

Introduction: Uncertain Rituals

LAURENT SÉBASTIEN FOURNIER

University Côte d'Azur, Nice, France
laurent.fournier@univ-amu.fr

MARIA BERNADETTE L. ABRERA

University of the Philippines Diliman, The Philippines
mlabrera@up.edu.ph

JESUS FEDERICO C. HERNANDEZ

University of the Philippines Diliman, The Philippines
jchernandez@up.edu.ph

‘Living Uncertainty’ as the focus of discussion and interpretation in 2023 was a significant mark of the global predicaments and disruptions of the early 21st century. These new challenges – the COVID19 pandemic, extraordinary waves of migration, unexpected wars – give a strong feeling of uncertainty and risk. Other conditions, such as the climate crisis, gender questions, mental health issues, AI ethics all heightened the sense of precarity and unpredictability. The 16th SIEF Congress in Brno, Czech Republic in June 2023 opened the inquiry on uncertainty “both in terms of the uncertainty of everyday life and of epistemological uncertainty”.

The SIEF Ritual Year Working Group organized two panels for the 2023 Congress. Rituals themselves, as human responses to historical conditions, are both certain and uncertain. Certainty arises from the sense of predictability and control that the rituals offer, but uncertainty comes from the changes in the rituals themselves. As we stated when preparing for the conference, the traditional knowledge concerning rituals is disappearing with the elder generations and there is often a lack of foundation for the younger generations. Due to this situation, a lot of rituals have become uncertain, as scholars have already noted since the beginning of the 19th century. However, there has been an increase in creativity and thus a growth of improvisation in the holidays.

And yet there is a sort of constancy, solidity of the tradition, which is still present. How do these aspects coexist in concrete rituals? What sorts of changes have been experimented on, accepted or discussed among the traditional communities? The RYWG panel in Brno, “Uncertainty, Improvisation and Constancy in the Ritual Year”, called for case studies addressing both continuities and changes in calendric or life-cycle rituals at the beginning of the 21st century. In a more self-reflexive way, the panel sought to better understand the role of the researcher in the observed changes. Is the researcher called to participate in the changes and the new improvisations? What are the differences of perception of the uncertainties according to the age or the gender of the researcher? The panel on “Rituals of Faith and Religion during Uncertain Times” explored the religious ritual responses to uncertainty that provided a channel for people to cope with distress and danger. These symbolic actions, from a functionalist view, reduce tensions, provide assurance (Malinowski 1948) as well as reaffirm social connections and collective identity (Durkheim 1912).

Comparing older archival notes with contemporary fieldwork studies may enable a better understanding of the improvisation and the constancy in the ritual year itself. This volume extends, but is not limited to, some of the reflections that were initiated in Brno as part of the panels organized by the RYWG. It aims to take stock of the uncertainties affecting rituals in a world where traditional regularities are fading, due to the widespread mobility of people and the vagaries of current events. It invites a general reflection on the life and death of rituals and offers a series of case studies.

LIFE AND DEATH OF RITUALS

Working on the uncertainty of rituals requires keeping in mind the conceptions of the great French researcher Arnold Van Gennep (1909) regarding “rites of passage”. Van Gennep reminds us that rituals are “living facts”, which evolve according to the societies that organize them. This definition allows Van Gennep to link the study of rituals to ethnology and folklore, as opposed to history, which primarily deals with past facts. As it is possible to speak of “life cycle rituals”, it also seems possible to speak of “the life cycle of rituals”. For each historical period, the researcher must interpret popular creativity and the birth and death of the different rituals. The theory proposed by Van Gennep is therefore a dynamic theory that encompasses the various factors that control the birth and death of ritual behaviors.

The empirical study of rituals confronts us with “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), since all rituals were created at one time or another. In our investigations, we discovered rituals that were only a decade or two old but were considered “traditional” by their practitioners. However,

there is an important debate here. For some researchers, the invention and revitalization of rituals in the contemporary world is linked to tourism (Bois-sevain 1992). New rituals are then resources that serve communities for economic reasons. For others, the invention of rituals is a reaction to modernity. It is then a question of finding ways to resource themselves on the scale of small communities, which is more reassuring than the globalized world in which we live (Bravo 1984).

Coming back to Van Gennep, the great French folklorist used to oppose history and folklore. He postulated that history was only descriptive, whereas folklore proposed explanations of social facts, and therefore was far more interpretative. Ethnography, he suggested, relies on oral culture and memory. It works on five or six generations maximum, which is the maximal length for oral remembrance of past facts among people who don't use written records. In other works, Van Gennep differentiates history and folklore even more, assuming that history only studies dead facts, while folklore studies living phenomena. From there, he suggests that folklore follows a better method, because it can study past facts as living phenomena, replacing them carefully in their context, while history focuses only on the past and on dead facts.

In the beginning of the 20th century, Van Gennep wrote that the 19th century had put a great emphasis on historical sciences, but that the future would need ethnographical sciences to understand culture as a living phenomenon. According to this perspective, history would only be able to study cultural forms, whereas folklore and ethnography can study factors and mechanisms and give more solid explanations. Some other French folklorists criticized Van Gennep, arguing that history is, however, necessary if we want to study past traditions and understand social changes and processes. This debate is just as important as it prepares the theory of social and cultural anthropologists in the 20th century, namely, functionalism and structuralism. Indeed, according to the functionalist perspective, society is conceived as a living organism (Malinowski), and according to structuralist theory, structures are opposed to historical events (Lévi-Strauss). Of course, one century later, the dissemination of historical anthropology and cultural history has profoundly changed our perspective, but it is still interesting to think of social facts as living facts. This brief reminder of the history of theories concerning social facts leads us to question the factors which lead to the birth or, on the contrary, to the death of rituals.

SOME HYPOTHESES

Here, several hypotheses could be considered. A first hypothesis would state that rituals appear when older rituals are no longer adapted to the audience. New audiences encourage creativity among the communities organizing the rituals. In some cases, the models of sports and mass media competitions are imported into the local culture to make the rituals more understandable by tourists (Fournier 2005). Another hypothesis states that rituals appear when a part of the community struggles for better recognition. In many cases the manly traditional rituals are today complemented by female performances in order to make the rituals understandable to the new generations and to women. A third hypothesis states that a ritual can change in a diaspora situation, when the connection to the original culture loosens (Fournier 2015). A fourth hypothesis can consider that rituals disappear when beliefs change. Christian traditional festivals have often been replaced by lay rituals, in Revolutionary France or in Soviet Russia, for instance. A fifth hypothesis would make a correlation between the life and death of rituals on the one hand, and health and security issues on the other hand. A sixth hypothesis would consider that when body culture changes, ritual games can be abandoned and replaced by ritualized modern sports.

Of course, numerous other hypotheses could be imagined in connection with other different cases of study. However, “life” and “death” are far from being the only modes of existence of rituals. Indeed, rituals can transform and adapt in more complex ways. Beyond the study of the life and death of ritual forms, it would be interesting to look how rituals can change, hybridize, cross-fertilize and eventually adapt to new cultural settings. This volume eventually invites us to look at rituals as living processes more than just as social “forms” or “facts”.

CHALLENGING UNCERTAINTIES IN CASE STUDIES

This volume is composed of six articles connected partly (but not only) with the notions of crisis and uncertainty. The first article, by Skaidrė Urbonienė, is devoted to the ways of coping with uncertainty and crises in traditional societies. It concerns traditional modes of crisis management, using Lithuanian examples. The aim is to understand how rituals made it possible to cope with different types of uncertainty. Rituals were then used to protect against climatic or social disasters, for example, diseases or fires. References to popular religion were then extremely widespread as an accompaniment to protective rituals.

The next three articles concentrate on the analysis of changes in traditional rituals due to the COVID19 pandemic. Vito Carrassi studies the worship of the dead in southern Italy, Archna a traditional Japanese Shinto community confronted with the crisis, and Judith Balatonyi the changes in weddings in Hungary. These three articles allow us to cross-examine an exceptional situation, paying attention not only to the rituals of the life cycle (marriages, cult of the dead) but also to ordinary life in the ritualized framework of a Shinto temple.

The last two articles open up a more general reflection in terms of changes or continuity of ritual practices in the longer term. Anastasia Shevchenko's article considers a traditional festival in Monaco when it is confronted with hypermodernity. Last, Giovanni Kezich and Antonella Mott propose a research note on gaps and intermittencies in European carnivals, taking into consideration the extended length of their transformation.

REFERENCES

- Boissevain, Jeremy (ed.) 1992. *Revitalizing European Rituals*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bravo, Gian Luigi 1984. *Festa contadina e società complessa*. [Peasant Festivals and Complex Society]. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Durkheim, Émile 1995 [1912]. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Transl. K. E. Fields. New York: Free Press.
- Fournier, Laurent Sébastien 2005. Old resources for new ceremonies. Building up olive products as a new leisure and as a cultural heritage in Mediterranean France. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, No. 15/1, pp. 99–120.
- Fournier, Laurent Sébastien 2015. Circulation and Differentiation of Scottish Games and Sports. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, No. 60, pp. 15–28. <https://dx.doi.org/10.7592/FEJF2015.60.fournier>.
- Hobsbawm, Eric & Ranger, Terence (eds.) 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw 1948. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Van Gennep, Arnold 1909. *Les rites de passage*. [Rites of Passage.] Paris: Picard.

Laurent Sébastien Fournier is Professor of urban anthropology at the Côte d'Azur University (Nice, France), L. S. Fournier leads a research team on anthropology archives and conducts ethnohistorical surveys on festive and sporting events in Europe. President of the French Ethnological Society, he also chairs the European network Eurethno (Council of Europe) and the Ritual Year Working Group (International Society of Ethnology and Folklore). He is an expert in intangible cultural heritage.

laurent.fournier@univ-amu.fr

Maria Bernadette L. Abrera, PhD is the President of the Social Sciences and Philosophy Research Foundation, Inc., College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines Diliman. She served as Chair of the Department of History and was the Dean of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines Diliman from 2017 to 2023. Among others, she is a member of the Philippine-American Academy for Science and Engineering where she is the co-chair of the Research Expertise Cluster on Museology, Arts and Culture, and Indigenous Knowledge and the SIEF

Ritual Year Working Group. Her research focus has been on indigenous and pre-colonial culture with a focus on indigenous boatbuilding technology and the exchange between the Philippine belief system and colonial culture and religion.

mlabrera@up.edu.ph

Jesus Federico Tuting Hernandez is an Associate Professor in Linguistics at the University of the Philippines Diliman (UP). He is also the coordinator of the Folklore Studies Program of the UP College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. His research interests include Philippine diachronic linguistics, ethnolinguistics, folklore, and language endangerment in the Philippines. Tuting is also the convener of The Katig Collective, an initiative that raises awareness about the current Philippine linguistic situation towards the advancement of linguistic rights of various Philippine ethnolinguistic groups.

jchernandez@up.edu.ph