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## RITUAL AND THE QUEST FOR MEANING

Ritual appears in every human society and thus seems to be a central component to the human experience, even a necessary component. Yet the question as to what ritual does—its purpose and meaning—is not necessarily answered. Latter-day Saint anthropologist Walter van Beek, with his extensive interaction with the Dogon people in Mali and the Kapsiki-Higi people in north Cameroon, looks at these questions, establishing criteria by which one can examine different types of ritual activity. Reviewing Latter-day Saint ritual, he introduces the idea that our rituals are tied to notions of communalism, universal equality, and interaction between the divine and the mortal. Still, he acknowledges, ritual is sometimes silent as to its own meaning, and we are left to interpret the silence from which meaning arises. —DB

### 1. Ritual Is What Others Have

“**W**E DO NOT HAVE RITUAL, we have sacraments,” a Roman Catholic colleague once assured me. He also could have used the word *liturgy*, which is also often used in Catholic discourse. After all, the academic discipline that studies the history and variations in Catholic worship is called liturgical studies. However, he chose not to do so, as he

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was aware that his Protestant counterparts preferred that term. Indeed, a Protestant service has a liturgy, as has an Anglican one, like a vespers or evensong. Of course, we as Mormons do not have ritual either—we have “ordinances” or “priesthood ordinances,” though sometimes we do have “ceremonies.”<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in this volume’s introduction, ritual is what we call the weird acts of strange people: the mask rituals of the Dogon in Mali that I happen to study, the enthronement rituals of the Mesopotamian kingship, the rituals preparing the Romans for war, the totem rituals of the Australian Aboriginals, or the cleansing rituals of the Iroquois. Ritual is what others have. Curiously enough, most of these cultures do not have a word for ritual either. The Dogon, for instance, have no generic term for their religious acts; what they do have is one term for each specific rite, as each of these has its proper name. If they define their own religion, they call it *omono buro*, “to sacrifice,” the core ritual of their religion.

Yet for an anthropologist, all of these terms—*sacrament*, *liturgy*, *ordinance*, and the like—belong to one and the same category, *ritual*, and there is no scientifically valid reason to make a fundamental distinction between them. We study rituals as a universal human expression, irrespective of truth claims, based in the long history of each and every religion, recognizing in all of them creative ways to express our deep and lasting relationship with other ways of existence and with our own deepest roots. Of course there are differences. One of the most notable is the distinction in ritual form between those religions that are based or dependent upon text and those that are not. Those religions without script, like the Dogon, have their own expressive forms, often much more exuberant than ours, in fact. These are transmitted orally and thus have no sacred script as a measuring rod. Religions with script, such as the many varieties of Christianity, show a complex interaction between the written scripture and the ritual acts, which are usually less exuberant and more word-oriented. But the use of the words *ordinance*, *liturgy*, or *sacrament* has little to do with the nature of the acts themselves, which are all just rituals. Instead these terms signify that a particular ritual is ours, different from acts performed by others, even if they are similar to

ours. The terminology serves as a means of discernment and boundary maintenance between us and the outer world. So ritual is both universal and specific. This paradox leads to some of the fundamental questions for those anthropologists who study ritual (or anyone studying ritual, for that matter): what is it, and what are its characteristics?

## 2. The Ritual Paradox

During one of my field stays in Mali among the Dogon, I hosted an American film team that was comparing Amerindian rituals and world-view with those of other indigenous cultures, such as the Dogon. One of the crew was an American who was part Iroquois, and one afternoon he performed an Indian ritual. In a bowl he burned some tobacco and waved the smoke towards the four cardinal directions and at his chest, invoking a prayer. Immediately my Dogon friends ran towards him, bared their chests, and said, "Here, do it here too." I was astonished, first because they instantly recognized the act as a ritual, not as a new way of smoking, and second because they wanted to participate, to be in it, not just to watch. Geographically, the two cultures, Iroquois and Dogon, are almost as far apart as our globe permits, but there still was an immediate recognition that a ritual was going on.

It is not always that easy to recognize a ritual, though. A Tilburg colleague of mine was traveling in Mexico when her group visited a Catholic church in which they found a Maya ritual in progress. A curious ritual, they thought, as the participants drank liters of Coca-Cola. The reactions in the tourist group were mixed; some were thrilled to witness an authentic Mayan rite, while others were put off by the Coca-Cola and thought that it might be an advertising gimmick. It proved to be the first, as the beverage was used to generate large burps, an important element in their liturgy. Here the recognition was that something like a ritual was going on, but the visitors were distracted by symbols that do not feature in our Western definition of ritual, like the soft drink, or, for that matter, burping. If these Maya had drunk wine—or even better, pulque, the prime ritual beverage in Maya culture—and had chanted, nobody would have had any doubts.

We as humans do seem to have a mechanism for instantly recognizing that something is going on, and we have several models of what that specific event might be, though it may be difficult for one to verbalize if asked. As anthropologists, we have found no cultures without ritual, religious ritual in particular. So what is a ritual? On a basic level, a ritual can be recognized by its similarity to and yet distinctive difference, and therefore strangeness, from common, everyday acts. Ronald Grimes has defined rituals as “sequences of ordinary action rendered special by virtue of their condensation, elevation, or stylization.”<sup>2</sup> The basis of ritual lies in the way the actions are made strange, because many rites are normal, everyday acts with a specific twist. For instance, two people talking to each other is a normal event, while one person talking to an absent other is strange (e.g., a prayer) and is thus a ritual. People having a joint meal is a daily event, but if the most important guest at the table is invisible but still addressed and present in the mind of the people, then it is a ritual known as sacrifice, communion, or the sacrament. People washing themselves is a good habit in any society, but when they immerse themselves in water with their clothes on, calling on an invisible presence, it is a ritual, and we call it baptism.

Yet this strange act can also be understood as special because it does not seem to do anything; that is, it does not leave behind any permanent, physical mark that it happened. The smoke of that Iroquois team member was quickly blown away, and the burps of the Maya lost themselves in free air, just as after the baptism the new Latter-day Saint convert dries off quickly. After the ritual everything seems to come back to normal, as if nothing has happened, with the physical environment exactly the way it was before. Grimes’s definition comes back into play, as “ordinary action rendered special” are the operative words, the word *special* implying that no utilitarian, technical, or other concrete goal is discernible. Ritual is just a different, transient act.<sup>3</sup>

This observation leads to our main question: if ritual is transient, seemingly not “doing” anything, then what meaning does it have? Of course, for the participant in the ritual experience, the ritual is highly significant—the smoke ritual of the Iroquois, the baptism of the Latter-day

Saint convert, the devout Catholic partaking the wafer in communion—each group defines its acts as very meaningful. Here we have to distinguish between two levels of meaning. On the first level, ritual is often thought to have a meaning in and of itself, a meaning-as-given or an intrinsic message—that is, what the ritual really communicates without explanation or exegesis. The second level of meaning is that attributed to the act by the participants or observers.

*The first level of “meaning”: a null message.* Concerning the first level of meaning, many anthropologists and scholars of religion have reached a surprising consensus: in terms of communication, ritual has no inherent message and therefore communicates a null message. This perspective can be seen as early as 1966 in the writings of Anthony Wallace, who suggested the uninformative nature of ritual: “Each ritual is a particular sequence of signals which, once announced, allows no uncertainty, no choice, and hence, in the statistical sense of information theory conveys no information from sender to receiver. Ritual may, perhaps, most succinctly be classified as communication without information.”<sup>4</sup> Others such as Pascal Boyer speak of ritual as “acts emptied of their meaning,” Maurice Bloch insists that all daily interaction has more information content than ritual, and I distinguish between the empty inherent “message” of ritual and an elaborated attributed “meaning.”

But it was the work of Frits Staal that put this “meaninglessness,” as he calls it, into full perspective.<sup>5</sup> His was a pioneering study of an old Vedic ritual, the *agnicayana*, or fire altar, in India. During this lengthy, complicated, and highly professionalized ritual, he noticed that none of the participants, neither the professionals nor their patrons nor any of the bystanders, had any coherent notion of why this ritual had to be done nor what goal the whole enterprise was undertaken in order to achieve. The only drive was the notion that it had to be done, and their main worry was that it had to be done right. The notion of meaning just did not enter the proceedings. Staal called this “meaningless ritual,” implying that this meaninglessness held for any ritual. That latter implication proved to be highly debatable; first, people do attribute meaning to their participation in ritual, an evident fact that can never be ignored. Second, for some

rituals, meaning is easier to construe than for others. In Staal's fire ritual, there were few clues for the participants to "make something of it," but that did not necessarily mean that all ritual forms lack such clues.<sup>6</sup>

While the idea of ritual as zero communication may suggest that ritual has no value, this is not a conclusion any of the above ritual scholars reach. In fact, some have suggested that it is the very absence of an intrinsic message in ritual that gives ritual its power and efficacy. An intriguing theory based on this concept is found in the writings of Roy Rappaport, an anthropologist who has studied Melanesian ritual in great detail.<sup>7</sup> For Rappaport, ritual is the most basic social act in that it establishes a relationship between the participants. This relationship created through the ritual experience generates social trust and cooperation, without any necessary or spoken reference to specific meaning, knowledge, or information. And it can do so because all participants willingly and knowingly submit to the ritual format—"strange acts"—while seeing the others doing the same.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the efficacy of the ritual, the cooperation and consensus, remains effective as long as people do not try to explain what the ritual "means." This is the basic ritual paradox: an act with a null message loaded with deep signification, which consequently can be described as an exercise in silence. The ritual "speaks silence," and in and from that silence, people construct meaning that addresses their own existence.

*The second level of meaning.* The second level of ritual meaning mentioned above was the attributed meaning, the one the participants construct themselves. They do so with the help of the symbolic elements that make up ritual—that is, acts or speech—and thus construe a second layer of meaning. Invited by the ritual silence discussed above, participants in a ritual may go on a quest of meaning. Whether it is as participants in a religion or as fans of a baseball club—and the two show surprising similarities—or in pursuing hobbies, collecting art, buying prestige objects, doing our simple duty, writing a book, or composing an article on ritual, we all are in the pursuit of signification, we all are continuously attributing meaning to what we do and what others do either unto us or without us. Thus we are, ultimately, "Homo significans," the attributor of meaning. That act has everything to do with our language facilities and



Clearly a Dogon ritual, but what does it mean? (All photos courtesy of the author.)

is an invariable component of our existence. Clifford Geertz, following Max Weber, called man “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun”<sup>9</sup>; we are probably the only animals to do so, and it is the least beastly side of us.

Of course, this attribution of meaning is never a simple matter. The construction of this second level of meaning is a process involving the participants and specific features of the ritual acts such as the symbols used, the history of the ritual, and the general discourse on the ritual in the religious setting. Thus it is an open process that usually leads not to just one explanation but to several. Baptism, to take one example, is one ritual all Christian churches share (though with varying amounts of water). For many denominations it means the washing away of sins, such as original sin. Latter-day Saint culture constructs a similar meaning in that this rite washes us clean for the remission of sin, but baptism also means entrance into a covenant, a witness of God at all times, and even symbolic death and resurrection (see Romans 6:3–6). Moreover, it is quite possible that young baptismal candidates in the Church will hear most, if not all, of these as interpretations of baptism. Of course, they probably will not hear of another meaning that has now dropped from our baptismal vocabulary but was once a strong and vibrant meaning—that baptism was a healing. This meaning has been relinquished, exemplifying that ritual interpretations are not static but fluid and may change according to cultural needs of the time.<sup>10</sup> In light of this last meaning, it is possible that for future members, baptism may have another meaning not in use now.

Rituals of initiation, wedding, and death—the so-called rites of passage—allow for a wide array of interpretations and thus can serve as focal points in a society’s definition of self. So through the array of meanings, ritual may function as a window to a given culture’s or religion’s understanding of itself and its relationship to the world. Scholars call that a metacommentary, the expression of a culture’s views on itself. For instance, many cultures incorporate a particular type of ritual that turns the world upside down. One obvious example is Carnival, during which the normal order of events and the usual hierarchy of society are inverted, thus offering a venue for the release of pent-up feelings and



Clothed for baptism, occasion for a ritual photo. (Arnhem, Netherlands, 2011.)

frustrations that may accumulate from the interaction between different levels of society. In anthropological terms, this is a ritual of rebellion. In my analysis of Dogon mask rituals, several masks portray people with power such as Europeans, slave raiders, and Fulani herdsmen. These former superiors are being shown to be awkward and stupid—in short, the proper laughingstock for normal Dogon, who like to ridicule these powerful foreigners, cutting them down to human proportions.

Latter-day Saint rituals have little of this specific type of ritual meta-commentary, though hints of it are there. Our rituals tend to highlight notions of communalism, universal equality, and divine-mortal interaction. Latter-day Saint baptism can be understood primarily from a communal, inclusionary perspective. It is witnessed by a community of believers, hopefully attended by as many as possible and witnessed as to its proper execution by two authorities. Afterwards, the whole ritual sequence of proceedings—which is what we call “liturgy” in religious studies—culminates in the individual’s acceptance into a larger social unit; on the physical plane, the bishop welcomes the newly baptized member into the flock, while on the eternal plane, acceptance of the Holy Ghost represents inclusion into the divine community. The metacommentary of equality is highlighted by our rituals of investiture, particularly those found in the temple. Such rites highlight theological equality before God, regardless of social standing or economic prestige.

Yet because these metacommentaries are a form of attributed meaning, it is possible to have divergent, even contrary metacommentaries. While baptism emphasizes the metacommentary that all may be part of the community, baptism can be viewed as a mechanism for exclusion. Many converts have been baptized before in other denominations, and yet missionaries insist in doing it over, with the argument that it has not been done properly or with the proper authority. The rites of investiture, while emphasizing the commonality and equality of the participants, also highlight the hierarchical priesthood structure of the Church.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, what the rite means depends on what meaning is assigned by the individual.

This open-ended nature to meaning can make it difficult to assign cognitive, conscious meaning at all. Studying ritual firsthand in two

African groups, I was especially struck by one aspect of the attribution of meaning: it often is not done at all, at least not in any specific way. When I ask my Dogon or Kapsiki informants (in Cameroon) why they do these rituals, they tell me that these rituals have been done since the time of their ancestors and that they have to be done again in precisely the same way. That is what we call tradition, meaning not that it has never changed but rather that the people feel that it has been inherited in this form from the ancestors. Objectively, all rituals change—they have to, in fact, in order to remain effective in changing circumstances—but discourse on tradition implies that the authority of the past is invoked to legitimate the present. Calling the rituals “tradition” does not imply that no meaning is attributed, because everybody in the village agrees that the ritual really needs to be done, and done in that particular way. “Tradition” simply means that they should be performed and that another reason is not needed. In fact, when performing the ritual, they express their gratitude to partake in a meaningful event, assigning a general importance to the ritual and the part they play. However, when pressed to express what precisely it does mean for them, they are often at a loss and have to construct or formulate specific signification on the spot. This is not particular to the Dogon or the Kapsiki, nor is it true of rituals in local religions generally, but it holds for ritual participants in most religions. We assign generalized meaning to a ritual first and start specifying later.

People are more than capable of finding something important without being able to postulate why. This is well known to ritual participants in the Latter-day Saint sphere as well. When attending the temple rituals—usually called ceremonies—participation is rated as being highly significant. Yet most Latter-day Saints realize they understand precious little of it. The point here is that a deep understanding of the ritual, in the sense of a personally constructed explanation of it, is not deemed essential for a meaningful participation in it. Of course, some aspects are explained as part of the ritual itself, but most are not.

But not all people are equal, and in any culture, some are more prone to construct a specific meaning than others. In a Dogon village I visited, some elders were very much interested in what Harvey Whitehouse calls

“spontaneous exegetic reflection” (SER), constructing and sometimes systematizing the meaning of their intricate and spectacular rituals. Those are informants that anthropologists value, but I am very much aware that they do not reflect the average Dogon at all, so as an anthropologist, one has to be wary of extrapolating these individual constructions to the whole culture. Some colleagues have constructed conceptual edifices based upon a few very reflective informants, only later realizing that that edifice was a castle in the air.<sup>12</sup> In local religions without script, there is little authority, so there is usually no mechanism through which the exegetic ruminations of one become an obligation to believe for the others. Thus the SER remains open-ended. But scholars do construct meaning as well. Few of us content ourselves with just descriptions because we want to understand what is happening. That, in fact, is legitimate, as long as one realizes that this is a construction too—an informed, comparative, and, if done properly and with enough empathy, insightful one—but a construction nevertheless. There simply can never be the last exegetical word on any ritual.

### 3. Signposts for Signification

That attribution of meaning, including SER and scholarly constructions, is possible at all is because rituals are not without their own forms and logic. While rituals may not say anything, they do give clues, hints for possible interpretation, and it is these signposts that allow for communal attribution of meaning or for insight into the ritual’s metacommentary. One such signpost is their similarity to everyday acts and events, as indicated above. A prayer, being a conversation with an absentee partner, easily leads to interpretation in terms of communication. Though the communication appears one-way for the observer, it is a two-way communication for the one who prays. A sacrifice, being modeled after a joint meal, hints at commensality, at the gods eating with us, at sharing, and thus at giving, receiving and giving back, *do ut des*. Even a minimal meal like the Latter-day Saint sacrament carries pointers to a meal both through the historical referent of the Last Supper—which was both a meal and a ritual in itself—and through the simple act of eating.

Similarly, bathing and washing are models for many rituals, both the many types of baptism and the almost ubiquitous cleansing rituals in many religions. Another example is the act of greeting, an integral part of human life, which forms a part in any verbal ritual, prayer, or sacrifice, and therefore in any ordinance of the Latter-day Saint kind. Putting on clothing is another such everyday model; this is one act that is easy to celestialize by having special clothes for the occasion, dressing deliberately, or changing one's dress during the celebration. The possibilities are limitless and easily stimulate the interpretation of what is going on. Decoration can join special clothing. A wedding ritual—which, if it exists at all in Latter-day Saint culture, does so only in heavily modified form—is a good example. The public ritual forges a new union and has its own symbolism: in the British tradition, there is something old and something new, something borrowed, something blue, plus the rings, the bridal bouquet, and the strange hats bridegrooms sometimes wear.<sup>13</sup>

So the basic paradigms of ritual reside in daily life, but there are much more complicated signposts. One crucial cultural model is the feast—the extraordinary, special event—as opposed to the meal—the everyday, common event. All cultures feast, meaning that they perform special, nonproductive acts at a specific time and place, an occasion set apart and separated from the rest of daily life. Feasts are what Victor Turner calls liminal time, “time out of time,”<sup>14</sup> and almost always include music and dancing as well as the consuming of special food and drinks.<sup>15</sup> Often, the normal rules of daily conduct are slightly suspended during a feast, offering some leeway from the rules that govern daily life (similar to Carnival). Lawson and MacCauley, in their studies of rituals, note that rituals tend to develop either in the direction of daily events or in the direction of feasts as the two basic paradigms of human acts.<sup>16</sup>

Another such feast event is the concept of the journey. Unlike normal, everyday travel from home to work or to shop, the journey is a specific, out-of-the-ordinary event, and therefore it is not surprising to find it a model or template for many ritual forms. Initiations often are modeled on a journey, the initiates traveling a trajectory loaded with instructions, tests, and revelations. Pilgrimage has long played an important

role in Catholic ritual behavior, but it has become increasingly popular in European Protestantism as well. Adherents may journey not only to Catholic centers such as Santiago but also to Protestant sites like Taizé, a Protestant monastery in France. So powerful is this model that even secular Europeans are known to engage in pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Similarly, Mormon culture has developed similar endeavors, like the Mormon pageant, huge family reunions, or temple tours. Another recent example is the increasingly popular trek by Western Latter-day Saint youth to Martin's Cove. In this trip to Wyoming, people play on the characters in this historic tale, dressing, eating, and acting according to the lifestyle of the pioneers.

I have dubbed rituals based upon daily life and those based on feasts "minimal" and "maximal" rituals, respectively.<sup>17</sup> The former consist of slight changes in well-known daily events, while the latter vary more and are much more elaborated. In Latter-day Saint ritual culture we have a host of rituals of the first kind, though we do not often recognize them as such. John Sorensen once listed the rituals in Latter-day Saint culture,<sup>18</sup> and they are many and varied indeed: from the sacrament to the ward party, from the temple endowment to the Mormon pageant, from a daily prayer to an anointing, from setting someone apart to sealing a couple in the temple, from baptism to washing in the temple, from bearing testimony to serving a mission—the list is long. Quite a few are done by proxy as well, again increasing the volume of rituals.<sup>19</sup>

All of these may lead to a primary Latter-day Saint metacommentary that the divine realm is reflected in this earthly one. But as noted above, we also have our maximal rites, and for those we have a specific building, the temple. Here we find the complicated rituals modeled on less ordinary behavior. Part of the models derive from royal investiture rituals, with the central rite, the endowment, also modeled on a typical initiation journey ending in a classic symbolic test. These are maximal rituals far removed from daily life, a fact that renders their interpretation much more difficult, even within the general metacommentary of the homology between the divine and the earthly. Still, in wrestling with the meaning of their maximal rites, temple patrons find themselves in a similar situation as others

with their own maximal rites, such as the Dogon, who participate in a mask ritual: we recognize that it is highly significant, but what does it mean?

#### 4. Meaning out of Silence

As we explore an answer to that question, it may help to have one more theoretical perspective. Harvey Whitehouse at Oxford University has suggested that there are two “modes of religiosity” which determine the manner by which one remembers one’s religious experience.<sup>20</sup> This religious memory is influenced by the frequency and type of rituals performed. The first mode he calls the imagistic mode, so named because of the lasting impression it leaves on the participant. Rituals of this mode are less frequently performed and therefore correspond to the feast or maximal rites mentioned earlier. Such rituals are often colorful, even spectacular, rituals which generate a lot of emotion or effervescence, culminating in strong bonds among those participating in the rites as well as long-term memories which the individual may contemplate long after the event itself.<sup>21</sup> Such rituals are intensely personal and the memories very emotional, the individual focus being on the spectacular—in initiation rites sometimes even traumatic—transformation engendered.

In terms of performance, since such rites are infrequent and extraordinary, with long-term effects, the emphasis among participants is on the episodic nature of the rites or their procedure. In other words, importance is placed on liturgical questions such as the proper procedure and the correct order between the ritual elements, what to say, how to sacrifice and when, when to dance, how to dance, and how to chant the long songs. One example is the Dogon mask dance, mentioned above, which is performed every twelve years. The elders spend a lot of time discussing the proper order of events. The Dogon even have a ritual performed every sixty years, the *sigi*, so they have to have a special class of people who know the liturgy—which of necessity has to be relatively simple—and have learned the long texts by heart, which are themselves in a special ritual language.

Because of the intensely personal and extraordinary nature of imagistic, maximal rituals, there is very little emphasis on orthodoxy; instead concern is placed on orthopraxy, how to do the ritual, not what to believe

when doing the ritual. Exegetical reflection is incidental and spontaneous, depending on an individual's personality, and even then, emphasis is often placed on the importance of participating rather than on any inclusive meaning.

Whitehouse calls his second mode of religiosity the doctrinal mode. This mode involves high-frequency, low-arousal rituals, or minimal rituals. The goal of such rituals is not to impress the participant and generate an emotional fervor in individual participants but to repeat the ritual often enough that it engraves itself into long-term memory. The high frequency and low levels of emotion in the doctrinal mode call for much more religious exegesis to be conveyed. Explanation and thus language, both spoken and written, play much more important roles in such rites.

Moreover, because such rituals are less emotive, they are more accessible to exportation. In other words, such rituals are more easily interpreted as inclusive rather than exclusive. And with greater emphasis on this transmission of meaning both within the group and beyond, authority, hierarchy, and centralization within the religious structure emerge. Thus both modes of religiosity have a function: the imagistic, with its emotional, extraordinary nature, highlights the individual belonging inside a given environment, while the doctrinal mode provides a platform for exegetical meaning as well as a vehicle for proselyting. Whitehouse's theory stresses that both modes, doctrinal and imagistic, operate in any given religion, but not in equal measures.

For Latter-day Saints, the doctrinal mode most closely describes our ritual experience. The dominant Latter-day Saint discourse surrounding ritual is on authority and personal worthiness. Authority is closely linked with the notion of priesthood with all its hierarchical implications, and our rituals highlight the Latter-day Saint concept of patriarchy, which also explains similarities with other highly structured, hierarchical religions, such as Catholicism. The abundance of minimal rituals in the doctrinal mode also facilitates the transmission of our extensive doctrine while it emphasizes our metacommentary concerning the interconnectedness of—even the collapse of distance between—the divine and the mortal, two elements that are fundamental to Latter-day Saint missionary work.<sup>22</sup>



Two Dogon stilt masks performing in an imagistic, maximal ritual.

But the Latter-day Saint faith also includes rituals in the imagistic mode that do not have an authoritative exegetical meaning—those associated with the temple. Though more sedate in setting than the Dogon mask ritual, the temple can be quite compelling or emotional. For many, it is the otherworldly nature of the endowment, the extraordinary nature of it compared to our other ritual forms, that makes its meaning difficult to explain. The preparations are elaborate, with new clothing and even a new name, but because of its imagistic nature there is no explicit or extensive scriptural text providing exegesis to this rite (Nibley's work notwithstanding, which is simply an academic attempt at attributed meaning). The dominant Latter-day Saint mode of thought concerning this ritual's meaning is from a historical perspective, meaning that things are thought to be portrayed as they really occurred historically, yet this meaning can be difficult to accept since the figures within the ritual appear and interact outside of their historical time and space.<sup>23</sup>

So here we have a typical imagistic process: a high-impact ritual without exegesis and highly concerned with procedure (the temple rituals, after all, are not to be changed by the participants, neither by the ritual personnel in the temple, only by the top echelon of the Church, and then only rarely),<sup>24</sup> that is meant to trigger one's own exegetical reflection.<sup>25</sup> And yet because the individual engages in so much doctrinal ritual performance, lack of exegesis can be a challenge. This quandary is increased with the emphasis placed by the Church on the rituals as sources of learning and teaching. People are expected to go to the temple to learn; the official definition of the temple as a place of learning is growing stronger, not weaker, and so is injunction to seek out learning with the Spirit.

Yet for all of these difficulties, the silence regarding ritual meaning does reflect an implicit recognition as well as a deep understanding of the nature of ritual itself. Meaning and ritual make for a very dynamic duo, with the construction of meaning as a creative process, ultimately an individual one. In the case of the endowment, this creative process is highlighted first by the discourse around the ritual as a place of learning and then by muting any overt discussion of the ritual, along with a complete absence of exegetical meaning to the specific ritual in question



A Dutch LDS “pilgrimage”: a ward reunion. (Utrecht, Netherlands, 2006.)

and the very meaning of ritual in general. But it is in this silence that the power of the endowment is actualized. Confronted with such a maximal ritual as the temple initiation, we have to learn in silence, we have to be taught by silence, and thus we have to find in that ritual the very silence that reverberates in our deepest core, where we meet our truest emotions.

In the end, performing ritual—be it a minimal, doctrinal ritual with explicit attributed meaning or a maximal, imagistic one with little or no explicit attributed meaning—is part of being human. Trying to understand ritual is the ultimate quest for meaning, the meaning of human life that is lived from a core of silence, where we have to inscribe the meaning of our own existence upon our personal life journey. Silence is no longer with us in these modern, noisy days, but it has been an enduring companion of mankind during most of our existence. In our time we meet silence in the rituals, the silence that is not the absence of sound but the deafening silence of the desert, the silence that fills all the nooks and crannies of the wilderness, the silence in which the other side of the

world reveals itself. Ritual is embodied silence. For the Latter-day Saint, this is the silence that speaks to us, and in this revelatory conversation we construct meaning, the deep meaning of our own life that comes from within our own silent and eternal core and that can only be searched in a lifelong quest, a perennial journey for insight and understanding.

### Notes

1. The term *ritual* never appears in our standard works. The term *rite* appears only three times in our standard works: Numbers 9:3; Alma 43:45; 44:5. In terms of defining the term, the Topical Guide immediately refers to “ordinances.”
2. R. L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 70–71.
3. This does not mean that the ritual has no lasting or permanent effects. Ritual, such as circumcision, certainly results in permanent transformations. What Grimes appears to be addressing is the environment in which the ritual is enacted. This specific time and space is transitory. Thus, even though the effect of circumcision is permanent in the body of the individual, the room, which may be a living room, is temporarily transformed into a space in which the ritual can be enacted, only to return to its more prosaic purpose following the ritual.
4. A. F. C. Wallace, *Religion, an Anthropological View* (New York: Random House, 1966), 233.
5. Frits Staal, “The Meaninglessness of Ritual,” in *Numen* 26, no. 1 (1975): 2–22; Staal, *Agni, the Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1983); Staal, *Over zin en onzin in de filosofie, religie en wetenschap* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1986); Staal, *Rules without Meaning: Ritual, Mantras and the Human Sciences* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1989).
6. Staal links this notion to his theory of language and thus arrives at the conclusion that ritual has no meaning at all. This is unfortunate. The language paradigm only has limited hermeneutical value for ritual studies, and this important conclusion, which should have resulted from Staal’s work, has been missed. Even Catherine Bell does not formulate this conclusion, probably because she considers the ritual as a text: Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
7. R. A. Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1980).
8. R. A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 134. Similar points have been made by anthropologists Dan Sperber and Maurice Bloch: Dan Sperber, *Explaining*

- Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); M. E. F. Bloch, *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 86.
9. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.
  10. Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, "'They Shall Be Made Whole': A History of Baptism for Health," *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (2008): 69–112. For a general theology contingent on Latter-day Saint ritual, see three books by Douglas Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and *Joseph Smith, Jesus, and Satanic Opposition* (London: Ashgate, 2010).
  11. Walter E. A. van Beek, "Hierarchies of Holiness: The Mormon Temple in Zoetermeer, Netherlands," in *Holy Grounds: Re-inventing Ritual Space in Modern Western Culture*, ed. P. Post & A. L. Molendijk (Leuven, Netherlands: Peters, 2010), 255–300.
  12. For a critique on an anthropologist overinterpreting his data in this fashion, see W. E. A. van Beek, "Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule," *Current Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (1991): 139–67, and W. E. A. van Beek, "Haunting Griaule: Experiences from the Restudy of the Dogon," *History in Africa* 31 (2004): 43–68.
  13. Marriage is the institution that consists of a union of husband and wife in order to have legitimate children. A wedding is the ritual in which (the family of) the groom and (the family of) the bride publicly consent in their union, in front of an appreciating audience, often involving the "giving away" of the bride by her father, or other similar ritual elements. Latter-day Saint culture potentially acknowledges three rituals: a civil wedding, a temple ritual, and a wedding reception. A civil registration is not a Latter-day Saint ritual and is in fact deemed superfluous. A sealing is in principle the celestialization of a union. The wedding reception is also not the wedding itself but the public post-facto celebration of the union. See Walter E. A. van Beek, "The Infallibility Trap: The Sacralisation of Religious Authority," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 4 (Fall 2011): 14–44.
  14. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969).
  15. For an excellent analysis of the role of food in human feasting as part of our being human through the ages, see Martin Jones, *Feast: Why Humans Share Food* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and more generally Bloch, *How We Think They Think*.
  16. R. N. McCauley and E. T. Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25. For an interesting outside view and appreciation of the place of education in Mormonism, see S.-H. Trigeaud, "Conversion, éducation et

communauté. Une étude socio-anthropologique, transnationale et contemporaine des pratiques et représentations des ‘Saints des Derniers Jours’ ou ‘Mormons’” (PhD diss., EHESS, Paris, 2008).

17. Walter E. A. van Beek, *The Dancing Dead*, chapter 2.
18. John L. Sorenson, “Ritual as Theology,” *Sunstone*, May–June 1981, 11–14.
19. Proxy rituals are crucial in the Latter-day Saint temple ritual repertoire; in principle there is one proxy version for each of the temple rituals, plus baptism, the conferring of the Holy Ghost, and priesthood ordination.
20. Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (New York: Altamire Press, 2004). For the application of this theory to Latter-day Saint ritual, see Walter E. A. van Beek, “Meaning and Authority in Mormon Ritual,” *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 3 (Spring 2010): 17–40.
21. “Effervescence” was a term used first by Émile Durkheim and subsequently by later ritual scholars to describe the temporary collective energy or social transformation created by ritual action.
22. Terryl L. Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 38–48. See also Terryl L. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
23. A derivation of the historical perspective is that espoused by some though not endorsed by any official Church doctrine or policy: the belief that the endowment reflects Joseph Smith’s interest in Masonry, which was the means of transmission for esoteric knowledge for millennia. This too has problems, since present scholarship on Masonry has reached a clear consensus that Masonic initiation was an invented tradition from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See J. Snoeck and M. Straussberg, eds., *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). However, these historical issues are not overly relevant for the individual Latter-day Saint who tries to make sense out of a complex and relatively strange ritual.
24. See, for example, J.-C. Duffy, “Concealing the Body, Concealing the Sacred: The Decline of Ritual Nudity in Mormon Temples,” in *Journal of Ritual Studies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 1–21.
25. This is not to say that no explanation is present within these rituals. One purpose of the endowment appears to be the stressing of listening to priesthood authority, which is couched in instruction to the performer. Yet, even with such instruction, its relationship to the actual ritual behavior is not explained. In other words, while the endowment does contain explicit instruction, the instruction is either about one’s moral and ethical decisions, which do not necessarily address the actual ritual behavior, or the instruction is how to do the ritual correctly, which, again, does not provide an explanation as to why the ritual should be performed in that way.