



PROJECT MUSE®

Memory

Radstone, Susannah, Schwarz, Bill

Published by Fordham University Press

Radstone, Susannah and Bill Schwarz.

Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates.

Fordham University Press, 2010.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/66748.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66748>

Access provided at 27 Jan 2020 18:16 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

III. PUBLIC MEMORY

19. Ritual and Memory

Stephan Feuchtwang

The study of ritual has received its greatest elaboration in the work of anthropologists. This chapter, then, will be a discussion of how anthropologists, including psychological anthropologists, say ritual is related to human memory. Let me begin the discussion with the first question a reader may ask: What is ritual?

Ritual

The simplest definition of ritual is repeated and standardized communicative action, in which communication is not simply through signs but also through symbols. In the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*'s entry on ritual, Edmund Leach defines it as any form of repeated action that is not only functional or technical but also aesthetic. Ritual is the aesthetic aspect of repeated action, conveying meaning that is also an expression of power.¹ But this makes ritual ubiquitous, an aspect of most human action. So Leach's definition narrows it down by dwelling on ritual form, noting that ritual is a dramatic performance, one that is stylized, distorting normal, everyday repeated action. The distortion itself is, he says, part of the communicative code.

Such a performance is dramatic, in that it has a structure and is compelling. Its structure is that of a separation from the everyday, a state of suspension, and a return that is also a separation from whatever was disclosed in the state of suspension from the everyday. It may be a prescribed sequence of verbal or nonverbal acts, usually both. This sequence was first proposed by Arnold Van Gennep in 1909,² but it has been worked over by many subsequent anthropologists, most famously Victor Turner, whose work on ritual drama, including divination and pilgrimage as well as rites of passage, made the middle stage, which he

called “liminality”—a state of being on the border, or “anti-structure,” as he termed it—famously suggestive.³

Ritual performance is compelling, both for its participants and for its audience, because it has to be completed and because much depends on its completion, into which is built an expectation, be it of peacemaking or rainmaking. Consider first the fact that ritual has to be completed. Maurice Bloch pointed out that the communicative code of ritual is highly formalized, that in it ordinary speech turns to oratory, to archaic forms (such as masks and costumes), or to song, and ordinary communicative gestures turn to dance.⁴ Rituals are highly predictable speech and body acts in sequences that have to be completed. Compared to ordinary propositional speech and its almost infinite openness and logic, ritual is far less communicative; it is not logical or propositional but is instead a manifestation of traditional authority. It has the illocutory force of authority itself. It forces the participants, even those whose privileged parts in its performance mark them out as having greater authority, to follow its sequences. Ritual is a performance to which they consciously submit because it came from before and will be repeated in future. What ritual communicates is authority. Its words are like objects and its objects are symbols, emotive and with multiple meanings understandable in the context of the occasion or event of ritual performance.

When we now consider what is expected from its completion, such as the renewal of life, we have moved not only beyond signification, but beyond symbolic authority. At the very least, as in commemorative ritual, the performance does something of itself, brings to mind what might have been forgotten and in a certain way that will, perhaps, warn or prevent (never again), or articulate solidary resolve (they died for us). But quite often the expectation goes beyond what is achieved by performative acts of authority, to effects such as healing, response to prayer, ecstatic possession, and revelation. Rituals are repeated performances with expectations of effects beyond the normal.

With this stress on authoritative action, anthropologists ask whether the exegesis of the meaning of rituals, given by the thoughtful or authoritative experts that are so vital to anthropologists, is part of ritual. If the essential character of ritual is that it is action, nonverbal and verbal, then its explication is secondary. But if the ritual is both verbal and nonverbal and the verbal acts—such as spoken or silent prayer, or invocation of cosmic forces, or the chanting of scriptures, or the giving of sermons—are a commentary on the nonverbal action—as in a list of the offerings and the naming, placing, and praising of the deity to whom they are made—then surely exegesis is part of the ritual. Even so, further exegesis is then extraneous to the action.

Emphasis on ritual action has been called “orthopraxy.” The prefix *ortho-* introduces a key to what ritual is, as distinct from habit or custom, namely that it is prescribed. But there is a distinction between orthopraxy and orthodoxy, between the prescription of practice and that of doctrine or of faith in a mystery that includes belief, which may come later as an epiphany after years of obedience. It is a distinction used to differentiate modes

of religiosity, those that are ritualistic and those that stress belief. For instance, Jewish and Chinese religious ritual observance are said to be orthopraxic whereas Christianity, or at least Protestant Christianity, is said to be doctrinaire. But since both ritualistic and doctrinal religions contain prescribed actions, verbal as well as nonverbal, in which the verbal is often textual and contains commanding descriptions of the world beyond the everyday world of the living, the distinction is of minor importance. This chapter, in any event, is concerned with ritual, a broader category than religion. Ritual is prescribed and authoritative action with expectations of effects beyond the normal, which is to say it is neither functional nor technical according to the knowledge of the people concerned, to what they treat as technical and for use. You could say that religion is traditional ritual authority expanded into doctrine, an authoritative interpretation of ritual rules and practices. The doctrine or its affirmation is incorporated into ritual.

Ritual is prescribed, and it is therefore a deliberately learned discipline, not just a habit picked up with experience and mimicry. It does things to people who perform it. Its performance forms public emotions and virtues, whether ascetic or ecstatic, whether through pain or through pleasure. Catherine Bell concludes in “The Ritual Body,” a key chapter of her book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, that rituals “forge an experience of redemptive harmony.”⁵ “Redemptive” means to claim a return on what is owed, for instance, in an ideal of justice and just reward. Two different situations—or both together—induce this ideal experience or expectation of redemption. One is when relationships of power are being negotiated and when a basis for them is sought beyond a particular person’s or group’s claims to wield authority. The other is when such authority is claimed to be socially redemptive in such a way that it is also personally redemptive. The experience is part of what is learned practically in the performance of ritual. Learning and participating in ritual is an experience of a model situation, of a basic number of what Bell calls oppositions, such as male–female, inner–outer, right–left, and up–down. The ways they are related to each other act as an instrument for knowing and appropriating the world. Learning them molds dispositions that are effective because ritual provides an experience of the coherence of a current hegemony. Like Leach and Bloch, Bell maintains that ritual is an expression of power and that it always involves a negotiation of authority.

There are of course other ways in which hegemonic authority is conveyed and naturalized, such as the way children are taught by their parents to behave. But ritual is to be distinguished from other social and linguistic practices. It is distinctive by the differentiation it creates through reference to, intimation of, or experience of a summary totality and a timeless tradition. Ritualization “does not *resolve* a social contradiction. Rather it catches up into itself all the experienced and conventional conflicts and oppositions of social life, juxtaposing and homologizing them into a loose and provisional systematicity.”⁶ It creates a context for other social practices. It is practical spatial learning-to-be and conveys an overarching sense of time. It creates ritualized agents who act as recreators

and emenders of ritual as if they were doing what has always been done and who hold the ritual as a model for and of other social practices. It is a distinctive linguistic practice by virtue of its long and set order, distinct from other forms of statement, from propositional statements. Ritual may be explicated by the telling of a story, but the story does not capture ritual, which is a universal and personal drama, not a play. And it is unlike language in being nonlogical, not a structure of oppositions and their resolutions in a paradigmatic order of classification. It is a constant deferral of resolution through a sequential interleaving of oppositions (commonly of fleshly life and everlasting life) hinting at an ultimate and higher unity and harmony.

So ritual is learned repetition and a discipline. It is like other habits and techniques of the body, but distinctive. It is another kind of memorized action, one that Bell specifies by its content, by what it induces: intimation of a greater totality and authority, the experience exemplified by the ecstasy of being removed into something greater than a single self.

Other anthropologists focus less on what habits of cognition are learned and more on the emotions formed by the discipline of the prescribed ritual performance. Gilbert Lewis singles out the components that alert anyone familiar with the context. Familiarity that determines choices of action and composition tells people that something is different and that it is ritual. What alerts us is what brings about the separation of ritual from habit: the heightening of color, noise or the percussive transport of music, the pungency and selection of smells, the performance of peculiarly stiff formality and switches from noise to silence, the avoidance of foods ordinarily eaten and the eating of foods not ordinarily eaten, anxiety and fearful anticipation and then the shock of pain (of a puberty or another initiation rite), the revelation of secrets, the inducing of an experience that is or is not named as that of a god or God, the situational oddity.⁷ Oddity and intensity do not just pertain to the experience of pain in the ordeals of initiation rites or of ecstatic transport. Ritual performance everywhere also includes occasions of positive excess, avoidance of negative comment or open conflict, enactments of generosity with spectacle or food, rituals of reversal and mockery, sexual impropriety—in short carnival: performances of visions of abundance and of hedonistic disorder.

Ritual can vary in intensity and degree, be more or less clearly called out as a memory, and the feelings and emotions can be induced by pain, by anticipation, relief, and release, or by pleasure. But whatever the variation, ritual performance is a corporeal experience, not just an image. Ritual creates a memory, and when it is repeated, it is reinforced. Depending on its intensity and frequency, it is more or less lasting or revisited, and moreover, it is recalled in other situations, adding to one's knowledge of what happened and to what it has by now referred in its own and subsequent contexts.

Anthropologists have also pointed out that changed situations are read into the repetition of ritual action. Ritual endures, accommodating change, precisely because it is prescribed action, not exegesis. Exegesis depends on interpreting in accordance with what

has changed. Ritual, on the other hand, is like myth, stories we live by, according to which we identify with others and share models of conduct that is often extreme, of heroes and villains, of an originary past and an expectation of continuity and possibility, and into these are fed our personal and individual experiences and events that are new, unique, personal, or contingent.

From ritual as memorable experience and expectation, Talal Asad turns to ritual as a learning of emotions. Helped by Foucault's concept of microtechnologies of discipline, Asad shows how in early Christian monastic ritual, prescribed performance of divine service also produces both virtue and desire. He proposes that this aspect of prescribed action has been marginalized by the post-Enlightenment emphasis on representation and on symbols and their interpretation.⁸

A fitting conclusion to this section is a theory of ritual that builds on the work of the anthropological theorists I have discussed. They have convinced Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw that ritual has to be seen as an action intrinsically distinct from other action.⁹ It is a boundary marker, marking itself out as different from other action and from linguistic logic and meaning. Ritual action creates a space and a time that is distinct from other kinds of standardized or conventional action. Most important, it is not habitual. This is where Humphrey and Laidlaw propose their own theory. Performers of ritual know they are committing themselves to prescribed action. Humphrey and Laidlaw call this prescription "archetypal." Even when it is changed, the change has to be ordained by a preceding authority that always preexists it. Ritual's authority is in its intrinsic temporality, to which I shall now turn.

Social Memory and the Temporality of Ritual

Societies don't remember, but there are institutions for the transmission of knowledge. Ritual is one and it works by means of repetition. Ritual is itself remembered. But note that every social institution is an institution of transmission. People acting in and through those institutions remember them, or represent them to themselves, and feed into them their particular experiences. Stories and objects of institutional life and knowledge trigger associations with stories and objects external to it in expressed or unexpressed dialogue. But because every social institution is also an institution of transmission, Maurice Halbwachs's pioneering work and Paul Connerton's equally pioneering reworking of it tend to flatten habit and transmission into a generalized social memory.¹⁰ But institutions trigger stories and mutual recognitions through learned habits of interpretation, using background assumptions shared by some but not by others, asserted in order to differentiate experience, its validation, and its recognition. We should therefore think of publics in the plural and consider how and whether they are linked into a cohesive public. Ritual, because it is prescriptive and leaves room for a number of possible exegeses, is one means

of linking memories and providing occasions for sharing them. But rituals also divide. One set of rituals refers to and recreates one sense of overarching reality, as Bell points out. Other sets of rituals recreate other worlds. Each set produces a different public.

Further, since memory is in a rudimentary sense a past, we are bound to ask whether and in what sense a past is built into what are mutually recognized memories. Is it simply continuity, or does our common memory have a past distinct from the present, and if so, how is that past related to the present? Is such a relationship directional, oriented toward a future, as autobiographical memory is, even if it contemplates only a moment?¹¹ In short, social memory brings us to the question of temporality: What temporalities are learned within social institutions, particularly through rituals? Memory is temporal, and its study must involve theories of time.

There have been many anthropological statements about human senses of time. A good review of them and a good argument about them can be found in Alfred Gell's book *The Anthropology of Time*. Gell argues that the experiential sense of time is a way-stage between, on the one hand, an inner time-series of mental models and maps that is aided and kept going as symbolic capital by those who wield power, and, on the other hand, an outer time-series of tasks in the real world that depend on economic activity and geographic fact.¹² By his own admission, Gell has not dealt with history and tradition,¹³ but, starting from universal senses of time, we can move to historical temporalities. Two intimately linked and universal human senses of time are kept going and formed socially in personal interaction as well as in less intimate, larger-scale transmissions: (1) Sequential or nonrepeated time in various scales, from split-second momentary sequences that are the neuropsychological elements of autobiographical memory, to life events, to numerically ordered or named years or generations or dynasties; and (2) Cyclical or repeated time, again on different scales, from the neuropsychological momentary recognition and repetition of a response to previous or similar experience, to annual cycles, to generational cycles of life cycles. Like senses of time, memory is both sequential and cyclical. Even when it is not tied to a chronological date, it is recalled in and triggered by a present situation. Memory thus relates to the present through the mode of time. It is also placed and formed in historical temporalities that accompany mental maps. It infuses sequences of the stories we live by.

Historical temporalities are ideological formations of senses of time. I contend that all historical temporalities involve an adjustment to a present, usually for a better future. In other words, they may include repetition and cyclical time but they are sequential because they contain a teleology. One could go further by specifying the conventions of particular historical temporalities, such as that of the project of modernity and the way it has been incorporated into the temporalities and cosmologies of particular cultures. For now, however, it is enough to point out that temporalities underlie any narration of pasts. This enables us to ask what temporalities are transmitted in ritual and what ritual may transmit as a vehicle for memories.

Historical temporalities construe the past as pertinent in the present in a number of ways. A contrast between two of them is illuminating for a discussion of ritual. The first recounts the past as a saga or a myth, the past as a before that explains or directs or makes sense of the present and its eternal or universal truth, even if the cause of the present is so trivial as to be whimsical.¹⁴ The second recounts the past as a unique narration of events and circumstances, in which a past that is gone is a model for the present, or evokes nostalgia, or must never be allowed again, or simply has happened and has been but no longer is. Individual biographies, stories that tell lives, can take on the character of either relation to the present, heroic or generic or contingent. For instance, death rituals consign personal memories of the deceased to heroic eulogy or to “abstract identity, depersonalised destiny and generic vitality.”¹⁵

Ritual as a marker of repeated occasions and points of transition in a life cycle or in annual cycles provides points of convergence and repetition for personal memories and the sharing of them. The very timing and repetition of rituals also conveys at least a rudimentary cosmology, a rhythm of cyclical time and of biography, its continuity as well as the sense of position and place that Catherine Bell pointed out. Many rituals also work to contain what threatens to disrupt or destroy continuity, threats averted by the correct performance of the ritual. But like the present of myth, the temporality of ritual is of an eternity. Its tense is of something that has always been so, is repeated, or is revitalized or recovered, or of a continuity that is adjusted to a change. Plainly, anthropologists and historians can claim great merit for showing when and how a ritual was “invented” or when new elements were introduced. In principle, a history of any ritual can be written or recounted. It can tell us much. For instance, Andrew Walsh writes of a commemorative rite in northern Madagascar that marks and celebrates an event by the hoisting of a mast, and he shows that interpretations of what it celebrated according to one witness in 1961 differ radically from how another interpreted it to him in 1997 mainly because the political and economic contexts, the two “presents” of interpretation, were so different even while the rite and the polity that it drew together remained the same.¹⁶ Despite Walsh’s focus on the history and changing contexts of the rite, I want to draw from this example the more basic point, once again, that interpretation is extraneous to ritual and that ritual’s intrinsic time is that of repetition, of continuity and archaism if not of eternity.

History and Its Ritual Transmission

Commemorative rites seem to be an exception to this point. They mark a particular event and the lives that were spent (heroically or tragically, heedlessly, catastrophically) in it, which are made significant by the commemorative rite. But the rite enters a set or a repertoire of commemorative rites, which make up the shared past of an ongoing present. The rhetoric of gesture and performance and the architecture of memorials, however

innovative, all aspire to a time out of the contingent present. Civic Holocaust memorials and days mark a unique event, the attempted annihilation of Europe's Jews, but they place it in a cyclical time, in an architecture and with words that cast the commemoration as a negative example and lesson for all time, through which visitors are drawn into vicarious memories of identification with the victims and a horrified understanding of how the Holocaust and other genocides happened, in the hope, however forlorn, of preventing them from ever happening again.

War memorials convert historical events, on one hand, and families' individual mourning for their dead, on the other, into a grander vision, of a national or human destiny. Live memories, whether of wars that ended in defeat or in victory, of the chaos of war, or of the violence of death and the cutting from a living self of a life cut short, are all turned into a ritual monument of self-sacrifice. As Michael Rowlands has pointed out, the narrative of history and the pointless repetition of death are thus turned into an enduring monument.¹⁷ The monument and its accompanying commemorative rites repeat the names, if they are included, or evoke the anonymous fallen by a significant ritual act by which the chaos and pain of death can be forgotten by its transformation into a remembrance. It may be a monument of classic heroism, as the memorials (but not the graveyards) of the "Great War" tend to be. Or it may be a gash in the earth like Washington's memorial to Vietnam veterans, which much more ambivalently suggests the pointlessness of the sacrifice. Or it may be the field of blank slabs in the center of Berlin, an equally enduring memorial to the horror of the annihilation of Europe's Jews. All of them evoke the spirit of an enduring present of redemption in which the personal is raised into a collective transformation, as Catherine Bell has pointed out about ritual in general.

Death rites also mark a unique event, the death of a person. But they turn the event into a typical one, in which the unique person is included. Even in a case, among the Toraja of Indonesia, of what the participants stress is an "intimate" calling back and reconstitution of a life (rather than a rendering of it as separated from the living present), intimacy is identification of and with the "kernel" of the dead person as one of a few types of humanity. The living identify with the deceased, passing through the stages of death, a process Dmitri Tsintjilonis calls "obviation" of the past and the present.¹⁸ In this way, as in all death rituals, personal memories are opened out to myths and senses of life and death in general. The uniquely personal fades into the typical by a process of ritually ordered amnesia.

Death rites turn into a form of history as they extend into rites for the honoring of ancestors and as the dead are selectively entered into remembered or recorded genealogies. Whether and to what depth this occurs depends on the importance of relationships of descent for a culture's social organization. But whether reckoning of ancestry is deep or shallow, mortuary rites and commemorations of ordinary deaths extend into stories of origins and mark out dislocations, removals, and the remaking of places of origin. In addition, they allude to the secretly or openly acknowledged displacement of those whose

place it had been. But this is mythical or saga-like narrative. Ancestral rites, where they occur, convey events that are the past of a continuing present of a collective entity, in these cases a descent group.

Rites and their sites can also convey the history and geography of far larger populations than the descendants of a common ancestor. Hierarchies of shrines and the roads by which pilgrims visit them create sacred landscapes, as do the places of heroic deeds and their commemoration. They orient us spatially around past and present places of belonging. By carefully checking archaeological finds of ritual sites of the Yanasha people of the lower Andes against the myths of deity-heroes whose stories are commemorated there, Fernando Santos-Granero has been able to trace the geography of several centuries of history, as people were forced up from the Amazon basin by hostile others, emerging as “Yanasha,” who were then forced further upland to avoid the Spanish conquerors.¹⁹ He gives us a further example to add to those of other anthropologists, such as those in Australia who have described how new places of autochthonous belonging are created and ritually perpetuated.²⁰

Histories are written into landscapes through ritual and myth. But history as written from archaeological and documentary evidence functions in a quite different mode from mythical temporality, just as the landscape of events and histories of them are quite different in mode from a ritual landscape, which is cosmological or cosmogonic, that is, of a world and its origins and of humanity in it. What the performance of rituals does is to locate those whose rituals they are. Their location and the focus they provide forms places of their identification as if for always.

Ritual as a Different Kind of History

The relation between memory, history, and rituals, is taken up by Michael Lambek who mounts a critique of the unique authority we tend to accord to individualized memory and evidential historiography.²¹ In the course of his critique, Lambek raises the issue of how feelings, ethics, and the recalling of the past into the present are linked. He bases his critique on Sakalava spirit mediumship, which he observed in northern Madagascar. Lambek’s starting position for a comparison of the making and maintenance of history is to question two distinctions vital to the Western tradition. One is between *poiesis* (expressive creativity) and a rational, dispassionate representation of the past based on evidence. The other is between *praxis* (acting on practical reason) and *theoria* (reflection, pure theory). Many other distinctions are inferred from these two. For instance, he questions the distinction between history, an account of the past, and memory, a clinging to what has happened and bringing it into a living moment. Often, philosophers and historians assert that these distinctions are axiomatic. But they do not exist for the Sakalava spirit mediums.

When possessed by spirits, mediums dress and act the part of a significant character in a royal line. Even when not possessed, they conform to the likes and dislikes, demeanors and emotions of the beings that appear through their bodies. The past is brought into the present vividly. Often several pasts are simultaneously present because beings from different times are made present by their mediums and interact. Every possession is also an adaptation to and a comment on current circumstances. It is the telling of history by the performance of characters, who then make history by their new encounters, in which they nevertheless observe genealogical prerogatives, the service and deference that juniors owe seniors. The past is respected genealogically, but at the same time it is not just made present. It is telescoped, made simultaneous. The medium is an experiencing human in the present, so that the character from the past is neither history nor memory—the medium is aware of the other being and the burden of bearing her or him.

Spirit-possession is at once grand and directed to personal “cases.” It aspires to the status of mythic history, bringing gods or ancestors to life, and at the same time it responds by making judgments or prescribing ritual action on “cases” of the recent dead or of the living. It makes of them a public property precisely by including them into an ever-present mythic history. The emotional history enacted by Sakalava spirit-mediums legitimates a royal court and does this by creating a spatial and temporal disposition—not a chronological story of events but a genealogy of the dead brought into being.

Ritual as Transmission of Unspecified Events

Other anthropologists have read into the history of rituals the effects and the transmission of great emotional events. Two studies in particular have seen in rituals, despite their temporality, despite their never referring to particular events, the history and trauma of slavery.

Rosalind Shaw claims that the landscape of threatening spirits and the divination rituals performed by the Temne of Sierra Leone form an unconscious memory through habit that conveys the terrors of the slave trade and turns them to creative use. She counts ritual as a kind of body memory, a nondiscursive re-experiencing of suffering. Like Lambek, she counterposes this public memory to the narration of what she calls positivistic (evidence-based) histories of the slave trade, calling the rituals emotion-laden and suggesting that they teach and convey a moral imagination.²² To my mind, she and Lambek neglect the descriptive terms, such as “devastating” or “terror,” used by historians to convey events and acts that are horrifying. But the main force of her argument comes from the idea that the terrors of enslavement are not articulable, not evidential. They are “unspeakable,” in all the word’s meanings. And rituals, unlike descriptive words, can convey the “nightmarish character of the traffic in human commodities”²³ through the sites and stories of powerful spirits and their use and abuse by diviners, witches, and

chiefs. She produces evidence that there were more spirit shrines in places of human settlement before the slave trade than there are now,²⁴ assuming that many of what were then considered protective have now become threatening and have been transposed into borderlands. Ritual evocations of borderland menace enfold the turbulent history of slave raiding, turmoil, and civil war that still engulfs Sierra Leone in an abiding sense of witchcraft and threat.

Nicolas Argenti makes a similar claim for the rituals of succession to kingship in the Grasslands of the Cameroons.²⁵ He argues that the masked dances in the chief's court, an example of which he saw in 1992 in the chiefdom of Oku, include actions and symbols that make sense only when you know that chiefs and heads of lineages sold their own youth into captivity. For instance, two of the masked characters that dance at the enthronement of the king are known to enact "twins," who had in former times been buried with the old king, the double bodies marking the distinction between the eternity of kingship and royal power over life, on the one hand, and the fleshly life of the corpse of the king, on the other, while at the same time marking the crossing over between death and life. Twins can also be understood to be "slaves," who also exist between death and life. Another instance is a threatening character who comes last in a line of masked men, who perform a slow and shuffling dance while he keeps them in line in front of him, driving them and preventing them from harming the audience or being harmed by the audience. Is he protecting them? Their shuffle is a sign of age and therefore of the respect they are due, Argenti says. But it might also be seen to evoke the awkward gait of captured slaves, who were bound to one another to be led to the coast in single file. The fact is that there are many possible interpretations, and none of them are given discursively.

The fearsome masked dancer carries in his hand a blade of grass called a Fulani sword, and at the back another masked dancer wields an actual cutlass. The young men who form the palace guard and also perform announce that outsiders are planning to use the occasion to murder. Fulani were slave capturers from the north. More immediately, the military guard are terrifying because it is they whose noisy progress could be heard at night as they went about the business of capturing for labor or capital punishment and who still act as the court's military guard. The kings, in whose succession the ritual links the new king, preyed on their own people and said that there were cannibal-witches in their midst that they had to capture. The kings are themselves feared as cannibal-witches whose attacks hollow out their victims until they are mere human husks, an appropriate image for slaves. Argenti points out that youth in the audience come both to mock and to act as those threatened by the dancers. They come in order to be near and to touch the revealed and terrible power of chiefs. But the hollowing out—turning living men into mere bodies forced to find work elsewhere that could kill them, work undertaken to earn the means to return and marry and so become "men,"—could lead to their future. Their part in the ritual, according to Argenti, is a working through of their dread of the future,

of what will have been, which is also what was, including slavery and, after the end of the slave trade, being bound by ropes as porters for colonial rulers.

Neither the Temne nor the Grasslands people mention slavery willingly. Why not? Initially, Shaw argues, because to remember is like commemoration, acknowledging and bringing to life the power of the person remembered, and nobody wants to do this for slavery and slave-takers.²⁶ But she cites inquiries, including her own, that have succeeded in convincing people to speak about the subject. The inhibition can be overcome in general discourse, but knowledge of the past never comes up in interpretations of ritual. What the rituals convey is awesome and terrifying power and what they trigger are stories of the abuse of power, but not specifically of enslavement. Instead, the rituals enact the royal gift of life and the concomitant negative power over life in general terms; they evoke reproduction of life and its opposite, cannibalism. They display the contrast between those with power over life and those like the watching and mocking youth who are dependent on that power, ultimately under the threat of being put to death.

Are Argenti and Shaw right in thinking that this ritual demonstration of the power over life conveys the traumas of the slave trade? Do the rituals, in Argenti's vocabulary, act out the "encrypted" trauma of slavery? In terms of the individual experience of trauma as it has been clinically described and treated as an unspeakable void that governs the activities of the sufferer and produces involuntarily recurrence of flash-bulb memories, of course not. As Argenti writes: "In contrast to traumatic re-enactment, these performances are not the trauma."²⁷ Some ritual enactments and reminders of generalized horror, of the possibilities of enormous power, can be screens for personal traumas, but they are not their enactment—which would be enslavement itself. Have changes to the rituals, during or since the slave trade made a difference to what the rituals seen by Shaw and Argenti can convey? The question remains open. But the point remains that rituals are screens, they are a mythologization of personal imagination and memory by which the personal, memory proper, is shared and made public. They in turn provide the imagery and genre for the recounting and recalling of experiences.

Eric Mueggler shows how a more recent horror was incorporated into the rituals of the Lolop'o, a mountain people in southwestern China.²⁸ The Lolop'o ritual imagery of the underworld and of powers over the life of the dead and the living includes a category of black ghosts who prey on the dead who are wild because unmourned. Black ghosts can also kill the living and turn them into wild ghosts. The black ghosts are extremely exacting and greedy for the offerings that they must be given to cease their predations. In Zhizuo, to the north of the Chinese province of Yunnan, after the central state had mobilized local officials into conducting land reform and collectivization, collective offerings were banned and small household offerings reduced. According to Mueggler's inquiries, the response of the Lolop'o was a telling of stories of illness, madness, and death suffered by those living in the houses occupied by the new state offices, stories of illnesses caused by neglected gods of fertility or of rain or by vengeful ghosts. From the mid-fifties,

these stories grew in coherence and force. Then the mass mobilization called the Great Leap Forward, instigated to produce grain and steel far in excess of previous targets, which forced people to eat in collective dining halls, produced not sudden abundance but mass starvation, here as everywhere in China. Even minimum death rituals and ghost exorcisms had to cease for lack of offerings. An indirect reflection of this was the telling of stories of black officials becoming increasingly demanding and killing more and more people. Since the late seventies, when the old rituals began to be performed again, there have been exorcisms of black officials and mourning rites for the unmourned. Mueggler sums up with the comment that the famine “unbalanced the digestive flows of grain and meat, through houses and bodies” that made up the community and its gods, ancestors, and ghosts.²⁹ In other words, a spate of rituals did reflect the historical event, but placed it into a perennial imagery of sickness, death, and the ideal of well-being as a balanced flow. Since the secular state and local officials are now part of their lives, the rituals the Lolop’o perform now enact what Mueggler calls the spectral state, with features identifying it as far away but capable. It can reinforce male potency,³⁰ but it can also spread a malign “bitter herb from heaven.”³¹

Everyone learns conventional ideas of what it is to die a good death and how to mourn properly, turning the dead into an archetypal (to use Humphrey and Laidlaw’s term) memorial past. When disaster and political events create bad deaths, in which people die or are killed and cannot be mourned properly, there is often also a physical dislocation as well as a disruption of the past and its continuity. Such radical contingency threatens extinction, but everywhere, after intervals of varying duration, attempts are made to restore continuity and to repair bad deaths, to find and memorialize the lost dead whose spirits haunt and harm the living. Judith Zur movingly describes how, after the vicious counterinsurgency of the U.S.-backed military dictatorship in Guatemala, worse deaths than had ever been experienced began to be retrieved and transformed for mourning.³²

When, alternatively or in addition, a new politics comes to state power through a revolutionary event with an ideology condemning older ways of mourning and disposal of the dead, a new project and temporality is introduced, as in China. In such an instance, the distances between official ideology, academic history, and ritual temporality are reduced. The politics of ritual is close to turning ritual from a cosmic ideology of repetition into a political ritual of history as destiny. But people persist, secretly if necessary, with older death rituals. Then a further change of regime seems to allow their open revitalization, but the new politics is also a manipulation of the temporality of rituals of death. Katherine Verdery’s study of the fate of statues and the spate of reburials in post-socialist countries stresses, as do all anthropologists now, that rituals of death, like all rituals, are corporal, sensual experiences.³³ Likewise, corpses and bones, however their rites may have been politically manipulated, are physical remains and carry for their mourners an authenticity that purely verbal ideology and revisions of history do not. Reburials in, for

instance, the former Yugoslavia, in the soil of established graveyards or removed with the soil of the old into new burial grounds, do remake places politically with new inclusions and exclusions of belonging. They are central to reformulated claims to a past, to proprietary rights and to state territory in a new politics invested in that past, and they convey an ardent moral universe of blame and accountability. At the same time, they extend the rewriting of political history and the finding of a new political order into a greater dimension that Verdery calls “cosmic.” The rituals act on politics and political history with their own temporality. They enchant politics, she says, filling it with stories of spiritual occurrences and uncanny powers.

Ritual as Transmission of Specified Events

Of course, rituals do commemorate and name events, the births of gods, the resurrection of Jesus, the assumption of the Prophet Mohammed, the Passover. These are the events of a mythology, which bear a relation to evidence-based history but are not events of such a history because they are part of a cyclical liturgy and a world-forming temporality not of past lives as such but of past lives that transcend a particular life into a life beyond death that can affect an eternal present. Nevertheless, some historians claim affinity with these rituals, claiming that both ritual and history are acts of public memory in a time when Auschwitz has brought progressive narrative radically into question.

In a close examination of Jewish liturgy and history of the Holocaust, as well as the end of modernist optimism and its chronologies after Auschwitz, Gabrielle M. Spiegel juxtaposes an equation of history and memory with an equation of history and ritual and questions all the distinctions within and between them.³⁴ She describes the writing of memory books that began in the Nazi ghettos and continued after liberation from the annihilation and labor camps. Such books are historiographical records, but they are also defiant acts of remembrance, written preservations of the collective life that had been completely destroyed. She points out that, even when written by non-observant Jews, they became analogues of the liturgical models of the destruction of Jews: the destruction of the two temples, the binding and sacrifice of Isaac, Jews’ martyrdom for the Name of God. The memory books were acts of defiance of the blank page that the Nazis tried to make of both the Jews and of their own attempts to wipe out the documentary record of their destruction of Jews. The memory books were as unlike narrative history as is survivor testimony, which puts into words vivid, flashbulb memory, resisting closure, again more like the temporal structure of liturgy, a never-ending repetition. In fact, the Holocaust, or Shoah as it is called in Hebrew, has been included, by a law of the state of Israel, in a secular liturgical calendar as the day before the anniversary of the formation of Israel, turning shame into glory. It could have been included in the much older Jewish liturgical and lunar calendar alongside the day of the destruction of the two temples and the hope,

with the next day's new moon, of the coming of the Messiah. Instead, a politicized ritual cycle parallels the older liturgical cycle, both of them recording historical events into a hope for eternal life and continuity. Jewish communities include both calendars in their annual rituals.

In all countries, there is a more secular and politicized calendar of rites, one that passes down a heroic time and reaffirms the nation, even as the country retains older, more religious liturgies that allude to "cosmic," or enchanted perpetuity. Both liturgies are distinct from personal memories and from academic historical narratives.

Ritual as Memorization and Transmission

So far I have discussed ritual as a formation, a conveyer, a trigger, or a screen for the mutual recognition of memory, emotion, and event. Now, finally, I turn to theories of how ritual as a mode of transmission relies on human memory. Ritual functions, I suggest, as a creation of memorable experiences and as a training of memory.

Fredrik Barth proposed two modes of transmission of religious knowledge in Southeast Asia and Melanesia, which may be found elsewhere.³⁵ One is the transmission from a guru in words, extending over great distances, with long-standing relationships perpetuated and carried further by writing. The other is transmission by initiation into ancestral knowledge, accomplished by an elder manipulating concrete symbols. Both modes convey esoteric knowledge, but in the second mode, the initiator's knowledge is local and the initiation ritual transmits knowledge through what Barth calls a spellbinding ordeal. For Barth, this pair of modes of transmission of ritual knowledge is not universal. It is closely linked to two different concepts of a social person and two different relations of exchange in the region. But Harvey Whitehouse has turned these models into universal modes of religiosity.³⁶ His theory sits alongside a growing number of studies of religion and of religious ritual that build on cognitive and evolutionary psychology.

The evolutionary approach is, as always, to find the survival function, which is the facilitation of group coordination through the spreading of mutually recognized ideas. Whether such a proposition is an *ex post facto* argument that simply confirms what is (where there is common religious belief there is a group) need not bother us; we can stay with the plurality of publics and the way ritual can link or divide them. More relevant to this chapter is the basic cognitive psychology of memorization that the theory mobilizes for an evolutionary psychology of ideas. Of the many new ideas that occur, which survive and why?

Whitehouse's answer is to propose a distinction between the two modes as modes of religiosity, based on the psychological distinction between two kinds of memory, both of them explicit and lasting. One is semantic memory, which refers to mental representations of a propositional nature, learned knowledge conveyed by linguistic and other semiotic

means of communication, which are themselves learned knowledge. Here, Whitehouse inverts Bloch's and Bell's point that ritual is nonlogical and not propositional by asserting that it performs a proposition (of belief) that has to be repeated because belief is to a certain degree counterintuitive, which makes it memorable but also requires repeated restatement. This is the doctrinal mode. Doctrinaire repetition of truths, verbal rituals, conveys semantic ideas and makes them last. It prompts conventional exegeses of them, which are added to doctrinal repetitions. Doctrinal ritual is capable of large-scale extension, linking groups over time and space. The other mode of religiosity, according to Whitehouse, depends on the creation of vivid experience of images in autobiographical and episodic memory. Rituals that create autobiographical memories induce strong emotions of anticipation, pain, and pleasure. An important part of such rituals is the inflicting of extreme and unusual experiences, as Lewis had pointed out,³⁷ accompanied by images created and reproduced for the purposes of the rites: awe-inspiring images (masks, dances, paintings), such as those described by Argenti.³⁸ Like trauma, submission to such rituals creates flashbulb memories of what most struck the participant. The ritual of having had to undergo them to avoid a greater danger motivates their exegesis and their repetition. Exegesis occurs when people recall the rituals in which they had participated and also when the rituals are repeated, but their repetition is not frequent or at least does not have to be. Whitehouse insists that exegeses in the imagistic mode are "spontaneous" and interpersonal. Lewis gives examples of how they are rehearsed and repeated over the lifetime of a person, so that exegetical recall is extracted from momentary, fragmented, and much more personal flash-bulb memories.³⁹ Nonetheless, Whitehouse maintains, even such repeated exegeses do not become part of imagistic rituals.

Both modes coexist in any one religion, but according to Whitehouse they do not mix. The doctrinal mode tends to become routinized tedium and is kept lively by religious leaders' rhetorical devices and sermons that apply the repeated doctrine to changing and personal circumstances. They are further re-enlivened by prophetic, imagistic rites.

The argument that minimally counterintuitive images and ideas are attractive propositions relies on Pascal Boyer's theory of religious ideas, that they are minimally counterintuitive and therefore vivid and memorable and so have the highest survival rate.⁴⁰ By intuitive Boyer means what is learned from infancy by experience, by the application of built-in cognitive capacities to experiential knowledge of material and physical surroundings and necessities for survival or more comfortable living. Images that entail one counterintuitive feature are particularly vivid, such as a human with a monstrous head, or a human who can float and pass through solids, or a father (stereotypically pictured with a beard, or with severe but kindly eyes) who created the things and children not just of one person but of the world, or another father who drives sleighs that are themselves counterintuitive because they can fly gifts to everyone.

The complexity of ritual imagery is difficult to break down into singular minimally counterintuitive images. But the basic argument that some images are more memorable

than others is compelling and seeks answers to the question why. On ritual and memory, the argument says, one thing that drives ritual's repetition is precisely such memorable images, which may be combinations of a basic repertoire of metaphoric motifs, just as folk stories and myths are analyzable into basic motifs or mythemes. Such combinations are interestingly counterintuitive and demand to be imputed as the cause of extraordinary or disturbing events and strange objects. They are the stuff of fears and rumors, as well as of rituals of propitiation and exorcism. For instance Santos-Granero recounts rumors that spread among the Yaneshas in the Andes of body-snatchers that kill to extract fat for a cure for a strange disease only suffered by the Spanish colonists, or of snatching human bodies to bury them under foundations and bulwarks for contemporary state projects that have destroyed the places of spirits who need to be fed in this way to prevent them from destroying a road and its bridges.⁴¹ The same imagery and name for the body-snatchers, *pishtacos*, persist while their function and context changes over the centuries. The same adaptable persistence is true for the performance of rituals, as I have already pointed out.

The contributions to a collection of constructively critical studies based on this theory show that there was not as great a divergence between the doctrinal and imagistic modes of religiosity as Whitehouse had claimed.⁴² As a result of such criticisms, Whitehouse concludes the book with a compromise theory of cognitively optimal images that are the most memorable, with a minimum of counterintuitive elements in both doctrine and vision.⁴³ Nevertheless, he leaves intact the theory of two kinds of transmission based on two kinds memory and the counterintuitive catchiness of ritual imagery.

Concluding Reminder: A Confirmation of the Peculiar Quality of Ritual

A close cognitive theory of ritual brings us back to the theory of ritual persistence and its peculiarity, namely that ritual is prescribed and demands commitment and submission. Maurice Bloch adds a cognitive layer to Humphrey and Laidlaw's proposition that ritual is distinct from other action.⁴⁴ Bloch's theory is based on the human capacity for theory of mind, the capacity to posit the intention of another mind in communication, to know that the other is also positing a mind in me or another. This capacity is the uniquely human means of acting socially, equivalent to the means possessed by other animals to cooperate (as herds, swarms, hives, flocks). But it has as a side effect the imputing of intention and knowledge of others' intentions to any notable object or event. This is the beginning of a theory of religious imagery and belief. For Bloch, ritual—all ritual—has the peculiar quality that it hazes theory of mind and the imputing of intention. Theory of mind naturally imputes intention to a singular and individual counterpart, such as a god. But ritual does something strange. Bloch points out that ritual differs from habit, such as the habitual use of language, because it is conscious repetition. Ritual demands

submission as a conscious process. Prescribed ritual action certainly mediates the intention of an imputed agency, such as a demon, and participation may have as many intentions as there are participants. But the ritual as medium to which participants submit hazes intentionality. We submit to what must be done, as it has been done. This is how ritual joins together our various intentions in a shared memory.

In performing a ritual, we deliberately set aside any attribution of the ritual's existence to a singular origin. But we cannot remove our instinct to impute intention. The only way to satisfy the propensity to impute intention, according to Bloch, is to turn our theory of mind on a vague and collective counterpart, such as "our ancestors" or another "we" stretching into the past as the originating authority of ritual. People explain themselves to outsiders in formulations that say, We have always done this, and in this way. The hazing of intention is, Bloch argues, typical of the first phase of a ritual, an attack on self and on normal, intuitive order and expectation, in readiness for a transformation and a triumphant return to the world from which the ritual has been a counterintuitive removal.

I want to stress that the authority of ritual repetition is the *medium* for imputing intention and origination. Succumbing to repetition does not make the thinking and acting subject dumb. Instead it lets something in, making ritual an enactment of communication from and with imputed but present authors, conveyed through its own authority. In addition, it is a medium into which the contingencies of the here and now are admitted through the performers' inventiveness, something that becomes part of its repetition. Ritual is not history. Nor is it personal memory. It produces experiences that are memorable. But of itself, it is a transmission of its own discipline of memory and of its intrinsic temporality. New elements, new customs, and personal memories and their organization are added into it. Rituals incorporate events, but events as they are transformed and transposed into the temporality of ritual authority, of prescribed repetition. Ritual performance is, finally, a trigger and a screen for the sharing of different memories and for their organization into publics of shared submission to it or to its observation and enjoyment as "ours."