

# Symbolic Manifestations as Tools of Psychological and Historical Development

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**Received date:** November 14, 2022; **Accepted date:** November 29, 2022; **Published date:** December 02, 2023

**Citation:** Vera Barros de Oliveira. (2023). Symbolic Manifestations as Tools of Psychological and Historical Development. *Journal of Clinical Case Reports and Studies* 4(1); DOI: [10.31579/2690-8808/135](https://doi.org/10.31579/2690-8808/135)

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## Abstract

The belief in the human being as a builder of his own history has guided my work as a psychologist, based on his social and cultural background. In this conquest, man build and rely on his great symbolic ascent, already marked by the hands of the hunters who left their passage and work recorded in their graves and first dwellings. The children's growing cognitive and affective-emotional organization has as their main instrument of action their play and make-believe. This text aims to follow in broad lines the human cultural evolution and its symbolic representation. It begins with a brief prehistoric synthesis, pointing out manifestations of a religious nature, noting its intimate connection with magic and its ritualistic manifestations.

**Keywords:** rites; prehistory; symbolic rituals; religious ceremonies

## At the dawn of history

The ability to symbolize is a phylogenetic product resulting from action on the environment and the growing cortical complexity that accompanies it. Each and every behavior appears as a response to the meaning attributed to the environment. In any type of situation, the motor skills developed in previous experiences come into play, as well as the meaning that action has for the person. The logic inherent to the dynamic meaning of motricity is present in any search for adaptation to the environment. The ability to represent what has been experienced through mental images is supported by sensorimotor schemas. This symbolic representation has an underlying logical organization and historical significance for the person. The environment grows in direct proportion to the action, and in this increasing openness to the environment, symbolic or make-believe play has an irreplaceable role in the child's vital organization.

From very remote times, as early as the Neanderthal stage, dating from 200,000 to 75,000-25,000 years BC, there are clear testimonies of ceremonies linked to death and food, associated with graves and shrines. By religious ones, Leroi-Gourhan (1965) understands the manifestations or techniques as disconnected from material needs, as well as he does not attest that there is a secure justification for separating religion from magic. Both the technique and the religion of that time sought functionality, and the main function of myth, expressed by rituals, would be to explain and control reality.

The evolution of techniques and the first manifestations of artistic and religious activities, however, reveal the great transformations that

occurred in the human brain and that coincide with its new ways of relating, based on primitive group values. In an ethological view, with the help of Lorenz (1978), we can see that the guiding thread from phylogenetic to cultural rituals demonstrates the search for conciliation between the vital mechanisms of approximation and protection and those of combat. In this escalation, the relationships of the living beings with the place where they live are significant, and the symbology of "home" follows all the phylogenetic and cultural evolution. In this sense, there is a direct and proportional relationship between the level of combativeness and proximity to the territory itself. Lorenz raises three specific functions in this regard: guaranteeing living space, facing rivals and defending the offspring.

The objects that are part of the rituals lose their functional characteristics and take on the symbolism they represent. Research organized by Mons (1988), regarding the interactions between cerebral and industrial conquests, enabled to place the funerary rituals already in the epoch of Neanderthal Man and see the correlation between the appearance of art, associated with the mythical images painted in caves and the intentional construction of the first dwellings. It helps us understand a little better the evolution of the chipped stone industry, aiming at the production of increasingly smaller utensils, which presumes a much more precise manual motor coordination, based on a more elaborate mental planning.

From the National Museum of Prehistory in Les Eyzies, another research organized by Guichard (1986), also covering historical times reaching up to Julius Caesar, Gaul, in 52 BC, related the development of techniques and industries to different times. It also confirmed the appearance of

funeral rituals around 100,000 years ago, coinciding with the emergence of prehistoric art. This also evidences the correlation between major climate changes and glacial periods. In short, these synopses seek to highlight the beginnings of the great human escalation and the first symbolic manifestations through rituals, which already unveil their strength.

The cultural rites established through History are transmitted by tradition, and must be learned through a group. Lorenz stresses the importance of the ability to learn, which is already combined with a developed social life. He summarizes that it is on the cohesion and healthy preservation of the group that the rite focuses. Rituals play an irreplaceable role in the construction of human ethical and social-historical systems, however, when ritualistic manifestation loses its symbolic character, it disfigures and becomes a real threat to the group's historical cohesion.

From the point of view of Anthropological Social Psychology, the humanization process is really evident when we observe the passage from a pre-culture based on biological rhythms to a culture affirmed in historical-social phenomena. At that time, while human brain had already reached its maximum volume from nowadays, the history of utensils was still in its infancy. Over time, however, the techniques show an increasingly evolved intelligence, which entails and is entailed by the increase in the frontal domain, in which the extremely complex, and still very little known, role of the prefrontal cortex reveals itself as an instrument of abstraction, command, decision and affective interaction.

### Individual memory associated with sociocultural memory

It was the slow formation of the individual memory integrated to the sociocultural memory that made possible the functional synthesis from the utensil to the gesture. Man sought to pass on to the tool the possibility of executing something, moved by the hand. What he used to do with his teeth and nails, such as cutting, scratching, ripping and grinding is now done indirectly, by a tool; as Cassirer (2004; 1994) says when studying the formation of the symbol, man becomes pre-positioned against reality. But the operations performed by the hands, increasingly agile in their finger-palm and interdigital coordination, continue to be paramount to his survival as a member of a group, such as stroking, hitting, using his hands to protect himself. The increasing coordination of the fingers acquired when removing parasites from the body or husking grains proves to be very important in the creation and handling of more precise and delicate utensils, such as those used in the handling of fibers. There is a growing intentionality associated with the progressive logical structuring underlying the manufacture of the chopper and the biface, main tools of the Upper Paleolithic.

The arsenal of instruments expands and improves over time. It gradually acquires greater lightness, smaller size and a relative style, like that of the 'laurel leaf'. The most widespread instruments are: the scraper or sandpaper, elongated and rounded on one side, the chisel, similar to a saw, with its narrow and oblique cut suitable for carving or engraving, making grooves in the stones or bones, with its small and hard point, very free at one end, capable of piercing wood, bones, including teeth, shells and hides.

### Symbolic rituals: pathways of conservancy and innovation

The techniques were perfected and constituted in successive operations. The conservation-innovation binomial, proposed by Cassirer (1977) in his *Philosophical Anthropology* to characterize the human trajectory, sometimes still experiences the predominance of conservancy, the fear of the new, and reassures itself in the need to rediscover the origins. The way out of this impasse will be assisted by the symbolic representative

character of the rite, which is always a representation, containing a double latent significant vector: it is a repetition, but it is also a presence.

Rituals become symbolic manifestations that represent values built and preserved through the history of the group of people who practice them, reconciling their tradition and authenticity. By losing its symbolic character, the ceremonial ceases to be representative of values and starts to have a purpose in itself. Its participants no longer need to have a common history, and can be anonymous or unknown to each other. As previously stated, when disfigured, the ritual loses its strength and its *raison d'être*, and may even become a threat to the real historical cohesion of the group. Whenever its form overwhelms its content, it stiffens and empties itself to such an extent that it crumbles or deteriorates, failing to regulate the relationships between individuals and, more than that, creating the illusion of regulation, which is the worst.

For Lorenz (1978), this major function of the rite, in relation to the union of the group, is divided into three subfunctions, which in summary: aim to suppress divergences within it, to consolidate its unity, and to guarantee it as an entity.

By repeating over and over again the same gestures cradled by the rhythm of the songs, the people who participate in them know, or intuit, that, deep down, they are forging their history, their future, their values. In rituals, the repetitive regularity of their movements does not crystallize or lose meaning but, on the contrary, their successive comings and goings grow and become a ceremonial full of meaning. Its rhythmic repetition helps to eliminate or drastically reduce possible alterations that threaten the communication and validity of the message contained in the harmonious and sequential whole of the ritual.

### Rituals and the symbolic experience of the sacred

In his beautiful archaic ontology *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade (1989a), when dealing with the relationship between rituals and the mythical image, warns us that the act of following the experience of the rite in the sphere of the sacred becomes a challenge. He reminds us that, when studying the formation and use of the capability to symbolize, we are stepping on the terrain of signification, since the meaning attributed by man to his life experience is intimately linked to his discovery of the sacred.

Still according to Eliade, archaic ontology can be seen as essentially traditional as it is expressed through the endless repetition of gestures and speeches from the beginning of time. Reality, including cities and temples, is acquired through symbolic participation with the center of the world, and sacred rites and profane gestures only acquire meaning when they exhaustively repeat the gestures made at the origin, by the gods or ancestral heroes. The purpose of the rite is, therefore, to repeat without ceasing the act of creation.

The rituals organize the cosmos, providing texture and meaning to the initial chaos. It is through them that man resembles the gods, acquires existence and organizes the world in which he lives, always according to the primeval model.

Rite does not become a mechanical and automatic stamping of a situation, but, on the contrary, because it is a living gesture, it expresses an idea. The rites are therefore profound and authentic expressions of the search for oneself, as well as for the reality that remains and only acquires meaning if it contains within its core a living image of its origins, which grants it the gift of creating, of making the things and people who practice it real, wholesome and participants of this initial creative force.

As an example, we will briefly follow with Eliade (1989a; 1989b) the symbolism of the 'Center', found in the Temple (or holy city, by extension), in the Palace or even in the Holy Mountain, but always an 'Axis Mundi', an earth-heaven-hell axis. This archetype can be said to be

as old as man and expresses, through a symbolic image, the idea of totality, of Cosmos, which represents the absolute reality, from which everything is formed. The rites have the main purpose precisely to smooth the path of search for these origins through paths already covered, which show us the ways of this difficult journey.

In this search, rituals make use of narratives, seen as instruments of communication, and use imagination, since they suppose listening to exist. They do not seek to explain, justify, demonstrate or convince, such like the scientific discourse, based on the 'logos' (□□□□□) but, through their images, they open space for contemplation and consideration, as Brandão (1990) says so well. In doing so, they sometimes expose rites considered barbaric practiced in simpler societies, as described by Durkheim (1978), but which were basically giving voice to social needs.

When perceiving himself as historical, builder of his own tomorrow, man is terrified by such a task and, seeking to take such a great and heavy responsibility off his own shoulders, he attributes to fortune, to luck, to what is to come, and tries to read it in the position of the stars and in the flight of birds around him. He thus seeks to see signs with hidden, implied meanings that help him to orient himself. This encumbrance, or destiny, is played out in the classical tragedy, over and over again, making us feel its strength, for instance as in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Diaz and Sawatzky (1995) remind us of the great complexity of understanding rituals, which finds in great anthropologists, such as Malinowski (1975), demonstrations of how rituals in their diversity are also performed and felt in different ways, but that, deep down, contribute to the personal, social and cultural formation of people. They have a cause associated with a purpose and develop themselves according to a structure.

### The power of myth and rite in cultural transmission

By not accepting the irreversibility of life, man of primitive cultures abolishes the profane, linear time and immerses himself in the circular universe of sacred time. With Bernardini (2020), in her beautiful analysis of Meletinski's *The Poetics of Myth* (1976), we see a functional inner unity between myth and rite, and even the practical function of Psychology, where myth is not a simple means of pre-scientific explanation, as already seen, but an authentic means of cultural transmission, codifying thought, maintaining the cosmic and social order, even proposing rules of behavior. Myths are not lost or disappear over time, and even today, according to this author, they continue to be a living principle of creativity, whether they are associated with rituals, sciences such as psychology and sociology, art or ideology, as well as continuing to be a theme of universal culture.

Myths and rites are entangled in the history of man, his *ethos* and dreams, his ideas and ideals, as Levi-Strauss (2019) rightly points out. Myth can be seen as a narrative that, through an imagery language, reconciles history and cosmovision. Eliade (1989a) strengthens the ties between the myth and the sacred, tying them to the origins. His major theme necessarily includes the sacred and becomes one of the great foundations of History and the understanding of the human psyche.

In the history of humanity, there are many rites that accompany us. Rüpke (2006), when describing and analyzing a ritual occurred in ancient Rome, highlights the possible relationship that is created between Symbolic Anthropology and Magic. The Roman custom of celebrating their heroes of conquests at their burials through public rituals, inserting statues that represented their deeds, aimed through ceremonials to make them well known and disseminate them. The statues, however, were sometimes venerated and considered to have magical powers. The presence of rituals and their symbolic manifestations follows the trajectory of humanity, as exemplified below.

According to Rüpke (2006), the Roman triumph with the figure of the triumphator and the burial of Roman nobles with the *pompa imaginum* should be interpreted within the framework of the prestige related to honorific statues as an attempt on part of the senate to regulate the prestige by tying it to a public ritual. Rituals, as known from late republican sources, were developed from the fourth century BC onwards.

An article on Soviet anthropology and contemporary rituals reports how political movements are well aware of the power of rituals in the way people live and think (Sadomskaya, 1990). It recalls how in the Communist Revolution of 1917, in the USSR, traditional popular rites were suppressed. Many of these rituals had a religious character which was not allowed at the time. Likewise, ancient customs with a religious bias, whether Christian, Muslim or tribal, were targets at that time of large-scale extinction. Over time, however, the manifested public need to express themselves through rituals became a decisive factor in the acceptance of the revival of religious practices, which the government classified as "survivals of the old life-style," and the means to overcome such survivals, and creating new "socialist ritual forms." The need for the ritual expression became an essential factor in the rebirth of the traditional religion of each ethnic group.

Sas and Coman (2016) write how personal grief rituals are beneficial in dealing with complicated grief, but challenging to design, as they require symbolic objects and actions meeting clients' emotional needs. Findings indicate three types of rituals supporting honoring, letting go, and self transformation, with the latter being particularly complex. Outcomes also point to a taxonomy of ritual objects for framing and remembering ritual experience, and for capturing and processing grief. Besides symbolic possessions, the authors identified other types of ritual objects including transformational and future-oriented ones. Symbolic actions include creative craft of ritual objects, respectful handling, disposal, and symbolic play. They conclude with theoretical implications of these findings, and a reflection on their value for tailored, creative co-design of grief rituals. In particular, several implications for designing grief rituals were identified that include accounting for the client's need, selecting (or creating) the most appropriate objects and actions from the identified types, integrating principles of both grief and art/drama therapy, exploring clients' affinity for the ancient elements as medium of disposal in letting go rituals, and the value of technology for recording and reflecting on ritual experience.

### Symbolic manifestations as ways of affective-emotional expression

Sørensen (2005), in his paper do not attempt to provide a definition of ritual, but is concentrated on it as a special modality of human behaviour, as something that we can explore from different angles, and thereby hopefully shed some light on both ritual behaviour itself, and on its relation to other types of human behaviours, in particular esthetic genres.

Another possible bridge of contact and intersection is raised by the author, between rituals and playing, emphasizing that both forms of expression and communication involve emotions and feelings. From a deep ethological reading, however, it also traces a bridge between rituals and biology, by focusing on the specific spatial reference in which rituals take place, developing themselves according to the symbols of the geographical conditions of the region in their connection with the experienced local history.

And another important insight from ethology is that ritualization together with play entails a process of weakening or decoupling of the emotions involved in the actions. Therefore, ritual can be seen as a bridgehead leading from biologically based signalling, locked in a set referential space and dependent on spatial contiguity, to cultural symbolic systems able to convey meaning through reference to other symbols.

In this text, we join the reading of Sørensen (2005), who places rituals as relatively independent of time and space, since they have their own rhythm and symbolism. In this sense, I also emphasize its power and ability to represent and express world perspectives, as well as affections and emotions; in a representation it combines several symbolic manifestations, such as verbal, gestural and imagery ones, enabling the intimate connection between cognitive and affective-emotional aspects.

### Concise final remarks

At the beginning, we made reference to the great significance of symbolic or make-believe play for the physical, mental and social organization of the child. Throughout the text, we followed the symbolic representation since prehistory, seeking to emphasize its evolutionary character of human expression and communication. At the end, we emphasize that the importance of symbolic manifestations is effective and complements in the personal and cultural interaction of the human being throughout his history.

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