

Examining Ritual and Symbol

Whether you know it or not, you already have a kind of idea of what ritual means. Maybe the word has something to do with your understanding of organized religion: baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Or perhaps you think about what it means to engage in a bedtime ritual with a child: take a bath, read a story, sing a song. Regardless of what you may think of first, ritual applies to both kinds of activities described above. Rituals are both public and personal; they are both highly organized as well as spontaneous. Rituals are enactments in which people participate in the communal celebration of highly valued beliefs, ideals and myths. They are regularly repeated, patterned social events that help us to shape our relationships to other people and to our culture as a whole.

In the case of a wedding--a public/popular ritual--people reflect and reinforce their beliefs about family, monogamy, and many other abstract concepts such as sex roles and spirituality. In the case of a bedtime ritual with a child--a personal/private ritual-- actions may reveal how people think about family, the role of children, the responsibility of parents, the importance of literacy, the appropriateness of daily grooming, and so on. In other words, the purpose of ritual is to make cultural beliefs visible and tangible. When people do certain things and act in certain ways, they can literally see what it is they believe. The elements of any ritual--each action, set of actions, symbols and behaviors--can all be examined as representations of cultural beliefs. If you extend this discussion of weddings to your specific experiences with weddings in real life or in pop culture images, you can begin to this manifestation of cultural beliefs. Consider these questions:

- What happens before, during, and after the wedding?
- Who participates? Who does what?

- What ritual actions or behaviors associated with the wedding do you recognize as “typical” for weddings in your culture? What meaning do those actions carry?
- If not “typical” for your culture, what meaning does the break from “typical” have?
- What larger, cultural beliefs, are those rituals connected to?

The multiple layers of ritual that you find in weddings, wedding videos, movies about weddings, and even the wedding industry itself, should give you a start at recognizing meaningful patterns of behavior (ritual) and differentiating them from behaviors that are simply repeated (habit).

But what does it really mean to represent a cultural belief? Well, let's turn to another example: Thanksgiving. "American" Thanksgiving is celebrated in the United States on the fourth Thursday of every November. A grade-school description of this holiday may be represented something like: the day in the year when we remember the settling of our country in terms of a positive relationship between the Native peoples and settlers. It is first and foremost a feast day, a day of rest and relaxation. It also signifies the “beginning” of a North American holiday season. The day following Thanksgiving is known as the “first day of the Christmas shopping season.” Folks in our country make a huge meal—most probably including a roast turkey, potatoes and pie—and sit around and eat, talk and watch football on TV.

Though the notion of a feast day is hardly unique with respect to cultural ritual, Thanksgiving is a holiday particular to the United States, wholly naturalized and taken for granted in this culture. In order to begin to analyze this ritual, take a few minutes and try to describe what happens on this day and why:

- Where do you celebrate?
- What happens that day?

- What can you always find on the table?
- What seems to always happen?
- What is your role in the events of the day?
- Are there certain “jobs” for certain individuals? If so, what are they?
- Overall, how do you feel about this holiday? Why do you think you feel this way?

If you do not celebrate Thanksgiving, apply these same questions to a national or important holiday that you do celebrate.

Which actions did you seem to emphasize in your description? There could be a number of answers to this, and maybe you mentioned most of the ideas covered by the questions above. But, for the sake of continuing this example, let's concentrate on the act of eating the food. OK, so, where does this happen? How does it happen? What does it mean to "eat" Thanksgiving dinner or another holiday meal? What happens at your table? Most US students talk about the "adult table", with TONS of food, someone who "says grace", a patriarch who carves the turkey, men who eat until they feel pain, and women who labor in the kitchen making the food and then labor in the kitchen cleaning up the food. The focus is, of course, the food itself, a huge turkey (most likely) with all the "trimmings," side-dishes that are usually bound to one's subcultural connection. (Not everyone has macaroni and cheese, or oyster stuffing, for example. Are marshmallows a "natural" part of your yam/sweet potato dish?)

Now, you've identified the action—making and eating a meal—but what does this reflect about beliefs? What does this mean? What does this food represent? Think about it in terms of the larger culture, as well as in terms of your family. In general, we eat to excess at Thanksgiving because we believe in the bounty of America, we believe in the "spoils" of harvest, and all that

"God grants us." Food at Thanksgiving simultaneously represents our being grateful for what we have, and our entitlement to excess. Food and bounty represents our American belief in rural life. Even if you live and celebrate Thanksgiving in a city, Thanksgiving is a rural holiday. It is about the farm, it is about farming and "simpler" times. It is about a romantic view of the past and all of the family values we think we may have lost.

If you doubt any of this analysis, be sure to check out the Thanksgiving commercials this year? How many reflect some "past" time? How many take place on a farm or in a farm house? How many include grandparent-type figures? How many show the table just full of food? These commercials will reflect general cultural beliefs about Thanksgiving, but every family does not celebrate the same way. This is where the specifics of any ritual celebration become relevant. While it may be more obvious to think about what Thanksgiving means in a general sense, as the authors of this book, we cannot say what Thanksgiving may mean in your family, at your house?

Think about whether there's another layer of meaning in Thanksgiving. Is this food tied to the land from whence it came (a representation of agrarian beliefs) or does this food illustrate the buying power in your family (a reflection of capitalist success)? Or maybe the food on your table represents connection to an ethnic homeland (the inclusion of manicotti, greens or kim chi to represent Italian, African-American and Korean ethnicities, respectively).

When it comes to your specific site—your celebration—only you know the answers to these questions. But the point is that these questions do have answers, that the actions do mean something and they do represent certain beliefs. As you think about your field research site this week, you need to consider the ritual involved there. You can use some of the same questions we have presented to guide your analysis of weddings and Thanksgiving:

- What are the repeated actions?

- Who participates?
- What do they mean?

You may think about ritual with respect to a larger shared set of actions and beliefs—as in the case of Thanksgiving—or maybe you identify a more localized ritual, something like the preparation for going to a concert. There may even be ritualistic elements of your own research. But in order to sort out a focus for yourself, whether you want to look at more public/global ritualistic behavior, or more private/localized action, it is helpful to also understand how ritual works, how it is that an action becomes representative of meaning.

How does ritual work?

Because of the connection between belief and action, the examination of ritual becomes extremely useful to any ethnographic investigation. However, in order to really understand this connection, you need to consider how it is this connection can be made. You cannot assert that every single action, every movement and behavior reflects or represents some belief. Sometimes people just do things. However, in the case of ritual, there is an assumed relationship. And this relationship is made possible with respect to specific qualities of space.

Recall the distinction between the idea of place and space presented in Module 2. A place is simply a location—where events occur—while the space not only refers to the location but to the atmosphere, the vibe, if you will. This vibe is the result of the actions, behaviors, beliefs and expectations of the people in the place. In a ritual, space is one of the most important elements to consider. If the space has not been correctly constructed, if it does not do its job and present/create the correct vibe or atmosphere, then the actions won't represent meaning or belief.

In short, for ritual to work, the space of the ritual must be magical. It must be imbued with the universal power of connection. The space must be sacred.

If you're not quite sure what we're getting at in terms of sacred space, think about all your experience with one particular holiday celebration. You can choose any one you like, any one that has a particular significance for you. Now, in considering your experience, can you think of any year when it was particularly "magical," meaningful? On the other hand, can you think of a year when it just didn't seem right--it wasn't that holiday? Now, ask yourself why or why not in terms of the "magic."

- What did or did not happen?
- Who came?
- What elements were or were not present in order to make the ritual work?

As you consider the elements of a successful holiday or ritual, you begin to engage in the initial analysis of the sacred space necessary to make the ritual “work” to enable the connection between behavior and belief. Without sacred space, without the creation of a certain feeling/vibe/atmosphere, actions are just action; eating is just eating; talking is just talking. You are not connecting to a larger meaning; you are not connecting with cultural belief.

Of course, these ideas turn back into each other because sacred space is partly created by the ritual behaviors themselves. But there is more to it than that. Every space is not sacred. The "magic" of the holiday, it's meaning, is directly linked to the idea that your existence transcends linear time. Action exists in a timeless quality. The day flies by, or is "magically" suspended as you revel in the power that connects the actions to the beliefs you are there to celebrate. Recall the example of Thanksgiving again. Sure, you may be aware of a general progression of events--arrive, cook, chat, say grace, carve, eat, watch football, eat again, say goodbye--but there most

probably isn't an assigned amount of time prescribed for every action, nor is there even a hard and fast schedule of any kind. Sacred space is characterized by the non-linear qualities of time. In sacred space, time is suspended. You do not mark it with hours that are represented with numbers. Rather, time is understood with respect to a pattern of behavior, a series of action, ritualized moments. Actions and behaviors flow one into the next; we know what to do because we have done it so many times before, not because we have our day planners with us.

What's the function of the symbol and what does it have to do with ritual?

In presenting a definition and exploration of ritual, it may seem as though every researcher will identify the occurrence of ritual in their site. While it could be said that every site may illustrate moments of ritualistic behavior, it is also fair to concede that there may not be a specific ritual associated with each site. In the workplace, for example, the possibility for sacred space and time is limited. Because Western notions of the workday absolutely revolve around the marking of time, workplaces themselves are not conducive to ritual. There may be ritualized moments—the chatting over coffee each morning, staff meeting minutes, activity in the lunchroom, e-mail memo writing—but there isn't the connection between belief and action that is represented in a regularly repeated set of universal behaviors.

However, just because you may have a more difficult time seeing the relationship between belief and action, it does not mean that these sorts of places are bereft of cultural meaning. On the contrary, the American workplace—its structure and design—illustrates quite clearly how Americans make meaning in their lives. But rather than working to identify the presence of a specific ritual, in the sites where sacred space and time may be limited, you may be able to connect with cultural meaning more readily through the identification of specifically

relevant symbols. Symbols are objects, artifacts in a site that are imbued with cultural meaning. They are cultural talismans, intended to represent belief. Some examples may be the cross, Star of David, or Buddha, which are symbols of Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism, respectively. These symbols may become a part of a specific ritual, but they may also simply be worn or displayed as a representation of the potential of meaning that is present in a ritual.

In thinking about symbol, you want to reconsider the place, noting the objects of importance. A symbol is not just a thing; *it is a thing that means*. And you can only determine whether something means by examining how people use, interact with and talk about the object. The meaning and importance of the object—its viability as a symbol—may have universal meaning, but it is the site-specific meaning that becomes most interesting in an ethnographic study.

Consider the workplace. Many workplaces across the country have a water cooler somewhere. Now, in a general sense, a water cooler can symbolize the belief that people need moments of break at work. You may have accepted the notion of a break as a natural part of culture, but it is actually a legislated division of work time from leisure time. The water cooler represents the need for leisure and the compartmentalization of work time. However, symbolic significance of a specific water cooler in a particular place is much more dependent upon how the people think about, use and relate with the said symbol. If the water cooler becomes a place of connectivity, a location where workers actually come together to meet, to gossip, the symbol of the cooler—its meaning—may extend beyond the more obvious. It would be pure speculation however, without supporting ethnographic data, to suggest what the symbol could mean. The point is that many symbols, once identified, have a global—larger, cultural interpretation—as well as a local meaning.

If you are focusing on a particular ritual in your research site, you will want to identify the presence of particular symbols, how they are used and what they mean. If you do, the theoretical significance of ritual and symbol will begin to dovetail. You'll begin to see the layering of meaning and belief as you connect the ways that actions and behaviors center around specific objects, thereby indicating the presence of a symbol, even as an object may be understood as having symbolic meaning based upon how it is used and related to by people in the site.

There is a two-way relationship between ritual and symbol. You may get at this relationship either through the identification of the ritual or the symbol. The key here is that once you locate one, you want to consider the presence of the other. In this way you'll enrich your understanding of meaning in your site.

Writing about Ritual and Symbol

Here are a couple of prompts to assist you in framing your expanded fieldnotes about ritual and symbol.

1. Begin with a simple identification of repeated behaviors and actions, and revisit the questions presented earlier in this chapter. As a part of your jottings and headnotes, record an initial overview of what happens; identify a sequence. Once you identify a sequence, think about whether this is in fact a ritual, or it is simply a part of habit. The difference here has to do with meaning, how it is understood and created. If you think something is meaningful, ask people at the site what it means to them.
2. Write about why or why not you would classify the pattern as a ritual, and if it is ritual, discuss the meaning you think it carries. This can be your own theory of what it means to people

at the site or what it means to you personally. Push yourself here to examine multiple layers of meaning, and how any rituals you identify connect to symbols.

3. Discuss how the rituals you find at your site connect to you on a personal level. Do you participate in these rituals? Why, what do they mean to you? How might that meaning be different for other participants at the site? If you are not a participant, does this ritual compare to a ritual you are familiar with or does it resonate with you in some way? What is the larger cultural meaning of the ritual? In these fieldnotes, you want to continually ask, and attempt to answer, the question “Why?” Why? Why?

4. In the same way you identify ritual (above), identify possible symbols and the creation of sacred space. If a symbol is a thing that means something, in your headnotes and jottings, note how people interact with the “thing.” In your expanded fieldnotes, describe your observations and write about what, to you, are the indicators that this is a symbol. Do you connect with the symbol in any personal way? How does the behavior of people at the site center around the symbol? What does it mean to them? What is the larger cultural meaning? Again, you should try to ask and answer “why?” on multiple levels.

5. While there are differences of opinion with respect to individual perceptions of meaning, make sure you focus on the difference in your own fieldnotes between description, thoughts and feelings, and analysis. The simple act of separating these kinds of writing serves to emphasize that you are, at once, a participant in your site and a researcher. Yours is a complex subject-position. Do not lose sight of this even as you concentrate on the action in your site. Actually work to address this gap in the analysis section of your fieldnotes. Why can you write about ritual/symbol in two different ways? How does that shift make you feel? Do you feel more confident of either type of writing? Why?

Rhetorical Considerations for Writing about Ritual and Symbol

As you begin to consider ritual and symbol in your site, think about the connection between meaning and complexity. How is it you can identify meaning, but also honor multiple perspectives and truths? What does it mean to write in a clear, yet not over-simplified manner? How can you begin to make assertions, yet also leave room for alternate interpretations? These are important questions to keep in mind as you write, so you may want to focus on two of the “ethnographic top ten” elements:

- o #1 explores meaning
- o #5 highlights complexity.

One of the characteristics of ritual is that it reflects how people make meaning in their lives. In considering ritual, then, you immediately open yourself up to consider the location of meaning in your site and what that meaning might be. Specifically, ritual links meaning with action and belief. Actions reflect belief and the beliefs reflect how it is we create meaning. To explore the meaning of rituals and symbols, ask your informants about the significance of various behaviors and/or objects that you have noted as important. If they use words like, “meaningful,” “important,” “powerful,” in their description, use follow-up questions to get at the specifics of such importance. What is that meaning? Why is it important to them? What does it represent to you?

In order for ritual to be effective, it must often take place in sacred space and time. This means there are at least two layers you need to consider when examining ritual: the course of action and the space in which it occurs. In addition, there is a relationship between ritual and symbol, a relationship that further complicates the location of meaning. In ethnographic writing,

you are seeking to highlight complexity in order to avoid intimating that there is any one Truth, that there is any one reality. Because of the complexity of ritual, how it affects people, how and where folks find meaning, it becomes useful in coming to understand how to highlight complexity when you write about your research site.

As you think about your observations and the responses of people at your site to your queries about the meaning and significance of ritual and symbol, focus on the issues, ideas and points where folks disagree, where they see things a bit differently. One of the best ways to highlight complexity is to identify conflict. Rather than working your exploration toward a right or wrong answer, consider reasons why these multiple perspectives exist. If you see things one way, and your informants see them another, consider why that may be. Do not assume that either you or your informants have the “right” perspective. Rather, work to consider why these differences co-exist, how they co-exist and how this difference actually helps to characterize the meaning in the ritual or symbol.

You should also think about ways you can represent this complexity on the page. Can you present the different informant responses in different type-face? What rhetorical effect does that have? In other words, even though the main writing focus at this point is expanded fieldnotes, it is not too soon to think about how you might textually represent conflict. You could add some thoughts about this in your analysis section of your notes.

Student Fieldnotes that Focus on Ritual and Symbol