

The semiotics of ritual*

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Myth, religion, and ritual command the attention of many anthropologists today, but they are by no means unanimous on how these aspects of culture are to be understood. Some scholars hold (shades of functionalism) that they should be analyzed according to their contributions to psychic, social, or ecological well-being. Others insist that ritual and other forms of symbolic behavior are 'expressive' phenomena which should be explained in terms of their meanings — although precisely what that entails is often obscure. Sherry Ortner's book on Sherpa ritual affords an excellent context for a consideration of these issues. It is symbolic analysis on a high plane, replete with interpretations both imaginative and, for the most part, convincing. And yet certain ambiguities in Ortner's view of what ritual does in society are apparent in the book. Making those ambiguities explicit is beneficial to an exploration of proper goals of symbolic (or, as it might also be called, semiotic) anthropology.

Ortner scrutinizes the society and culture of the Sherpas (who live in the region around Mt. Everest) through the context of ritual. In the tradition of Godfrey Lienhardt and Clifford Geertz, she views ritual as a source of the meanings in terms of which people's experience of reality is culturally organized. More specifically, Ortner's primary aim is to demonstrate how ritual begins with some problem in social life and proceeds to construct a solution to it by reorganizing the elements of experience associated with the problem into a meaningful and more acceptable form. These points are presented in a theoretical introduction which is followed by a brief orientation to the social and economic elements of Sherpa society. The heart of the book consists of four chapters, each devoted to a particular ritual. In every case, after a description of the rite under consideration, the analysis proceeds from an exploration of the problems with which the ritual deals to a demonstration of how it provides a solution to them. In

* Sherry B. Ortner, *Sherpas Through Their Rituals* (= Cambridge Studies in Cultural Systems 2). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

the final chapter, Ortner boosts the level of generalization up one notch by examining how the rituals analyzed previously articulate together in the Sherpa version of Buddhism.

The four rituals which Ortner dissects are Nyungne (a ritual of asceticism), the secular ritual of hospitality observed at parties, the exorcism of demons, and finally rituals of offerings to the gods, designed to solicit their cooperation and protection in human affairs. First I want to present a fairly detailed summary of one of the most satisfactory analyses in the book: that of offering rituals (Chapter 6). We will then be in a position to comment upon Ortner's approach to ritual and, more generally, on the goals of the symbolic or semiotic analysis of culture.

Offering rituals

The Sherpa year is punctuated by a series of rites — some of them all-village, others smaller ones sponsored by individual households — which include offerings to the gods. Sherpas see their world as harassed by destructive demons and the purpose of the offerings is to enlist the aid and protection of the gods against their depredations. It is important for people to make offerings to these gods frequently, thereby renewing divine interest in this world. The gods are, after all, utterly fulfilled and blissful beings who have achieved the Buddhist ideal of detachment from all worldly things. Unless periodically recalled, they could easily become totally absorbed in their own transcendent salvation and abandon the world to the demons.

In the offering rituals, the protection of the gods is sought in precisely the same way that Sherpas solicit assistance from each other: by hospitality which involves pressing the person whose help is sought into a chair and regaling him with food and drink. The aim is to induce benevolence towards the host, and thus a disposition to grant whatever favor may be asked. This is accomplished ritually by inviting the god to enter a conical dough figure (*torma*) which is surrounded by incense, butter candles, and food offerings.

Ortner draws attention to a paradox in the offering rituals: that sensual enticements are directed to beings who have absolutely no interest in them. The gods have detached themselves from earthly things; how, then, can the Sherpas expect to move them with offerings of sensual delights? By an analysis of the altars and the offerings, Ortner suggests that the ritual overcomes this paradox by embodying the gods. Understanding this point requires more information about the ceremony itself.

The altar consists of a series of steps. At the center of the top one sits the

torma for the main god being invoked in the ceremony. This is flanked by two receptacles, one containing beer and representing semen, the other containing tea and representing menstrual blood. On the next step down stand *torma* of lesser gods. Below those are offerings of the six senses: cloth, signifying touch; a plain dough image (*torma*) as food, signifying taste; incense, signifying smell; cymbals, signifying hearing; a mirror, signifying sight; and a sacred book, signifying the sixth sense of thought or spirit. On the lowest step are the 'eight basic offerings': three vessels of water for washing, drinking, and cooking respectively, incense and a flower for pleasant odors, a butter lamp for soft, pleasing light, a *torma* for food, and cymbals for music. Finally, beer and several kinds of food are placed on a low bench in front of the altar.

The ritual itself consists first of attracting the gods' attention by playing loud music and inviting them to be seated in their *torma* to partake of the feast prepared for them. After measures are taken to rid the area of demons, the gods are invited to enjoy the offerings on the altar, and incantations praising the gods are recited. Then prayers requesting the help of the gods in human affairs are read, while representatives of the congregation prostrate themselves before the altar begging forgiveness of past sins. Finally, the food on the bench before the altar is offered to the gods and then eaten by the people in attendance. Concluding benedictions signify the departure of the gods, and the ceremony ends.

The embodiment of the gods, Ortner argues, is symbolized by the altar itself and the course of the ritual. The gods are invited at the outset to enter the *torma* prepared for them. The *torma* of the chief god sits at the top of the altar, between the containers representing semen and menstrual blood. In Sherpa belief, conception results from the mingling of these two substances. Hence the chief god, entering his or her *torma*, is placed between the materials of which bodies are made. Passing down the steps of the altar, the gods are endowed with the six senses and, on the lowest step, those senses are treated to the sensually pleasurable experiences of cooling and cleansing water, fragrant odors, music, and food. The gods are most fully embodied — become most humanlike — at the end of the ritual when they join the congregation in a feast of the actual food on the bench before the altar. So Ortner contends that Sherpa offering rituals surmount the paradox of offering sensual things to sensually disinterested deities by symbolically clothing them with bodies and sensual appetites.

Remember Ortner's idea that rituals solve problems. Her argument is that the embodiment of the gods is an important part of the solution which offering rituals provide for a basic problem in Sherpa culture. The problem is a fundamental contradiction between Sherpa religious and social values. Mutual aid and cooperation are valued highly in lay, social

life. They are engendered largely through hospitality: people become benevolent when regaled with food and drink, and thus more disposed to help each other. From the religious perspective, however, hospitality is misdirected at best and usually downright sinful. A person's attention should be focused not on material matters and sensual pleasures, but precisely on an ultimate salvation which entails release from all attachments of this world. Participation in hospitality, especially when, as is usually the case, it is done with the intention of self-aggrandizement, is antithetical to this religious ideal. At the same time, religion does not fare well by the morality of society. That morality upholds the value of human cooperation and recognizes the efficacy of hospitality in bringing it about. The religious ideal leads to social atomization, with people wrapped up in their own accumulation of religious merit and disinterested in the condition of their neighbors. Such persons are indicted by the social ethic as selfish. A strong undercurrent of resentment even exists against the Buddhist monks — who try to live as religion dictates — because they are thought to be concerned only with their own salvation and insensitive to the needs of the lay people.

Briefly, then, lay Sherpas have the problem of reconciling their adherence to an other-worldly religion with the necessity of living together in this world. Ortner's argument is that the offering rituals contribute to the resolution of this dilemma by the double accomplishment of integrating the gods into the social pattern of hospitality and mutual aid while simultaneously turning those same patterns to the accomplishment of cosmic and religious ends. The rituals, as we have seen, humanize the gods: they are embodied, provided with offerings that gratify their newly received senses, and finally approach so closely the status of humans that, at the rite's end, they come down and share the food on the bench before the altar with the people. Thus, the ritual redefines an other-worldly religion in terms of human, social values. At the same time, the social value of hospitality, normally condemned by religion, is sanctified in the offering ritual. The reason is that hospitality is used for a religious end: the gods are asked to help combat the demons, who threaten the religion and cosmic order as well as the social order. That is, in the offering rituals, people do not simply use hospitality for their own benefit and aggrandizement. They use it for the more detachedly benevolent (and therefore religiously acceptable) purpose of protecting the cosmos from forces of evil. In an end-justifies-means sort of way, then, the hospitality which humans use to dispose the embodied gods to combat the demons is sanctified. Ortner's conclusion is that offering rituals, by humanizing the religious order (the gods) and sanctifying or religiously justifying the human order (hospitality), enable Sherpa religion and society to reach

something of a compromise — but only a fragile one, she acknowledges, because the rites which establish it are performed over and over again.

One further facet of the analysis remains to be considered. Sherpas say the offering rites make the gods happy. Ortner's intriguing claim is that the purpose and symbolism of the rites point to the contrary conclusion that they make the gods *angry*. For one thing, the Sherpas' expressed intention in these rites is to enlist divine protection against demons. Now Sherpa deities have two aspects or states of being. In their *shiva* state they are utterly fulfilled, blissful, and detached from the world. In their *takbu* aspect they are fierce and vengeful, dedicated to the destruction of demons. Clearly, then, the angry, *takbu* aspect of the gods is more appropriate to the Sherpas' stated purpose in offering rituals than their serene, detached *shiva* aspect. Moreover, the treatment the gods receive in offering rituals seems far more likely to enrage them than to please them. Sherpa Buddhism holds the body and everything connected with it to be foul, polluting, sinful. The gods, in their *shiva* aspect at any rate, are beings which have succeeded in detaching themselves from the corruption of the body and the world. One can imagine their reaction, then, when the offering rites disturb their blissful detachment, sit them down between containers of polluting, body-generating semen and menstrual blood, endow them with bodily senses, and caress them with sweet sensations, tastes, odors, and sounds. It would come as no surprise if such treatment were to bring forth the wrathful *takbu* deities; indeed, Ortner's further suggestion is that the worshippers' plea for forgiveness during the rite may relate as much to their current actions of embodying the gods as it does to past sins.

Ortner argues that the elements of wrath in offering rituals contribute to the solution of another problem in Sherpa social life. The problem is that Sherpas do not deal effectively with anger. Their religion tells them that all forms of anger and violence — even angry thoughts — are sins which impede one's progress through the cycle of rebirth toward eventual salvation. Due partly to this and partly to other factors such as a weak authority structure and the absence of mechanisms for coping with disputes, Sherpas lack institutional means for expression of anger. This is not to say that they are unable to express anger at all, but rather that when they do express it, they do so in disorderly, unconstructive ways such as tantrums. They are not good at controlling anger — either their own or someone else's. The whole business seems to be something of a mystery to them. The offering rituals, Ortner maintains, respond to this problem by providing the Sherpas with models of and for anger. Two forms of anger are involved in the rites: the purely destructive, uncontrolled violence of demons and the ultimately benevolent anger of the gods in their demon-

destroying *takbu* aspect. The former presents the Sherpas with a model of the random type of anger which they themselves all too often express; the latter presents them with one of the few models Sherpas have of a more focused and constructive form of wrath and a model for how they might achieve it. The models, to be sure, are dramatic and bigger than life, but, perhaps precisely for that reason, they provide a means for the Sherpas to understand and come to terms with their own darker emotions.

Ritual: Problem-solving or communication?

My general attitude toward Ortner's imaginative analysis is one of admiration. I think, however, that a skeptical stance is indicated with respect to her claims about the place of anger in offering rituals. The evidence she marshalls in support of her interpretation is hardly overpowering. That the gods are angered rather than pleased by the ritual's embodiment of them is, she admits, deductive rather than grounded in evidence (p. 150). Although it does seem entirely reasonable that deities who have managed to escape attachment to the material world would not be pleased at being shoved back into bodies and plied with sensual gratification, surely we have learned by now that cultures very often take unexpected turns and, therefore, that deduction divorced from evidence can seldom take us very far. About the only evidence she offers for her notion that offering rituals infuriate the deities is a song praising the goddess Drolma which makes reference to her powers and fury. But Ortner acknowledges that Drolma is a sublime *shiva* diety concerned primarily with personal mercy rather than a *takbu* diety bent on destroying demons, and, in a footnote, she concedes that another translation of the same song dwells less on Drolma's anger than the one she has quoted. Most disturbing, this is the *only* song used in offering rituals to which Ortner has access. Somewhat lamely she acknowledges that 'while one would certainly need to look closely at a range of similar texts, presumably they all have the same general form and intent' (p. 150). To this reviewer, that seems like a rather large presumption to make on the basis of a single example — especially when most of the evidence Ortner *does* provide about offering rituals is that they *please* the gods, and that the sensual gratification renders them generous disposed to help humankind. Given this paucity of evidence, no matter how compelling Ortner's ratiocination may be, one begins to entertain serious doubts about whether Sherpa offering rituals have anything to do with anger at all.

My other caveat, theoretically far more general, is not so much a

criticism as a clarification having to do with Ortner's programmatic assumption that ritual solves problems in social life. This is an ambiguous notion, compatible with two quite different ways of understanding the role of ritual in society. One of these has been widely accepted but is, I think, unfortunate and misleading. The other points in the direction which I think analysis of ritual and other forms of symbolic behavior should take. While I am quite certain that Ortner and I are in agreement as to which of the two is the proper course, the distinction between them is not always clearly maintained in her argument. As a result, on occasion it comes quite close to the less desirable alternative. The introduction of some concepts not discussed by Ortner can clarify the ambiguity and show why one alternative is to be preferred over the other.

The misleading point of view assumes the relationship between ritual and social life to be one of the variety which we may term consequential. In a consequential relationship the relata can be sorted into independent and dependent variables, such that the occurrence of the independent variable causes or in some other sense brings about the occurrence of the dependent variable. The notion that ritual is related to social life consequentially is extremely common. Native explanations themselves usually take this form. So the Sherpas' account of their offering rituals is that their performance is an independent variable which produces in the gods the disposition to protect humans from the depredation of demons. Disinclined to accept the existence of either gods or demons, scholars such as anthropologists and psychoanalysts have come up with other, more subtle interpretations of ritual. Usually, however, these have adhered to the consequential form. Ortner's view of ritual as problem-solving is readily understood in this manner: when a ritual (the independent variable) is performed, salubrious effects flow (or ideally should flow) through the social fabric.

Her analyses at these points are strongly reminiscent of classical functionalism. In line with Malinowski's proclivity to explain social institutions in terms of some contribution to the satisfaction of human needs, Ortner claims that offering rituals help Sherpas understand and cope with their emotions of anger. In Radcliffe-Brown's tradition of identifying the function of an institution as its contribution to the maintenance of the total social process, Ortner sees offering rituals as a solution to the conflict between Sherpa religion and social values concerning hospitality and cooperation.

If the link between ritual and social life is consequential, then one should be able to detect some social results of ritual performances. But if Sherpa offering rituals are out to solve social problems, obviously they are not very successful at it. In spite of their frequent performance, for

example, Sherpas *still* have a great deal of difficulty with anger. While this realization is in itself somewhat destructive of the notion that rituals solve social problems, further exploration of the implications of that notion ends in a methodological paradox. If the offering rituals were resoundingly successful solutions to the problem of anger, then Sherpas would handle their anger with aplomb. But in that case would we ever suspect that the offering rituals are the cause of their commendable *sang froid*? After all, it is precisely the difficulty that Sherpas have with anger that alerted Ortner to seek a ritual solution for it. It appears as if the analytic assumption that rituals solve social problems can only be applied successfully in cases where those solutions are failures — or, at best, very meager successes. (Perhaps if the offering rituals were terminated, Sherpas would be even more prone to tantrums than they are now — but a synchronic study like Ortner's offers no evidence on that point.)

The same sort of criticism can be raised with reference to the other problem that offering rituals reportedly solve. Obviously, they fail to solve the contradiction between religious and social values, or solve it very imperfectly, because that contradiction persists. Ortner herself closes the discussion of offering rituals with the observation that the compromise to be achieved between religion and social life is a fragile one, which is one reason why the offering rituals are performed so frequently. On the other hand, if the solution were a successful one, the conflict, being resolved, would no longer be apparent, and we would have no knowledge of this problem-solving function of the ritual, nor of its felicitous outcome.

It seems to me that this situation runs deeper than a curious quirk in subject matter which reveals its true purposes only in its failure to accomplish them. The problem is rooted in misplaced analytic focus, specifically, in the notion that rituals solve social problems via a consequential relationship between them. There is another, preferable way to conceive of the relationship between ritual and social life. From its perspective one might still hold that ritual solves social problems, although what is meant by that is quite different than is the case if one takes the relationship between them to be consequential.

The relation between ritual (or, indeed, any form of symbolic behavior) and social life is of a sort which we can label *semiotic*. The salient distinction between *semiotic* and *consequential* relationships is that in the former case it is not possible to sort the *relata* into independent and dependent variables. Some *relata* are not consequences of others; instead, the relationship between them is one of *signification*. It may be that one member of the relationship signifies the other, so that we may speak of *signifier* and *signified*, or the two or more items may be related as *signifiers* of the same thing.

Being of a different kind from consequential relationships, semiotic relationships do different sorts of things. While consequential relationships are concerned with the production of dependent variables from the occurrence of independent variables, semiotic relationships, operating in the realm of signs and signification, deal with the communication of messages. In the case of ritual and much other symbolic behavior, the messages are largely about the world and the human condition as these are culturally construed. The messages are a means by which people both learn their culture's construction of reality and gain reassurance that reality is the way their culture says it is. The process works through the repeated exposure of the individual to reality. When the individual's experience of reality (nature, language, architecture, other people, the things they say and do, etc.) repeatedly takes certain forms, he develops corresponding expectations about the world and organizes his activities accordingly. To the extent that the expectations are accurate and the activities appropriate, they are reinforced by subsequent experience. But, of course, the reality that people experience is not something *sui generis*. Be it the language and music one hears, the form and arrangement of houses and cultivations one sees, the food one eats, the odors one smells, the social organization one participates in, and so on through the entire gamut of human experience, the reality to which we are exposed is predominantly a cultural artifact. Semiotic relationships represent one of the ways in which cultural constructions of reality are communicated to people, enabling them to understand their world and hence operate in it.

Examples of the semiotic approach to symbolic behavior that I am recommending may be found in the work of Ortner's teacher, Clifford Geertz. In one of his most celebrated essays, he characterized the cockfight as 'a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves' (1973: 448). It would be difficult to find a more lucid statement to depict the relationship between symbolic behavior and social life as semiotic and not consequential than this one concerning the significance of straight lines in Yoruba art and culture:

Nothing very measurable would happen to Yoruba society if carvers no longer concerned themselves with the fineness of line, or, I daresay, even with carving. Certainly, it would not fall apart. Just some things that were felt could not be said — and perhaps, after a while, might no longer even be felt — and life would be the greyer for it ... the central connection between art and collective life does not lie on ... an instrumental plane, it lies on a semiotic one. (Geertz 1976: 1478)

On the assumption that ritual is linked to social life semiotically rather than consequentially, it is still possible to say that ritual solves social

problems. It is, however, a potentially misleading way of speaking and so, to avoid misunderstanding, it is necessary to be entirely clear about what that means. It emphatically does not mean that the ritual solves the problem in the sense of making it go away, so that it is a problem no longer. As we have seen, things most definitely do not work that way in Sherpa society. Sherpas still experience contradictions between religion and lay values, and have difficulty coping with anger, despite repeated performance of offering rituals. Instead, rituals 'solve' social problems by providing means whereby people can conceptualize or order their experience of those problems in less problematic ways. This is, I am confident, Ortner's own view of how rituals solve social problems. It is the general position she borrows from Lienhardt in her Introduction: 'ritual creates a transformation of subjective *orientation* to the "facts" of the situation' (p. 6, Ortner's italics). It also underlies her analysis of offering rituals as responding to the contradiction between religion and social values through their statement that religion and social life are not irrevocably opposed because, just like people, the gods are susceptible to persuasion by hospitality and sense gratification. If the ritual represents the solution to a problem, it does so not as a cause before which the problem retreats in consequence, but as a message which declares that, in some contexts at least, the problem is not really a problem after all.

References

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