

THE MEANINGLESSNESS OF RITUAL

FRITS STAAL

svarge'pi pipilikāḥ santi
"even in heaven there are ants"

Sanskrit Proverb

The Agnicayana, a 3000-year-old Vedic ritual, was performed in 1975 in a village in southwest India by Nambudiri brahmins. This event, which lasted twelve days, was filmed, photographed, recorded and extensively documented. From twenty hours of rough footage, Robert Gardner and I produced a 45-minute film, "Altar of Fire." Two records are planned with selections from the eighty hours of recorded recitation and chant. Photographs of the ceremonies were taken by Adelaide de Menil. In collaboration with the chief Nambudiri ritualists and other scholars, I am preparing a definite account of the ceremonies, which will appear in two illustrated volumes entitled: "Agni — The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar."

I shall here be concerned not with empirical description, but with theoretical implications. Vedic ritual is not only the oldest surviving ritual of mankind; it also provides the best source material for a theory of ritual. This is not because it is close to any alleged "original" ritual. Vedic ritual is not primitive and not an *Ur*-ritual. It is sophisticated and already the product of a long development. But it is the largest, most elaborate and (on account of the Sanskrit manuals) best documented among the rituals of man. Hubert and Mauss, who noted these facts in 1909, used the Vedic animal sacrifice as source material for the construction of a ritual paradigm ("un schème abstrait du sacrifice").¹ However, they did not know that these rituals are still performed, so that many data were inaccessible to them. I shall use data from the 1975 performance and textual material from Sanskrit manuals, in particular the *śrauta sūtras*, a literature exclusively devoted to ritual which dates from the eighth through fourth centuries B.C.

¹ H. Hubert and M. Mauss, "Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice," *Mélanges d'histoire et des religions*, 1909, page 22.

I

A widespread but erroneous assumption about ritual is that it consists in symbolic activities which refer to something else. It is characteristic of a ritual performance, however, that it is self-contained and self-absorbed. The performers are totally immersed in the proper execution of their complex tasks. Isolated in their sacred enclosure, they concentrate on correctness of act, recitation and chant. Their primary concern, if not obsession, is with rules. There are no symbolic meanings going through their minds when they are engaged in performing ritual.

Such absorption, by itself, does not show that ritual cannot have a symbolic meaning. However, also when we ask a brahmin explicitly why the rituals are performed, we never receive an answer which refers to symbolic activity. There are numerous different answers, such as: we do it because our ancestors did it; because we are eligible to do it; because it is good for society; because it is good; because it is our duty; because it is said to lead to immortality; because it leads to immortality. A visitor will furthermore observe that a person who has performed a Vedic ritual acquires social and religious status, which involves other benefits, some of them economic. Beyond such generalities one gets involved in individual case histories. Some boys have never been given much of a choice, and have been taught recitations and rites as a matter of fact; by the time they have mastered these, there is little else they are competent or motivated to do. Others are inspired by a spirit of competition. The majority would not be able to come up with an adequate answer to the question why they engage in ritual. But neither would I, if someone were to ask me why I am writing about it.

Why ask such personal questions? It might be more proper and fruitful to ask specific questions about the meaning of particular rites. Some such questions do receive specific answers, on which participants and scholars generally agree. The Yajamāna, or Patron of the ritual, must keep his hands closed "like a child in the womb of its mother, ready to be reborn." The fire altar has the shape of a bird because fire, as well as Soma, were fetched from heaven by a bird. The priests do not go south if they can help it for the southern direction is inauspicious. Certain bricks of the altar are consecrated so that it may rain.

Such simple answers form a small minority. They are given rarely, and only in reply to similarly simple questions. Most questions concerning ritual detail involve numerous complex rules, and no participant could provide an answer or elucidation with which he would himself be satisfied. Outsiders and bystanders may volunteer their ideas about religion and philosophy generally — without reference to any specific question. In most cases such people are Hindus who do not know anything about Vedic ritual. There is only one answer which the best and most reliable among the ritualists themselves give consistently and with more than average frequency: we act according to the rules because this is our tradition (*parampara*). The effective part of the answer seems to be: look and listen, these are our activities! To performing ritualists, rituals are to a large extent like dance, of which Isadora Duncan said: "If I could tell you what it meant there would be no point in dancing it."

Ritual, then, is primarily activity. It is an activity governed by explicit rules. The important thing is what you do, not what you think, believe or say. In India this has become a basic feature of all religion, so that we should refer, not to the faithful or orthodox, but to the orthoprax (from Greek *orthos*, "right" and *praxis*, "action"). It is precisely this feature which is least understood by English-writing Indian authors such as V. S. Naipaul and N. C. Chaudhuri, who have recently taken on the role of explaining India to Western intelligentsia.

II

If we wish to know the meaning or theory of ritual, we should not confine ourselves to practising ritualists; we have learned, after all, that it does not pay to ask elephants about zoology, or artists about the theory of art. Before asking anyone else, however, let us take a look at what the Indian tradition itself has to offer. Since in India ritual has always been a favorite topic for speculation, there is an abundance of material. Even prior to speculation we find suggestive ideas. In the earliest Vedic literature, rituals, along with metres and chants, are used by gods and demons to fight and conquer each other, and sometimes to create worlds. Even when the aims are not explicit, gods and demons are frequently depicted as engaged in ritual. Commentaries provide rituals with a great variety of interpretations, sometimes inconsistent with each other.

In due course specific rites came to be prescribed to fulfil specific desires: for health, power, offspring, victory, heaven, and the like. The list of wishes and desires is not so very different from that of modern man. It is certainly not exclusively spiritual, as some modern visionaries have claimed. But this trend receded again into the background. With increasing systematization of the ritual, we witness a codification of two kinds of rites: the *gr̥hya* or domestic rites, which are "rites de passage," life-cycle rites or sacraments, accompanying such events as birth, initiation, marriage and death; and the *śrauta* rites, "rites solennels," or traditional rites. There are several general and formal differences between these two kinds of ritual. For example, the traditional rites require three fire altars and the services of several priests, whereas the domestic rites require only one fire (the domestic fire) and one priest (the domestic priest). While the function of the domestic rites appears to be fairly straightforward, the significance of the traditional rites is not obvious. The traditional ritual, with its myriad ramifications, exhibits the unhampered development of ritual construction and creativity. It is therefore more important for the understanding of ritual than the domestic rites. The latter, by themselves, might seem to be amenable to explanations along the lines of, e.g., Van Gennep's *Rites de passage* (1909). But since such explanations are clearly inapplicable to the traditional rites, and domestic and traditional rites are partly similar in structure, it follows that all such theories are inappropriate. There are, moreover, traditional rituals which last a thousand years, which shows that some of the rites were purely theoretical. Such theoretical constructs (which the grammarian Patañjali compared to the infinite uses of language) should not be brushed aside, as was done by Hillebrandt, who referred in this connection, to "myth and fantasy" of the ritualists.² On the contrary, they are as important for the theory of ritual as are concrete ceremonies. Many rites have in fact an intermediate status. The Agnicayana, which was performed in 1975, is a traditional ritual which seems to have been always "real", though some of its extensions, which the texts describe, smack of theory.

The *śrauta sūtras* of the late Vedic period offer several definitions of ritual. One which is often quoted characterizes it as comprising

² A. Hillebrandt, *Ritual-Literatur, Vedische Opfer und Zauber*, Strassburg 1897, page 158.

three things: *dravya*, "the substance (which is used in oblations)"; *devatā*, "the deity (to which oblations are offered)"; and *tyāgā*, "renunciation (of the fruits of the ritual acts)". The *tyāgā* is a formula pronounced by the Patron at the culmination of each act of oblation. When the officiating priest, on behalf of the Patron, makes the oblation into the fire for one of the gods, for example Agni, the Patron says:

"this is for Agni, not for me" (*agnaye idam na mama*).

At this point a contradiction begins to appear, which becomes increasingly explicit in the ritualistic philosophy of the Mīmāṃsā. The reason for performing a specific ritual is stated to be the desire for a particular fruit or effect. The stock example of the Mīmāṃsā is:

"he who desires heaven shall sacrifice with the Agniṣṭoma ritual" (*agniṣṭomena svargakāmo yajeta*).

But this fruit is renounced whenever the Patron utters his *tyāga* formula of renunciation. The effect, therefore, is not obtained.

The resulting picture is further complicated by another apparent contradiction. The rites are subdivided into two classes: "obligatory," (*nitya*) and "optional" (*kāmya*). Unlike the Agnicayana, which is *kāmya*, the Agniṣṭoma is a *nitya* rite: every brahman has the duty to perform it. So here is a ritual which appears to be optional, since it is confined to those who desire heaven (nobody's duty); but which is also not optional, because it is a prescribed duty; and which moreover in the final resort does not bear any fruit because its fruits are abandoned. The texts reflect such contradictions. The Mīmāṃsā Sūtra, basic manual of the Mīmāṃsā, lays down that the rites lead to happiness, but the subcommentary "Straight Spotless" (*R̥juvimalā*) observes that this does not apply to obligatory acts.

The Mīmāṃsā philosophers faced another difficulty. When a ritual performance is completed, no fruit is seen. The Yajamāna, on whose behalf the rites have been performed, does not raise up and go to heaven. Rather the opposite: he returns home and is, as the texts put it, the same as he was before. In particular, he must continue to perform the morning and evening fire rites (*agnihotra*) for the rest of his life. The Mīmāṃsā concluded, quite logically, that the fruit of ritual activity is — temporarily — unseen. It will become apparent only later, e.g., after death. An elaborate theory was devised to show

that this is in accordance with the mechanism of *karman*, according to which every cause has an effect. A special logical theorem, called *arthāpatti*, was invented in support of this theory. The followers of the Mīmāṃsā were criticized by others (e.g., the philosophers of the Advaita Vedānta) for postulating such unseen effects. For whatever our contemporary fads may suggest — in India, the unseen is resorted to only under duress. What the Mīmāṃsā in fact ended up teaching is that the rituals have to be performed for their own sake.

The notion of *tyāga*, “renunciation,” has attained an important position in Hinduism through the teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā. Here Śrī Kṛṣṇa advocates as the highest goal of life a mode of activity, in which acts are performed as usual, but the fruit (*phala*) of action (*karman*) is always renounced (*karma-phala-tyāga*).

III

The Indian tradition offers suggestive speculations but it does not seem to come up with a single consistent theory of ritual. The most interesting Indian contribution is perhaps the term *karman* itself: originally and primarily used for ritual and similarly pure or ideal activity, it comes by extension to denote any kind of human activity. Now let us see what modern scholars have to offer. For a long time it has been fashionable to believe that rites re-enact myths. This idea was partly inspired by the Babylonian festival of the New Year, which involves a recital of the myth of creation. But this hypothesis is difficult to support and creates an unsolved problem: why should anybody wish to re-enact a myth? The same difficulty applies to several more recent theories, according to which ritual reflects social structure. It is true, again, that there are some remarkable parallels which require explanation. But the question remains: why should social structures be represented or enacted ritually, and in a very roundabout manner at that? Such unanswered questions, generated by the theory, suggest that theories of this type are best abandoned.

A related theory, current among anthropologists, is that rituals are used, in preliterate societies, to transmit “cultural and social values” to the younger generation. This would explain the informants’ emphasis on tradition. But the assumption is, of course, unnecessary. Not only are rituals not confined to preliterate societies (it is anthropologists who tend to confine themselves to preliterate societies); but such

values (e.g., gods, myths, kinship systems) are most readily transmitted by grandmothers and through language, and there is no need for them to be transmitted again by other means. The only cultural values rituals transmit are rituals.

Another widespread theory is that ritual effects a transition from the realm of the profane to that of the sacred. (Instead of "transition" we also meet with "communication": a weaker version of the theory.) This is very intriguing and unclear. Terms such as "transition" or "communication" do not pose too much of a problem; but "sacred" and "profane" certainly do. Either the theory expresses a tautology: the distinction between profane and sacred is the distinction between the status of a person or object before and after a relevant ritual is embarked upon; accordingly, if sacred and profane have been defined in terms of ritual, ritual cannot be defined in terms of sacred and profane. This is circular and uninformative.

On another interpretation, this theory would assume that the distinction between sacred and profane is already established and known from elsewhere. For example, in the realm of divinity, "sacred" might have been shown to be the domain of the gods, and "profane" that of men. But a satisfactory distinction of this kind is not easily found, especially outside the realm of ritual. Moreover, the terms do not introduce anything new. The theory would merely claim that ritual effects a transition from the realm of men to that of the gods (or a communication between the two). As a matter of fact, the Vedic ritual offers an immediate contradiction. During the Soma rituals, a transition is effected from the "Old Hall," (*prācīnavamśa*) to the "Great Altar" (*mahā-vedi*). The former is said to be the abode of men, and the latter that of the gods. Thus a transition from the domain of men to that of the gods is effected *within* the ritual. The distinction therefore cannot serve as a concept in terms of which the ritual itself may be defined.

IV

Why has it proved so difficult to define the meaning, goals and aims of ritual? Why are there so many different answers and theories, not only often contradictory between themselves, but of such disparate character that it is difficult to even compare them with each other? There is one simple hypothesis which would account for all these puzzling facts: the hypothesis that ritual has no meaning, goal or aim.

This is precisely what I suspect to be the case. Ritual is pure activity, without meaning or goal. Let me briefly digress for a point of terminology. Things are either for their own sake, or for the sake of something else. If I were defending the view that ritual is for something else, it would be necessary to distinguish between such other things as meaning, function, aim or goal. But since my view is that ritual is for its own sake, I shall not bother about these differences. To say that ritual is for its own sake is to say that it is meaningless, without function, aim or goal, or also that it constitutes its own aim or goal. It does not follow that it has no value: but whatever value it has is intrinsic value.

Ritual exhibits its character of pure activity most readily when it is contrasted with the applied activities of our ordinary, everyday life. In ritual activity, the rules count, but not the result. In ordinary activity it is the other way around. In Vedic ritual, for example, an important ceremony is *agnipranayana*, "transporting the fire (from the Old to the New Altar)." This is in fact a transition from the abode of men to that of the gods. But the priests do not first think of men and then meditate on the gods. They think of neither, at any time. What is essential in the ceremony is the precise and faultless execution, in accordance with rules, of numerous rites and recitations. The result is important, but it has only ritual use and can only be reached in the ritually prescribed manner. I could not come in and assist in the proceedings by picking up the fire from the Old Altar and depositing it on the New. In fact, if I did such a horrible thing, the entire ceremony would be desecrated, interrupted, and expiation rites would have to be performed. Similar disasters would result if anyone used the sacred fire for any but a ritual purpose, e.g., to heat water for tea.

Now contrast this with an ordinary activity. I am about to transport my suitcase from my house to the bus stop, which is about a mile away. There are no rules I have to follow, provided I obtain the desired effect. I may put my suitcase on a skate board. Or my brother may appear on a bicycle, and the two of us use this vehicle to transport my suitcase to its intended destination.

The two kinds of activity, ritual and ordinary, can be juxtaposed without conflict or contradiction. After making fire for the altar in the ritually prescribed manner by rubbing two pieces of wood together, a priest leaves the sacred enclosure and lights a cigarette with a match.

Not so different, actually, from Arthur Rubinstein back home after a concert, putting on a gramophone record. But the two domains should not be mixed. If a priest would light a cigarette from the sacrificial fire, it would be bad. If he would light a cigarette from fire which he had produced by rubbing two pieces of wood together in the ritual manner, he would be considered mad or very eccentric. The ritual and ordinary ways of making fire are neatly demarcated.

A distinctive feature of ordinary activity is that it runs risks which ritual activity avoids. In ordinary activity, the entire performance may fail to have the desired effect. The bicycle together with its load may fall into a canal, or the suitcase may be seized by armed robbers. In ritual activity, the activity itself is all that counts. Not only have we established the rules ourselves, so that we are completely in control; we are also assured of success. If one rite goes wrong, another takes its place. This goes a long way to explain the curious fact that rituals, so apparently meaningless and useless, are at the same time readily engaged in. *Eo ipso* it explains that ritual activity has a pleasant, soothing effect. If you give up desire, you will be happy. This idea and the notion that ritual is performed for its own sake are closely connected and clearly foreshadowed by the Indian doctrine of *tyāga*, the teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā, and by similar notions in other traditions, e.g., *wu-wei*, "absence of (effective) action" in Taoism, or the categorical imperative in Kant. It also accounts for the similarity between rites and games, which are equally unproductive, as Huizinga and Caillois have pointed out. But ritual is one up on most games because you cannot even lose.

Several anthropologists have detected features of meaningless in ritual, without recognizing that these features express its essence. Lévi-Strauss says that ritual "consists of utterances, gestures and manipulations of objects which are independent of the interpretations which are proper to these modes of activity and which result not from the ritual itself but from implicit mythology" (*L'homme nu*, 1971, page 600). If we remove the word "implicit" from this sentence (which means forsaking the author's ideas about the complementarity of myth and ritual) we approximate what I believe to be the correct theory. Van Gennep came close to the idea that ritual is meaningless. After completing his *Rites de passage*, he noted that marriage ceremonies, in many societies, include an aspersion rite which he inter-

puted as a fecundity rite. But identical aspersion rites are employed, in the same and in different societies, when a slave is acquired, when a new ambassador arrives in town, to make rain or to expel someone. Like Indian commentators, Van Gennep gave different interpretations to each of these rites. He concluded: "the aspersion rite does not have any personal or basic meaning in the state of isolation, but it is meaningful if seen as a component part of a particular ceremony. The meaning of the rite can, consequently, only be found by determining the relation it has with the other elements of the whole ceremony." ³

Aspersion rites are not confined to humans. In his Sather lectures at Berkeley, Walter Burkert dealt with the ritual pouring of liquids for marking a territory and observed that this is quite common in mammals: "we all know the dog's behavior at the stone." — In the development of our concepts and theories of ritual it is only a small step from "changing meaning" to: "no intrinsic meaning" and „structural meaning," and from there to: "no meaning."

If ritual is useless this does not imply that it may not have useful side-effects. It is obvious, for example, that ritual creates a bond between the participants, reinforces solidarity, boosts morale and constitutes a link with the ancestors. So do many other institutions and customs. Such side-effects cannot be used to explain the origin of ritual, though they may help to explain its preservation. They explain why rituals are preserved though their meaninglessness is recognized, like the Jewish ritual of the Red Heifer which baffled even Solomon and which was considered the classic example of a divine command for which no rational explanation can be adduced.

These side-effects fail to explain the most curious fact about ritual preservation: rituals are always guarded jealously and with extreme conservatism. This is directly explained by the theory that ritual has no meaning. A useful institution is open; it may undergo change, because efforts are made to render it more (or less) useful. A useless institution is closed; it is not understood and therefore can only be abandoned or preserved. There are parallels to this situation from

³ "De la méthode à suivre dans l'étude des rites et des mythes," *Revue de l'université de Bruxelles*, 1911, pages 505-23; English translation in J. Waardenburg (ed.), *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*, The Hague-Paris 1973, I, page 299.

outside the realm of ritual. In India, during the last 3000 years, the Vedic language gave way to classical Sanskrit which was in due course replaced by Middle and Modern Indo-Aryan languages. During all these changes the Vedic mantras were orally transmitted without any change. Why? Because they had become meaningless. Languages change because they express meaning, are functional and constantly used. Meaningless sounds do not change; they can only be remembered or forgotten.

Freud has drawn attention to similarities between ritual and neurosis. The obsessiveness which pervades ritual has led several anthropologists to emphasize the emotions and anxiety which sometimes accompany ritual, and which they claim underlie it. In *L'homme nu*, Lévi-Strauss has located such anxiety in the ritualists' fear that reality, which they have cut up ritually, cannot be put together again. But it is apparent that the obsessiveness of ritual is also an immediate consequence of its meaninglessness. Nothing is more conducive to uneasiness than to be entrapped in absurdity. If I detect a mistake in cooking or calculating, I perceive the result and understand the reason. But if I have made a ritual mistake, I don't notice any difference and don't see any reason. I am not even sure whether I made a mistake or not, and there is no way to determine it. It is like being in a foreign culture where strange things happen and it is not clear whether one has made a *faux pas*. The Agnicayana performance of 1975 was followed by a long series of expiation rites, for mistakes that might have been committed. Our anxiety is greatest when we don't know why we are anxious.

The meaninglessness of ritual explains the variety of meanings attached to it. It could not be otherwise. Ideal activity cannot fail to resemble actual activity. Therefore rituals resemble other things, including features of myth and social structure. However, though a ritual activity may resemble a meaningful non-ritual activity, this does not imply that it must itself be meaningful. This can be seen in the realm of animal ritualization, as well as in the human domain. Among animals, ritualization often implies that the goal of an activity has changed. Many ritual displays incorporate modes of action which originally had a different function, e.g., fighting. Such ritual displays may acquire a new function: they lead to copulation because they are sexually stimulating, for example. Some of the same ritual displays, however, are post-nuptial or post-reproductive, and therefore not clearly func-

tional. Biologists find them puzzling (e.g., Huxley⁴).

Human ritualization often follows animal ritualization rather closely. Fighting, simulated or real, is still sexually stimulating among humans. But typical human forms of ritualization seem in general to dissolve meaning, not replace it. One of the earliest rituals originated in connection with the use of fire. During most of its existence, mankind did not know how to use it. Subsequently, more than 250,000 years ago, man learned the use of fire; but he could not make it. So fire was collected from natural conflagrations and was carefully kept and carried around. Elaborate techniques were devised for the preservation of fire. Finally, more than 50,000 years ago, man learned how to make fire. At this point ritualization and the cult of fire came into being. For instead of relying on his art of making fire, and producing it whenever he needed it (which is easy at least during a dry season or in a dry climate), man continued to carry fire around. A distinction was made between such "eternal" fire and the "new" fire which could now be made—a distinction we have since abandoned as irrational. To ancient man, and in several existing societies, fires have retained individuality. They should not be mixed. Fires have to be extinguished, or newly made, at set times by ritual experts. Alongside, the continued preservation of "eternal" fire reflects fossilized habits which had lasted some 200,000 years.

A more recent example comes from the Agnicayana.⁵ During the ceremony of *agnipranayana*, when fire is transported from the Old to the New Altar, one of the priests engages in a long recitation. The recitation is of an ancient battle hymn, the Apratiratha or "Song to the Irresistible Warrior" (Taittirīya Saṃhitā 4.6.4, cf. R̥gveda 10.103 and 6.75). Indra is invoked as a victorious warrior or hero, "fond of slaughter, disturber of peoples", who with the help of his arrows, chariots and troupes, destroys the enemies. When the priest recites: "Comrades, follow in Indra's footsteps!", he sounds less like an officiating priest than like a gang leader or a commander-in-chief. And what is the origin of all of this? At an earlier period, the Vedic Aryans fought their way into the Indian subcontinent, moving from west to east and

⁴ J. Huxley (ed.), "A Discussion on Ritualization of Behavior in Animals and Man," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, 1966, Series B, No. 772, Vol. 251, page 254.

⁵ Cf. J. C. Heesterman, "Vrātya and Sacrifice," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 6, 1962, pages 34-36.

carrying fire. In the *agnipranayana* rite, fire is still carried from west to east. But the priests are not celebrating the ancient raids of their ancestors, of which they need not even be aware. The function of the hymn has not changed. It has become ritual, i.e., disappeared.

Can the hypothesis of the meaninglessness of ritual be formulated in terms of evolution or development? Necessarily so, but we have to speculate back to the origin of man. Philosophers, especially in Germany, have made much of self-consciousness as a characteristic of man, but we are rarely told what this means. I think that man became aware of himself primarily as an agent. Like many other animals, he was already aware of the outside world and could communicate to a limited extent with other members of the species (which does not imply that he possessed language). Abandoning a sense of being pushed around, man made the discovery that he affected the outside world by engaging in activity—a pursuit wrought with risk and danger. So he created a world of ritual or ideal activity, intrinsically successful and free from such contingencies. It expressed man's awareness of himself, and paved the way for theory construction and language, as we shall see. Much later, when ritual was contrasted with ordinary, everyday activity, its meaninglessness became patent and various rationalizations and explanations were constructed. Ritual became deeply involved with religion, which always stands in need of the mysterious and unexplained. Rites were attached to all important events. In the course of time rituals, instead of remaining useless and pure, became useful and meritorious.

Throughout the history of man's speculation on ritual we find inklings of its original function as perfect activity. Just as the Indians mused about *śrauta* rituals, the Chinese theorized about *li*, which means: rites, ceremonies, rules of good manners and proper conduct, etiquette. The Confucian philosopher Hsün Tzū (third century B.C.) explained the origin of the *li* as follows:

Man at birth has desires. When these desires are not satisfied, he cannot remain without seeking their satisfaction. When this seeking for satisfaction is without measure or limit, there can only be contention. When there is contention, there will be disorder; when there is disorder, everything will be destroyed. The early kings hated this disorder, and so they established the *li* and standards of justice so as to set limits to this confusion, to satisfy men's desires, and give opportunity to this satisfaction, in order that desires should not be stretched to the breaking point by things, nor things be used

up by desires; that both these two should mutually support one another and so continue to exist. This is how the *li* originated.⁶

V

Enough of generalities. If ritual consists in the precise execution of rules, it must be possible to know what its rules are. The rules of the *śrauta* ritual have been formulated with great care in the *śrauta sūtras*, and made accessible by Sanskrit scholars, foremost among them Willem Caland. Searching for the best literature outside the Vedic, one soon finds out that there is no literature at all. Lévi-Strauss, in *L'homme nu* (pages 601-603), distinguishes two basic ritual operations: "morcellement" (dismemberment, fragmentation) and repetition. But he offers no actual rules. Hubert and Mauss showed little more than that rites have a beginning, a middle and an end. Scholars and students of ritual seem to lag behind their colleagues who study the rules of measurement, counting or language, and who have for millenia been familiar with some of the rules which obtain in their respective domains. Among students of ritual — whether religiously, anthropologically or psychologically inspired — we mostly meet with generalities. The reason for this neglect is rooted in the nature of ritual itself: if a thing is useless, it is not taken seriously. Thus we do not possess much in the way of a science of ritual, even though the subject is certainly amenable to precise investigation, not unlike physics, mathematics or grammar.

Even at this early stage of pre-scientific groping, in which we find ourselves, it is not impossible to formulate ritual rules. I shall give a few examples from Vedic ritual. This will necessarily involve some detail (for more, see Staal, forthcoming⁷). We must start with the observation that the *śrauta* rituals constitute a hierarchy. Four of them, for example, which I shall refer to by capital letters, are listed in the following order:

- D: "Full and New Moon ceremonies" (*darśapūrṇamāsa*)
- P: "Animal Sacrifice" (*paśubandha*)
- A: "Praise of Agni" (*agnīṣṭoma*, paradigm of the Soma rituals)
- C: "Piling of Agni" (*agnicayana*).

⁶ Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, transl. Derk Bodde, Princeton 1952, I, page 297.

⁷ "Ritual Syntax," *Sanskrit and Indian Studies. Essays in Honor of Daniel H. H. Ingalls*; "Ritual Structure," *Agni. The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, volume II.

This sequence is not arbitrary. There is increasing complexity. A person is in general only eligible to perform a later ritual in the sequence, if he has already performed the earlier ones. Each later ritual presupposes the former and incorporates one or more occurrences of one or more of the former rituals. Sometimes these embedded rituals are abbreviated. In general, they undergo modifications. We find the following embeddings, among others:

- In P, performances of D are embedded when a cake of eight potsherds is offered to Agni and when a cake of eleven potsherds is offered to Agni-Viṣṇu;
- in A are embedded: two performances of P (for Agni-Soma and for Pressing Soma) and several performances of D (called Consecration, Going Forth, Final Bath, Conclusion and Departure, etc., not to mention performances of D embedded in P);
- in C, a performance of A, fourteen performances of P and numerous performances of D, some already embedded in A and P, are embedded.

This enumeration is by no means complete, but it may serve to illustrate the "embedding" feature of the underlying structure.

Now for the modifications which rituals undergo when they are embedded, and, more generally, in different contexts. First of all, the deities to which rites on different occasions are dedicated are often different, which induces differences at least in the names which occur in many of the recitations. Even within D itself, one of the main oblations is for Agni-Soma at full moon, but for Indra-Agni at new moon. Similarly, the different deities to which the different animals in performances of P are dedicated, induce differences in recitation. But apart from these substitutions there are numerous more complex modifications which are induced by embedding. I shall give one simple example. In the regular performance of D, there are *fifteen sāmīdhenī* verses, recited when the twigs of firewood are put on the fire. But at the performance of D which is embedded in P when a cake on eleven potsherds is offered to Agni-Viṣṇu, there are *seventeen sāmīdhenī* verses. Such examples can be multiplied almost indefinitely.

Though all these rituals involve embeddings and modifications, it does not follow that there is a unique description in terms of these for each particular ritual. For example, C may be analysed differently as

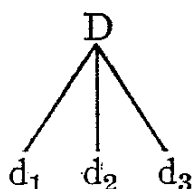
an Atirātra, viz., a modification of A, in which the construction of the New Altar is modified. Such an alternative analysis would necessitate a different structural analysis; what is important in the present context is only that it would involve embeddings and modifications.

In order to get an inkling of the syntax of these structures, we have had to enter into some complexity even though I have made several simplifications. In order to explicate the rules, I shall have to simplify differently and construct a model of a ritual — a more formal representation corresponding to what Hubert and Mauss called a “schème abstrait du sacrifice.” In order to make this precise, a series of artificial assumptions will be made, defining D, P and A. The reason for these artificial assumptions and definitions is merely that they constitute a model which exhibits specific structures and rules of the ritual. This model is similar with respect to these structures to the really existing rituals, but is much less elaborate than the latter. What is important is that the existing rituals can be analysed in the same manner as the model with regard to the structures in which we are here interested.

Let us assume that a *ritual* consists of smaller units, which I shall call *rites*. The rites of ritual “D” will be written as “d,” those of “P” as “p,” etc. Now let us make more specific assumptions. Let D consist of three rites, d_1 , d_2 and d_3 . I shall write this as a rule:

$$D \rightarrow d_1 d_2 d_3. \quad (1)$$

This may be illustrated as in Figure 1:



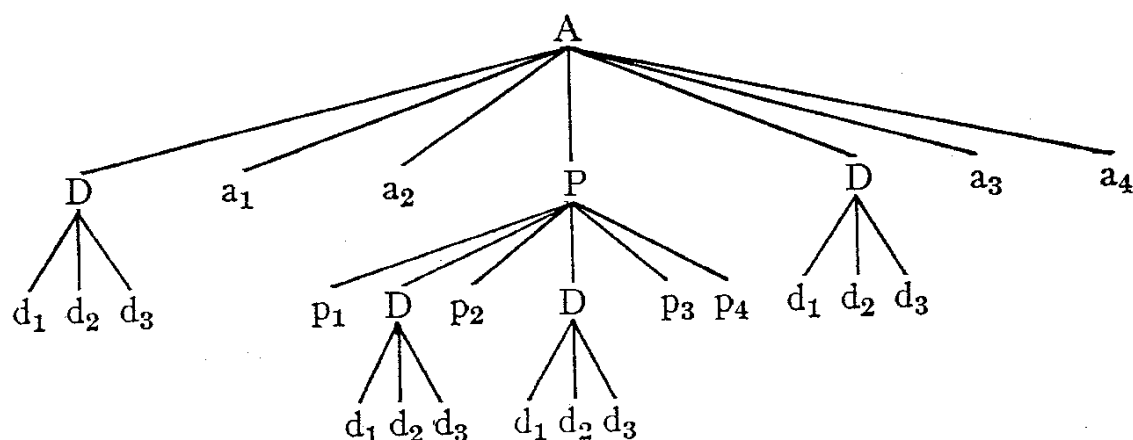
Ritual P involves several performances of D. Let us assume:

$$P \rightarrow p_1 D p_2 D p_3 p_4. \quad (2)$$

Similarly, A involves performances of P, as well as of D directly, e.g.:

$$A \rightarrow D a_1 a_2 P D a_3 a_4. \quad (3)$$

A representation of the structure of (3) is given in Figure 2:

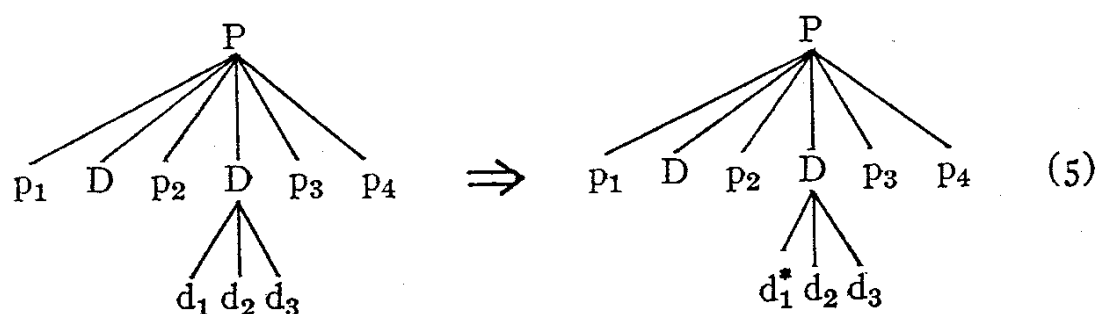


This picture does not correspond to any existing ritual. However, it expresses, precisely, one of the main features of ritual structure, which I have referred to as *embedding*.

We have already met with a second structure: rituals which are embedded undergo *modification*. We may introduce the example I gave into our model by assuming that in ritual D, the first rite, d_1 , represents the recitation of fifteen *sāmidhenī* verses. Let us further assume that in the second occurrence of D in P, rite d_1 has to be replaced by a rite d_1^* , in which seventeen *sāmidhenī* verses are recited. We cannot simply represent this transformation by adding an expression:

$$d_1 \rightarrow d_1^* \quad (4)$$

for the effect of this would be that all occurrences of d_1 are replaced by occurrences of d_1^* . What we must do is, replace by d_1^* only the d_1 in the second occurrence of D in P. This can be done by introducing a different kind of rule which can be effected by means of an expression which uses a different symbol instead of the single arrow \rightarrow , for example a double arrow \Rightarrow . We have to represent the entire configuration in which d_1 occurs since it is not otherwise possible to single out the d_1 we wish to single out. This can be done as follows:



Again, this rule does not correspond to any actual rule, but it expresses, precisely, the feature of ritual structure which I have referred to as *modification*. In the forthcoming article on "Ritual Syntax" I have shown that there are also other types of ritual rules than those which exhibit embedding and modification.

IV

No linguist will have failed to observe the similarity of these ritual rules with the rules of syntax. The single arrow rules which pertain to ritual embedding correspond to the phrase structure rules of syntax; the double arrow rules which pertain to ritual modification correspond to its transformational rules. This correspondence is not due to the fact that I selected ritual rules which appear to resemble syntactic rules. The rules of embedding and modification are in fact very basic rules of ritual, or at least of Vedic ritual.

The partial similarity between ritual and syntax could mean that ritualists follow, albeit unconsciously, the rules of syntax which they had internalized when they learned their native language. I am inclined to the opposite view: syntax comes from ritual. A simple consideration in support of this idea is that animals have ritual, but not language. But there are weightier considerations. Syntax is the part of language which stands most in need of explanation. Language relates sounds to meanings, and so it must necessarily comprise a domain of sounds (studied in phonetics and phonology) and a domain of meanings (studied in semantics). If language were rational and adapted to its purpose, sounds and meanings would be related by means of a 1-1 correspondance. If this were true of natural languages, assuming semantics to be universal, different natural languages would also stand to each other in a 1-1 correspondance, and translation could be effected with the help of dictionaries only. There would be no need for artificial languages, and logicians would be out of business.

What we do find in language is something different. Meanings and sounds are related to each other through a vast and complicated domain of structured rules: syntax. The transition between sound and meaning is unnecessarily complex, roundabout and mathematically absurd. "Nobody in his right mind would attempt to build an artificial language based on phrase structure plus transformations"

(J. A. Fodor ⁸). How are we to explain such apparent redundancies? It is not enough to say, as communication theorists might, that redundancies are necessary for communication because they decrease mistakes in reception. That assumes that language is only for the sake of communication, which it is not. More importantly, such redundancies, to perform their alleged function, merely need be random: which cannot explain syntax, a structured domain of specific rules which in fact makes language unlogical and inefficient. These specific rules, which are without rhyme or reason, must come from elsewhere. They look like a rudiment of something quite different. The similarity between syntax and ritual suggests that the origin of syntax is ritual.

The ritual origin of syntax has implications not only in language but also in religion. I shall mention three. Ritual is replete with language, but it is very often meaningless language. When a small golden image of a man is buried under the fire altar of the Agnicayana, the Chief Priest of the Sāmaveda chants songs which contain such sounds as:

kā hvā hvā hvā hvā hvā
 phal phal phal phal phal
 hau hau hau hau hau
 bham bham... (eighteen times).

Such structured sounds partake of the syntax of ritual, but do not relate to meaning. This applies to most mantras. Originally, language was born when such structured sounds were connected with meaning. The state immediately preceding language survives in religion as mantras and magical spells: *abracadabra*. Unlike language, these are universal and need no translation. The abundance of such formulas in Buddhism facilitated its introduction into China, where their way was paved by the sacred noises of popular Taoism.

A second feature is that mysticism is characterized by the absence of language. It points to a pre-linguistic state which can be induced by ritual, by recitation, by silent meditation on mantras, or by other means, as I have shown in *Exploring Mysticism*. All these methods help to eliminate meaning, sound and (ritual) structure.

⁸ In: F. Smith and G. A. Miller (eds), *The Genesis of Language: A Psycholinguistic Approach*, Cambridge, Mass. 1966, page 270.

Wittgenstein had an inkling of the place which language occupies in religion when he remarked:

Is speech essential for religion? I can very well imagine a religion in which there are no doctrines, and hence nothing is said. Obviously the essence of religion can have nothing to do with the fact that speech occurs — or rather: if speech does occur, this itself is a component of religious behavior [the German original has: *Handlung*, "activity"] and not a theory. Therefore nothing turns on whether the words are true, false or nonsensical.⁹

The ritual origin of syntax is connected with another curious fact, which I mentioned in passing: the Vedic gods fought and created not only with ritual, but also with meters and chants. What an extraordinary thing to do! But no, it is not. Meters and chants are like ritual in that they fail to express meaning, but reflect syntactic structure in its pure form, hence pure activity.

VII

We have not come to the end of our investigation. On the contrary, we have hardly begun. What I hope to have shown is that ritual, which has so far been impervious to our understanding, is meaningless and also a subject amenable to serious study. Once we abandon generalities and start working, a first adequate theory will undoubtedly emerge, sooner or later. Such a theory will not only elucidate ritual; it will throw light on the origins of language, religion, and perhaps man.

What will a theory of ritual be like? — Let us reflect once more on the Agnicayana. The main altar is constructed in the shape of a bird from 1005 kiln-fired bricks, 200 each in four layers, and 205 in the fifth layer which comes on top. The configuration of the first, third and fifth layer is the same; and so is that of the second and fourth. The surface of each layer is $7\frac{1}{2}$ times a square of the Yajamāna's length. The bricks are of ten different shapes. There are 136 squares, 48 oblongs of one size, and 302 of another. In addition there are 207 halves of squares, 202 halves of oblongs, and five more groups consisting of bricks arrived at by further subdivision of the former shapes. There are ten bricks which are half as thick as all the others. All the bricks constitute furthermore another set of groups, each with

⁹ F. Waismann, "Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein," *The Philosophical Review* 74, 1965, page 16.

its own name and consecrated by particular mantras. Most bricks have to be consecrated in a specific, very roundabout order; others may be consecrated in any order, provided one general direction is maintained and the location of the final brick is fixed. Some bricks have figures drawn on them. Others are lifted from their proper place, carried around the altar and put back before they can be fully consecrated. All of this, and much more, is in accordance with numerous precise rules, for which in almost all cases no explanation whatever is offered. Whether or not the rules are arbitrary, they are strictly adhered to. In case of controversy or differences of interpretation, various schools arise which establish different traditions. Unlike sects, ritual traditions co-exist peacefully, they are mutually exclusive and there is neither desire, nor mechanism for conversion. This feature, too, has become a mark of Indian religions.

And so we may return to the question what a theory of ritual would be like. It is unlikely that such a theory, if at all adequate, will be simple, viz., more simple than the ritual facts themselves. There will be complaints about its myriad rules, as there have been about Chomsky and Halle's *Sound Pattern of English*, Euclid's *Elements*, and the *śrauta sūtras*.

A final paragraph and consolation. There must be readers who are shocked, angry or depressed at the thought that ritual (not to mention religion and even language) is not only complex but also meaningless. I am not a bit sad about it. I prefer a thing, like a person, to be itself, and not refer to something or somebody else. For all we know life itself may be meaningless. Seen from without, the life of an ant seems to be just that, a thought that must have occurred to King Solomon (*Proverbs* 6:6). Neither ants, nor we are any the worse for it.