

UNRAVELLING RITUAL VICTOR TURNER AND THE PROBLEMS OF EXEGESIS

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ABSTRACT

As a pioneer in the interpretation of ritual, Victor Turner showed us how to access other peoples' deepest understandings about the nature of life. In the process, he encountered problems of presentation that ethnographers still have to confront. This paper explores Turner's solutions to these problems, and how subsequent authors have modified them.

Keywords: ritual, ethnography, Victor Turner

Victor Turner, always ably supported by his wife Edith, was a pioneer in many ways. He was largely responsible for a major re-orientation of anthropology in the 1970's, away from issues of social organisation—kinship studies as they then were—towards a much broader view of what made one culture characteristically different from another. He talked in terms of ritual and religion, but those terms were used in so encompassing a way that they became effectively entire understandings of the world. In this way, he built a bridge between British social anthropology and American approaches to the study of culture. His interests also converged with those of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the 'symbolic anthropology' that resulted from the fusion of the three national traditions was the first genuinely international movement in anthropology since the collapse of nineteenth-century evolutionism. Nowadays, the rapid transmission of intellectual fashions across the world is so taken for granted that we can easily forget that it was not always so, and so underestimate Turner's contribution.

In his writing, Turner was also an innovator. Above all he tried to give a sense of immediacy, in place of the dry structuralist accounts that had been the model during the 1950's. In particular, he developed the notion of a 'social drama' which consisted not of a system of norms or rules, but of an unfolding series of events. In effect, they were 'soap operas', like daytime television serials, full of stock characters and melodrama. Turner shows, however, that the social dramas of the Ndembu of Zambia, where he did his classic fieldwork, were incomprehensible to an outsider. In figuring out what was going on in them, he revealed the underlying tensions that made Ndembu society what it was. As it happens, there is a fundamental conflict in the rules of residence. A woman is supposed to live with her husband, but her sons inherit from their mother's brother. In the technical jargon of the era, virilocality co-existed uncomfortably with matrilineality. The result was that marriages were constantly being pulled apart by uncles who wanted their heirs back home in their maternal village. This was the subject matter of Turner's first book, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (1957), and there is nothing lightweight about it. On the contrary, it is densely packed with illustrative material and case studies.

Ritual as social drama

In his later books, however, there is shift in emphasis. Increasingly the dramas he focusses on are not quarrels between family members, but another kind of unfolding drama, namely ritual. Ndembu village life was full of rituals, including many that had to do with healing. In them there was clearly an element of social healing, that is to say an attempt to reinforce relationships that were inherently stressful. The individuals that underwent these rites then became adepts themselves, so creating a new generation of ritual specialists. By paying attention to who played what roles in these dramas, Turner gained new access to the internal workings of Ndembu society. His best known book was a collection of essays entitled *The Forest of Symbols*, which laid out his theoretical program and provided examples of his methods.

Rituals are the ultimate social dramas, but they are even more difficult for an outsider to understand than the quarrels between neighbours. Take for example this little episode, taken from a long essay in *The Forest of Symbols*, called “*Mukanda: The Rite of Circumcision*”. *Mukanda* is a major Ndembu festival with several phases, and these events occurred near the end of the one that Turner witnessed:

Two men who wished to “catch *nfunda*,” that is, to become full circumcisors in the near future were now told to strip completely. The men sat upright in the ashes of the lodge facing one another and worked their way into a favourite Ndembu position for copulation, the legs of one over the other’s thighs. Sampasa now squeezed from the complete intestines of the beheaded chicken all the excrement into a clay pot. This pot, already containing the chicken’s blood, he then placed under the entwined legs of the men. Next he laid the intestines on the genitals of the apprentice playing the male role and led them along the legs and around the other’s genitals. This apprentice’s penis had been tied up against his stomach. Sampasa warned the men not to break the intestines, otherwise their own legs would break and they become impotent.

Sampasa then told the first apprentice to urinate into the clay pot. This he did, having previously drunk some of the sacred beer for the purpose. The mixture in the pot was then stirred several times by Sampasa, who afterwards put some of it in one half of the new *kadiwu* container. In the other half of the *kadiwu* he placed the soggy mixture of ashes. Then he suddenly drew his circumcising knife lightly along the genitals of both men. This was the signal for them to get up and hop across the smouldering ashes of the lodge. Senior men, aged about forty to fifty, rushed around to meet them, and lashed at them, driving them back towards the *ifwilu* side. As they entered the *ifwilu* they were beaten quite hard. (Turner 1967: 196–7)

Taken out of context, as I have done here, the impression this passage gives is of complete incomprehensibility. Even in reading the entire essay, however, it has a jarring effect. The reader has the alternative of skimming over it, or of searching around for meanings spelled out elsewhere in the essay.

My proposition is that, in his pioneering work, Turner encountered a range of problems in writing about ritual that all of us who followed him have also had to face, no doubt with mixed results. My procedure is to pick apart different aspects of Turner’s narration to isolate the problems, and Turner’s attempts to cope with them.

Balancing description and analysis

Rituals, however, lack the soap opera dimension of social dramas. Instead they have a tendency to sound like cookbook recipes: first do this, then do that. It does not help that the participants themselves tend to describe them in this way. As W. Robertson Smith showed over a century ago, religion is primarily a matter of practice, not theory (Smith 1956 [1894]). Adherents are told what to *do*, not what to *think*. This is the very starting point of the anthropology of religion, as opposed to theology or religious studies. The vast majority of the world's religions do not have a credo. Ethnographers do not begin by describing some abstract system of beliefs, but with the mundane matters of making crops grow or classifying animals, not to mention getting people named, married, or buried. In other words, we begin with ritual prescriptions, which are with rare exceptions what the people we work with want to talk about. It is a common experience in fieldwork for a debate to break out in the middle of a rite about whether something has been done wrong, or something important left out. It is usually older people who engage in these debates; it is the business of old people to know how to do things.

Consequently, ethnographers are in a double bind. The information we have painstakingly assembled by watching what happens in rituals, or asking people what should happen, consists of lists of prescriptions, and these make for very dull reading. It is hard for the reader to make any sense of them. On the other hand, to constantly interrupt a narrative with explanations or analysis is equally painful and hard to follow. What makes this worse is that symbols are, as Turner insisted, multivocalic. That is, they have many meanings, nuances invoked or understood differently in different contexts or by different participants. If every connotation were followed out each time a symbolic act occurred, the account of even the simplest ritual would be appallingly convoluted.

Turner tried to circumvent this dilemma by following out the method he used for reporting social dramas. That is, he describes specific people performing specific rites. This gives a journalistic sense of reportage, so that we can imagine Turner's experience, almost as if we could see him on screen holding out a microphone to record the instructions given to the novices. This is the aspect emphasized by Turner's wife, Edith, in her book *Experiencing Ritual* (1992). Her own writing makes clear the tremendous contribution she made to Victor Turner's work. Especially with a major festival like Ndembu initiation, there are bound to be activities going on simultaneously in several places at once. Edie provided a second pair of eyes, which were especially valuable in observing the women's view of things. Edie also played a major role in the transcription of fieldnotes and in proposing interpretations. It was not the practice at the time, but Edie could very well have been listed as co-author of several of Victor Turner's monographs.

Personalities and prescriptions

The technique runs deeper than journalism, however. The first part of the *Mukanda* essay is concerned with setting up a caste of characters, so that we understand the social position of each of the people named in the narrative, and catch a glimpse of their motives for playing the roles they were assigned by general consensus. Sampasa, for instance, had been a candidate for the role of senior circumcisor. He had many qualifications. He was the

headman of a village that had once been large and influential, though somewhat reduced in recent years. He had a reputation as a competent circumcisor, meaning both that he had the necessary technical skills and also the knowledge of proper ritual procedures. However, he was an ally of a man who had jockeyed hard to take on the most important role of all, that of sponsor of the entire festival. Since people would converge on his village from far and wide—some nine villages, plus outlying homesteads—he gained great prestige. There was intense rivalry among local leaders for the honour of playing host, and Turner unwraps the details in the same fashion that he followed in *Schism and Continuity*, including marriage alliances and convoluted intrigues.

Consequently the essay falls into two parts. The first 34 pages concern the social dynamics of the villages mainly involved in making the arrangements for the festival, and then there follows 75 pages of description of the rites themselves. Including a brief summing up (18 pages), the essay totals 126 pages—a substantial piece of writing. For the reader, however, the transition from one section to the other is abrupt. Both the main parts of the essay are full of ethnographic detail, but the nature of the details changes from interpersonal relationships to ritual details, and it is not easy to make the bridge between the two. What Turner had discovered was the difficulty of integrating the two types of data. In his conclusion, he explains that he considered writing two descriptions, one concerned with social structure, the other with culture. He rejected the idea, however, because he wanted to stress the “interdependence” of the two sets of data (Turner 1967: 261).

Grand rituals like *mukanda* always have economic and political implications because they require the commitment of material resources and the cooperation of many people if they are to be a success. In this case the sponsor had to arrange for the assembly in his village of substantial amounts of food and drink for the initiands and visitors, and he needed the cooperation of many people, both his close followers and those of his rivals for the job. At the same time, however, they reflect fundamental ideas about the nature of the world and the place of people in it, which would be the same whoever was in charge, or even if the event was a failure. I faced the same problem in describing the long sequences of mortuary rituals that I studied in central Borneo, and I went so far as to write two books. The first concerns the eschatology of the rites, the second the dynamics of the longhouse communities that held them. There is certainly sociological data in the former and sketches of religious practices in the latter, but the emphasis is different. In reading the work of other ethnographers, I notice the same divergence: the emphasis is invariably on one side or the other. The literature on the anthropology of religion is split in the same way as Turner's essay.

Getting things out of order

Another set of problems surround the sequence of narration. At first sight, this would seem simple enough, given the cookbook quality of rituals, but with extended rites like *mukanda* there are often multiple events going on simultaneously. Moreover, it is sometimes necessary to invoke things that happened later in order to make sense of earlier events. The episode quoted above is in fact out of chronological order. Turner points this out (1967: 195), but the inattentive reader might easily miss his warning. At the beginning of the second section of the essay (1967: 185–6), Turner lists the order of events, which took the

familiar three-part form of rites of passage. After lengthy preparations, there were two days of rites that were collectively described as *kwing'ija* or “causing to enter”. What was entered was the lodge where the novices were housed, with no outside contacts other than their middle-aged male instructors. The circumcision process itself occurred on the second day. After that, the novices were secluded for nearly two months, giving their wounds time to heal. Finally, the boys-become-men were welcomed back into society in two days of celebration called *kwidishi* or the “the rites of return”.

The little segment of ritual quoted above actually occurred during “the rites of return”, which is why Sampasa and friends were sitting in the ashes of the boys lodge, which had been burned down the same morning. So why is Turner’s description of them given in the section devoted to “causing to enter”? The answer is that there was a key ingredient in the entire process that had to be mentioned at the outset, but whose manufacture occurred at the end of the events, ready for the next initiation festival years later. This was the potion called *nfunda*, which had to be daubed on the novices in order to make their initiation effective. A personal supply of it would be an essential qualification for the major roles of circumcisor in any future *mukanda*. Consequently, Turner is in effect describing something that must have happened in a previous festival, in order that the current one could occur. It is time loops of this kind that sabotage our efforts to keep everything in neat chronological order.

Use of indigenous terms

Finally, a third problem is illustrated in this example, and that is the use of Ndembu terms. It comes as no surprise that there is no English equivalent of the word *nfunda*. Moreover, the obvious translation ‘medicine’ has misleading connotations, since a common usage among colonial administrators was to refer to all African ritual specialists of whatever kind as ‘medicine men’. The term has a condescending suggestion of magic which obscures the dramatic power of *nfunda*. True, it is a concoction made of bizarre elements: chickens’ blood and urine, and ashes from the burned lodge and other paraphernalia, and, most significantly, the foreskins of the recently circumcised boys. But this newly manufactured mixture does not replace the supply of *nfunda* used in the current *mukanda*, it only replenishes it. That is to say, it is mixed with the diminished stocks of the established circumcisors, and shared with newly qualified ones. As Turner was told repeatedly, *nfunda* comes down to them through the generations “from the beginning of time”, renewed in countless performances.

So central is *nfunda* to the entire process that it is reasonable that the reader is given the Ndembu term, and expected to remember it throughout the following account. The same is not true, however, about the word *ifwilu*. Turner explains the term in an aside a couple of pages earlier: “In the *ifwilu* site (where the boys sat bleeding after being circumcised) sat Headman Sampasa (...)” (1967: 195), and once again there is of course no equivalent term in English. Nevertheless, the number of such words rapidly builds up, because there are dozens if not hundreds of things and ideas that have no English equivalent. It could hardly be otherwise, but it is not the readers’ job to learn Ndembu. For the author, these words were familiar, and they were of course the right terms, the correct terms. There is a danger, however, of lapsing into a sort of patois, a mix of English grammar and Ndembu vocabulary.

Levels of analysis

Turner's pioneering work provides a model that many of us have tried to follow, and it also revealed problems of exegesis that were unavoidable. They could not be solved, because they are inherent. They could only be managed, and I turn now to some of the techniques that evolved to do that. The most challenging is the presentation of detail, of all the little steps required to perform a rite and what they might variously mean to the participants. It seems to me that the most successful response has been to deliberately override chronology, to pull things out of order so as to shake off the cookbook quality that can be so stultifying. In particular, for any rite much longer than a gesture, there are levels of analysis where different meanings emerge.

The broadest framework of Turner's description was always the rite of passage, an idea that he took from van Gennep's classic account and developed enormously. In the same volume as the description of *mukanda* there is a chapter entitled "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*" (1967: 93–111). Having read that, there are bits of the ritual in the episode quoted above that are immediately recognizable. For instance, it comes as no surprise that the two men wanting to "catch *nfunda*" were "beaten quite hard". It is standard feature of initiations that the people undergoing a transition from one status to another are subject to physical abuse, as if to emphasize that they are temporarily outside society, literally nobodies. In effect, the rite of "catching *nfunda*" is an initiation ritual in itself, packed inside a much more prolonged one. This is not at all unusual, and it explains why pieces of liminal symbolism pop up in unexpected places. What was happening to the crowd of boys after the seclusion lodge was burned down were rites of reincorporation into society, so we look for images of rebirth. But the adult men that Sampasa was instructing were still in transition to the status of qualified circumcisors.

At the opposite extreme of generality, there are details that are mystifying, even to readers well versed in the literature of comparative religion. For example, there is nothing about liminal symbolism that hints at why the two men had to cross the smouldering ashes of the lodge by hopping on one leg. The reader has the choice of letting it pass, or hunting around elsewhere in the essay for exegesis. In fact, there are other occasions when participants are made to hop, indicating that the act had some general significance. Right before the circumcision of the boys, they are instructed to hop across a clearing (1967: 213). Elsewhere, there is an explanation offered by Turner's most effective informant, Muchona. Hopping he says, was like the "pounding" (*ku-twa*) of a penis during intercourse. Sexual symbolism at a male initiation is no surprise, but it would be easy to miss the special significance of hopping. At the same time, Muchona clarifies other aspects of the rite. The man playing the male role was instructed to urinate in the clay pot, and it turns out that urine is associated with semen. This is surprising, since in other parts of the world excreta are sharply distinguished from semen. As evidence that the connection is made, Turner points out that the verb 'to urinate' (*kukola*) is an inflection of the word for semen (*matekela*) (1967: 212). Moreover, novices in the seclusion lodge have to tell their personal guardian when they wanted to urinate, and then both of them would hop outside the lodge together (1967: 225). The association of excreta and semen also hints at why the genitals of the two aspiring circumcisors were linked together with chicken guts. It suggests a sexual metaphor, emphasized by Sampasa's warning that if the guts were torn the two men would become

impotent, not to mention breaking their legs. Guts are evidently associated with those other internal organs, wombs and ovaries, such that the men are symbolically engaged in intercourse. This proposition was already made clear by the position in which they were obliged to sit, making one a woman for the purposes of the rite. What would have happened if there had been three men wanting to “catch *nfunda*” is not explained.

Switching levels

The satisfying result of pulling together clues throughout the essay is that ritual details do indeed seem to fit together in meaningful patterns. The question is whether it would be possible to present exegesis in such a way that the reader would grasp the meaning of rites while they were being described, so that the he or she could appreciate their unfolding significance. The only practical way of doing this it appears is to move back and forth between levels of analysis. For example, much about *mukanda* fits so neatly into the three-part symbolism of rites of passage that it hardly requires any comment. Indeed, at one point Turner invokes just this feature, immediately after his description of the circumcision itself: “I have commented little on the last nine episodes because an analysis of their symbolism has already been published (‘Three Symbols of Passage’, Turner 1962: 124–73).” This is rather weak, since the reader has a reasonable expectation of being supplied within the same article with everything he or she needs to be told to understand the topic at hand.

An alternative would have been to begin with an overview of the entire ritual sequence, pulling out those aspects that are mostly clearly expressive of separation, transition, and reincorporation. That would include the whole format of the proceedings, spread out over a couple of months, neatly divided by the Ndembu themselves into *kwing’ija* (causing to enter), *kung’ula* (seclusion), and *kwidisha* (rites of return). It would comprise more than a list, however, since a range of pervasive themes could be indicated. One might be the nature of *nfunda*, and how that relates to the ritual specialists involved in *mukanda*. The rite of “catching *nfunda*” could then be taken out of the sequence, and its connection with past and future festivals would be all the more striking. Another theme might be the sexual symbolism that runs through *mukanda*, including the necessity of initiands of all kinds to hop about on one leg.

Having sketched an outline of basic themes, individual episodes could be unravelled at a more leisurely pace, teasing out meanings that are evoked only in those episodes. Indeed, Turner himself proposed something of the same kind. In his essay “Symbols in Ndembu Ritual” also included *The Forest of Symbols*, he distinguishes between what he calls dominant and instrumental symbols (1967: 30–32). Furthermore, he says that the Ndembu themselves make the same distinction, naming ritual elements that are *mukulumpi* (elder senior) in different rites or phases of rites. For so complex an event as *mukanda*, there are a whole series of dominant symbols. At the camp where the parents prepare food for the boys it is the *chikoli* tree, which “represents, among other things, an erect phallus, adult masculinity, strength, hunting prowess, and health continuing into old age”. *Chikoli* wood is apparently very hard. The dominant symbol in the post-circumcision phase is the red *mukula* tree, for obvious reasons. During the circumcision rites themselves it is the *mudyi* tree, whose many meanings, both explicit and implicit, are laid out in a virtuoso piece of exegesis in the same

essay (Turner 1967: 21–25). Clearly, trees play an important part in Ndembu ritual, but they do not make up all dominant symbols. For the entire rite of *mukanda*, the dominant symbol, Turner tells us, is *nfunda*.

Switching tenses

Turner's progression from social dramas to ritual dramas established a precedent that was followed by virtually all subsequent authors—or at least was ignored at their peril. No self-respecting press would nowadays publish a book that laid out rituals in the abstract, as page after page of prescriptions. Not to lose a reader, an ethnographer must break up a schematic account with vignettes of actual events that he or she witnessed firsthand. Only in that way can the sense of drama that Turner was so good at invoking be preserved. Turner used a musical analogy to express this, likening “the cultural structure of *mukanda* to a musical score and its performance to an orchestra” (1967: 261). In that way, every performance of a rite was unique. The analogy was subsequently used by other theorists, but in less convincing fashions.

There is a complication. It is not unusual for ethnographers to get from older informants descriptions, even lengthy descriptions, of rites that are no longer practiced, perhaps because government agents or missionaries disapproved. They cannot be described first hand, and it is a matter of some craft to find the right place to use them in an ethnography so as not to kill the pace of the narrative. One device is to recount the circumstances under which the information was obtained. There is a real poignancy in the image of old people reflecting on the lost worlds of their childhood.

Avoiding patois

Regarding the use of indigenous terms, a series of informal conventions has grown up. When Turner explains the far-from-obvious association of urine and semen he makes this statement: “to make urine in the medicine means that power (*ng'ovu*) is added to it, for urine (*masu*) represents the penis (*wuyala*), its strength (*kukola*)” (1967: 201). This sentence contains four Ndembu words, but they cause the reader no problem. What Turner is showing is the words he is using in English are glosses of Ndembu terms. So we know that there is a term *ng'ovu* in Ndembu, and that it constitutes a concept of ‘power’ that is unlikely to match the connotations of the word in English. Moreover, the reader is not burdened with remembering the term, since it is not a dominant symbol like *nfunda*. Generally speaking, an ethnography can focus attention on only a small number of words, three or four at most, whose meaning it is trying to convey in another language. In this way, the whole ethnography is focussed on the translation of a subtle and important concept. The reader can reasonably be expected to carry those terms in his or her head from one chapter to another. All other words have to be glossed, even if the translation is only approximate. In this example, for instance, we do not need to be given the Ndembu term for urine more than once. Power is a little more tricky, but the same convention applies. When Turner later refers to the ‘power of *nfunda*’ we already know that there is an indigenous concept in place that does not happen to be the one the author is focussing on at that moment.

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Unravelling ritual

Robertson Smith was the first to make the strikingly counter-intuitive argument that ritual logically precedes belief. The proposition was unattractive to theologians, but the vast majority of the world's religions lack theologians anyway. Turner developed this insight into a methodology. He showed that through the observation and interpretation of their rites, we might learn about other peoples' most profound understanding of a huge range of things, from what Westerners call the 'natural' to the 'supernatural', including the proper relations between people, the origins of the afflictions that bedevil us, what is worth striving for, and much else besides—in short, the whole meaning of what it is to live. These meanings are not spoken, and perhaps cannot be spoken, because they are to the participants too basic to require discussion. They are simply things taken for granted, and it does not occur to anyone that any other view of them is possible. Forty years after the publication of *The Forest of Symbols*, I still find its vision breathtaking. Falteringly to be sure, and taking only small steps at a time, we may find our way into experiences of existence utterly different from our own.

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