

## **RITUAL RULES IN CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES: BREAK, ADAPT OR MAINTAIN? AN INTRODUCTION**

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This issue gathers some of the works presented by the members of the Ritual Year Working Group during the 15th Congress of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) in Helsinki in June 2021. As the general theme of this congress was “Breaking the Rules? Power, Participation, Transgression”, most of the articles stick to this question and try to understand the relationship between rituals and (the breaking of) social rules. The authors address the major problem from several perspectives: the regulations for performing traditional rituals and the reasons for violating them; ritual behaviour on certain dates when the social norms, the hierarchies, and the gender roles are turned upside down; modification of the ritual year recommendations according to the new environment in emigration; etc. Transgression is seen as breaking the traditional foundations and also as a transition from real performance to virtual participation. And, as in June 2021 the entire world was subjected to the rules of COVID-19, some articles in particular attempt to address the pandemic's impact on ritual sociability worldwide.

Speaking of methodology and academic approaches to the challenges, the authors recognise that the twenty-first century is definitely the time of an easier crossover from one discipline to another. Though this is an issue of a folklore-oriented academic journal, the neighbouring scholarly spheres, such as sociology,

ethnography, cultural studies, folk religion, textology, semiotics, and linguistics, are heavily dwelt on. New digital science disciplines and methods are combined with the traditional ones and added to one another.

Questioning the relations between rituals, rules, and transgressive behaviours is anything but a new topic in the field of the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, there were some classical debates already at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century regarding the general reasons why humans feel it necessary to perform rituals. According to some scholars, rituals would have a logical origin. Edward Tylor (1871), for instance, suggested that the first rituals were due to the questioning of prehistoric men when facing corpses for the first time. The incomprehension in front of a dead body would be at the origin of a need to ritualise in order to rationalise the situation vis-à-vis the sudden absence of response from the loved one. But from another perspective, rituals would also be connected with the need to cure fears and anxieties. Emile Durkheim (1912) accordingly suggested that rituals derive from irrational beliefs and therefore have to be understood as elementary forms of religion. Last but not least, Victor Turner (1969) came out of this debate by asserting that what was most important about rituals was not their cultural meanings but the very way in which they were carried out as local experiences and performative acts.

For this issue, most relevant is the comprehension of a ritual presented by Jens Kreinath. He wrote:

*By intentionally following prescribed rules of conduct [emphasis added], ritual is used to indicate a transformation in the meaning and efficacy of the respective act, behavior, or practice. The concept “ritual” can therefore be defined as the orderly performance of a complex sequence of formulaic acts and utterances that are set apart from other forms of everyday activity through framing and formalization... (Kreinath 2018: 1)*

Interestingly, the recent pandemic has led to the reuse of this accepted theoretical framework and also to its renewal through the lens of participant observation. Indeed, nobody has really been exempted from the COVID-19 crisis, which raises the question of self-reflexivity in our studies. When rituals suddenly stop or need to adapt worldwide, it becomes difficult to remain objective about the situation, and researchers are urged to comment on it, eventually using their own subjective experiences.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, the accepted rules of social sciences, humanistic epistemology, and the usual ethical codes have largely been twisted since the beginning of the pandemic, as everybody was in need of focusing on the

present. As a result, this issue presents very different sorts of texts, although they are all precisely centred on the problem of going beyond the rules.

The first sort of texts try to keep a cool head and carry on with the objectivist tradition. This choice was defended within our group by those who felt that the best thing to do in times of crisis was to continue to do what we were able to do the best, namely, research. In a way, this is already a transgressive attitude insofar as strong social expectations are weighed on the researchers, asking them, at all costs, to think about the situation and about the crisis first. Within the framework of this effort to concentrate on the continuation of our work on the ritual year, several options stand out. In some cases, the authors have proposed more descriptive approaches, centred on the long history of certain rituals (Nina Vlaskina), on the holiday bans and the punishment for violating them (Irina Sedakova), on the transgressive social functions of other rituals (Anamaria Iuga and Georgiana Vlahbei), or on linguistic approaches to cultural diffusion phenomena (Gleb Pilipenko and Maria Yasinskaya). In other cases, the approach is more committed from a political point of view and proposes strategies for improving traditional rituals based on the observation of their inadequacy with the values of modernity (Lidia Montesinos Llinares, Margaret Bullen, and Begoña Pecharromán Ferrer).

Another sort of text reports, on the contrary, the need to think about the crisis and the sudden collapse of the rules. This type of text strives to understand what the pandemic has done to rituals, for example, through the study of the transformations undergone by annual rituals or by the rituals of the individual life cycle. It is from this perspective that the sometimes surprising transformations and adaptations of Easter rituals in Russia (Daria Radchenko), wedding rituals in Hungary (Judit Balatonyi), and pilgrimages in Romania (Irina Stahl) have been studied in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, as a symptom of the need to change the rules in order to give oneself the means to think about a situation that is in many respects new, the logic of the authors' text dissolves, at the end of our issue, into a multivocal report of a roundtable on rituals during the pandemic. Thus, the rule of formally presenting separate research fields is replaced by the need for a collective dialogue and an exchange of experiences. However, this dialogue is all the more constructive in that it makes it possible to compare individual points of view and to propose a debate of ideas, beyond the simple presentation of data.

In the first article of this issue, **Irina Sedakova** (Russia) concentrates on a very direct understanding of the Congress's and the Ritual Year Working Group panel's topic and analyses the violation of the holiday bans and recommendations as they are depicted in Bulgarian ethnographic prescriptions and

their folkloric poetic versions. In the traditional culture, any holiday is seen as a blessed and, meanwhile, a dangerous day, which is supported by the terms for the feasts (*sacred day* vs. *damned, malevolent day*). Thus, misbehaviour, for example, working on a sacred day, is punished with natural disasters, losses of crops and cattle, illnesses, and death. Sedakova gives examples of the remains of the bans on working and doing certain activities on holidays and shows how the bans are covered by the Bulgarian mass media.

The next article, by **Anamaria Iuga** and **Georgiana Vlahbei** (Romania), concentrates on the Mute, a central masked character in the *Căluș* Whitsunday ritual in Romania, which is now protected by the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage. The *Căluș* ritual is a complex healing and prophylactic ritual, intertwining the connected dimensions of transgression and laughter. It is both a living tradition and an artistic performance, within which the costume and mask simultaneously hide and reveal sexual taboos. The authors show that the reception of the Mute's transgressive behaviour by different audiences and over time reveals how society views, constructs, and controls deviant behaviours and the evolution they undergo within these boundaries. In this respect, ritual makes transgression temporarily acceptable.

**Nina Vlaskina** (Russia) presents her fieldwork on the Nekrasov Cossacks in their processes of emigration and re-emigration. Focusing mainly on fishing and agricultural rituals, she shows how economy is deeply intertwined with culture, nature, and ideology, and how the Cossack rituals have followed a multigenerational historical adaptation. Vlaskina thus reminds us that any ritual is built over a long period of time. Rituals are therefore complex constructions, and as such, they are fragile and need to be studied and protected.

In their article, **Gleb Pilipenko** and **Maria Yasinskaya** (Russia) focus on Easter traditions among Slovenes in the Natisone Valley in the Province of Udine, Italy. Through field research, they study both Easter customs and the linguistic materials, which demonstrate the results of the contacts between the two languages and two cultures. The zones of contacts display innovations and contaminations, but they also demonstrate that some archaic customs are stable, and the rituals in the region of Udine confirm that. The authors show the importance of interculturality in general and of Slavic-Romance interactions in particular, reminding us about the importance of cultural contacts in building up traditional rituals.

While the first group of articles draws attention to the importance of commitment by researchers in their field of research, the recent event of the pandemic has even reinforced the need for such commitment. In her article, **Daria Radchenko** (Russia) focuses on Easter festivities during the lockdown in Russia,

investigating how believers constructed and reflected the space of the Easter service in their homes, using three key strategies: synchronisation, spacing, and appellation to experience. She questions the so-called “distributed church service” and tries to find out if on-screen rituals enable participation. Reflecting on private space and the materiality of rituals, she eventually shows how the mediated Easter service during the pandemic produced a complex system of communication and co-action between the actors of the religious ritual.

**Irina Stahl** (Romania) documents and scrutinises the changes in the religious processions and pilgrimages dedicated to St Paraskeva, St Demetrius, and St Nektarios in urban settings under the COVID-19 restrictions. She investigates the new norms imposed by public authorities, the solutions found by the Church representatives, and the faithful’s reaction to the new situation. Pilgrimages urge physical performance by the priesthood and participation by the parishioners, so the processions cannot take place entirely in the virtual form. The article depicts in detail how the Church representatives and the faithful finally adapted to the rules.

For her part, **Judit Balatonyi** (Hungary) studies weddings in quarantine in Hungary. She notes that there were fewer weddings in general during the pandemic, but not in Hungary, where a 3% increase was observed in the number of weddings. Using netnography as well as questionnaires, she discusses macro-contextual factors that influence individual decision-making, replanning, and reinterpretation processes, and follows up by examining how these processes unfolded. She argues that people usually turn to micro-weddings when restrictions increase and asks about the reasons why they choose to maintain or postpone their weddings. While restrictive government measures to curb the pandemic (e.g., curfews and interdictions on public gatherings, the banning of events, or limitations on the number of attendees) were often used as an explanation for the cancellation of weddings, Balatonyi also draws attention to stronger reasons for getting married, especially emphasising the power of love as well as pre-pandemic social policies of the government. People, she suggests, rather thought tactically, either trying to postpone their wedding to be able to hold large wedding receptions, or downscaling their wedding, or postponing it, or holding the official wedding and postponing the wedding reception.

Then, **Lidia Montesinos Llinares**, **Margaret Bullen**, and **Begoña Pecharromán** (Spain) use the lens of feminist anthropology to study the role of women in traditional “androcentric” rituals in Spain. Studying the *fiesta* from a gender perspective, they find out that where previously women assumed invisible domestic tasks, such as sewing costumes, cooking, and taking care of children, they now begin to take the lead as participants in the festive rituals.

In order to answer the demand and vindication of women to participate in living history or in carnivals, the promotion of more equalitarian festivities might follow different consensus strategies, such as dialogue and mediation strategies, creative strategies, strategies that seek parity, equity, or equality, strategies for intervention in the communication of festivals, strategies for eradicating violence against women, and institutional strategies aiming at a better inclusion of women in the rituals. The authors eventually advocate for the need for progressive changes and propose that researchers should encourage intervention in the field in order to promote gender equality.

Thus, the strategic reactions observed in the case of traditional prohibitions (as in the case of Spanish women prevented from participating in traditional rituals) were also observed in response to the new prohibitions that appeared in the context of the pandemic. The roundtable concluding the work of two previous panels organised by the SIEF Ritual Year Working Group (transcript by **Irina Stahl** and **Nina Vlaskina**) makes it clear by questioning the different impacts the recent COVID-19 pandemic had on the ritual year. Indeed, such impacts were manifold, including emotions, (re)negotiations of space, and the adaptation of research strategies. Moreover, the sudden absence of collective rituals during the lockdown made us realise how important they are and how they are actually rhythm-making. A feeling of alienation resulted from the lack of communication with other people, of togetherness. There was also an alienation from the senses, from feelings, and from being involved in the ritual as a person and as a physical body. With the suppression of rituals, plenty of cultural meanings and performances were also suppressed. The discussions show that new rules appeared during the pandemic, along with violations of the same rules. Alongside the transformations of the rituals themselves, the ways in which they were viewed, the modes of engagement of researchers, and the strategies of adaptation were transformed.

**Alexander Novik**, **Irina Sedakova**, and **Anastasia Kharlamova** provide a general view on and a detailed account of some panels of the 15th SIEF congress “Breaking the Rules? Power, Participation, Transgression”. The authors conclude that “the main topic of rules, norms, chaos, and anomalies has inspired the researchers to look for new approaches and review the traditional ones in their analysis of sociological, political, and scientific facts as well as the ethnological and folkloristic data”. This statement sums up the ideas of all the articles in this thematic issue.

This collection of essays eventually gives an idea of the various issues at work in the context of global crises, which can be not only health-related but also economic, political, and cultural. While the COVID-19 pandemic seems to

have faded away, 2022 has brought new challenges and tragic events that have influenced the run of the ritual year and established new topics and rituals to be studied and discussed. Because rituals always constitute a bridge between nature and culture, they are fragile in times of crisis, but at the same time they are very valuable indicators for judging the consequences of crises on human societies.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> The pandemic inspired the SIEF Ritual Year Working Group to start a Seasonal Webinar in 2020, which proved to be a great platform for uniting the scholars and supporting their traditional studies of the rituals. The virtual meetings also stimulated the members of the group to document and investigate the new forms and contexts of the feasts and celebrations during the COVID-19 restrictions. About the account of the webinars see Sedakova & Stahl 2022.

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