Definition: **Ritual (sociology)** from *The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*

An action or body of practices regularly performed. Rituals tend to be prescribed by tradition, religion, or culture. A ritual can be a method for performing an act or the act itself. Ritual is generally understood as a repetitive or recurrent practice and is often associated with ceremony.

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**Summary Article: Ritual**

*From The Brill Dictionary of Religion*

**Concept**

1. ‘Ritual’ is a common word. In ordinary usage the term presents no problems. It is used for a category of individual or social behavior—such as religious or solemn ceremonies or, more generally, procedures regularly followed—that most people seem to recognize immediately. But the meaning of the term has been far from self-evident to its students. For over a century, ritual has been a ‘standard’ topic of study, especially within the social sciences and history of religion. Discussions have focused on the ‘basic characteristics’ of ritual behavior, on the question: What exactly is ritual?

In 1968 Leach observed that “even among those who have specialized in this field there is the widest possible disagreement as to how the word ritual should be used and how the performance of ritual should be understood.”¹ A decade later the situation was unchanged, which prompted Grimes to advocate the development of ‘ritual studies’ as a distinct discipline. As he pointed out, students of ritual were isolated from one another in various fields and, although sharing a common interest in performative phenomena, they were separated by their methodologies and academic traditions.² Indeed, the heterogeneity of the studies on ritual is enormous, ranging from liturgics and religious studies to the social sciences and humanities, from drama and literature to psychology, ethology, and neurobiology.

**What Is Ritual?**

2. Some researchers have viewed ritual essentially as the means by which culture is passed on from one generation to the next, as the ‘key’ to → traditions. For others ritual behavior has been fundamental in establishing individual or social → identity. Others again have considered ritual basically a safety valve to release psychological or social pressures. The purposes or functions, moreover, which authors have ascribed to ritual behavior, link up with its perceived origin or cause. Ritual has been alternatively seen as biologically grounded, psychologically engendered, or socially generated. It has been seen as answering a universal human ‘need’ or, conversely, as a historically based socio-cultural phenomenon. For some, ritual is an essential feature of all human interaction; for others, ritual is confined to specific times and places.

Most authors have agreed that ritual is action: that it is done. This action of course implies bodily involvement. The exact nature of such bodily involvement, however, is subject to much debate. Moreover, the discussion on the nature of bodily performance in ritual is entangled with the issue of consciousness: there is no agreement that ritual action is (wholly) conscious or unconscious. The stand
an author takes in these matters depends to a great extent on the author’s views on symbols and the nature of their meaning. In fact, the question of meaning appears to lie at the core of the problem that ritual presents, and most researchers of ritual grapple with this issue.

Contemporary debates on ritual incorporate the postmodern preoccupation with hermeneutics, acknowledging the plurality and contextuality of individual perspectives. At the same time its most important lesson is ignored: that scholarly interpretative endeavors are largely constitutive of their subject. Mostly, the reality of ritual as an objective phenomenon is not doubted. The ever returning question ‘what is ritual?’ is crucial in this respect. It inspires the effort to formulate ‘one coherent theory’ of ritual and to describe ‘ritual’ in a definition which, in turn, leads to further questions on its ‘origin’ and ‘purpose’, and to discussions on the adequacy of one theory as compared to another, in capturing the essential qualities of ritual.

A History of the Concept

3. Most of the literature on ritual theory focuses on what has been written about ritual in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, going no further back than Robertson Smith’s *The Religion of the Semites* (1889), Durkheim’s *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912) or Harrison’s *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913). Asad (1993) was the first to explore the etymological history of the word ‘ritual’ and its genesis as a concept, making use of old dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Whereas nowadays it goes without saying that ritual is *action*, Asad demonstrates that this has not always been the case. It was not until the seventeenth century that the word ‘ritual’ entered the English language as a substantive conveying either the prescribed order of performing religious services or the book containing such prescriptions. ‘Ritual’ was thus, at first, a word used to denote a *book*. In the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1771), ‘ritual’ was “a book directing the order and manner to be observed in celebrating religious ceremonies, and performing divine service in a particular church, diocese, order, or the like.” There was no entry after that for ‘rite’ or ‘ritual’ until the eleventh edition (1910), when a completely new entry appeared under ‘ritual.’ It was no longer the short explanation of a word but had become a five columns long treatise on a phenomenon, linking ritual to psychological and sociological functions and also admitting that ritual is not confined to religion. These notions were absent from the 1771 entry. As such, the conception of ritual as symbolic behavior that is not necessarily religious is entirely modern.

But why was it that ‘ritual’ came to be conceived as a specific form of action? It is not easy to trace the actual genesis and development of the concept during the latter half of the nineteenth century. First, religious practice was viewed in part as symbolic before ‘ritual’ came into use as a term referring to religious action. Second, the term ‘ritual’ was used synonymously with ‘rite,’ ‘religious practice,’ ‘religious ceremony,’ or ‘worship’ before it became a concept of a specific form of action. Third, it developed in connection with other concepts such as ‘magic’ and ‘taboo.’ As Sharpe pointed out, the decade from 1859 to 1869 witnessed a rapid development of the evolutionary method in the study of religion, culminating in ‘comparative religion.’ As Sharpe pointed out, the decade from 1859 to 1869 witnessed a rapid development of the evolutionary method in the study of religion, culminating in ‘comparative religion.’ As Sharpe pointed out, the decade from 1859 to 1869 witnessed a rapid development of the evolutionary method in the study of religion, culminating in ‘comparative religion.’ The outlook changed with *The Religion of the Semites* (1889), in which Robertson Smith emphasized the primacy of religious practice. Thus, religious practice became a subject worthy of study in itself. Furthermore, his argumentation in the matter was important to the conceptualization of ‘ritual.’
meaning attached to ritual, Smith argued, is extremely vague: whereas ancient ritual was fixed and obligatory, → myth (i.e. meaning) was variable and ‘at the discretion of the worshipper.’ Smith used the term ‘ritual’ as synonymous with ‘religious practice’ and primarily took it to represent ‘fixed’ and ‘obligatory’ behavior. He did not view ritual as an instrument to recover belief: In his view, ritual was analytically separate from ‘meaning’: Ritual reveals nothing about individual mental states. By placing religious practice in the context of long-term social traditions and disconnecting it from individual mental states, he connected it to the collectivity. As such, religious practice—ritual—became a social fact.

Although it is obvious that Robertson Smith put ‘religious practice’ on the agenda of scholarly research as a social phenomenon worthy of study, this does not yet explain how ‘ritual’ came to be seen as a certain type of behavior. Smith used the term ‘ritual’ as synonymous with ‘religious practice’ and as having a fixed and obligatory nature. It was part of the vocabulary he employed as a matter of course and had no conceptual status. But by this time religious action had become a separate category of behavior. As Steiner (1956) explained in his treatise on ‘taboo,’ Victorian scholars became interested in religious behavior—i.e. prescribed ceremonial behavior—because its rule-based nature could not be rationally explained. The interest in ‘irrational’ rules generated the discussions on ‘magic’ and ‘taboo.’ It is no coincidence, then, that the authors who first used the term ‘ritual’ were not addressing ‘ritual’ as such, but were focused on explaining the myths and magical rites of savages (Lang 1913), or the nature of taboos in sacrificial rites (Robertson Smith). In the context of these discussions, their use of the term ‘ritual’ seemed inspired by its original meaning of a script for behavior: Because it had the connotation of ‘rules’ and ‘prescriptions.’ In short, recognition of the aspect of ‘rules’ as characteristic of ‘religious action’ as a separate category of behavior, may have instigated adoption of the term ‘ritual’ to refer to ‘ordered sequences of religious acts;’ ‘acts based on (a) ritual,’ later to be called ‘ritual acts,’ which, with the passage of time, became ‘ritual.’

Ritual and Psychology

4. From the nineteenth century onwards, most theories have, implicitly or explicitly, awarded a certain role to the → psyche. Ritual was, for instance, said to answer a ‘human need’ or was traced back to the ‘human capacity to symbolize.’ As such, ritual was seen as somehow inherent to the human constitution. Today also, it is remarkable how easily ritual is described in psychological terms or how matter-of-course the origin and ultimate function of ritual action are explained in psychological terms.

Rituals are said to be instructive and formative; they are said to convey knowledge, moral values, solidarity, and tradition. Also, ritual is qualified as an instrument for the regulation of human relationships; it is said to further the integration and continuity of human relationships. In this respect, rituals are often characterized as mechanisms that suppress selfish, socially damaging impulses, or, alternatively, as mechanisms which enable the expression or channeling of → emotions. In addition, they are seen as instrumental for both the formation of the individual ‘self’ and the social identity of the → group.

It is important to note the influence of general psychoanalytic theory on social studies of ritual (→ Psychoanalysis). In this respect, the ritual studies of Victor Turner must be mentioned, because they have been very influential in the field of ritual studies as a whole. As Turner himself explained, psychoanalytic theory had a strong formative influence on his conceptualization of ritual symbolic processes. In his view, implicit social conflicts find a symbolized expression in ritual. The ritual symbolic representations refer to existing social and/or intrapsychic tensions, which are normally unconscious and repressed. Thus, the psychoanalytical interpretation of ritual amounts to the analysis of ritual
symbolism.

Next to an interest in psychoanalytic theory, in the last decade of the twentieth century ritual studies profited from a new interest in cognitive psychology within the social sciences and the academic study of religion. Lawson and McCauley (1990; 2002) are distinct proponents of a cognitive approach to ritual action. They present a model designed to chart ‘ritual competence’: Ritual participants possess cognitive representations of ritual forms, which enable them to competently re-enact specific ritual performances. Their focus is ultimately on mapping the structural features of religious ritual action. Psychological theory is used to identify the universally constant mental processes that are thought to underlie and structure these socio-cultural performances.

Most scholars of ritual tend to take the psychological aspects of ritual behavior as axiomatic. Oversimplifying, one could say that the psychological explanations on which many of the theories in ritual studies are based, often are little more than very general notions—such as ‘the human need to symbolize’—functioning as a priori assumptions, which are not questioned or clarified. When, on the other hand, psychological theory serves as an explicit frame of reference—as with psychoanalytic theory or cognitive psychology—it is used to portray the universal psychological conditions that structure the variable social processes of which ritual is a part. Ritual is invariably seen as a social mechanism. The methodology developed to understand ritual—why it exists, how it works—is dependent on the particular psychological theory chosen. Once the psychological constants are established, they themselves are no further discussed but are used to lay bare the supposed universal principles of ritual structure.

The Problematic ‘Essence’ of Ritual

5. It is generally taken for granted that ritual phenomena present themselves to us to be studied objectively. This assumption is not surprising, since studying ritual initially means studying observable behavior—deeds done, bodily performances—which we strive to understand and explain. In this context many scholars state that it is pre-eminently the task of the researcher—as an outsider—to recover the ‘true meaning’ or ‘underlying structure’ of ritual, a meaning or structure of which the performers themselves are frequently said to be unaware. In the course of time, however, research has tended to become detached from the tangible events that gave the initial impetus to scholarly scrutiny, and focus has shifted to theoretical issues: the abstract concept of ritual itself then becoming the object of study.

Already in 1961, Goody addressed the problem of “what is involved in categorizing acts and beliefs as religious, or ritual, or magico-religious.” It was not his intention to determine the ‘fundamental’ meaning of these particular concepts, which he saw as part of the folk categories of Western society. As such, he emphasized, they cannot serve as analytic tools, but are nevertheless the inevitable starting point from which our analytic concepts develop.

In his analysis of the various definitions of religious and ritual phenomena, Goody refuted the Durkheimian assumption that the sacred-profane dichotomy (Holy) is a universal feature of how people view the world. Such a criterion for isolating religious or ritual phenomena is derived not from the actor’s but from the observer’s assessment of what is intrinsic. To take this criterion as universally valid is not only problematic because of definitional complications, but also because it takes as a general principle precisely what needs to be demonstrated in each particular case.
In 1977, Goody again addressed the definitional problem. He discerned two general approaches to ‘ritual.’ On the one hand, ‘ritual’ is seen as an aspect of all social action. Consequently, the definition of ritual embraces almost all action that is standardized in some way. This concept includes such a broad range of activities, that it has no analytic utility and is certain to give rise to a proliferation of ‘subcategories.’ On the other hand, ‘ritual’ is looked upon as a category of action that requires a special kind of interpretation. In this case, the problem is to determine the criterion that distinguishes ‘ritual’ from ‘non-ritual’ behavior. Such a criterion cannot be found. Goody discussed a few of the criteria commonly postulated, such as the qualification of ritual behavior as ‘formal’ and ‘repetitive.’ As he pointed out, routinization, regularization, and repetition are at the basis of social life itself and thus cannot serve as distinctive criteria. In the same way, the analysis of ritual in terms of ‘meaning’ has been highly problematic. Meanings change in two different ways. First, meanings are often forgotten or elaborated. Second, in the course of time new social experiences engender new meanings and affect the entire fabric of meaning. What, then, is the meaning of a ritual event? Is it the ‘original’ meaning (and how does one recover that meaning?), or is it the meaning attributed by the actual performers? But the central meaning of a ritual event is not always evident to all the members of the social group enacting it. Interpretations of ritual differ, because it is inherent to ritual that meanings are communicated in a partial and superficial way, which induces performers, indigenous onlookers and outsiders, such as ritual researchers, to devise their own interpretations.

Final remark

6. Considering the vagueness of the term ‘ritual’ and the impossibility of adequately defining it, Goody rejected the use of the concept, except as a highly generalized pointer that needs to be translated every time it is used. His adequate assessment of the definitional problem, however, has not been able to put a stop to the debate. It remains to be seen if discussions have really moved beyond Goody’s identification of the theoretical deadlocks and impossibilities involved in the definition of ritual.

→ Communication, Drama (Sacred), Feasts and Celebrations, Initiation, Liturgy, Meaning/Signification, Symbol/Sign/Gesture, Rites of Passage

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1 Leach 1968, 526.
2 Grimes 1982, xii.
3 Asad 1993, 56; see also Buc 2001.
4 Sharpe 1986, 27f.
5 Boudewijnse 1998.
7 Goody 1977, 25–35.
8 See, for example, Bell 1992; Platvoet 1995; Kreinath et al. 2004 and 2005.

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