

## S/A 4074 Ritual and Ceremony

### Lecture 22: Rituals of the Family

Today we will look at rituals of the family. Despite the many developments in ritual studies in recent decades, family rituals have been paid relatively little attention. Yet ritual practice should be of considerable interest. The fuzzy boundary between work and family is often ritually manipulated. Rituals of the modern family are marked by ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction. Domestic rites are in principle seen as profoundly authentic and soothingly distinct from the commodified marketplace, a haven from a heartless world, yet are often the historical product of conscious corporate marketing drives or government policy. Family rituals often manifestly celebrate the immortal unity and unbreakable interdependence of the family group, yet may subtly prepare younger family members for separation and for the ultimate dispersion of the nuclear family unit. Conversely, rites that in principle celebrate the newly recognized autonomy of a given person ("a wedding is the bride's day") may in practice foreground the extensive social and psychological control wielded by elders or society over the actor and others of her generation (hence the final scene of *The Graduate*, where fleeing the wedding was seen as revolutionary).

The many puzzling and paradoxical features of ritual are closely associated with the phenomenon of performativity, through which certain kinds of linguistic and non-linguistic acts may simultaneously define, enable, dramatize, constitute and transform a given state of affairs. When performed by legitimate ritual specialists or ritual actors in appropriate contexts, statements such as "I solemnly swear," "I christen thee", "Today I am a man," or "I now pronounce you husband and wife" function as "performative utterances," experienced as extraordinarily binding and efficacious. Yet the actual formal semantic meaning or social implications of such utterances are often far from clear, especially in our largely secularized culture. Clearly, in modern American society a 13 year old Jewish male or female is not really considered to be an adult just because he or she says so at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, yet most Jews would find a ceremony without such a performative utterance to be sadly lacking; the utterance might in a strict sense be counterfactual, yet it evokes and in some complex fashion projectively helps constitute an eventual status of adult maturity. A bride could fail to state, "I do" (due to nervousness or laryngitis), or (as often happens) a Jewish groom might fail to break the glass, yet the wedding might nonetheless be broadly considered to have "really worked." A family singing "We gather together to ask the Lord's blessings" at Thanksgiving might be said by a foreign anthropologist to be engaged in a performative ritual utterance, in effect constituting themselves as a group seeking a blessing by stating that they were doing so, but family members, if asked, might insist that they were simply singing a nice song. Where, then, precisely does performativity lie, in commonly held ideas about the rites, in specific acts performed at these rites, or in less tangible ritual frames and contexts, which could not exist without those ideas and acts?

The staying power of bourgeois domestic rituals, which emerged during the late Victorian era, is further evidence that the "meaning" of ritual action cannot be reduced to a manifest semantic or logical message. Many family rites are strikingly archaic, evoking in wording or gesture states of affair that are manifestly at odds with contemporary blended families and life

courses, commonly held principles of gender and generational equality, individual autonomy and animal rights. Yet vegans hold Thanksgiving dinners; sexually liberated and successful career women may wish to wear white at their weddings. Innovations abound, from tofu turkeys to gay commitment ceremonies, yet the underlying ritual forms remain surprisingly robust. A review of the range of family ritual in modern North America casts some light on this apparent puzzle.

### **American Paradoxes: Law and Blood, Autonomy and Integration**

If ritual is a privileged domain through which underlying cultural paradoxes are dramatized and at least partially resolved, American family rituals would seem to be closely bound up in several North American cultural conundrums, including the relative status of relations through "law" and "blood" and the relative claims of dependence and independence:

**(a) Blood and Law.** Schneider (1980) distinguishes between two principles of relatedness in normative American kinship, relations by law (through marriage) and relations through blood (the parent-child or filial bond). This distinction gives rise to the two complementary forms of love in American culture, romantic or erotic love (typified by the conjugal bond) and filial love. The two kinds of love must in principle be kept carefully separate (the incest taboo) but are mutually constitutive, each implying the other. They are mediated, Schneider argues, through the complex core symbol of heterosexual sexual intercourse, through which romantic love (codified in law) is in effect translated into blood-based love through birth and conception. Building on Schneider, we may note that the deep prohibition on mixing these two kinds of love is evidenced in the major groupings of American family rituals. Love through marriage (or through erotic, romantic attraction) is celebrated in weddings, Valentine's Day, proms, and anniversaries. Love through common blood is emphasized in Mother's Day and Father's Day, baby showers, the bris (Jewish circumcision), christenings, birthdays, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and family reunions as well as less elaborate ritual acts such as bedtime story-reading or bedtime prayers. The two most important family rites of the annual calendar, Christmas and Thanksgiving, tend to privilege love based on common blood, although they also place considerable attention upon conjugal (affinal) links. Funerals in a formal sense privilege the marriage bond (the widow or widower is usually the "principal mourner") but blood relations are of course also of paramount importance. Considerable tension can result at these rites as varied claims of loyalty are negotiated and contested. Weddings in particular, which mediate between links by blood and by law, are often especially fraught.

**(b) Autonomy and Commitment.** American family rites may also be conceived of in terms of a related deep cultural tension between ideals of dependence and autonomy, between integration and individuation. In contrast to virtually all other human kinship and descent systems, middle class American families self-destruct in a periodic fashion; from an early age, parents train their children for autonomy, having them sleep alone, go to sleepover parties and summer camp, usually go away to college and eventually form a new family unit through a marriage or long-term romantic bond. While celebrating independence and individuation, many family members often long to recapture the intimate bonds (real or imagined) of the early nuclear family. Family rituals at times foreground these ambivalent responses to autonomy and offer potential solution to these challenges. They may allow for "identity updating," allowing persons to experience their own maturing selfhood in a coherent fashion within clearly sign-posted arenas; alternately, these performances may bring to the fore frustrations and dashed expectations.

In a developmental sense, the tension between autonomy and dependence would seem to be present in young children's symbolic enactments. Transitional objects, such as beloved

blankets or dolls, help mediate separation anxiety associated with weaning and growing knowledge of the wider world. Such play elements are heavily infused with the persona of the primary caregiver (for psychoanalytic object relations theorists, they substitute for the breast) yet they enable the child to engage in willful action upon the world and to develop a sense of separate, discrete identity ("my blanket!" "bad dolly!"). Children often impose a ritual frame on bedtime story-telling and reading, insisting that the caregiver precisely repeat a given narrative sequence, night after night. Yet, while storytelling as a ritual scenario is usually bound up with feelings of secure, repeatable dependence on adult figures, in modern society the content of these beloved narratives often celebrates individual ventures away from home. These texts, ranging from McClosky's *Blueberries for Sal* and Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* to the Harry Potter series and the Chronicles of Narnia-raise enduring questions. Can one truly come home again? Where do my ultimate affiliations lie, with those whom I was born to love or those whom I come to love later? Can longings for individual autonomy and for dependence on others be reconciled?

### **Life Journey and Enduring Cycles: Mediating Person, Family, and Society**

These varied tensions are played out in family rites that mark singular transitions in a person's life ("rites of passage") and regularly repeated rituals ('calendrical rites').

#### **1. Rites of Passage**

Most scholarly discussions of life-stage transition ceremonies ("rites de passage" or "rites of passage") proceed from Victor Turner's (1967) development of Van Gennep's classic (1910) model of the "tripartite" structure of these commonly occurring rituals. Such rites commence with the radical separation of the person or persons being transformed, often marked through special adornment, locale, or comportment. The subject then enters into a special interstitial or intermediate state, in Turner's terms, "betwixt and between" conventional social statuses or categories: he or she is neither student nor graduate, child nor adult, unmarried nor married, layman nor priest. During this "liminal period" the person undergoing ritual transformation is often subject to special prohibitions and precautions; he or she may be apprehended as especially pure, sacred, stigmatized or polluted, and may be subjected to heightened risks. This in-between period is often characterized by paradoxical or dramatic reversals of ordinary behavior; one needs, in effect, to step outside of normal society in order to alter one's social position. In the final stage of re-aggregation, the subject is reintegrated into normal life, usually into a different (often higher ranked) social role than that occupied before the rite. Often basic principles of social life are renewed or celebrated during this concluding stage.

Consider, for example, the traditional middle class wedding, which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A bride is (in principle) initially separated from her fiancé for a period of time, and is herself rendered distinct from her peers through special costume. During the liminal period of the formal wedding service her person is quasi-sacrosanct and hedged about with ceremonial restrictions (as she walks down the aisle she should not chew gum and no one is supposed to shake her hand or chat to her) and she is in a mild state of elevated risk (tripping, dropping the ring, or flubbing her vows would usually be seen as ominous or at least deeply unfortunate). In the final phase, she enters into her new role as "married woman" and is reintegrated into ordinary life (marked, often by changing out her wedding gown into less formal attire and by the relaxation of strict control over her conduct). This tripartite structure is repeated in overlapping and hierarchically nested subcomponents of the rite, such as the first dance at the reception, which re-enacts the formal separation of the new couple from their natal family and

peers (they should first dance alone) and then their reintegration into the community (finally, everyone should dance with them).

Like many rites of passage, weddings simultaneously dramatize, repress and seek to redress underlying social tensions associated with life stage transitions. The inevitable tensions between the couple's loyalty to their natal families (the families of orientation) and to the new family that the union is expected to forge (the family of procreation) are alluded to in multiple moments, including the rehearsal dinner, the handover at the altar of the bride from her father to the groom, the dance between the father and his daughter-bride, the humorous and often racy or ambiguous toasts at the reception, and the expectation that the bride and groom will visit the various tables of wedding guests from both sides of the family.

These multilayered and ambiguous effects are accomplished through the creative use of what Turner terms the "polyvocality" of ritual symbols, the capacity of a given ritual object or act to evoke different meanings or associations at various levels of experience. Thus, at one level the wedding cake evokes the sweetness and pleasure of conjugal unity, as emphasized in the (quasi-erotic) moment when the bride and groom feed one another, as well as the resplendent and unique status of the couple, as often signified by small dolls of the couple atop the wedding cake. The cake may also be said to signify the collective force of the assembled guests, who are all afterwards expected to eat a piece of the cake, in effect sealing through a shared act of commensality their united witnessing of the marriage. The cake also seems to carry associations with fecundity; not only should it be large and round, but a piece should be saved to be consumed one year after the wedding, the idealized moment when a newborn baby is expected. In turn, the bouquet carried by the bride down the aisle also initially has extensive associations with her hoped-for fertility (a single flower, after all, would usually seem as inappropriate as a single handful of rice). Yet when the bride tosses the bouquet a different set of meanings comes to the fore: she is not discarding hopes of fertility but is rather shedding her liminal state as wife-to-be and dramatizing her new married state through a playful (but ultimately serious) contrast with her unmarried former peers. In turn, the many handfuls of rice thrown by the wedding party's members simultaneously re-emphasize their collective commitment to recognizing the marriage and evoke the union's hoped-for fecundity; appropriately, this action both marks the formal end of the rite and signals the commencement of a new liminal period, the honeymoon, during which the couple is traditionally supposed to initiate the sexual union that will lead to conception and birth.

In other rites, all participants are subject to this tripartite structure of transition, which may be interlaced in complex fashions. Thus in a funeral, mourners are separated out of ordinary life, and enter into an ambiguous interstitial space and time (they wear special somber clothes, adopt a solemn demeanor, and may even be expected to kiss the corpse) and, then, in the final stage, are reintegrated into ordinary life, often through actions, such as food and lively conversation at a reception, that emphasize the renewal of life. Simultaneously the dead person may be thought of as moving from initial separation (through special treatment, including embalming), into the ambiguous liminal status of funeral corpse, to a final state of integration into the domain of the dead (signified through burial or cremation). The ultimate consequence of this double tripartite structure is an achieved marked separation between the categories of life and death; paradoxically, this ritual distance enables subsequent moments of communion between the living and the dead, as in visits to the cemetery. In a similar vein, this schema may

be applied to analyzing birthing and aging, respectively, as multilayered American rites of passage.

The enormous ideological and emotional power of such rites of passage, which can provide such deeply meaningful frameworks through the life cycle, is evidenced by the ever-increasing popularity of innovative life-transition rites, ranging from gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies to Afrocentric coming of age ceremonies. Indeed, one might argue that given the declining formal economic rationale for the nuclear family, the family is pre-eminently a ritual order in modern American society; a "family" could increasingly be defined as a group of people who practice a set of domestic rituals, integrating them both into intimate units and into larger structures of belonging across divides of space and time.

Educational rites, which subtly mediate between the symbolic practices of the internal family and the wider public sector, play important, ambiguous functions in the developmental cycles of middle class families. School theatricals, concerts, dances, and sport events are staged as dramas of symbolic detachment, celebrating a student's increasing autonomy from family-bound roles and integration into horizontal peer groups; yet they often occasion emotionally-laden family gatherings, in which family members are cast in the roles of "supporters" or "audience members" (or in the cases of proms, as "chaperones.") Multiple, at times discordant planes of experience are also evident in graduation and commencement exercises, which in addition to marking passages in the life of individual students and of student cohorts, help constitute shifting phases in the life of the graduate's family, at times signaling the coming of the "empty nest" for parents, or marking significant socioeconomic upward mobility. While high school and college graduation ceremonies at one level signal a graduate's fitness for entry into the labor force (and in that sense help mediate detachment from one's natal family and the process of eventually founding one's own family), they also often celebrate the authority of the academy and the contemplative life, and in that sense may signal enduring anxiety over the capacity of the "the real world" or marketplace to provide ultimate meaning in life. Individual and family trajectories are both interlaced and juxtaposed in class reunions and homecoming games, which are often characterized by intermingled nostalgic elegies for lost innocence, celebrations of material success and family vitality, and anxiety over failed opportunities.

## **2. Repeated or Calendrical Family Rites**

The nostalgic features of modern American domestic rituals are especially evident in our common calendrical rituals; as our society has become increasingly industrialized and urbanized, we place more and more emphasis on rites grounded in an agrarian past, including the harvest festival (Thanksgiving), the midwinter rite of sun return (Christmas, Kwanza and Hanukah) and spring fertility festivals (Easter and Passover).

Christmas occupies pride of place in American private and public ritual life, consistent with the fundamental American cult of the pure child and our shared faith in perpetual renewal through novelty, industry, and material goods. Although commentators dutifully denounce the "commercialization" of Christmas as contrary to the day's spiritual and religious principles, it is manifestly a festival of mass commodity consumption, arguably the most important context through which the domestic domain is integrated into the broader public sphere. Preparatory mini-pilgrimages to department store or shopping mall Santas are de rigeur in many families. A Christmas morning featuring only homemade toys would hardly count as Christmas; enormous emphasis is placed on obtaining fashionable and expensive industrially manufactured gifts, especially those celebrated in the mass media. The common myth that Santa Claus, and not the

parents, miraculously places the gifts under the Christmas tree could be interpreted as poetically evoking the nearly magical status of the commodity at the symbolic heart of the American family system. The gifts, after all, really do come from somewhere else (if not the North Pole) and through interacting with the outer world of the marketplace the parents have translated mere money into expressions of love, the foundation of the family unit. The polyvalent symbol of the wrapped Christmas present effectively conflates two kinds of parental love—the outer colored wrapping evokes nurturing affection, classically associated with maternal love and aesthetics, while the material value of the store-bought gift within the wrapping evokes the parents' monetary contributions, classically associated with the wage-earning father. Significantly, on Christmas morning, all these gifts, evoking the multiple relationships (parent-parent, parent-child, sibling-sibling) that constitute the nuclear family unit, are assembled around a singular ritual object, the Christmas Tree. There should be only one tree per family, topped by one single star, but the tree itself should have been previously decorated through the collaborative work of the entire family, using objects that often evoke previous Christmas celebrations and key persons and events in family history. The idealized tableau of Christmas morning, of children and parents delightedly opening gifts under the tree, is thus an exemplary symbolic model of the American family system, composed of close relatives bound together as a single unit by exchanging tokens of love derived from the wider market-driven culture.

Bellah (1970) similarly approaches Thanksgiving as an integrative rite, binding discrete families into the national "civic religion" of shared sacrifice and imputed grace. The turkey might in this light be conceived of as symbolizing both the solidarity of the family (hence the common prohibition on cutting the turkey before all members and branches of the family have assembled at the table!) and the unity of the nation. In partaking of a piece of the turkey (partly consecrated by a common prayer or murmured words of thanks) family members are thus more intimately bound to one another and to their fellow citizens—symbolically integrated into the "imagined community" of the nation. In some families, this integration is hierarchically ordered; all "children," including unmarried persons of any age, are confined to the "children's table."

In contrast, the controversial holiday of Halloween celebrates the emergence of children's autonomy and individuation over their normative, vertical integration into the social collectivity. In spite (or perhaps because of) parental and mass media anxiety over child abduction and rumors of poisoned candy, children avidly campaign for trick-or-treating, a practice that dates only to the 1930s. Costumed trick-or-treating could be interpreted as a kind of "deep play," a symbolic rehearsal of adolescence and adulthood, as children try on new roles and identities (in the form of masks and costumes, often associated with miraculous powers) and venture out into the wider world, especially into the normally prohibited domains of other households—precisely the kind of sites they will come to know once they leave the nest of their parents' homes. In contrast to the integrative communion meals of Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter, Halloween is centered on a kind of anti-meal, candy, which is not consumed in a collective context. As in classic carnival or saturnalia, the world is "turned upside down" during Halloween. Children shout out commands to adults, venture out into the darkness, violate social conventions of decorum, flirt with the grotesque by over-eating and hanging toilet paper, and actively seek out frightening experiences. In temporarily taking control of instruments of secrecy, children may be tentatively exploring more pervasive mysteries and secrets of the adult social world. Each year, the complex dance of collaboration and conflict between parents and children over the precise nature of Halloween activities dramatizes in microcosm parents and children's deeper ambivalence over the maturation process: how much dependence or independence is desirable

and tolerable? At the same time, Halloween exemplifies the child's growing horizontal integration into a socializing peer group, within which solidarity will be increasingly established (especially in adolescence) through carefully calibrated exercises in common risk-taking.

Family reunions, in which scores or hundreds of persons claiming descent from a common ancestor gather for the primary purpose of gathering, appear to be a North American innovation. They emerged soon after the Civil War, evidently stimulated by the traumas of war, migration and industrialization and were facilitated by new transportation networks and nostalgic longing for a common agrarian past. They gained broad popular recognition around 1900, and have undergone a boon since the 1970s closely associated with the growing popular interest in genealogy and family history. They may occur sporadically, but usually take place on a regular basis, annually, bi-annually or every decade or so. Like Thanksgiving, family reunions have broad integrative functions and have been actively promoted as patriotic by the national government; in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, President Johnson officially urged all Americans to hold family reunions in support of national unity. These integrative functions at times are predicated on structural exclusion; some white family reunions, for instance, have long functioned as racial boundary-maintaining mechanisms, as evidenced by recent struggles over the inclusion of the African American descendants of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings in the Jefferson family reunion and in the associated family cemetery.

Southern family rituals initially dramatized the hoped for reunion of family members in heaven. Family reunions to this day often feature memorials to deceased relatives and may coincide with collective cleanings of cemetery gravesites. It is proposed that family reunions and revivals are Protestant inversions of medieval Catholic pilgrimage. Rather than leaving the village and the family to journey across a sacralized landscape towards a distant site associated with the wider universe, these modern pilgrims temporarily abandon the wide world of the market and rationalist self-realization to return to the idealized domain of family, often situated in an agrarian or pastoral setting (such as a farm or park). Such rites momentarily deny or seek to overcome the entropic and dispersive structure of the American nuclear family system, which constantly fragments older nuclear units and impels the creation of new units through marriage and romantic bonds. During the weekend or week of the reunion or revival, multigenerational family bonds are nurtured and the principle of cognatic descent (as opposed to links through marriage) is celebrated. The family reunion celebrates love through consanguinity (common blood) in contrast, for example, to the wedding's emphasis on romantic love and legal bonds.

It is often asserted that about half of all American family reunions are held by African American families. These performances, at times tied to church homecomings, often celebrate family success in the face of great historical odds, and sometimes allude to remembered post-emancipation reunions of family members long separated by slavery.

Like family reunions, family vacations often are structured as nostalgic, regenerative pilgrimages back to natural, pastoral or archaic sites that function as seemingly authentic "homes" for transient and displaced middle class persons. In some cases, vacationers travel to "staged symbolic communities," such as Colonial Williamsburg or Disneyworld, in which idealized relations of gender, kinship, home and labor are presented.

In contrast to reunions, most family vacations emphasize the nuclear family unit. For dual-income households with children, family vacations often require the complex coordination of schedules, with consequent high pressure on participants for achieving "quality time" within

strict parameters (often confined within an automobile). Vacations may help solidify the natal nuclear family or aid in their articulation with broader kin networks. Nuclear families often construct narrative chronologies and mythic histories around remembered vacations, at times aided by photographs and other souvenirs. Vacations may also occasion the attempted integration of new blended families, at times with memorable positive or negative results.

### **Cults of the Image: Photography and Television**

Photography is of central importance in the ritual life of American families. Most family rites and gatherings (with the striking exception of funerals) are photographed by amateur family members. Weddings are routinely photographed and video taped by professionals. Families often produce tangible icons of their own private history in wedding and other photographic albums, which simultaneously incorporate new persons into the cohesive "familial gaze" while excluding others. Showing these images to a new romantic partner, especially in the presence of parents or other kin, often signals a serious intent to include the outsider in the family's inner emotional life (and, presumably, in the family's future photographic albums).

Photography often plays key functions in mediating relations between the living and the dead. Framed photographs of present and absent kin are usually considered vital to making a house a home. At family reunions, which function as overarching symbolic homes for multiple family groups, old photographs of ancestors may be prominently displayed on walls or in reunion books, alongside newer photos of the living. The standard reunion practice of taking a posed photograph of the assembly similarly produces a symbolic bridge between past and present, emphasizing lines of continuity between the eldest and youngest family members and between past, present and future. Memorial photographs are often left near the sites of accidents or disasters (most notably for the victims of September 11, 2001); these small shrines to the lost seem to play important roles in mediating between private family grief and the wider public sphere.

The consequences of television and other electronic media (such as videos, computer games, and the internet) for family ritual are still not well understood. Critics often decry the corrosive effects of television and PlayStation, which are assumed to separate family members and destroy family solidarity. The proliferation of television sets within middle class households, it is often said, decreases the frequency of shared watching and produces families of virtual strangers. Yet, a half-century of mass television viewing has hardly spelled the end of family rituals; indeed, television and the annual ritual calendar are inextricably intertwined. What would Halloween be without the Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown special, Thanksgiving without the Macy's parade and football games on the tube, Christmas without repeated broadcasts of *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street*, or New Year's Eve without the televised Times Square festivities? Television and film are enormously powerful models for family ritual performance, and have helped standardized ritual scripts for holidays, weddings, and other major ceremonies across the nation (and increasingly, across the globe). In many contexts the Internet actively promotes face-to-face ritual performances. Wedding webpages are ubiquitous. Numerous websites advise parents on how to hold birthday parties and holiday celebrations. Internet sites and email listservs are vital for modern genealogical pursuits and are deployed to coordinate thousands of non-virtual family reunions each year.

### **Just Desserts: Food Rites**

Micro-rituals of food preparation, exchange, and consumption are also embedded in



virtually all family rites, ranging from the Thanksgiving turkey, the Christmas roast, birthday cakes, Halloween candy and Valentines' Day chocolates to wedding banquets, Easter egg hunts, Mother's Day breakfasts-in-bed and picnics at family reunions and on the 4th of July. Family gatherings such as revivals often occasion a retrogressive return to traditional gender roles in food preparation. Distinctive family cultures, often with an ethnic or regional flair, are reproduced through the repeated presentation of familiar dishes, often passed from senior to junior female relatives in "kinwork."

In virtually all human cultures, the extensive ritualization of food preparation, storage, exchange, and consumption has profound sociological implications. Food sharing ("commensality") may reinforce social bonds. The ritual of the common meal remains an idealized expression of family solidarity in our society, typified in Norman Rockwell's famous Four Freedom's Thanksgiving painting. Yet food gifts may also overtly or subtly signal or help constitute social distinctions. Consider, for example, the profound contrast between offering food from one's plate at a restaurant to a friend or relative at the table and giving the same food in a doggy-bag to a hungry homeless person on the street; the former is usually an act of solidarity and affection, the latter expresses social distance and stratification. The choice of drinks and food presentation styles, especially at holiday meals, may signal important social class distinctions, cementing alliances across newly forged families or laying the ground for subsequent resentment and feuds.

Once the idealized symbolic fulcrum of domestic life, the dining table in an era of fast food is often relegated to archaic status. But the refrigerator, in which are stored the family's common perishables, remains an important center of family social experience, often decorated with children's art work and all-important family calendars.

As evoked in films from *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) to *Annie Hall* (1977) the ritual arena of the family meal is well suited to dramatizing ambiguous structural relations between natal families and actual or potential in-marrying outsiders. A mother-in-law teaching her daughter-in-law a beloved family recipe may be simultaneously expressing affection as well as seeking to encompass and control her. A father-in-law and son-in-law barbecuing together at a Memorial Day picnic may be both bonding and competing. A heterosexual businessman taking his mother and her lesbian partner out to an expensive restaurant dinner on the couple's anniversary may be both flaunting his wealth and striving for reconciliation. Out of such complex ritual transactions - large and small, antagonistic and collaborative, traditional and innovative - are families made.

### **Implications for Practice and Research**

Although in modern colloquial usage ritual tends to be classified as superficial or insubstantial ("a mere ritual") ritual action remains a foundational element of contemporary social life. In some regards, the modern American middle class family might be regarded as primarily a ritual order, a partially-enclosed dramatic arena in which highly meaningful and emotionally-laden symbolic actions are performed, modified, and argued over. Domestic ritual practices may be experienced at times as liberatory and at times as oppressive, yet the multilayered and multichanneled dimensions of ritual, through which contradictory desires and motifs are dramatized and at least partially redressed, are invariably central to the maintenance and reproduction of family units. A family without ritual would be so deeply impoverished as to scarcely be considered a "family" at all.

We surely need a richer understanding of ritual practices along the dynamic frontier between family and work, as formal distinctions between these ostensibly separate domains are increasingly blurred in practice. At one level, a standardized speech act, such as "Hi Honey, I'm home!" marks return into family space and family time, yet such utterances do not preclude immediately setting up the laptop in the kitchen and logging on to check work-related email. Under what circumstances do (and should) families restrict work related activities and virtual communication during symbolically-laden joint family activities? Do beepers and mobile phones ever go unanswered during dinnertime or family outings? How often are bedtime story sessions curtailed by parents' need to do late night work-related activities at home? How and when are rituals such as weddings and funerals deployed to enhance the social capital of their organizers in work and financial domains, through status displays and networking? In turn, when do family rites occasion profound debate, critical self-examination, or collective reflection over career goals, work-family balance, and the ultimate significance of material success in life?

In particular, further research is needed on the efficacy and effectiveness of ritual innovation within families and at the frontiers of domestic, work and public spheres. Much of the power of ritual is typically assumed to lie in its conventional and received qualities, handed down from time immemorial, or at least from parents or grandparents. Yet family rituals are highly susceptible to creative transformation, from marketers, popular and mass culture, and individual inventiveness. Which structural features of ritual tend to remain invariant, and which ones tend to be modified or eliminated? The complex dynamics of continuity and innovation in weddings and funerals, in particular, call for careful comparative examination. The recent proliferation of family reunions and popular genealogy also suggests avenues for historical and ethnographic work: how are extended kin networks and nuclear family units articulated and differentiated during ritual and non-ritual periods of time?

Although domestic ceremonials are usually conceived of as autonomous and private, family rituals have long been subject to subtle and not-so-subtle governmental surveillance, policy and manipulation. Thanksgiving, for example, was standardized during the Civil War as a rite of pro-Union solidarity, and the modern image of the holiday was largely fixed through the famous Norman Rockwell "Freedom from Want" war bond poster during the Second World War. As noted, President Johnson actively promoted family reunions during the 1960s to mobilize patriotic support for the Vietnam War. The lighting of the White House Christmas tree has long functioned to integrate individual families into the idealized extended national "family." National political and business leaders urge extensive commodity consumption during the period from Halloween to Christmas as a veritable patriotic duty. Halloween perennially catalyzes municipal and police campaigns for sanitized "alternatives" to trick or treat, often in the form of supervised neighborhood festivals. We need a better historical understanding of state intervention in practices of family ritual and in the parallel development of idealized images of family togetherness.

In turn, it would be helpful to study the ways in which innovative family ritual activities function as experimental staging grounds for new conceptions of sociality, community, and collectivity. Does Kwanzaa's emphasis on social responsibility, for example, translate into increased participation in struggles for social justice? Has the growth of gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies (now reported in the New York Times society pages) directly contributed to wider tolerance for alternate forms of sexuality and sexual orientation? Is ritual, in other words, not simply the surface manifestation of social structure but in some instances

constitutive of social and cultural transformation?