

From Wordless Ritual to Ritual Words

An Analysis of the Ritualized Contact with Leprosy in Thailand

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Abstract. – Based on an anthropological study combined with historical investigation, the article analyzes changes in ritual aspects of Thai society's contacts with leprosy during the past one hundred years. The findings indicate a process of metaphorization, starting with ritual behavior in the presence of beggars suffering from leprosy, and culminating in the ritual use of their popular designations that have survived in the spoken language. In the course of this process, ritual aspects of encounters with leprosy became increasingly potent. The analysis demonstrates the contribution of studying the metaphorization of rituals to the resolution of the current debate over their survival versus their decline following modernization processes. [*Thailand, ritual, modernization, metaphorization, symbolic type, leprosy, beggars*]

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1. Introduction

For several decades anthropologists have been at odds on the issue of rituals in modern society; some maintain that they still play a prominent role, while others claim that following modernization they have faded away. Despite the popularity gained in recent years by the view according to which rituals are prevalent in all realms of modern life, methodological problems have hitherto prevented an unequivocal resolution of the controversy over this issue. The present article aims to contribute to the resolution of the conflict between these approaches to rituals through their examination in a field of research that has not yet been sufficiently utilized for this purpose.

In the past, rituals were often identified with magic, authoritarianism, irrationality, and indiscriminating conformism to standard social customs (Malinowski 1948: 28-32, 37-41, Merton 1949: 154 f.). This view entailed a stereotypical conceptualization of rituals, underestimating their importance and utility. They were perceived as an ineffective activity, as meaningless routine performed

thoughtlessly, and even as a symptom of personal maladjustment (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 20, Klapp 1986: 47). Their conduct was attributed to small groups, tribal societies, and the uneducated masses (Gluckman 1962: 38, 1965: 261 f.). Modern society, on the other hand, was viewed as rational, secular, and dominated by sophisticated culture and social organization. This belief, inspired by Weber (1946: 267-301), linked modernization with progress (Doty 1986: 97). Since rituals were regarded as being incongruous with progress, it comes as no surprise that a decline in their practice was considered by many anthropologists as the obvious result of modernization processes.¹

An opposite approach to the issue of rituals' survival versus their decline in modern society was taken by researchers who viewed them instead in a favorable light, as a means of promoting reflexivity and even as one of the cornerstones of culture (see Scheff 1977: 483, Shore 1990: 226). According to them, rituals are not to be identified with religion nor modernization with secularism, for unquestioned tenets guide the secular way of life as well. Following this argument, Douglas (1966: 58-72) posited that when we clean and tidy up, we engage in rituals of defilement and purification, subject to the same rules underlying the behavior of simple societies. Similarly, the analyses set forth by Goffman (1967, 1971) indicated that everyday interactions among strangers in the modern world are actually based on rituals. Moore and Myerhoff (1977) noted the performance of secular rites in a wide array of contexts in industrialized societies, ranging from courts of law to graduation ceremonies. Kertzer (1988) showed that rituals are an integral part of political life in modern society. Additional studies on this topic brought to light rituals discernible in public behavior at festivals and sporting events, in the world of commerce, in dining customs, and in the domains of media

¹ See Scheff 1977: 483, Cheal 1988: 85 f., Kertzer 1988: 177, Reeves and Bylund 1989: 238.