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DESIGN AND RITUAL. CROSSED NARRATIVES AMONG DESIGN, ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

(Note: the parts 1, 4.1 and 4.2 are written by R. Trocchianesi; the parts 2, 3 and 5 are written by G. Pils)

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to underline disciplinary relations among design, anthropology and sociology in rituals. It also aims to verify the potentiality of this relation in creation of new kinds of scenarios, objects, places able to generate rituals and new social behaviors.

Nowadays there are several rituals able to re-define themselves in heterogeneous social contexts; for this reason you can define the ritual as a "social must" (Martine Segalen 2002, Pierre Legendre 2005).

Issues such as identity, memory and belonging especially in social contexts defined by migration, multiculturalism and cultural frictions, are crucial subjects for design approach. This paper aims at describing the power of rituals as a driving force of cultural identity.

The focus will be on the provocative idea that it is possible to reinvent rituals, that it is possible to introduce some changes into a very codified and traditional practice. Just this flexibility allows the ritual to reinvent and survive in different contexts and to become an opportunity of comparison for a specific community to reaffirm the legitimacy of its values or to establish new ones.

The value of ritual as a fundamental moment for negotiation of the cultural and social value between individuals and communities; it is a topic of interest for the current research because it identifies a range of markers of identity in the form of objects, places and ritual behaviors. Analyzing rituals through design tools one observes that the ritual practice possesses some morphological features, needs a specific context in terms of both time and space and encourages a collective dimension because it produces meaning for a specific group of people. This aspect contributes to social cohesion and encourages a sense of identity and responsibility/commitment that helps individuals to feel part of a community and enables important dynamics of dialogue with other communities.

Keywords: ritual, cultural identity, community of practice, transdisciplinarity, narrative potential, collective essence.

1. DESIGN & RITUAL

Since time immemorial the presence of rituals is pervasive both on the private and the public sphere. Nowadays it is interesting to analyze this archetypal practice in light on the fact that new commodity-related landscape is more and more complex in terms of kinds of objects and -consequently- of new ritual attitudes and behaviors generated by them.

Despite the difficulty to acknowledge a bound and determined definition it is undisputed to consider rituals both as founding moments for the creation and maintenance of social harmony and tools to enable the important exchange between uniqueness and universality that are so fundamental to establish connections among diversities. Rituals can be considered "sustainable" practices

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by the fact that contribute to social cohesion and encourage a sense of identity and responsibility, these values help individuals to feel part of a community and of a society at large.

Recognizing such important role and complexity to the ritual identifies a field of exploration of great interest for the design discipline and highlights the need to refine tools and practices in order to decode the *ritual genoma* and improve the social and economic value of this transmission of knowledge. Rituals are central in the design debate on one side because the heterogeneity of ritual phenomena highlights the need of a multi-disciplinary observation capable to give meaning to otherwise fragmented and discontinuous elements.

On the other side, ritual, by its very own nature, is linked to objects, spaces and behaviors full of significance that establish a very fertile area where to address design strategies.

This paper aims at describing the topical of rituals not only in social sciences debate but the centrality of the issue also for the design discipline. Through our line of subject we wish to show how rituals configure a key element and a driving force of cultural identity and one wishes to demonstrate that design thinking can improve this potential through a process of enhancement of the cultural, social and economic value of rituals.

Analyzing rituals through the design tools highlights its morphological features such as the need of a specific context in terms of both time and space and its collective dimension producing meaning for a specific group of people. All these elements -*locus, habitus, repertoire*- help individuals to feel similar to others and to foster a willingness to maintain this particular bond enabling even important dynamics of dialogue with other communities and even the society at large.

Being ritual a concept originating in anthropology, the following part of the paper briefly introduces the original contributions produced by scholars, underlining the milestones of the social anthropological debate on the theme of rite.

One then explores the concept of contemporary rituals presenting a series of cases and argues how design can be involved in ritual action. In the contemporary age some brands create products, services or places able to generate new rituals: for example one can mention the new technology field where package of services, social networks, new performative products create new forms of relationship among people.

In this line of research it is interesting the narrative potential of rituals; therefore this work will focus on some significative cases where the narrative is the cultural key to interpret products and object exhibits at high symbolic gradient.

The innovation design driven often happens thanks to an interdisciplinary approach. In order to analyze the potential of this topic, one underlines three overlapped areas: the sociology that studies social behaviors and social changes in the contemporary context, the anthropology and ethnography that studies human features and behaviors, the design focused on the processes of innovation. In the middle of this intersection there is the ritual as a common ground that includes values and potentials readable from different point of views. If one collocates in the design area and wants to produce innovation (studying ritual, "using" rituals, reinventing ritual and so on) one has to create relationships among other disciplines and understand the best ways to create an interdisciplinary dialogue (fig. 1).

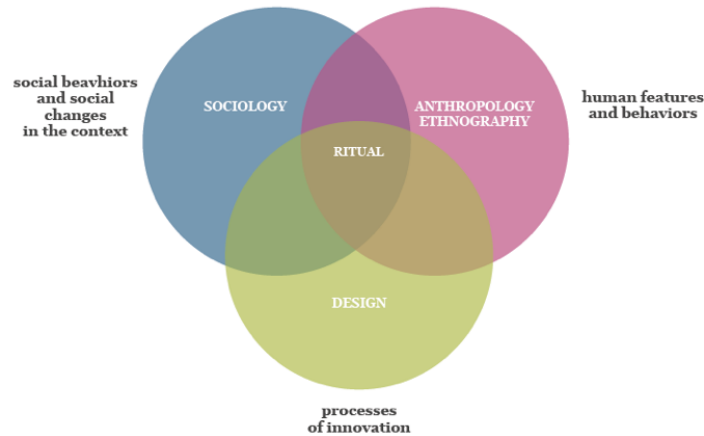


Figure 1 – Interdisciplinary relationships, chart by Raffaella Trocchianesi.

2. THE SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEBATE ON THE THEME OF RITES

Although the large number and diversity of ritual practices means their traits are more peculiar than generic, it's impossible to conceive a culture or society without them (Durkheim, 1963). The practice of rituals is in fact an anthropological universal and constitutes a distinct aspect of human social existence, so much so that just as a society without language or exchange is inconceivable, so too it is impossible to imagine a society without rituals. On recent times there were voices propagating the end of rituals, specially the ones institutionalized in large organizations supposed to have lost ground (Soeffler, 1997). But today the use -and abuse- of terms such as «rite» and «ritual» turns on again the attention on a practice whose presence seems to have become pervasive both on the private and the public sphere. Today the book of rituals has expanded, incorporating additional dimensions such as body worship, political actions, sporting events or professional activities, on one hand retrieving and drawing on symbolic systems of the past, on the other hand generating “new” expressions, free from their previous connotations (Pils, 2014). Rituals range almost anywhere from longstanding traditions to specific little oddities that are repeated just for the sake of repetition. This proliferation of a wide repertoire of more fluid forms of rituals emphasizes both the actuality of ritual and its capacity to update in different cultural backgrounds so that Pierre Legendre gets to define it a social must (Legendre, 2008). Given all these varied usages, how can ritual be defined?

Despite the increasing interest on ritual it is difficult to acknowledge it a defined status and nobody can agree on what exactly it is to be a ritual: dealing with ritual and giving a precise definition -or at least to mark off its boundaries- is therefore very complex and invariably leads to an aporia and yet neither social sciences nor anthropology have unreservedly embraced a “marriage” between very different point of views. On one side the difficulty is due to the fact that the first formalizations of the concept arose from the analysis of societies where the social, religious and political aspects were closely linked. In particular French and English anthropological teachings have been dealing with the study of rites and their interdependent state with that of religions (Segalen 2002), nurturing theories claiming that the primary function of a ritual practice is to make a

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religious experience repeatable in order to preserve a shared culture. Furthermore those societies -often defined as "traditional, simple or primitive cultures"- where supposed to function according to rules perceived as totally different from those of "modern, complex or civilized cultures" highlighting a hierarchy between the two: it is undeniable that the word "primitive" has connotations that are almost always associated with negative meanings. That is why the word "ritual" commonly brings to mind exotic images of "primitive others" engaged in some mystical activity like dancing or performing some obscure magic: the reason is that the traditional field of anthropology where the "simple societies", so named because defined by magic, witchcraft, irrational culture, savageness in contrast with the civilized, rational and secular complex societies. The dominant current in both anthropology and religious studies has been for long time to consider rituals as something related exclusively to primitive societies. In the same way cultural evolution has been perceived for a long time as being a shift from the "primitive" to the "civilized" condition, thinking of this transition as in increase of complexity and implying a hierarchy in the way things are seen. Nowadays this dichotomy has become problematic in the consciousness of the anthropological teachings and the International community and it is legitimate to think that the opposition between "traditional-simple-primitive" and "modern-complex-civilized" societies has anything to do with reality. Moreover these areas of research have multiplied and ethnographic and anthropological studies have progressively opened up to the observation of everyday life, the concept of rituals has also begun to embrace manifestations of a more secular and less collective nature.

The other reason why it is difficult to agree on what exactly is a ritual can be found in the evidence that rituals seem to elude any single and systematic definition because of the variety of activities that qualify as rituals. Beginning from the second half of the 19th century anthropologists adhered to a series of paradigms in which the notion of a rite sometimes emerged in the form of standardized optimism (Malinowski 1970), like an instrument whose function was to legitimize collective values (Durkheim 1963, Rosati e Santambrogio 2002) and serve as a mechanism for a solution to social conflicts (Gluckman 1965), like a generator of symbolic, linguistic and semantic aspects (Turner 1969; Leach 1972; Tambiah 1995) or more still like a frame capable of orienting human action (Seligman et al 2011). All these definitions, which at first glance appear to be significantly different, are in fact more complementary and equally legitimate than contradictory and go at the same pace of the huge number of words to define ritual procedures in the common language: habit, etiquette, celebration, liturgy, customary practice. This apparently saturated use of the word "ritual" and its synonymous is not a simple "verbal symptom" which can be ignored but rather highlights the diversity of procedures included in the ritual category. In particular one can find rituals almost throughout in contemporary society: collective experiences, from the Olympics to the commemoration of national tragedies; cyclical gatherings, from weekly congregations at the local church to the annual turkey carving at Thanksgiving to the intoxication of Mardi Gras; and personal life-patterns, from morning grooming routines to the ways in which we greet and interact with one another (Carrico 2011). Traditional enduring rituals coexist with brand new ones addressing new issues important to people that are not being addressed by the traditional repertoire. In order to meet their needs on one side people are constantly inventing new rituals: "the point is that people - both as individuals and institutions- are inventing rituals all the time, or at least they are ritualizing, that is, accentuating the ritual aspects of things" (Rothenbuhler 1998 p.51). On the other side they are re-inventing and updating traditional rituals that have lost their satisfaction because their performance it is believed to be not as effective, significant and enjoyable as it used to be. The longevity of some rituals can be attributed to the fact that ritual is an hybrid phenomenon in a constant struggle between the necessity to feel faith to its roots and to tradition, and the necessity to innovate and keep updated.

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Consequently the idea of “reinventing” a ritual it is not to be considered a provocative statement at all because it is indeed possible to change a very codified and traditional practice. It is believed that all rituals -also those most institutionalized- are malleable, there is the possibility of introducing a variable and produce a change. Generally the social actors themselves are the ones who claim this urgency of transformation because not always recognize themselves in the role of exegete of the tradition. Just this flexibility allows the ritual to reinvent and survive in different contexts and to become an opportunity of comparison for a specific community to reaffirm the legitimacy of its values or to establish new ones. Therefore is undeniable how much ritual is related to a group of people, normally called “community of practice” to underline the fact that this group shares a mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, a shared repertoire (Wenger 1998) and these elements are a domain of the community itself.

3. THE COLLECTIVE ESSENCE OF RITUAL: RITUAL OBJECTS, RITUAL SPACES AND RITUAL BEHAVIORS

Rituals pervade our social interactions and, as a matter of facts, gather people together in collectives perceived as bounded and essential because they provide a strong sense of belonging to participants. In this perspective ritual is inevitably linked to a specific social context and deals with particular symbols which are identified by the community of practice: it makes sense for those who take part in it both the “actors” and the “public” (Segalen, 2002).

Observing the ritual phenomenon from a design point of view the main strategy would be to identify a shortlist of formal and peculiar characteristics of a rite, capable of defining it and giving it shape, which without becoming an objective is able to interpret its meaning, and therefore the cultural system codified and evoked by the symbols of a rite. The following one is the definition we drafted:

“a ritual is a precise sequence of actions that are fulfilled in a defined arrangement (in terms of time & space), with a collection of specific objects, a system of behaviors and specific rules; the meaning of all these elements is something shared for a specific social group or community”.

Given the definition this work suggests the shortlist of key-elements: *locus*, *habitus*, *repertoire*. Indeed within the ritual narration performers and audience are moving in a real theatre scene (*locus*) with costumes and props (*habitus*) and according to a determined script (*repertoire*). *Locus* circumscribes a significant area for the practice of ritual and makes it a constitutive element of specific identifying characteristics related to the community and to the physical space which is part of the ritual. *Habitus* is an element which enters into combination with the body becoming its communicating extension that amplifies and encodes the celebratory nature of the ritual: objects, garments, food become link-elements between the performers and the community. *Repertoire* is the set of behaviors, movements, actions performed by the community during the ritual. Therefore it is possible to pinpoint spaces (*locus*), objects (*habitus*) and behaviors (*repertoire*) as the key elements of ritual, essential and unavoidable factors without ritual loses its sense. This process of breaking down the rite into its constructive elements is not intended to isolate its individual components, extracting them from their context, but rather serves to enhance their value as “mother” elements of the rite, pieces without which the rite itself would have no meaning (Pils 2014).

This interpretative model is interesting to browse three relevant case studies, each highlighting a particular key-element of the ritual process (the body scale,

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the object scale and the landscape scale) and showing clearly how much ritual hybridizes with contemporary culture.

Analyzing the scale of body (*repertoire*) an interesting example is the one of the **Pupazze di Bova** which is a traditional easter procession through the little town of Bova-Chora in Calabria, a region in the South of Italy. During this procession vegetable puppets are brought from the central square to the church, where they get the benediction, and after that, they are dismembered and their pieces are distributed to people to be carried home. The relevant aspect of this case concerns the body scale of the ritual: the activity of pleat and braid the branches of palm gather the community in a shared activity creating a strong bound among individuals. Moreover despite the pupazze retain a very distinctive craft aesthetic, yet are starting to absorb more contemporary elements: the reverence for tradition is starting to embrace new aesthetics and making methods.

Exploring the scale of landscape (*locus*) it is interesting to observe **Sukkot**, a week-long biblical Jewish Holiday that commemorates the forty-year period during which the Israelites were wandering in the desert, living in temporary shelters. In honor of the holiday's historical significance people have to build a temporary hut called sukkah. The constrains are simple: must be temporary, have at least 2+1/2 walls and have a roof made of shade-providing organic materials. A sukkah is basically designed for living, so it becomes the ritual landscape during all the festival period. In 2010 Joshua Foer and Roger Bennett conceived **Sukkah City** an architectural and design competition based on the idea that tradition can be imbued with modern relevancy. For almost a week over 200 designers built just as many non-permanent structures in New York's Union Square Park demonstrating how design can truly reinvent some aspects of the ritual and become an exploration in creating community through the ritual itself.

For the object scale (*habitus*) it is particularly relevant the **Quinceañera** which is the celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday in communities of people from Latin America. This birthday is celebrated differently from any other birthday, as it marks the transition from childhood to young womanhood, so it is a rite of passage. The celebration varies significantly across countries, with celebrations in some countries taking on, for example, more religious overtones than in others. This passage is symbolized through a series of objects that is constantly changing and updating although stick to tradition; also in this case the necessity to stay true to the long-established and beloved spirit of the ritual compromises with the urgency of renewal, mostly pushed by young generations.

Every ritual possesses all the key-elements but each time one emerges on one other becoming more relevant or distinguishing. Understanding which is the dimension to explore to truly understand the ritual process could be eased by design which can establish itself as a core discipline in the ritual investigation. Moreover, knowing ritual mechanisms, one can improve the design capacity to give shape to objects, services, landscapes, behaviors full of significance for social groups increasing that social dimension so fundamental for rituals.

4. THE DESIGN ACTION AND THE NARRATIVE POTENTIAL OF RITUALS

1.1. DESIGN ACTIONS FOR RITUALS

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An interesting aspect of the relationship between ritual and design is based on the narrative potential that underlines the symbolic and humanistic meaning of this field. Therefore one highlights six lines of intervention where some actions design driven are recognisable:

- designing scenarios and visions;
- inventing new uses;
- inventing new kinds of place;
- inventing new kinds of object;
- activating new behaviors;
- increasing the value of the narrative potential of the object.

Designing scenarios and visions: if one analyzes statistic data bases one can deduce some interesting trends and behaviors useful to design future scenarios. Thanks to data one can understand significative values and possible new rituals. The book *Visionary Cities* (Mass, Swerdlow, Waugh, 2009) shows a collection of sociological data through explicit statements and representative collages of pictures in order to declare some possible crucial meta-design corridors. Into these data one can find the new rituals with which the contemporary society will be represented (e.g. "More than 330 marriages a day occur as a result of online dating", "The global average for TV watching is 23 hours and 20 minutes per week").

Inventing new uses: through design action one can answer not only to new forms and functions but also new demands and uses; that means creating new ritual practices. In particular, in the contemporary age there is strong relationship between actual and virtual dimension and, consequently, between actual and virtual rituals. The design can contribute to increase the contemporary process of hybridization of real and virtual places: some real public spaces are redefined through unconventional uses generated on the web in order to give a new meaning to places. For instance, one can see the *Flash Mob* case where people suddenly invade a public space creating a sort of artistic and collective performance; *Clandestine Marzurca* or *Illegal Tango* both are forms of temporary appropriation of public places to give space to a mass dance performance. All of these performances are possible by way of a strong web network; there is a parallel dimension where everyone can participate before, during, and after his experience.

Inventing new kinds of place: one can mention some interesting examples of brands that have generated new social rituals in creating places where people experiment new behaviors. For instance the famous coffee chain *Starbucks* has been the first place where students and workers could spend overtime in order to work (together or alone). The product service system of this brand has changed the way to consume coffee because it is based on the customization of the drink, on the customization of the service and -above all- on an unconventional way to spend time in a public space like a private one. This brand has been able to generate new rituals (individual and social) around a simple daily action.

Inventing new kinds of object: in a more and more extended landscape of the objects the design action overwrites new functions and meanings to existent objects in creating new rituals around the same object. For instance if one thinks of the iPhone -key product of the last years- one immediately understands the ritual potential in it because it has a strong power of relationship. Also another interesting aspect emerges: the plurality of the objects and services that have been produced around it (decorative accessories like charms, little toys and cover, functional accessories like wide-angle lens and so on).

Activating new behaviors: the book *Curious Rituals. Gestural interaction in the digital everyday* (Nova et al. 2012) collects and analyzes the new typical rituals of the contemporary society in the age of digital devices: it is an interesting photograph of new attitudes, gestures and kinds of relationship between people and device and among people. This is just a demonstration how products can generate new rituals that influence our daily life.

Increasing the value of the narrative potential of the object: one is everyday surrounds by of objects that have a strong symbolic meanings, usually these

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objects are became rich of symbolic value thanks to signs and tracks of our past and memory, for this reason they are able to “tell stories”; however one can find some contemporary products that have been designed in order to express this narrative potential from the moment of purchase. For example the company *Alessi* puts on the market a series of daily kitchen objects that represent characters of an imaginary world, each of these has a fun name and “dialogues” with other in order to create several stories. This choice is supported by a special section in the *Alessi* website that collects a lot of films where these objects are present as a testimonials of daily rituals.

1.2. THE NARRATIVE POTENTIAL OF THE OBJECTS IN EXHIBITS

One can recognize the narrative potential of the object also in exhibit field: in particular in exhibits where the object exposed creates ritual dynamics of cultural experience and in exhibits where the ritual meaning of the object is the main element of the narrative experience.

For example there is not only a collection of objects but also of rituals in the *Museo del Quotidiano Ettore Guatelli* (Ozzano Taro, Parma, <http://www.museoguatelli.it/>). Here the vertiginous collection of the objects of the daily culture typical of the 1900s crowds the plain construction that accommodates this unusual museum. Guatelli was interested in objects as a testimony of the human history, but above all he was fascinated by unlimited stories potentially included in each object both in terms of social and individual scale. The museum’s mission is “the narrative of the time, in the unlimited fragments of daily life”. The project *Storie Plurali* (<http://patrimonioeinterculturala.ismu.org/index.php?page=esperienze-show.php&id=48>) was created starting from this awareness and will to work on the inter-cultural integration on part of a territorial museum. This project starts from the objects of the collection, from the identity and narrative potentiality of them in order to create renewed stories through a theatrical workshop able to involve local and immigrant people. One of the logics in creating these narratives is based on the gestural memory and rituals around an object; it is an useful method to highlight tangible and intangible values. In this way performances and narratives weave together creating an interesting combination between traditions and reinterpretations. In the museum every surface (walls, sides, tables) is a sort of landscape of the objects to the point that one can see a historical representation through articulated compositions of the objects (divided in forms and typologies). These compositions look three-dimensional tattoos that nullify any need of additional displays and they immerse the visitor in a decorative “dizziness” where the only ornament is the way with which the whole collection of the objects appropriate the space. The tangible value is visible in the object itself and the intangible one comes alive from the script narrative, it becomes voice, gesture, performance, ritual, story and -valorizing the local identity- it goes beyond the geographic boundaries thanks to an inter-cultural communication: migrant stories from the object to the territory. In this case, thanks to a re-activation of the collection, a creation of new rituals overwritten on the previous ones is possible (Trocchianesi 2013).

Or once more when setting up the exhibition on the *Etruscans* at Palazzo Grassi in Venice, where the architect Francesco Venezia displayed the bronze throne in a crystal showcase, constituted by a wooden floor and a unusually shaped step which forced the visitor to bow, integrating informative elements about the artwork through the gesture itself.

The value of the individual ritual involves the social dimension in the cycle of the installations *Object de Guerre 1-44* (2000-2006) by the Lebanese artist Joreige that starts from a series of testimonies about Lebanon war. She asked every person involved to choose one daily object that has a special value in order to remind some important sensations and tell stories about their experience. In this way there is a “plural photography” of a collection of points of view about a significant topic: the memory of the war. The exhibit shows these contents

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through video-interviews to people involved and through their objects in showcases, so multimedia tools and the “traditional” display made an interesting contrast: on one hand the video-interview get close the visitor to person because it stages him in an empathic way in fact the person tells his story through his expressions, his voice, his ritual objects in a sort of “public intimacy”; on the other hand the showcase isolates the object socializing and displacing it out of its physical and emotional habitat. Here is recognisable the paradigm of the technological performance in the relationship between object and visitor. A similar paradigm is also recognisable in *Whispering Table* by TheGreenEyl in the Jewish Museum in Berlino (2009): this installation uses the pretext of the object present on the decked table (that have a high gradient of ritual) in order to show contents about religion through food. The table is dark and located in a dark room, the objects on the table are lighted in a theatrical way. Visitors can take place around it, take the objects and approach them ear: they reveal own sound narrative telling the symbolic meaning of meal, rituals and religious beliefs (e.g. the Easter Eve). The objects also talk to each other about differences and similarities among cultures according to their disposition on the table. The visitor moves and listens in becoming an active part of the conversation and in living a renewed ritual. The memory of the movement and body allows to the knowledge to leave a sediment in a more complete and definite way.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The possibility to incorporate or apply the design method to other fields of knowledge, other than specifically technical scientific ones, represents - paraphrasing Freud - an “irresistible temptation” and together almost a “scientific imperative”. The observation of ritual practices using a broad, specific and collaborative multidisciplinary approach, where the designer’s contribution becomes complementary, but also propelling with respect to that of other sectors, constitutes a possible response to the growing complexity and articulation of the theme of rituals. Creating a system out of the different components of a rite, providing shape to experimental scenarios of observation and interpretation through their analysis, offers new perspectives which incorporate not only the historical and critical sphere, but which can also be imposed on the process of recognizing and enhancing various practices.

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