Gender Rituals

In some sense all ritual is gender ritual. As long as people live gendered lives, their experience of the world, and thus of ritual, will be gender dependent, whether or not the rituals they perform explicitly relate to gender. Religious rituals often make gender distinctions in their actions, and many rituals can only be performed by men or by women. However, this article defines gender rituals as those rituals whose major purpose is to establish, reaffirm, or problematize gender.

Defining and Theorizing Gender

Before examining gender rituals it is important to understand what is meant by “gender.” Until recently it was agreed that gender could be defined vis-à-vis sex, sex being biologically determined, while gender was culturally acquired. Similarly, many cultures viewed “male” as closer to culture and “female” as closer to nature, with the result that nature was considered inferior to culture, and women inferior to men.

This gender-versus-sex dichotomy was eventually critiqued by feminists as too simplistic and beside the point. Most famously, perhaps, Judith Butler has argued:

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning upon a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts. (Butler 1990, 7).

Thus Butler would contend that the widespread belief that sex differences are natural indicates the very success of such a system. In understanding Butler it is important to realize that for her nothing exists before culture. There can be no natural sex because sex could not have been conceived or spoken of before the existence of cultural constructs.

So how does one study gender if it is always a result of culture? According to Daniel Boyarin, when studying gender one is “investigating the praxis and process by which people are interpellated into a two- (or for some cultures more) sex system that is made to seem as if it were nature, that is, something that has always existed” (Boyarin 1998, 117). Studying ritual is an intriguing way to understand how this cultural conscription of gender occurs, as many rituals play an important role in establishing, reaffirming, and problematizing gender and provide an outlet for participants to discuss and internalize the meaning of gender differences in society.

Establishing Gender through Ritual

Religious rituals that establish gender usually occur early in life. While many religious traditions treat young children as somewhat androgynous beings, there are traditions in which gendered existence begins at birth. An example of this is seen in Judaism. The first event after the birth of a baby boy is a bris, or
ritual circumcision, which traditionally occurs eight days after birth. The purpose of the *bris* is to remember and re-enact the covenant made between God and Abraham (Genesis 17:1–14). It is through circumcision that boys are welcomed into the covenant and inherit the promises of abundance and land. Traditionally, this covenant was made between God and the male descendants of Abraham, and because the action of
the ritual involves marking the male body, there was historically no parallel ceremony for girls. Although the overt purpose of the *bris* may be to commemorate Abraham’s promise to God, it also serves to segregate boys and girls at an early age by indicating that being male is a prerequisite for full participation in Jewish rituals. In many cultures, puberty, or coming-of-age, ceremonies have almost always been explicitly rituals of gender. These rituals, which Arnold van Gennep would label “rites of passage,” welcome the initiates into the world of adults. While some cultures have celebrated parallel puberty ceremonies for boys and girls, most have emphasized either the male or the female in coming-of-age ceremonies. However, it is not just this division that marks these ceremonies as gender rituals. The very point of these rituals is to celebrate differences. Children become adults and begin living as distinctly gendered when their differentiated sex organs develop into their mature form at puberty. This explains why many of these rituals occur around puberty, although social and biological adulthood are not always considered synonymous.

Although some would assume that in a tradition-ally patriarchal world coming-of-age ceremonies would be more common for boys than for girls, there are a surprising number of such ceremonies for girls. Among the best-known girls’ puberty ceremonies is the Kinaaldá ceremony that the Navajo traditionally perform for girls at each of their first two periods. According to Bruce Lincoln, the Navajo celebrate a girl’s menarche “because it indicates that she is ready to bring forth new life” (Lincoln 1981, 17). It is a girl’s becoming a woman and thus her ability to bear children that is celebrated in such rituals. Thus, these rituals help establish her as a gendered being and emphasize those traits considered properly feminine in her culture—in this case fertility.

In the Kinaaldá ritual the girl becomes the Changing Woman (a fertility goddess) through songs, dress, and action. Her transformative power can especially be seen in the action of the initiated girl as she places her hands on younger girls, lifting them up to help them grow. Just as the Changing Woman is concerned with growth and the life cycle, so the initiate (new initiate) develops these concerns in part through this ceremony. Once the girl has undergone the Kinaaldá ceremony she is expected to be ready to marry and have children: at this point she is a woman, as the ceremony has affirmed the physical status she has already reached.

Reaffirming Gender through Ritual

Many religious rituals serve to reaffirm adults’ gendered existence. Whether or not these rituals indicate equality or oppression, they do affirm differences between men and women. These differences do not necessarily relate to physical characteristics, as some puberty ceremonies do, but often re-establish the characteristics that the religious tradition considers properly masculine or feminine. To be socially accepted a man must often behave in masculine ways and a woman in feminine ways, and this is learned through ritual.

One common reaffirming ritual is the wedding ceremony. In many religious traditions men and women (both the wedding couple and their guests) play slightly different roles during the ceremony, roles that specifically relate to the ways in which men and women should behave in marriage. In a traditional Iraqi Muslim wedding, the actual ceremony takes place between the bride’s father and the bridegroom. The father gives his daughter to the groom and asks whether the groom accepts the daughter according to the law of God and the prophet Muhammad. Once the groom has accepted her, the father gives his blessing, and those assembled recite the first chapter of the Qur’an. On the wedding night, usually after a day of festivities, the bride is delivered by her family to the groom, who greets her by washing her feet and praying. The wedding ceremony is a microcosm of the traditional marital relationship where the major public decisions are made by the men. Women are respected and loved by their husbands, but that affection is
shown only in private. Finally, as the recitation of the Qur’an and the prayer indicate, the relationship between husband and wife will be guided by devotion to God and the example of the Qur’an. Thus, the very ritual of the wedding reinforces the cultural notions of masculinity and femininity and the relationship between men and women.

Some theorists suggest that our daily lives include cultural rituals not commonly regarded as religious that reaffirm gender. For instance, James McBride has argued that football games can serve as religious rituals that reaffirm gender for men who play or watch them, by tapping into anxieties associated with masculine gender in American society. According to McBride, “Football is a masculine ritual that symbolically plays out men’s unresolved separation anxiety—the desire for and hostility toward the mother in every woman and the woman in every mother.... The basic structure of the game, pitting opposite teams against each other, mimics the binary opposition of father/mother, phallus/not-phallus” (McBride 2001, 135). In this theory, it is the relationship between the mother and son, and the very definition of masculinity that is being replayed on the football field. While few people would consider football a traditional religious ritual, McBride contends that its collective nature defines it as religious ritual.

Problematizing Gender Through Ritual

Religious ritual can also work to problematize traditional beliefs about gender or the relationship between sex and gender. One of the most basic ways in which ritual problematizes gender is through inversion: When men perform typically feminine actions or women exhibit masculine traits gender roles are questioned.

An example of gender-inversion ritual is “male menstruation,” or sympathetic menstruation. Although men do not literally menstruate, in some cultures men ritually cause themselves to bleed or vomit so as to replicate the natural processes of women. In some cultures this only happens during initiation or puberty rituals, but some men perform such bleeding throughout their lives. Male menstruation can be accompanied by transvestism and doing traditionally female work, as in the case of the Northern Mejbrats in Western New Guinea. Ashley Montagu’s description of the Australian Aborigines indicates that in some cultures it is even common for ritual surgery involving subincision of the penis to be performed upon boys so that they can imitate the female genitalia.

Why do these men ritually imitate women, and what does this gender-bending mean? First, according to Matthea Cremers, ritual inversion can serve “as an affirmation of masculinity and a way for men to rid themselves of contamination by females” (Cremers 1989, 85). By showing that they can imitate what is naturally unique to women, men negate any of women’s potential superiority. Second, imitation of women may also indicate men’s envy of the power they believe women naturally possess through their sexual organs.

Roman Catholic ordination rites accomplish such gender-bending, although not through strict ritual inversion. Although only men are permitted to become Catholic priests, the gendered language associated with the priesthood emphasizes the traditionally feminine characteristics that priests should exemplify, including submission and compassion. Even more explicitly, priests are considered to be “brides” of Christ. Clearly physical womanhood is not necessary in order to portray the ideal of femininity; however, physical manhood does seem necessary in order to portray the Priest’s relation to Christ. One major Roman Catholic argument against ordaining women is that the priest must be an icon of Christ when performing the sacraments Christ instituted, and as an icon the priest must resemble Christ physically, maleness being an important component of this resemblance. As it is never argued that priests should be Hebrew or circumcised so as physically to resemble Christ, it is clear that gender is an important issue in the priesthood. It may be that the traditional feminine ideal of being submissive brides of Christ is balanced by physical masculinity, indicating that Roman Catholic priests are regarded as somewhat gender neutral, a notion reinforced by their vow of celibacy. In this example ritual thus problematizes gender so that the ritual participant may transcend it.

The Future of Gender Rituals

Particularly as a result of the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s, there have been several changes in the acceptance of gender rituals throughout the world. In the West, reform movements within major religious traditions, especially Judaism and Christianity, have sought to de-emphasize the importance of gender in religious ceremony. This shift is especially clear in the case of Judaism, where
ceremonies for girls have often been created to parallel the bris and bar mitzvah rituals for boys. Several Christian denominations have begun to ordain women, thus largely negating (or possibly complicating) the gendered distinctions formerly present in ordination rituals.

Another consequence of the women’s movement has been the Western feminist critique of gender rituals throughout the world. Many American and European women have decried the practice of genital mutilation performed during some female initiation ceremonies. In addition, Western feminists have argued that unequal marriage and divorce ceremonies, female infanticide, suti (widow burning), and other religious or cultural practices oppress women and should be stopped. While many such rituals have been banned, at least in some areas, some women defend these practices theologically and do not find them oppressive.

Many feminist efforts have gone toward establishing strict equality for women in religious matters, but some religious feminists have worked to create rituals that celebrate gender differences, instead of sameness. Women in the women’s spirituality movement have especially concentrated on empowering women through religious ritual. This empowerment may begin early, as many spiritual feminists have created menarche rituals for their daughters. These rituals emphasize the girls’ feminine characteristics and introduction into womanhood. Spiritual feminists do not limit their celebration of womanhood to adolescence. In the feminist spirituality worldview all rites of passage are gender rituals, as womanhood is celebrated in all of them, including birth ceremonies, weddings, and menopause rituals. Women are empowered in these rituals through symbolism, chanting, gifts, and ritual activities such as dancing, which emphasize a connection to the Goddess and the creative abilities of women.

Not just the women’s movement has complicated gender rituals. Same-sex wedding rituals have toppled many preconceived notions of gender relations within marriage, and transgender individuals have forced a rethinking of the very definition of gender and its relation to religious ritual. There are also men’s spirituality groups that have focused on empowering men through religious rituals. While gender rituals will continue to shift in meaning and shape, clearly they will always be an important aspect of religious ritual.

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See also Birth Rituals; Body and Ritual; Hair Cutting Rituals; Identity Rituals; Marriage Rituals; Passage, Rites of; Puberty Rites; Purity and Pollution; Ritual as Communication; Scatological Rituals; Witchcraft

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