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During his first presidential inauguration, Barack Obama got the oath of office wrong, so after some intense debates, he eventually had to retake it. At the 2014 Winter Olympics opening ceremony in Sochi, one of the five Olympic rings did not light up as planned, which created a fertile ground for mockery and ridicule of the organizers. Similarly, the nature and timing of Saddam Hussein’s execution were at the core of ultimate disagreements among those several interest groups involved in it.

These are all examples of public, collective rituals gone wrong on a grand scale, yet there are numerous examples of different errors of varying magnitudes. According to Kathryn T. McClymond, such ritual disruptions are not exceptions, but in fact a norm in all human societies. Since every known society engages in ritual behavior, this global prevalence of rituals has stimulated a broad academic interest, with researchers exploring its various aspects. However, despite their frequent occurrence, barely any research specifically targeted ritual mistakes, which is the motif of Ritual Gone Wrong: What We Learn from Ritual Disruption.

In her account, McClymond draws examples from various cultures to discuss the nature, magnitude, and consequences of ritual disruptions. The reader will gradually learn about the processes of ritual repair in the manuals from ancient India – the Srauta Sutras – and about the rich discussions about ritual corrections in the Mishnah. The author then presents the case of ritual misrepresentation known as the Jewish Blood Libel, followed by an account of the ritual failures in modern Olympic Games ceremonies. The last chapter is devoted to the collision between different ritual systems in the execution of Saddam Hussein.

McClymond is quick to point out that we should not consider rituals as rigid, overly routinized systems of action, but rather as being constantly in flux and adjustable to actual needs, conditions, and contexts. The former (the rigid) is just imagined, whereas the latter (the elastic) is experienced – routinization and change are in direct opposition. Still, routinization could, in fact, be argued to be part of the process of ritual change by gradually (or sometimes even abruptly) adding and routinizing some elements while altering, substituting and abandoning others.

McClymond then continues with the issue of properly defining a ritual and, following Smith and Wittgenstein, advocates a polythetic approach (3). This approach claims that it is better to see rituals as instances of different magnitude rather than categorical instances, whereby some events are more ritualized than others. Rituals thus share some common characteristics, but they are always arranged uniquely in various ritual systems, and none of them is sufficient to define something as a ritual. McClymond offers a possible list of such characteristics, such as prescribed times and locations, gestures and language. Her take thus nicely (albeit not intentionally) builds upon the work of Roy A. Rappaport in Ecology, Meaning and Religion (1979), who was a known advocate of the polythetic approach in ritual studies. However, it would be beneficial to mention his more exhaustive list of ritual characteristics explicitly.

Actions matter more than intentions in rituals, and so disruptions ought to be identified and addressed appropriately, else they can lead to severe social and metaphysical
consequences. Individuals with such competencies are deemed highly prestigious and powerful in their respective societies, as is the case of the Brahmans in the Hindu tradition or rabbis in Judaism. These are ritual specialists who are familiar with the relevant scriptures and ritual manuals and can advise or perform the rituals themselves, as well as deal with disruptions. At the same time, these specialists stir respect and awe for they can deliberately sabotage a ritual to harm the devotees.

The Sutras dedicate considerable space to the discussion of ritual errors, focusing both on precautionary measures and ex-post fixes. The recommended solution is expiatory practices, often in the form of substitutions (e.g., of substances, names or places). One major side-effect of ritual expiations is that they help preserve the ritual system itself and slow down ritual change, through referring to the original and ideal code of conduct when addressing the potential or actual mistakes. In this way, they bridge the gap between the imagined ‘ought to be’ and the ‘actual is’ via the expiatory ‘can be,’ and thus allow the system to ‘bend without breaking’ (38).

According to McClymond, expiatory practices are good indicators of a ritual system’s fitness – if the fixation of errors is reinforced and followed, this prevents the system from accommodating and routinizing mistakes and eventually breaking down. This insightful hypothesis seems to be primarily suited to ritual traditions with written prescriptions and explicitly stated and shared rules. An alternative (or rather complementary) approach to McClymond offered by McCauley and Lawson in Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms (2002), and by Whitehouse in Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission (2004), may have been referenced in this section, for their cognitive-structural take on ritual stability and change is more robust and inclusive.

Ritual errors are also at the center of discourse in the Mishnah, which offers guidelines for the proper execution of rituals. In this case, however, expertise in interpretation of what presents correct execution is more valued than the execution itself. This situation reflects the developments following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, whereby rabbis (the discourse specialists) succeeded the priests (the execution experts). The Mishnah thus captures a shift in power and knowledge demonstrated by the rabbinical discourse.

Intentions, however, do matter according to the Mishnah, and ritual sabotage can be severely punished, as is particularly the case when violating the ritual calendar established during the temple period. Since the sacred space for ritual performance had been lost with the temple destruction, sacred time became all the more important. To preserve the continuation of ritual performance attached to sacred time, penalties were introduced to control for any deviations. Hence, along with expiations, penalties for ritual misconduct are another mechanism to secure ritual continuation and stability.

However, ritual knowledge can be instrumental not only in intra-cultural power shifts. As a powerful tool for expressing cultural hegemony, such knowledge can (deliberately or not) misrepresent the targeted cultural habits. With the blood libel accusations, the dominant Christian people in Europe have used alleged Jewish ritual disruption as an excuse for their oppression. They charged the Jews with host desecration and with the usage of Christian blood, including ritual murder, in their ceremonies. Although such practices are in complete disagreement with the requirements of proper ritual conduct in Judaism, the accusations spread across the continent and sometimes led to violence and even pogroms.

The suspicion of ritual mischief, coupled with physical abuse, eventually resulted in the alternation of the practice itself. The Passover celebration of nowadays is manifested with open doors welcoming guests to the festive Jewish households. Such an arrangement was a reaction to the widespread Christian belief that Jews were using Christian blood in their Passover bread preparation. McClymond claims that blood libel is more predicate about the
accusers than the accused – it could be a case of projective invasion. According to the belief in transubstantiation, Christians intake Christ’s blood and flesh through the Eucharist, which may cause some mental dissonance and uneasiness. Blood libel might have been a way to deal with these unpleasant feelings via projecting them on another tabooed group and accusing it of illegitimate ritualized cannibalism.

Not only religious rituals are highly scripted and prone to disruptions. McClymond introduces the Olympic Games ceremonies as largely ritualized secular events that can elicit considerable anxiety about their smooth deliverance. Importantly, the Olympic rituals signify the apolitical and ahistorical nature of the Games, and at the same time embody the ideology of sportsmanship, fair competition, and the celebration of the human body and spirit. Any deviation from this ideological framework thus presents a violation of the Olympic spirit.

At the 1988 Seoul Games, the ceremony was disrupted with several pigeons getting burned when perching on the Olympic cauldron. However, since it was only one case of an unfortunate casualty invading an otherwise flawless ceremony, a subsequent expiation in the form of artificial doves has fixed the problem for future Olympics and at the same time maintained the ritual with this innovative twist.

On the other hand, a dramatic intervention in the award ceremony can be interpreted as an attack on the spirit of the event, causing an unwanted contextualization within the outside world. By this means, ritual disruption exposes and shatters the Olympic mythic realm and highlights its detachment from reality. What we witness in effect is the ‘mythifying’ of the myth itself (121). This strategy was employed when the American basketball team boycotted the award ceremony in Munich 1972 for what they considered unfair arbitration in the finals against the Soviet Union.

Another, more spectacular example refers to two African-American sprinters who sabotaged the award ceremony by wearing symbols of resistance against discrimination in their homeland and by raising their fists while looking down when their national anthem was being played. Such demonstrations of absence and resistance signify a ritual sabotage by the designated ritual actors, precluding the audience of partaking in the act of consecration and celebration of the Olympic spirit.

McClymond then asks if some rituals are incapable of going right and as an example takes the execution of Saddam Hussein. The trial presented a case of several ritual systems colliding on many levels in a global political arena. Disagreements between the interested parties encompassed mainly the proceedings and timing of the execution, as well as the fact of it happening at all. The conflict over the correct judicial and political rituals involved views represented by traditional Iraqi politics, international war crimes trials, American capital punishment practices, and distinctive religious worldviews.

These conflicting views eventually led to a ritual failure, since no interpretation would claim authority over others. In turn, Saddam himself took advantage of that and presented himself as a martyr, turning his execution into a religious sacrifice and hence transgressing his death as the final stage. The whole process had thus been doomed to failure from its very start, McClymond notes.

To conclude, McClymond presents a strong case for disruptions in procedures as a regular and frequent part of rituals around the world. These disruptions, leading to short-lived or long-lasting changes, are countered by corrections and expiations, which are the life-blood of robust ritual systems. Deliberately orchestrated disruptions can furthermore shape the social dynamics within and between groups in desired ways. Importantly, ritual errors serve as an alarm, distorting routinized procedures, raising awareness and opening new areas of interpretation. A proper handling of mistakes is, therefore, crucial for each ritual’s fitness.
Ritual Gone Wrong thus brings a fresh perspective to ritual studies, focusing on the widespread yet neglected phenomenon of ritual mistakes. It offers a novel approach to explaining the success and failure of public legal proceedings and ceremonies through ritual theory. The book covers a variety of cultural samples of past and present to outline its argument, and it does so in a persuasive and engaging way. Any scholar or individual with interest in the study of ritual will appreciate having read McClymond’s book.

References


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