation means to relinquish a previous social status, a requisite for movement into a new social position in the social structure. To be born is to move from the world of the unborn to the society of the living. To die is to depart the world of the living, and to enter the home of the ancestors. To mourn is to detach as a wife, or husband, to become widow or widower.

Movement from one status to another is gradual. The person enters a transitional or luminal period, a sacred and dangerous time, during which normal, ordinary activities are interrupted. Now the individual is suspended between two worlds, between the past and the future, between a former condition and a new social destiny. In limen, one undergoes transformation, shedding an old social identity while molding a new social personality.

The passenger emerges from limen ready in a ritual and social sense to assume the responsibilities of a new social existence. A rite of incorporation, which includes a ceremonial meal, confirms the transformation of the individual. Each person eats of food brought by others. "All are united to all, so that a complete and profound union is affected among the members of the group" (Van Gennep: 170).

This tripartite model fits well the analysis of initiation (social puberty) rites. The initiate is separated physically from his home, parents and neighbors. He is transported to a mysterious and sacred place, where, together with peers, he faces a series of trials and ordeals. During limen, his former identity is obliterated, and a new social and spiritual self takes shape. The metamorphosis completed, he is accepted into adult society in a rite of incorporation at which he joins with others in a communal meal. He has made the transition from the asexual to the sexual worlds.

Marriage, too, lends itself' to Van Gennep's analysis. Separation is evident as the betrothed moves from one household to another, from one family to another, from one village to another, from limited social responsibility to full adult status.

Betrothal, the transitional period, may last for several years. Among the Chaga of Tanzania, reports Van Gennep, tree long transition allows the groom's family the time to raise the bride price promised to the bride's family. The slaughter of an ox signifies the end of the betrothal. After the wedding feast, the couple begins married life together.

In American marriage, the honeymoon period may be viewed as transitional. The newlyweds have been formally united in marriage, and have presented themselves at a reception for the community. They depart on a honeymoon, to a magical place (often in the sun) where they luxuriate in a wonderful dream world. Normal responsibilities, e.g., working, shopping, cooking, and cleaning do not have to be met at this time. Like Van Gennep's actors in limen, the honeymooners are special and set apart. Soon the couple return to earth, to the real world, there to begin married life. The honeymoon is over.

Death ritual subsumes elements of separation, transition and incorporation. Symbolic of separation in death is the deposit of the corpse in the grave, coffin or cemetery; burning the dead person's tools, jewels, house and other possessions; killing wives, slaves, and favorite animals of the deceased.

Mourning is transition. The bereaved are segregated, physically and socially, from the living. In limen, they are cut off from the dead and from their friends and neighbors. Normal social life is suspended for them for a prescribed period of mourning, their activities hemmed in by taboos.

Reversal of normal patterns occurs during the luminal period. In Europe, this included stopping all clocks in the home, the turning of mirrors toward the wall, the emptying of water vessels, and the opening of doors and windows (Lessa 1971: 760). A Jewish mourner during Shiva is forbidden, for seven days beginning with the day of the funeral, to leave home, to greet another person, to wear leather footgear or any new garment, to bathe, use makeup, shave or cut hair, or have sexual relations. The mourner sits on the floor or on a low stool, and not on a chair or sofa. From the seventh to the thirtieth day, the person may not shave or wear new clothes. He must refrain from participation in festive activity for a full twelve months. (Wigoder: 273-274)

Incorporation occurs when the mourners have fulfilled their ritual duties and have been cleansed. Together with others in the group they partake of a communal meal. They may then reenter the normal, social world.

For Van Gennep, the themes of death and rebirth recur periodically during the life of an individual. Physiological death occurs when a person stops breathing. It happens once. Socially a person dies many times, on those occasions when he undergoes transition from one social station to another.

Turner finds symbols and metaphors for death in initiation rites. "The initial may be buried, forced to lie motionless in the posture and direction of customary burial, may be stained black, or may be forced to live for a while in the company of masked and monstrous mummers representing the dead" (Turner: 25). In Ndembu (Zambia) initiation rites, circumcision is a metaphor for killing, says Turner, since it kills the novice's childhood status. The blood soaked site of the operation is called "the place of death or dying" (Turner: 21).

Van Gennep saw a man's life as a series of separations, transitions and incorporations. Death and rebirth follow one upon the other, a cycle that repeats like the seasons of the year, or the waxing and waning of the moon. With eloquence he wrote: "For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act, and cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross; the thresholds to cross; the thresholds of summer and winter, of a season or a year, of a month or a night; the thresholds of birth, adolescence, maturity and old age; the threshold of death and that of the afterlife for those who believe in it." (Van Gennep: 189-190).

Functions of Death Ritual

One approach to the study of ritual emphasizes the social and psychological functions of behavior. Social functions refer to the effects of a rite on the social structure, the network of social relations binding individuals together in an orderly life. The immediate or direct effects on the individuals involved in the ritual are psychological functions (Radcliff-Brown: 186).

For hertz, death ritual offers a respite, a breathing spell, time for the society and the individual to accommodate to a dramatic change. Physical death does not, all at once, convince people that a person has died. Images of him persist. His connections to society are too strong to sever in a moment. The acknowledgment comes slowly. The long intermediary period of the Dayak death ceremony provides the opportunity for this social readjustment.

Death not only involves the extinction of the physical body, but also the blotting of a social identity. "When a person dies, the society loses in him much more than a unit; it is stricken in the very principle of its life, in the faith it has in itself" (Hertz: 7'.). Ritual is a collective response to this attack. In effect, society looks death squarely in the eye and reaffirms its own will and resolve. Life will go on, irrespective of the loss of an individual.

In smaller communities, individuals play a wider range of social roles so that everyone is relatively important. Death becomes a kind of "national calamity" since the deceased leaves behind physical property, a spouse, and also bundles of roles and statuses which have to be redistributed if social equilibrium is to be restored. (Lewis: 131-133) Mortuary rites, often spaced over a period of months, provide time to recruit for the social positions left vacant by death.

Mortuary rituals promote the solidarity of the group. Mandelbaum observes that death ritual among the Kota of south India brings people together at moments of crisis. It reminds them of their responsibilities to the dead, to the bereaved, and to ethers in the society. He points to the cohesion of the immediate family at this time, as relatives console the Mourners and give material aid. Other Kotas, and also non-Kotas who knew the deceased lend their presence and assistance, creating a wider integration.

Howells likens funeral ceremonies to our periodic oaths of allegiance to the flag. They serve to unify the members of the community, to remind them: of a common commitment. (Howells: 159)

Among the Kanuri of the Sudan, death brings the members of the community together and confirms the individual's membership. No matter what differences exist between people, a funeral demands attendance because the deceased was a relative, a friend, or a "man of our to.-,n." Not to participate was "unthinkable" (Cohen: 72). In attending, a person shows respect for the dead. He also reinforces the links with the bereaved and with the society as a whole.

For Radcliff-Brown, death rituals are the collective expressions of feeling appropriate to the situation. In this common display of emotion, individuals signal their commitment to each other and to the society itself. Ritual functions to affirm the social bond. (Radcliffe-Brown: 168)

In Van Gennep's view, the rites of passage prepare the individual to step into a new social status, ready to assume new social responsibilities. Further, they focus attention on this change in social identity. The person has taken on a new social personality and must be treated in a manner appropriate to his new status. Finally, Van Gennep saw regeneration as a law of life and of the universe. From time to tire, societies lost energy, suffered cultural fatigue and had to be reenergized. The rites of passage functioned to revitalize there.

Firth noted that many funeral rites were associated with "ideas of completeness of sequence in human affairs" analogous to ceremonies of farewell. Here society takes formal notice of the termination of social relations. (Firth: 317) Mandelbaum refers to the need to complete "the proper order of a person's career" (Mandelbaum: 197). This final stage must be celebrated just as other previous social transitions had been marked during the life of the individual. In a sense, the dead man's family and friends gather in collective reminiscence of earlier moments they had shared with the dead person. They engage in a summation of a man's lifetime, of his character, achievements, successes, less often of his shortcomings and failures. They assert that in death the individual continues to invite the respect and regard of his fellows.

Funeral orations made over the dead by chosen orators are the "keynote of the Mapuche burial ceremony" (Faron: 72).Each orator speaks in laudatory terms of the exploits, virtues, and character of the deceased, of his noble qualities, of his meaning to his family and friends, and of their loss and grief.

In primitive society, "ordinary human events" such as death, marriage or puberty are rendered extraordinary and sacramental. Diamond calls them "ritual dramas" as man takes center stage. He regards these rites as an art form. Around them cluster the esthetic creations of primitive society, the masks, poems, songs, and the dance, the "quintessential rhythm of life and culture" (Diamond: 199). in the performance of these ceremonies, man raises himself above the purely biological, and confirms his humanity and the cultural character of human existence.

Douglas touches on this theme of transcendence in Dinka death practice. A revered Dinka spearmaster[3], nearing the end of his life, chooses the time, manner and place of death. As his breath ebbs, he is placed in a coffin and carried to the grave. He utters his final words to his grieving son. He is then ritually murdered by suffocation. By this free decision, says Douglas, the spearmaster cheats death. By free will, he sets himself apart from other creatures that must live as nature ordains. Man transforms as he strives for "perfect fulfillment" (Douglas: 209-2i0).

Grief and sorrow, pain and loss are experiences associated with death. Douglas writes that funeral customs remind the living that death and suffering are integral parts of

nature (Douglas: 210). They remind us, too, "of the gravity of death and do not allow us to develop indifference" (Lessa 1971: 757).

Mortuary rites serve private and personal functions as well as social ones. As passage rites, they support the individual as he accomplishes transition and moves through uncharted waters. They signal the gradual release of the bereaved from the "psychological tentacles of death" (Howells: 159). Well wishers distract the mourners and bolster their spirits. A mourning period allows the bereaved to readjust personally and to contemplate a future without the physical presence of the dead person. "Ritual dramas" allow the person to "maintain integrity of self" while taking on a new social identity. The individual "acts in new ways without crippling anxiety"... (Diamond: 198).

For Malinowski, death rites functioned to allay anxiety. The crisis of death triggered "a chaos of emotion" which might result in mental conflict and possible disintegration. Mortuary rituals dampened the potential danger to the individual and the group (Malinowski: 97-99). Also, these ceremonies prepared the individual for his own ultimate demise. "Any survivor who has gone through a number of mortuary ceremonials for others becomes prepared for his own death" (Malinowski: 97).

DERITUALIZATION

Some observers identify religion in modern society with deritualization. Kimball, referring to a decline in sacred ceremonialism, notes that fewer rites of passage are celebrated today although the need for ritualized expression is no less than in earlier times. When they are marked, they are private and individualized, unlike life cycle ceremonies in traditional societies. There they provided an occasion for group participation at the same time the individual was undergoing social and ritual transformation (Kimball: xvi-xvii).

Lessa refers to the virtual disappearance of many of the external evidences of mourning in American society. Rarely seen anymore are black clothes, black armbands, black bordered handkerchiefs and stationery, crepe veils and mourning jewelry (miniatures, lockets, brooches, rings, and earrings (Lessa 1971: 764).

Gluckman acknowledges a decline in sacred ritual which he attributes to a shift in social relations in modern society. In tribal societies, members of the same family share the same household, work in the same fields and worship the same gods. Ritual delineates and marks off social roles, lessening the possibility of confusion. It dilutes the effect of a negative moral evaluation in one sphere in those situations where an individual does not perform as expected in a specific role. Furthermore, it dampens the effect of conflict. A disturbance in one institutional encounter would spill over were it not for the isolating qualities of ritual.

Ritual is less important in our world because relationships are distinctive, played out in different physical surroundings with different sets of performers. Roles and judgments are segregated. Disputes are compartmentalize-.. Conflict is contained within institutional boundaries.

Fortes discusses the importance of passage rites in traditional society. Ceremonial participation teaches and reminds the individual of the responsibilities he is to be charged with. he learns to act in accordance with norms and sanctions that legitimize the role. Ritual binds the holder to his new office. It invests him with legitimate authority. It confers citizenship on the individual.

If ritual is less important in modern society, it is because of the availability of alternative channels of access to new social positions. In traditional society, an individual has to undergo ritual passage in preparation for a new social role. Today an individual moves ahead by gaining credentials, by meeting universal criteria set by schools and colleges, and by birth, marriage and death registries.

Wallace does not see deritualization, but rather a transformation of ritual away from the sacred. Ritual continues an integral element of a secularizing religion. It is not ritual that weakens, but supernaturalism. "...belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out ... as a result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of s21entific knowledge and of the realization ... that supernatural belief is not necessary to the effective use of ritual" (Wallace: 265).

Whether ritual is diminished in importance today, or whether it is being transformed, it nevertheless continues to capture the energies and emotions of many Americans in sacred and secular circumstances. On Christmas Eve, in churches across the land, millions celebrate the birth of Christ. It is a special time for non-Christians too. We speak of the holiday season, of the Christmas spirit, of peace and good will. We renew relationships as we mail our Christmas cards, some to people we may riot have seen for months or even years. Shoppers jam stores in December buying sprees, and families and friends reunite for the traditional dinners and gift giving.

On New Year's Eve, in clubs, hotels, restaurants, and at home, people congregate to welcome the new year. They wear party hats and carry noisemakers as they revel and make merry. It is an evening of laughter and letting-go. Hundreds of thousands jam Times Square in New York, and as midnight approaches, they raise their eyes upward, eyes fixed on a symbolic lighted apple. Millions more join in the excitement on television. As the apple begins its descent, they begin to chant in unison: ten, 9, 8, 7....... Happy .few Year, Happy New Year. Champagne corks pop, people hug and kiss, and all intone "health, happiness, and prosperity."

Sports events also provide a focal point for collective ritual. Football fans filled with excitement plant themselves in front of their television sets in mid-January, on Super Bowl Sunday[4]. Friends visit and share a meal or a six pack of beer as they wait kickoff time. It is a day of enormous anticipation.

On the whole, ceremonies involving the individual have declined in importance in modern life. Birth, naming, and puberty, when they are celebrated, do not command the energy and commitment they once did. 1’1arriage and death, however, continue to summon ritual participation. 1’1ost Americans still are married by a clergyman, for sacramental or other reasons. The bride and groom wear special clothing as do members of the wedding party. Especially the bridal gown and veil are treated as if sacred. After the ceremony, the couple exit to a shower of rice, an ancient fertility rite.

At a reception, guests eat, drink, sing, dance and give gifts. Solemn moments are swept away in laughter and happiness. The couple holds center stage as surrounded by family and friends; they join in their first dance as man and wife. Then members of the wedding party move onto the floor in prescribed order. The bride dances with her father as the band plays "Daddy's Little Girl," and the groom dances with his mother to the strains of "Mr. Wonderful."

At a signal, usually before the main course, all rise to join in a toast to the newlyweds by the best man. During the meal, a collective glass tinkling directs the couple to kiss. Each kiss is a profession of love, but it is also an expression of the acquiescence to the public wills, a union of two individuals, but also a commitment to community. By this tinkling, too, the guests acknowledge the new status of the pair.

The couple, hands together, cut the wedding cake and feed each other. Each guest eats a slice of communion with the new husband and wife.

Following the dinner, the bridegroom removes his wife's garter in a public display and tosses this over his shoulder to a group of single men, gathered in a cluster, who leap for the prize. The counterpart of this male ceremony is the tossing of the bridal bouquet by the bride to a line of unmarried females. The lucky woman who catches it is supposed to become the next bride.

After the reception, the two secretly take their leave and depart for a honeymoon. The marriage ceremony has lasted for part of a single day, but it has been a day filled with sentiment and feeling.

Death, too, continues to issue a ceremonial call. The dead person has been embalmed, prepared, and dressed for final disposal by a professional mortician. He is viewed at a wake at which mourners, friends and relatives renew old relationships. It is a time for reminiscence, for recounting the past for tears and for grief.

A clergyman performs a funeral service. he reviews the life of the individual, of his place in the lives of the others, and of his past gifts to the living. Blessings are intoned, and prayers for the repose of the soul uttered.

A motorized procession in a rented limousine carries the corpse to the cemetery. Sometimes the procession passes by the house of the dead man for the last time before proceeding to the cemetery. At the grave, the clergyman recites more prayers. Before the

coffin is lowered, members of the family strew flowers on the coffin. After the service, the procession returns, and mourners, friends and neighbors partake of a communal repast.

Although we continue to fulfill our obligations when death strikes, our involvement is short-lived unless we are mourners. When the funeral service is over, the ritual support ends and the bereaved are left to their private agonies. Kimball laments that people have to accomplish their transitions alone with private symbols. Once the funeral is over, the guests leave. They no longer care to dwell upon death.

While we are not indifferent to death, as some charge, neither do we invest ourselves so deeply as in the past. By distancing early from the mourners, we banish the memory of the dead, adding to the burden of the bereaved. What effect this shrinking commitment will have on us as people remains to be seen.

Perhaps a greater danger lies in our indifference to life. An inability or an unwillingness to resolve problems of mass starvation, malnutrition and inadequate health care all over the world will test our minds, wills, and souls in the years to come. Violence and war, the proliferation of weapons of destruction, of megaton bombs and Saturday night specials promises a future of blood and misery.

Wallace predicts the eventual displacement of supernaturalism by a new, non-theistic, ethical theology which centers on man during his stay on earth. Ritual will not disappear, but will be transformed toward the secular. What is needed is to orient this ritual around an ideology which reasserts the value of human life.

FOOTNOTES

1. "Collective Representations of Death" is one of the two Hertz essays in Death and the Right Hand. In "The Pre-Eminence of the Right Hand," Hertz attributes the primacy of the right hand to social cause.

2. Fossil skulls of Peking Man were found in Choukoutien, badly shattered and fragmented. Some scholars suppose these were the results of cannibalistic behavior. Shapiro denies this allegation. He ascribes the broken and fragmented bones to crushing by rocks and layers of debris which fell on the bones from the ceilings of caves (Shapiro: 84-85).

3. The spearmasters are a hereditary clan of priests among the Kinka of the Sudan. Ritual murder of these spearmasters constitutes the central rite of Kinka religion (Douglas:209)

4. Super Bowl Sunday is a probable future addition to the lexicon of American English. There it will join Easter Sunday and Palm Sunday as very special days.

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