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# HM 344

## Introduction to Semiotics

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## Semiotic Analysis of Ritual and Religion

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Final Assignment

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# Contents

|          |   |          |
|----------|---|----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Abstract</b>   | <b>3</b> |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Introduction</b>   | <b>3</b> |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Semiotic tools</b>                                       | <b>3</b> |
| 3.1      | General Semiotics Tools . . . . .                           | 4        |
| 3.1.1    | Signs and symbols . . . . .                                 | 4        |
| 3.1.2    | Denotation and Connotation . . . . .                        | 4        |
| 3.1.3    | Binary opposition . . . . .                                 | 4        |
| 3.1.4    | Encode and Decode . . . . .                                 | 5        |
| 3.2      | Victor Turner's Term for ritual analysis . . . . .          | 5        |
| 3.2.1    | Symbols . . . . .   | 5        |
| 3.2.2    | Ritual Process . . . . .                                    | 6        |
| 3.2.3    | Understanding Different Meanings . . . . .                  | 6        |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Ritual Analysis</b>                                      | <b>6</b> |
| 4.1      | Case Study with Victor Turner's Theory . . . . .            | 7        |
| 4.1.1    | Diwali . . . . .  | 7        |
| 4.1.2    | Sun Dance . . . . .   | 7        |
| 4.2      | Case Study from Semiotician's view . . . . .                | 8        |
| 4.2.1    | Rituals connected with River Ganga. Is it a myth? . . . . . | 8        |
| 4.2.2    | Semiotic analysis of Christian Ritual: Eucharist . . . . .  | 8        |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Conclusion</b>   | <b>9</b> |

# 1 Abstract

This paper gives us an analysis of the ritual and religious beliefs that are embedded with it or that have been cultivated for many years. This analysis would be carried out with the use of semiotic tools and terms that help human beings think from a new perspective and decipher the real or true motive or meaning behind the happenings around them. The first half would be the introduction to the topic, followed by the semiotics tools and approach explained in this analysis. This will also consist of some examples and a case study that we would carry out in this case.

## 2 Introduction

This paper will revolve mainly around two things: ritual and religion. The main aim will be to observe and understand how ritual makes a person lean towards any religion or how a ritual can add authenticity to some procedure that a religion may follow. This is seen in every religion, as each religion has its own beliefs, and each belief can follow different types of rituals. Moreover, rituals are not just bound to religion; they also symbolize a particular culture, caste, community, or some different groups of people.

It would be noticed that a ritual can divide a group of people and further create a different ideology too, which is indeed a part of semiotics. These people have been found in almost every corner of the world for more than a hundred years. It is also seen that many of the rituals may be created with some negative intention to get benefits from the beliefs of the people who follow them. This could lead to unjustified malpractices around the world. The spread of misbelief through inculcating wrong things through a ritual may be considered a crime from a justice point of view, but at the same time, it may be the foundation of living a life for some people. Many people are employed or kept to perform some particular ritual (for example, Brahmins perform many rituals in Hinduism); these people earn through such practices. We will see in more detail the analysis of this topic in the next section.

## 3 Semiotic tools

Semiotics, which is the study of sign and symbol, provides us with a large number of its tools that can help us study any topic or analyze any kind of text, media, culture, and many more. In our case, we would focus on the tools that are most widely used in deciphering the meaning and understanding any ritual connected with any culture, group, or religion. Below are the two sections that comprise the general or common terms that are used in semiotics to abstract the true meaning, and the next section will be from the guide of Victor Turner, who studied rituals and religion. Turner has introduced many concepts that are used in today's world. His work was carried out with the tribe name "Ndembu," which resides in Africa.

## 3.1 General Semiotics Tools

### 3.1.1 Signs and symbols

We can consider signs and symbols as a very basic functional unit or the building block of any semiotic analysis. Sign, which consists of two terms signifier and signified, stands for some specific signs that are culturally defined gestures, or it may be some object, or it can be some spatial arrangements that are carried out in a ritual. For example, in Hinduism, while doing Pooja, they have the “Havan Kund,” where there is fire lit up. So here, Havan symbolizes the process of carrying out a particular ritual, which is pooja.

- **Signifiers and Signified :** As mentioned above, these two terms together make up the meaning of signs used in semiology. Here, signifiers are the actual words in their physical form, and signified is the meaning or concept behind those signifiers. For example, if we consider the ritual "Aarti," which is carried out in temples, Here we can say that the signifier is the Diya, the oil lamp, and the signified meaning is the offering that is made for God with light, which symbolizes purity and ignorance of the darkness. This has an even deeper meaning from person to person. So we can observe here that the ritual “Aarti” with its signifiers and signified connects the people and forms a group that follows a particular religion; in our case, this showcases Hinduism, as this ritual is done in most of the temple.
- **Codes :** We can say that code also falls into this domain. There are different codes, such as social code, conventional code, or artificial code. On the basis of the codes, we would say many things are classified. For example, social code can include some religious practices, such as joining hands in front of someone, which signifies that you are bowing in front of someone; wearing footwear in a temple is not allowed, which is allowed in the church. Here we can observe that in Hinduism, footwear that is generally made from leather is classified as a pollutant as it is the skin of a dead animal.

### 3.1.2 Denotation and Connotation

In simpler words, denotation refers to the literal meaning that is conveyed, and connotation refers to the cultural aspect or the true meaning behind the words. We can consider the offering of flowers to the almighty. Here, the denotation is simply a flower that signifies a plant from where it is plucked, but the connotation is its offering, and this depends on religion to religion. For example, in Buddhism, generally, a lotus is offered, which connotes the bloom of a person’s ability with its spiritual growth, which overcomes the challenges, just as a lotus grows from mud water.

### 3.1.3 Binary opposition

This is a kind of actantial function that is arranged in binary opposition as a set of six actants, which comprise the subject/object, helper/opponent, and sender/receiver. In

a system of language, there are two theoretical opposites that are against each other. For example, in Islam, washing the hands before entering the mosque (also known as Wudu) is of great importance. Here the binary opposition between purity and impurity is highlighted, where purity is compared with cleanliness and spiritual preparation for the prayer. On the contrary, dirt and sweat are considered impurities, and removing them is an essential part.

### **3.1.4 Encode and Decode**

The fundamental meaning and concept of these terms are simple: encoding is the process of transforming an idea or a message in a system of signs and symbols into a meaningful discourse (message), whereas decoding is the process of interpreting those signs and symbols to understand the underlying meaning of those symbols. In the case of ritual, we would understand this by considering the ritual of applying “Tilak” in Hinduism. As we know, there are many sub-sects or religions that follow different traditions to worship God. A tilak is a mark applied to the forehead of a person in different styles and ways with different colors and substances, like ash or sandalwood, white or orange. So applying tilak encodes that a person is a follower of Hindu tradition, but the decoding can only be done when you know the tradition in Hinduism; that is, if the tilak is horizontal with ash, the person may be a deity of Lord Shiva. If a long sandalwood tilak is applied from the nose to the center of the head, it may symbolize that you are a deity of Lord Krishna. So all this decoding can be done only when you have shared knowledge of the tradition, and then only you can encode or decode this ritual; otherwise, this can cause errors.

## **3.2 Victor Turner’s Term for ritual analysis**

Victor Turner has offered a very rich framework to understand and analyze rituals and their symbolic meaning. Here are some of his key framework is discussed below.

### **3.2.1 Symbols**

Symbols by Turner are the fundamental building blocks of rituals; he has considered them the smallest unit, and they have the most concentrated meaning within any ritual. Turner has further considered symbols as a storage unit that can be interpreted as storing information about the values and beliefs of that particular community or religion.

Symbols are further divided into two groups by Turner:

- **Dominant Symbols:** This type of symbol has a consistent meaning across various rituals and cultures. They form a layer of meaning, which he called condensation; they also include the connection of two concepts, which he named unification, and the one that

holds two distinct meanings is known as polarization. These are some methods he named for the analysis of ritual.

- **Instrumental Symbols:** These are the symbols that have meaning within the ritual, and it depends on the context and other symbols that occur in that particular ritual itself.

### **3.2.2 Ritual Process**

Victor, when he started to study the Ndembu society, never wanted to study their rituals individually. He then introduced some concepts, applied them to their culture, and deciphered their different social forms and meanings. He first started by using social drama; he considered rituals as a process of conflict and resolution within a society.

Further, he introduces a major term, which is liminality, which is the central phase of the ritual. Here, the participants are separated from the social role they possess (referred to as the between state) and go into transformation and renewal.

Now Victor states that during this liminal phase, the person develops a sense of *communitas*, which is a feeling of fellowship or shared experience from which one should emerge to make this whole community and group united.

### **3.2.3 Understanding Different Meanings**

Victor Turner has proposed majorly three conceptual meanings in his work, and they are the empirical meaning, the operational meaning, and the positional meaning. Below is a brief explanation of Turner's work.

- **Exegetical Meaning:** This approach questions the participants or the experts in that community about the meaning of the symbol that is being used in the ritual; they gather information about how the object is used within the ritual.
- **Operational Meaning:** This approach explores the hidden meaning of the symbol by observing it in the ritual. The person should notice how it is handled and observe what explicitly the meaning states with the association with that particular symbol.
- **Positional Meaning:** This approach is an analysis of how the symbol behaves or has a relationship with other symbols that are performed in any ritual. Turner says that this would help us understand the unconscious meaning, or it may help us reveal its deeper meaning.

## **4 Ritual Analysis**

In this section, we will study different case studies using both Victor Turner's work and a semiotician's view. In the below section, Turner's work is applied to two rituals: Diwali, which is connected to religion (Hinduism), and the Sun Dance, which is performed by plain

Indians of North America. This represents that a ritual can unite and spread ideology among a group of people, which ultimately makes a community or a tribe that follows this ritual apart from being a particular religion.

## **4.1 Case Study with Victor Turner's Theory**

### **4.1.1 Diwali**

Diwali, which is considered the festival of light, is a very ancient ritual or ceremony celebrated for many years. Let us apply the theory of Turner in this case. Considering the traditional phase, first comes the separation. In the days around Diwali, people thoroughly clean their homes, symbolizing the discarding of negativity or misfortune. This act works as a separation from old and impure things. Next comes the phase of liminality, which is a phase in between the ritual where people decorate their houses with Diyas and Rangolis, which symbolizes the renewal phase, which shows the removal of darkness and presents that good triumphs over evil. The last stage is the reintegration with the *communitas*, that is, people get together with their whole family and have a feast together, lit diyas, and celebrate the light and purity with prosperity.

Now we can use various methods to decipher the meaning mentioned above. It is noticed that the lighting of Diya is a dominant symbol as this ritual is performed during other religious festivals, and though it possesses the same meaning, now the making of Rangolis can be considered an instrumental symbol as it is mostly done during the days of Diwali, though this is practiced as an everyday ritual in many places in the south. Beyond this, it has many regional variations, as at different places, a few rituals are done in some other fashion, which might not be done at all places, so each such ritual has a historical and cultural significance.

### **4.1.2 Sun Dance**

This ritual is related to the Lakota, who are natives of North America and speak the Lakota dialect. This tribe has been connected with each other for many years and performs rituals every year. One of which is the Sun Dance, where people come together for community gatherings and pray for healing; it also includes fasting from food and water. Sometimes include ceremonial piercing of skin. Now, considering the traditional phase, in the separation phase, people undergo physical preparation, which includes prayer and fasting, which according to them is the purification process. In the next phase, liminality, it involves mainly four days in which people dance around the sun dance pole, generally made from wood or any particular tree, which showcases sacrifice and endurance with the spirit world. At last comes the sense of community, where people reunite and conclude their fast and have feasts and giveaways. The dancers are again reunited with their community with new strength.

In this case, we can say that dance is a dominant symbol as it is practiced across the

world in various forms, but it has a specific essence with this ritual, whereas piercing of the skin can be considered the instrumental symbol that is performed in this particular ritual only in this tribe.

## **4.2 Case Study from Semiotician's view**

Now we have already seen and applied Turner's theory, and now we will see other case studies with respect to a semiotics view. This would be done through the above-mentioned semiotic tools.

### **4.2.1 Rituals connected with River Ganga. Is it a myth?**

Everyone is aware of the longest river that flows throughout the year in India and is also considered a holy river. It has a lot of connections with ritual and religion, typically in Hinduism. It suspects a number of people performing various types of ritual, worshiping the river, and offering many things as its deity. So as per mythology, the Ganga was in heaven, and then it was brought to earth by Bhagiratha, a prince. It is believed that Lord Shiva, who holds and is the controller of the flow of the Ganga, has done this through his immense power.

So this could be considered a myth, as in this ritual, which is particularly worship of the Ganges with the offering of light (Aarti) and doing 'pooja' with flowers and incense. Here we can see that aarti, flower, and incense can be the signifiers that signify the purification of the mind and the dispelling of darkness. Performing this ritual for many years has kept this myth alive. It can be deciphered that people have faith in worshipping the river, but they might not be able to see that the river is getting polluted. From a semiotics perspective, one more tool is used, which is the figure of speech. This ritual can be considered a metaphor, as a river is considered a mother and possesses the same faith for people as they have for God ("Ma Ganga-Ganga Devi"). This whole ritual brings people together every day and binds all the people with this cultural and spiritual significance in Hinduism. One can also argue that if the river is sacred, then why do the people flow the dead bodies into the Ganges? It can be contended that by performing this ritual, the person's afterlife can obtain purity. So this myth from the past many hundred years witnesses many types of rituals every day.

### **4.2.2 Semiotic analysis of Christian Ritual: Eucharist**

The Eucharist in Christianity is also known as the Holy Communion; this is at the heart of Christian worship. It is celebrated in the world as the death and resurrection of Jesus while having the last supper. Let us analyze it. Here we can see that the prayers, readings, and consumption of bread and wine are the signifiers, especially bread and wine, as they were given by Jesus to his disciple in his memories. This offering from him symbolizes the sacrifice of Jesus for his community. This whole process can be considered the encoding of the ritual, and now we will decode it. Here, bread and wine seem to represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed for humanity's sins; consuming them signifies the spiritual



union with the almighty. This communal act of being together with everyone signifies that there is a renewed bond between God and believers, which strengthens their religion.

## 5 Conclusion

It can be concluded that both Victor Turner's theory of ritual and a semiotic approach offer us a very good framework for the analysis of different kinds of rituals, whether they are religious or tribal. It is not a good way to compare both of these theories or approaches, as they show different aspects to us in order to understand any ritual of any society. We saw that Turner's theory mainly focuses on the process that is performed in the ritual; it separates the different phases and symbolic actions. This helps us achieve a dynamic view to analyze any ritual. If we see the semiotics approach, it helps us detect the cultural aspect of the ritual through signs, codes, signifiers, and signified. Semiotic analysis has a firm approach to understanding the symbols that are used within the community. This also has good vision to differentiate myths and ideologies that are spread in different cultures in various regions.

On a larger scale, the most common thing that we came across is that in every ritual, People get together and form their own community. Performing rituals adds authenticity and builds trust among a group of people. This small thing separates many religions and communities; sometimes it might experience malpractices where people move ahead of their faith and blindly follow what is being told to them. So we can say that there is a greater importance of understanding these large signs and symbolic systems in this world.

Therefore, we can say that Turner's framework helps us understand the processes in ritual, the liminal phase, and how people experience them, whereas in semiotics analysis, it helps us decode several meanings from their cultural aspects. Using both of these approaches, One can gain a more comprehensive and richer view of how to understand this very complex phenomenon called ritual.