Ritual and Identity;
The staging and performing of rituals in the lives of young people

Christoph Wulf, Birgit Althans, Kathrin Audehm, Constanze Bausch, Michael Göhlich, Stephan Sting, Anja Tervooren, Monika Wagner-Willi, and Jörg Zirfas

Translated by Alice Lagaay and Elizabeth Hamilton

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Introduction

With the exception of social anthropology there has never been much interest in the study of rituals in the social sciences and the humanities. This is now beginning to change, as we have come to realise that rituals play a far more important role in creating, maintaining and transforming the worlds of human beings than has generally been assumed. The purpose of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of the significance of rituals in the lives of young people finding their way in the world. We will demonstrate that many interactions are staged and performed as rituals. These ritual actions are complex social processes that can vary widely in their intention, content and context. Therefore our study of ritual situations requires multi-dimensional concepts of ritual action. Rituals have a tendency to force people to comply with their rules or to fit in and are sometimes quite oppressive, but over and above this they have a creative quality, an aspect that has often been overlooked. Rituals create social cohesion and help groups or communities to overcome problems and conflicts that arise within them.

In this book we aim to show that rituals are necessary for the development of young people. They are among the most effective forms of human communication and interaction. We may think of rituals as actions in which staging and performing play a central role (cf. Tambiah, 1979). Insofar as rituals in the worlds of children growing up at home, at school and in social situations are performances and enactments of the body, they tend to have greater social weight than mere discourses. For with their bodily presence, the ritual actors invest the social situation with 'something extra' in addition to the spoken word. This 'something extra' is rooted in the material nature of the body and in the physical existence of the individual.

Through the staging and performing of rituals, differences are constructively dealt with and cultural communalities are produced. Young people stage themselves and their relations, and in so doing produce social life. Rituals produce systems of order, often hierarchical ones expressing power relations: between social classes, generations and between the sexes. By virtue of being performed and expressed by people using their bodies in a certain way, rituals take on the appearance of being 'natural' and universally accepted. By inviting people to 'join in and play along', ritual performances facilitate the unquestioning acceptance of the cultural *status quo* or system that they embody. Children and

adolescents who decline the invitation to 'join in and play along' put themselves beyond the pale, are excluded and can become scapegoats upon whom the hidden negativity and violence inherent in the community is projected (Girard, 1989; cf. Dieckmann et al., 1997).

Young people learn to learn, to behave and to live together through rituals (Delors, 1997). These are important ways of learning those skills that will eventually be needed in the fields of work, the family and in the wider community. The study of the rituals of childhood and adolescence cannot therefore be divorced from research into rituals in other areas of our society.

In contrast to purely linguistic forms of communication, rituals are social constellations, in which individual and communal social actions and the way they are interpreted produce structures and hierarchies (McLaren, 1993; Alexander, Anderson and Galegos, 2004). The spectrum of ritual actions comprises liturgies, ceremonies, celebrations, ritualisations and conventions, from religious rituals, transitional passage rites on occasions such as birth, marriage and death all the way to everyday rituals of interaction (Grimes, 1995; cf. Bell, 1992, 1997). Areas in which everyday rituals are particularly important are child rearing, education and social development. In today's society where there is much discussion about the disintegration of social cohesion, the loss of values and the search for cultural identity, rituals and ritualisations are growing in importance. Alongside this we find a more complex view of rituals. For a long time it was the aspects of rigidity, stereotypes and violence of rituals that were the prime areas of research. Now, there is an expectation that they will bridge the gap between individuals, communities and cultures. They tend to appear today to create cultural cohesion mainly by virtue of presenting forms which, through their ethical and aesthetic content, offer security in times where the bigger picture is easily lost sight of. Rituals hold out the promise of compensating for the experiences of loss associated with modernity: loss of a sense of community, loss of identity and authenticity, of order and stability, furthermore, of compensating for the tendencies towards individualism, abstraction and virtualisation which flow from the erosion of social and cultural systems (Soeffner, 1992; Gebauer and Wulf 1998, 2003; Wulf and Zirfas, 2004; Hermès, 2005).

Being complex social phenomena, rituals are the subject of many different academic disciplines. As a consequence, international research lacks a universally accepted theory of rituals, since the positions in the various disciplines are simply too variegated. Depending on the field of inquiry, the discipline and the methodological approach, different aspects are emphasised. There is, however,

today a far-reaching consensus that it makes little sense to restrict the richness and variety of perspectives in favour of one particular theory. Instead we need to put the rich variety of points of view on the agenda in order to reveal the complexity both of rituals themselves and also the different lines of research.

Interaction and ritual

Social communities are formed through verbal and non-verbal forms of interaction and communication. Ritual tableaux are, as it were, performed on 'stages'; by means of staging and performing, bonding and intimacy, communal solidarity and inclusion are engendered. Communities are distinguished not only by a collectively shared symbolic knowledge, but to an even greater degree by cultural action, in which they stage and perform such knowledge in rituals in which the particular social system is expressed, projected and reproduced (Wulf, 2006b). Communities are dramatised fields of action, which come into being through symbolic performances in different areas of life through rituals.

Human beings communicate and interact in ritual practices and tableaux. Rituals, such as Christmas parties, children's birthday parties or ceremonies marking the first day at school and summer festivals at school, use body language and are performative, expressive, symbolic, rule-based and efficient. They are repetitive, homogenous, liminal, playful, public, demonstrative and operational (Wulf et al., 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010). Rituals are institutionalised templates in which collectively shared knowledge and collectively shared practices are staged and performed and the way in which the social or cultural system projects and interprets itself is reaffirmed (Wulf, 2002, 2005, 2009).

Rituals have a beginning and an end and therefore put communication and interaction into a time frame. They take place in social situations which they in turn help to shape; ritual processes embody and display institutions and organisations. They have a pronounced character, they are conspicuous and they are determined by the way they are framed (Goffman, 1974). In rituals transitions between one social situation or institution and another are shaped and differences between human beings and the situations they are thrust into are negotiated and worked out (Wulf and Zirfas, 2004, 2005).

Rituals as performance

Central to our study is the performative nature of rituals (Wulf, Göhlich and Zirfas, 2001; Wulf and Zirfas, 2007; Alexander, Anderson and Gallegos, 2004). We look at how ritual practice in the worlds of children growing up and

finding their place in the world comes about, how it connects to language and imagination, how its particular character is made possible by social and cultural patterns, and how its event-like character relates to its repetitive quality.

We aim to show that the effects of rituals that are rooted in institutions are determined above all by the fact that ritual activity is based on habitual actions that have been acquired by the body and through mimetic processes involved in staging a scene. Here boundaries are drawn, attitudes created and skills defined. This enables processes of social acceptance to take place, the performative quality of which contributes significantly to the creation of social cohesion or communities. If social life is structured through actions of 'instituting people' in social positions and creating institutional structures which build social life by labelling, categorising, and structuring it, then we may speak of ritual 'acts of instituting' (Bourdieu). These practices clearly play an important role in the fields of education and socialisation.

Here group identities are created through verbal and non-verbal ritualised forms of interaction and communication which are constantly being acted out on a 'stage'. It is precisely this 'performance' that determines the identity of the members of the group and the way they bond together and become a cohesive, intimate, integrated whole. This means that groups or 'communities' are characterised by symbolic knowledge that is collectively shared (Douglas, 1986; Wulf, 2005) and also that they *enact* this knowledge through rituals that confirm the cohesion and reproduction of the *status quo* (Liebau, Schumacher-Chilla and Wulf, 2001) Communities are dramatic arenas of action created through rituals and their symbolic enactments (Mannheim, 1982). They create a system of interaction that acquires unity by means of all forms of interaction, including divergences.

We will demonstrate that for the production of social cohesion in rituals, their properties and characteristics as theatrical productions, as stagings and performances are of special significance. The performativity of rituals has three central dimensions (Fischer-Lichte and Wulf, 2001, 2004).

Rituals may firstly be grasped as communicative *cultural performances* (Singer, 1959), i.e. they are the result of enactments and processes of performances by the human body. They involve a number of ritual scenes, in which participants in the ritual fulfil different functions. These ritual arrangements may be construed as the outcome of cultural actions, in the course of which divergent, conflicting social forces are integrated into an accepted social and cultural order (Wulf, 1997, 2002, 2009).

Secondly, the *performative character of speech* is of crucial significance in ritual action (Austin, 1979). In rituals of baptism and confirmation, of transition and investiture, for example, the words spoken during the performance of the ritual practices contribute substantially to the creation of a new reality. The same is true for cultural practices in which the relation of the sexes to one another is clearly defined and in which repeatedly addressing a child as 'boy' or 'girl' contributes to the development of gender identity (Butler, 1997).

Finally, the performative also comprises an aesthetic dimension, an important ingredient in artistic *performances*. This aesthetic perspective points to the limitations of a purely functionalist view of the performativity of ritual acts. Just as the aesthetic dimension of artistic *performances* prevents them being reduced to acts that are determined merely by the aim of attaining functional goals, so it reminds us that rituals are 'more' than displays of concrete intention (Wulf and Zirfas, 2004; Huppauf and Wulf, 2009).

Even when the intentions of rituals are identical, the staging of bodily performances of rituals often exhibits important differences. Among the reasons for this are general historical conditions, cultural and social conditions and, finally, conditions associated with the uniqueness of the protagonists. The interplay of these factors produces the performative character of linguistic, social and aesthetic action in ritual stagings and performances. When we consider the aesthetic dimension and the fact that rituals are staged like events and also processes, the limits of their predictability and manageability become apparent; we also become aware of the significance of the style of cultural practices. The difference between what is consciously intended and the multiple layers of meaning implicit in the way bodies are used to stage scenes is obvious. The performative character of ritual action invites many different interpretations and readings, without this difference in interpretation diminishing the effect of the ritual arrangements as such. On the contrary: part of the effects of rituals derives precisely from the fact that the same rituals can be read in different ways, without detrimental consequences for the social magic of their practice.

Social communication crucially depends on *how* people make use of their body in their behaviour and action, which is culturally determined. This involves how much space people leave between them, what body postures they adopt, what gestures they develop. By these means, people communicate much about themselves and their approach to life, about their way of seeing, feeling and experiencing the world. Despite their central importance for the effects and consequences of social action, these aspects of bodily performativity are missing

from many traditional theories of ritual, in which the actors are reduced to their cognitive side, while the sensual and contextual conditions within which they act are ignored. In order to avoid such reductionism, we have to bear in mind how ritual action comes about, how it is linked to language and imagination, how the uniqueness of rituals is made possible through social and cultural patterns and how they are both one-off events and repetitions at the same time.

The creation of social cohesion in young people's lives through rituals

Our study on rituals constitutes a thematic case study in which we investigate how social cohesion and community life are created through rituals and ritualisations in the four major fields of socialisation, i.e. 'family', 'school', 'peer group' and 'media'.

The focus of our study is on everyday rituals in the world, or worlds, of 300 children aged between six and thirteen with twenty different ethnic backgrounds at a primary school in an inner-city district of Berlin. Within the same inner-city environment of this school, three families were chosen, each with a different family structure: one family with two children, one family with three children and a single mother with one child. Of all the family micro-rituals, the ritual of eating is at the centre of our study. At the primary school our particular interest is in the micro rituals of transitional situations in school. Threshold rituals and ritualisations are studied in three classes of nine to thirteen year-olds, including children from various ethnic origins and social strata. In the realm of child culture, our study focuses on the ritual games that children play during break-time in the playground and corridors. The significance of television media for everyday ritual community-building processes in child culture is investigated through the use of video staging—a method developed especially for this purpose. Finally, an example is used to show how practical ritual knowledge is acquired through mimetic learning in the performance of ritual processes (cf. Willis, 1999; Woods, 1986, 1996; Woods, Jeffrey, Troman and Boyle, 1997; Zinnecker, 2000; Wulf et al., 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010).

Our research pursues several aims. To begin with, our aim is to reconstruct the educative and socialising effects of rituals in four main areas of children's life. The result is an ethnographic case study of the inner-city life of children at the turn of the millennium. We then develop a multi-dimensional performative concept of the ritual based on the analysis of this material. Furthermore, we will show how ritual action creates a sense of community as well as what is

understood by this word 'community' (*Gemeinschaft* in German) in the various contexts. Finally, we will attempt to reconstruct how rituals and ritualisations are learnt mimetically, or by imitation, and how the inner-city environment finds expression in these performances.

The family as a performative unit

In order to understand the ritual dynamic of family life, we placed the ritual of family mealtimes at the centre of our study. During the breakfast ritual, generational differences, for instance, are dealt with and the family performs as a 'normative community', establishing its own norms and standards. The family creates and confirms itself as a socially cohesive group through ritual processes. The family members' specific interaction is constantly portrayed on the 'family stage'. Different roles are incorporated and learnt; family intimacy, solidarity and inclusion are staged and portrayed in performative arrangements. We use detailed ethnographic material to reconstruct the way families are formed, upheld and transformed through ritual acts and symbolic performances, in recognition of the fact that families are both heterogeneous and homogeneous at the same time. If family cohesion is endangered, the family members will stage ritualised ways of restoring it. By enacting and displaying collective knowledge which is shared by the family, the family group becomes a dramatic arena where, through the habitual, typical patterns of behaviour that are displayed in them, rituals bring about a normative order by means of controlling or sanctioning mechanisms. Three forms of family mealtime rituals emerge: rituals in which differences surface, are observed, dealt with and resolved; rituals of passage or transition in terms of space or time or even socially; bonding rituals in which family crises are overcome.

Rituals in daily school life

Micro-rituals are also of central interest when it comes to reconstructing ethnographically the world of school. The child has two roles in school—that of the child with his or her friends and that of the pupil in the classroom—and constantly moves backwards and forwards between the two. Our analysis focuses on these transitions from being the child in the playground who identifies with the peer group to being the 'pupil' again and vice-versa. Our objective is to reconstruct the rituals that emerge during phases of transition, and to establish how they contribute to creating social cohesion between the children. Here again, we understand ritual activity to be recurring interactive patterns of behaviour

that create, confirm and transform the boundaries, structures, values and norms of a group or community. This ritual activity is to be seen in body language, stylised gestures and the way scenes are staged. It is through these rituals and the practical knowledge required for their staging and performance that collective identity and differences are generated and dealt with. The game-like elements of rituals open the way for spontaneity and creativity. Our study concentrates on the particular transition from break-time to lessons.

GoGo performance in the playground

During playtime children develop their peer group culture with great intensity. In the playground and the school corridors a whole range of games are staged that allow an insight into inner-city child-culture. These areas are characterised by a high social density and heterogeneity of children from various ethnic origins and different family backgrounds. The focus of our investigation is how boys and girls behave during the ritual playtime games in which there is a constant turnover in groups of players and on-lookers. We focus on the GoGo game, which happened to be a favourite among the children at the time of our study. It involves players gathering in a particular place, the swapping of game figures, an approved order in the game, the pragmatics of establishing common rules, and a style of movement and play that is characteristic of the group. The practices of giving, swapping and winning figures used in the game, as ritual forms of social exchange, result in there being a continuous change in group composition. We are particularly interested in the relation between gender and the way groups are formed in this game, which is primarily, though not exclusively, initiated by boys.

The creation of peer-group identity through TV adverts and popular shows

The new media, and television in particular, are another part of life in which rituals are important. Ritual activities and processes are portrayed on television and our everyday life as viewers becomes ritualised, as do our perceptions of reality. Media-related ritualisation processes are a central aspect of living in the media-dominated world. The social reality that the media stages in its ritualised portrayals becomes absorbed into children's practical knowledge through mimetic learning processes. They then draw upon this knowledge when it comes to their own social relationships. In order to show how we resort to media models in everyday life our research group developed an experimental method to reconstruct these practices. Video workshops were set up in which

children were asked to think up, perform and record scenes for a video. During this process, they clearly drew on rituals and ritual actions that they were familiar with from television and used these as a model upon which to base their own productions. Among the types of programme that shaped their conceptual world, commercials and chat shows were found to be particularly prominent. During the staging of the video films, intense community-building processes were at work between the children. Regardless of ethnic origin, they drew on a collective world of concepts communicated by television to fulfil their task. The young people adapted the ritual activities that they had acquired mimetically through television and combined them with scenes arising from their own imaginative world, to produce an original performance dealing with issues that are of concern to young people at this stage of their development.

The role that mimesis plays in rituals

Since in our view rituals are forms of practical action here we examine how this action and knowledge are acquired. When we reconstruct ritual acts in the social world, we notice that ritual knowledge and the ability to apply it in practice are assimilated through mimetic processes. So the main question we attempt to answer is how practical knowledge is acquired through reference to models. The theatrical nature of ritual action, and the fact that it is performed by the body, plays an important role in it becoming firmly rooted as a habitual action. Ritual competence comes about above all through the mimetic acquisition of particular movements and gestures. Furthermore, the performative character of ritual knowledge allows us, through an act of mimetic re-creation, to gain access to its inherently symbolic and bodily elements. Mimetic assimilation of ritual knowledge is a question of using the senses in a practical way. A group identity is thus established, confirmed and modified through a shared taste or liking for something (Wulf, 2005; Gebauer and Wulf, 1995, 1998, 2003; Wimmer, 2006).

The creation of social cohesion in rituals

At the heart of our study is the performative nature of rituals and ritualisations. This raises a number of issues that are deserving of further investigations. The following are central elements of our research and may be considered as our contribution to the theory of rituals (Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg, 2006). Among these elements are: the complexity of ritual arrangements; the performative character of ritual actions; the aesthetic and playful nature of

ritual performances; the corporeality and sensuousness of ritual actions; the role of mimetic processes in the staging of rituals; the inbuilt power structure in ritual performances; the implicit rules in ritual arrangements; the iconology of the performance in rituals; the staging of macro-rituals; and the sacred in ritual arrangements.

The city as a performative space

In this final section we show how the city, as the area where the children live their lives, can be seen as a performative space. This is important for understanding their lives in school, their families, their peer groups and also their attitude to the media. The city's architecture, class structure and variety of cultures, its history and particular traditions all contribute to moulding the lives of the members of the school and the families in our study. People's lives are shaped by their environment and the atmosphere peculiar to it; this particular space is constantly reshaped and re-created by its population. Authors like Georg Simmel (1995) were quick to recognise the social significance of a particular space. Contemporary observations confirm this view and inspire us to give the performative character of this environment and its atmosphere its due. Life in the neighbourhood and the immediate surroundings of the school are important factors in the children's world.

Ethnographic methods

We use ethnographic methods, which allow us to find answers to the questions that have guided our study while remaining very close to the structure of the field and the perceptions of the ritual actors (cf. Troman, Jeffrey and Beach, 2006). Moreover, reconstructing and evaluating the empirical material allows us to expand these key questions further. Grounded Theory, with its propositions regarding 'theory as practice', remains an important source of inspiration (Glaser and Strauss, 1969; cf. Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1994). Our assumptions regarding the relation between rituals and the way in which group identities are formed through performance can only be formulated adequately through reconstructing and interpreting the ethnographic material (Wulf, Göhlich and Zirfas, 2001; Wulf and Zirfas, 2004, 2007; Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009).

Throughout this process methodological reflections have often been challenged by situations that have led us to change our assumptions. It has been important to constantly check how we reconstruct the material, how we

interpret it and relate it to the theoretical questions of the investigation (cf. Woods, 1986, 1996; Woods, Jeffrey, Troman and Boyle, 1997; Wulf, 2003). In our efforts to understand the dynamics of ritual behaviour, we have also considered sequence analysis (Oevermann, 2000), which has helped us to understand the sequential nature of human action, the significance of latent structures of meaning for ritual behaviour, and the important role of crises within normal case scenarios. In addition, consideration of narration analysis (Schütze, 1983), ethno-methodological conversation analysis (Eberle, 1997), biographical research (Krüger and Marotzki, 1998; Délory-Momberger, 2000) and ethnography (Geertz, 1973; Spindler and Spindler, 1987; Schechner, 1977; Beach, 1993; SEE, 2004 ff.; Walford, 2008; Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009) has also contributed significantly to our methodological approach. The constructive elements of our own research play a particularly important role throughout the study, so that we are led to confirm the conclusion that the notion of 'one' social reality (the thing itself) is replaced by various realities as versions of the world by its participants. Natural protocols are revealed as methodically constructed texts. The idea of latent structures of meaning as objective, given reality which can be objectively proven, becomes therefore highly questionable (Flick, 2000, 2006). This epistemological view has also evolved, in our context, from insights into the historical and cultural nature of knowledge, which is currently of great interest in historical cultural anthropology and historical cultural anthropology of education (Wulf, 2009, 2002).

Ethnographic methods of research are best suited to our purpose. Since the staging and performance of social life in rituals is our focus, participatory observation and video-supported observation and also our own method of video enactment will play a central role. The methodological problems inherent to participatory observation are well known; those that accompany video-supported observation, however, less so. The very fact that one is recording the ritual transforms the ritual process significantly. This must be taken into account. Further research is needed in order to acquire a more precise understanding of these processes that are, in part, unintended results of the iconic nature of the recording (Denzin, 2000; Krüger 2000; Zinnecker, 2000). The ever-increasing importance of images and the iconic turn in cultural studies and the social sciences suggest that we need to develop an iconology of the performative in the context of visual anthropology (Mollenhauer and Wulf, 1996; Schäfer and Wulf, 1999; Knoblauch, Schnettler, Raab and Soeffner, 2006; Pink, 2007; Bohnsack, 2009; Huppauf and Wulf, 2009).

Considering the limitations inherent in any method of research and the well-known advantages and disadvantages of the various approaches to participatory observation, the most appropriate procedure is clearly to analyse a particular ritual process using overlapping methods, that is, through triangulation (Flick, 2000). Thus, we have used recordings of conversations, group discussions, and interviews too (Bohnsack, 1997; Weigand and Hess, 2007). In the various areas of our investigation, these methods are exploited in different ways, according to the different kinds of questions in each area and the varying conditions of study. As a result, the multiplicity of methodological approaches to the reconstruction of rituals opens up new ways of comparing different forms of the performative creation of social cohesion.