

**Ritual from the
Stone Age to the
Present Day**

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Introduction

In the modern world, our lives are imbued with the residues of ritual and ritualistic thought – which would amaze us if we knew the antiquity of their origins.

Ritual is intended to prevent an unpleasant outcome and to promote a good one. It is often an important component of magical practices – and, like much magic, it is based on the assumption that a constant effect can be achieved by a given chain of circumstances. As such, rituals lay the foundations for many aspects of our lives. Examples of modern rituals may, perhaps, include the scientist's laboratory experiments.

One of the most extraordinary features of rituals is their longevity. As we shall see, they survive change in peoples, borders, language and religion. And they persist long after their original rationale is forgotten. Ralph Merrifield, in his 'Archaeology of Ritual and Magic' concludes that, although current beliefs and the reasons for doing things may change from generation to generation:

‘what remains is the ritual itself, the proper thing to do in certain circumstances and something that it might be unsafe to neglect.’

Human beings, it seems, constantly create new rituals as an inbuilt approach to help them cope with new situations and challenges. Ritual ranks with the use of metaphor and analogy as a way of 'generalising' about classes of situations; once the ritual trigger is pressed, it allows us to launch more or less automatically into what may be quite a complex pattern of behaviour, which would otherwise have required a good deal of thought and energy. As such, ritualistic behaviour is one of the tools which have helped human beings to evolve and progress, automating what may be automated, and thus freeing up capacity for where it may more profitably be used.

There may, however, be a level at which the mimetic behaviour which underpins ritual ceases to be of use. There may have been a

time, for example, when the chemical process of distillation was considered a magical act which might only be undertaken if various ritual incantations were made. It would be considered unwise, and even dangerous, to attempt the process without the attendant hocus pocus. But only when somebody challenged that assumption, and broke the ritualised rules, would it be discovered that the chemical process happened anyway. Only with this knowledge would the birth of chemistry from alchemy be possible.

We will now trace some of the world's oldest rituals, from the earliest record we have of them to the present day; which may enable us to learn more of the role of ritualistic thought in human development.

Stone Age Ritual

Man may have begun some forms of ritual observances even before he achieved his full brain capacity. As such, it could be said that the roots of some of his customs are older than man himself.

Among the earliest were particular ways of dealing with the bodies of the dead.

Some observers speculate that the very first rituals had their origins in hunting magic. The bones of animals from the kill were laid out in anatomical order, perhaps with some form of magical dance, intended to bring the animal back to life, and hence ensure the success of future hunts. There has been some debate about whether this is an older belief than that of the immortality of the human soul, which may be based on it.

Later, perhaps, similar ideas were applied to human beings. Another interesting ritual which appears to have proved most durable from the Palaeolithic period up until the present day is the association of the colour red with the body of the dead, which some have linked to the idea of blood, others to fire. It is, perhaps, not outside the boundaries of possibility that this could originally have been connected to an early magical practice, intended to bring the dead back to life.

From the Upper Palaeolithic, skeletons have been found laid on beds of red ochre or smeared with it. The practice persisted for thousands of years, through the development of many civilisations and is found in Greek, Roman and Etruscan times. It still survives among the Melanesians. In Minnesota, a twelve thousand year old

grave was discovered, which was outlined with red chalk. Beside the skeleton lay burial gifts of stone points.

In Europe, however, the practice appears to have evolved; Homer wrote about the dead being covered by red shrouds – and that custom is still observed for the body of the dead Pope. Its ancient origin and original purpose, of course, have been quite forgotten – but it is an example of a specific ritual which appears to have existed before the evolution of modern man.

From the idea of red ochre to revive the dead, it is but a short step to the concept of the spirit: a powerful force residing in the bones, which is shared by many ‘primitive’ people. This is considered by most to be particularly potent in the skull, a repository of power.

The oldest surviving indications of funerary customs have been found at Chou Kow Tien cave in China, in the form of about six skulls, belonging to *Sinanthropus* (Peking) man, who flourished some 600,000 years ago. They suggest that this early form of man had already begun to speculate on the possibility of existence after death.

As only the skulls and jawbones were found, Henri Breuil concludes it is unlikely they were simply used as food (other animal debris, including a variety of bones, was strewn around in a far more haphazard manner) and suggests:

‘It therefore looks as if the *Sinanthropi* dwelling in the cave had carried the corpses of their relations outside and brought the skulls and jaw-bones back there, when the flesh had disappeared, to serve only as mementoes.’¹

In common with many other later skull deposits, the occipital orifice (at the base of the skull) had been enlarged. This operation is often associated with two-stage burials among primitive peoples (where the entire body is allowed to decay to some degree before the head is removed for further ritual treatment). In other cases it has been equated with cannibalism.

By 120,000 BC, there are indications that Neanderthal man may have had some involvement in a skull cult. One such remnant, known as the Monte Circeo skull – dates back 50 or 60 thousand years. It was found lying on the floor of the cave, surrounded by a circle of stones and inverted, as though it had been used as a cup. The skull had suffered two mutilations; a blow on the side of the

head, and another at its base, similar to those discerned on the *Sinanthropi* skulls.

Interestingly, the pattern of mutilations, and the position of the skull in a prominent place associated with the dwelling is identical to some of the documented cannibalistic practices of head-hunters in Borneo and Melanesia, themselves identified as a 'remnant' stone age people.

In his paper 'Some Evidence for the Ideologies of Early Man' Blanc goes further, and suggests that the skull's presence in a chamber apparently not used as a living room, implies a 'sacred' part of the cave, employed for ritual meetings and ceremonies.² He also goes so far as to compare the bones of animals arranged in groups around the skull with the Mediterranean sacrifice of pig, ram and bull, documented in Classical times. Deer had been used instead of bull and early forms of pig and ram were present. If true, this would not only be an extraordinarily ancient and long-lasting custom, but a cultural breakthrough; showing that Neanderthal man had thought at least to some extent about life and death – and had conceived some notions about a world beyond.

Nor is this likely to be chance; the find at Monte Circeo is mirrored over a large area, and into Leptolithic and Mesolithic times. In later years, the 'offerings' became more elaborate; skulls placed on flat stones were sometimes decorated with shells and pendants. 'Leaving,' says Breuil, 'no doubt about the existence of rites connected with the skull cult.'

What were the nature of those beliefs? Again, we may turn to modern hunter-gatherer peoples for inspiration. As recently as the turn of this century, the head-hunting peoples of Melanesia kept skulls both of much-loved relatives, and of slain enemies. Much care had to be taken either to propitiate or to contain the spirits of the dead, who for a while after death have more power than when they are alive. In his classic on the Melanesian head-hunters, R. H. Codrington remarks:

'The bodies of common people are cast into the sea, but men of consequence are buried, and some relic of them, skull, tooth or finger-bone, is taken up and preserved in a shrine in the village.'

As long as spirits are remembered and sacrificial food is offered to them on earth, their power remains, but when they are forgotten, they fade away. Lesser people are buried straight away, but

powerful, or much-loved relatives will be given temporary burials, to be brought out during a feast to celebrate a year of good crops:

‘The skull and jawbone are taken out, and these are called mangite, which are saka, hot with spiritual power, and by means of which the help of the *lio’a*, the powerful ghost of the man whose relics these are, can be obtained.’³

They are hung in the house, and offered sacrifices of food.

Those peoples believe that the ‘spirit’ of the dead man may be harnessed, and power gained, but precautions must be taken to contain it, to prevent it doing harm to the living. This can be done in several ways, the most notable being propitiatory sacrifice, and physical containment; sewing up the mouth and eyes, for example. Both these have resonances in prehistoric days: the circles of stones around skulls, for example, as possible barriers to their return, and the bones of animals surrounding them, which appear to us very much like offerings.

A hint at the powerful superstitions surrounding the dead of stone-age times, is given by the much later beliefs of the Pagans of northern Europe before Christianity. Legends tell of dead spirits who begrudge the living their life, and who become destructive beings. The only means of dealing with them was to cut off their heads and burn their bodies. Interestingly, there are many archaeological remains of Celtic burials where the body has been decapitated, and sometimes weighted with stones.

The ancient Celts, it is related, were enthusiastic head-hunters. Hunting heads seems to have been a symbol of divinity and the mysterious powers of the otherworld. It figured prominently in their art and magic. One commentator from the Roman period, Diodorus Siculus, said they:

‘cut off the heads of enemies slain in battle and attach them to the necks of their horses . . . they embalm in cedar oil the heads of their most distinguished enemies.’

They seem to have shared with modern head-hunters the belief that their enemies could, by this means, become a source of power ‘on tap’ as it were.

However, if the head-hunters of Sarawak are anything to go by, a collection of potent skulls may be a burden. Even very old skulls

have to be regularly ‘fed’ with pork and attended to every day. Consequently, families often wish to be rid of some of their collection when they move house. However, they must first undergo a series of elaborate ritualised precautions to deceive the skulls as to their intentions.

First, a small hut has to be built beside the old house especially for the skulls. It is made snug and a fire lit. The skulls are carefully rehoused. The family must visit them every day and keep the fire alight. Every precaution is taken to ensure that the skulls have no inkling that a new home is being built elsewhere. On the morning the new home is ready, the family stokes the fire in the skull-house high, and sneaks away. It is hoped that it will be several days before the skulls notice that they have been tricked and neglected.

‘They look up river and down river and along the banks, but rain has obliterated all the tracks the people made when they flitted; and finding it hopeless to follow them they give themselves up to their fate, and gradually become bleached by the rain and the heat of the sun . . . so the people are saved from any serious harm coming to them.’⁴

The cult of the Bear

In August 1923 a Frenchman decided to explore the cave of Montespan in the Haute Garonne. Accordingly, he plunged under the submerged entrance to the cave – and swam. At times the water actually reached the level of the cave roof and he was forced to swim underwater.

His perseverance was, however, rewarded when, after some three-quarters of a mile, he found himself in a damp cave, the floor of which was littered with models of animals, made from clay. In the centre was a three foot effigy of a bear, also from clay. It had no head, but a hole in the neck suggested that a real bear’s head may have been attached. And indeed, between its forearms, as if it had fallen, was the skull of a young bear. The bear, the clay models and other effigies on the walls had all been struck again and again with weapons. In so doing, the stone-age hunters had left a powerful indication of their early beliefs. The scene is reminiscent of a ceremony intended, by some form of ritual magic, to influence the outcome of the hunt.

It seems that man, at the earliest stage in the development of civilisation, made the assumption which exists to this day as one of

the basic principles of sympathetic magic: that there is a mysterious connection between the *reality* of the animal to be shot and its image. Shooting the image, therefore, under the right conditions of heightened emotion and mystery, may be said to have an effect on the animal itself.

The find is echoed by deposits on the Drachenloch, in Switzerland, where a series of stone containers were found to be filled with bear-skulls, all pointing in the same direction. The long bones of the animals were piled nearby. Similar finds were made in caves in Bavaria, the Pyrenees and near to Macon in France.

A modern-day continuation of an ancient ritual may shed some light on the thought processes behind these relics. As we have seen, the clay model at Montespan had no head, but a hole in its neck suggesting that the real head of a bear could have been used. It held in its arms the skull of a baby bear, and it has been suggested that a real bearskin could have been draped over the whole ensemble.

Its fate – to be fired at by arrows and its position on a platform apparently as an object of some veneration and awe – bears an extraordinary resemblance to the bear cult practised by the Ainu aboriginal people of Japan.⁵

Today, the Ainu are much looked down upon and despised by the Japanese population, and their ancient customs have all but died out. However, records of their ‘Bear Festival’ have survived in nineteenth century accounts by the Venerable Dr John Batchelor and other writers.

A bear cub – captured in a hunt – would be brought up in an Ainu family, and suckled at the breast of the lady of the house. For a year, it would be treated as a loved and respected member of the household. As it grew too large to play freely with the children, it would be transferred to a specially-designed box – but still showered with affection and presented with all manner of edible delicacies and fetishes made of whittled wood.

On the day of the festival, amidst a great feasting and dance, the bear would be brought out and addressed thus:

‘O thou divine one, thou didst come into this world for us to hunt. O thou precious little one, we worship thee; pray hear our prayers. We have nourished thee and brought thee up with great pains and care, and all because we loved thee so much. Now, as thou hast grown big, we are about to send thee to thy parents.’⁶

Taken to the place where fetishes had been set, the bear was shot at with blunt arrows, in order to enrage it. Sometimes it would be throttled to the brink of death with cords. Its end would come at last – usually its jugular vein would be severed with a knife and a bowl of its life-blood passed round to be drunk in order to bestow especial virtue on the drinkers. Its severed head would be placed high outside the east window of the hut as a fetish and offerings – including the boiled meat of its own body – placed before its head. The rest of the body would be consumed by the village, at the bear's 'invitation'.

Throughout this grisly procedure, the Ainu would express their utmost devotion and respect for the hapless bear. They maintained, furthermore, that they were not killing it, but sending it back to its ancestors, with whom it would feast sumptuously on the offerings provided. It was happy and honoured, they insisted, to be such an object of veneration and worship. Besides, it did not die, but would return next year in the shape of another cub. This they would look out for eagerly, would instantly recognise, and would enjoy fattening up again for another 'send off'.

The origins of this belief are, of course, lost in time. But the ritual addresses some very basic questions: the concept that the spirits not only of men, but of every living being and (as the Ainu maintain) even of stones and rocks, never die or lose their identity. It raises the possibility of another world, with a traversible border, which may, however, only be passed into under special circumstances governed by strict rules.

Here, as in many other cases, the ritual element may be viewed as a kind of overlap area between magic and religion. There are elements of both the magical (following a formula which will bind forces to one's will) and the religious (placating spirits or deities).

Finally, in the simultaneous affection for, and destruction of, the bear, it has echoes the approach of ancient hunter-gatherer societies across the world towards their prey; they love and respect it; they kill it. In some sense, the prey is believed to collude in its own destruction as part of a cycle of life.

Interestingly, evidence of a bear cult has been found too among the Eskimos, who sometimes buried bear jaws with the dead, and bear festivals are found in a widely-diffused range of peoples, including some North American tribes.

The journey of the soul

Once the concept of the human soul became unquestionably established, an elaborate network of rituals grew up designed to smooth its passage into the world beyond. Many of these rituals followed a common pattern. In Bronze and Iron Age times the practice of two-stage burials was associated with the idea of a link between body and soul after death, until the final dissolution of the physical body freed the soul. The spirit had to be aided and actively encouraged to make this journey, to avoid the possibility that it would linger around to plague the living.

A recent example of this kind almost exactly parallels many prehistoric burials: from the binding of the corpse, to the decoration with shells, and the separation of the bones and skull. It took place among the Pygmy (Mincopy) peoples of the Great Andamans, documented in the last century. When a child dies:

‘The mother shaves the head and paints it, as well as the neck, wrists, and knees, with ochre and white clay. Then the limbs are folded and wrapped in large leaves held by cords. The father digs the grave under the fireplace in the hut. When everything is ready the parents say a last farewell to their dead by gently blowing two or three times upon his face . . . the mother places upon the grave a shell containing a few drops of her own milk, that the spirit of her child may quench its thirst. The Mincopies believe, indeed, that one of the two principles which animate the body will haunt for some time its old abode . . .’⁷

The entire village abandons the scene for about three months, after which period:

‘the funeral garland is removed, and the body exhumed. The father gathers the bones, cleans them carefully, and divides them into small fragments suitable for use in necklaces. The skull is carefully painted yellow, covered again with a sort of network ornamented by little shells, and the mother puts it on a string round her neck . . . the other bones are used to make necklaces, which the parents distribute around their friends as souvenirs.’⁸

In some periods human sacrifices were made which constituted an ‘entourage’ to accompany the deceased into the next world. In some Anglo Saxon burials, for instance, there are indications that

males may have been provided with ‘wives’ – possibly slaves – who were sacrificed in order to accompany them. One such example is a grave at Finglesham in Kent, which holds two bodies:

‘The lower being that of a male aged 40-5, properly laid out and accompanied by a spearhead, a scramasax, a buckle, a knife, a pair of tweezers and a pin. The upper burial was female, which seemed to have been thrown into the grave rather unceremoniously and had no grave goods.’⁹

This custom mirrors practices noted in the Congo until well into the nineteenth century, where the slaves of a chief were often decapitated so their spirits might accompany him into the next world. And it evokes the outlawed Indian ritual of ‘suttee’ which still occurs from time to time today, when a widow is expected to throw herself upon her husband’s funeral pyre.

Grave goods were often buried with the dead – indicating a belief of a journey after death. In some cultures, these goods were deliberately broken – for example, pots were smashed to allow the ‘spirit’ of the pot to pass from this world with the deceased into the next. In other cases, models of useful objects, such as knives, were provided, apparently on the principle that the representation of the object in question would magically acquire its full function in the symbolic world to come (a belief which, incidentally, had certain economical advantages).

To this day, many Corsicans (a people with prehistoric roots, whose society still contains some shamanistic residues) believe that the spirits of the newly-dead may lurk about, to try to entrap the spirits of the living into accompanying them on their journey to the next world. Therefore, they provide the deceased with a lavish funeral repast. It is only after this has been consumed, it is believed, that the spirit of the dead may be persuaded to begin its journey. The parallels with the traditional baked meats of a modern-day funeral ceremony in much of Europe are inescapable.

Sacrifice to a Higher Power

As has been seen in the foregoing section, the idea of sacrifice and ritual deposits is closely linked with ancient customs of burying the dead. For the Celts, the burial mound was considered a ‘liminal’ place, a threshold to the otherworld. Like wells and seas, it was

regarded as a kind of entrance, through which the otherworld could be reached.

Was this a new idea, or the survival of a very old one? It certainly bears similarities to many animist beliefs, such as the aboriginal 'dreamtime', which speaks of a parallel dimension, with a fluid border, between the tangible world of everyday life and its intangible counterpart.

The Celts also made votive offerings in water to a variety of gods. These offerings seemed to follow the same rules as that of grave goods; often being broken, as if to allow the 'soul' of the object to pass the invisible boundary between the two worlds. Iron objects, bent swords in particular, were popular. One pit, found at Swanwick in Hampshire, contains loom-weights dating to 1200-1000 BC as well as traces of dried blood. This, and other ancient sites have led some observers to believe that the ancestry of these practices could predate the Celtic times.

By the Middle Ages, the custom had evolved a little. Coins would be bent in the name of a saint as a symbol of a vow to visit his shrine. They later came to be seen as a way of reinforcing a wish. Interestingly, although the idea of water as a liminal place had been forgotten, the practice of throwing coins into water survived. In London, for example, a coin would be bent and thrown into the Thames. Acquiring a magical connotation, bent coins as love tokens survived at least until the eighteenth century. The concept of the 'lucky' crooked sixpence has survived the onset of decimalisation.

And, despite centuries of determined stamping out of the old pre-Christian beliefs and practices by the Church, at least one form of votive offering perfectly mirrors those of our Pagan ancestors. In his 'Archaeology of Ritual and Magic', Ralph Merrifield noted this example at the opening of the Museum of London, which itself houses many ancient Celtic votive deposits and bent coins found in the Thames:

'In order to maintain the humidity necessary for the conservation of the Lord Mayor's coach, which is shown at the museum when not in use, it is exhibited standing above a shallow pool, specially designed by the architect. This at once began to attract votive coins, fortunately no longer bent, and it continues to do so, providing a modest but useful addition to the museum's revenue.'

This small example amply illustrates the durability of this type of ritualistic behaviour, even though what once may have been a much more coherent accompanying belief system has been entirely forgotten.

The early Christian Church found the old Pagan beliefs a challenge, which it surmounted only by divesting the old rituals of their former connotations and clothing them in new, religious, garb. Like other religions, it eventually found ritual indispensable in propagating its message. The durability and addictive qualities of ritual make it the ideal tool to help new religions ‘stick’ in a culture. Thus, Sir Isaac Newton, in his ‘Prophesies’, tells us:¹⁰

‘The Heathens were delighted with the Festivals of their Gods, and unwilling to part with those ceremonies; therefore Gregory, Bishop of Neo-Caesarea in Pontus, to facilitate their conversion, instituted annual festivals to the Saints and Martyrs; hence the keeping of Christmas with ivy, feasting, plays and sports came in the room of Bacchanalia and Saturnalia; the celebrating of May Day with flowers, in the room of the Floralia; and the festivals to the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist and divers of the Apostles, in the room of the solemnities at the entrance of the Sun into the Signs of the Zodiac in the old Julian Calendar.’

Placating the Thunder God

In contrast, what were once known as thunder stones provide an example of objects made for a practical purpose which – when their original function was no longer remembered – subsequently acquired ritual importance. Neolithic stone axe-heads were often turned up by ploughs in Britain and elsewhere. Their actual purpose having been forgotten, it was assumed for centuries that these were ‘thunder stones’, created by the Gods during thunderstorms. They were placed in the eaves of houses, where they were thought to afford protection against storms, and were generally used as lucky charms.

With the arrival of a more rational age, a ‘scientific’ explanation was posited. According to the 17th century zoologist Ulisses Aldrovandani they were:

‘due to an admixture of a certain exhalation of thunder and lightning with metallic matter, chief in dark clouds, which is coagulated by the circumfused moisture and conglutinated into a mass (like flour and water) and subsequently indurated by heat, like a brick.’¹¹

Despite the fact that nowhere in either the earlier ‘magical’ or later ‘scientific’ theories is to be found the admission of the possibility of doubt, it was only when nineteenth century explorers uncovered ‘stone-age’ peoples still making identical axe-heads that their true origin and purpose was discovered.

As a sidebar to the debate on man’s capacity for independently jumping to conclusions is an account by a nineteenth century explorer:¹²

‘On the right hand bank of the Bomokandi, rises Mount Tena, a huge rock of volcanic origin. Around this mountain are found prehistoric axe-heads, made of pure hematite iron. The natives find them just below the surface of the soil and think them to be charms of great value. They have a widespread belief in their healing virtue and rub with them any part of the body affected by illness, regarding them as magic talismans which have dropped at some time from the skies.’

Taboos

According to the principles of sympathetic magic, omission of certain acts may have an effect upon the unseen environment. Bushman hunters, for example, would not allow a menstruating woman to touch their arrows, or they would lose their potency. Even overhearing talk of menstruation could rob a hunter of his ability. The hunters believe that bodily fluids contain a powerful life force. This is released on death, so if the blood of a slain animal is permitted to flow onto the ground, then it will terribly unbalance the natural order. Droughts, storms or death may result.

Among the Sema Nagas of Assam, no woman may weave while her man is away hunting.

‘If this prohibition were not observed, the husband will get his legs caught in a tangle of creepers when going through the jungle and thus meet with an accident.’¹³

Naga women are also forbidden to eat the flesh of kites or hawks as ‘it makes the woman who eats it too free with her nails, making her unpleasantly addicted to biting and scratching’.¹⁴

Ritual behaviour usually relies on the premise that the ritual itself costs little to carry out, in comparison with the possible ill-effects if neglected. As such, rituals are so easily self-multiplying that life can become a misery. In ‘The Golden Bough’, Sir James Frazer tells of the Sea Dyaks of Borneo:

‘When a Dyak is out head-hunting, his wife or, if he is unmarried, his sister must wear a sword day and night in order that he may always be thinking of his weapons; and she may not sleep during the day nor go to bed before two in the morning, lest her husband or brother should thereby be surprised in his sleep by an enemy . . . some of the rules are negative and some positive, but all alike are based on the principles of magical homeopathy and telepathy.’

This ritual behaviour could have a role to play in easing the stress of a situation in which a loved one is facing danger that one can do nothing about. It gives the practitioner something constructive to do. However, when every aspect of life is governed by such ritual, the therapy must of itself become a terrible burden; and the poor women left at home dread at every moment that some error on their part may have the most terrible consequences for their brothers and husbands.

Codrington gives an interesting example of the birth of a taboo among the Melanesians, who strictly refrain from certain foods, which they believe to contain the spirits of their ancient ancestors:¹⁵

‘It was observed with surprise when a mission school was established in that island (Ulawa, one of the Solomon Islands) that the people of the place would not eat bananas, and had ceased to plant the tree. It was found that the origin of this restraint was recent and well-remembered; a man of much influence had at his death not long ago prohibited the eating of bananas after his decease, saying that he would be in the banana. The elder natives would still give his name and say, “We cannot eat So-and-so.” When a few years had passed, if the restriction had held its ground, they would have said, “We must not eat our ancestor.”’

Rituals Today

What is ritual for? And what are the assumptions that underlie it?

Like both magic and religion, it often requires at least an implicit belief that there are higher powers in some form which may be influenced or placated by a set pattern of actions, and that a given sequence of actions may have a constant effect. One key reason for this belief, isolated by psychologists, is the association of one event with another. Because two things happen in close proximity to one another, they are considered to have a causative function.

So, if you miss your bus and then buy a winning lottery ticket,

you may, at some psychological level, conclude that there is a link between the two events. In order to achieve the same result a second time, you may try to replicate the conditions under which it was achieved the first time round – and this may include deliberately missing your bus. The multitude of superstitions and ritual beliefs adopted by habitual gamblers is a good example of this kind of thinking.

The dynamic underlying this edifice of beliefs has been exposed by the behavioural psychologist B.F Skinner in his classic study “‘Superstition” in the Pigeon”¹⁶.

A number of pigeons were placed in a box, into which, at random intervals, grains of corn were dispensed. After a space of time, the behaviour of the pigeons was drastically altered. Some pigeons were observed to be making repetitive movements, or holding their wings, their beaks or their heads in peculiar positions.

Skinner’s explanation was this: whatever position the pigeon had been in when the grain of corn appeared was interpreted by the bird as somehow having triggered the arrival of the food. It therefore began to amend its behaviour, to incorporate more of that type of movement, which in turn made it more likely that the random grain of corn appeared just after it. So, a chain of belief was set up, which resulted in the ‘superstitious’ pigeons.

This may be all very well for pigeons, but how about human beings? An example in Gustav Jahoda’s ‘Psychology of Superstition’ makes clear that we are not immune to this type of behaviour – and that it is likely to surface more strongly in times of stress, or when the individual is confronted with a situation in which the stress-making factors are largely beyond his control. Jahoda quotes Charles Odier’s ‘L’Angoisse et la Pensée Magique’ in describing the plight of a student who, on his way to an examination room, is obliged to undergo a whole pattern of ritualistic behaviour – opening and shutting the door to his room a set number of times for example – before he can even enter the examination hall. The ritual, however, performs its therapeutic function:

‘That done, all will go well; he is quite certain of it. Entering the candidates’ room boldly, he faces his examiners and answers their questions brilliantly . . . Fate in its malice decreed that he was to be questioned on problems of psychology!’

So, evidently, an intellectual knowledge of this psychological process does not limit its action.

Now, if Skinner's findings do indeed apply to human beings, we would expect to see not just rituals of hoary antiquity which nobody dares to leave out, but a constant invention of new ritual behaviour. There have been few better examples of this than the 'Cargo Cults' which have been extensively observed in parts of the South Pacific.

During the Second World War, military authorities and Colonial Powers imported large cargoes of military and other supplies to their territories in the Pacific. Locals were often hired to move the cargo, and there was a corresponding positive effect on local economies. Within a year or so of the end of the war, most of this cargo dried up. Within a short space of time, and apparently independently, there were several incidents of 'spirits' of the ancestors appearing to selected locals. The 'Dictionary of Anthropology' takes up the story:

'A leader tells his followers to expect great shipments of modern luxury goods, clothing, guns and food. In anticipation, they build an airstrip or great warehouse. Although the goods should have come to them long ago, the British (or whatever the Colonial Power) have diverted them for their own use.'

Needless to say, this kind of message went down well with the local populations, who in many cases, killed their animals and left their jobs, in anticipation of the wondrous cargo.

Nowhere was the 'cargo cult' fever more avid, or the ritual preparations more thorough, than on Tanna Island in Vanuatu in the South Pacific. Here it is now widely believed that a character by the name of John Frum – whom his followers often describe as an American G.I. – will return one day with an immense cargo of goodies. One branch of the cult reputedly keeps as a relic a G.I.'s uniform, with the Red Cross of the medical corps on the sleeve. An elaborate ritual structure has grown up here and elsewhere, aimed at recreating the conditions in which the cargoes used to appear. An 'army' drills with wooden rifles. Landing strips, complete with landing lights have been built:

'Like many recent cargo movements, the prophets of John Frum have directed the construction of landing strips, bamboo control towers and grass-thatched cargo sheds.'¹⁷

Once embedded in the minds of the locals, the ritual proved all but impossible to dislodge. The failure of any cargo to arrive did little to dissuade the enthusiasts.

In Australia's former Melanesian colonies, the post-war authorities went to great lengths to disabuse the 'prophets' of their beliefs – and even flew groups of them to tour Australian factories and offices in an attempt to demonstrate the procedure by which cargo was, in fact, produced. However, the locals exhibited the kind of stalwart faith associated with more long-standing religious movements, pointing out that they have only been waiting since the 40s for their cargo, while Christians have been waiting for the return of Christ for two thousand years. And, in a perfect metaphor for the whole situation, Peter Lawrence's classic about the Cargo cult phenomenon, 'Road Belong Cargo' has, reportedly, itself become a sacred text in parts of New Guinea.¹⁸

Now, we may well feel that we, in the West, are immune from this sort of thinking. Yet, the Melanesian cargo cults are scarcely more bizarre than the activities of what, twenty years after his death, can now only be described as a 'cult of Elvis Presley'. Like the Melanesians, followers of Elvis dress in strange clothes, impersonate their 'prophet' in dress and action – and, on the twentieth anniversary of his death, attended a mass ritual gathering at his home in Graceland. There, just like their Melanesian counterparts, they awaited the reappearance of their hero.

Some fans now believe that Elvis was sent to fulfil a biblical prophecy. Statues of Elvis have been spotted weeping; and comparisons have been made between Elvis and Jesus:

'Both died an ignominious death and in the Christian communion service the devout imitate the actions of their Messiah, just as Elvis impersonators do, and Elvis impersonators can be seen as the high priest in this trailer-park religion. "People have . . . found the sacred in Elvis."' ¹⁹

That may be an extreme example. However, we are all likely to indulge in mimetic or automatic behaviour at some time or other. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine being able to operate effectively if we could not act automatically at times. However, our 'reflex' decisions may carry their own risks. In another experiment, psychologists placed a ladder on a pavement. Of 51 people passing

that way, only fourteen walked under it. The rest stepped into the road, exposing themselves to far more danger from the traffic.²⁰

You only have to half-believe in a miraculous cargo, to make it worth your while to buy into the cult (rather like taking a one in fourteen million chance of winning the lottery). You only have to half-believe (or even quarter believe) that something bad will happen if you step under a ladder, in order to avoid it. The nagging feeling: 'But what if it works?' kicks in.

This is one of the factors which makes rituals so very deep-rooted. Another is the way we automatically copy the behaviour of others; few of the people who avoided the ladder were likely to have suffered any ill-consequences of walking under ladders at first hand. This principle helps rituals to spread; where there is a void, new rituals spring up.

A recent newspaper article pointed out an example of the birth of a ritual:²¹

'One aspect of the new cult of death can be seen in the ritual of leaving wrapped-up-flowers at the scene of a violent death. This practice started in the mid-80s as a local custom here and there, but what really accelerated it was Hillsborough in 1989. More than a million people visited the football ground in a week to leave flowers and drape scarves.'

The successful embedding of this ritual could be observed within two hours of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, when a man appeared at the gate of Buckingham Palace with a bunch of flowers. That morning, he was followed by a trickle of others, which grew into a steady stream, as news of the death spread.

During the following week, far from slowing down, the deposits of flowers – extensively publicised in the media – acquired further ritual significance. Typically, mourners from the ordinary public would say they 'just wanted to do something' to mark their feelings on the occasion. At one point, flowers around the Princess's London home, Kensington Palace, were five foot deep, and beginning to compost. Still more flowers arrived. More than a week later, her family were appealing for people not to leave flowers, and teams of boy scouts had to be drafted in to clear them away. In a short space of time the solution (what to do to mark the death) had already become a problem.

Why this new ritual had taken such powerful hold in a society which is generally considered to be abandoning religious and societal rituals (marriage, church services and so on) is also an interesting question. The mourners clearly felt that this was no ordinary situation, and ‘something needed to be done’. That action, it was felt, had to venture beyond the practical (the Spencer family appealed in vain for donations to the Princess of Wales Trust to be offered in the place of flowers) into the symbolic. Global communications, which beamed pictures of the poetical ‘solution’ may have helped a kind of mimetic tendency snap into operation – possibly offering a speeded-up version of a process which has persisted in human societies for millennia.

The whole process acquired such mystique that two foreign women, caught stealing flowers from the pile, were actually sent to jail by the judge, who remarked that such a sentence would be expected by the public ‘even though it would not normally be warranted by the offence’.

Conclusion

Ritual is one of the earliest expressions of human thought; its foundations were laid at the dawn of the human story. As well as being enormously durable, ritual may also be invented as it is needed, seemingly at the drop of a hat. Today, it still forms an indispensable part of the fabric of our everyday lives and, it may be argued, is an indispensable part of mankind’s adaptive capacity.

Like magic and superstition, ritual is at its most forceful in those situations which are outside our control; such as the rites governing death, or at times when our emotions are raised. As such, rituals provide a tool which allows us all – from the most primitive tribesman to the most sophisticated twentieth century urban dweller – to cope with what may otherwise be frightening or unbearable. They give us an illusion that we are doing something constructive to take matters back into our own hands.

This is, of course, of enormous benefit, both socially and psychologically. However, once invented, rituals easily become a straitjacket which cannot be left behind by the individual or group, even after their disadvantages have come to outweigh their usefulness.

Thus, many of the most durable rituals – in both ‘primitive’

cultures, and in our own – may be viewed as attempted solutions to problems which at the time could be tackled in no other way. With the passing of time, if not continually questioned and updated, those solutions all too often form the basis for new problems of their own.

Notes

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8. *op. cit.*
9. Wilson, David. *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, London and New York, 1992.
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14. *op. cit.*
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