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# Performing Ethnography

*by Victor and Edith Turner*

Anthropological literature is full of accounts of dramatic episodes which vividly manifest the key values of specific cultures. Often these are case-histories of conflicts between lineages or factions, spreading into feuds, vendettas, or head-hunting expeditions. Frequently they describe how criminal behavior is defined and handled. Other accounts describe how illness and misfortune are ascribed to witchcraft or ancestral affliction and reveal tensions and stresses in the social structure. Such descriptions are richly contextualized; they are not flat narratives of successive events for they are charged with meaningfulness. The actors commonly share a world-view, a kinship network, economic interests, a local past, and a system of ritual replete with symbolic objects and actions which embody a cosmology. They have lived through hard times and good times together. Culture, social experience and individual psychology combine in complex ways in any "bit" or "strip" of human social behavior. Anthropologists have always favored the long-term, holistic study of a relatively small society, examining its institutions and their interconnections in great detail, locating the links among kinship, economic, legal, ritual, political, esthetic and other sociocultural systems. When they study, say, a particular performance of ritual, they are on the look-out for expressions of shared cultural understandings in behavior, as well as for manifestations of personal uniqueness.

Nevertheless, while it may be possible for a gifted researcher to demonstrate the coherence among the "parts" of a culture, the models he presents remain cognitive. Cognizing the connections, we fail to form a satisfactory impression of how another culture's members "experience" one another. For feeling and will, as well as thought, constitute the structures of culture—cultural experience, regarded both as the experience of individuals and as the collective experience of its members embodied in myths, rituals, symbols, and celebrations. For several years, as teachers of anthropology, we have been experimenting with the performance of ethnography to aid students' understanding of how people in other cultures experience the richness of their social existence, what the moral pressures are upon them, what kinds of pleasures they expect to receive as a reward for following certain patterns of action, and how they express joy, grief, deference, and affection, in accordance with cultural expectations. At the University of Virginia, with an-

thropology students, and at New York University, with drama students, we've taken descriptions of strips of behavior from "other cultures" and asked students to make "play-scripts" from them. Then we set up workshops—really "playsshops"—in which the students try to get kinetic understandings of the "other" sociocultural groups. Often we selected either social dramas—from our own and other ethnographies—or ritual dramas (puberty rites, marriage ceremonies, potlatches, etc.), and asked the students to put them in a "play frame"—to relate what they are doing to the ethnographic knowledge they are increasingly in need of, to make the scripts they use "make sense." This motivates them to study the anthropological monographs—and exposes gaps in those monographs in so far as these seem to depart from the logic of the dramatic action and interaction they have themselves purported to describe. The actors' "inside view," engendered in and through performance, becomes a powerful critique of how ritual and ceremonial structures are cognitively represented.

Today, students of social science are familiar with Bateson's concept of "frame," and Goffman's, Handelman's and others' elaborations on it, including Goffman's notions of "framebreaking," "frame slippage," and "fabricated frames." To frame is to discriminate a sector of sociocultural action from the general on-going process of community's life. It is often *reflexive*, in that, to "frame," a group must cut out a piece of itself for inspection (and retrospection). To do this it must create—by rules of exclusion and inclusion—a bordered space and a privileged time within which images and symbols of what has been sectioned off can be "relived," scrutinized, assessed, revalued, and, if need be, remodeled and rearranged. There are many cultural modes of framing. Each of them is a direct or indirect way of commenting on the mainstream of social existence. Some use special vocabularies, others use the common speech in uncommon ways. Some portray fictitious situations and characters which nevertheless refer pointedly to personages and problems of everyday experience. Some frames focus on matters of "ultimate concern" and fundamental ethics; these are often "ritual" frames. Others portray aspects of social life by analogy, including games of skill, strength, and chance. Other modes of "play" framing are more elaborate, including theater and other performative genres. Some social events are contained in multiple frames, hierarchically arranged, frame within frame, with the ultimate "meaning" of the event shaped by the dominant, "encompassing" frame. Frames, in other words, are often themselves "framed." But let's not speak of "meta-frames," except in a play frame! Nevertheless, ribaldry may be the most appropriate "metalanguage" for today's play frames—as Bakhtin argued in his great defense of Rabelais and the "Rabelaisian language" he drew from "the people's second world"—in order to reinstate human good sense in a literature bedeviled by the cognitive chauvinism of intellectual establishments, secular and sacred.

Framing frames perhaps makes for intensified reflexivity. In 1981, one of our Virginia graduate students, Pamela Frese, who has been studying marriage (culturally, structurally, and in terms of social dynamics) in the Charlottesville area—usually in the official role of photographer—elected to cast the entire anthropology department as participants in a simulated or fabricated contemporary Central Virginian wedding. Edith and Victor Turner, for example, were the bride's mother and father, and the bride and groom were identified primarily because they were not in the least a "romantic item." The rest obtained kinship or friendship roles by drawing folded strips of paper from a hat—each slip describing a role: bride's sister, groom's former girl friend, groom's father's father, bride's drunken uncle, and so on. A Department of Religious Studies graduate student was cast as the minister. Both faculty and students were involved. A "geneology" of the families was pinned up in the department office several weeks before the event. Almost immediately people began to fantasize about their roles. One of the faculty members declared, as



### **Arranging the “bride’s” veil**

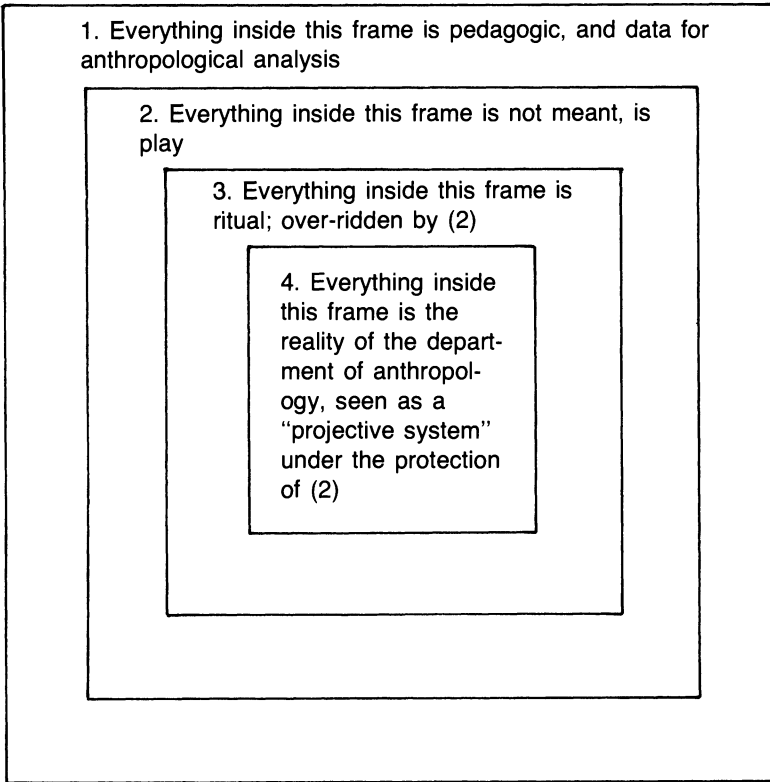
father of the groom, that his “side” of the wedding represented \$23 million of “old New England money.” This figure, he remembered, was what the heiress whom he nearly became engaged to at Yale was alleged to be worth. Victor Turner was an old proletarian Scots immigrant who made vulgar money by manufacturing a cheap, but usable, plastic garbage can, and who quoted Robbie Burns, often irrelevantly. The Lévi-Straussian principle of “binary opposition” was clearly in evidence.

The “wedding” took place in the large basement of our house at Charlottesville—the “kiva,” some called it. Afterwards, there was a “reception” upstairs with a receiving line, real champagne and festive foods. At subsequent sessions students were asked to describe, or if they wished, to write down their impressions—partly as seen from their own “real” viewpoint. The data is still coming in. Several people took photographs of the different stages of the event. Others taped conversations and registered variations in the decibel level of the group during the reception. All the materials would add up to several full length papers. Pan Frese, the original researcher, will “write up” the whole enterprise. Here, let’s consider just the “nesting” of “frames” involved.

(1) The encompassing frame is a *pedagogical* one—“everything within this frame is data for anthropological analysis.” The formula is “let us learn.”

(2) Within (1) nests a play frame, with Batesonian “metamessages.” (a) The messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant; and (b) that which is denoted by these signals is non-existent. The formula is: let us make believe.

(3) Within (1) and (2) nests a ritual-script—the preparations for the wedding and a Christian form of the wedding service. If this frame had not itself been framed by the override “all this is play,” the ritual frame would have had its wider cultural “moral function.” Ritual says “let us believe,” while play says, “this is make-believe.” Without the play frame



***Nesting of frames***

there would have been a real danger that, in terms at least of Catholic theology, a real marriage would have taken place, for here it is the couple who are the ministers of the sacrament of marriage, not the priest, whose basic role is to confer the blessing of the Church on the couple. Since ritual is "transformative," the couple would have transformed their relationship into that of spouses by the performative utterances of the nuptial liturgy. Truly to "play at" performing a ritual drama is, without suitable precautions being taken, to play with fire. But it was clear that the "serious" ritual frame was being desolemnized and demystified by its own containment in the wider play frame. A reminder of play was the reciting of a poem—an epithalamion by Sappho, in fact—before the service proper began, by a stranger to the group, though a close friend of the "bride." Of course, in a real marriage the couple's intentions are all-important. They must seriously "intend wedlock."

(4) Within this frame of fabricated marriage ritual was the frame of the parapolitical structure of the University of Virginia's Department of Anthropology. This frame was covert but genuine, fabricated like the other frames. At the "wedding reception" it was clear in the behavior of the pretended kin and friends of the groom and bride what the extant pattern was of cleavages and alliances, oppositions and coalitions, between and among faculty and students—a delicate situation we won't dwell on here. However, these artificial rufflings were minor indeed, hardly troubling a genial group of scholars. But under the



***The couple embrace at the "alter"***



***The reception line***



***The couple feed cake to each other***      ***Old “grandfather” takes a nap***

protection of the play frame and simulated wedding frame, in words, gestures, conversational style, and dress, in reversals of “real-life” roles and manners, one saw everyday departmental politics as a “projective system.”

As the evening progressed, frame slippage occurred more and more frequently, and people reverted to their ordinary “selves,” though for a few “peak moments”—for example, when the champagne cork popped—there was the sort of “ecstasy” that E. D’Aquila and C. Laughlin in *The Spectrum of Ritual* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) write about—the simultaneous “firing” of cerebral and autonomic nervous systems, right brain and left brain, sympathetic and parasympathetic. It was interesting, too, to observe which persons “stayed in role” longest and who could or could not suspend disbelief in order to play their roles properly. Some, it became clear, thought there was something sacrilegious, some profanation of their own cherished values, in enacting what for them was a religious sacrament. Others, atheists or agnostics, introduced a note of parody or irony, into the ritually framed episodes. We were surprised at the wholeheartedness with which some anthropology students played their conventional roles—for example, the “bride,” who in real life was having reservations about her own marriage, sewed her own bridal gown. We were also astonished at how well the students understood what phenomenological sociologists would call the “typifications” of American culture, how almost “instinctively” and “automatically” they “knew what to do next” and how to do it, in fact, how “natural” many people find it to act “ritually” given the proper stimuli, motivations, and excuse. It was interesting, too, for us to observe how some participants were almost shocked into recognizing buried aspects of themselves. Others were taken over, “possessed” by what Grathoff and Handelman have called “symbolic types”—priest, bride, bridegroom, and so on, in the domain of ritual liminality; Drunken Uncle, Pitiful Lean and Slipped Pantaloons in the play domain (the “bride’s grandfather”—a student played this

senile type; in the middle of the service he shouted, “Battlestations! Battlestations!” reliving old wars.)

A few comments on this performance: in practice, the hierarchical nesting of frames (as shown in the diagram) was overridden by the subjective responses of the actors, who evidently selected one or another of the frames as dominant. For example, the “bride” caught herself on numerous occasions following the performance talking about her “wedding” as though it was real. Others remained resolutely within the play frame; enacted creative fantasies pivoted on their chosen cultural roles. One woman remained consistently “dotty” throughout the whole ceremony, denouncing the sexual innuendoes of Solomon’s *Songs of Songs* in loud tones, and remaining generally objectionable during the subsequent reception and “wedding breakfast.” Others kept on shifting frames, both during the performance and for some weeks afterwards; some remained “in frame” for several months and continued to call each other by kinship terms derived from the fabricated genealogy. Most participants told us that they understood the cultural structure and psychology of normative American marriage much better for having taken part in an event that combined flow with reflexivity. Some even said that the fabricated marriage was more “real” for them than marriages in the “real world” in which they had been involved.



**Stealing the “bride’s” garter**



The fabricated marriage was not our first attempt to "play" ethnography. At the University of Chicago, in seminars we ran in the Committee on Social Thought, our students put on several performances. One was a simulation of the midwinter ceremony of the Mohawk Indians of Canada, directed by David Blanchard, which involved the use of "False Face" masks, "dreaming," trancing, and prophesying. Another "ritual" was a deliberate construct of our students, led by Robert Abernathy, using van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* and Victor Turner's *Ritual Process* and *Forest of Symbols* as "cookbooks" or "how-to" protocols. This "ritual" expressed in terms of symbolic action, symbolic space, and imagery, the anxieties and ordeals of Chicago graduate students. It was divided into three stages, each occupying a different space. Each participant brought along a cardboard box in which he/she had to squat, representing his/her constricted, inferior social status. There were episodes, of a sado-masochistic character, representing registration, in which the actors were continually referred between different desks, monitored by sinister Ihadamanthine bureaucrats, who continually found fault with the registrants. Another scene, using multimedia, portrayed a typical student, being harangued from a lectern by an "anthropology professor" spouting technical gobbledegook (actually excerpts from published texts), while he was typing his dissertation to the accompaniment of a series of rapid slides of familiar architectural details of the University of Chicago. Finally he "died," and was solemnly buried by a group of his peers clad in black leotards. The scene then shifted from a room in the students' activities hall to a yard in the campus, where the constraining boxes were placed so as to represent a kind of Mayan pyramid which strongly resembled the new Regenstein Library, scene of many painful graduate attempts at study. The whole group danced around the pyramid, which was set on fire. This "liminal period" was followed by a final rite in another room of the hall, where student papers that had been unfavorably commented upon by faculty were cremated in a grate; the ashes were then mixed with red wine, and two by two the students anointed one another on the brow with the mixture, symbolizing "the death of bad vibes." Finally, all joined together in chanting "Om, Padme, Om," representing a "communitas of suffering." This production involved music, dancing, and miming, as well as dialogue. Many of the participants claimed that the performance had discharged tensions and brought the group into a deeper level of mutual understanding. It had also been "a lot of fun."

There was one curious further "real-life" development. Victor Turner was contacted by a notorious dean in charge of student discipline, who inquired whether a series of small harmless fires, started in odd corners of the Regenstein Library, could have resulted from the "ritual." He even suggested that some of the participants should be hypnotized by a university psychiatrist to elicit information about "wild-looking" people who participated in the fire dance around the symbolic Regenstein Library. Turner said it was unlikely that one of the actors was to blame for the small fires, since ritual theory suggested that such "rituals of rebellion" (in this case, a "play" rebellion) were cathartic, discharging tensions and allowing the system to function without serious contestation. He then invited the dean to the next seminar, which was an explanation by a Benedictine nun of a new script she had devised for the clothing ceremony of a postulant who would be taking her final vows. This evidently proved too much for the Irish American dean, who no doubt disapproved of Vatican II and all its "liberating" consequences including taking liberties with the script of traditional ceremonies. Turner never heard from him again.

We have described, in some detail, in a *Kenyon Review* article, "Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology," (1, 3, 1980, pp. 80-93, reprinted in *A Crack in the Mirror*, ed. Jay Ruby, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982, pp. 83-97), how we experimented with the performance of a social drama described in Victor Turner's books, *Schism and Continuity* (Manchester University Press, 1957) and

*The Drums of Affliction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), with a mixed group of drama and anthropological students at New York University. This was our contribution to an intensive workshop devoted to exploring the interface between ritual and the theater, between social and esthetic drama. In subsequent sessions at NYU, we have experimented, mainly with drama students, in performing Central African and Afro-Brazilian rituals, aided by drummers drawn from the appropriate cultures or related cultures.

These ventures emboldened us to experiment further at the University of Virginia with the rendering of ethnography in a kind of instructional theater. Our aim was not to develop a professional group of trained actors for the purposes of public entertainment. It was, frankly, an attempt to put students more fully inside the cultures they were reading about in anthropological monographs. Reading written words kowtows to the cognitive dominance of written matter and relies upon the arbitrariness of the connection between the penned or printed sign and its meaning. What we were trying to do was to put experiential flesh on these cognitive bones. We were able, fortunately, to do more than this, for we could draw upon the recent first-hand experience of returning fieldworkers. We therefore cast in the roles of director and *ethnodramaturg* anthropologists fresh from immersion in fieldwork in, for example, New Ireland and the American Northwest Coast. Students were encouraged to read available literature on these areas, and were then given roles in key ritual performances of the cultures recently studied by their returned colleagues.

One of the performances we tried to bring off was the Cannibal (Hamatsa) Dance of the sacred winter ceremonials of the Kwakiutl Indians. Here the director was Dr. Stanley



**Kwakiutl Raven Mask**

Walens, an authority on the Northwest Coast, whose book, *Feasting with Cannibals: An Essay on Kwakiuti Cosmology* (Princeton University Press, 1981), was published shortly after the performance. Walens condensed the long series of rituals composing the Hamatsa ceremony into a short script (see Appendix). My students prepared the ceremonial space, which, again, formed part of the extensive cellarage of my house. Under Walen's guidance they made props, and improvised costumes and body decoration, including face-painting. For speeches, invocations, homilies, myth-telling, ridicule songs, and occasional bursts of competitive dialogue, Walens used Franz Boas's translations of Kwakiutl texts. Walens acted as narrator, chorus, and coordinator throughout.

A similar format was used by Mimi George, the ethnographer who had just returned from her study of Barok ritual in New Ireland. We have no space to discuss these performances in detail, but it might be useful for those who contemplate doing something similar to quote from comments made subsequently by Walens and others. Both, we think, indicate the high reflexive potential of ethnographic performance as a teaching tool, essentially as a means of raising questions about the anthropological research on which they are based, but which the performances transform in the process of dramatic action.

First, then, Walens' commentary:

*The most obvious aspect of putting on the cannibal ritual was perhaps the continual feeling that it was play. The actual ritual must have been far more serious, more cataclysmic in its experiential effect on native observers than it could possibly be on non-natives. The ideas behind the ritual are so cosmic that without the associations that a native makes between those overweening social and cosmic forces, the symbols and actions of the ritual must lose much of their impact.*

*At the same time, the reactions of the students to the ritual did seem to imply that they picked up on the tenor and timbre of the actual ritual. The sense of aggressiveness, conflict, the controlled display of hostility and destructiveness did come across despite the constant messages from the actors that these were amateurs playing. Of course, there is a dual element of seriousness and play in all drama; one might even wonder about the use of the word "play" to refer to dramatic presentations. Indeed, rituals often seem to focus on the revelation that reality is merely a fiction, a presentation that humans make for one another. Vast secrets are revealed as being mere mechanical tricks; the spirit in the mask turns out to have the same birthmark behind his left knee as does Uncle Ralph. We may marvel at the technical ability of an Uncle Ralph or a Laurence Olivier to make us temporarily suspend belief that we are watching them (indeed that may be the most cogent marvel of drama as a whole) and for a moment to see only a Hamlet, or a cannibal bird, or a Willie Loman. We might ask why that most cosmic of modern plays, *Waiting for Godot*, seems to be one in which the action consists solely of play activity, activity in which all the conventional dramatic moments are negated by statements of their irreality. Contrast how Beckett handles suicide with the way Chekov or Ibsen do.*

*In short, the problems encountered in putting on an ethnographic performance are not by nature different from those that an opera or drama director would face. In fact, while preparing the Kwakiutl ritual, I was continually made aware of just how much preparation, training, rehearsal, how many years of stockpiling the paraphernalia, the foods for the feast, the validating gifts, how much patience in achieving the requisite status, must have gone into such native ceremonies. Kwakiutl*

ceremonies are long—the winter ceremonial season lasts as long as four months, consisting of daily ritual activities in hundreds of varieties, all complexly interrelated, and all of which alter the statuses of the participants so that subsequent rituals must take account of the newly acquired or divested statuses of everyone else in the society. We prepared only a minimal amount of food and paraphernalia, and had only the merest mote of performance, yet the amount of preparation time and rehearsal time was tremendous. The amount of camaraderie that arose among us was also astounding; I was not particularly friendly with the people who helped with the preparations before the class, but since then have felt much closer toward them. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of dramatic presentation is the way in which the mutual performance of a fiction unites all its creators.

Another matter is that of performers versus audience. In one sense, we were all the audience for this ritual. The Hamatsa ritual now exists only in a printed form; we tried to approximate this form as much as possible. It was therefore quite unlike the production of a play, where there is a movement toward breathing new life into a form. By nature, living rituals seem to be ever changing. To perform a ritual the same way twice is to kill it, for the ritual grows as we grow, its life recapitulates the course of ours. It becomes the symbol for the society itself. Just as the experimental theater directors of the sixties and seventies rebelled against the strictures of our society by contravening those strictures in their performance texts, so do Kwakiutl see the cannibal ritual as a symbol of the life and death of their culture, and mourn the demise of their culture in mourning the demise of its ceremonies. Our play presentation then can be seen as a representation of the modern view of primitive ritual as a whole—that it is slightly if not completely foolish, that it is primarily a social act, that it is play-acting.

We imagine our own view of the Kwakiutl is the same as their view of themselves. The meaning of the ritual for them is forever unapproachable by us. We experience only the ritual we perform, the one that actually takes place between a group of students, colleagues, and friends in the basement of a house in Charlottesville in December 1981. If we rejoice in our common experience, well and good. We have put on a play, we compare notes, and wait for the reviews. As in any play, we reaffirm, through this particular fiction communally performed, truths communally experienced. We must also question the validity of that experience. The situation is not unlike that in which a Plains Indian presents his vision, gained on a solitary quest, to a committee of elders who review it and give it their stamp of approval, or when a ritual of fecundity is given validity through subsequent bestowal of approval by the relevant deific elders. The reviews are important, as important as the production itself, for they define the commonality of the experience.

I wonder if I would have asked these questions about the nature of performance if I hadn't had to put one on. I certainly feel much more aware of the nature of performance per se than I did before. It becomes easy to see the messages embedded in rituals that remind the audience that this is a performance—the little skits in the cannibal ritual, or the overblown speeches, the constant revelations by dancers of their human identities. There is an interesting paradox here—in Western drama, the performer's technique should be so good that he conveys through the maximum of artifice the greatest amount of naturalness to his stage character. Both poor mastery of technique and overpresentation of the emotions themselves ("hamming") detract from the illusion of balance

*between contrivedness and spontaneity that makes for convincing dramatic presentation. Since stage gestures bear no relation to everyday gestures, having by nature to communicate over distances far greater than those normally used in gestural communication, the illusion of naturalness is possible only with carefully controlled artifice. In the cannibal dance too there must be this balance—the cannibal dancer must convey through the balanced use of gesture and action the feeling that he is going to destroy the people in the room. He must make them fear for themselves—is this not the purpose of all drama—by striking a balance between natural human motion and alien motion.*

*I have often wondered how to convey to my classes an emotion that would be similar in character and degree to that which the audience at a cannibal dance might feel when the cannibal first appears. How do you convey to people that the instrument of their own deaths is present in the room? My classes know me as a cream puff, so I could never begin to pretend to be the type of psychopathic villain that might, in our society's mythology, strike fear into their hearts; I have not prepared them to expect it from me, nor do I possess the acting ability to convey it to them. I think this the most important facet of the cannibal dance—the confrontation each person has with his own death in a living embodiment—and can only feel that it was not conveyed in our play ritual. Douglas Dalton, one of the participating students, giving a somewhat different view, wrote: "As the ceremony progressed I felt not so much the antagonistic rivalry that was overtly expressed in the ceremony between the bear clan and the killer whale clan, but the fact that we were collectively doing something really important—something essentially correct. There was so much power flowing all over the place in the longhouse (the Charlottesville basement) that night! The spirits were really at work that evening and we had to keep everything in line so all that power wouldn't destroy everything!" The Kwakiutl used to enhance the destructiveness of cannibal dancers, putting on demonstrations of death by using masks, bladders full of blood, and the like. To the audience these must have been very effective; and of course, there were times when people were really killed.*

*I keep coming back to this one issue—the nature of artifice and fiction in play performance. I think this is what people in the seminar were most aware of, a universal of drama, not the particular ritual we performed. I also think the questions that lie at the foundation of theatre and theatrical performance lie at the foundation of ritual and ritual performance—questions about the relationship of actors to text, of actors to audience, or fiction to fictive reality, and so on. I have no doubt that the students see some of the dramatic nature of the cannibal ritual—dramatic in both senses of the word: it is effective and it is theatre—and that they can now read ethnography and introject those feelings of theatre into the dry accounts of dances and songs and spirit names which anthropologists have written down. I have breathed life into Kwakiutl ritual just as a director breathes life into a play—but I have done it independently of the intentions of the Kwakiutl authors, just as a play production is independent of the intentions of the play's author.*

*One has the feeling that rituals are magical, that for some reason as yet unknown to science they can communicate to people, not despite their artificiality, but because of and through their artificiality. Rituals are efficacious and we wonder how. Just as we know that a good stage magician is performing tricks—that is, really not levitating that elephant or sawing that woman in half—we still marvel at the beauty of the*

*illusion and the mastery with which it is presented; so we marvel at the mastery of illusion in ritual while we reaffirm its illusionary nature.*

*It's obvious from all this that I've been thinking about the question of doubt, in an Augustinian sense, as the basis of ritual. In the chart of frames, each of the inner levels presents more doubt of the outer levels, each contravenes and obviates the outer levels. It is not that religion is so much a statement of belief but that at its most effective it enables us to suspend disbelief in the things that are larger than ourselves, whether they be deities or nature or history or the sacred corpus of anthropological theory. Just as at a ritual we may have a momentary inkling that there was something greater present than simply a bunch of people playing at ceremony, so in our acting of the cannibal dance we have an inkling of something which transcends the limitations of a particular moment in the history of the anthropology department at the University of Virginia. Compare this finale with Dalton's leap into what he took to be the Kwakiutl view of the Hamatsa ceremony: "The potlatch ended, in fact, with the assurance that the Kwakiutl would continue to keep the world in order in a pledge for next year's ceremony. The bitter rivalry that was expressed in the early parts of the ceremony gave way to a final reconciliation and a true feeling of oneness with the forces of the universe." Perhaps this is the critical difference between esthetic theatre and ritual—the actors on a stage must always seem to be the characters they portray or they have failed; the ritualist must always seem to be nothing other than what he is, a frail human being playing with those things that kill us for their sport. Stage drama is about the extrapolation of the individual into alien roles and personalities; ritual drama is about the complete delimitation, the total definition of person.*

Unlike Walens, Mimi George insisted that the participants in the Barok initiation ritual were not to be instructed in the culture and social structure, but rather assigned ritual roles without preparation. This, in the words of one of the participants, Jean-Jacques Decoster, "provided the feeling of magic that prevailed most of the evening . . . We went through a rite, and didn't just enact a 'savage ritual.' When I went home that evening and my housemates asked me about the stripes painted on my face, my answer was: 'I have just been initiated.'" Mimi George, the director, dramaturg, and fieldworker who prepared the scenario, told us that despite the alienness of the context, the students were "caught up into the meaning and worth of the ritual." Indeed, she was surprised by the similarity of their performance to its Papuan original. However, she felt that she had not given the actors sufficiently detailed guidance, and was continually beset by the cry, "What do I do now?" What this ritual did bring off was a kind of existential "double-take." At one point the "initiators" beat the Tubuan masked figure. It was then revealed that inside it was merely a human being (in this case Victor Turner). But later, in the garden, in darkness and simulated firelight, the Tubuan glided in unexpectedly to the beat of drums. The demystified "spirit" was dramatically remystified. Decoster notes, "The moment of greatest intensity was the outdoor ceremony . . . I felt definitely uneasy when we initiators were lined up and facing away from the entity, and it was not Eric (the dancer within the Tubuan) I was turning my back upon, but truly the Tubuan, an unknown and decidedly scary being. In a curious way, the ritual flogging (administered to the initiators by the 'elders') worked as a tension reliever." Other "initiators" commented on how close they felt to one another as against the uninitiated and already initiated.

We have a thick file of such comments on these and other performances of rituals



**The “owner” of the Tubuan  
concealed in the costume**



**Initiands attack the Tubuan**

in other cultures. On the whole they are enthusiastic and encouraging, though not a few echo Walens' skepticism about whether any culture can be adequately translated into the action-language of another. For our own part, we have not reached any definite conclusions as to the merits of this performative approach to ethnography. Whenever our classes have performed scripts based on our own fieldwork among the Ndembu of Zambia in Central Africa we have undoubtedly learned something about that culture that we failed to understand in the field. For example, when we enacted the girl's puberty ceremony (in which the novice is wrapped completely in a blanket, laid at the foot of the symbolic "milk tree," and is compelled to remain motionless for a long period of time, while a large group of initiated village women dance and sing around her), we were later presented with the following account of her subjective impressions by Linda Camino, the student taking the role of *Kankang'a* (novice, initiand, literally, "guinea fowl").

*Around and around they danced, again and again with punctuated cries and claps. Beneath the blanket I lay still and quiet, firm and "cool," patiently awaiting the next stage, which I knew would be to escort me to my seclusion hut. Then a strange thing happened. Time lengthened, expanded, and my wait seemed interminable, for as the singing and cries of the women grew lustier, as the pulsation of their feet and hands quickened to the driving beat of the insistent drums, I began to fear that they had quite forgotten all about me, guinea fowl.*



**Tubuan initiand approaches  
for outdoor rites**



**Initiand shows mask and  
“yams” (note face painting)**

*They were having fun; I was not. The drums beckoned me. Their wrenching beats filled my muscles with tension, demanding a response, a response I could not give as guinea fowl. The women's enthusiasm and boisterous cheers challenged me to spring out from the blanket to join them. At this point, a desire to be like those other women, a desire to move my body freely to the sounds of the drums overwhelmed me. I longed to be a woman—alive, vital, responding, moving; not a dull guinea fowl, still before a tree, unseen, stationary, alone.*

We were aware of the ambivalence with which pubescent girls had regarded the passage to adult social status, but Camino's comments suggested a hypothesis about how the ritual might have motivated a real Ndembu novice not merely to accept but to strongly desire her new status-role and membership in a community of wives and mothers. Such a hypothesis would have to be tested out, of course, in further field research, but the fact that a simulated ritual could raise it is at least one persuasive argument in favor of performed ethnography. In our experience the most effective kind of performed ethnography is not the simulation of a ritual or a ceremony torn from its cultural context, but a series of “acts” and “scenes” based on detailed observations of processes of conflict.

Rituals, like law cases, should not be abstracted from the frameworks of the ongoing social process in which they were originally embedded. They have their source and *raison d'être* in the ceaseless flow of social life, and in the social dramas within which communities



seek to contain that life. By posing the functionally familiar against the culturally exotic in the dynamics of social drama, we can make our students vividly aware both of innate commonalities and cultural differences in relation to a wide range of human societies. Our recommendation, then, is this: If we attempt to perform ethnography, let us not begin with such apparently "exotic" and "bizarre" cultural phenomena as rituals and myths. Such an emphasis may only encourage prejudice, since it stresses the "otherness of the other." Let us focus first on what all people share, the social drama form, from which emerge all types of cultural performance, which, in their turn, subtly stylize the contours of social interaction in everyday life. In practice, this means setting apart a substantial block of time to familiarize students with the culture and social system of the group whose dramas they will enact. Such instruction should be interwoven with what Richard Schechner might call "the rehearsal process." The resultant instructional form could be a kind of synthesis between an anthropological seminar and a postmodern theatrical workshop. The data should be scripted; costumes, masks, stage settings, and other props should be made carefully, with an eye to cultural authenticity (though heavy-handed realism may not be appropriate). It is highly desirable, whenever possible, to bring in a member of the group studied as a dramaturg or director—or someone in the group who has done fieldwork should be dramaturg or director. We have found that students greatly enjoy these detailed, technical preliminaries. We have also found that nearly all the rituals we have performed involve at least one episode of feasting. If possible, the foods used in the original setting should be provided, cooked in the traditional ways. Foods, food taboos, and ways in which food is shared and exchanged make up a kind of cultural grammar and vocabulary which often give clues, when their symbolism is decoded, to basic attitudes and values of the group and to its social structure.

At least one session should be allocated to a close review of all aspects of the performance seen in retrospect. This should include subjective statements by the actors, the director, the dramaturg, and members of the audience if an audience was thought necessary. Much of the emphasis will be found to be on cultural differences, and the difficulties and delights of playing roles generated by cultures often far different from our own. In these occasions of intercultural reflexivity, we can begin to grasp something of the contribution each and every human culture can make to the general pool of manifested knowledge of our common human condition. It is in dramatics and dynamics most of all that we learn to coexperience the lives of our conspecifics, "our brother man and sister woman," to quote the great bard of Victor Turner's own Scottish culture, Robert Burns.

## Appendix

### ***Potlatch Script***

#### *Greetings*

*guest—host host—guest*

#### *Small distribution of some food*

#### *Telling of myths*

*guest—return speech*

*Story of potlatch**falling—shame taken by man-eater raising totem pole**Selling of copper*

*guests' chief gives speech announcing intention to buy  
 host's chief acknowledges willingness to sell  
 price offered is too low; admonishments not to be afraid to pay a lot;  
 price is brought up by increments to be much more than the previous  
 price  
 much telling of myths—calling upon ancestors  
 ridicule songs*

*Insult of Haida through skit**Small distribution of food**(To hamatsa dance)***Hamatsa (cannibal) ceremony***Follow meals and covenantal songs**Cries and whistles heard from woods (hamatsas and all helpers)**Ghost dancer appears**mentions death, excites old hamatsas and spirit retinue**Hamatsas enter from all over—dance four times around fire*

*new initiate appears—enters excitedly, circles fire four times; he  
 is very wild, dressed only in hemlock, with no restraining clothes;  
 comes from upper level*

*People try to encircle hamatsa; he is too wild, enters sacred room,  
 sheds some hemlock branches—burned*

*Discussion of why hamatsa has escaped*

*confession of sins and analysis of ceremonial errors; must be cor-  
 rected by pledging potlatches, becoming a hamatsa's victim, or be-  
 coming an initiate; records are kept of who agrees to be a victim.*

*Adjournment—repurification through smoke**Setting of trap for hamatsa*

*hemlock neckring made; all carry hemlock old man put in center as  
 bait  
 hamatsa escapes three times—on fourth time all join hands and he  
 is captured  
 all sing taming songs*

*Family of hamatsa is on steps of house—acknowledge their pledges*

*Hamatsa will not enter house—women dance before him enticingly to no avail, entice him with bones and mummified flesh*

*Screen is set up—hamatsa goes to sacred room*

*Hamatsa returns*

*goes counterclockwise four times around fire, each time holding a victim's arm in his mouth and pulling him along; more taming songs, unsuccessful*

*All hemlock removed, burned*

*Distribution of property; display of coppers*

*All spirits appear to dance—faces black; eagle down in their hair and put around the room (carried in dishes like food)*

*Hamatsa appears*

*dances around fire—reappears dressed in cedarbark clothing, a new piece added each time he reappears*

*House is totally shut up, no chinks or light from outside*

*Burning of cedar bark*

*smoldering bark passed over head of dancer; everyone says "hoip, hoip"; much loud drumming, very rhythmic*

*Hamatsa dances, squatting and turning*

*Four more days of ceremony follow, during which time no one enters or leaves the house; no food is served; there is constant singing of power songs*

*Hamatsa appears wearing cedar bark only*

*a simulacrum of him is washed and ritually treated, then smoked*

*Hamatsa still trembles*

*women sing their most powerful songs simultaneously while men sing songs of wildness*

*A bloody menstrual napkin from the hamatsa's mother is burned*

*he is made to inhale the smoke; he immediately collapses and has to be carried from the room*

*Someone has to pledge next year's ceremonials*

*The ceremonials end*

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