



Hydra

Interdisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences

Ritual Labour and Contemporary Politics

by Joso Skarica

MSc programme Social Anthropology

Abstract

Rituals have had a long historical application and have been used as a powerful tool to demonstrate and communicate strength and dominance to allies and foes alike. In order to truly understand how modern political leaders create and utilize their charisma to elevate themselves in the eyes of the general public, historical ideas that connect kings with gods have to be properly analyzed and understood. The most important link between kings and politicians lies in the fact that both have used and continue to use ritual as a way of legitimising their respective roles. Political ritual under its various guises has the power to strongly engage the emotions of the spectators, and therefore create the powerful illusion that they are somehow connected with the charismatic political figure and are an integral part of the power structure itself.

Ritual Labour and Contemporary Politics

Joso Skarica

Introduction

Rituals have had an important role in maintaining socio-political equilibrium ever since the time of hunting and gathering bands. Therefore, it can be safely deduced that the notions of “Divine Kingship” and “The King’s Two Bodies” were deeply rooted in the collective unconscious of different societies well before they were articulated by Feeley-Harnik (1985) and Kantorowicz (1957) respectively. If one wants to really grasp how modern political leaders create and utilise their charisma to elevate themselves in the eyes of the public, historical ideas that connect kings with gods have to be properly understood. Whether we take a closer look at the ancient Sumerian civilisation and its progeny Babylon, Egypt and Hebrew kingdoms, one striking fact is essentially unchanged – the line between kings and gods is blurred and it is never distinguished at all who came first; the king or the god? As Collingwood wrote so elaborately: “Whether the king and the god are sharply distinguished...or somehow identified...is a question into which we need not enter because, however we answer it, the result will be that government is conceived theocratically” (1946: 14). Some of Hocart’s writings from the first half of the 20th century draw a strong parallel between polytheism and the notion of divine kingship, arguing that religion and kingship have never been divorced from each other. He wrote at the beginning of his seminal book on kingship: “...perhaps there were never any gods without kings or kings without gods” (1927: 7).

This great uncertainty of the real nature of the king is something that has been used as a means to control the masses since the dawn of humanity. I would argue that it is by this same token that contemporary politicians project their power, by behaving as if they derive it from a source much higher than their own mortal bodies. There is an important connection between this notion of god-king and the use of ritual in modern politics. Therefore, this essay will examine and analyse how monarchs and modern day political figures have used and still continue to use ritual as a way of legitimising their roles and projecting the invincibility thereof onto the minds of the *hoi polloi*. Furthermore, the following paragraphs will examine effective symbolism of funeral rites, rituals of continuity and installation rites and their utilisation by powers for various reasons, such as maintaining the status quo to preserve the dominant regime in turbulent times.

Besides trying to find historical parallels between ritual behavior of modern day politics and historical and contemporary kingship, this essay will examine in depth Durkheim’s theory of solidarity from his 1915 masterpiece “The Elementary Forms of Religious Life”. Durkheim’s work offers one of the best explanations why people have always had the need to relate to certain symbols and artifacts. Elaboration of this idea of “social communion” will be used to try to rationalise the behavior of the public in relation to political ritual.

Installation Rites, Charisma, and Modern Political Ritual

It can be argued that installation rites are one of the most potent tools by which a certain entity,

be it a king, a religious figure, or a politician, establishes his/ her legitimacy from day one. This essential practice has been observed in practically every culture and society and at all times throughout human history, albeit in modified and varying forms, but with the core objective remaining one and the same: to elevate an individual up to a particular vantage point where he/ she remains distinct from the others as well as his/ her previous identity. This new identity has been labelled differently by historians and social scientists, however, the particular phenomenon is best described and analysed in Kantorowicz' seminal work *The King's Two Bodies* (1957). By examining the Plowden court reports from the Queen Elizabeth's reign, Kantorowicz discovered that in 16th century England the law differentiated between the king's Body politic and Body natural. He argues: "The body politic of kingship appears as a likeness of the holy sprites and angels, because it represents, like the angels, the Immutable within Time." (1957:8). Therefore Kantorowicz's main thesis is that the king's Body natural, that is his mortal body, is divorced from the Body politic, which he assumes only for a certain period of time, that is to speak, he borrows his legitimacy from a source much higher than that of his own mortal human nature. This very notion of the king borrowing his legitimacy from other 'higher' realms has been the main driving force behind "the divine right to rule", which has been invoked by monarchs relentlessly. In her paper *Issues in Divine Kingship* (1985), Feeley-Harnik goes back to some important arguments made by political theologians Hocart and Fortes. She examines Hocart's *Kingship* (1927) and *Kings and Councillors* (1936) in which Hocart analyses how ritual has the power to transform a person into a thing or, in more abstract terms, an idea: "Man is not a microcosm; he has to be made one in order that he may control the universe for prosperity" (1936: 69).

This awkward idiom of "inherent sacredness of central authority" (Geertz 2000: 146) comes back to haunt us in contemporary political discourse and there are numerous examples from which one can deduct that modern political leaders use this notion to very subtly elevate their individual selves (Body natural) to semi-divine figures (Body politic). Geertz (2000) emphasizes the role of charisma in modern political discourse and labels it as an essential element by which politicians try to emulate the way of the ancient kings, albeit modified and adjusted to the contemporary political fashion and current state of affairs. His striking analysis of the mobility of Moroccan kings and how they use this element of 'mobility' to "demonstrate sovereignty to the sceptics" (1977: 162) draws a clear parallel to modern political ritual. For instance, during the American presidential elections, both major candidates traverse thousands of miles, visiting remote places and towns to hold speeches, shake hands or eat hot dogs in front of a handful of individuals. Not because those people are particularly important to their election campaign but they simply turn their mobility into a vehicle for demonstrating sovereignty to the uninitiated, and thus, using their charisma as a tool of political legitimacy. Parading across different and remote parts of the country serves the monarch (or any political figure) with a clear purpose – it allows the people to identify with the power of the ruler, while at the same time signifying the subservient nature of local authorities (Kertzer 1988: 22). The Moroccan example is not the only instance where rulers have used mobility as a tool to spread their authority and legitimacy. This practice is also found in South East Asia, for example in 14th century Java, where Geertz outlines how the royal caravan of the Javanese king passed through hundreds of communities over a period of several months. The procession was very elaborate with elephants, camels, ox-drawn carts and full royal regalia in order to emphasise the grandeur of the king to the peasants and villagers (1977: 159). The practice of 'royal entry' was not only confined to North Africa and the Far East but it was practised in 16th century Europe as well. In 1563, Charles IX was throned at the tender age of 13,

and to emphasise the new king's authority and counter the rising rebellion, his mother decided that he should embark on a two-year procession across France (Graham and Johnson 1979: 3).

Based on examples such as these, it can be proposed that "the most important ritual of legitimation in modern nations is the election" (Kertzer 1988: 49). Modern day elections have assumed the idiom of ancient rites of authority and 'royal entry'. And even though politicians try hard to impose onto the public the transparent and uninhibited nature of the roles which they assume, when examined at a deeper level and with a curious eye, one can conclude that modern day political rituals, particularly the elections, share essential features with ancient rituals of installations and successions.

Funeral Rites and Rites of Successions as Vehicles for Maintaining Continuity

Royal funeral rites have had major significance throughout human history and their utilisation to enhance the strength of powers can be observed in a vast number of spatially and temporally unrelated societies. There is a particular problem that concerns succession and installation of new kings: considering the king's divine nature, how is it possible to replace a God or some other sort of a divine creature? The Shilluk people of East Africa have a very elaborate way of dealing with this seemingly paradoxical situation. In their cosmology, a divine spirit resides in the king which is called Nyikang and looks after the people. Even though the king is mortal, Nyikang is eternal, and thus, when a king dies, the spirit of Nyikang needs to be transferred to another individual who will become the new king. This is a task that cannot be completed without the use of an elaborate ritual. The Shilluk use an effigy to represent the immortal spirit Nyikang, and when the king dies, the effigy is taken from the royal shrine in the north to meet the army of the king elect in the south. When the two armies meet, the king's elect army is allegorically defeated by Nyikang, and subsequently, both the new king and Nyikang return together to the shrine. Once in the shrine, the spirit that resides in Nyikang leaves it and enters the new king (Evans-Pritchard 1964: 205-06). One could be tempted to disregard the Shilluk example as an exotic practice of faraway peoples, but the use of effigy in funeral procession and rites of succession can be observed in Renaissance Europe, most notably in 15th and 16th century France. The French used the effigy in rituals of succession between the old and new king to represent the eternal power and the divine nature of the king. During the funeral procession, the effigy would accompany the corpse of the old king and the participants of the procession would regard the effigy as the king himself since it was made to look like the king, with waxed face and complete royal regalia (Giesey 1960: 177).

This emphasis on the symbolism of continuity during rites of succession is still alive and practised in the modern day Western political sphere, and in fact, the use of funeral rites as a political tool has a long history in the Western world. One of the most striking modern examples of such utilisation of these symbolisms in order to generate public support and validate the new leader's legitimacy occurred after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November of 1963:

Lyndon Johnson felt compelled to ritualize his transition to the presidency without delay. Although in legal terms he automatically became president upon Kennedy's death, this was not enough. For Americans to think of him as their president, he felt, they must see him go through the inauguration rites. Aboard the plane that would take them back to Washington, Johnson entreated Jacqueline Kennedy, who had just watched her husband die, to stand by his side for the ceremony. (Kertzer 1988: 57-58)

Why did Lyndon Johnson feel compelled to take the oath of office when he was well aware that he became president the moment Kennedy drew his last breath? The answer is very obvious: he had to legitimise his new role in the eyes of the American public, and by having Kennedy's widow with her late husband's blood still on her clothes by his side, Lyndon Johnson relayed an extremely powerful symbolism not just to Americans but to the whole world. It is reasonable to believe that this was performed in a premeditated manner, but even if not, it is without doubt that Lyndon Johnson used the shock and distress that the American public was going through at that time to his advantage.

David Kertzer (1988) believes that it is possible to draw parallels between Kennedy's assassination and subsequent events, and Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 and the funeral rites performed by her son Rajiv. After Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh guards, India was boiling with turmoil and riots - the country was on the verge of total collapse. In this situation, her inexperienced son Rajiv used funeral rites as a way to gain approval from the masses and to legitimise his position as the true successor to his mother's political platform. It can be argued that the main reasons why Rajiv Gandhi succeeded in the twofold task of calming the country-wide rebellion and at the same time establishing himself as a truly legitimate successor of his mother, lies in the fact that he had made use of elaborate rituals to accomplish these goals. Rajiv Gandhi employed powerful Hindu funeral rites that involved a four-hour-long procession, not that much different from John Kennedy's two decades earlier. But this was just the first step of a series of complex rites Rajiv Gandhi used to seal his new position as the country's leader. Indira Gandhi's funeral pyre took place in a location that was suspiciously proximate to the locations where her late father, Jawaharal Nehru, and Mahatma Gandhi were cremated. Through this particular symbolism, Rajiv conveyed the message to the public that his mother was the person of the same gravitas as her father and Mahatma Gandhi, and thus, effectively cementing her position as a martyr. It is also important to note that Rajiv himself set the funeral pyre alight - a classic example of continuation rites and a powerful symbolism in itself. Afterwards, Indira Gandhi's ashes were placed in more than thirty urns and sent to all Indian states and territories - effectively ushering Rajiv's succession and sending the message of continuation of the agenda to the whole country. After a period of time, during which the urns were displayed to the public, the ashes were collected and Rajiv himself scattered his mother's ashes over the Himalayas, supposedly over a cave where the Hindu god Shiva is believed to be dwelling (Kertzer 1988: 140-144). This powerful use of succession rites coupled with Hindu symbolism secured Rajiv's elections victory and earned him a place as a legitimate successor of his mother Indira, now practically elevated to a status of a martyr and saint.

What do these two major political events of the 20th century have in common? There is ample evidence which shows that both Lyndon Johnson and Rajiv Gandhi borrowed legitimacy from their respective predecessors. This goal was achieved through slightly different means; Rajiv Gandhi employed complex Hindu funeral rites that lasted for several weeks, while Lyndon Johnson's approach was more simple and straightforward: it was enough to have Kennedy's widow by his side at the time he took the oath of office. In other words, the delivery was different and adjusted to the appropriate cultural setting, but the aim and the goal of the ritual was precisely the same in both cases: to borrow political legitimacy (Kertzer 1988).

Durkheim's Theory of Solidarity and the *Social Communion* Element of Political Ritual

What is the driving force behind political ritual and ritual at large? Do societies create rituals or

are they created through rituals? Such questions arise during the investigation of rituals and their significance in modern societies and this paper puts particular emphasis on political rites. Some of these questions can be answered by examining Durkheim's theory of solidarity that pinpoints ritual as a crucial factor for producing and maintaining solidarity. Even though it deals with ritual in general, Durkheim's theory can be extended to include political rites and it helps explain why there is so much need or even necessity for it. Durkheim (1915) proposes that if we are left by ourselves, that leaves our existence at the mercy of other people, and as such, humans have the innate need to comfort themselves by emphasising and constantly reaffirming the strength and positive aspects of the society in which they live in. This need for 'social communion' can, therefore, only be met through some form of common action which has the power to binds us together: "It is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that they become and feel themselves to be in unison" (1915: 230). According to Durkheim (1915), it is only by such means – the use of symbols – that humans can communicate their deepest and most intimate feelings and mental states. He argues that the modern nations are not any different than primitive societies in this respect and both have the same need to utilise rituals to maintain social solidarity, thus rendering rituals an essential and integral part of every society. There is another important feature of ritual that concerns its standardisation. Kertzer noted a strong connection between standardisation and emotions when he wrote (1988: 42): "This, along with its repetitive nature, gives ritual its stability. Stability, in turn, serves to connect ritual to strongly felt emotions: emotions experienced in past enactments of the ritual re-emerge at subsequent re-enactments". To further expand on this notion of ritual's connection to emotions, we can turn to Munn's (1973) commentary on Durkheim's theory. She postulates that the "ritual dramatizes and energizes collective representations that mediate between society and the individual" (1973: 583). It is obvious how this notion connects to modern political parades, speeches and election rallies, and how the individual is made to be part of something much larger than themselves by participating in such activities. This 'societal control system', as Nancy Munn (1973) puts it, has the ability of creating a connection between the individual and others participating in the same ritual "through the symbolic mobilization of shared life meanings" (1973: 605). Modern political symbols such as flags, national anthems, certain public holidays, physical artefacts such as buildings that house the governmental apparatus, the president and the parliament provide the general public with means through which they can worship their culture, society and the nation state. Max Lerner echoed Durkheim when he compared the United States Constitution with a totem:

Every tribe needs its totem and its fetish, and the Constitution is ours. Every tribe clings to something which it believes to possess supernatural powers, as an instrument for controlling unknown forces in a hostile universe...Like every people, the American people have wanted some anchorage, some link with the invariant (1941: 236).

Durkheimian theory is not without its critics though, and the main criticism lies in the fact that his theory does not really deal with political change, but in fact, "acts to reinforce the status quo" (Kertzer 1988: 61; 66-67). Kertzer (1988) argues that Durkheim's theory of solidarity does not address social conflict and, therefore, ignores the political changes, how solidarity is affected by rituals or how rituals get affected over time by these very dynamics and mechanisms of change. Regardless of some of its shortcomings, Durkheim's theory of solidarity provides us with a meaningful and elaborate way of explaining some of the major forces that affect individual's attitude toward rituals and the role that rituals have in the society at large.

Conclusion

Drawing parallels between the ancient god-kings and modern day political leaders might seem preposterous. One could be tempted to make such a claim if there wasn't a whole plethora of evidence that connects the behaviour of these seemingly distant entities. The most important link between kings and politicians lies in the fact that both entities have used and continue to use ritual as a way of legitimising their respective roles. This so called "theocratisation" of political ritual (Collingwood 1946: 14) is paramount if one wants to project to the outside world that his right to rule is derived from a source much higher than his/ her corporeal nature. As Hocart put it so eloquently: "The earliest known religion is a belief in the divinity of kings" (1927: 7).

Political ritual under its various guises has the power to strongly engage the emotions of the spectators and create a powerful illusion that they are somehow connected with the charismatic political figure and are, therefore, part of the power structure itself. Durkheim's theory of solidarity addresses this particular aspect of ritual down to its very core. 'Social communion' is an important agent in facilitating the emotions during an election rally or an uprising and its great power and allure lies in the fact that it produces the effect of being one with the rest of the participants; or put in crude terms, 'social communion', in its most extreme instances, engenders herd mentality.

Various instances of political utilisation of ritual described in this paper evidently show us that "Transmission of messages through ritual dramatization is much more powerful than communication through verbal declaration" (Kertzer 1988: 30). Ritual as a means to demonstrate and communicate strength and dominance to allies and foes alike has had a long historical application. Aztecs are infamous for their ceremonies involving human sacrifices and they were known for inviting "foreign dignitaries" to these vicious events. It is not very hard to guess what kind of an effect did the ritual murder of hundreds or event thousands of captured soldiers have on these "guests of honour" (Foster 1950: 63- 64).

Finally, to the sceptics who hold the belief that rituals employed in the past by kings, Tzars and emperors do not have any actual significance and are obsolete in this day and age I present the quote from Clifford Geertz (2000: 142-143):

The relevance of historical fact for sociological analysis does not rest on the proposition that there is nothing in the present but the past, which is not true, or on easy analogies between extinct institutions and the way we live now. It rests on the perception that though both the structure and the expressions of social life change, the inner necessities that animate it do not. Thrones may be out of fashion, and pageantry too; but political authority still requires a cultural frame in which to define itself and advance its claims, and so does opposition to it. A world wholly demystified is a world wholly depoliticized.

Bibliography

- Collingwood, RG (1946) *The Idea of History*. Oxford. Clarendon Press.
- Durkheim, E (1974) [1915] *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Translated by Joseph Swain. Glencoe: Free Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, EE (1964) *Social Anthropology and Other Essays*. New York: Free Press.
- Feeley-Harnik, G (1985) *Issues of Divine Kingship*. Annual Review of Anthropology 14: pp. 273–313.
- Foster, E (1950) *Motolinia's History of the Indians of New Spain*. Berkeley: The Cortes Society.
- Geertz, C.(1977) Centers, Kings and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power. In J. Ben-David and T.N. Clark, eds. *Culture and its Creators*, pp. 150-71. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Geertz, C (2000) *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gieseey, R (1960) *The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France*. Geneva: Droz.
- Graham, V.E and Johnson, WM (1979) *The Royal Tour of France by Charles IX and Catherine de' Medici: Festivals and Entries, 1564-1566*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Hocart, AM (1927) *Kingship*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Hocart, AM (1936) *Kings and Councillors*. Cairo: Printing Office P. Barbey.
- Kantorowicz, EH (1957) (1997) *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in the Mediaeval Political Theology*. Princeton University Press.
- Kertzer, D (1988) *Ritual, Politics, & Power*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Lerner, M (1941) *Ideas for the Ice Age*. New York: Viking.
- Munn, N (1973) Symbolism in ritual context: Aspects of symbolic action. In J.J. Honigmann, ed., *Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, pp. 579-612. Chicago: Rand McNally.