

## Rituals of Life, From the Day-To-Day to the Sacred

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### The Rite and the Symbol<sup>2</sup>

The word *rite* comes from the Latin word *ritus* and refers to a practice executed in a repeatable and unchanging manner within a cultural community. It is based on myths and symbols, which give rites special characteristics. These characteristics do not act only on daily life, but transcend daily life on a superior plane.

The symbol (*simbolum*) indicates concurrence and congruence of meanings from images that are real on a simple, visible, day-to-day plane, but also refers to these images within other meaningful, more complex, invisible realities. It is the perceptible or noticeable representation of an idea, a sign without similarity or contiguity that conventionally links its meanings and commonly expresses itself in an analog, metaphorical language through images.

There exist a variety of definitions that complement themselves and can help us reach what we believe to be symbols with greater ease:

- Let us define a *symbol* as a concept, a name, or an image that can be recognized in day-to-day life even though it may possess specific connotations beyond its common and current meanings (Carl G. Jung).
- The symbolic does not refer to a meaning, but represents the meaning itself (Gadamer).
- The symbol has multiple meanings that can only be put into words through myths, words of the sacred, and poetry (Ricoeur).

### The Ritual

The definition of *rite* is broadened when we speak of the *ritual*, because we are referring to a series of practices and attitudes that are related, marked or signed by some sort of symbolic value that generally finds sense or reason to be within the context of a group of humans – be it a religion or the tradition of some other community. Rituals are processes with specific actions, different from ordinary ones practiced in day-to-day life. These actions include objects or words invested in the possibility of modifying beliefs, relationships, meanings, or realities.

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Though the ritual requires previous preparation, we can clearly identify three stages: the beginning, the development of the ritual as it were, and the conclusion.

The ritual begins with the separation of an officiant who prepares himself internally with reserve, silence, and intentionality while also generally undergoing some sort of special diet and/or maintaining sexual abstinence. The procedure has a beginning, a stage of development, and an end, with precise actions, connection with context, participants, and the invisible world. The officiant observes and controls the interactions that go on in the open ritual space and utilizes various elements and techniques to achieve the goal of the ritual. The conclusion of the ritual by means of a specifically marked act, brings upon the return of day-to-day reality. This ordinary perception of reality allows integration of the experience and personal reintegration into reality.

Sacrificial rites, as the name indicates, “sacralizes, makes something sacred” an ordinary act through which conscious acceptance of pain offers the sensation of resignation due to the offer in the ritual space. In some villages in ancient times, human sacrifice was common and accepted by the officiant, the community, and even the victim, “to achieve superior goals”. Today, sacrifice is symbolic and subtler, but our hedonistic society instinctively rejects all effort, all acts that come with some sense of displeasure. This rejection weakens our capacity to access the sacred, the rigor inherent to the rite. We can, however, identify meaningless sacrifice within consumerism. This can be seen when we “sacrifice the present for a better future”, or better said, sacrificing the quality of life for the progressive myth of a better future.

Ritual spaces stay out of the usual limits of day-to-day interactions. They are composed of symbolic practices that include ceremonies and their corresponding preparation. With or without the use of words, they contain apertures and closures that stay united by a guided metaphor, a guided process that moves towards a goal. This directly connects us with our subconscious and expresses, through images, the paradoxes of human existence and its meaning.

We are speaking of a different plane of space-time that transcends chronological time and the linearity of causality and temporary logic. This plane of space-time privileges itself on subjective experience, intuition and perception, contact with congruent phenomena, resonance, integration, and emergence of basic, numinous knowledge. This is the space where the ritual acts, connecting both realities, the visible with the invisible, reasonable with the unreasonable. This permits us to explore and integrate these realities into day-to-day life. When we refer to modification of consciousness via diverse techniques (one of which is the use of psychoactive plants), the ritual is configured on traditional techniques that permit a safe, protected aperture into the invisible world, into the sacred.

Rituals, although practiced by various different cultural groups, are not all the same; they sustain themselves on a cosmovision, on a specific learning goal. Nevertheless, they are similar in their fundamental basis, within the variety of their processes. For example, in the

Amazon jungle, there exists a broad spectrum of ways to celebrate an Ayahuasca ceremony. This can depend on factors such as the experience of the *curandero* (medicine-man/shaman), the person leading the ceremony. There are, however, certain guidelines when it comes to preparing the brew, as well as the transmission of awareness and knowledge, prohibitions, and the care of energetic transmission, among other aspects.

Rituals can include: purification rituals, blood rituals, coming of age rituals, rituals of passage, funerary rituals, initiation rituals, rituals for the changing of nature's seasons, commemoration rituals, rituals of exorcism, rituals of thanks, individual or collective rituals, with an officiant or alone, traditional or modern rituals, rituals that define or redefine identity, among many others. Some rituals have to do with pertaining to a group (family, community, ethnic, etc.); these rituals have guidelines for induction and egress based on requisites and limits placed by the others pertaining to said group. Likewise, there are rituals in place for celebration, to mark changes, personal or group achievements, or related to cultural values. These rituals can also be commemorative, when they are put in place to remember events, institutions, or foundational events. We can also consider rituals that mark the change of vital cycles such as: life/death, union/marriage, funerals, rites of passage or initiation, the beginning of a new stage, or consecration. These are events that, in our western society have lost their profound connections and meanings, and have become vacant, common behaviors.

We have healing rituals applied with therapeutic mechanisms, utilized to manage losses or pains, to cleanse and reconstitute health, and to mark practically any important aspect of life. This field is well defined in traditional medicine whose holistic cosmovision inscribes human activity within a broad space that does not only include the individual but his environment (ecosystemic vision), but also his relations with the invisible spiritual world which is as populated and alive as the visible day-to-day world. The mourning ritual of the Kacharina, within the Quechua population in San Martín, Peru, precisely marks the period of bereavement in the loss of a spouse. The grieving process begins with funerary rituals and for one year the widow/widower will abstain from social life while wearing black necklaces and collars, among other accessories. At the end of the period of grief, a celebration takes place during which the late relative is commemorated. This process is also marked by the widow/widower changing into a more brightly colored costume and exchanging the black necklaces and colors for more vividly colored ones.

### **At Takiwasi**

The Takiwasi Center<sup>3</sup> treats people addicted to various substances as well as people with behavioral health problems. This occurs using a therapeutic protocol that combines

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<sup>3</sup> Takiwasi is a Center for Drug Rehabilitation and Investigation of Traditional Medicine based in Tarapoto, San Martín, in the Peruvian Amazon. [www.takiwasi.com](http://www.takiwasi.com)

traditional Amazonian medicine, modern psychotherapy, and a minimal amount of allopathic medication.

The process at Takiwasi involves the necessary use of rituals, from renouncing drug use and harmful behavioral patterns (these rituals are accompanied and fortified by therapeutic treatment and sessions with psychoactive plants), to personal healing and healing family systems, among others. This treatment cannot take place any other way, because in the modern world, addictions express loneliness, emptiness in one's being, the addict's confusion and vulnerability in a world that lacks meaning, without reference points, but with a great spiritual need. Due to these symptoms, drug use occurs in a ritual manner, because the individual subconsciously knows or perceives that he is accessing an unordinary space and needs protection, a way of entering this space and returning safely. It worth noting, for example, that within groups of drug users and other derelict groups (gangs, cartels, and mafias among others), spontaneous reintroduction of ritual codes (distinctive clothing, tattoos, haircuts, piercings, speech patterns, greetings, etc.) which comfort an individual into feeling as if he belongs to something larger than him; causes recovery of a certain level of social identity through the reappearance of clans, to the point that some sociologists mention a certain "retribalization" of marginalized groups of society, especially in underprivileged urban areas. Addicts, however, access these unordinary worlds by using substances in an inappropriate manner. They utilize incorrect mediums, they are not prepared, nor do they understand that contact with the invisible world can be dangerous, and they end up lost in a parallel reality that they control even less than the day-to-day reality that they are trying to escape from.

The goal of treatment is not simply the cessation of drug use, but for the patient to be able to discover what gives meaning to his life, while developing his potential and relating himself in a healthy and integrated manner with his interior world and the "other" world through coherent spirituality. In treatment, the ritual accompanies every stage; it gives every act meaning, a different tone, more strength and depth. Takiwasi utilizes religious and secular rituals, sometimes simple, but loaded with meaning, such as walking backwards as a way of symbolically retracing the path up until the present day. Others are very complex, such as ceremonies with psychoactive plants. The ritual, very precisely, opens the ceremony with security, and later closes the timeless space of communication with the invisible world (internally and externally). This reorients the spiritual and psychic energies that are moved about during the ceremony, channels intentions, modulates experiences according to the need and purpose of the therapeutic process.

An important example that demonstrates the operability of the ritual and which has emerged from personal experience, is the difference seen in the effect of the purgative plant Yawar

Panga (*Aristolochia didyma*) with and without a ritual at Takiwasi.<sup>4</sup> When Takiwasi first started, sessions with purgative plants were not ritualized due to belief that purges were merely physical processes with therapeutic effects/benefits. Before the ritual was put in place, the effect of Yawar Panga began after an hour or more, and continued until five or six hours after ingestion. Once the ritual was applied, we observed that the effects of the purge began earlier and concluded more quickly, as well as with less difficulty for the person purging and with more therapeutic efficiency.

Therefore, rituals structure, operate, and potentiate the sought-after effects while preventing harm, and while safeguarding integral health and healing through holistic means. This manifests itself in the stage of cleansing or purification with depurative methods, and continues with the exploration of the inner world with the help of a predetermined group of plants integrated into the psychotherapeutic treatment also containing ritual protocols. Rituals are also introduced to facilitate and consolidate the management of communication, processes of atonement and forgiveness, reconciliation between the patient and the natural elements (earth, water, air, fire), reestablishment of contact with nature, promises that need to be completed or undone (if they are harmful to the patient), making paper mâché masks that symbolize the patient's dark side to examine it and resign its negative qualities (the resignation is done during a ritual we call "the mask burn"), recognition and reparation of wrongdoings and transgressions, celebrations of gratitude for life, recognition of achievements in one's therapeutic process, meditation and prayer, and access to holy sacraments to believers. Anything that moves towards a process of healing ends with an act that can reorder chaos while promoting reconciliation with oneself, others, and life!

### **Contemporary Rituals**

Rituals have accompanied humanity throughout its whole existence, and they continue to do so, although we often do not identify them as rituals or are not conscious of them as such. Various secular rituals have appeared in our post-modern society to respond to the desacralization of contemporary life. As pointed out previously, the ritual became something other than symbolic, although still demonstrating and emphasizing humanity's inherent need to attribute meaning to the most common aspects of life, to relate the ordinary with the extraordinary. Therefore, we constantly seek security, belonging, and connection with transcendence by ritualizing day-to-day events and glossing over the lack of meaning in our current society. We see lavish examples of this in the scope of religion, politics, and sports, as well as in academics, concerts, the beginning of events such as the Olympics, and parades. Each of these events makes reference to a group of beliefs, an order implanted in a way of doing things, a practice that gives a different, more profound meaning to simple acts, such as

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<sup>4</sup> Also see: "The Yawar Panga ritual ceremony", by Dr. Jacques Mabit, Takiwasi Center, available at [https://takiwasi.com/docs/arti\\_ing/YawarPangaCeremony.pdf](https://takiwasi.com/docs/arti_ing/YawarPangaCeremony.pdf)

a first day of school. These events contain elements that signify a proper beginning, competition, brotherhood, a struggle, protest, and prevent possible harm.

Scholars such as the sociologist Emile Durkheim, the anthropologist Victor Turner, or the social scientist James Lull refer to rituals as multidimensional practices, sacrosanct practices, which exist in secular environments as well as religious ones while giving a sense of belonging to those who belong in communities with the help of communication, revitalization, and diffusion. For Bettelheim, day-to-day rituals express themselves through individual and collective acts.

### **Rituals and Tasks**

Nevertheless, we see confusion between rituals and routine tasks that we realize almost mechanically in our day-to-day lives. Is washing your hands before eating a ritual? Is greeting a person when you enter a home a ritual? These tasks are so common in the day-to-day plane that they have basically become functional and lost their depth. They end up obtaining foreseeable and familiar results (such as receiving a greeting after giving one). Although they have very distinct origins from the religious sense (purification, keeping agreements between people, coexisting together, etc.), their repetition ad infinitum has turned them into reflexive practices, habits, or simple customs. They no longer mobilize much mental or spiritual energy. The ritual goes beyond that. The ritual encompasses multiple levels, with open and closed areas. It consists of a precise series of symbolic practices that mobilize internal personal, collective, and archetypical energy. This is profoundly related to myths and has elements of cosmovision, and its execution requires special preparation.

In the scope of mental health, the ritual is used as a protective mechanism, although it is not linked with transcendental purpose or meaning, and it turns into a series of repetitive acts developed over time in the same manner with no apparent meaning, giving the sensation of security. In turn, the act turns into a compulsion, a pathologic pulse that eventually evolves into an obsession such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Its cathartic effect: the relief of tensions and the illusion of control by means of these compulsions in an insecure context or due to an invisible aggressor are based on its continuity and intensity. A study applied to a group of students at César Vallejo University in Tarapoto (2013), shows that everyone could identify at least one, if not multiple, rituals that they practice daily. These rituals were practiced outside of religious contexts (50%), for reasons of hygiene and safety (35%), to reinforce belonging to the family clan (35%), or due to beliefs or superstitions (18%). Some mentioned acts that they learned early on in life to ensure safety and hygiene (22%). With this simple study, we can appreciate the value of the presence of rituals in our day-to-day life even while living in a desacralized society, even if we only consciously recognize them as rituals when they are practiced in a religious or ceremonial nature.

## **Conclusion**

We can say that rituals are made up of “sacred technology”, a way of accessing the invisible world safely, transcendently. They are operative and efficient, and are not tied to human judgment. They are also precise, and because of this, errors or transgressions carry the risk of bringing out unpleasant consequences independent of the good or bad intentions of the officiant.

By approaching the ordinary as if it were sacred (by use of rituals), the simplest thing accesses a superior plane, a spiritual plane, turning it into something sacred. Rituals are not products of capricious ideology or creativity, but instead respond to universal symbolic laws (although they do contain a cultural tint), and correspond to practices and context, the intention and the meaning that guides them.

I will finish by pointing out how indigenous spirituality can help the modern human being recover the meaning of the truly sacred and its potential for therapeutic processes (such as the ones utilized at Takiwasi) to treat pathologies especially within the context of mental health, which encompass an existential dimension. Once reintroduced into desacralized society, the ritual is useful. It has the potential to heal and reconnect one with transcendence, and encourages an encounter with the meaning of individual and collective life. An example of this (more than just seen in the globalization of some forms of traditional medicine) includes various theories and methods nourished by contact with cultural rituals and ancestral religions such as “family constellations” that have emerged from Hellinger’s contact with the Zulu tribe, the inspiration of Jung, and others who have investigated rituals when in contact with indigenous populations of Mexico, the Orient, and Africa.

*Rituals of Life*



*Indigenous peoples have been, and currently are, the guardians of nature. They have conserved and enriched biodiversity. They hold profound knowledge about the sacred rituals of life.*



*The spiritual dimension of fire reveals itself in its visible and evident presence by means of the light and heat that it radiates.*



*Dance holds great potential for transformation and healing.*