Ritual Behavior and Consumer Symbolism

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ABSTRACT - Ritual behavior is proposed as a useful conceptual vehicle for interpreting consumers’ psychosocial symbolic behavior. The domain of ritual behavior is identified, and ritual practices among animal species, and in various religious and aesthetic, civic, family, and personal contexts are elaborated. The diverse literatures that discuss ritual phenomena are critically reviewed and integrated. Finally, some relationships between individuals’ ritual involvements and their “consumer behaviors” are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Just prior to the start of the 1983 National Basketball Association All-Star Game, popular “soul” singer Marvin Gaye led The Los Angeles Forum sports arena audience in singing the “Star-Spangled Banner.” His rendition of America’s rational anthem was a radical departure from traditional approaches; and midway through the song many fans began clapping their hands and swaying to the vigorous rhythms Gaye’s elongated version was providing. Many members of the television viewing audience, however, were less enthusiastic, as indicated in two representative letters to the editor of the Los Angeles Times.

I am writing to state my deep objections to the manner in which the National Anthem was sung at the NBA All-Star game. An anthem is defined in Webster's as a sacred composition. It is not some popular rock song to be crooned, accompanied by intermittent screeches by the singer's fans. "The Star-Spangled Banner" officially represents the United States of America. It should be performed always with dignity and respect. It is not possible for me to believe I was the only American offended by the way part of my nation's tradition was mocked on this occasion.

Helen Murphy
Huntington Beach

This rendition had to be the most tasteless piece of “artistry” I have ever heard. As a musician, I was greatly offended by the stylized cheapening of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that this country's anthem would be sung in such a way as to encourage audience clap-along. Disgusting!

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These sentiments resemble reactions to Jimi Hendrix’ late-1960s rendition of the U. S. National anthem. The emotional and normative content of such responses provides vivid illustration of individuals’ symbolic investments in ritual behavior.

Formal social rituals and private ritualized experience pervade daily life. In contrast to the numerous behavioral science constructs that have been advanced to interpret consumers' behavior, ritual phenomena remain largely unexplored among the marketing community. The discussion that follows offers the construct of ritual behavior as a useful conceptual vehicle for interpreting consumers’ symbolic behaviors, ar
area which is itself a common marketing blind spot.

THE DOMAIN OF RITUAL BEHAVIOR

The term ritual refers to an extensive and diverse domain of human behavior. At one end of a conceptual continuum, a ritual is a public, elaborate, and often largescale religious, aesthetic or civic ceremony. At the other end, it may be one of a variety of private and persons' rituals, such as those associated with religious prayer or one's own grooming behavior. In between these conceptual poles are numerous small group and family rituals; for example, formal office luncheons, and birthday and holiday celebrations. Interpretation, definition, and even identification of ritual behavior vary widely across disciplines, due to the diversity of the phenomena, and also to the various theoretical approaches employed. In spite of these differences, "rituals" may generally be described as formal behavior systems comprised of four elements: 1) actor-participants, 2) an audience, 3) scripted episodic behavior, and 4) ritual artifacts.

Some large scale public rituals (the Super Bowl, Fourth of July parades, public papal masses) involve thousands of actor-participants and much ceremony. Other rituals require a smaller cast of characters, and more or less ceremony (religious confession, obsessive hand washing, birthday parties). Participants' ritual roles may be rigidly defined, as in graduation and initiation ceremonies, or more diffusely assigned, as in the numerous marketplace rituals consumers experience as "fans," "guests," "parishioners," "connoisseurs," "clients," etc. As a form of social symbolic behavior, ritual practices are performed for some target audience. Even the solitary rituals of religious prayer, or personal grooming, are commonly performed with significant others in mind. Ritual behaviors are symbolic expressions through which individuals articulate their social and metaphysical affiliations.

Ritual phenomena are distinguished from other modes of experience by the extent to which they are scripted behavior episodes. The actual behaviors associated with any ritualized expression are typically formal and prescribed by convention. Such behaviors tend to occur repeated and in a fixed sequential pattern over time. Ritual episodes are redundant behaviors that begin at a fixed point (invocation, anthem) and move through a specified series of events to some conclusion (processional, benediction). Ritual behavior demands relatively punctilious observance, and may be extremely resistant to innovation or deviation. As time goes on, it may become ceremonious, and sometimes even solemn (Bossard and Ball 1950). These "serious" qualities enhance ritual's function as a vehicle for symbolic communication.

When a ritual is shared in common by a population segment, it provides a focal point for group identification, and for the articulation of shared meanings. On the other hand, if a ritualized practice becomes too rigidly invariant, an obsessive "ritualism" emerges (Erikson 1977). In this situation behavior that once may have been profoundly meaningful is disparaged as "merely" a ritual. Accompanying ritual behaviors are ritual artifacts that facilitate individuals' ritual role performance. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) suggest that it is useful to conceive of some consumer products as "ritual artifacts." A child's birthday ritual, for example, commonly includes a cake, candles, soft drinks, party games, and gifts for the celebrant. To the extent that a product or brand becomes a ritual artifact, its popularity may endure beyond the dismal norms of the product life cycle.

Although ritual behavior has historically been the focus of much anthropological, sociological and psychological analysis, relatively little emphasis has been given its operation in contemporary life. Some individuals argue that rituals are vestigial links to primitive cultures and, therefore, merit little attention today. Others insist that everyday ritualized behaviors are merely habits, and of no particular significance. The discussion that follows rejects both of these ideas, and develops instead the argument that behavior ritualization plays 2 critical role in the construction of an individual's personal and social identity, and in the bending of groups. Ritual behavior will be presented not as anachronism, but rather as a vital mechanism for human symbolization and interaction. Finally, it is precisely because much ritual expression is "merely" of an everyday nature that it is so interesting to the research.

Edmund Leach (1968) observes that among those who have specialized in the study of ritual, there is wide disagreement even as to how the word should be used. Discussion here aims to interpret the operations of ritual behavior in several distinctive contexts. First, human ritual's parallel forms among animal species are discussed, followed by a consideration of ritual's prominence in religious and aesthetic settings.

Next, the practice of modern civic rituals and rites de passage are presented. Ritual behavior is also reviewed in the context of nuclear family structures.

RITUAL BEHAVIOR AMONG ANIMAL SPECIES

Animal behavior studies commonly argue that human ritual behavior practices predate the advent of formal religions, and has its bases in human sociobiology. Ethological perspectives describe the functioning of ritual systems among animal species, and point to similar operations among homo sapiens. It is useful in studying forms of human ritual action to appreciate these parallel forms of behavior in the animal kingdom. Much interaction between and within animal species is mediated by ritual behavior mechanisms. To a summary of the ethological literature Oh the "ritualization" of animal behavior patterns, Sir Julian Huxley (1966) presents this orienting view:

Ritualization may be defined ethologically as the adaptive formalization or canalization of emotionally motivated behavior, under the teleonomic pressure of natural selection so as: (a) to promote better and more unambiguous signal- function . . . ; (b) to serve as more efficient stimulators or releaser of more efficient patterns in other individuals; (c) to reduce intraspecific damage; and (d) to serve as sexual or social bonding mechanisms (p. 250).

Animal "greeting" rituals illustrate these ideas. For example, when one fish approaches another of the same species, its "motives" may derive from curiosity, hunger, territoriality, or sexual goals. Prescribed ritual behavior unambiguously and immediately informs the other as to what is exactly intended. Huxley points to the striking operational similarity between the results of human ritualization and those of animal ritual behavior (Turner 1969). Both perform the same essential functions of channeling aggression, (etiquette rituals), and of effecting the cohesion of groups (patriotic rituals).

Ethological analyses advance the idea that although men are more in charge of their ritual performances than animals, much human ritualization is a culturally inherited, natural, almost instinctive metalanguage. Much is also consciously created from the evolving dynamics of human culture. The main difference rests mainly on man's capacity for language via systems of symbols (Huxley, 1966, p. 258). Animal "language" relies more on the instinctual interpretation Or unambiguous signals than the manipulation of a variable symbol system. In human systems, ritualization is governed by psychosocial (ontogenetic) selection rather than genetic (phylogenetic) selection mechanisms. The complex variability and individuation that characterizes human behavior creates the potential for objects, persons 2nd events to take on ritual significance. At one end of this animal kingdom. Man projects elements of his own personality into natural objects and forces, thus personalizing them. A distinctive example of this human proclivity is found in the domain of religious ritual expression.

RELIGIOUS AND AESTHETIC RITUALS

Early discussion of human ritual behavior emphasized its relationship to formal religion. Tylor (1873) describes ritual as the dramatic utterance of religious thought, the "gesture language of theology." Robertson Smith (1889) suggests that religion consists essentially of both beliefs and rituals and that, of the two, ritual is in some sense prior. The association between religious ideology and ritual behavior is typically modeled as symbiotic. Clifford Geertz explains:
Eliaade regards ritual 25 primarily a reenactment of sacred prototypes with the purpose of revealing a transcendent world (1965, p. 132). The role of ritual behavior in religious belief systems has been a focus of much anthropological and sociological inquiry. Exclusive emphasis on ritual's religious usages has, however, tended to circumscribe and even discourage the study of ritual behavior elsewhere. The idea that ritual is aimed primarily at the occult tends unnecessarily to sever its connections to rationality and modernity. Such an approach encourages the disparagement of ritual as a relevant topic for the empirical study of modern cultures and problems. Reflecting this limiting view, British positivist A. J. Ayer myopically argues that ritual and religion are "today beyond the range of serious inquiry." (1959, p. 125) It is simply incorrect to relegate ritual behavior solely to the domain of religious dogma and practice, much less to deny its manifestations in contemporary life.

The idea that rituals are primarily religious vehicles has its origin in a basic misconception: that ritual behavior characterizes preindustrial, tradition-bound cultures, but is not a mainstream feature in modern secular societies. This orientation is blind to the operations of ritual practices in various civic, aesthetic, familial, and personal contexts. Further contributing to a distorted view of ritual behavior is the widespread but unrealistic depiction of all traditional cultures as universally bathed in religious mysticism and participating in complex ritual networks. This notion too simplistically contrasts a "robot-like," secular modernity with "lotus-like," mystico-religious folkways. Mary Douglas (1974) argues that cultures vary widely in the prominence they assign to both religious and secular ritual. Recent discussions by Douglas and Isherwood (1979), Gluckman (1962) and Bocock (1974) thoughtfully address the needs of secular urban societies for vital ritual systems. Bocock (1974) rejects the idea that rituals are the exclusive artifacts of primitive cultures. Be argues that ritual behavior is an adjunct not only of religious expression, but, more generally, it relates to key areas of life, to one's sense of community or lack of it; to social cohesion or conflict; to the human body, death, birth, illness, health, sexuality; and to the symbols of beauty and holiness.

Overemphasis on the mystico-religious dimensions of ritual behavior has served to mask its other prominent expressions in everyday life, as well as its biological functions. On the other hand, the purpose here is not to deny the spiritual elements that are found in many rituals. Erikson (1977) argues that "numinous," or mystical components are present, more or less, in all adult ritualizations. It is possible to view aesthetic rituals as a form of secular displacement of religious impulses. Bocock, for example, thinks that the emergence of aesthetic ritual forms is linked to the historical loss of spontaneity in religious ritual (1974, p. 147). The borderline between a purely aesthetic experience and a mystico-religious one becomes difficult to maintain. Mystical elements are likely present in both, a fact which makes untenable the argument that all rituals are religiously motivated. Many, in fact, have distinctly secular functions.

CIVIC RITUALS AND SOCIAL MEANING

Large-scale public rituals are widely viewed as contributing to the cohesion of a society or group; yet today many observers detect a trend away from common ritual practices. From a normative standpoint, there is some agreement that this is not necessarily a sign of social progress and enlightenment. Many Douglas (1974) argues that one of the gravest problems today is the lack of commitment to common social symbols, and she regards the anti-ritualism trend disapprovingly as an ineffective way of humanizing society. In her view, it would be more practical to experiment with more flexible institutional forms, and to seek to develop their ritual expression than to reject all ritual expression as socially primitive or psychologically regressive. The contemporary decline of common ritual behavior forms creates a vacuum wherein unsatisfied demand for symbolic interaction generates strong social pressures for new modes of ritual involvement.

It is not necessary to assume that all new ritual expressions will be necessarily worse than old patterns. Recent modifications of the traditional marriage vows, for example, represent not so much the deterioration of this ritual as they do creative attempts to revitalize it in light of society's evolving ideas about marital partnerships. On the other hand, because of rituals' aggression control functions, the wholesale abandonment of traditional social rituals may increase the risk of social disintegration. This is, of course, a controversial issue, and one which cannot be resolved in this discussion. The more modest purpose here is to appreciate how rituals provide common ground for the symbolic interactions of a society's membership.

Ritual is often studied side by side with social mythology. Harrison characterizes ritual as the dramatization of myth (1919). More recently Joseph Campbell describes the relationship between these two symbolic vehicles:

Myths are the mental supports of rites; rites the physical enactments of myths. By absorbing the myths of his social group and participating in its rites, the youngster is structured to accord with his social as well as his natural environment . . . and (become) a defined and competent member of some specific efficiently functioning social order (1972, P. 45).

From this perspective ritual is modeled as a medium of social communication, even as a language in a quite literal sense (Levi-Strauss, 1962). Ritual serves to define the way to do things, and to provide a series of tools and techniques for social behavior (Bossard and Boll 1950). It crystallizes customs (Weber 1958); it fixes public meanings (Douglas and Isherwood 1979); and defines social order memberships (Campbell, 1972).

Ritual serves to make symbolic statements about the social order. In this capacity it structures social cognitions (Leach 1968; Munn 1973). Firth (1973) notes the role of ritual in the social coding of experiences, and Campbell (1972) describes the "imprinting" function of ritual. Parsons (1949) stresses the role of ritual as a defense against anomic. By providing a common vision for social groups, ritual links the past with the future (Durkheim, 1954). More recently Meddin describes how ritual organizes, then "fixates" or "freezes" symbols in culturally variable ways, and standardizes symbolic activity (1980). Among those who have specialized in the study of human ritual action, there is considerable consensus about its social identity and bonding functions. These aspects are particularly visible in various secular, civic rituals.

Civic rituals cluster around themes of social cohesion, community, and inclusion/exclusion. Identification with the group is enhanced with the ritual use of symbolic substances such as national songs, pledges of allegiance, myth-recitation, and holiday celebrations with their characteristic modes of dress and consumption (foods, beverages, gift giving). W. Lloyd Warner's (1959) analysis of the Memorial Day parade exemplifies American anthropological study of a pervasive civic ritual. Although it appears useful conceptually to distinguish civic rituals from other types, this orientation should not serve to mask the moral and religious tones that often permeate supposedly secular ritual events. Professional football fans, for example, are used to delays in televised post-game coverage while the teams conduct their "team prayers." And in spite of the supposed separation of church and state, elected officials' speeches are thick with references to or entreaties of "god."

RITES DE PASSAGE AND STATUS TRANSITIONS

Various social rituals center around the observance of events that mark individuals social status transitions. These include a class of phenomena anthropologists label rites of passage. Major classes of such rites have been described as marking pregnancy and childbirth, childhood, adolescent initiation rites, betrothal and marriage, and funerals (van Gemep, 1908). Anthropological accounts of the ritual practices
accompanying these events often describe ceremonies involving erotic dress (or undress), arational behaviors (scarification), and superstitious metaphysics. Van Gennep argues that rites of passage are primarily symbolic devices for charging individuals status positions within a social structure. Rites of passage accentuate the permanent quality of a status change: for example, the Western habit of carrying the bride across the threshold signifies the irrevocable transition from one world to another (Mol, p. 239).

In America today, religious and secular rites of passage still play vital roles in individuals' development. The stages of an average person's life are linked by a fairly predictable series of meaningful ritual events: baptism, circumcision, religious confirmation, graduations, military inductions, marriage(s), divorce, disengagement rituals, and funerals. Below the level of formal, grand public rituals second ceremonies lie many diverse rituals of affiliation and identification that may properly be considered rites of passage.

The position of rites of passage in the post-industrial world is an ambiguous and controversial one. The critical problems of becoming male and female, of relations within the family, and of passing into old age, are directly related to the devices which the society offers the individual to help him achieve this new adjustment (Boocock 1974). Modern changes in rites de passage practices are rarely observed with dispassionate neutrality, as sociologists Bossard and Boll (1950) demonstrate below.

No one who studies modern marriage practices can fail to note how often life's most permanent and intimate obligations are assumed in the neon-lighted, cigarette-littered offices of commercial marriage performers, to the underlying strains of music that is neither sacred nor stirring. These are but the more glaring instances in the field of marriage of that growing lack of the ceremonial in American life, which so many people mistake for democracy, but which really is only cheap tawdriness (p. 2).

Here the authors' aesthetic preferences cloud their observations. Even in the stereotypic Las Vegas 24-hour wedding parlor there is ceremony aplenty, albeit with neon rather than candlelight, and perhaps cigarette smoke instead of incense. But the interpersonal bonding still occurs, and new social status is conferred. And, presumably, the vows are still viewed, if not as "sacred," as profoundly meaningful by the participants.

**NUCLEAR FAMILY RITUALS**

While sociological analysis of rituals has been less extensive than anthropological inquiry, study of the sociology of family life has sometimes examined the dynamics of ritual performance in the nuclear family. In studying family ritual, sociological focus is on certain forms of family behavior so recurrent as to suggest the term "habit," and yet having about them aspects of conscious rigidity and a sense of rightness and inevitability not generally associated with mere habits (Bossard and Boll 1950). Through content analysis of the autobiographical materials of seventy- three individuals, Bossard and Boll discovered the thematic characteristics of family behavior patterns the authors consider to be rituals. The authors consider the presence of family rituals to be a "relatively stable index of family integration" (p. 467). Within a family, ritual practices cement relationships and foster joint participation in numerous household activities. They also serve to instruct younger family members in appropriate ways of doing things, as well as validate the authority roles of senior members. In addition, Bossard and Boll's data highlight the impact of family ritual practices on subsequent behavior patterning. One example draws on a family's grooming rituals:

Thursday night was always hair-washing right at our house. Religiously, when that night of the week rolled around, Mother would march me upstairs, and make sure I got into the tub before I had a chance to jump into bed. I usually knew when it was time for this ordeal by listening to the radio. It never failed that when Rudy Vallee would come on the air, Mother would call: "Come on, sister, it's time for your hair-washing." To me this was worse than a dose of castor oil. "But all little boys and girls have to have their heads washed," Mother would say. "Look at Daddy and me, we are grown people, and we have to wash our hair." "All right," I would say, "but little girl won't ever have to wash her hair." This would make Mother laugh, but all the same she would dump me into the tub and start scrubbing away. When the Rudy Vallee program went off the air I was delighted, for I knew the job was over and I would not have to go through such torture for another week. Now it is many years later, and other radio programs are on the air, but Thursday night is still hairwashing night in my life (1950, p. 280).

Family rituals fix members' ideas about what is, or is not, the "right" way to do something. These patterns are enduring and carry over into other areas of ritualized behavior. That such mechanisms operate seems clear; how they do so is a complicated issue. Leach comments that we understand roughly what ritual messages are about and at least part of what they say, but we are still "very much in the dark as to how ritual behaviors manage to convey messages" (1950, p. 524). The most thoroughgoing theoretical examination of the dynamics of ritual behavior is found among clinically oriented psychologists. They focus on the emergence of ritualized interplay as an aspect of individuals psychosocial development.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF RITUAL BEHAVIOR**

Psychological approaches to the study of ritual behavior vary considerably, but they tend generally to emphasize ritual's dual role in regulating an individual's impulse life, and in mediating social relationships. Freud views some rites and ceremonies as manifestations of obsessional neuroses (1959, p. 126). He also describes them as necessary prerequisites to the development of human civilization because they demand the renunciation of socially harmful instincts. Jung also stresses the role of ritual in diverting "the libido from its natural riverbed of everyday habit (1960, p. 44); and in building dams and walls to "keep back the dangers of the unconscious" (1959, p. 22). More recently, a study by Meddin (1980) emphasizes ritual's impulse control function. He describes the ritual practices employed by the Israeli army to facilitate its paratroopers' transitions from combat modes to everyday settings. This orientation runs parallel to the ethological perspective on the use of ritual to canalize aggression within animal species.

In addition to ritual's function as a defense mechanism against impulsiveness, it provides positive benefits in its own right. Jung believes that ritual restores wholeness (1959, p. 188), and contributes to individuation (1958, p. 273). Erikson also stresses the integrative function of ritual for the individual. Erikson's focus is not so much on the grand display of rituals and ceremonies as it is on the meaning of everyday ritualized interplay for the development of the individual ego (1982, p. 73). Erikson argues that daily ritualization facilitates a person's adaption to both the natural and the social universe. Unlike the instinctive, relatively unvarying rituals observed among animal species, human ritualization is a mixture of formality and improvisation. In Erikson's view ritualization is anything but neurotic symptomatology; rather, it "supports the formation of a set of behavior patterns combining human propensities in a cultural system within a circumscribed section of nature and technology (1977, p. 82).

Erikson concludes that at its best ritualization represents a "creative formalization which helps to avoid both impulsive excess and compulsive self-restriction (1977, p. 82)."

**RITUAL INVOLVEMENT AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR**

The preceding discussion has sought to map the domain of contemporary ritual behavior, identify the primary modes of ritualized expression, and interpret their essential functioning. This undertaking points to the pervasiveness and vitality of numerous ritual behavior systems, and advances the idea that rituals do merit serious attention. A sensitivity to individuals' participation in ritualized behavior systems should broaden the epistemological base from which researchers seek to "know" the consumer.
First, rituals are "serious" behavior. As the physical enactments of myth systems (Campbell 1972), even everyday rituals express individuals' strivings for social status, maturity, and sexual identity. Some consumer rituals do so directly: election to an exclusive membership, graduation ceremonies, or an exchange of going-steady bracelets. Here, much importance is attached to a particular, exact sequence of behaviors, and the use of symbolic artifacts. Also "serious" in nature are many diverse, everyday rituals such as those associated with retail queuing behavior, or with consuming a family meal. Ideas about what is "right" are reiterated through prescribed ritual practices. Formal study of consumer rituals will improve understanding of the normative dimensions of consumption behavior. Such social symbolic aspects of market behavior have been largely neglected by the research community (Zaltman and Wallendorf 1977).

Ritual behavior also highlights the depth of content of even everyday behavior. Although this orientation was commonplace during the motivation research era, it has largely been forgotten by the process oriented trends of recent years. Yet consumers' behaviors still, presumably, involve motives, frustrations, anxieties, and superstitions. Consumers' ritualized experiences are often replete with fantasy elements. A recent study by Rook and Levy (1982) analyzed the elaborate fantasy themes that energize young adults' daily grooming rituals. Failure to deal with these deeper levels of consumers' experiences often results in static and naive depictions of human behavior (Levy and Zaltman 1975).

A third general benefit from the formal study of consumers' involvements in ritual systems will impact the study of consumption symbolism. Learning how individuals come to ritualize various aspects of their consumption behavior will complement recent work revealing when they learn to decode product symbolism (Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982). Ritual behavior is essentially symbolic behavior, and its study should illuminate what is often the marketers' blind spot. Finally the study of an individual's ritual involvements may extend understanding of consumer brand loyalty. This idea rests on the observation that ritual behavior is extensively scripted and highly redundant. To the extent that a product or brand becomes a ritual artifact (Douglas and Isherwood 1979), predictions can be made about its usage probabilities. This discussion claims that numerous benefits will derive from the study of ritual behavior. Perhaps this overstates the case, yet it is hard to deny the rich texture and deep understandings that have resulted from anthropological studies of ritual behavior systems.

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Ritual has been a fertile research domain for researchers in the field of consumer culture theory and has been used to understand the meanings of consumption and consumer behavior more broadly. Rook (1985) introduced and elaborated on the ritual construct as a vehicle for interpreting consumer behavior. McCracken (1986) analyzed the movement of cultural meaning theoretically and suggested that advertising, the fashion system, and rituals (possession, exchange, grooming, and divestment) are responsible for this movement. Ritual has been defined by Rook (1985, p. 252) as "a type Ritual, religious beliefs, and symbols are in Turner's perspective essentially related. He expressed this well in another definition: Ritual is "a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests" (Turner 1977a:183). In the cultural field, ritual symbols are regarded as clusters of abstract meanings. The dominant symbols are studied in each ritual performance and in each of its phases. The cultural field encompasses the ritual within the totality of Ndembu rituals and within the cultural realm of Ndembu religious beliefs.