

Symbolic Inversions

An Interpretation of Contrary Behavior in Ritual

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Introduction

Anthropologists have recorded several examples of contrary or nonnormative behaviors in the ritual context that occur around the world. Such behaviors include scatological activities and lewd conduct as well as gender and status reversals, and numerous other forms of contrariness. It is possible to identify these contrary, nonnormative behaviors collectively as *symbolic inversion*, contrasting them with the normative cognitive or social structure of society, and ask the question, "Why does a society approve of and foster in the ritual context symbolic inversions that challenge, ridicule, and debase the conventions of the society?" The answer proposed in this paper is that symbolic inversions acquire significance as sacred or elaborating symbols (Geertz 1973; Ortner 1973) and that an analysis of these symbols will shed much light on the cosmological and social organizations of the particular cultural traditions. In this paper I examine Peter Rigby's essay "Some Gogo Rituals of 'Purification'" (1968) and McKim Marriott's description of "The Feast of Love" (1966), and I interpret the symbolic inversions of these rituals, one from eastern Africa and the other from northern India, as important discourses on cosmological and social organizations. In both of these rituals, women temporarily acquire significance as embodiments of purity and power and become sacred, elaborating symbols serving as vehicles for synthesizing worldview and ethos and for ordering or sorting out the cultural experiences or orientations.

Sherry Ortner (1973) identifies certain symbols as "elaborating symbols" in terms of their function of "ordering or sorting out of conceptual experience" and for "providing cultural strategies." Symbolic inversions in the ritual context represent certain individuals as having certain properties or qualities that are not normally, i.e., socially associated with them: Those who lack power and purity in the social context are represented as embodiments of power and purity. As Victor Turner (1978: 287) notes, "One aspect of symbolic inversion may be to break people out of their culturally defined, even biologically ascribed roles, by making them play precisely the opposite roles. Psychologists who employ the sociodrama method as a therapeutic technique claim that by assigning to patients the roles of those with whom they are in conflict, a whole conflict-ridden group can reach a deep level of mutual understanding."

In both the rituals (referred to as "Gogo Rituals of Purification" and "The Feasts of Love") women temporarily acquire significance as "sacred symbols."

The function of sacred symbols, according to Clifford Geertz (1973), is to synthesize ethos (the moral and evaluative elements of a culture) and worldview (the cognitive orientations about the order of self, society, and the world). Every society has important sacred symbols that embody meanings of why there is ultimate order in human existence even when we cannot experience it, and these symbols serve as vehicles to conceptualize the meaning of one's own existence, combining the experiences of diverse domains. Symbolic inversions endow women with the moral, evaluative elements of a culture, and render them as sacred symbols of power and purity in order to deal with the cognitive orientations about the order of self, society, and the world. In his essay "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," Geertz (1973: 127) notes: "... religious symbols, dramatized in rituals or related in myths, are felt somehow to sum up, for those for whom they are