

Featured Columnist: Dr. Jharna Chatterjee

Rites, Rituals, and Ceremonies

By Dr. Jharna Chatterjee

Last summer, I attended a convocation ceremony at an American university for the Faculty of Law.

The graduates waited in a separate area behind a partition, proudly donning their robes and hats—waiting for the band to signal the start of their procession into the public arena. Music warmed up the mood, and then the Dean welcomed the parents and other guests. Soon the graduates arrived, beaming at their family members and friends, who eagerly tried to capture their radiant smiles with a camera. Inspiring speeches were delivered by the scholarly professors and judges from the podium, before the students were invited there one by one to receive their hoods and to wear them with pride and honor.

Throughout this joyous celebration, while enjoying the event thoroughly, I also kept wondering what rites meant and why we had these socio-cultural rites—what was the purpose of their observance and celebrations in our lives. In the case of graduation, wouldn't it be so much simpler and more practical just to mail the certificates to these graduates and send them away on their chosen paths? Why, instead of making such occasions simple and practical, do we tend to make them elaborate, special, and formal?

On the other hand, if we don't have such rites and celebrations—I won't be standing there listening to the band, vicariously feeling the pride and the sense of achievement; my heart won't resonate with the hopes, aspirations, and dreams overflowing the trembling hearts of these young men and women, and tears won't well up in my eyes to remember similar special occasions in my own life. These are the emotional benefits of rites.



Convocation at the University of Syracuse – (Photo taken by the author)

What are rites and rituals?

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines 'rite' as "prescribed or customary form for conducting a religious or other solemn ceremony: *the rite of baptism*" or "a ceremonial act or series of acts: *fertility rites*." The meaning of the word 'ritual' is as follows: "A ceremonial act or a series of such acts or a detailed method of procedure faithfully or regularly followed."

Our social lives are shaped by rites and rituals

It won't be much of an exaggeration to say that our social lives are enhanced and shaped by such rites. In all major religious traditions as well as many cultures, birth, adolescence, marriage, and death are associated with traditional rites. For example, in the Christian faith, newborn babies are usually baptized. Moslems whisper the call to prayer into the baby's ear at birth, and after a week, the baby is named, shaved, and baby boys are circumcised. In Judaism baby boys are circumcised after eight days. The followers of the Sikh religion whisper the "*mool mantra*" (the core lesson) into the baby's ear at birth, and for naming the baby, open the sacred book of Sikh religion, "The Guru Granth Sahib." The first letter of the baby's name comes from the first letter of the first word on the page where the book opens.

Many cultures have 'rites of passage' parallel to the natural cycle of life: from childhood to adolescence, and again, from adolescence to adulthood. Usually these latter rites represent the initiation of boys and girls into their future (dare I say it? stereotypical) roles as adult males and females. For boys, the rites may involve challenging their strength, courage, maturity, endurance, and other qualities valued in the specific culture in a structured environment, under the guidance of parents or other adults. Separation from the household and mother or sisters, indoctrination into new role activities, and finally, re-entry into the community are said to be its three phases. In the process, the boys are supposed to recognize and be prepared for three different types of struggle: man vs. man, man vs. nature and man vs. self (source: www.thebridgebuilders.org). In ancient India, the Brahmin adolescent males were required to leave parental home and live in the guru's home as disciples to learn the scriptures, living a strict, ascetic life, until the guru considered them ready to move back to their 'normal' adult lives. In modern times, graduation from school or university could be compared to such a rite of passage from one stage of life to another.

All cultural traditions have marriage rites, one of the most important rites in the lives of men and women everywhere—representing a social contract for life-long companionship and mutual faithfulness. Depending on the individual culture (religious vs. secular, geographical region, traditional vs. modern), the details of the event usually vary. However, most traditions include an officiating priest or a civilian official reciting sacred verses and/or secular vows emphasizing the eternal bond of love (ring is a symbol of a never-ending relationship) between the bride and the bridegroom, loyalty to each other, and continuity of the families. It takes place in the presence of family and friends to offer their support and best wishes. Rice and even a wedding cake are symbols of fertility in many traditions. In this day of global communication and travel, most of us are familiar with the common rites such as weddings in most major cultures. So instead, I would like to describe here a few relatively unfamiliar socio-cultural rites from around the world.

Rites from around the world

Old Chinese birth rites (source: www.panda-greatwall.com/society/birth-rites-in-both-old-and-new-times) for boys might include giving them jade gift objects, placing them on a bed, dressing them in fine clothing and hanging a bow on the left side of the door; for a girl, the clothes would be ordinary, the baby would sleep on the floor, the gift would be a pottery spindle, and a piece of cloth might be hung on the right side of the door. On the third day after baby boys were born, the parents would take them outside, and shoot an arrow in four directions to indicate the belief that boys should have high ambitions. Another interesting rite called 'Zhuazhou' is said to be still prevalent in Chinese families, celebrated on the baby's first birthday. The adults would place within the baby's reach a variety of articles such as stamps, classic

books, a brush pen, ink, paper, an ink stone, abacus, coins, an accounting book, jewelry, flowers, food, and toys. For a baby girl, a scoop, spoon (representing cooking utensils), and various items representing other stereotypical feminine activities such as sewing and embroidery are also placed. Apparently, the item chosen by the baby would foreshadow his/her talents and future tendencies. In Indian families, a very similar rite is observed at the baby's first rice-feeding ceremony, usually when the baby is about six months old.

Two other ceremonies that are most probably celebrated only in Indian families are called "Bhratri-ditiya" and "Raksha-bandhan," where brothers traditionally and theoretically offer unconditional protection to their sisters, even if they have to sacrifice their own lives doing that, and the sisters offer unconditional love and prayers for their brothers' long and healthy lives. In celebrating Bhratri-ditiya, sisters put a little auspicious 'protective' mark on their brothers' foreheads with sandalwood paste, and in Raksha-bandhan, the sisters tie a piece of colored string around their brothers' wrists, meant to protect them from harm.



Celebrating Bhratri-ditiya – photo taken by Sharmi

The popular legends of Australian aboriginal groups present a world view that attributes living souls to the land (respected as the mother) and natural phenomena. They believe that powerful ancestral beings inhabit the eternal earth, creating plants, animals, and human beings. The 'dreamtime' (English translation of an aboriginal word) refers to the union of their own identities with spirits and timeless present. Dreaming or dreamtime is believed to control nature. The various rites in their lives are intricately related to this world-view, and are observed in sacred places at major stages of lives through song cycles, dances (some are called 'corroboree') and body painting—to seek the spiritual powers of these mythical beings, to pass on the information about 'dreaming' and to increase the fertility of the land. (source: www.abc.net.au/religion/stories).

Funeral rites

Funeral rites around the world are relatively less familiar to us. Most of us know that when Christians die, the bodies are laid to rest (most often buried, occasionally cremated) with a hope for resurrection in some future time. Among Hindus and Sikhs, cremation of the bodies is most common; Hindus usually scatter the ashes in a sacred river, if possible. In the Islam faith, bodies are prepared as if for prayer and then buried. In Judaism, burial must take place within 24 hours—for obvious reasons this is also the typical time-limit in most tropical countries, whether it is burial or cremation. In Taoist tradition, the bodies are buried; paper artifacts representing house, cars and money are burnt for the use of the souls in afterlife. This rite reminds us of the ancient Egyptian tradition where all kinds of articles were buried in the burial chamber of the pyramids along with the dead bodies. Among Taoists, the bodies are buried, and it is customary to dig up the bones after ten years and bury them again in a sacred place. The Zoroastrians (also called 'Parsees' since they originally came from Iran and settled in India) place the body in a built place high above the ground where vultures might eat the remains—thus, using the body to the service of living animals.

There is one tribe in Indonesia called Tanah Toraja, who lives in the hills of Sulawesi. Because of their elaborate funeral rites, this tribe has been nicknamed "The Culture That Lives to Die." After death, an

adult's body is embalmed, covered with a multi-layered red funeral shroud and placed in his/her house for a long time. Later, these bodies are buried in carved out cliff-side caves or cavities. Effigies of the deceased are made and displayed prominently. Bodies of dead infants are buried inside tree-trunks. Hundreds of water buffaloes may be slaughtered for a deceased nobleman, and the horns placed in front of the family residence as decorative status symbols. Hundreds of pigs are also slaughtered for the funeral feast for the community in a ceremonial place with shelters built for everyone. The temporal delay between death and the 'burial' is often caused by the family's ability to afford to buy or gather all these animals and make all the other preparations. The elaborateness of the funeral rites depend on the amount of wealth of the family of the deceased person. (source: www.merriewood.com/exindo/toraja)

Social value of rites and rituals

The fact that almost all known cultures in the world have their own rites and rituals seems to indicate that there is a social value inherent in them. One view suggests that as social animals, human beings need to share 'meanings' of their actions or words with other fellow community members. In a complex and dynamic environment, rites, rituals and ceremonies help us to define a significant moment and provide us with a way to establish that meaning among people who are culturally similar to us—and through such shared interactions, generate a sense of belonging. It is one of the ways to share our common, cultural identity—by emphasizing what is important to us, what needs celebrating and deserves respectful observance. University convocations, for example, are shared rites for all who are somehow connected with the university, respecting its academic culture. In this regard, it is associated with our self-concepts and self-esteem. I think all of us have experienced that comfortable feeling of participating in familiar, predictable rites—whether religious or secular. These rites are the tangible expressions of our invisible but ubiquitous culture and its values, and give us cues regarding cultural norms of appropriate conduct in a given situation. Similarly, 'culture shock' can occur when we are faced with completely new and unfamiliar rites and rituals.

Religious rites provide a psychological focus

Another view (Buddhist) holds that in a religious context, the rites and rituals provide a psychological focus to assist meditation or other spiritual activities. The rites and rituals are "ornamentation or a decoration to beautify a religion in order to attract the public," but they are not considered an essential aspect of spiritual pursuit. (source: www.sinc.sunysb.edu/clubs/buddhism/dhammananda/225.htm) The Hindu philosophy, too, endorses this view of symbolical value of rites, rituals, and festivities. These festivities, in most instances, make life more colorful, and help the continuity of cultural traditions.

Can you imagine how dull and monotonous life would be without Christmas, Hanukkah, *Durga Puja*, *Diwali* or *Eid* celebrations? There would be so few events to look forward to, to get all excited about, to prepare and dress up for, and to eat all kinds of 'traditional' food! Children wouldn't have the opportunity to experience the wonder and joy of such festivities—and we the grown-ups wouldn't have the opportunity to see them with that glow on their faces. It would be a major loss, if you ask me. Rites bring to us a vast array of emotions—for example, happiness, pride, excitement, and respect. So, these rites appear to have an enormous "fun-value," "expressive value," and "vitality value," and therefore, social survival value.

My own most direct and extensive personal experience of a religious festival is with *Durga Puja*, the autumn festival. It is the biggest and most important religious festival for Bengali Hindus and has evolved to be a socio-cultural festival, too, where people gather together to celebrate the victory of the Goddess of United Power (*Durga*) against evil, through disciplined rituals for almost a week. The puja itself includes sacred verses, complex rites, prayers, and offerings of flowers. Lamps and incense help to turn the place into a temple which is decorated artistically. Communal feasts are prepared, and musical and dramatic presentations entertain all participants, sometimes late into the night. It is a time to socialize and to celebrate the values that the gods and goddesses represent. The goddess of learning and fine arts (*Saraswati*), the goddess of grace and prosperity (*Lakshmi*), the god of perseverance and wisdom

(Ganesha), and the god of valor (Kartikeya) accompany their mother Durga, and are also worshipped during these festivities. Most importantly, it is a time for nostalgia for those of us who live far away from our motherland.



Photos by the author: The image of Goddess Durga standing on a lion (i.e., noble and fearless), fighting a monster (symbolizing evil and undisciplined physical strength) on the left, and on the right a group of children taking a bow following their dance drama. Durga has ten arms to offer protection in ten directions, and the third eye on her forehead represents insight. These 'idols' are symbols and not to be taken superficially to imply that Hindus worship idols—a misconception. The tradition was developed for the ease of conceptualizing abstract ideas by ordinary people.

To conclude, it seems to me that rites have a number of major roles to play: first, they affirm in a social setting **what is important to us**; second, they provide us with a way to **share with others** and **pass on to the younger generation** our cultural traditions. Perhaps there is still another meaning: no matter how different the rites and rituals are in various cultures, they all share one common characteristic: they help us to **socialize with other human beings** at the landmarks in our journey of life. Some tell us to move on and some are meant to bring in a closure. Some just ask us to celebrate our lives fully, and then we call them festivals.

Author's Note: The present article was partially based on my personal experiences, discussions with Chinese friends, and during our travel to Indonesia (where I had the opportunity to learn about the funeral rites of 'Tanah Toraja') and Australia (when we saw 'dreamtime' dances).