



# The ritual animal

Praying, fighting, dancing, chanting — human rituals could illuminate the growth of community and the origins of civilization.

BY DAN JONES

**B**y July 2011, when Brian McQuinn made the 18-hour boat trip from Malta to the Libyan port of Misrata, the bloody uprising against Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi had already been under way for five months.

“The whole city was under siege, with Gaddafi forces on all sides,” recalls Canadian-born McQuinn. He was no stranger to such situations, having spent the previous decade working for peace-building organizations in countries including Rwanda and Bosnia. But this time, as a doctoral student in anthropology at the University of Oxford, UK, he was taking the risk for the sake of research. His plan was to make contact with rebel groups and travel with them as they fought, studying how they used ritual to create solidarity and loyalty amid constant violence.

It worked: McQuinn stayed with the rebels for seven months, compiling a strikingly close and personal case study of how rituals evolved through combat and eventual victory. And his work was just one part of a much bigger project: a £3.2-million (US\$5-million)

investigation into ritual, community and conflict, which is funded until 2016 by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and headed by McQuinn’s supervisor, Oxford anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse.

Rituals are a human universal — “the glue that holds social groups together”, explains Whitehouse, who leads the team of anthropologists, psychologists, historians, economists and archaeologists from 12 universities in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. Rituals can vary enormously, from the recitation of prayers in church, to the sometimes violent and humiliating initiations of US college fraternity pledges, to the bleeding of a young man’s penis with bamboo razors and pig incisors in purity rituals among the Iahita Arapesh of New Guinea. But beneath that diversity, Whitehouse believes, rituals are always about building community — which arguably makes them central to understanding how civilization itself began.

To explore these possibilities, and to

tease apart how this social glue works, Whitehouse’s project will combine fieldwork such as McQuinn’s with archaeological digs and laboratory studies around the world, from Vancouver, Canada, to the island archipelago of Vanuatu in the south Pacific Ocean. “This is the most wide-ranging scientific project on rituals attempted to date,” says Scott Atran, director of anthropological research at the CNRS, the French national research organization, in Paris, and an adviser to the project.

## Human rites

A major aim of the investigation is to test Whitehouse’s theory that rituals come in two broad types, which have different effects on group bonding. Routine actions such as prayers at church, mosque or synagogue, or the daily pledge of allegiance recited in many US elementary schools, are rituals operating in what Whitehouse calls the ‘doctrinal mode’. He argues that these rituals, which are easily

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## FORGING LOYALTY

Members of large, stable groups such as religions, tribes and nations typically reinforce their commitment with routine rituals such as Buddhist prayers in Thailand (facing page). But members of small, committed groups such as the rebel cells that gathered in Benghazi, Libya, in March 2011 (this page) are often initiated by rituals or other experiences that are frightening and traumatic.

MADS NISSE/BERLINGSKE/PANOS(RIGHT)

transmitted to children and strangers, are well suited to forging religions, tribes, cities and nations — broad-based communities that do not depend on face-to-face contact.

Rare, traumatic activities such as beating, scarring or self-mutilation, by contrast, are rituals operating in what Whitehouse calls the ‘imagistic mode’. “Traumatic rituals create strong bonds among those who experience them together,” he says, which makes them especially suited to creating small, intensely committed groups such as cults, military platoons or terrorist cells. “With the imagistic mode, we never find groups of the same kind of scale, uniformity, centralization or hierarchical structure that typifies the doctrinal mode,” he says.

### Rebel yell

Whitehouse has been developing this theory of ‘divergent modes of ritual and religion’ since the late 1980s, based on his field work in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere<sup>1</sup>. His ideas have attracted the attention of psychologists, archaeologists and historians.

Until recently, however, the theory was largely based on selected ethnographic and historical case studies, leaving it open to the charge of cherry-picking. The current rituals project is an effort by Whitehouse and his colleagues to answer that charge with deeper, more systematic data.

The pursuit of such data sent McQuinn to Libya. His strategy was to look at how the defining features of the imagistic and doctrinal modes — emotionally intense experiences

shared among a small number of people, compared with routine, daily practices that large numbers of people engage in — fed into the evolution of rebel fighting groups from small bands to large brigades.

At first, says McQuinn, neighbourhood friends formed small groups comprising “the number of people you could fit in a car”. Later, fighters began living together in groups of 25–40 in disused buildings and the mansions of rich supporters. Finally, after Gaddafi’s forces were pushed out of Misrata, much larger and hierarchically organized brigades emerged that patrolled long stretches of the defensive

**“Rituals are the glue that holds social groups together.”**

border of the city. There was even a Misratan Union of Revolutionaries, which by November 2011 had registered 236 rebel brigades.

McQuinn interviewed more than 300 fighters from 21 of these rebel groups, which varied in size from 12 to just over 1,000 members<sup>2</sup>. He found that the early, smaller brigades tended to form around pre-existing personal ties, and became more cohesive and the members more committed to each other as they collectively experienced the fear and excitement of fighting a civil war on the streets of Misrata.

But six of the groups evolved into super-brigades of more than 750 fighters, becoming

“something more like a corporate entity with their own organizational rituals”, says McQuinn. A number of the group leaders had run successful businesses, and would bring everyone together each day for collective training, briefings and to reiterate their moral codes of conduct — the kinds of routine group activities characteristic of the doctrinal mode. “These daily practices moved people from being ‘our little group’ to ‘everyone training here is part of our group,’” says McQuinn.

McQuinn and Whitehouse’s work with Libyan fighters underscores how small groups can be tightly fused by the shared trauma of war, just as imagistic rituals induce terror to achieve the same effect. Whitehouse says that he is finding the same thing in as-yet-unpublished studies of the scary, painful and humiliating ‘hazing’ rituals of fraternity and sorority houses on US campuses, as well as in surveys of Vietnam veterans showing how shared trauma shaped loyalty to their fellow soldiers.

To gain a more global perspective on ritual practices, Whitehouse and Quentin Atkinson, a psychologist at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and a member of the project, used a previously developed database containing information on world cultures to explore the connections between frequency, peak levels of emotional arousal, and average community size for 645 rituals across 74 cultures<sup>3</sup>. As predicted, the rituals fell into two clusters: low-frequency but high-arousal imagistic varieties that were more common in societies with a smaller average community size, and high-frequency, low-arousal doctrinal rituals that

were more established in societies in which communities are larger.

Given these data from contemporary cultures, it is hard not to speculate about ritual's role in history: did the transition from imagistic mode to doctrinal mode, with its emphasis on a common identity buttressed by daily activities and rituals, play a part in the emergence of large, complex societies 10,000 years ago?

### The birth of civilization?

To address that question, Whitehouse, Atkinson and Camilla Mazzucato, also based at the University of Oxford, are looking at archaeological data from Çatalhöyük, one of the largest and best-preserved Neolithic towns known. Located in the Anatolian plains of northwestern Turkey, Çatalhöyük was founded during the dawn of agriculture roughly 9,500 years ago, and housed more than 8,000 people at its peak.

The town's early layers show that residents frequently buried their kin under the floors of their houses, sometimes with their heads severed. Wall paintings also depict the town's residents getting together to tease and kill enormous wild bulls for feasting. "The whole process of baiting and killing these animals would have been extremely intense, and have had a major emotional impact," says excavation director Ian Hodder, an archaeologist at Stanford University in California. These occasional feasts were also memorialized by mounting the skulls and horns of bulls inside houses, and burying the rest of the bones to commemorate the founding or abandonment of a house, which Hodder says were also highly ritualistic events.

Evidence for such imagistic-style rituals declines in the later layers of Çatalhöyük. Wild-bull rituals and bull-horn installations become less common as the herding of domesticated sheep, goats and cattle intensified, says Hodder. Human burials within houses fade out, and standardized symbolic artefacts, such as painted pottery and seal stamps, become more common. Whitehouse and Hodder believe that these changes represent a shift to a more doctrinal mode of ritual as people united into a larger, more cooperative community devoted to agriculture and animal herding. Although speculative, this interpretation is consistent with Whitehouse and Atkinson's cross-cultural survey, which found that in contemporary societies the doctrinal mode is more established where agriculture is practised most intensively.

Looking beyond Çatalhöyük, Whitehouse, Atkinson and Mazzucato are building a regional database chronicling similar changes in ritual at 60 other sites across the Middle East, from the end of the Palaeolithic around 10,000 years ago until the early Bronze Age around 7,000 years ago. This database will dovetail with another one that covers the entire world over the past 5,000 years<sup>4</sup>. That resource codifies information about the culture, religion and ritual

practices of people worldwide, and combines this with measures of social complexity — for example, how many levels of administration a society's government has, or the number of distinct professions — as well as data on the intensity of warfare. The plan is to use this database to explore the links between ritual and social life, as well as the roles of war and competition between societies in nurturing certain kinds of ritual and driving increases in social complexity.

## Rituals could feed conflict by turning opinions into 'sacred values'.

Members of the ESRC project are also probing people's beliefs about how rituals work. For example, Cristine Legare at the University of Texas at Austin has studied Brazilian rituals called *simpatias*, which are used to solve everyday problems ranging from bad luck to asthma and depression<sup>5</sup>. A *simpatia* for getting a good job says that during the full Moon the jobseeker must take the jobs page out of a newspaper, fold it four times, and then place it on the floor with a small white candle surrounded by honey and cinnamon, imagining themselves in a new job with good pay. The candle stub and the paper should be buried with a plant and watered daily, and the dream job will soon emerge.

### The ritual mind

Legare presented Brazilians with a variety of *simpatias*, and found that people judged them as more effective when they involved a large number of repetitive procedural steps that must be performed at a specific time and in the presence of religious icons. "We're built to learn from others," she says, which leads us to repeat actions that seemed to work for someone else — "even if we don't understand how they produce the desired outcomes".

Meanwhile, psychologist Ryan McKay at Royal Holloway, University of London, and Jonathan Lanman, a cognitive anthropologist at Queen's University, Belfast, are exploring how rituals can be broken down into their component parts and how each part influences behaviour. One such component is synchronized physical action — for example, the ritualized goose-stepping of military units — which social psychologists have shown<sup>6</sup> promotes a sense of connection and trust between individuals.

This work builds on research by Richard Sosis, an anthropologist at the University of Connecticut, who has shown that immersion in collective rituals, such as communal prayer, in Israeli kibbutzim increases cooperative behaviour in economic games<sup>7</sup> — but only with other kibbutz members<sup>8</sup>.

Ritual also has its darker side. Surveys by Ara Norenzayan, a psychologist at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver who has an advisory role on the project, suggest that support for suicide terrorism among Palestinians is more strongly tied to communal ritual attendance than to religious devotion, as measured by the frequency of private prayer<sup>9</sup>.

Atran thinks that rituals could also feed conflict by turning the opinions and preferences of groups into 'sacred values' — absolute and non-negotiable beliefs that cannot be traded against material benefits such as money. For many Israelis, for example, one such value is the right to occupy the West Bank, whereas for many Palestinians it is the right to return to the villages from which they were expelled. In fact, Atran has found that financial offers to compromise on these sacred values makes them even more entrenched<sup>10</sup>.

As an example of how rituals can cause values and preferences to become sacralized, Atran points to his studies showing that, in the United States, people who attend church more frequently are more likely to consider the right to bear arms a sacred value<sup>11</sup>.

"Emotionally intense rituals have bound us together and pitted us against our enemies throughout the history of our species," says Whitehouse. "It was only when nomadic foragers began to settle down did we discover the possibilities for establishing much larger societies based on frequently repeated creeds and rituals."

The big question, he says, is whether this kind of unity can be extended to humanity at large. For Whitehouse, understanding the ways that rituals shape group behaviour is the first step towards finding out how they can be harnessed to dampen down conflict between groups. He hopes that such insights could help policy-makers to "establish new forms of peaceful cooperation, as well as bringing down dictators". ■

Dan Jones is a freelance writer in Brighton, UK.

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