books & ideas.net

Ritual Matters

by Jean-François Bert

In the tradition of Marcel Mauss, Pierre Lemonnier examines the male initiation rites of the Baruya of New Guinea not in terms of the signifier that can be attached to them, but rather the action on matter that they make possible.

Reviewed: Pierre Lemonnier, *La ritualité des choses. Objets, gestes et paroles des initiations masculines baruya (Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée)*, Éditions Mimésis, 2023, 592 pp., €42.

Did Marcel Mauss have it right again? Alongside his hypothesis of gift-giving as the fundamental structure of all human society, and his discovery of social shaping through the acquisition of bodily habits, the man who is often referred to as the founding father of French ethnology left us, in his scattered writings, an irrefutable rule of method that consists in always proceeding from the concrete to the abstract, particularly in the case of religious rituals. In Mauss's view, one must focus with great care on the materiality (a term that has become fashionable in recent years) that encompasses the performance of a ritual, i.e. on the gestures, objects, but also the mechanics that are engaged during this particular moment to achieve the desired result. To summarize this highly innovative position, it could be said that every ritual must be observed as a technique for shaping bodies, modifying thoughts and rearranging interactions between participants and other members of the community.

On reading Pierre Lemonnier's book, *La ritualité des choses. Objets, gestes et paroles des initiations masculines Baruya (Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée)* [The Rituality of Things: Objects, Gestures and Words in the Baruya Male Initiations (Papua New Guinea)], there can be no doubting the strength and deeply heuristic nature of this crucial return

to Mauss. Clearly, objects do have a role to play, especially during the Muka, the great collective initiation ritual of the Baruya[1] of Papua New Guinea and the pillar of their social and political order. This ritual, lasting several weeks and involving more than 110 successive stages, has entered the pantheon of ethnographic literature for two particularly iconic moments: the piercing of young boys' nasal septums and the ingestion of sperm, the principle of life and strength, which flowed from elders to cadets through the discontinued practice of ritual fellatio[2].

However, beyond these two major ritual events, which have given rise to much speculation among specialists, this ceremony is primarily concerned with the profound shaping of the bodies and minds of these young boys aged 8 to 12, who are about to be brutally taught new taboos that will form the basis of the rest of their lives.

Everything changes from then on, from their behavior to their clothing, their relationship with death and danger, and the absolute necessity of helping each other as future warriors. The contribution that Lemonnier's approach makes to these otherwise well-known elements is to understand the different purposes of this ritual, which constructs a new mental universe for the initiates, by focusing, in the manner of Mauss, on the hundreds of gestures and objects that can be observed, but also by seeking to understand how these objects play a key role both in the search for a particular effect (such as warming up the body) and as an essential form of non-verbal communication for the various participants in the ritual.

Setting the scene

Lemmonier's description spares us nothing of the long process of this Muka ritual, which serves to generate strength, vigor and courage, while at the same time making violence and death palpable for the young initiates for the first time. It all starts with extensive preparations, which can take several months before the momentous piercing of the nasal septum. These involve procuring feathers and shells, cultivating gardens so as to have enough food on hand, making bark cloaks and fine basketry from orchid stems, and above all constructing the circular men's house (*mukaanga*)

[1] The Baruya inhabit two valleys in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, and belong to the Anga group.

[2] Maurice GODELIER, 1982. *La production des Grands Hommes. Pouvoir et domination masculine chez les Baruya de Nouvelle-Guinée,* Paris, Fayard. More recently, as Lemonnier explains, young initiates are given a plant substitute to ingest.

which will become the place of confinement for the young initiates. Their confinement is reinforced by a high palisade with only two entrances. Only then can the young children's treatment begin by anointing them with ginger to raise their body temperature. They are not allowed to drink water—only sugarcane juice—as this would have the opposite effect of cooling the body. Next comes the dreaded *seguta*, the ritual flogging that takes place at sunrise. The young initiates, dressed in a cloak, run with their godfather under an alley of warriors who whip them with sticks or palm stems across the middle of their backs and thighs. This step, which marks their separation from their mothers, inevitably leads to their symbolic death, which takes place a few hours later when their nasal septum is pierced with a bone awl belonging to a great ancestral warrior. On a few occasions, this symbolic killing has led to real deaths from septicemia, despite the words of protection repeated at each piercing ("Bone of this man, you must not kill this *mukai*," p. 142).

The whole process is enlivened by grunts, shouts, chants, insults and frightening words hurled by the fearless warriors at the children to stop them from revealing what is happening during the ritual, or from telling their mother what they have suffered or seen: "You, you, I'll open your belly and throw your guts and everything else into the water"; "If you talk, I'll kill you!" (p. 147). The ceremony ends with some semblance of comfort. The boys are smeared with clay. They can drink water again. The house is dismantled and the hearth removed. The men can once again approach the women. And, as is so often the case, a feast brings the ritual to a close, or rather opens a new cycle of interdictions that the young initiates must now follow for the rest of their adult lives, in particular behavioral and dietary taboos.

A vast system of transformations

The first 313 pages of the first part of Pierre Lemonnier's book, together with the impressive photographic section intended to help us understand the Muka rituals, do not fully exhaust the extreme complexity of this ceremony. Dozens of ritualized actions follow one another, day after day, in a coherent order, and sometimes with a degree of improvisation.

According to Lemonnier, this wealth of gestures and objects suggests that the Muka has an essential function, which is to materialize the required physical break between the young Mukai ("the one who is beaten") and his mother. It takes an

anointing, a sweating-out and a whipping with nettles to strip (literally) the female impurities from the children's bodies and transform them into true warriors. The Muka is a rebirth, or rather a reconstruction, whose purpose is to erase the outrage of the birth of boys from women's wombs. Being confined and wearing a chrysalis-cloak are ritual gestures modeled on the process of pregnancy, but with no female intervention.

However, the Muka is not merely a vehicle for reproducing the Baruya gender hierarchy. It also serves to assert the irrevocable equality of men among themselves. While distancing himself from women, the young boy enters his future role as a man by adopting several new behaviors, including, in particular, the acceptance of two actions essential to the continuation of all Baruya social life: helping his co-initiates and working for the elders. The accomplished new man-warrior who has bravely withstood the pain of being whipped and having his nose pierced is also a man who has forged an unbreakable solidarity with the other men during his confinement in the circular house. From now on, he will cooperate in any circumstance. He will help the old and the sick, building garden fences and pig pens.

So, why materiality?

The aim of this book is not just to provide a precise, detailed description of the Muka ceremony, even if Lemonnier's writing is sharp and clinical from start to finish, making his description a model of its kind. It is also an attempt to finally take the objects involved in the ritual action seriously. This implies not thinking of the object, as anthropology has too often done, in terms of the signifier attached to it, but first and foremost in terms of the action on the matter that it makes possible. We must confront the matter of these many “resonators”[3] involved in a ritual, as Lemonnier calls them, with the aim of understanding the physical and cognitive effects (including memorization) they produce. Conceiving the objects involved in terms of their basic physical properties and the things they make it possible to do already shows that, in many cases, doing is often just a question of doing (pp. 404-405). Donning a cloak that covers your face and prevents your mother from recognizing you among the other initiates is a physical reality. In this instance, the cloak-object is not a substitute for the

[3] Resonators are ritual objects whose function is to bring together dispersed areas of social reality in the minds of those who make or use them.

words spoken by Baruya warriors in the form of prohibitions or threats. Rather, this object is required throughout the ritual and enables a direct action to be taken on the boys' bodies. As Lemonnier points out, words and lyrics accompany the ritual process, but what takes precedence over these spoken words are material actions. The objects used always do something specific in social relations, things that words alone cannot do.

For Lemonnier, any serious consideration of materiality also requires taking an interest in the various basic physical actions. This longstanding anthropological idea, professed by André Leroi-Gourhan, André-Georges Haudricourt and François Sigaut, is all the more important to document as it enables us to measure the role of technical changes, to ascertain what constitutes an innovation for the Baruya, and to better understand the impact, ultimately minimal, of the exchanges and contacts that take place between this marginal population and our modern world.

Lemonnier easily convinces us of the importance of this materialist shift. We can only regret, as he does, that so few ethnologists still take the trouble to describe systematically and comparatively the ways in which members of a community act on matter.[4]

First published in laviedesidees.fr, December 4th, 2023.

Translated by Susannah Dale with the support of Cairn.info and published in booksandideas.net, February 20, 2025

[4] A point he discussed in *Mundane Objects, Materiality and Non-Verbal Communication,* Walnut Creek, Left Coast Press, 2012, Critical Cultural Heritage Series, 205 pp. See the review published in La Vie des Idées.