

German Freemasonry and Framed Cognitive Immersion. The Transcultural Power of the Masonic Master Ritual

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Abstract

This paper identifies theories and cognitive aspects that shed light on the transcultural unifying identity power of Masonic initiation rituals and illustrates this more closely using the case study of the German master ritual. It suggests that the potential of the unifying identity of Masonic rituals does not reside solely in their symbolism, but rather primarily in their enactment as performance. By breaking down the basic elements of the performative character of rituals and comparing the Masonic ritual to that of male initiation among the Chambri people of Papua New Guinea within Whitehouse's theoretical model of modes of religiosity, this paper also explores the transcultural unifying identity power of rituals while outlining a novel explanatory framework in the field of Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) and Ritual Studies. The present paper suggests that religious and religiously connoted transcultural unifying identity, including its inherent capacity for meaning creation and meaning attribution, is more strongly and stably achieved the more Framed Cognitive Immersion (FCI) is engaged, that is, the more corresponding cognitive processes of the participants are triggered together.

Keywords: Ritual Studies, Masonic Ritual, German Freemasonry, Chambri People, Cognitive Science of Religion, Modes of Religiosity, Whitehouse, Framed Cognitive Immersion, Performance

1. Why ritual research?

The research and analysis of rituals from diverse scholarly perspectives is a significant and fascinating challenge. In my opinion, the significance of ritual research lies in its social relevance: Anyone who wishes to understand the vitality and influence of the religions and religiously connoted organizations active in society must study their rituals. That is why I consider ritual research to be one of the most exciting sub-disciplines of religious studies.

1.2 The concept of religion used in this study

Still, why should one research rituals in particular? The answer to this question depends essentially on the understanding of religion with which one approaches religion at all or religiously connoted organizations, at least provisionally and operationally. In this respect, the work of the Heidelberg theologian Gerd

Theißen on the one hand and of the sociologist of religion Martin Riesebrodt on the other have decisively shaped my understanding of religion. Thus, I understand religion as an empirically given system of action that promises life gain by means of semiotic communication with supernatural powers and/or an ultimate reality.

Both acts of speaking and acts of thinking are, of course, equally included in my modified view under the concept of the action system. This understanding of religion is basically a synthesis of the understanding of religion of the sociologist of religion Martin Riesebrodt and the theologian Gerd Theißen. On the one hand, religion represents for Riesebrodt “a complex of meaningful practices” that “is based on communication with superhuman powers” and holds out the prospect of salvation.¹ On the other hand, Theißen understands religion primarily as a “cultural sign system that promises gain of life by means of corresponding to an ultimate reality”.² I consider by no means this understanding of religion to be conclusive or infallible. But for socially relevant topics it seems to me to be very productive and advantageous. I would like to mention only two advantages here. The first advantage is that this understanding of religion enables us to pick up the self-interpretation, the self-perception as well as the self-image of the respective religious organization in its own socio-cultural context. The second advantage is that it allows us to focus not on the construct of “the essence of religion”, but on the vibrancy and thus the effectiveness of religions in communities and in society. For the vitality of a system of beliefs, of values and of signs is most clearly visible where the community is at work and thereby continuously constitutes itself. By this, I mean the liturgies (λειτουργία from λειτός and ἔργον), the joint work, and the practices that are more or less in a context of meaning and which establish a semiotically designed relationship to the ultimate reality—for the purpose of adding value to life.

1.3 The concept of ritual used in this study

Thus, if we understand religion as an empirically given or existing system of action that promises life gain—such as salvation, defense against disaster and some spiritual (mystical or magical) development—namely through semiotic communication with supernatural powers or through a semiotic access to an ultimate reality, we can deduce from what has been said that the concrete actions, which are responsible for establishing the communicative access to the ultimate reality, are predominantly religious or religiously connoted rituals.

In this context, a religious ritual represents the performance of pre-structured, repetitive, or repeatable actions, which have a semiotic character and are intended to concretely establish the interrelation between human individuals (as well as collectives) and the supernatural powers or the ultimate reality, and thus promote life gain. In this sense, the ritual takes place within an already loaded senso-sematic field, which in turn is co-constituted and situatively transformed by the ritual itself.

1.4 The three basic elements of a ritual

In his description of the Isis and Osiris cult, Plutarch identifies as early as the beginning of the 2nd century CE three basic elements that play a central role in a ritual:

1. specific words of interpretation or the things that are said (τα λεγόμενα / ta legόμενα)
2. concrete actions or the things that are done (τα δρώμενα / ta drόμενα) and

¹ Martin Riesebrodt: *Cultus und Heilsversprechen. Eine Theorie der Religionen*, München 2007, p. 12–14, 108–135.

² Gerd Theißen: *Die Religion der ersten Christen: eine Theorie des Urchristentums*, Gütersloh 2001, p. 19–42.

3. concrete objects or the things that are shown (τα δεικνύμενα / ta deiknύmena).³

To a system of action, which is configured in a semiotically communicative way, belongs without doubt a language of signs (including symbolism), which is mainly supplied by a basic narrative of an enarrative (orienting) character (such as myths, history, stories, or world views about the last reality in relation to life gain) as well as by the tradition that has emerged from it. Although the language of signs is the common component that connects all three elements of the ritual and provides all ritual actors with a common language, the creation and the attribution of meaning are by no means tasks that symbols alone can handle. Without being together and the communicative interaction of a community, symbols can indeed point to something else and thus signal “meaning”, but they do not create and generate meaning on their own. The symbolic requires the community, whose formation, preservation, and restitution take place in rituals. In order to support this thesis, I use a cognitive science approach to ritual research.

2. Symbols and the performative character of rituals

According to Durkheim's thesis in his *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* from 1912, communities form, maintain or reconstitute themselves in rituals. In the past, Durkheimian ethnology and sociology have tried to support this thesis by emphasizing the symbolic content of rituals. The ritual is seen as a large and dynamic sign system that must be read and interpreted symbolically. Seen in this way, the ritual in its functionality would be a kind of transcription of values or teachings, world views and meanings, which is primarily intended by ritual designers and scribes or scriptures specialists. According to this view, the ritual would be a dynamic text, but still only a text.

However, the performative dimension of the ritual (in relation to the δρώμενα) plays a fundamental role, through which an experienceable (world) order is carried out. Within the framework of the performed actions, the symbolic can no doubt be visualized, recited, or represented. Yet the performance as such is by no means limited to the representation of symbols. More than that: the performance qua event does not need a right to exist, neither functionally nor instrumentally, nor in terms of content or in a symbolic sense. The ritual simply happens.

In this sense, my suggestion is that although the symbolic plays an important role, the community-constituting power lies not in symbols alone, but rather and precisely in the performative character of rituals.

In the sense of Social Identity Theory⁴ in general and Identity Fusion Theory⁵ in particular, it is precisely the performative character that provides a shared experience, a collective memory and a sense of belonging to a specific symbolism.⁶ This applies first and foremost to the mode of ritual dynamics, which involves cognition in a holistic way. I am thinking here above all of the cognitive science approach of embodiment, which by no means reduces cognition to intellectual processes “in the brain” alone. In general, I understand the structure of human cognition as the ability to process experience, to (epistemically) differentiate, to organize, and, as the competence for behavior and action, as a result of learning processes. Human cognition takes place within a certain social dimension through systemically

³ Plutarch: De Iside et Osiride 364–368 (e.g. 364 D 20, 364 E 26, 365 A 14, 366 E 25), in: J. Gwyn Griffiths (Ed. and Trans.): Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride, Cambridge 1970, p. 168–188.

⁴ E.g. H. Tajfel / J. C. Turner: An integrative theory of intergroup conflict, in: W. G. Austin / S. Worchel (Eds.): The social psychology of intergroup relations, Monterey, CA 1979, p. 33–47.

⁵ William B. Swann / Jolanda Jetten / Ángel Gómez / Harvey Whithouse and Brock Bastian: When Group Membership gets personal: A Theory of Identity Fusion, in: Psychological Review 119, 2012, p. 441–456, doi:10.1037/a0028589; William B. Swann / Michael D. Buhrmester: Identity Fusion, in: Current Directions in Psychological Science 24:1, 2015, p. 52–57.

⁶ “Identity fusion occurs when people experience a visceral feeling of oneness with a group. The union with the group is so strong among highly fused persons that the boundaries that ordinarily demarcate the personal and social self become highly permeable” (Swann et al.: When Group Membership gets personal, p. 442).

connected senso-semantic processes. I discuss these processes in more detail elsewhere.⁷ For now, however, it is sufficient to assume that the senso-semantic aspect of cognitive processes refers to the inseparability, as well as to the unified potentiality of, physical stimuli (or perceptions) and their meaningful coping offers (affordances) available in the context of the *Lebenswelt* (lived world).

Recent research in the field of the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) has increasingly shown that the developed mechanisms and processes of human cognition have a decisive influence on the perception of religious life and the associated forms of action with regard to the possibilities of social shaping.⁸ In this respect, Harvey Whitehouse's cognitive theory of religious transmission⁹ is, in my opinion, of pivotal relevance. In his work he distinguishes between doctrinal and imagistic modes of religious practice. Doctrinal practices in this context comprise collective rituals that tend to exhibit a high-frequency, but a low-arousal dynamics. Doctrinal rituals usually correlate with a social design that is associated with relatively much larger groups of people in comparison to imagistic rituals. This is possible because the doctrinal rituals are often associated with relatively fixed belief systems that can be easily transmitted to other people or novices. The classic example of a doctrinal ritual is the traditional temple or church service, which has a sermon as its main content. Accordingly, Whitehouse and colleagues¹⁰ argue that this allows a large number of religious teachings to be stored in semantic memory so that they can be reliably reproduced and efficiently spread as an oral tradition.

On the other hand, imagistic practices include collective rituals that have a low frequency but a high arousal. Imagistic rituals correlate with a social configuration and are associated with relatively smaller, closely, and strongly cohesive communities or subgroups in comparison to the doctrinal rituals. A very popular, dramatic example of an imagistic ritual is the male initiation of the Chambri people in Papua New Guinea. This ritual gives a striking expression to the transition from childhood or adolescence to manhood. In the threshold phase of this ritual, hundreds of incisions about 1.5 cm long are made on the back and upper arms of the initiand, so that the wounds give an aspect of crocodile scales after healing. This scarification, of course, takes place in cold blood and without anaesthetics, because both the bleeding and the pain have a ritual meaning that has an effect on the social integration of the individual.¹¹

In contrast to the doctrinal rituals, the imagistic rituals imprint the experience into the episodic memory by evoking strong feelings and emotions. Research in memory and recollection of traumatic events¹² shows a relatively strong inverse proportional relation between frequency and arousal, especially in the case of dysphoric (aversive, unpleasant), but not least also euphoric, ritual experiences. These have a lasting effect on the imagination as well as on the mental processing faculties, especially of the initiate, and ensure a secure place in his long-term memory.

⁷ Cf. Javier Y. Álvarez-Vázquez: How? Enarrativity and the Cognition of Explicative Thinking. A Theory of Constructive Reasoning, Paderborn 2022, p. 135–162.

⁸ Harvey Whitehouse: Modes of Religiosity: Towards a cognitive Explanation of the sociopolitical Dynamics of Religion, in: *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 14, 2002, p. 293–315.

⁹ Harvey Whitehouse: Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission, Walnut Creek, CA 2004.

¹⁰ E.g. Quentin D. Atkinson / Harvey Whitehouse: The Cultural Morphospace of Ritual Form: Examining Modes of Religiosity Cross-culturally, in: *Evolution and Human Behavior* 32, 2011, p. 50–62.

¹¹ Margaret Mead: Sex and Temperament in three primitive Societies, London [1935] 1963, p. 249–251; Deborah B. Gewertz: The Father who bore me: The Role of *Tsambunwuro* during Chambri Initiation Ceremonies, in: Gilbert H. Herdt (ed.): *Rituals of Manhood: Male Initiation in Papua New Guinea*. Berkley/London 1982; Deborah B. Gewertz / Frederick Errington: Twisted histories, altered contexts: Representing the Chambri in a world system, Cambridge/New York/Sydney 1991, p. 58–100. Gewertz and Errington construe the process of scarification as follows:

“Scarification was an ordeal that would transform and ramify: through releasing the blood that a boy had incorporated from his mother in her womb, he would be made more fully into an adult member of his father’s clan; through acquiring the scars that duplicated the markings on a crocodile’s back, he would have its formidability and, as a warrior, he would be able to fight alongside other adult men of his clan without a child’s longing to be with his mother” (Deborah B. Gewertz / Frederick Errington: Twisted histories, altered contexts, p. 60).

¹² Martin A. Conway: Flashbulb Memories. Essays in Cognitive Psychology, Hillsdale, NJ 1995.

In this context, Swann and colleagues¹³ have pointed out that it is precisely the imagistic rituals that are among those practices that significantly promote identity fusion and thus foster a relatively close and strong cohesion of those communities that cultivate such rituals at the center of their existence. The strong sense of personal agency and family-like connection created by identity fusion fosters extreme pro-group behaviors. These can range from an unusual attitude of openness and acceptance towards new members of the community up to sacrifice one's own life.¹⁴

2.1 The holistic approach to human cognition (Embodiment)

To what extent can the ritual performative and basal human cognition be linked in ritual research?

Since cognition in its systemic and holistic character is by no means limited to our heads, I am not concerned here with a model of inner consciousness or a neurological concept of the mind. The cognitive model I am using here can be better understood under the label “embodiment”, to use a more fashionable term. This trendy label has its own history of development.

The so-called “neuro-boom” of the 1980s and 1990s brought with it a scientific negligence concerning a holistic and integral understanding of cognition. In response to this shortcoming, some theorists and scientists have driven a theoretical movement to return to the basics. That is: to bring the brain back into its skull, the skull back into its body, the body back into the environment and, in the case of humans, the environment back into the lived world (*Lebenswelt*). Independently of this “view”, Ludwig Feuerbach formulated a similar approach as early as 1848:

The truth is neither materialism nor idealism, neither physiology nor psychology (...) The soul does not think and feel —since the soul is only the personified and hypostasized function or occurrence of thinking, feeling, and willing that has been transformed into a being—, nor does the brain think and feel —since the brain is a *physiological abstraction*, an isolated organ that has been separated from the whole, from the skull, from the face, from the body at all. The brain is, though, an organ of thinking as long as it is connected with a human head and body.¹⁵

The fashion labels for this legitimate theoretical reaction are embodiment and enactivism.¹⁶ Embodiment and enactivism (also called the enactivist view) are actually two sides of the same coin. While embodiment emphasizes the contribution of the whole body to cognitive processes —and not just the brain alone— the enactivist view focuses on the dynamic interaction between the living body, the organism, the environment, and its individual specific conditions. Embodiment in general (including enactivism) suggests that the cognitive processes of the living being, say a chimpanzee, are inescapably linked to both the body as a whole and its environment. I welcome this “new” trend because it has awakened the interest of many philosophers and scholars in exploring cognition and thinking in a more sensible and productive way. This theoretical trend is also scientifically progressive because its core ideas are older than the fashion label

¹³ William B. Swann / Michael D. Buhrmester: Identity Fusion.

¹⁴ Harvey Whitehouse: Dying for the group: Towards a general theory of extreme self-sacrifice, in: *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 41/e192, 2018, p. 1–62, doi:10.1017/S0140525X18000249.

¹⁵ Ludwig Feuerbach: Anthropologischer Materialismus, in: Alfred Schmidt (Ed.): *Ausgewählte Schriften I*, Frankfurt a. M. [1848] 1985, p. 177. Emphasis in the German original. I provide it here: “Wahrheit ist weder der Materialismus, noch der Idealismus, weder die Physiologie, noch die Psychologie; Wahrheit ist nur die *Anthropologie*, Wahrheit ist nur der Standpunkt der Sinnlichkeit, der Anschauung; denn nur dieser Standpunkt gibt mir *Totalität* und *Individualität*. Weder die Seele denkt und empfindet – denn die Seele ist nur die personifizierte und hypostasierte, in ein Wesen verwandelte Funktion oder Erscheinung des Denkens, Empfindens und Wollens – noch das Hirn denkt und empfindet; denn das Hirn ist eine *physiologische Abstraktion*, ein aus der Totalität herausgerissenes, vom Schädel, vom Gesicht, vom Leibe überhaupt abgesonderetes, für sich selbst fixiertes Organ. Das Hirn ist aber nur so lange Denkorgan, als es mit einem menschlichen Kopf und Leibe verbunden ist.”

¹⁶ E.g. Francisco J. Varela / Evan Thompson / Eleanor Rosch: *The Embodied Mind. Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge, MA 1991.

itself. It restores an interdisciplinary continuity that has been largely overlooked or ignored by many philosophers and scholars. In this sense, my ritual-theoretical approach and the cognitive model I argue for can only be adequately understood in the context of embodiment (and enactivism in general).¹⁷

3. The power of rituals: The performative dimension¹⁸

I would now like to use the Masonic master ritual to illustrate how the ritual may have an impact on community building through the performance of the Hiram legend. You may wonder what reason I could have had for choosing Freemasonry at all? Only three reasons were enough for me to select this religiously connoted organization as a research object in this context:

1. its age,
2. its claim of universal validity, and
3. its specific transcultural and trans-religious unifying accomplishment.

Freemasonry sees itself as a global association that seeks to cultivate and spread the values of freedom, equality, universal charity, tolerance, and humanity among all people. In terms of its age, modern Freemasonry in the form in which we find it today, can be traced back to the founding of the Grand Lodge of England (GLE) in 1717. However, historical pre-forms can be found in the late medieval guilds of masons and stonemasons.¹⁹ The last phase of the historical process of the guild/society transition to Freemasonry, i.e. the development of a craft guild into a voluntary society of gentlemen or club, took place mainly in the second half of the 17th century between Scotland and England.²⁰ Although the first assemblies of lodges in the form of clubs took place as early as at the end of the 16th century and at the dawn of the 17th century in Scotland, albeit still following an organizational governance based on Scottish local customs and clan regulations,²¹ it was first in England that they embodied the fundamental civil values of equality and freedom in their institutional structures and constitutional ideals. The settling source of these institutional ideals took place in close connection with the English Revolution against royal absolutism.²² Freemasonry is thus one of the oldest fraternities —and subsequently also a sorority— in the world, that does not belong to any specific religion, although it is considered a religiously connoted association, and still exerts its social impact today. This old association, which counts an estimated 6 million members worldwide —among them about 15,000 members in 500 lodges in Germany— formulates its claim to universal validity not only by means of its primary values like liberty and tolerance, but especially in the sense that Freemasonry's membership is open to everyone regardless of origin or faith and can be practiced by anyone. Nevertheless, an important prerequisite for membership is that the candidate shows a certain maturity, has a good reputation, and that he or she believes in a supreme being as stipulated in one of the historical constitutional documents from 1723:

*A Mason is oblig'd, by his Tenure, to obey the moral Law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid **Atheist**, nor an irreligious **Libertine**. But though in ancient Times Masons were charg'd in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet*

¹⁷ Javier Y. Álvarez-Vázquez: How? Enarrativity and the Cognition of Explicative Thinking.

¹⁸ This section is developed from a lecture I was privileged to give at the German Masonic Research Society Quatuor Coronati (Freimaurerische Forschungsgesellschaft Quatuor Coronati e. V. Bayreuth) on March 10, 2019 in Mannheim, Germany. See Javier Y. Álvarez-Vázquez: Das Performative und die Liminalität des freimaurerischen Meisterrituals: Realität jenseits von Glauben und Symbolischem, in: *Quatuor Coronati Jahrbuch* 56, Leipzig 2019, p. 188–199.

¹⁹ Helmut Reinalter: *Die Freimaurer*, München 2006, p. 10–14; Helmut Reinalter: *Freimaurerei, Politik und Gesellschaft. Die Wirkungsgeschichte des diskreten Bundes*, Wien 2018, p. 15–53.

²⁰ Margaret C. Jacob: *The Origins of Freemasonry: Facts and Fictions*, Philadelphia 2006, p. 11–15.

²¹ David Stevenson: *The Origins of Freemasonry*, Cambridge 1988.

²² Margaret C. Jacob: *The Origins of Freemasonry*.

'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is, to be *good Men and true*, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish'd; whereby Masonry becomes the *Center of Union*, and the Means of conciliation true Friendship among persons that must have remain'd at a perpetual Distance.²³

With the last sentence of this quotation, I am already at the third reason that motivated me to include this worldwide spread organization in this ritual study: namely its transcultural as well as trans-religious unifying accomplishment. Anyone who has ever been involved in ecumenical work knows very well that this accomplishment is very difficult to achieve and is respectively a remarkable one. This religiously connoted organization has managed over the centuries to unite, e.g., Jews, Muslims, Hindus, agnostics, and Christians among others as brothers and sisters beyond all ethnic and cultural borders and differences. This promotes global harmony and peace, and therefore, in my opinion, deserves our attention. Now, my question as a scholar of religious studies is, of course: How do they accomplish this? How do they manage that? Although the answer to this question is by no means easy, I am suggesting here that a decisive part of the solution to this problem actually lies in their rituals. For the thesis I am arguing for, neither the content nor the symbolic meaning of the Hiram legend (as the specifically Masonic foundational story [Gründerzählung]) is of central relevance in my argumentation. For the community-constituting and thus unifying power of rituals, although supported by symbols, lies above all in its performative character. That is the central point of my thesis. In order to demonstrate this, I use a list of some aspects of the ritual performative dimension that Christoph Wulf and Jörg Zirfas published in their essay "Performativität, Ritual und Gemeinschaft" in 2004.²⁴ Wulf and Zirfas suggest eight aspects or dimensions. I will only discuss three of them here, because I subsume the others under the aspects mentioned below and because I believe that some of them are of secondary relevance for my current purpose. The most important aspects of the ritual performative character for my thesis are:

- generation of reality,
- scenic staging or scenic performance, and
- corporeality or physical presence (physicality).

3.1 The performance of the legend of Hiram Abif

The legend of Hiram Abif is the basal story within the typical construction metaphoric of Freemasonry. It is no exception in the German study case analyzed here. The legend narrates how Hiram Abif, the master architect commissioned by King Solomon to supervise the construction of the temple, was murdered by three journeymen.²⁵ This legend is read out in the master ritual immediately after the initiand has taken the vow. It is also scenically performed at certain points. In this sense, it is therefore a performance within a performance, namely the performance of the Hiram legend within the framework of the *Erhebung* (raising) to the master degree in the format of a rite of passage.²⁶ As a rite of passage, the master ritual guides and accompanies the change of state of the initiand from fellowcraft to master. According to van Gennepe, every rite of passage can be divided into three phases: the separation, the threshold, and the

²³ James Anderson: *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons*. London 1723, p. 50. For the digitalized original text of Anderson's Constitutions, see https://books.google.de/books?id=LklCAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

²⁴ Christoph Wulf / Jörg Zirfas: *Performativität, Ritual und Gemeinschaft*. Ein Beitrag aus erziehungswissenschaftlicher Sicht, in: Dietrich Harth / Gerrit Jasper Schenk (Eds.): *Ritualdynamik. Kulturübergreifende Studien zur Theorie und Geschichte rituellen Handelns*, Heidelberg 2004, p. 73–93.

²⁵ *Großloge der Alten Freien und Angenommenen Maurer von Deutschland (AFuAMvD): Ritual III der Großloge der Alten Freien und Angenommenen Maurer von Deutschland*, Selb 2013, p. 41ff.

²⁶ Arnold van Gennepe: *Übergangsriten*, Frankfurt a. M. 1986.

reincorporation phase. Additionally, in the German master ritual the initiand enters the temple in his fellowcraft state, from which he gradually detaches and develops or transforms itself into the master state. Only after taking the vow the initiand enters to an undefined state of “neither-nor”, namely the liminality (threshold phase). Finally, after the saying “You have experienced the mystery of mastery”,²⁷ the initiate emerges in the master state. According to this scheme, the part of the master ritual, in which the Hiram legend is the focus of attention, thus corresponds to the liminal or threshold state.

The legend narrates how 15 fellowcrafts who worked on the construction of the temple conspire against Hiram Abif to get the master secret word and thus enjoy more money and more prestige abroad. Only three fellowcrafts carry out the conspiracy finally.

Further, the legend tells that the master architect refused to reveal the secret word when the three fellowcrafts demanded it from him by force at the three entrances to the temple. At the eastern gate, the first fellowcraft injured him with a yardstick across his throat, the second stabbed him on the left chest with an angle measure at the southern gate, and finally the third struck the already seriously injured master architect at the western gate with a maul on the forehead.

The three murderers took the body of the master at midnight and buried him on the slope of a hill. Finally, they marked the grave with an acacia twig to assist with finding it again.

The causal connection of greed and violence as a moral theme suggested here, as well as the marking of the improvised grave site with a small evergreen branch lead me to suspect that the Masonic ritual designers or writers were inspired by the ancient legend concerning the fate of Polydorus. The story of Polydorus, as told to Euripides in his tragedy *Hekabe* and Vergil in his *Aeneid*, describes how he was murdered by his own brother-in-law out of greed for gold. Priam, king of Troy, sent his youngest son Polydorus, together with his heir, to Thrace to his son-in-law Polymestor, king of Thrace, to bring him to a secure place and, if Troy loses the war, also for education. After the fall of Troy, Polymestor killed his brother-in-law Polydorus and appropriated the inheritance entrusted to him. Aeneas heard this story directly from the voice of the murdered man, when he accidentally found Polydorus' improvised burial place while walking up a hill:

This I climbed. And I tried to uproot green wood from its groundsoil, Eager to cover my altars with living and leaf-covered branches. Just as I snapped the first shrub from its roots to extract it, I noticed Something that made me bristle with fear, and which makes an astounding Story; for dark blood started to ooze, dripping downwards in large drops, 'Staining the soil with its putrid gore. A shudder of ice-cold Horror shivered my limbs. And my blood froze, clotted in terror. Still, I persisted, and tried once again to extract a reluctant Shaft from another bush, seeking the latent cause of the problem. Dark blood flowed from the bark of this second tree, in the same way. [...] 'After I'd tackled a third group of shafts, and with even more effort, Wrestling, down on my knees, with the sand that resisted my struggles— Now—should I speak or be silent?—a moan that would drive you to heartbreak Rose to my ears from the depths of the mound; a voice drifted on breezes (*Aeneid* III).²⁸

When the master architect Hiram Abif went missing and the 12 repentant fellows told King Solomon everything, Solomon sent the fellows to search for the three murderers and nine masters to find the body of the murdered master.

²⁷ AFuAMvD: Ritual III, p. 46.

²⁸ Virgil: *Aeneid*, Trans. by Frederick Ahl, Oxford 2007, p. 24–40.

The burial place of the murdered master was found, the earth was cleared away and two masters one after the other tried to bring the body back to life.²⁹ After the first two attempts failed, a third master tried to lift up the lying body with provided handles and pre-arranged positions. This third attempt succeeded. The murdered master was raised back to life.

This is the legend as it is told in the tradition of the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Germany (AFuAMvD) until today. But what do the three performative aspects of its ritual execution look like in concrete terms?

3.2 Generation of Reality

The generation of reality as the first aspect of the performative character refers to the creative power of performing. The ritual as performance is not only representation or reproduction of contents and content transporting symbols, but rather exists as an action qua execution in time and space, namely in the here and now. As a performance, the ritual generates an autonomous aesthetic and meaning that eludes the original intentions of the ritual designers. It goes beyond the media. The ritual does something.³⁰ It produces an event. It occurs. Whether it is intended to be fictitious, symbolic, metaphorical, realistic, or even scientific, the ritual is, either way, a reality in which all ritual participants are involved.

The first phase of reality generation of a ritual consists of separating the dimensions and orders in opposition to the everyday course of events. The ritual separation and differentiation of things, spaces, behaviors, and attitudes creates a sacred reality, which is maintained by a serious and respectful attitude on the part of the ritual participants. This, however, excludes neither spontaneity nor a frugal playfulness. The master ritual of the AFuAMvD performs this work of separation (e.g., by prohibition and prescription), exactly like its other two main rituals, in many different forms. The Masonic clothing of the participants, for instance, indicates the above-mentioned sublime, serious or solemn occasion of the ritual. The successive and orderly entry of the ritual performers and protagonists (in this context, the so-called "Brothers Officers") and the gradual preparation of the room by lighting candles in a certain sequence and arrangement are also examples for the constitution and separation of a sacred time and space from the everyday profane world order.

The master ritual also generates a certain mood and a thoughtful attitude through, for instance, thematic (illocutionary) speech acts of an imperative nature. If, for example, the ritual leader (*Meister vom Stuhl*) shouts "Reflect on Death!" three times during the travel part after a strong hammer blow, and if there are skulls visibly placed around the room, it is highly probable that the initiand does really reflect on death. Thoughts, feelings, and an atmospheric mood are generated as part of the shared reality through the concrete performance of the ritual.

The most important aspect of this phenomenon is that the generated reality is a shared reality. It is not a private reality, but a communally created and collectively experienced reality. To what extent is the generated reality in the ritual collectively generated and communally experienced? The specific form of the Masonic master ritual answers this question most clearly under the aspect of scenic staging.

²⁹ The so-called Graham manuscript includes a central narrative, namely the Noah legend. This tells how Noah's three sons attempt to lift their father's body from its grave. See E. John T. Acaster: The Noah Legend and the Graham Manuscript, in: *Ars Quator Coronatorum* 131, 2018, p. 137–80.

³⁰ Roy A. Rappaport: Ritual und performative Sprache, in: Andréa Belliger / David J. Krieger (Eds.): *Ritualtheorien. Ein einführendes Handbuch*, Wiesbaden: 2003, p. 191–211.

3.3 Scenic Staging

Freemasons read the master ritual in advance, memorize it in part, and practice it on a rehearsal basis. But none of these practices can be considered equivalent to the ritual itself. For the ritual must be performed. It requires an opened stage. In contrast to Wulf and Zirfas,³¹ for whom there can be no performance without an audience, there seems to be no ritual participant in the German master ritual who has the exclusive function of a spectator. In the master ritual, all ritual participants are more or less performing actors in the generated sacred event. Even the novice, who should not know the action of the ritual, is involved in the performance as a co-actor. This aspect leads me back to the Hiram legend.

The legend as a narrative is an important part of the performance. It is told or read out loud. It should be noted that from the cognitive science point of view, stories have elements that are cognitively anchored. These are situatedness, event sequencing, worldmaking / world disruption and “what it's like” or *quale*.³² Thus, it is very plausible in this context that the cognitive processes that are presupposed for a narrative and activated by a narrative can also be produced collectively, if the narrative is collectively experienced by a community. And it is precisely this aspect that is increasingly brought to a holistic level of cognitive imprinting and community experience by means of staging the narrative.

In the midst of the recited narrative of the Hiram legend, principal ritual performers take turns playing the role of the three conspiring fellowcrafts and perform the murderous acts. The role of the master architect Hiram Abif is given to the initiand. The first conspiratorial fellowcraft, Jubela, is staged as he slits the throat of Hiram Abif with a ruler; the second fellowcraft, Jubelo, perforates the master architect's left breast with an angle measure; and finally, Jubelum,³³ the third, smashes the forehead of the dying master with a pickaxe hammer. The novice experiences all of this in his role as Hiram Abif through the scenic performance of the narrated murder. Note that in the German master ritual the names of the conspiring fellowcrafts are not mentioned, in contrast to the York rite.

It is important to note, at this point, that this performance, in which several actors are at work, constitutes a shared experience. It is precisely this experience that points to a holistic perception of the event: through the senses, where feelings and emotions are involved, as well as by means of reflection. Here we can see that this corresponds to the sensorial modality of rituals that Whitehouse has described as *imagistic*; but with one proviso: while the pain-inducing actions are indeed staged, the pain as such is *realiter* excluded. The effective act of physical injury is replaced by its plastic staging, with no need to forgo the cognitive triggering of an embodied perception of the act. For the ritual participants—and in particular the novice—are already cognitively immersed in the situation (*situatedness*) and in the event sequencing of the narrative, they are immersed in the narrated world and in a specific emotional state (*quale*), so that the actual pain in this context becomes superfluous for a high emotional and cognitive arousal (*high-arousal*). Finally, the ritual emphasizes the dimension of a direct experience over that of an intellectual comprehension. A textual statement supports this proposition by saying immediately after the uplifting of the initiand: “You have experienced the mystery of mastery”.³⁴ Now although it says “you”, it is impossible to experience this event without the joint performance. Both the other co-creators as well as the joint scenic performance are necessary in this sense to bring “the mystery of mastery” to life.

³¹ Christoph Wulf / Jörg Zirfas: *Performativität, Ritual und Gemeinschaft*, p. 87.

³² David Herman: *Basic Elements of Narrative*, Massachusetts, 2009.

³³ These are the names of the three conspiring fellowcrafts, according to the ancient York rite. See Malcom C. Duncan: *Duncan's Masonic Ritual and Monitor*, New York 1976, p. 122–125 and 137–140.

³⁴ AFuAMvD: *Ritual III*, p. 46.

3.4 Corporeality or Physical Presence

Although the novice feels no pain and his “death” is only staged, the intended homicide is suggested on his body and is also signaled by the positioning of his body in the context of the ritual situation. This brings us to the aspect of corporeality or physical presence. Corporeality as an aspect of the performative directly refers to the ritual event in concrete corporal actions, in the dramaturgical behavior, in the arrangement of the situation including the associated requisites (ritual accessories and objects) and in the particular physical relations among the ritual participants determined by the different roles. Facial expressions and gestures play a prominent role in this, inasmuch as they convey dynamics and vitality across a broad spectrum.

None of these three aspects of the performative (generation of reality, scenic staging and corporeality) can de facto be separated from one another completely. Each one involves the others in one form or another. This theoretical differentiation is just an analytical or artificial distinction, namely an analysis. From the perspective of cognitive science, human cognition permeates the whole body. The human being therefore perceives somatically and also recognizes his living environment somatically. The more senses and corporeality are involved in an experience, the more intensively the experience shapes us. One of the most prominent reasons for this is that embodied cognition is at work in a holistic way. It is precisely by means of the acts of the human being as a living organism encompassing his body in the world and interacting with and within its environment (including his fellow human beings!), that the human being cognitively brings forth a whole cosmos through the process of action.³⁵

The body of the initiand suddenly stands with its own role in the middle of the ritual action. His throat, his left breast and his forehead are touched by the enacted legend. After the mortal stroke, his body falls backwards on his back and is placed in the same place where a coffin was placed since the beginning of the master ritual. For the spatial orientation of the novice this marks a violation of expectation (violation-of-expectancy), which activates Connecting Cognitive Reflexes.³⁶ In the middle of this cognitive disturbance and at the same time stimulation, the Hiram-novice is “buried”, his body is covered with a black cloth. Beyond life, the Hiram body of the initiand is buried in the middle of the ritual site (also called temple). Here we are dealing with one of the usual motifs that communities and societies use to give a meaningful expression to the threshold state (liminality): death. Victor Turner mentions other popular motifs as metaphorical expressions of liminality in his 1969 work *The Ritual Process*: “Thus, the threshold state is often equated with death, with being in the womb, with invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, with wilderness, and with an eclipse of the sun or the moon”.³⁷

While the Hiram-initiand lies on the ground, he is in his deepest liminal state: neither living nor dead, neither here nor there, neither passive nor active, neither fellowcraft nor master, and neither he himself nor another —namely not Hiram Abif.

The ritual action continues while the Hiram body of the novice lies physically resting on the ground. And his thinking? Does his mind rest while he lies covered on the floor? Probably not, perhaps because his cognition was stimulated by a spatial violation of expectancy; perhaps because his senses, his sight being the weakest, continue to perceive the ritual event —although from a particular perspective.

It is precisely in this process of liminality, through which *communitas*³⁸ —in the sense of a community without structures— is built more in reality. By this I mean that the formation of community takes place not only symbolically, but also in a real, factual, concrete way, as well as through the use of corporeality

³⁵ Humberto R. Maturana / Francisco J. Varela: *The Tree of Knowledge. The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, Boston [1987] 1998.

³⁶ Cf. Javier Y. Álvarez-Vázquez: *How? Enarrativity and the Cognition of Explicative Thinking*, p. 138-142.

³⁷ Victor Turner: *Liminalität und Communitas*, in: Andréa Belliger / David J. Krieger (Eds.): *Ritualtheorien. Ein einführendes Handbuch*, Wiesbaden 2003, p. 251–252.

³⁸ Victor Turner: *Liminalität und Communitas*.

in a perceptible way and in the sense of embodied cognition in a recognizable way. The generation of reality, which I am concerned with here, is the generation of an experience called *communitas*, in which the persons involved no longer act in a structured way next to each other or hierarchically, but rather move together toward a common goal and let a particularly being together happen synergistically.³⁹

By using one's own body in the ritual performance of the Hiram legend, this liminal experience of *communitas* is anchored physically and thus also cognitively. Symbols such as a skull or an acacia branch subsequently form a sign complex in the context of Freemasonry, which functions as a shared language in the form of a ritually determined symbolism, in which this complex of signs points to a more or less collective experience. From the cognitive science point of view, these symbols also constitute an important part of a mnemotechnical system in the sense of memory artifacts of a collective memory.

4. Framed Cognitive Immersion (FCI) in ritual context

The question that guided my examination of the German Masonic master ritual was: Where does the amazing unifying power of Freemasons come from, which has united them as Sisters and Brothers for three centuries, beyond any social, ethnic, and religious difference? To answer this question, I have developed the following thesis: Although the symbolic plays an important role, the community-constituting and thus the unifying power does not lie in the symbolic alone, but rather primarily in the performative character of the ritual.

In order to present this thesis, I have used the cognitive science approach of embodiment (or the Enactive View) and put it in relation with recent studies in the Cognitive Science of Religion. In doing so, I have shown that the imagistic mode is the predominant one in the master ritual of the German Freemasons. However, the master ritual proves to be a special phenomenon of imagistic rituals: Its high-arousal quality does not depend on physical pain or a somatic dysphoric experience. Every dysphoric experience is rather only suggested or represented by its staging, but not carried out in a more real way. From this exception or novel manifestation of the imagistic mode of the Masonic ritual, the following question ensues then: Which mechanism in the master ritual is at work so that the extraordinary effect of a transcultural and trans-religious unity of the members of the society is fostered? My answer to this question is: The mechanism that makes this outcome possible in the style of an imagistic ritual is what I call *Framed Cognitive Immersion*.

Using the three central aspects of the performative character as an example of the German master ritual, I have tried to show how Framed Cognitive Immersion is actuated. It is at work when there are at least three main elements present:

1. an event framing,
2. a Holistic Triggering of Perceptual Faculties, and
3. an activation of the Connecting Cognitive Reflexes.

Through the event framing, the action is perceived as a ritual. This serves above all to draw the attention of the ritual participants to the (possible) meaning of the event. This creates a meaning expectancy. It is precisely the separation work of the ritual that co-constitutes and differentiates the sacred from the profane, which opens the stage for the performance of a meaningful event. By making use of all the senses of perception, the environment and the mental faculties, a holistic activation of the perceptive faculty is set in motion. This stimulates cognition in its embodied, intellectual, mental, and social-situational dimensions. We have seen this most clearly in the discussion of the three main aspects of the performative character, namely the generation of reality, the scenic staging, and corporeality. Finally, the natural

³⁹ Victor Turner: *Liminalität und Communitas*, p. 259.

tendency of humans to acquire knowledge can be explained by the basic cognitive mechanisms of the Connecting Cognitive Reflexes. I understand the basic form of the Connecting Cognitive Reflexes as *tentio mentis* (in the sense of “attempt to reach” or “expansion of thinking”, after the Latin verb *tendere*), i.e., as the drive of thinking to seek connections between objects, events, and sequences of events. Connecting Cognitive Reflexes are acquired cognitive responses that are under the influence of known or current (activated) structures of events (usually action structures). They are activated when violations of expectancy or causal opacity are experienced as something significant. Religious or religiously connoted rituals almost always have elements that are taken away from their profane use and meaning and their secular logic. The unexpected embodiment of the figure of Hiram Abif in the person of the initiate, for example, can be seen as such an element. The activation of the Connecting Cognitive Reflexes in turn fosters subsequent and lasting reflection on what has been experienced.

Meaning creation and meaning attribution cannot be an exclusive achievement of the symbolic alone, but rather —as I have been trying to show— the symbolic aspect itself firstly and foremostly needs community. We have also seen that it is precisely the dimension of the performative character in ritual that is the driving force behind community development. The symbolic aspect thus needs community, which is generated in and through the ritual. Furthermore, I have tried to explain why the Masonic master ritual as practiced in Germany is so effective in the case of German Freemasonry, so that it has the extraordinary effects of unifying people as brothers and sisters beyond cultural, ethnic, political, and even religious or belief differences. Based on this exposition, I have sought to give the following answer: The power of this accomplishment lies not only in the “positive ideology” or in the “good values” that Freemasonry fosters, but rather in the way in which the cognition of the participants in the Masonic rituals in general and the master ritual in particular is engaged, namely through Framed Cognitive Immersion as described here.

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