

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox
Editor

Coping Rituals in Fearful Times

An Unexplored Resource
for Healing Trauma



Springer

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Geneva, Switzerland

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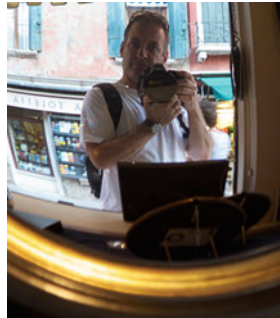
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Foreword

The idea that rituals are crucial to human behaviour is consistent with the arguments of different social scientists, such as Durkheim, Goffman, Collins, Douglas, Leach, Kertzer, Bell, Alexander, Warner, Shils, and Bellah, who have used this concept to analyse and examine society. However, despite the work of scholars such as these, the concept of ritual has been underutilised, if not often ignored, in sociology and related disciplines.

This is due to the conventional understanding of rituals in sociology and the social/behavioural sciences in general. For instance, it is often assumed that rituals are found only, or far more often, in premodern rather than modern societies. This is due in part to implicit or explicit evolutionary assumptions that depict modern societies as increasingly rational. Rituals are also presumed to be static, unchanging, and fixed in nature. Furthermore, rituals are often thought to occur only or mainly in religious or sacred contexts. And rituals are believed to be of secondary importance to more significant social processes—and epiphenomenal in that they are a product of those processes—which implies they have little effect or significance for people and occurrences in society.

Consistent with these assumptions, we find that many sociologists and others, while attentive to social organisation, pay relatively little attention to culture and/or identity (or personality) structures notwithstanding the contributions of those in social psychology, sociology of emotions, and the sociology (and anthropology) of culture.

For these reasons, rituals are often thought to have limited explanatory value and are often downplayed in social analysis. They remain in various ways invisible to and ‘under the radar’ of many students of social life and modern society.

In contrast, like this book with its thought-provoking range of approaches to ritual as a resource for healing trauma, structural ritualisation theory (SRT) focuses on the role rituals play in society.¹ Both are grounded on the basic supposition that daily life

¹For a discussion of some of the issues addressed by the SRT perspective, see Knottnerus 2016 (2011) and Knottnerus 1997, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, in press.

is normally characterised by an array of social and personal rituals. Such everyday—often taken for granted—rituals can lead to consequences unanticipated by group members while both being fed by and feeding into larger societal levels of interaction. As such, this theory and the chapters in this collection are directed to rituals that occur in various social settings, e.g. face-to-face interaction, small groups, formal organisations, and society as a whole.

Likewise, just as the presuppositions of SRT support my argument that ritual provides a ‘missing link’ in sociological thought, they also serve as a general framework for this entire volume on the role of ritual in healing trauma. More precisely:

1. Rituals are found in both premodern and modern societies. Stated somewhat differently, rituals are found all over the world and throughout history. They occur in all societies in one form or another.
2. Rituals occur at and impact micro- and macro-levels of society, ranging from face-to-face interaction and relationships to larger groups and organisations, societies as a whole, and globally. Furthermore, the relations between ritual activities within any particular level and between levels can take many different forms and exhibit various degrees of complexity.
3. Rituals occur in both secular and religious, or more broadly speaking, sacred contexts. They are not restricted to only religious and sacred milieus. Rather, rituals can play a central role in our ordinary, everyday lives and many collective events in the secular realm.
4. Rituals are dynamic in nature and subject to change. They are not always static, fixed, or permanent in nature. While rituals can be enduring they may also be altered for many reasons.
5. Rituals can have consequences for social organisation (i.e. social structure), culture, and identity. These are key dimensions of human and social reality that are of interest to many. Rituals can significantly influence all of these factors.
6. Ritual is a social phenomenon that can be investigated with very different methods and types of evidence, e.g. qualitative and quantitative techniques. Evidence collected by these research strategies can complement, supplement, and validate the findings of different methodologies.
7. The concept of ritual can be linked to perspectives emphasising other social dynamics and issues, i.e. approaches focusing on ritual should be capable of forming linkages or conceptual bridges with other perspectives (what is sometimes referred to as theory integration).
8. The idea of ritual can provide a common vocabulary and framework to study developments occurring in various groups and its individual members. It has analytical value helping us to explain the workings of society.
9. Ritual is a concept that has potential relevance for the multifaceted nature of social life. Consequently, it can be utilised in a wide range of studies given the complexity of human behaviour. In other words, ritual has implications for various dimensions of human reality ranging from personal experiences and individual conduct to diverse kinds of social formations, large and small.

10. Rituals can be of profound importance in social life. They are real and consequential for humans, albeit in numerous and varied ways.
11. Rituals have great explanatory value. Simply stated, they help us understand different aspects of social behaviour in a multitude of situations.

In my work, SRT directly addresses these issues and concerns because it, amongst other things, uses the idea of ritual to explain different social developments. It provides formulations that focus on ritual dynamics taking place in many settings throughout the world and in different historical periods, e.g. small groups, corporations such as Enron, ethnic communities in urban areas or small towns, slave societies in the antebellum south, health-care facilities, especially nursing homes, the emergence of golf in the USA, youth groups in nineteenth-century French elite schools, the socialisation of youth in ancient Sparta, and political systems ranging from the Nazi party to the Khmer Rouge. For all these reasons, ritual and perspectives using this concept provide a missing link in sociological analysis and more generally the social/behavioural sciences.

So too the work presented in this book is consistent with and builds upon these assumptions. The following chapters demonstrate in different ways how ritual provides a missing link in our understanding of human behaviour and social dynamics. More accurately, these chapters in both bold and more implicit, subtle ways demonstrate how critically important trauma is in human lives and the importance of ritual for coping with and mitigating the deleterious effects of traumatic experiences.

I would also emphasise that this volume's focus on ritual and trauma parallels and contributes to one line of research in SRT dealing with the disruption of ritualised practices. While I have not focused on the concept of 'trauma', it is directly relevant for much of this research and significantly expands the scope of what others and I have studied and thought about. Our work focuses on disruptions, deritualisation, and re-ritualisation, i.e. breakdowns of social and personal rituals, their consequences, and the ways people may cope with such experiences by reconstituting old or new ritualised activities.

More precisely, disruption refers to events or conditions that interrupt the rituals that people normally engage in. Deritualisation involves the breakdown or loss of previously engaged-upon rituals, i.e. the cessation of ritualised practices that occur in our daily, taken-for-granted lives. This can be an extremely difficult condition for individuals and groups; it can be confusing, uncomfortable, disorienting, aversive, and destabilising. Re-ritualisation refers to the re-creation of rituals after disruption and deritualisation. The re-creation of rituals (and patterns of such practices) helps people achieve, amongst other things, a sense of direction, a meaningful focus, coherence in their perceptions and behaviour, stability in their lives, and a sense of security. Thus, the re-enactment of rituals serves as a buffer to disruptive occurrences. They enable people to cope with problematic situations such as these.

Research has examined these ideas in a variety of settings, including internment in concentration camps during the mid-twentieth century, the displacement of youth during China's Cultural Revolution, disasters in general, the impact of earthquakes

on a major city in Nepal, dark ages/periods of ecological degradation in ancient China, task groups in a laboratory experiment, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia with particular attention to ritual and social control, rituals engaged in by victims of disasters, i.e. tornadoes striking two American cities, and the ritual and social dynamics of crews on polar expeditions from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.

Because of the contributions to this new book edited by Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, I have gained a much better appreciation for how most if not nearly all of the cases studied involve different forms of trauma.

Indeed, the chapters in this book (and the research just mentioned) offer many ideas and raise many questions about the nature of rituals and how rituals may help people cope with the disruptions caused by, for instance, (a) hurricanes, earthquakes, and tornadoes, (b) actions often coercive in nature such as wars, colonisation, terrorism, internment, or imprisonment, (c) long-term, unsafe, stressful, and isolated ventures and settings such as expeditions, space missions, pandemic lockdowns, or refugee camps, and (d) social, economic, scientific/technological, and political developments in the modern world and to a certain degree in premodern societies. All of these situations and others not mentioned can involve trauma and the potential for different kinds of ritualised responses.

Overall, the goals of this volume are clearly stated by the editor. They are to examine a wide variety of approaches that are potentially relevant to the issue of ritual as an asset for responding to trauma and to focus on what it means to ritualise in ways not impeded by mistaken presumptions and ways of thinking. In doing so, it suggests new points of view for examining an extremely wide range of ritual practices. And it would promote further examination of the ways and reasons ritual takes such varied forms in different epochs, regions of the world, cultures, and even within specific societies.

I will not address in detail the organisation of the book and the authors and contents of the different chapters because Jeltje Gordon-Lennox does so in exemplary fashion in the "Introduction". I will say that the contributors' focus reflects the just described objectives of the editor and many of the suppositions that underlie the belief that ritual provides a missing link for understanding human behaviour and the workings of society. My comments will, therefore, be of a much more limited and general nature concerning the assumptions and goals of the authors.

Certainly, the contributions to this volume rest on the assumption that rituals occur in the present and the past, i.e. modern and premodern times, and in all types of societies and regions of the world. For instance, some chapters focus on the archaeological study of mortuary rituals in prehistory, healing rituals in ancient China (481–221 BCE), and rituals such as processions, festivals, and the wearing of masks in medieval Europe. Other chapters, on the other hand, concentrate on the modern world, sometimes in a very broad manner, and other times giving more attention to modern Western nations. And certain chapters focus on rituals in South Sudan (both today and in the past), and contemporary Afghanistan, Ukraine (and the Soviet Union), Nepal, Brazil, and Switzerland.

While the focus of the contributions to this book is on a more micro-level since they are examining trauma in the lives of people and their enactment of rituals, they also often give attention to more macro-levels of society including the ways the latter may influence the former. For instance, we learn how widespread events and practices such as wars and political conflict in a country, the treatment of patients in hospitals (large organisations) and medical professions (which operate at a national level), and hazardous environmental practices, some of which are influenced by large-scale political, economic, and corporate entities, influence the lives of individuals, the suffering they experience, and the rituals they may turn to.

So too we find that while some rituals are of a more sacred nature, others occur in very secular settings. Contrast, for example, the more traditional, ancestral rituals of the Dinka in South Sudan, rituals which brought a sacred quality to the secular environments of a hospital, those of farmers struggling to survive in Nepal or Brazil, or the routine use of the Internet by persons around the world. In the latter case, we learn, however, that sometimes when people mourn and memorialise online the death of certain persons this type of collective activity takes on, albeit in a temporary manner, a special meaning for all concerned, a quality that might be considered to be sacred in nature.

Actually, this online collective event also shows how rituals are dynamic. For instance, a new online ritual has emerged in recent years in which individuals respond to the death of a person in a manner that is quite different from traditional practices. And another example is the recent development of a community-based ritual whose goal is to facilitate healing and reconciliation in war-torn Afghanistan.

Given the potency and ubiquitous nature of many rituals, it should not be surprising that they have consequences for social organisation, culture, and identity (and personality). For example, it is argued that responses to social dislocation in the modern world can lead to different forms of powerful addictions, which may be reduced if not eliminated through the cultivation of particular kinds of communal rituals. When this happens the social worlds people live in and the structure of their relations to other groups can radically change along with the culturally shared beliefs and sentiments they share with others and the way they see themselves, i.e. their identity. Moreover, in a study of people's responses to terror, we find that when individuals in two quite different groups engaged in special rituals, their sense of despair or trauma was ameliorated and the values presumably shared by group members were affirmed.

Of course, we should remember that the study of ritual is not limited to any particular technique. Many different methodologies can be employed to study this phenomenon as the chapters in this volume clearly demonstrate. Some of the methodologies used include interviews, field observations of specific groups and/or collective events, personal (autobiographical) accounts, and the examination of historical evidence such as ancient texts or objects, e.g. masks. So too some studies are based on the examination of other research employing similar or different methods whether they be quantitative or qualitative in nature.

Moreover, some contributions are informed by or directly build upon different conceptual frameworks and arguments, i.e. a bridge, linkage, or integration of

theoretical ideas. For instance, one chapter presents an extremely sophisticated formulation, polyvagal theory, which primarily deals with neurophysiological processes involving the brain and a major nerve system. Yet, being receptive to observations and insights concerning ritual, the theory also addresses behaviours that are found in ancient rituals and their relevance for people's physiological condition in contemporary society. In a quite different vein, the chapter on addiction in modern societies, which takes a psychological—or perhaps I should say psychosocial—approach, draws upon the ideas of such diverse thinkers and scholars as Plato, Karl Polanyi, and Émile Durkheim.

The issues and investigations discussed so far clearly show how ritual is a concept that provides a common vocabulary and set of ideas for studying and better understanding different groups and persons. The scope of the concept is to be sure wide-ranging. As one example of how this concept can be used, consider the investigation of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the doctors and scientists who at great risk documented the health costs of the contamination for countless persons and who developed protocols for curing and preventing some of the medical problems many people experience. Their dedication to such endeavours was grounded in the rituals of science which they were committed to, ranging from the collection of evidence and developing explanations for what they found to the need to disseminate this information to others and provide care for all those who were sick. The value of ritual is quite apparent in this chapter on Chernobyl and especially the discussion of it by Jeltje Gordon-Lennox in the introductory chapter.

The cases examined in this volume also demonstrate the value of ritual for understanding the different dimensions of human reality. It is a concept that can be used in many kinds of studies whether they address the impact of the scientific and medical professions to which one belongs, the ways ritual can help people cope with disturbing experiences, or other investigations.

Finally, all the chapters in this volume and the other studies referred to here show how profoundly important ritual is in the lives of humans, past and present. And how important it is for dealing with harmful and emotionally disturbing disruptions in our lives, perhaps especially in the world we live in today. For all of these reasons, ritual has great explanatory value.

To summarise, this book (and SRT) rests on the fundamental assumption that ritual is a key dimension of social behaviour as are other aspects of social conduct such as rationality, symbolic interpretation, or emotions. Put somewhat differently, *ritual is like an engine that drives much of social life*, sometimes quite intensely (Knottnerus, 2016 [2011]). This driving force, particularly as it is exposed in these chapters, remains largely unacknowledged at a time when ritual greatly influences how society handles the trauma of a pandemic.

In closing, the chapters in this volume are extremely timely and relevant, highly engaging, thought-provoking, sometimes quite moving, and simply put exceedingly interesting if not fascinating to read. It is a very valuable work, not only for all the reasons previously discussed, but because it paves the way for more theorising, research, reflections, and conjectures about ritual, trauma, and their effects on individuals' psychological states, the psychosocial reality of group members, and

broader collective phenomena within society. I urge all concerned with such issues to read this book.

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About the Editor

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, MDiv, is a psychotherapist trained in body-based approaches and world religions. Her research and practice is influenced by her life experiences in conflict zones on several continents, in particular her work with the International Committee of the Red Cross. She has written five practical guides on secular ritualising, two in French and three in English. This collection continues the conversation on ritual and trauma started in *Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies: A Transdisciplinary Conversation* (2017, Jessica Kingsley Publishers). Jeltje lives with her husband and their two children in Switzerland. *Website:* gordon-lennox.ch *E-mail:* Jeltje@Gordon-Lennox.ch

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Introduction



Ritual, Dignity, and the Fragility of Life

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox

Tunisian Chamseddine Marzoug is more famous for his ‘cemetery of the forgotten’ than he is for his prowess as a fisherman. Several times a week he digs graves to give a certain dignity to the unidentified migrants whose bodies wash up on the beaches of Zarzis. When he is not burying their remains, he marks and lays flowers on their tombs.¹

Death inmate Roger McGowen declared his innocence from the start. The Afro-American man who has been imprisoned since 1986 undertook, alone, a long spiritual journey that led him from rage at the system and victimhood to compassion, forgiveness, freedom, and unconditional love.²

Many of the islands in the world, including those off the coast of the Netherlands, may be lost to the sea over the next 20–30 years. Through the

(continued)

¹ Chamseddine’s cousin Captain Bourassine and his colleagues rescued hundreds of drowning migrants as they fished the Mediterranean Sea. Italian authorities punished the Captain by imprisoning him, confiscating his fishing boat, and dumping his catch back into the sea (Harari & Maillard, 2019).

² For over 20 years, Swiss writer and sociologist Pierre Pradervand has been in contact with Roger McGowen. This support turned McGowen into a spiritual model for hundreds around the world. See Pradervand’s book, *Messages of Life from Death Row* (2009).

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fragile beauty of the spectacular migration of monarch butterflies, Dutch artist Desirée Dolron communicates urgent and foreboding concern for the effects of environmental degradation on insect and human movements.³

‘I’ve experienced grief. But until the COVID-19 pandemic, I had not felt a part of an immense and widespread global grief,’ writes Zenobia Jeffries Warfield.⁴ ‘Now we’re in it too—right alongside people in Italy, Japan, South Africa, and most other countries. In my hometown of Detroit, the number of new cases and deaths climbs. While African Americans are only 14% of the state’s population, we’re 33% of the COVID-19 cases and 41% of the deaths. Amid so much grief and renewed anger at the inequalities and injustices, we’re witnessing a rising up of our communities on a breathtaking scale. We have seen the power of community . . . to change the future . . . to draw on reserves of resilience . . . to look out for all people . . . to cultivate joy despite fear.’ (Warfield, 2020)

As unpredictability escalates on a global scale, the aptitude shown by people like Chamseddine, Roger, Desirée, and Zenobia to apply their creativity and imaginative faculties to coping with fear and despair through ritualising becomes ever more crucial for human survival. Humankind has always used creativity, imagination, and ritualising to deal with not only practical needs like food, clothing, and shelter, but also to cope with threats such as illness, transience, and death. Nearly a century ago, anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski recognised the human psycho-physiological need for ready-made or invented ritual acts to palliate anxiety and fear in uncertain times⁵ (Malinowski, 1948 [1925]).

The chapters in this volume build on previous conversations of scholars on ritualising, such as those initiated by Malinowski, and the 1966 symposium on *Ritualization in Man*, which was broadened in *Secular Ritual* (1977) and in *Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies* (2017).⁶ While the symposium directs our attention to

³ In addition to ‘Monarch’ (2018), Desirée Dolron has created other installations with similar concerns such as ‘Complex Systems’ (2017), ‘I will show you fear in a handful of dust I’ (2016), ‘Uncertain TX’ (2016), and ‘Xteriors’ (2001–2005). See website: Dolron (2021).

⁴ Zenobia Jeffries Warfield, an Executive Editor at YES! Magazine, is a mother and journalist who is always searching for ways to better herself, her family, her community, and the world.

⁵ When man realises his impotence, ‘his anxiety, his fears and hopes, induce a tension. . . His nervous system and his whole organism drive him to some substitute activity. The man lost at night in the woods or the jungle, beset by fear, [may act] like an animal which attempts to save itself by feigning death. These reactions are natural responses to such a situation, based on a universal psycho-physiological mechanism. They engender what could be called extended expressions of emotion in act and in word.’ Malinowski refers to these ‘expressions’ as ‘spontaneous ritual and verbiage’ (1948 [1925], pp. 60–62).

⁶ The symposium was organised by Julian Huxley. Women picked up the concern for non-religious ritualising: Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff edited *Secular Ritual* (1977) and I edited *Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies* (2017).

how ritualisation—a highly condensed verbal and behavioural language—serves to perpetuate and communicate essential knowledge, the second conference attempts to define ritual and unyoke it from religion. The third book points to the role and function of non-religious ritualising in contemporary multicultural societies. The contributors to this fourth volume, *Coping Rituals in Fearful Times*, hone in on how the transformative power of ritualising can mitigate trauma by sustaining wellbeing and connectedness in an era of uncertainty, where human interactions are increasingly virtual.

It is important to clarify at the outset what this book is and what it is not. The volume does not pretend to be an anthropological or scientific discussion of what ritual is or of ritual efficacy, be it secular or sacred. It does not intend to pit traditional rites against emerging ritual, nor does it stand within or promote a particular theoretical perspective on ritual. Rather, the goal of this work as a whole is to highlight what it means today to ritualise at the systemic edge by drawing attention to the immense spectrum of human ritual activity that brings to bear on the issue of ritual as a resource for treating trauma.

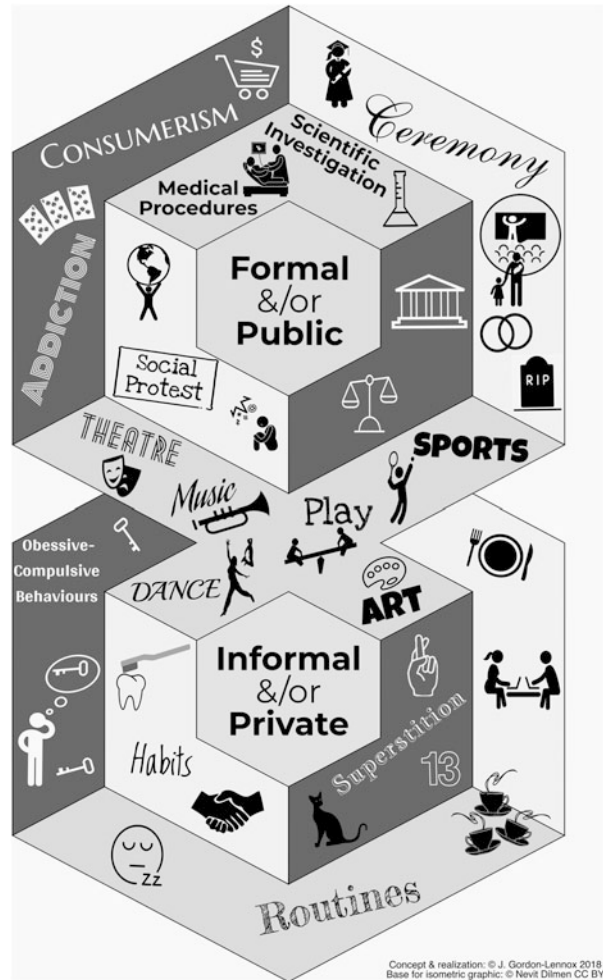
Doing Ritual

Our prehistoric ancestors left us few clues as to how they made and performed their rituals. Yet the objects they left behind attest to their great imagination and creativity in ritualising the bittersweet events of life. As noted, ritual practice is inherently tied to fearful situations because it appears to reduce the anxiety that impedes normal functioning by replacing it with a feeling of control (Malinowski, 1948 [1925]; Knottnerus, 1997, 2016; Sosis & Handwerker, 2011; Snodgrass et al., 2017; Lang et al., 2020).

Like our ancestors, we too create and ‘do ritual’ from birth to death to meet our biological needs for safety, deal with strong emotion, and be with others. Today, we tend to align ourselves with a number of loose ‘tribes’—physical or virtual—that share our interests, concerns, ideals, and fears, such as our yoga class, online gamer group, or the parents with whom we wait and chat each day at the gate of our children’s school. We commonly gravitate towards collective and personal rituals that help us be and feel like a balanced, good, and typical person in our corner of the world.

In and of itself, ritualmaking is neutral; it’s what we humans do. Yet just as ritual practice can promote love, healing, and social cohesion, its shadow side enforces a peculiar model of order that favours the injustice, inequality, and fragmentation that foments war, hatred, fake news, and racism. Imposed rituals—such as those enforced by legal systems, psychiatric hospitals, religious institutions or sects, or the workplace—are readily perceived as manipulative.

Fig. 1 Spectrum of ritual activity. Ritual represents a vast array of human activity that spans from elaborate public ceremony to intimate personal habits. This hexagonal isometric representation of the spectrum is nearly an infinity symbol. Rather than divide ritual activities into two spheres, the relatively few rigid lines create a mirror effect. Ceremonial ritual—long the main focus of ritual study—represents only a small part of the public/formal sphere where it is juxtaposed against superstition. Likewise, consumerism is juxtaposed against obsessive-compulsive behaviours. Common gestures and words, like shaking hands and saying ‘hello’, also figure in the model.
| © J. Gordon-Lennox



Spectrum of Ritual Activity

A strikingly vast array of activity is associated with ritual, from elaborate public ceremony to intimate personal habits. Jury trials, execution of criminals, and scientific symposia are marked by ritual tradition, repetition, and invariance, whereas a family meal often features spontaneity, irregularity, and variety (see Fig. 1). Ritual studies scholar Catherine Bell’s model of ritual practice, built on the work of Bourdieu (1977), recognizes a continuum of structuring and structured practices, ranging from everyday routines to highly ritualised ones with no clear separation of ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ (2009 [1992]).

What becomes evident from this perspective is the natural shift in focus away from the rituals people ‘have’ towards *how* and *why* people ‘do ritual’. Viewing ritual as a spectrum of activity highlights the importance of considering vantage point. From fiancés’ point of view, their wedding is about love; paramount to the state is the change in the couple’s civil and tax status. Most people bury their mother only once; scholars look at the big picture to see ritual repetition. Variation, not uniformity, in what, when, where, how, and how frequently rituals are created and practised is the norm across all times and peoples. The concept of *ritual acculturation*⁷ fits with our notion of how and why ritual practice changes from one era, region, and culture to the next. Ritual is, and has always been, culturally constructed. Perhaps this is why ritual has managed for so long to elude, if not outrightly defy, definition.

Going Global

With lucid foresight, anthropologist Jack R. Goody noted in the 1970s that the term ‘ritual’ was being defined and applied so widely among scholars, and others, that it was becoming a useless ‘global construct’ that could mean everything and anything; he appealed for a ‘revitalising paradigm shift’⁸ (1977, pp. 34–35). Ritual as a global construct first materialised with the post-war Beat culture of the 1950s and the hippie movements of the 1960s. These countercultures gave rise to creative ritual performances where ‘improvisation, direct experience, immediacy, and spontaneity were priorities’ (Aukeman, 2016, p. 107). Since then, traditional rites appear to cohabit in an uneasy ménage à trois with new rituals on one side and ritual theories on the other.⁹

At the heart of this uneasiness is a diehard notion of ritual as religious, if not sacred, with inherent transformative power that sets it apart from daily life, protects it from scrutiny, and welds it to prescribed order, formalism, repetition, invariance, and traditionalism.¹⁰ This narrow view contributes to the very aura that has recently

⁷ Social psychologist Batje Mesquita’s work on acculturation led to a concept she calls *emotion acculturation* (Mesquita et al., 2016). Adapted to the notion of ritual, the term *ritual acculturation* shows how one set of *ritual and ritual practices* are replaced by other sets to affect meaning, relationships, and health.

⁸ Goody’s article appears in *Secular Ritual*. It refers to scientist Thomas Kuhn’s popularised concept of ‘paradigm shift’, which argues that scientific advancement is not evolutionary but a ‘series of peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolutions’, during which ‘one conceptual worldview is replaced by another’ (Kuhn, 1996 [1962], p. 10).

⁹ Bell questions whether it is even possible to generate a theoretical model that simultaneously respects the ritual, the participants, and the social scientists analysing them (1993). Indeed, it is difficult to measure the implications of analysing ‘vantage point’, that is, what traditional or new rituals feel like for those at the centre of the ritual, participants, observers, and scholars without influencing either the process or the outcome.

¹⁰ Certain archaeologists decry the confusion created by the identification of some practices and occasions as ritual and others as domestic (Brück, 1999; Bradley, 2003). The ‘term ritual or rather

made ritual so popular—and so marketable. With a savvy makeover that untethers ritual from religion—while retaining a transcendent aura—marketing researchers and advertisers have successfully turned ritual into a global consumer construct and set in motion a revitalised paradigm shift quite different from the one imagined by Goody. The reconditioning of ritual as a consumer construct forces us to take a deeper look at the context in which ritual went global and what might distinguish it from non-ritual.

*Global Dislocation*¹¹

Ritual was, in fact, just one of many constructs co-opted to serve global consumer mechanisms. Sociologist Saskia Sassen tags the 1980s as a watershed for how wealth and power are accumulated and redistributed. The innovative global mechanisms invented to replace primitive accumulation of wealth (e.g. peasant and communal land ownership) and boost consumerism range from the logistics of outsourcing to the algorithms of finance. These same mechanisms cause extensive habitat destruction that expels both the monarch butterflies portrayed by Desirée Dolron's art and the people who wash up and are buried on a Tunisian beach by Chamseddine Marzoug.

[T]hese types of development [have led to greater inequality,] shrinking economies in much of the world, escalating destructions of the biosphere all over the globe, and the reemergence of extreme forms of poverty and brutalization where we thought they had been eliminated or were on their way out. Today, the structures through which concentration happens are complex assemblages of multiple elements, rather than the fiefdoms of a few robber barons. (Sassen, 2014, p. 12)

[The] vast destructive processes that produce dislocations are by-products of the pursuit of what powerful actors are after. The fact that people are pushed out of having reasonable lives can be [considered] a secondary effect. (Sassen, 2015, p. 178)

For perhaps the first time in human history, the usual discourse on poverty, racism, and injustice does not suffice to grasp the sources, impact, and sheer scale of the new socioeconomic and environmental dislocations. Granted, Zenobia Jeffries Warfield's description of the 2020 lockdown in Detroit leaves no doubt that the poor and those living in unjust contexts remain the most vulnerable. Yet the subtle shift to global dislocation is even more brutal than the actual targeting of the poor and defenceless. It causes suffering and fragmentation across the board, touching public arenas (political, economic, social, cultural, spiritual) as well as our intimacy (emotional, sensory, sexual, neuronal, relational). Moreover, the underlying

the more useful concept of ritualization as a process (cf. Bell, 2007, 2009) has the potential to inform our understanding of situations and phenomena which are definitely not religious in any sense' (Hamilakis, 2011, p. 211).

¹¹ In chemistry, the term 'dislocation' refers to irregularities in the fine structure lattice of an otherwise normal crystal. In this context, the word refers to subtle, and not so subtle, irregularities in the fine structure lattice of modern society.

brutalities that lead to dislocation are too often produced and reproduced by the complexity of the knowledge and technology that we have come to depend on—and may even admire.

Expulsions at the Systemic Edge

Sassen qualifies these dislocations as a type of expulsion (2014, 2015) that affects not only the small farmer in India, Brazil, or Switzerland but also the upper-middle-class family with a subprime mortgage and the hospital doctor forced to choose between ‘risk management’ and the Hippocratic Oath.

People living at what Sassen calls the ambiguous or systemic edge¹² are forced to migrate when they are expelled from their professional livelihood or driven from their homes. Like Roger McGowen, they are expelled from, and kept from going back to, their usual living spaces when full occupancy—which ensures good returns on shareholder investments in privatised prisons, refugee camps, and other such facilities—prevails over rehabilitation of the condemned or returning the displaced to normal life. Along with monarch butterflies, migrants, prisoners, and others are lost in transit and become invisible. Expelled men, women, and children do not count at all; they do not even figure into the picture (2015).

The sheer complexity of these global assemblages makes it difficult, if not impossible, to trace responsibility for the expulsions produced. The ruthless logic of the systems’ assemblages makes it equally hard for those who reap the benefits to feel responsible for any ‘collateral damage’ caused to people or the environment. Where no responsibility can be attributed or assumed, the risks of fragmentation and dislocation are increased a hundredfold, along with fear, uncertainty, stress, and trauma.

Transforming Trauma

When our sense of control over our environment is seriously compromised, fear of not being able to protect ourselves and those we love puts us at risk of psycho-physiological trauma, and thus of physical and mental illnesses, and social isolation.

¹² Sassen conceives of the systemic or ambiguous edge as the point where a condition takes on a format so extreme that it cannot be easily apprehended. This ambiguous edge signals the existence of conceptually subterranean trends. The proliferation of these edges means that each major domain has its own distinctive systemic edge (2015).

Fear Is a Vital Emotion

Fear is a deep primitive emotional and physical reaction to threat that can save but also kill. Just like the pain that pulls our hand from a hot stove, fear can pull us out of harm's way. A quick peek at top selling books like *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* (Jeffers, 1987) reveals that the fight-flight reaction to threat is well known. Action can indeed jump-start us out of fear and lead to power and agency. Paradoxically, life itself may be threatened when fear initiates metabolic shutdown (Scaer, 2014 [2001]; Schore, 2002).¹³

Being 'scared to death' refers to the rabbit-in-the-headlights reaction. Society often blames victims of aggression who collapse into submission rather than fleeing or fighting back. Feeling trapped by a danger that cannot be escaped activates a primitive immobilisation reaction that can result in death feigning or even death. A strong tie between fear and imagination can enhance or inhibit these processes. Political powers, for example, are very much aware of the value of fear—and the illusion of safety—for social control. In the 1950s, the threat of nuclear war coalesced with individual and communal senses of insecurity to make fear a global phenomenon (Bash, 2014). The phenomenon amplified in the 1980s with a systemic logic that gave rise to dislocation from and destruction of the very biosphere that makes life possible.

Embodied terror in the face of real or imagined inescapable threat of death can become a reoccurring experience, even a permanent existential state, that has profound impact on our capacity for love and work. Terror, along with the isolation that is at the core of intense fear and chronic trauma, literally reshapes both brain and body (Van der Kolk, 2014). Sadly, any action that feels like re-exposure to threat may well increase the risk of trauma or re-traumatisation (Levine, 2015, 2018).

Transforming Tragedy

How is it that some people appear to bounce back and others remain mired in inertia? 'Despite the seemingly boundless human predilection to inflict suffering and trauma on others, we are also capable of surviving, adapting to, and eventually transforming traumatic experiences' observes psychologist Peter A. Levine (2015, p. ix). 'In the case of biologically important concerns,' affirms ethologist Ellen Dissanayake,

people *do something more* to try to influence or ensure the outcome they desire. They make things associated with these matters special—extraordinary—even to the point of creating complex physical and mental constructions or ways of doing things that are not obviously

¹³ There is evidence that early relational trauma is particularly expressed in right hemispheric deficits in the processing of social-emotional and bodily information. Maltreated and neglected children diagnosed with PTSD manifest right lateralised metabolic limbic abnormalities. As adults they may regress to an infantile state when confronted with severe stress (Schore, 2002).

relevant to the vital matter at hand. These complex ‘constructions’ or ‘ways’ are called rituals or ceremonies. . . . existential uncertainty—leading to emotional investment or ‘caring about’—was the original motivating impetus for the invention of ritual in humans. One can observe in every society that rituals are meant to affect biologically important states of affairs whose attainment is uncertain. (Dissanayake, 2017, p. 92, emphasis added)

Art-filled ritual practices (actions and words) fulfil a basic human need. Catherine Bell saw ritual as ‘a culturally strategic way of acting in the world’ (Jonte-Pace, 2009, p. vii). She used the concepts of ritualisation and the process of embodiment to distinguish ritual—with its privileged, significant and powerful aspects—from non-ritual acts. Bell also positioned ritual as something that creates or generates—rather than just expresses or reflects—meaning and structure (Nilsson Stutz, 2014).

Against all odds, we humans can intuitively but consciously use our imagination to bridle fear and creatively transform utter helplessness and incomprehensible tragedy. Zenobia, Roger, Desirée, and Chamseddine feel compelled to ritualise their fear of ongoing threat through embodied words and acts. Ritualisation gives their concerns structure and meaning. It palliates anxiety and cultivates hope and joy. One day at a time. Resilience, the term often used to describe the amazing human capacity for coping with hardship, requires a sense of safety that goes far beyond the objective removal of threat.¹⁴ Safety is the *state of feeling safe*.

Searching for Safety

In times of global dislocation, with the precipitous advent of what French philosopher Frédéric Lenoir dubs the ‘ultramodern era’,¹⁵ the power of formalised religious and civic rites has waned in contemporary society. Rarely has humankind had to face such rapid large-scale change with so few meaningful traditional rituals.¹⁶ As our vertical and horizontal safety zones swiftly disappear, people experience dislocation and fragmentation as never before. ‘We have killed the gods,’ remarks Lenoir, ‘we have abolished or erased our borders. It is within ourselves that we must now find these “safety zones”’ (Lenoir, 2012, p. 64).

¹⁴ Sociologist David Knottnerus points to evidence from studies of concentration camps and other forms of internment to show how important personal and group rituals can be for enabling people to cope with highly disruptive experiences. Whether the disruption is positive (e.g., marriage, beginning a new job, birth of a baby) or negative (e.g., death of close friend or relative, loss of a job, divorce, internment), those who are able to create new or reconstitute old ritualised practices in the midst of such disruption are best able to cope with, adapt, maintain relationships with others, and survive their immediate situation (Knottnerus, 2016).

¹⁵ Lenoir prefers the term ‘ultramodern’ to ‘postmodern’ because the latter gives the false impression that we are disenchanted with the myth of progress and the modern process, which is contradicted by the unprecedented acceleration of modernity (critical reason, individualisation, globalisation).

¹⁶ ‘There is really very little evidence to suggest that ritual in general declines per se. It may be more accurate to say that it shifts’, observed Catherine Bell (2009 [1992], p. 166).

Like Lenoir, Peter A. Levine encourages the building of ‘islands of safety’ within ourselves to keep from being overwhelmed by the aftereffects of highly charged life experiences. He observes that ‘whether we are survivors of trauma or simply casualties of Western culture’ (2010, p. 256), we may suffer from ‘an impairing disconnection from [our] inner sensate compass’ (2010, p. 355). This is experienced as fragmentation or disembodiment. Inordinate amounts of energy are needed just to keep these sensations under control—usually at the expense of concentration, the ability to memorise, and the ability to pay attention to what is happening around us. Neurologist Robert Scaer calls this frightening experience an aberration of memory¹⁷ (Scaer, 2014 [2001]). The inability to live fully in the present impedes adequate preparation for the future, which in turn wreaks havoc on health and social relationships such as marriages, families, and friendships (Scaer, 2005, 2012).

A Science of Safety

Researcher Stephen Porges’ complex polyvagal theory (2011) is a ‘science of safety’ that can help us learn how to deal with the challenges of daily life like threat and stress but also how to enjoy happiness; it involves ‘feeling safe enough to fall in love with life and take the risks of living’ (Dana, 2018, p. xvii). According to Porges’ polyvagal theory, the autonomic nervous system responds hierarchically with evolutionarily newer circuits inhibiting older circuits (see Porges chapter). The newest pathway, the myelinated ventral vagal pathway (social engagement and connection), enhances co-regulation of our nervous system through contact with people, pets, and other mammals. Co-regulation is identified by Porges as a biological imperative. In dangerous and life-threatening contexts, the autonomic nervous system shows adaptive flexibility through two more primitive neural pathways which regulate defensive responses to threat: the sympathetic nervous system (mobilisation) and the dorsal vagus (immobilisation).

Hailed as a missing link both by clinicians and individuals who have experienced trauma, polyvagal theory (2011) provides plausible neurophysiological explanations for what trauma feels like from the inside. It puts words on often inexplicable sensations with new vocabulary such as *neuroception*, which differentiates ‘detection without awareness’ from our normal perception with awareness. Neuroception describes how the autonomic nervous system informs us on very subtle levels about our state of safety and any threat of danger, be it within our bodies, in our surroundings, or in our relationships with others. Therefore neuroception does not

¹⁷ In the case of trauma, memory imprints (known as ‘engrams’) are experienced, not as a recurring recollection of a terrible event that happened in the past, but as overwhelming life-threatening physical sensations in the immediate present (Levine, 2015). These physical sensations are ever the more frightening in that they may be tied to events that we do not remember and then triggered without warning by anything—a sudden noise, a smell, a taste, a colour, or a tone of voice—usually totally unattached to a conscious memory of an event.

tell us about *what* we are or *who* we are but *how* we are; it involves a *deep sense* of safety or threat that can be influenced by caring or traumatic experiences (see Fig. 2).

Ritual as Neural ‘Exercise’

Just as polyvagal theory constitutes a missing link to understanding trauma, it may also be a missing link to apprehending ritual practice. Especially since, as Levine (2017, n.p.) observes, ‘ritual has been an overlooked asset to the healing of trauma and to restoring broken connections’. Stephen Porges affirms that ‘a careful investigation of many rituals results in the discovery that the rituals are functional exercises of vagal pathways’ (cf. Porges’ chapter in Part I). This discovery indicates that ritual practice, whether composed of secular, routine, or religious elements (see Fig. 2), has less impact over *what* or *who* we are than over *how* we are. In other words, ritual process is more about wellbeing and personal subjective feelings of connectedness at the most basic levels than about meaningfulness or structures.

The function of ritual practice ‘may be different from that of the narratives upon which religions were based’ notes Porges. ‘The narratives are attempts to fulfil the human need to create meaning out of uncertainty and to understand the unknowable mysteries of the human experience in a dynamically changing and challenging world’ (cf. Porges’ chapter in Part I). Yet, as ritual practice exercises the vagal circuit and neuroception becomes perception with awareness, it may open the way to create or generate meaning and structure, as suggested by Bell (2009 [1992]).

Ritual must feel right to be right (Holloway, 2015). This right feeling rests on what I call *embodied intentionality*, which differs from mindfulness¹⁸ in that it involves ‘gut-up’ simultaneous dual awareness of the ritual experience and of one’s own bodily sensations. The embodiment of intentionality informs the inexplicable, mystical, or even magical sense of connectedness inherent in ritualising. My experience of accompanying traumatised people in therapy and through ritual practice confirms that ritualising is not therapy but it can indeed be therapeutic. The psycho-physiological manifestations of embodied intentionality in ritual—as felt by the practitioner and observed by therapists or celebrants—resemble the release of tension observed during trauma resolution.

An imbalance in ritual practice that favours awareness of experience over sensations fosters mental constructs (living in one’s head) that can traumatise or re-traumatise through unbidden memories and feelings of isolation, shame, guilt, or disgust. A mourner who is medicated ‘to get through the funeral’, for example, may feel unsupported in grief. Conversely, the mourner, or trauma victim, who

¹⁸ A recent study reports that 82% of people with negative experiences during mindfulness meditation had experienced fear, anxiety, or paranoia (Lindahl et al., 2017). Trauma survivors may be more at risk for the overwhelm and dissociation that leads to this kind of negative experience.

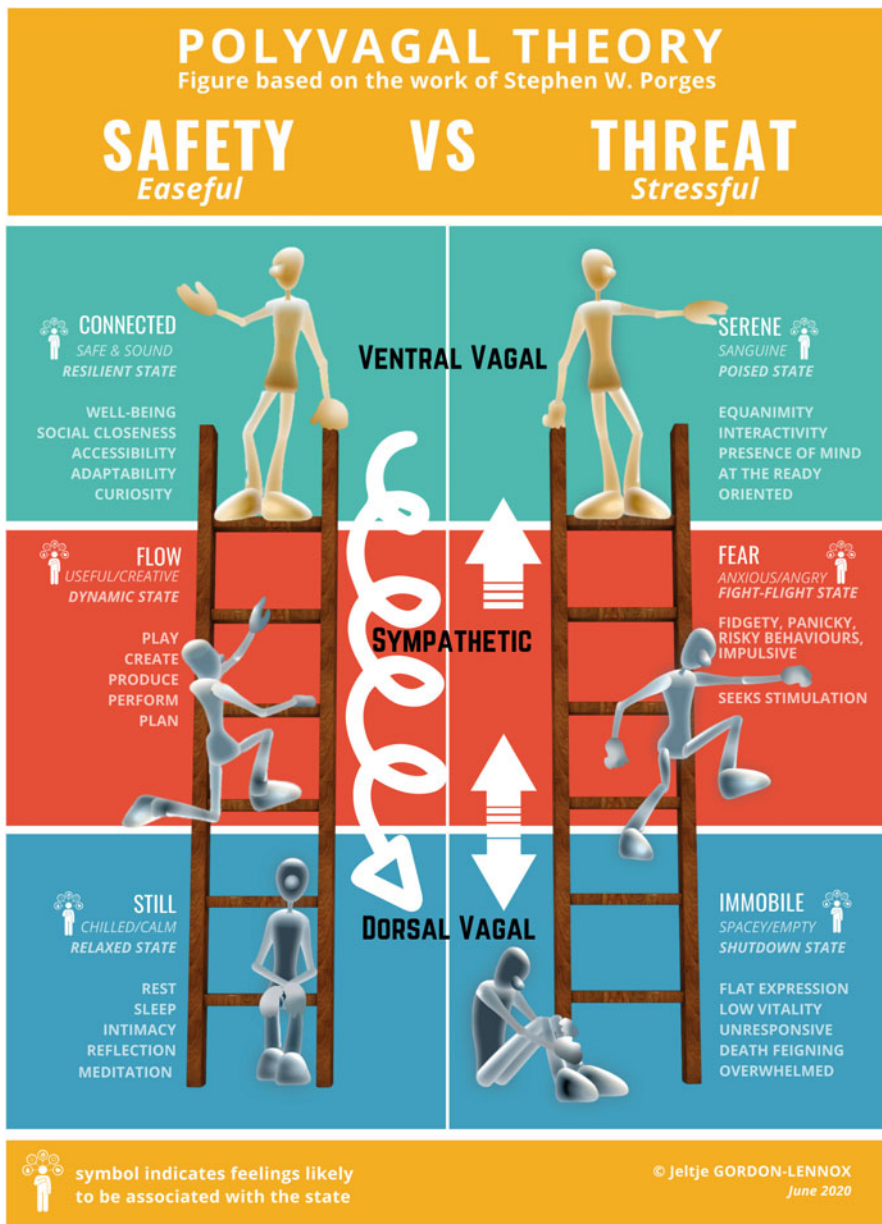


Fig. 2 Safety and threat. Whether we feel safe or threatened, transitioning between the three states (vagal, sympathetic, or dorsal) follows the same course on the diagram. The curly downward arrow (centre left) suggests a certain fluidity of movement between connection (ventral vagal) and either flow or fear (sympathetic) or calm and terror (dorsal vagal). The thicker arrows (centre right) indicate that moving in the opposite direction, from a dorsal vagal to a ventral vagal state, requires passing through the sympathetic state. Keeping this in mind helps us understand why we may stretch upon awaking from sleep as well as why the likelihood of risky behaviours, or even suicide, may increase as a person under threat moves from intense overwhelm (dorsal state) to action (sympathetic state). | © J. Gordon-Lennox

tracks bodily sensations without simultaneous attention to the experiential ritual context/content may find temporary relief for anxiety, grief, or terror but retain a sense of incompleteness. This embodied process of experience with sensation, in a context that feels safe, is what enhances self- and co-regulation.¹⁹

I posit that embodied intentionality may also be what distinguishes as ritual or non-ritual the practice of activities like habits, routines, obsessive-compulsive behaviours, and addiction.

Deb Dana's Four Rs

Therapist Deb Dana's four Rs polyvagal approach to trauma survival (Dana, 2018, p. 7) can be applied to ritual practice:

- 'Recognise the autonomic state.'
Look for and reinforce cues of safety during ritualising. Feeling safe is essential to an inner sense of control over out-of-control situations.
- 'Respect the adaptive survival response.'
Compassionate accompaniment from a ventral vagal state facilitates changes in the physiological state of the trauma survivor that supports feelings of safety and allows connection through ritual.
- 'Regulate or co-regulate into a ventral vagal state.'
A person whose default mode is the sympathetic state may be able to self-regulate during ritualising by imagining mastering fear and anxiety. Or they may co-regulate via the ventral vagal state of a compassionate person. Those immobilised in a dorsal vagal state need an extra step to move towards the ventral vagal state. The presence of a compassionate person can encourage *remembering how it once felt to feel safe*, thus fostering a gentle shift to the sympathetic state and then to connectedness in the ventral vagal state.
- 'Re-story.'
From a place of safety, the individual can perform voluntary behaviours during rituals that involve breathing, postural shifts, and vocalisations that functionally exercise the vagal circuit—without fear or overwhelm—to promote, reinforce, and strengthen states of calmness in the ventral vagal state.

¹⁹ Experience with sensation, in a context that feels safe, would appear to determine the effectiveness of trauma treatments that involve repetitive gestures such as David Berceci's Trauma/Stress Releasing Exercises (TRE), Francine Shapiro's EMDR, and Gary Craig's Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT).

Ritualising at the Systemic Edge

The challenges of ritualising in fearful times—particularly during ongoing threat—are not the same for people who belong to mainstream spiritual systems, or for the excluded and the expelled. Extreme conditions constitute a systemic edge for ritualisation that alerts us to more moderate, hidden trends relating to the spiritual dimension of contemporary human experience. Lenoir's concern about the absence of vertical and horizontal safety zones alludes to subterranean spiritual trends—trends that are invisible to conventional ways of seeing, being, and elucidating meaning. Clues to their presence lie in seemingly negligible contradictions in values taught and practised, or in minor disagreements between leaders and practitioners about ritual function and traditional narrative. These subterranean trends originate in the decline of Western-style global religions and capitalisms, the escalation of environmental destruction, and the rise of complex forms of knowledge and technology (Sassen, 2014, 2015).

None of the extreme conditions exposed by Desirée, Zenobia, Chamseddine, and Roger are easily captured by the standard measures of governments and experts. Each condition signals a different major domain with its own distinctive systemic edge. Together, as these conditions draw attention to the expanding populations of migrants, prisoners, the expelled or the ignored, they point to the proliferation of many such ambiguous edges across the world. These four intentionally embodied ritualisations manage to transform unbearable helplessness and trauma at the ambiguous edge into something extraordinary and healing for both the ritualmaker and for those who bear witness to them.

Through ritualmaking we mark time, seasons, and space; we anchor our memories and ourselves in the present, rather than in the past or the future. As our rituals are regularly updated, they provide guidance to individuals and groups on how to act in the current environment. The amazing capacity of our human imagination to intentionally produce and embody abstract signs and sounds is essential to the creative processes of healing trauma and ritualmaking. These processes result in what is perhaps one of the most astonishing aspects of ritual practice and trauma treatment: that is, feeling how the subtle interplay between individual and collective imagination allows human beings to enhance both self- and co-regulation (Tateo, 2016), thus preserving their humanity and dignity.

Chapter Summaries

The scholars, artists, and practitioners who wrote these chapters specialise in fields as diverse as anthropology, bioarchaeology, digital culture, ancient Chinese studies, psychiatry, political science, bioenergetics, ritual anthropology, philosophy, and psychotherapy, as well as in the political and social role of museums and peace studies. Although the contributors may present divergent views on ritual and trauma,

taken together these chapters demonstrate how embodied intentionality in ritualising can initiate healing processes and mitigate the negative impact of trauma on individuals, collective groups, and even global systems.

Part I: Trauma and Ritual in Other Times and Places

Bioarchaeologists Liv Nilsson Stutz and Aaron Jonas Stutz open this volume with their unique perspective on the material traces of ritual in prehistory. Rituals have long been part of the deeply human strategy for coping with death. While signs of recourse to ritual as a tool for healing and comfort upon the loss of a loved one appear often, archaeological records also reveal evidence of how rituals have been used to respond to catastrophic events or weaponised to increase fear or power.

Stephen W. Porges, researcher in traumatic stress and originator of the landmark work on polyvagal theory, presents a model that shows how specific voluntary behaviours (e.g. breathing, vocalisations, and posture shifts), which characterise ancient rituals and form the core of contemplative practices, can trigger a physiological state that fosters health and optimises subjective experiences. Porges' model emphasises that, in order to experience the positive benefits of these practices, the physical context must be perceived by the practitioner as calm and soothing, and above all, safe.

Researcher Ori Tavor examines key passages from classical Chinese texts written during the Warring States period (481–221 BCE), one of the most tumultuous and traumatic periods in Chinese history. Drawing on contemporary scientific work on how music impacts emotion regulation, Tavor offers valuable insights on the transformative effects on individuals and groups of ancient ritual events that combined music, dance, and the offering of sacrifices.

Ritual anthropologist Matthieu Smyth closes the section on ancient rituals with his chapter on the festivals that developed in medieval urban culture to counter the brutal hierarchical social systems of that era. Smyth observes that the transformative power of the old animistic rituals to conjure and regulate human reactions to threat was carried over to the new rituals that arose. He raises the question: What might we learn from these ancient European rituals about how the resolution of fear and anxiety in the face of death and calamity is transformed and adapted from one age to the next?

Part II: The Role of Ritual in Healing Trauma

The fact that medical interventions can cause trauma is a well-kept secret. Patients, their entourage, and medical professionals may all find themselves at the sharp end of medical care. Three therapists, Robin Karr-Morse, Juan Carlos Garaizabal, and Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, collaborated to produce this chapter. They know from

experience that the rituals surrounding medical procedures can serve to reduce fear, prevent disruption, and maintain order, or cause medically induced trauma. Regardless of the outcome of the medical intervention, rituals based on transparency and compassion can effect healing among all concerned at all levels of medical care.

The following two chapters examine the impact of ritualising in the context of armed conflict.

Kenyan philosopher Alex N. Kamwaria presents his unique perspective in a sensitive investigation of the use of ancestral rituals and Western psychosocial interventions to heal trauma and facilitate reconciliation within the Dinka community in South Sudan. While Western interventions view trauma as ‘post’, Dinka victims experience their suffering as being very much in the present. Kamwaria’s findings support the implementation, wherever possible, of cultural alternatives to the new international mechanisms such as truth commissions, criminal courts, and tribunals.

The Memory Box Project is a unique community-led effort that addresses traumatic experiences stemming from decades of political violence in Afghanistan. Memorialisation specialist Sophia Milosevic Bijleveld shows how ritualising memory can address impunity and provide victims and their community with a symbolic sense of justice—even in the absence of traditional rituals and political will to implement transitional justice mechanisms—by giving voice to victims and ensuring that the crimes and violence in Afghanistan are not forgotten. Early August 2021, as this volume goes to print, the Afghan government has collapsed and the Taliban rule the streets of the capital. Milosevic Bijleveld writes from Kabul: ‘I am 24/7 on trying to put Afghan Victims Archives to safety and evacuating the staff...’.

Interdisciplinary researcher Sasha A.Q. Scott closes this section with his work on online rituals of solidarity in the wake of highly public death events. Scott argues that social media memorialising cultivates a ‘sense of ritual’. The making and sharing of memorial videos, posting selfies of solidarity, a strategic use of hashtags, the remediation of symbolic imagery, and—perhaps most importantly—the collectives that form online around these digital expressions all serve an important role in the healing process. Spontaneous and unstructured online rituals circumvent ritual specialists and collapse barriers of time and space, accelerating and amplifying the scale of public mourning in unscripted, highly creative, and personalised ways.

The recent spate of funerals by zoom during successive pandemic lockdowns is further evidence of how bans on physical presence are creatively skirted in order to meet our fundamental human need for ritual and social connection. Without a doubt, Scott’s arguments regarding the power of online ritual responses to public death events also apply to private digital memorialising.

Part III: Global Threat, Trauma, and Ritual

Psychologist Bruce K. Alexander collaborates with anthropologist Matthieu Smyth to present a radical rethink of the nature and healing of addiction, which, in recent

years, has gone global. Its range extends far beyond drugs and alcohol to gambling, shopping, romantic love, video games, religious zealotry, television viewing, internet surfing, and emaciated body shapes. Plato explicitly invites us to face the nightmare possibility that, in a dislocated, deteriorating society, the most addicted people may become the political leaders. The ferocity of their addiction to power can make others turn to them in the vain hope of finding safety and a secure identity.

Peacebuilder Lisa Schirch analyses political leadership and what it means to ritualise in an age of terror and violent extremism. Schirch defines and compares the ritualistic aspects of terrorism and extremism and shows how different groups and people neutralise the effects of these violent acts through ritual. She documents and describes ritual responses, such as ‘magical resistance’ and ‘binding spells’, used to counter the perceived violent extremism evident in the 2016 election and mandate of Donald Trump, 45th president of the United States.

On January 6, 2021, just months after Schirch’s article was submitted for publication, Trump supporters violently stormed the United States Capitol where a joint session of Congress was beginning the Electoral College vote count to formalise Joe Biden’s victory. In response, 22-year-old poet Amanda Gorman stirred hope and awe at the 46th president’s inauguration with her poem ‘The Hill We Climb’: ‘We’ve braved the belly of the beast. We’ve learned that quiet isn’t always peace, and the norms and notions of what “just” is isn’t always justice’ (Gorman, 2021). Eight months later, like Milosevic Bijleveld, Schirch is working desperately to protect her Afghan staff from Taliban reprisals. The magical resistance cited in Schirch’s chapter, Gorman’s words and Schirch’s actions channel feelings of fear and powerlessness in an attempt to restore a sense of connection and community.

The chapter on nuclear threat was woven together from Mae-Wan Ho’s work by Alexy V. Nesterenko, Odile Gordon-Lennox, and Peter Saunders. It explores how a group of doctors and scientists risked their lives and careers to help people living in the areas most contaminated by the Chernobyl fallout. Using the rituals of scientific method, they discovered a simple treatment based on apple pectin that can clear radionuclides from the body. In the aftermath of Fukushima, it was found that certain seaweeds have similar properties. These solutions offer hope for future generations of Chernobyl and Fukushima victims.

The collection closes with three cases: a flash flood, the effects of pesticide exposure, and a worksite accident—all of which affect my family, directly or indirectly. Although these kinds of accidents occur regularly on large and small scales around the world, few studies consider the risk of psychosocial trauma resulting from the ongoing risk of such environmental hazards. In this chapter I examine how, as chronic threat pushes ordinary people out of the common to the systemic edge, ritualising may serve as an adaptive mechanism for coping with trauma in the midst of unrelenting threat.

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