

## The concept and elements of Rites

Written by Ronaldo Lidório

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The rites are activities that ' must produce a determined effect.'[1] This may be of purification or cleansing of the body or of the environment, or perhaps of the renewal of forces the balance the universe; the rites have a central function in life and the organization of human society.

Expiatory rites, of spiritual cleanliness such as for individual or communal penitence and sacrifices. They expiate the evil already rooted in society as some type of 'curse', personal, familiar, tribal or environmental. The expiatory rites that come to mind that I have knowledge were among the Chakali people in Ghana. We were in a 'tabanca' (dwelling hut) and two women were gossiping about a certain person when the elder of the house got up and said: 'ti ui aken', that means literally 'the gourd bowl is broken'. The women shut up and left shamefaced and no one said any more about the subject. Curious I sought an explanation. Then they told me that it was not possible to speak openly on the subject, but would explain it to me as a newcomer. When a person commits an error against the community and is punished, for six months they are not able to speak to anyone and no one speaks to them. When the time is complete, and seeing the culprit is humble, then the elder of that house takes a 'gourd bowl', actually a jar full of water, goes outside the village and breaks it and the spilt water soaks away into the ground; the water can never be found again and this symbolizes the error the person committed; that is, the rite being done in the name of the community no-one is able to speak again about the subject. There is not, in fact, a term among them for pardon, but there is the act. So we are seeking not terms but ideas. This is an expiatory act.

Apotropaic rites chase away evil that surround society. It may be an epidemic in the neighboring community, a volcanic eruption or simply a poor harvest. This term means protection against man, but in anthropology it designates defenses against personal, spiritual and mechanical forces. The idea is they are being persecuted. Normally they do not happen in inside villages. In Cape Verde Islands there is a Ilha do Fogo (Island of Fire) with its volcano and there is Brava Island beneath which is the root of the volcano; a little smoke comes out when Brava trembles. When the tremor is strong enough to make children of over ten years fearful, then they do a type of ritual in each village that involves the killing of chickens outside the houses, and a hole is dug in the ground and the blood is thrown into it, then the hole is closed over; in this way they believe they calm the forces tat make the tremor.

Purification rites resemble somewhat the expiatory rites, although they are specific for the purification of some basically good element that has been merely contaminated. The visible instruments for purification normally are fire, water, salt and abstinence. The researcher must pay attention to these rites, such as purification of a child when it is born and so on, for we shall introduce a theology of purification to the ethnic group that is being reached, within the conscious space made open by their culture.

Transition rites, proposed by Van Gennep, relate to the necessary attitudes that accompany house removals or change of social of social status, rites of passage, change of age or social position, burial and others. For example, if a 'Hupdah' goes from one place to another he burns his house; this can be so as not to leave the house or could be a rite of transition. As the Gospel

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deals with changes, these rites are useful to us and must be observed well; if there are rites of passage we must observe how these transitions are dealt with. For example, in cultures TCP (traditional, theophanic, historicist) these changes take place slowly and ritualistic acts are necessary in order for them to be accepted by society and absorbed by individuals. Another example of transitions that take place with much time can be recalled from the Konkombas: When a man dies the widow has to adapt herself, choosing whether to stay alone, because she cannot return to her father's house, or to marry her brother in law. This creates an impasse that demands time and as an internal solution for such a situation of the widow; the tribe allows six months for the funeral to give her time. The time between the removal of a tribal chief and the recognition of a new chief takes about twenty years from the time of his funeral, even though in the meantime there may be temporary chiefs. We have the hope of the conversion of persons, thinking that this must be immediate, as in our culture; however, in some cultures where changes take place very slowly; when we preach the Gospel and it is a message that causes an impact for change, each one that comes to God does it within the expectations of his culture. At times this conversion happens very slowly and we think of it as a spiritual weakness, but many times it is that the process must be long for them. The greater the proposed change, the more time it will take. The ritualistic process of transition of a convert is slow and stays in no – yes situation that we do not understand, but it is part of their culture.

Nature renewal rites cleanse the universe, rivers, earth, trees and so on. Normally they are linked to elements of sacrifice and in this case, and commonly are used water, fire or salt. Here the key word is 'sacrifice', both from the animist perspective, as from the Islamic and Judaic; to cleanse not the individual's sin, but the universe. Such cultures, both where there are expiatory rites, as well as nature renewal, are those that have a conscience very profound of sin. Malinowski perceived in some cultures the idea of death to give life; it appears there is anthropologically a line of comprehension that in order to affirm a life, or to purify a life, the best means is a death. The idea of the cross enters into this aspect.

Palliative Rites that alleviate pain are linked to the search for peace, whether individual or communal. Such rites follow practices normally open, visible and observed like pilgrimages or self flagellation. In the Middle Ages we had long fasts and purifications, as people tried to purify themselves of their own guilt.

Power recognition rites are linked to the adoration or recognition of an entity that 'provokes' the rite or worship, that is, the recognition of the works of the entity the requires the rite. Frequently there is a presence of spiritual possession, a phenomenon that has various understandings. For some it is a 'state of provoked sleepwalking, with doubling and substitution of the personality.' [2]

Writing of the ritual processes Laburthe-Tolra e Warnier affirm that:

'The search for an open religion, spreading into a planet wide perspective, may become possible with Christianity in Africa and Asia, if this comes to show itself to be taking root in the cultures, the universality of its message. But Christianity bumps into the rationality of the layman and into the relativism that contest its right to develop a role in the modern world . . . The very syncretistic cults testify to the capacity of the salvation religions to give life to ancient symbols.

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At present, meanwhile, the anthropologists frequently accuse the Christians of having destroyed the authenticity of the cultures with their proselytism. The truth is, however, more complex: We are able to affirm, to the contrary, that the churches are the only institutions sufficiently disinterested and exempt of taking away the substance of the cultures by its destruction.' [3]

[1]Käser, Lothar. Diferentes culturas – Uma introdução à etnologia. Londrina: Descoberta, 2004 or FremdeKulturen: Eine Einführung in die Ethnologie, Erlangen; VLM1997.and Lahr: Liebenzeller Mission.

[2] Rodrigues, Nina, quoted by René Ribeiro in the book Antropologia da religião e Outros Estudos, Recife, Brazil: Editora Massagana, 1982, (159).

[3] Laburthe-Tolra and Warnier, Ob. Cit., pg 264

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