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Tradition, performance and identity politics in  
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Afterword

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## Afterword

Robert Parkin

### Introduction

Although basically about ritual, the present collection also usefully raises issues of cultural authenticity and who has the right to decide them, as well as allowing us to reflect more extensively on the implications of Hobsbawm and Ranger's notion of 'invented tradition' (1983), so richly cited and discussed in these articles. Then there is the whole question of the significance of rituals, and whether the sorts of festivals the contributors describe are a distinct category of ritual, with differences from, as well as continuities with, for example, life-crisis rites or healing rituals. Finally, there are plenty of examples here of the conflicts that are always likely to arise over the meaning of a rite and/or how it should be conducted, whether it should be conducted at all, and who has the right to conduct it. Such conflicts are nonetheless external to the ritual performance and are to be distinguished from the ways in which different social categories may be confronted with one another as part of the ritual performance itself. As I will argue, all the contributions to this collection can be considered in these terms.

### Festivals as rituals

First, however, I start with the question of whether or not community-wide festivals of the sort discussed here should be treated as a special category of ritual. Probably they all obey Arnold van Gennep's well-known tripartite model (1909), if sometimes in reduced form. However, they can also be distinguished from both life-crisis rites (birth, initiation, marriage, death) and healing rituals by having as their focus not particular individuals or categories of individuals within society, but the whole community, and even outsiders to it. They may therefore be more suitable for expressions of identity politics: a couple getting married or a cohort of initiands may not lend themselves to this role as much as a whole, single-minded community. There is no reason to think that festivals are more prone to external dispute and conflict than any other sorts of ritual. However, they may give more scope for different social categories to be structurally opposed to one another as part of the ritual performance.

### Ritual: focus for harmony and unity, or source of conflict?

The true pioneer in the study of ritual is often identified as Arnold van Gennep, whose proto-structuralist model of the three stages into which all rituals can be divided – separation, liminality and (re)incorporation – has remained influential ever since its original publication in 1909. In and after the 1960s, it was greatly boosted by Victor Turner's adoption (e.g. 1969) of the idea of the liminal as underpinning his notion of formless *communitas*, which he saw as opposed to structured *societas*. However, another early and influential emphasis in the study of ritual, running from Emile Durkheim to Turner himself, was on how rituals allegedly give their participants a sense of themselves as a unity or collectivity, a harmonious community or congregation, thus denying, or at least not emphasising, the social differences and potential conflicts experienced by individual participants in their day-to-day lives. In this context, it was Turner's notion of *communitas* that provided the fulcrum whereby the work of van Gennep (1909) and Durkheim (e.g. 1912), intellectual antagonists in real life, could be brought together and reconciled.

However, the bland picture of harmony and unity proffered by both Durkheim and Turner, as well as many others in between, has long since been criticized as not always corresponding to the facts. Indeed, though he did not stress the point unduly, Robert Hertz, one of Durkheim's own students, drew attention early on to the rivalry between the four Italian villages and one French village involved in the cult of St Besse (a local version of St Lawrence) in the Alps above Turin, Italy. These disputes often involved fighting over which village had the right to hold the saint's festival from year to year (to this day, the *carabinieri* attend the festivities in their official capacity [personal field notes]; see Hertz 1913; also MacClancy and Parkin 1997). As for Turner, one attack on his emphasis on these values of harmony and unity in the context of his study of pilgrimage (especially Turner and Turner 1978) came from John Eade and Michael Sallnow's work on this same issue (2000). For Turner, pilgrimage experiences were confirmatory of these values and of the social conformity they underpinned. For his two critics, however, pilgrimage involved rather the varied and potentially irreconcilable experiences of individuals who, while not always at all hostile to one another, did not necessarily form a ritual community in the Durkheimian sense. This could be the case among themselves, as well as in respect of the authority (e.g. a church) responsible for putting on the ritual, as recent work on Orthodox rituals in Russia has shown (Kormina 2010, Agadjanian and Rousselet 2010). Pilgrims may travel as individuals or groups, but even in the case of the latter they frequently each have a separate, very personal reason for doing so, which they may well also keep to themselves and the divinity that is the target of their pilgrimage.

Indeed, Hertz's example of San Besse (1913) also involved a kind of pilgrimage (a stiff climb up a high and steep mountain path, which I've experi-

enced myself on more than one occasion), however local the pilgrims. Moreover, from my own observations, the pilgrims were clearly divided into two groups. One group, from the French village north of the nearby mountain ridge, celebrated the rite in a distinctly surreptitious manner the night before the official celebration on August 20<sup>th</sup> and left again immediately afterwards. The other group, consisting of those from the Italian villages south of the ridge, stayed overnight drinking and singing songs and took a full part in the festivities the following day. In short, they acted as if they had a right to be there, which the French group were evidently much less confident about. However, this distinction, and any past fighting of the sort Hertz was told about, was clearly external to the ritual performance itself and not a part of it.

#### Ritual and conflict: part of the performance, or extraneous to it?

Most of the present contributions mention disputes, though none appears to involve actual fisticuffs. However, they are clearly external to the ritual performance itself and must be distinguished from situations in which conflict, or at least the representation of structurally opposed social categories, are in fact an intrinsic part of that performance.

This is shown in the articles by Richard D.G. Irvine on the Plough Monday Bear and by Matthäus Rest and Gertraud Seiser on the Krampus rite in Austria. Both rituals pitch mythical characters against members of the same community in an as-if hostile fashion that is nonetheless intrinsic to the ritual performance. However, both examples have also raised controversies over the external circumstances of how they are conducted. Thus in the Krampus case, the recent turn towards using the rite as a platform for the expression of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment has been attacked by others as discriminatory. In the Bear case, though disputes here seem less fierce, there is at least a degree of tension between those who see the ritual as a celebration of local history and identity, and those who allegedly see the occasion as an opportunity to drink heavily and potentially cause public order problems. Venetia Johannes' article on food in Catalonia similarly exposes differences between those who refuse to eat some foods on ritual occasions because they are felt not to be traditional in any sense but new dishes designed as money-making ventures, and those who are more concerned to use any vehicle for the expression of Catalan identity and separateness from Spain. It can therefore be questioned whether these examples have the 'cathartic' functions of the rites of reversal described by Turner and his teacher Max Gluckman in certain African societies. These are held to mark the installation of a king or chief, who is made to suffer psychological and possibly physical abuse from his future subjects in the rite's liminal phase (Turner 1969; Gluckman 1965). Clearly this is an intrinsic part of the ritual performance itself: both chief or

king and subjects are ultimately part of the same ritual community, despite their opposed statuses in the rite. However, these examples are perhaps less a matter of cathartic release than of demonstrating the chaos that would ensue if the chief's authority were to be flouted at all extensively. Another aspect of ritual for Turner and Gluckman is therefore that it confirms the status quo after displaying its destruction symbolically. In other words, in this view, conflict enshrined in the rite itself is reconciled; conflict external to it – over, for example, how it should be held or who has the right to do so – may not be.

### Authenticity and invention

To introduce even the possibility of dispute and contestation into the study of ritual immediately raises questions of authenticity and the right to decide issues concerning it. Connected with this is the notion of at least some rituals as invented, as in Hobsbawm and Ranger's argument dating back to the publication of their classic volume in 1983 – something of an embarrassment to anthropologists and folklorists, incidentally, who had to leave it to a pair of historians to make the point for them! But what are Hobsbawm and Ranger actually saying in their edited work? To my mind their emphasis is not only, or even mainly, on the possibility of invention in general, but on the fact that certain rituals that are claimed to date from time immemorial can actually be proved to be relatively recent on the basis of historical accounts. Thus, as well as Hugh Trevor-Roper's notorious claim (1983) that the Scottish kilt, far from being as old as the Highlands, originated in a benevolent northern English industrialist giving his employees something more comfortable to wear at work, there is a chapter in the same collection on the UK's elaborate royal rituals, which are pregnant with their alleged ancientness, but in fact belong to the still relatively modern Victorian era and later (Cannadine 1983). However, the anthropologist might respond to the notion of invention by saying: 'But of course—what else would one expect?' In fact, in accounting for the origins of rituals there is no very obvious alternative to invention, however old or recent a ritual is or may appear to be. What is obvious is that no ritual just emerges out of thin air. All rituals depend on human agency for their genesis, as well as their interpretation and performance. This is the case however much they may also follow certain basic patterns, as van Genep taught us, as well as certain traits of ritual language, whether literally linguistic or, more usually, symbolic. Hobsbawm and Ranger's arguments about the recency, invention and/or reinvention of certain rituals should not be read as qualifying the authenticity of such rituals when compared to others: ultimately all rituals are invented, and they are very apt to be considered traditional as well.

As for ritual revivals, are they therefore inventions or reinventions? And who is to decide? The anthropologist or historian can hardly do so, though he

or she might be able to point out the inaccuracy or fragility of certain claims to a ritual's origins made by its supporters. However, the danger of leaving it at that is to place not only authenticity but meaning wholly in the past, when what we should be focusing on is their existence in the present, without which no ritual, revived or not, can exist. Thus it is for our informants to tell us what meanings they derive from their participation (or non-participation) in a ritual and what they find, or do not find, authentic about it.

To say 'tradition', of course, necessarily means invoking the past, and it is through the past that a contemporary or recent cultural practice can be 'traditionalized', that is, made to seem older than it really is. Also, the further one goes back into the past, the vaguer it tends to become. This is a definite impediment to the historian, folklorist or anthropologist trying to sort out fact from fiction, but it is of positive benefit to the native informant explaining or defending a particular ritual. This vagueness can be exploited, whether to deviate from known historical facts, to invent such facts, to replace them with others, or to be purposively unclear about any of these. We also know that history can be mythologized and that rituals frequently have their own myths as a 'charter' (to borrow Malinowski's term for a somewhat different set of circumstances; see 1948) for their own performance. Add in identity formation, and a rich tool is created for imaginative purposes.

Ideas about the authenticity of a tradition are therefore certainly one area in which contestation and dispute are likely to arise. However, holding a ritual may also reveal very serious uncertainties about these issues. Thus at one extreme, ritual participants may have no clue as to the meaning of a particular passage in the ritual performance, of a particular ritual item or symbol, which even the officiant holding the ritual may be uncertain about (cf. Leach 1976). At the other extreme, there is the self-appointed expert pontificating about every aspect of the ritual, even if, as one sometimes suspects, that means making it up on the spur of the moment, perhaps in response to the enquirer's questions. Yet even they may have to confront uncertainty: in his work on the Ok of Papua New Guinea, Fredrik Barth (1987) witnessed rituals that were only held every generation or so having to be pieced together from fragmentary information and memories, casting serious doubts over the continuity and consistency of their symbolic contents from occasion to occasion. Ultimately, however, the notion that a ritual has been invented does not of itself undermine the sense of its authenticity for those taking part in it (perhaps 'creation' would be a better word than 'invention'). Nor, incidentally, need the intervention or presence of outsiders: tourist interest may confirm a ritual's validity to its custodians, rather undermining it, as such interest is so often accused of doing (cf. Errington and Gewertz 1989 on the Chambri in Papua New Guinea).

As Johannes' article on food points out, however, those who feel connected with a ritual and the identity issues that may arise from it may themselves

dispute a ritual's meaning and authenticity. As we have seen, too obviously traditionalizing items of Catalan food are dismissed as money-making scams sully the currently urgent Catalan identity agenda. Yet in being revived, a ritual can strengthen, even acquire, its own sense of proper authenticity. Thus the Plough Monday Bear festival has gone from being a slightly disreputable hedonistic occasion eventually suppressed by the police as a form of begging to being used as a didactic tool telling schoolchildren about their local traditions and heritage. The very jocularity here is also worth remarking on. Johan Huizinga long ago pointed out (1949) the ludic aspects of social life, of which this is an example, though rituals can also be tedious enough to dull the senses, with long, boring speeches and endless manipulations of ritual paraphernalia for reasons that may be unclear even to those making them. This theme is not really at issue here, though many of the rituals described in this selection clearly have their ludic aspects. However, rituals are more likely to have a serious purpose in the main, as enshrined in the social conformity theories of commentators like Durkheim.

### Ritual and identity

There is yet another context of hostility that may be experienced as and in ritual, which brings us to the identity politics potentially associated with any ritual. In so far as Durkheim (1912) was correct in drawing our attention to the harmony- and unity-inducing aspects of ritual for those taking part, the community or congregation they form may well exploit the ritual to create a boundary around themselves in relation to a possibly hostile rival or the outside world generally. Thus Glenn Bowman showed how, on the Palestinian West Bank, municipal rituals efface distinctions among Palestinians (e.g. Christian versus Muslim) in order to present a united front, at least symbolically, to the Israeli occupier (1993). Attendees at the St Besse celebrations singing 'Siamo Cristiani' throughout much of the night before the festival and implicitly opposing themselves to non-Christians may be seen in the same light (personal field notes), as can modern Krampus participants using their activities to oppose the presence of migrants in Austria, especially Muslim ones. Yet strangers may also be welcomed to attend or take part in such festivals: for example, many attendees at the annual Notting Hill carnival in west London, still seen as an intrinsically West Indian affair, are white (Cohen 1991). Here Gerd Baumann's notion of the 'ritual constituency' is useful (1992: 99, 114), his own main example being how Punjabi Sikhs who have settled elsewhere to the west of London, in Southall and Uxbridge, celebrate the originally white Christian ritual of Christmas, to which they add 'Punjabi' touches, as well as holding birthday parties for their children in a way they would not in the Punjab. In other words, one and the same ritual may attract different groups or 'constituencies' of participants, some perhaps

more 'in' than others, but each group, and potentially even each individual, having its own reason for attending, though sometimes merely as spectators rather than as active ritual performers. A lot of Notting Hill revellers, or those at a Brazilian carnival, are clearly passive spectators in the former sense, not having anything else to do with the floats that are at the heart of both festivals apart, perhaps, from dancing to the music that often accompanies them. Similar remarks can be made of the examples of Krampus and the Bear, where again there is potentially a conceptual distinction between external spectators and those who are part of the community and play the role of, for example, the Krampus's victims from within that community.

There are also cases involving greater mutual participation by those who at first sight seem like outsiders, potentially turning rituals into an occasion for religious synthesis. Thus in India many Hindus visit the shrines of Muslim saints and vice versa (e.g. Jamous 1996). In this collection, a similar situation occurred formerly in Bosnia, though it was seriously impacted by the war there in the 1990s. As Safet Hadži Muhamedović's article on this shows, St George's Day in April and St Elijah's Day in August both drew together members of both the Orthodox Christian and Muslim communities, as well as Roma tinkers on the former occasion. Despite parallelisms (e.g. the two shrines to Elijah/Alija), both festivals were recognized as owned equally by all those attending them.

## Conclusion

Van Gennep's tripartite model of ritual structure has lasted remarkably well for a text that is now well over a century old (1909). By contrast, Durkheim's roughly contemporary insistence (1912) that rituals are overwhelmingly occasions where the day-to-day divisions of society are overcome and ignored in an effervescence of brotherly and sisterly good feeling has been criticized and modified almost out of existence by later writers in a manner that is unlikely ever to be wholly reversed. This is principally because Durkheim tended to ignore the conflicts that can surround rituals, whether externally over their ultimate custody and interpretation, or internally, as a symbolic part of the actual ritual performance. However, I suggest that such criticisms of Durkheim apply less to the latter situation than the former. It is clear that those who play the role of the Krampus or the Plough Monday Bear and those who are their victims combine in forming a ritual community of the sort Durkheim described, regardless of whether or not there are outsiders present (in any case, if any of the latter are present, they might well be drawn into the community while the ritual lasts). The present collection forces us to think further about these and other issues I have discussed here, indicating that ritual is a matter not just of invention but inventiveness, of the exercise of imagination within the basic structural framework suggested by van Gen-



nep. As a result, ritual is bound to continue to fascinate the anthropologist and ritual participant alike.

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