Comparative Studies in Society and History (2025), 1–26
doi:10.1017/S0010417525000076

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ritual and the Enemy Body: A New Approach to Modern Atrocity

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Abstract

The concept of ritual has been all too loosely applied to violence and atrocity with assumptions of repetitiveness, mythic symbolism, and religious overtones. This paper examines a selection of modern cases of atrocity for specific ritual elements: attention to body and spaces as frames for meaning; a prescripted mode of action; and performative enaction of a new millennial or transgressive order. Focal cases include American lynching (nineteenth–twentieth centuries) and militia atrocities in Sierra Leone and Liberia (1990s), while examples of gendered atrocity in ritualized forms (perpetrated by Bosnian Serbs and the Islamic State) are broached in the conclusion. Ritualization is not typical to modern atrocities but allows perpetrating groups to experience meaningfulness in the violent acts they assemble, often in situations of crisis.

Keywords: ritual; ritualization; violence; repertoires of violence; performance; procession; transgression; spectacle; body; affordance; lynching; African militias

Introduction

This article has two aims: first, to identify and explore *ritualized* forms of atrocity in the modern world as a way of understanding the construction of meaning through violence; and second, to push the category and concept of "ritual" comparatively into situations of extreme violence in order to redefine where ritualization and ritual efficacy can be found in the midst of complex (and horrific) social performances.

Can atrocities in fact *be* rituals or ritualistic? When and how would we classify them as such? Would they follow a quasi-"sacrificial" structure, invoking deeper myths of a prevailing religious tradition? Should they communicate or signify particular messages about power? Should they be intrinsically repetitive, following a recognized script? Or are there elements in their performance—not so much the content of the spectacle or its goal but its sense of prescription—that establish perpetrators in a ritual mode?

Much, of course, has to do with how we define ritual itself and how we imagine (and have imagined) violence as an expression of ritual. Since the work of Catherine Bell, scholars of religion have become increasingly accustomed to thinking of ritual as a discursive concept, not just a classification for a type of human action (Bell 1992; 1997).

In the third part of this essay I will explore some definitional aspects of ritual that can help make sense of modern atrocities. The goal here will be to demonstrate and test the category of ritual with an area of social action quite far from the ceremonial activities to which ritual is typically applied. But it is also important to understand how the term's discursive power has historically led to fantasies of the Other (the presumptive perpetrator of ritual violence) as accustomed to ecstatic forms of bestial savagery or, conversely, cold and manipulative forms of stylized ceremony. The latter framed Protestant caricatures of Catholic practice that, at the time of the Reformation and ever since, led to popular fears of violent impulses behind the walls of conspiracy. The former, much more ancient, framed the Other (whether Bacchae, Jews, savage tribesmen, or "cultists") as culturally prone to cannibalistic blood-orgies. Both fantasies of the Other's danger to "us" have revolved around an incipient predatory violence expressed in the Other's religious ceremonies, which come to be labelled "ritual crime" or "ritual murder" or "ritual abuse" in news reports and investigations. This ritual danger suggests conspiracy and "cult-threat" to a worried public. In these cases, ritual violence offers a scandalous mystery we want to unveil, to be appalled by its horrors. It outrages but also excites us (Frankfurter 2001; 2006).

It is in that sense that we must be alert to that discursive—evaluative—aspect of discerning ritual in violent acts. When are we labeling the ethnic Other's violence as ritual because the perpetrators seem "primitive"? When do we use ritual as a euphemism for what is incomprehensible, savage—only explicable by reference to acts of mindless repetition?

This article looks at incidences and forms of historically credible violence that both invite a critical, heuristic analysis as ritual *and* inform comparatively the definition of ritual itself. The incidents that I cover are not conceived in any way by the perpetrators as ceremonies, so the application of the category becomes an experiment in the circumscription and adjustment of ritual as a type of analysis.

In the following sections I will explain my use of ritual as a category of analysis applicable to extreme violence—atrocities, a term I shall explain—and then turn to case studies that exemplify and warrant the three dimensions of ritual that I will outline in the next section.

Conceptualizing and Recognizing Ritual in Acts of Atrocity

Instead of looking for repetitive action or some underlying mythic program, this paper will use three models of ritual: attention to bodies and spaces as sites of transformation; the sense of prescriptedness that distinguishes ritualized from mundane (if violent) acts; and a performative efficacy that brings about an alternative world through enaction. These models allow ritual to operate within itself, "in its own right" (Handelman 2005), rather than as a means of cultural representation. They are also features that comprehend the often spontaneous acts of violence that seem to arise without precedent or archetype yet express a "scriptedness" in their sense of requirement.

Attention to Bodily Affordances and Spaces

A concept of ritual as a delimitation of spaces, to highlight action and transformation within those spaces, derives from Jonathan Z. Smith (drawn from Mary Douglas):

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"Ritual is first and foremost a mode of paying attention. It is a process of marking interest … [And] the role of place [is] a fundamental component of ritual; place directs attention (1987: 103; compare Douglas 1966: 64). In subsequent essays Smith illustrated this "spatial attention" model of ritual both with urban topography and with strategies of miniaturization (1987; 1995). But I want to steer this notion of circumscribing spaces of attention to the body itself and its "affordances" (to borrow a term from the archaeology of things): its extremities, protrusions, orifices; points of visibility, of pain or pleasure. Just as "things … offer their properties and ready-to-actness in a direct and unmediated way" (Olsen 2010: 146–47), to which people can respond, take hold, or use, so body parts impinge themselves upon people and become sites for ceremonial adjustment, scarification, visual appeal, and social definition. Arnold van Gennep once noted that "the body [through history] has been treated like a simple piece of wood," as "each [culture] has cut and trimmed [bodies] to suit" its interests (1960: 72). Those bodily affordances—hands, arms, nose, eyes, anus, head, mouth, and so on—differ not only in their "adjustability" but in their sensations of pain, their expression of sexuality, and the degree of disability or public disgust caused by their change or removal (hands or eyes versus heads, for example). Thus at the broadest social level and in the most spontaneous acts of ritualized aggression the body is imagined as a site for marking.

Thinking about the body as the circumscribed site of meaningful action—or a site whose designation renders action meaningful—allows us to link the ceremonial life-cycle "adjustments" that Van Gennep observed, like circumcision and scarification, with treatments deployed as part of a strategy of defilement or neutralization (Ballentine 2016: 13–17). The body's affordances, we might say, provide contexts for developing and expressing symbolic meaning (see also Douglas 1996: 172–73). To the *perpetrator* the eyes, the genitalia, the mouth of the enemy body seem to demand interactive treatment. Like the bodily adjustments in the rite of passage, techniques of violence often carry the goal of *transforming* the body of the enemy. But *unlike* the rite of passage the result of mutilation is the victim's excision from the community, debilitated and dehumanized: s/he suffers or dies no longer an individual but a type, a specimen (See Malkki 1995: 92–93; Feldman 1991: 64).

Some of the most gruesome atrocities have involved militias' attention to the bodily affordances of victims as staged components of their repertoires of violence. Rather than invented on the spot, these components may have been appropriated and reinvented from enemy practices or from familiar tradition, from prevailing media, or simply from what the body itself offered. Sierra Leone militias' chopping off of civilians' arms in the 1990s and U.S. mobs' lynching of their Black victims both responded (apparently spontaneously) to bodily affordances as well as (in the American cases) to a culture of collecting lynching "relics." Similar procedures took place in eighteenth-century French judicial torture and execution, which Michel Foucault analyzed both in terms of attention to the body as tableau and of the public spectacle involved in the body thus treated. Judicial torture served as "an element in the liturgy of punishment":

> It must mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy, even if its function is to 'purge' the crime, torture does not reconcile; it traces around or, rather, on the very body of the condemned man signs that must not be effaced; … And, from the point of view of the law that imposes it, public torture and

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> execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph. The very excess of the violence employed is one of the elements of its glory…. Hence no doubt those tortures that take place even after death: corpses burnt, ashes thrown to the winds, bodies dragged on hurdles and exhibited at roadside (1995: 34).

Can we see ritual in such acts? Certainly they are staged, collective acts, repeated on many people, involving (or developing) repertoires of violent action. But even more, by circumscribing the body as the site of meaningful, public action (rather than a tree, or shrine, or meal), perpetrators articulate issues of crisis, power, and ideology. These concerns are worked out through the space and the affordances of the enemy body. In stressing affordances I am laying emphasis on the *materiality* of that enemy body—that it suffers pain, can survive temporarily after amputations and excisions, can bleed and burn; that knives and bullets have specific effects on it. It is both a symbol and a living material *medium* through which the perpetrators work. It is in designating the space of that body and imbuing its affordances with the capacity to mediate transformation vital to the mob or militia that "atrocity" becomes ritual.

Here I want to expand this model from the enemy body *as* space or palette, to the body *in* space—its treatment enacted across, and in dialectic with, specific territory. As I will show in the case of American lynching, the abusive transformation of Black bodies typically extended from the bodies themselves across the landscape, culminating on a particular lamp-post, bridge, or burning site. This "territorial" feature of ritual obliteration is particularly exemplified in an event that took place in 1941 Jedwabne, Poland, where townsfolk staged a procession of Jews from the village to the barn where they would be collectively incinerated:

> A group of Jews was brought to the little square to take down Lenin's statue. When the Jews broke the statue, they were told to put its various pieces on some boards and carry them around, and the rabbi was told to walk in front with his hat on a stick, and all had to sing, 'The war is because of us, the war is for us.' While carrying the statue all the Jews were chased toward the barn [on the outskirts of town], and the barn was doused with gasoline and lit, and in this manner fifteen hundred Jewish people perished (Gross 2001: 98).

Despite some familiar elements (and a goal that Nazis would soon repeat with much less theatre), this procession was a spontaneous bricolage of meaningful routes and practices. The procession to the barn drew on liturgical and political demonstrations, but it also used a traditional agricultural route and specific, parodic accoutrements meant to articulate collective difference, departure, and even the false agency of the victims. The route-spaces framed the bodies as separate, Other, and departing, while the bodies framed the route-spaces as effectively purging the community of Jews. "Ritual" here lies not in the imitation of liturgy but in the Jedwabne villagers' collective attention to Jewish bodies and the spaces through which they are forced to pass.

But in its very historical uniqueness the Jedwabne procession also illustrates one of the challenges posed by this "bodies/spaces" model of ritual. That is, even in their most pseudo-ceremonial forms, such treatments of enemy bodies are rarely repeated

with the sort of assiduousness we associate with the category ritual: for example, as Roy Rappaport defines it, "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers" (1999: 24). If we cannot describe these horrific treatments of bodies as random (given their performative, staged, and communicative features), neither can we describe them as self-conscious reenactments of established scripts or liturgies. They are at most bricolages and at least responses to the space and affordances of the enemy body itself.

Ritualized Action and the Sense of Prescription

The acts in which I am interested are *experiments* in effective performance using enemy bodies. Even with the thousands of Black men and women lynched between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, the indisputable patterns hardly amount to an established ceremony. In every case local mobs, in local territories, sought particular experiences of crisis-resolution through different efforts at abusing the victims. As Anton Blok noted, "much more is at stake than the physical elimination of opponents" in the most extreme purges and liquidations. Hence, "There occurs an increasing 'theatricalization' and an accompanying ritualization and polarization" (Blok 2000: 32). Such treatments of enemy bodies thus call for an approach to ritual that does not fundamentally delineate mental intention from physical gesture, or (social) "thought" from (symbolic) "action," as so many theories of ritual conceptualize it, but rather focuses on actions themselves and how they come to be distinguished as more meaningful or efficacious—how they come to be *ritualized.* Here I draw on Catherine Bell, Caroline Humphrey, and James Laidlaw to understand how a series of practical or mundane acts, from procession to burning or cutting, come to be distinguished as prescribed, even necessary to the context. In this model, ritual features like formality or repetition—or simply a discursive sense that "we must do X and Y to this person" to gain a sense of completion (cf. Aijmer 2000: 3–4)—become, rather, strategies of distinguishing actions as *ritualized*, as qualitatively different from mundane. So also the bodies of those engaged in the ritualization of prosaic acts (i.e., the perpetrators) themselves develop new dispositions and postures to signify that the acts carry ritual force. A ritual "mode" arises from the process of ritualization (Bell 1992: 91–92, 98–108).

Humphrey and Laidlaw argue that what distinguishes ritualized action is not the context in which an act is performed (holy time or space), or a need to symbolize, but the sense of stipulation, even a sense of an archetypal form that is felt to govern its gestures and deployment. Thus in cases of destructive or homicidal violence we might recognize a popular sensibility that *this* idol or *that* heretic's body "must be treated in this particular way"—disfigured, dismembered, burned, buried, or some variation. (Foucault saw this sense of necessary sequence as serving the greater authority of early modern jurisprudence [1995: 33–69].) Humphrey and Laidlaw distinguish the sense of *stipulated form* from strategic, *intentional design*—for example, the need to burn a corpse because it carries disease or to chop off its hands in order to get valuable jewelry. Ritualized acts always involve a shift in register from intentionality to adherence to that sense of archetypal form (even if such a form does not exist as a script; see Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 150, 158).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This ritualization model works particularly well with violent treatments of enemy bodies that occur multiple times in a particular region and period and that *seem* to be scripted according to traditional ceremonial models but that actually differ substantially in action or sequence. American lynching offers a good example. Over almost a century mobs abducted their victims from homes and courthouses, paraded them through local territory, mutilated and killed them, and exhibited the corpses in a rough pattern of sequential acts; and yet this pattern did not amount to a single ritual script. Their variations are too important and show too much strategic independence on the part of the mobs. Still, the patterns, in their diverse forms and strategies, suggest that participants felt that their instrumental actions were somehow prescribed or stipulated—that the sequences belonged not to "intentional" efforts at exterminating the victim but to a sense of archetypal structure: "This is what we *must* do to him."

Atrocity as Performative Declaration

Not all atrocities are aimed at destroying an enemy Other. In the West African cases I address below, the mutilation of civilians and public acts of anthropophagy contributed, I will argue, to a "world turned upside down," where the militias exhibited their capacity to turn the social system into havoc, to inaugurate a dominion of transgression, to render life itself unsafe. The repertoires of violence they drew upon certainly suggested that sense of prescription—of "this is what we must do here"—but toward what: chaos? I argue that such transgressive movements *declare* a dominion of transgression, a world turned upside down, by *performing* transgressive acts, including their peculiar atrocities.

I draw here from Speech Act theory, which comprehends how we often create a situation by declaring it (in such cases as naming something or officially pronouncing two people as married or as members of a special group) (Austin 1975; Searle 1969; Wheelock 1982; Tambiah 1985: 134–37; see also Seligman *et al.* 2008). Speech Act theory has had an important influence on the understanding of ritual. The basic model focuses on the efficacy of declarations spoken in a situation of ritual authority. But could embodied actions—even spontaneous actions—that mimetically *imply* an anticipated reality actually *establish* that reality in the here and now? This extension of speech acts to performative gestures offers another model of ritual action applicable to a range of situations (see Farneth 2023: 40–43, 91–96). In this case I am interested in how it applies to the "antistructural" situation of transgression, when the world must be turned upside down.

As perpetrators of atrocities, transgressive movements (like many modern African militias) can show an alternately ludic and nihilistic creativity in meaningful gesture, extending from the systematic destruction and repudiation of grounding traditions to the innovation of novel ceremonies (see Droogers 2005). Both orientations, destructive and innovative, involve this performative/declarative aspect of ritual. Ritual action of the innovative sort (often combined with acts of destruction) occurred in millennialist "cargo cults" in Melanesia and beyond in the mid-twentieth century, where a complex of ritualized building, feasting, dancing, sacrifices, and even nakedness, sometimes based on prior traditions, was geared toward the anticipatory establishment of a new millennial order. These novel practices both anticipated and inaugurated a new era of fortune, economic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

equality, and even immortality (Worsley 1968: 83–88, 118, 139–41, 150–52, 157; see also Kelly and Kaplan 1990: 129–36). In conjunction with destruction, then, ritualized action in situations of transgression may declare an imminent next stage beyond the destruction of the old order.[1]

But transgressive situations often involve the repudiation and destruction of traditions and institutions *as an end in itself*. Bruce Lincoln illustrates this tendency with early twentieth-century exhumations and desecrations of ecclesiastical corpses in Spain. Perpetrators motivated by revolutionary zeal hauled the half-decayed corpses of priests, nuns, and monks, treasured and secreted in churches, out into the streets for public gaze and ridicule: a shocking inversion of sacred and profane, secret and exposed. These acts did not presage or declare a new millennial order but meant to turn the world upside down, to disturb things irreparably for the sake of disturbance—for the sake of enacting disturbance (1989: 103–27).

This model of ritual as carrying performative efficacy is not applicable to every case of atrocity—perhaps only those perpetrated in an atmosphere of millennial transformation. But it makes sense of acts performed in the course of transgression for the sake of transgression.

Perceiving Ritual in Enactions of Atrocity

These three models of ritual, applied to acts of violent treatment of enemy bodies, are meant, first, to enlarge the scope and application of ritual beyond familiar religious ceremonies; second, to contribute to the comprehension of atrocities as forms of collective expression and performance with bodies, not simply punishment, abuse, domination, or extermination; and third, to make sense of atrocities performed, apparently, for the sake of transgression itself. However, the three models do not naturally complement each other; in fact, as theories of ritual, they can be said to resist each other. The ritualization model sees no intrinsic meaning in ritualized action, only in the subjective experience of its performance according to a sense of archetypal prescription—or, as Bell avers, in the experience of distinguishing ritualized from mundane or instrumental action (1992: 32, 90–93). The "circumscribing of attention" (or bodies/spaces) model, however, presumes that violent attention to the enemy body (as a space of natural affordances), performed *in the context of* crisis, revenge, extermination, or purification, articulates symbolic meaning over the course of the sequence. The acts may even signify explicit ideological concerns, "written on the body," as it were. The performative declaration model (as applied to transgressive acts) sees significance, even if ludic or nihilistic, in the transgressive world that perpetrators perform through atrocities and other acts.

In addition, the bodies/spaces model does consider the particular cultural or historical significance of a body part (arm), tool (machete), or space for disposing of the body (lamp-post)—that things and bodily affordances will assume particular meanings in context. The ritualization model attends almost exclusively to action, the discursive revaluation of action, and the governing experience of stipulation in ritualized action.

[1]This phenomenon recalls Jonathan Z. Smith's discussion of a "utopian ideology" whose symbols and rituals invert or attack the current cosmos (1978).

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And yet, given the challenges of the materials I am interpreting in this paper, I will regard these three models as complementary without the necessity of combining them. They each highlight a dimension of atrocity: (a) how the body, circumscribed over a series of stages, becomes a site for the articulation and resolution of social forces, in combination with other things and spaces; (b) how mundane actions like building a pyre or driving a car or even sexual intercourse can acquire a "prescribed" mode—felt as necessary for completion and resolution—sometimes through public declaration, sometimes through verbal/mimetic combination with religious scripture or ceremonial tradition (as in 1941 Jedwabne), and sometimes simply through enacting a role; (c) how in some cases—perhaps exclusively independent militias—particular repertoires of violence and atrocity perpetrated on civilians seek not to obliterate the Other but to demonstrate the perpetrators' transgression of social mores and their capacity to turn the world upside down.

Delimitation of the Data: Cases of Modern Atrocities with Ritual Elements

Over the last century we have seen a great number of historical situations in which violent acts were conducted according to strategies, repertoires, or implicit scripts, and these situations do invite the critical use of a concept of ritual. But in bringing the concept of ritual into discussion we are better served, not in *classifying* such acts themselves as rituals (as opposed, say, to torture, military action, or execution), but rather by recognizing how their practice and meaning shifts, in many situations, from instrumental intention into a mode or register we might helpfully call ritual. Nor should the interpretation of atrocities in terms of ritual in any way minimize or excuse their effects on victims and observers. Rather, it is to explore the modes in which certain types of violent acts can be meaningful.

Why refer to "atrocities"? The term is explicitly evaluative in its application to violent acts. As Foucault argues, it highlights the apparent distance of a violent act from some measure of natural or human law; the tension (or really, incommensurability) between the violence inflicted and the culpability of the victims; and, rather than the subject's quick dispatching (or a militia's strategic use of violence), the graphic, public, and staged infliction of power on bodies (Foucault 1995: 56–57; Mitton 2012: 33–34). As an entry to modern acts of violence that might exemplify ritualization, then, atrocity directs our attention to the victim body (deemed enemy body by perpetrators) as a site of transformation and group experience—horror, pain, prurience, anger.

Where then do we look for atrocities that might suggest ritual in some general way? For the purposes of this paper I am interested in treatments of *bodies* and specifically bodies deemed *enemy*: belonging to a perceived Other (ethnic, religious, or otherwise) whose presence is felt to threaten. Furthermore, I assume a collective dimension to any critical use of ritual, so I bracket situations in which atrocity or abuse are individual acts oriented primarily to produce pain, to gain sexual satisfaction, to humiliate, or to express idiosyncratic, personal motivations (even in a social setting). Rather, I am interested in collective actions—on the part of a mob or militia and often involving a group or class of victims. Here we can more effectively gauge the meaning in violent action, from the specific *repertoires of violence* held by particular groups (militias or mobs) and from which they might improvise, to their *techniques of violence*: for example, the particular scripts or staging of public

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

beheading or processing the men out of the village for massacre (E. J. Wood 2009; Guttiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017: 24–26). The collective settings for atrocities also bring attention to the role of spectacle: the deliberate staging of violent action to communicate power, terror, sensory overstimulation, as well as structure—the scriptedness intrinsic to spectacle (Foucault 1995: 32–69; Kitts 2018: 9; Fujii 2021). Yet, unlike the ceremonial and often explicitly scripted arrangements of early modern (and premodern) legal executions, whose processions, public torture, and overall graphic horrors demonstrated the authority of monarch and efficacy of law (Foucault 1995), I look for more spontaneous situations of atrocity: actions taken, techniques engaged, spectacles assembled out of a collective sense of "stages that must be followed" in order to accomplish purity or order or a new millennial order. As ritualized acts they are not mere repetition; they are performed with the sense that "this must be done to the enemy body to accomplish a greater purpose."

I will also set aside premodern accounts of atrocity. This may be a striking omission, given both the number of such stories and their graphic nature. Few can forget the story of the "Levite's Concubine" in the Book of Judges (ch. 19): gang-raped, left for dead, then (while still barely alive) chopped up in twelve parts like a sacrificed ox so that her owner could call for tribal reinforcements. That twelve-fold dismemberment is meant to recall a legendary rite for calling up the Israelite tribes with sacrificial oxen (1 Samuel 11). Could anything be more ritualized? The Hebrew Bible is awash in beheadings, rapes, and dismemberments, while early Christian literature of the martyrs, purportedly representing Roman treatments of enemy bodies, includes all manner of tortures and modes of staging death. There is little doubt that atrocities of some sort lay somewhere behind these accounts, and it is quite likely that many such protracted executions were constructed in ways we could helpfully call ritualized. However, it is almost impossible to discuss them as historical —rather than literary—data (Castelli 2004; Kitts 2018: 26–27). As literary representations these texts and vignettes deliberately steer the reader's gaze and control her response: awe, disgust, identification, glorification, satisfaction, or despondency. Indeed, it is the text that dictates the meaning of the event itself. Biblical narratives of violence (like the Levite's Concubine) and Christian martyr legends *guide* readers creatively to see analogies between ritual forms and historical or mythic acts. In that sense the work is done for us: the narrative articulated to evoke ritual procedures, even if we don't know whether such procedures could have been in play in an "actual" event. We can learn a lot from such literature in terms of the *imaginative* staging of violence as spectacle, the power of inversion and substitution, the uses of the body, the efficacy of blood, and the stages of dissolution (Bahrani 2008; Ballentine 2016; Olyan 2016; Wilfong 1998). But we cannot use these stories as historical resources for real occurrences.

The modern world provides no dearth of atrocities, both within and beyond wartime settings, as well as far more reliable collections of evidence, from first-hand witnesses and victims, forensic archaeology, investigative journalists, human-rights organizations, and even ethnographers. So, evidence of ritualized elements in modern cases is more useful for the application of the category than those literary witnesses and ancient historical writers whose interests lie in deftly steering and informing the reader's imagination.

This paper will look at two broad historical cases of atrocity performed in such a way as to invite the critical use of the category ritual (while pointing to others along the way). The first covers the lynching of Black men and women in the United States

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries, historical atrocities richly analyzed in secondary literature, especially with an eye toward public staging and ritual structures. The second case addresses militia acts against civilians in Sierra Leone and Liberia over the 1990s, which included staged anthropophagy (Liberia) and wide-scale arm-amputations (Sierra Leone). Both of these cases involved large-scale collective action and some measure of public "staging" (Fujii 2021). Each was repeated sufficiently to suggest some form of implicit script: that is, they carried a sense of some essential protractedness and proper sequence for perpetrators—even if repetition is not itself definitive of ritual. And each involved particular attention to the body, its affordances and appendages and reproductive potential, and (especially in the case of lynching) to the spaces where the body could be staged.

Lynching in America, ca. 1880–1950: Bodies, Places, and Prescripted Action

The lynching of Black men (and often women) across the American South, Midwest, and mid-Atlantic states in the many decades following Reconstruction has become a central part of American history and a central demonstration of white hegemony that gained audiences of thousands. Along with increasing recognition of lynching's importance as a cultural performance, there has been a change in scholars' assumptions of the prevailing moods and energy that attracted spectators and participants. If at one point people assumed that lynching involved momentary paroxysms of mob-fury against the victim, the historic 2000 photo exhibition and book *Without Sanctuary* showed clearly that lynchings were festive events for whole families, with picnics and bands and promotional posters. Postcards of the atrocities (made available after many lynchings) show well-dressed spectators smiling, pointing, with wives and children (Allen *et al.* 2000). Given that over six thousand Black men and women were tortured and killed in this manner over roughly seventy years, this festival atmosphere must be confronted in any theory of lynching in American society.

The category ritual has often been applied to lynching for its distinctive and repeated sequences of violence, collective focus on (generally) a single man's body, social roles, and symbolic reflection of deep-seated white anxieties (Harris 1985: 3–18). For the sociologist Orlando Patterson ritual captured the "drama, celebration, and play" of lynching (1998: 182) and configured the victim as a "sacrifice," in many ways imitating the suffering Jesus (ibid.: 192, 205–6; see also Harris 1985: 12–15 on victim as "scapegoat"). This theologically inflected sense of ritual manages to mythologize the stages of a lynching, drawing meaning from imagined resemblance (to Jesus's crucifixion) rather than interpreting the acts on their own terms (Frankfurter 2004: 526–27; Pinn 2003: 215 n60). The historian of religions Anthony Pinn echoes the bodies/spaces model introduced above in discussing lynching as a "ritual of reference": "a repeated, systematic activity conducted in carefully selected locations that is intended to reinforce the [victim's] status as object" (2003: 49, 75). Pinn's focus on the accused victim's dehumanization as the singular goal somewhat limits the complexity and spontaneity of the incidents, and yet his attention to "carefully selected locations" is key to the spectacle that lynchings sought to stage. Thus, drawing on models of ritualization and of circumscribed attention to bodies and spaces, we can see various ritualized aspects to lynching acts.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One often asks with lynchings, if a group of people so earnestly believed a particular Black man to be guilty of the rape, murder, or racial arrogance for which he was lynched, why not simply kill him quickly? The question highlights the strangely yet characteristically *protracted* nature of lynchings: movement from one place to another, even after the body is dead; hanging, then shooting, then burning, all taking place over many hours; train arrivals, parades, and the purveying of victims' body parts. This protracted process, with its movements and places, violent acts, and alternations of central actors, suggests that completion—resolution—only would come about through an appropriate series of acts. There is no explicit script, only a sense of "how it's done" (or perhaps, "how they did it in the next town over") and "what we must do" to gain a collective sense of completion.

Here the notion of ritualization offered by Bell, and Humphrey and Laidlaw, clarifies how a series of acts performed not for intentional efficiency (e.g., dispatching the victim quickly) but out of a sense of *stipulation* carries the total event into a different register of action. It is not traditional liturgy; there is no playbook; but there is an "archetype"—a strongly- and collectively-held sense that *this* performance involves *this* series of steps (although they could be negotiated and improvised in the moment). Thus lynchings were ritualized not because they involved ecstatic release or atoning sacrifice or sought symbolically to communicate white hegemony in a particular region. They can be seen as ritualized because their mundane or brutal acts, using everyday equipment, were propelled by a sense of prescription. The actors were not simply executing an accused criminal but performing a *lynching* and all it represented, and a sense of power arose from that correct performance (see Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 101).

The lynching victim's body also provided a circumscribed space for the attention of participants, for it is through his material form that the prescribed acts took place —both while alive and often after death. The eyewitness accounts closely echo Foucault's analysis of eighteenth-century French executions (1995: 32–69), but here they were less explicitly scripted. Aggressive gestures with knives, hot metal, and gasoline picked out bodily affordances: genitalia, eyes, ears, legs. The victim's body in its evolving, brutalized state served as the medium for the larger process—and a gauge of completeness (for at some point there was nothing left to "act upon"). In some of the more elaborate lynchings the victim was paraded (or dragged) intact through the streets before being immobilized, hanged, or exhibited publicly for torture (Wells-Barnett 2014: 53, 64, 72, 83; Fujii 2021: 79).

Participants' and spectators' attention to the space and materiality of the victim's body emerges in the immediate collection and exchange of lynching "relics": body parts and even things close to the victim, like the hanging rope.[2] One of the lynching photographs in the *Without Sanctuary* collection was framed for display with a clump of the victim's hair (Allen *et al.* 2000: fig. 32). Interpretations of lynching relics and their enthusiastic retrieval among spectators vary. The anthropologist Simon Harrison sees them as forms of hunting trophy, adjusted to a culture of racialized anatomy collections (Harrison 2012: ch. 10; cf. Young 2005: 649). But in many

[2]Documentation of relic-collecting of victims: Henry Smith, Paris, TX, 1893 (Wells-Barnett 2014: 54); C. J. Miller, Bardwell, 1893 (ibid.: 64); Lee Walker, Memphis, TN, 1893? (ibid.: 72, 74); George Armwood, Princess Ann, MD, 1933 (Fujii 2021: 79); Sam Hose, Palmetto, GA, 1899 (Frankfurter 2004: 527–28); Dudley Morgan, Lansing, TX, 1902 (Ginzburg 1988: 46); Shine Wilson, 1940 (Tyre 1947: 119–20).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

respects they served as souvenirs of a moment of local *communitas* (Frankfurter 2004: 528–30; Young 2005: 652–53; Mathews 2018: 162–63). The performance theorist Harvey Young sees lynching relics both as souvenirs of an event remembered but suppressed, "embodying the past in the present," and as a fundamentally material, tactile, gesture to an historical body (2005: 646, and see esp. 647–48). Young helps us to see the relics, even in their fragmentation, as referring back to the enemy body itself that served as the focus of lynching—whose transformation in space and *as* space made lynching a ritual (see also Stewart 1993: 140).

Along with the enemy body itself, lynchings as social performances involved special attention to the spaces through which the victim was brought—again, out of a sense of stipulation, of efficacy, but also with a particular interest in juxtaposing the victim's body to a series of particular places. I offer a selection of itineraries:

Claude Neal, lynched in Jackson County, Florida, in 1934, was first abducted from jail and taken to a site in the woods, where he was tortured and hanged. Only then was he brought to the larger mob (awaiting in the hundreds at the house of the alleged victims of his supposed crimes), his body dragged behind a slow-moving car. After further abuse of the corpse at this house and the harvesting of relics, the mob took it to the courthouse and hung it by a tree there, where it was photographed (McGovern 1982: 68–69, 76–85).

Tom Wilkes, also known as Sam Hose, lynched in Newman, Georgia, in 1899 before thousands of spectators, was brought into town on a train, crowds of spectators at every stop, and then escorted on foot to the jail. Quickly the mob then dragged him out of the jail, again through the center of town, to the courthouse square, where they intended to burn him publicly. But the mob was convinced by officials not to do it there, so they carried him, hoisted high for spectators' delectation, around town and up main thoroughfares, to present him at the house of his alleged victim, who supposedly identified him.[3] Then they found a nearby clearing in the woods, chained him to a tree, and burned him alive, as covered on the front page of the *Atlanta Constitution* (Mathews 2018: 157–66).

Henry Smith, likewise brought into Paris, Texas, by train in 1893, was placed on a sort of carnival float for a procession up Main Street and through the city to a scaffold already set up. Here he was tortured before thousands of spectators before being burned alive (Wells-Barnett 2014: 50–53; A. L. Wood 2009: 71–75).

George Armwood, lynched in Princess Ann, Maryland, in 1933, was abducted from the jail, tied by the neck behind a car, and dragged through the downtown business section to the home of the judge who had opposed his lynching. The mob then hanged him from a nearby tree, abusing his body, then dragged the body back to the jail where they again hanged him from wires over a nearby intersection, and then finally burned the body as it hung (Fujii 2021: 79–80). Other lynching victims were hanged from bridges and lamp-posts (not typically the trees of Abel Meeropol's 1937 lyrics "Strange Fruit"), their bodies often deposited in Black neighborhoods afterward.

What these itineraries reveal is an attention to movement and places, that *this* enemy body "must" be brought to *this* location and *that*, through *this* part of town and finishing *there*, as part of the stipulated stages of the lynching process. The places accentuated the significance of the victim—the enemy body—and the meaning of his

[3]Foucault points out the theatrical efforts in eighteenth-century torture/executions to juxtapose the accused to the "criminal" acts for which he was being punished (1995: 44–47).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

torture and execution. Lynching as performance was no bullet to the head in secret but a deliberately choreographed spectacle: each place had its meaning.

There was, for example, a subtle choreography of lynching victim and modern infrastructure—indeed, infrastructure as revealing the encroachment of modern economy, culture, and social order. These included developments of the late nineteenth century that contributed to everyone's well-being, like electric lamp-posts, automobiles, telephone poles, steel bridges, and urban main streets. As the historian Amy Wood interprets the (often sequential) localization of lynching victims' bodies, "If urban life had threatened white authority by bringing whites and blacks together on streetcars, sidewalks, and markets, lynchings performed on city streets and courthouse squares reclaimed urban, public spaces as decidedly white spaces" (2009: 13–14). Wood sees the spaces of lynching not as a reclamation of some bygone past but an assertion of white authority on modernity—indeed, an assertion *through* the accoutrements and infrastructure of modernity (ibid.: 54). Lynchings also exploited the downtown and urban squares to accentuate lynching as an *urban* spectacle rather than some rural custom. The use of cars to drag bodies gave lynching practice a technological feature. Yet there was also a repudiation of modernity, as when Philip Gather's corpse was hung so low over the road that cars could barely pass underneath (Ginzburg 1988: 133). The places of lynching also signified a repudiation of the colorblind justice ostensibly purveyed through American courts, as lynchings invariably began with attacks on the jails (holding the victims for trial) and might conclude on the grounds of the courthouse or, in the case of George Armwood, the judge's house. At the same time, the proclivity of mobs to take the accused initially, or even finally, for torture and burning, to the house of his alleged victim for identification or personal revenge, signified lynching as a sort of intimate justice, one that (seems to) care about neighborly outrage, unlike the (allegedly) systematic blind justice of the town.

To identify these various meanings in the itinerary of the lynching process is not to turn lynchings into theatrical communication about tradition, modernity, and white supremacy. The process revolved around the victim's body, where it should go, and what should be done to it and where. As ritual it meant to carry or create a collective sense of efficacy through improvised adherence to a general archetype; and that archetype stipulated passage between various places: to repudiate, celebrate, remonstrate, and of course torture and kill. The ritual of lynching lies in that sense of prescription (and concomitant efficacy) and the progressive, transformative focus on the enemy body, carried across the city and through the landscape.

Militia Atrocities in Sierra Leone and Liberia, 1990s: Ritual for a World Turned Upside Down

The "Big Man" era of post-colonial Africa and its aftermath (ca. 1970–1995) saw horrendous violence perpetrated on civilians in Uganda, Mozambique, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and beyond. The particulars of the militias, their leadership, political claims, and innovative techniques of violence and terror have been subjects of numerous studies. I focus on atrocities in the Liberian and Sierra Leone wars as but one example from an exceedingly violent period.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Militia Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia

The civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia over the 1990s involved graphic atrocities perpetrated by militias loosely affiliated with pro- and anti-governmental movements (and often under the authority of charismatic leaders with names like General Butt-Naked, Young Colonel Killer, Betty Cut Hands, and General Mosquito). Such militias often roared into towns on trucks, wearing women's clothes and cartoon masks (or naked, as in the case of the Butt-Naked brigade), augmented with war amulets, heavily drugged, and brandishing assault weapons. Or they would turn road-checkpoints into horrific liminal zones with decapitated heads and skulls on sticks. Along with indiscriminate shooting of civilians, abducting of children to fight, and widespread rape and the forcing of mothers to kill their infants, even more peculiar acts were widely and credibly reported: in Sierra Leone, the amputations of hands or arms (especially by the anti-governmental Revolutionary United Front), and in Liberia, the eating of hearts and other body parts (especially by militias associated with Charles Taylor). Along with investigative reports by Human Rights Watch and journalists, these acts have been the subject of focused anthropological studies that have placed the various militias and their repertoires of violence in broader historical and cultural contexts (Goldberg 1995; U.S. Department of State 1997; Richards 1996; 2005b; Human Rights Watch 1998; 1999; Jackson 2005; Ellis 2006; Hoffman 2011; Mitton 2012).

The atrocities of these two contiguous (and related) civil wars were part of a pattern of violence against civilians across Sub-Saharan Africa during this period, as revolutions against corrupt and intransigent post-colonial dictators mutated into loose bands of militants preying on civilian villages. Thus Wilson, analyzing acts by the rebel group Renamo in 1980s Mozambique, refers to the "particularly common" report there of "mothers [forced] to kill or maim (and even eat) their own infants," and to a 1991 attack on a village in which Renamo cleared out the shelves of stores and replaced the goods with the heads of their victims (Wilson 1992: 535, 577–78).

The chaotic, predatory, and post-political nature of these militias, subject to the whims of their charismatic leaders, invites comparison to Achille Mbembé's description of colonial warfare of the early twentieth century: "Colonial terror constantly intertwines with colonially generated fantasies of wilderness and death and fictions to create the effect of the real … the fiction of a distinction between 'the ends of war' and the 'means of war' collapses; so does the fiction that war functions as a rule-governed contest, as opposed to pure slaughter without risk or instrumental justification" (2003: 25). The militia, one might say, both inhabits and performs parodically the necropolitics of the colonial state (cf. ibid.: 32).

And yet Mbembé's model does not fully appreciate the peculiar theatrical features of the West and Central African militias, features that point to an important agency and selectivity in their performance of militarism. Wilson, the historian of Renamo, coins the term "cults of violence" to draw attention to "ritualistic elements which the perpetrators—who in such circumstances see themselves as some kind of brotherhood socially discrete from the victims—believe provides or imputes value or power into the activity." But Wilson concludes that—rather than some religiously constructive, sacrificial, or purificatory ritual process—"their purpose is to instill a paralysing and incapacitating fear into the wider population. They do this by conjuring a vision of inhumanity and maniacal devotion to the infliction of suffering that sets them outside of the realm of social beings and hence beyond social control and even resistance" (1992: 531).

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It is this sort of social and political nihilism that historians, anthropologists, and journalists have seen in the militia acts in Sierra Leone and Liberia: terrorizing villages to *perform* social disorder and to demonstrate the breakdown of traditional institutions, civilian impotence, and the powers of the militia. In Sierra Leone, "attacks on civilians and atrocities against women 'prove' that wider society is as the RUF believes it to be—dangerous and corrupt. The burning of villages and the killing of villagers make concrete the assertion that captives have no home to return to, at least until larger victory is won" (Richards 1996: 30). The journalist Jeffrey Goldberg in Liberia was told that the performance of "one or two ritual sacrifices can shock an entire web of villages into flight" (1995).

Between the militias' atrocities and their regalia—"wedding gowns, wigs, dresses, commencement gowns from high schools,…" (Ellis 2006: 112)—and underneath their evident frustrations to get what they deserve, interpreters have perceived a deeper carnivalesque element in their performances (Jackson 2005: 60–62; Ellis 2006: 112–15; Hoffman 2011: 70). That is, in their performance of power and their assault on social institutions there was a larger impulse to turn the world upside down—not temporarily, as in classic notions of "rituals of rebellion," communitas, and carnival, but with a horrifying finality: to make village and society uninhabitable as such, to tear down traditions. What roles does ritual play in this context, then, and how does this context demand ritualized acts for its larger enactment? I want first to explore this violent form of the carnivalesque or transgressive, which diverges considerably from its more ludic or romantic constructions, and then focus on amputations (Sierra Leone) and selective anthropophagy (Liberia) as ritual acts that manifest and declare a world turned upside down.

Ritual Expressions of the Carnivalesque and Transgressive

The observation that a type of ritual (in African societies and beyond) might invert social norms or hierarchies goes back to Max Gluckman, who frankly wondered how such inversions were meant to work for the common good (2004: 117–18). But in modern anthropology and Religious Studies it is most associated with Victor Turner's theorization of a "communitas" in the liminal period of Ndembu (Zambia) boys' initiations (Turner 1967; 1975; see also Kelly and Kaplan 1990: 138–39). The boys transitioning to manhood are "dead," neither male nor female, between animal and human. (In boys' initiations in the men's Poro society that grounded tradition for much of Sierra Leone and Liberia, the boys are said to have been eaten by the bush-spirit: Bellman 1984: 8–10.) The initiation takes place in a location far from the village (in Poro tradition, in the bush, a zone of wild animals and devouring spirits that is structurally polarized to the village). And the "secrets" to which the initiates are exposed are monstrous and grotesque, meant to teach deeper social truths. Altogether, the liminal initiation period is a controlled, socially-generative, and institutionally oriented experience of *temporary* inversion, monstrosity, instability, and, in many cases, fright (Bellman 1984; see also Wlodarczyk 2009: 103–11, on Kamajor initiations during the civil war).

But the carnivalesque of the militias represented a mutation in every sense of this initiatory liminality. While the militias did provide some of the same functions as initiation cohorts, offering social groupings through which boys might find a kind of social transformation (Richards 1996: 30; Hoffman 2011: 70), the terrifying specter of

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bizarrely dressed, armed, and amphetamine-dosed young men emerging from the bush signified the utter breakdown of an initiation structure that had kept youth *away* for protracted periods before they were ready to serve society. Indeed, as Paul Richards observed, the militias embraced this collapse of boundaries with the saying "'bush' come to 'town'" or even "the leopard has entered the city," conjuring the fear of the most dangerous forest animal (1996: 31).

The catastrophic antistructure of the militias also emerges in the *exposure* rather than cultivation of secrets among initiates. In Liberia, militias strutted around with the sacred Poro masks for everyone to see or hung them up near decaying skulls, destroying any means for the masks to connect to ancestral spirits (Ellis 2006: 275–79). In Sierra Leone the RUF militia made women, traditionally prohibited even from gazing on the Poro masks, actually put them on to profane them.[4] Thus the "strategies of concealment" that Mariane Ferme has described as underlying Sierra Leonian society were inverted and perverted by the militias (2001: 1–8).

Perhaps the transvestism also reflected a mutation of initiatory liminality—or, as one anthropologist suggested early in the Liberian war, a creative recombination of cultural elements that distinguished the "warrior" from the government-sponsored "soldier." But in any event, she continued, "all the dangerous elemental force of the warrior has been unleashed without the social context and ritual hierarchy that once controlled and directed it. The result is true chaos, not the playful, inventive visual chaos of the indigenous warriors' costume, but Schwarzenegger and Stallone in wigs and wedding dresses, a disrupted gender discourse that serves no purpose but destruction and death" (Moran 1995: 82, and 80–81). So the militias cultivated a carnivalesque quality in their regalia and accoutrements, their desecration of traditions, and their raping and mutilation of women, but it was not carnival as commonly discussed in connection with Bakhtin. It belonged to a more foreboding genre of behavior oriented toward "symbolic inversion and cultural negation" and emerging from a "cultural resource of actions, images, and roles which may be invoked both to model and legitimate desire and to 'degrade all that is spiritual and abstract'" (Stallybrass and White 1986: 17–18). It was a repertoire of violence, skewed more toward transgression and social disorder than vengeance or purge (cf. Guttiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017). In 1990s Liberia and Sierra Leone that cultural resource included Rambo and Chuck Norris movies, rap icons, and the random American commodities that collect in West African markets. It included a deep awareness of traditions like Poro in order to overturn them. It did not veer toward temporary hilarity, nor was it a critique or (by 1995) a revolution with an eye toward a new society. The militias (RUF and Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia, and others) tore apart everything, shooting and maiming entire villages. They were movements of *transgression*, bent on inverting the world. At the same time, as David Keen and Kieran Mitton have proposed, it was a transgressive world that excluded *shame*, the repudiation of which underlay the boys' astounding atrocities against civilians (Keen 2005: 75–81; Mitton 2012: 121–66). "Rebel atrocities frequently involved cutting out eyes and tongues and mutilating sexual organs. These horrifying practices helped to give an impression of mindless and meaningless violence." However, Keen notes, these body parts are precisely those that bore powers to humiliate (2005: 78).

[4]Personal communication, Raphael Frankfurter, 15 July 2023.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Where is the place of ritualized action in such movements of transgression? Above I proposed a performative/declarative model for rituals that enact an anticipated or intended order of things: for example, acts of destruction, feasting, or dancing performed in Melanesian "cargo cults" that enacted the anticipated millennial order, or the exhumation and profanation of sacred corpses in revolutionary Spain, meant utterly to invert the traditional order of things. The acts are ritualized because they perform the anticipated new order (cf. Richards 2005a). It is via this comparative model of ritual that I want now to turn to two distinctive acts of the Sierra Leone and Liberian civil wars: the amputation of civilians' arms by the RUF (Sierra Leone) and the public consumption of enemies' select body parts (especially hearts), credibly attested across Liberian militias. How did these acts become both ritualized and ritually meaningful over the 1990s?

Hand-Chopping: Sierra Leone. The impulse of RUF militants to chop off civilians' hands and arms seems to have begun as a way to interrupt harvesting, whose continuation—Paul Richards proposed—actually challenged the militants' claims to disrupt everyday life. But by 1995 they were telling victims that the act would keep them from voting (Richards 1996: 6, 17). By 1998, a Human Rights Watch report suggests, the RUF was cutting off civilian hands as a general "message" to the central government. Thus Helen C., a fish seller from Koidu: "They captured me and said lie on the floor. I was reluctant; they cut me on the neck with a machete. I was cut by a small boy. Then they put my hand on a stone and cut me. They told me to go to Kabbah [then-president of Sierra Leone] and tell him what happened. They left me there.… I walked eleven days to Forekonia [the border with Guinea]. I left my belongings with my hand. I had to bury my own hand" (Human Rights Watch 1998: [4]; Jackson 2005: 58).[5]

By 1999, when the RUF invaded the capital city of Freetown in an attack called "Operation No Living Thing," hand- and arm-amputation had become a symbolically charged repertoire of the RUF, with a "Cut Hands Commando" unit, with leaders called "Captain 2 Hands, Betty Cut Hands, and Adama Cut Hands," and even systems for mass-amputation: "Civilians were often mutilated in pairs or groups of up to eight, during small rebel operations in which victims were rounded up, made to form a line and their limbs amputated one after the other" (Human Rights Watch 1999: [17]).

> The particularly macabre practice of filling up bags with amputated hands and fingers was witnessed by several people interviewed by Human Rights Watch. Another witness hiding within a house in Calaba Town on January 24 witnessed a commander calling himself "Dr. Blood" summon five rebels and order them to begin a "cut hands" operation. He then said, "I want a bag of hands from Kissy, one from Wellington, and one from Calaba Town."
>
> Allieu, fifty, a civil servant with the customs department, described seeing a bloody rice bag full of hands during the brutal amputation of both of his arms in Kissy on January 21 (ibid.: [19]).

Efforts to find cultural or historical precedents for these acts, such as the collecting of hands from corpses in early twentieth-century Congo, have failed.[6] The practice

[5]Numbers in brackets here and elsewhere indicate page locations in my printouts of unpaginated reports.

[6]On the amputation of hands in Congo, see Hochschild 1998: 164–66, 173, 191, and 226–27; and McGinnis 2016.

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against living civilians was unique to the RUF in its rage against the government and civilians and to the transgressive culture that developed among its militias. It came about as a militia repertoire of violence as the RUF recognized and then cultivated a distinctive sign of their power. Hand-chopping served as a kind of (mutable) communication, but even more as a performative declaration of the militia's transgressive presence, for by this practice they could reduce civilians to abject and economically useless victims.

In what ways can we see the act as *ritualized*? There is no evidence of militias setting apart the act ceremonially within the overall terror of their presence. But, to return to the ritual model of attention to bodily affordances and spaces, the act primarily responds to a bodily affordance both visible and essential for social and economic interaction; it envisions the body as a space of transformation. But what sort of transformation? As a distinctive act declaring futility, suffering, and—coupled with rape and massacres—social breakdown, the act signified a civilian world destroyed and a militia world emboldened: the world turned upside down. Hand-chopping became the signal act in declaring the world transgressed. And indeed, by 1999 hand-chopping had become prescripted in RUF encounters with civilians.

Selective Anthropophagy: Liberia. Anthropophagy[7] as a comparable repertoire or strategy of violence among Liberian militias—especially, but by no means exclusively, Charles Taylor's affiliate groups—was widely reported and witnessed in 1990s Liberia.[8] As a signature performance of Liberian militias it was done publicly, before civilians, even while militia members claimed the consumption of enemy body parts and organs offered them war magic (Wlodarczyk 2009: 37–38, 83–111). "Fighters—whether AFL, LPC or one of the ULIMO sub-factions—also targeted their enemies, fighters and civilians alike, removed their victims' body parts and ate them in front of civilians" (U. S. Department of State 1997: [2]). As in Sierra Leone with hand-cutting, a specialist role emerged among the Liberian militias: the "heartman," who could be called upon to cut out a victim's heart for consumption (Goldberg 1995; Ellis 2006: 253). In this regard we see the setting apart of the act through the designation of "expert" roles.

The historian Stephen Ellis has made an important case for placing the militias' selective anthropophagy in a broader cultural context (across both cultures) of both historical practices among secret societies and a pervasive discourse of "eating" that was often mobilized to discuss Poro ritual process and the dynamics of individual power in society (2006: 146–48, 220–80). However, he argues, whatever anthropophagous practices had actually taken place in the early twentieth century would have participated in the broader social order, in which the powers one acquired through ingesting particular victims' body parts contributed to one's role as guardian of society, within traditional religious hierarchies (ibid.: 222, 234–37). Consequently, over the course of

[7]My choice of (selective) anthropophagy over "cannibalism" is meant to avoid the weight of colonial fantasy, the implications of calling it an "-ism," and to leave open the nature of the anthropophagy itself—as sustenance, as war-practice, or as component of sorcery (see Sanday 1986; Lestringant 1997; Frankfurter 2006: 129–67).

[8]Both Liberian and Sierra Leone cultures had extensive folklores about anthropophagy and the people who engaged in it: (MacCormack 1983; Shaw 2001); and selective anthropophagy was also performed in Sierra Leone by Kamajor militias on the bodies of RUF militants (Human Rights Watch 1998: [9]; Wlodarczyk 2009: 89–90, 117–19). It is unclear why one group of militias developed hand-chopping and the other developed anthropophagy.

the twentieth century, these traditions of sacrifice and power acquisition shifted from the context of social order and benefit to that of individual power and charisma. This historical shift in context created a market for freelance assassins who collected body parts for avaricious buyers (ibid.: 240, 253–56). Consequently, by the 1990s, "activities which had previously been carried out by heartmen or other specialists in secret could now be carried out openly by combatants in the civil war"—that is, as a form of display and terror (ibid.: 259; see also Wlodarczyk 2009: 118–19).

This shift in selective anthropophagy from traditional to individualistic and from secretive to public suggests also that the act cannot simply be explained as war magic—as a way for militia members to ingest and acquire power—but served as a transgressive theater for the terrorizing of civilians and for the ritual declaration of a social structure invaded and destroyed. If cannibalistic ingestion had a discursive familiarity for civilians brought up in a culture of Poro (and of rumors and fears of freelance organ-collectors), this only would have made the spectacle more effective as signaling an inescapably transgressive world. That is, what used to be whispered about was now performed by militia youth—not senior priests or initiated elders but uninitiated, bloodthirsty, and crazed boys.

While admitting its embeddedness in fears and rumors about the Other and about illegitimate power in modern Africa, selective anthropophagy and the killing that precedes it also deserve discussion as a ritual atrocity (see Shaw 2001). The specific evidence of the Liberian civil war points, as with Sierra Leonean hand-chopping, to militias' cultivation of *distinguishing repertoires* of violence, of a theater of transgression and ultimate social breakdown. It is not that cutting out and feasting on an enemy's heart in public "means something," but that, as a terrifyingly prosaic consumptive process, it becomes *prescripted* in the militia's repertoire and thus ritualized as a demonstration of the world turned upside down.

Conclusions

Atrocity and Models of Ritual

The complexity that atrocities present to us demands that no one single definition or model of ritual be imagined as sufficient. Thus I have introduced three patterns of action that might helpfully be applied to the most violent atrocities as distinctive of ritual (and as a gauge of whether ritual is present). The first, drawn from the works of Mary Douglas and Jonathan Z. Smith, looks at the *framing of bodies and places as sites for attention*: the body of the enemy and its affordances, the places through which it is processed, executed, and even dismembered. Much research on premodern executions has emphasized the deliberate production of spectacle—of the horror of the body graphically abused and the sounds of agony, all before public eyes. It was spectacle, Foucault observed, that produced justice itself. Spectacle, of course, does not necessitate ritualizing, but spectacle involves the staging of the body and its affordances for all to see. The body, framed in some particular space, becomes itself a theater. One cannot look away.

American lynching exemplifies the ritual attention to bodies as well as spatiality: the places through which the body needed to be taken or dragged, such as courthouses and main streets, Black neighborhoods and bridges, the homes of alleged victims and those of the lynch-organizers. Each site took on a different meaning as it interacted with the body of the accused. At the same time, the

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meaning of the body of the accused changed through juxtaposition to or passage by the different sites (and, of course, through the stages of torture and burning to which the body was put in these different places). As historians have observed, some of these places (like lamp-posts and steel bridges) signified a modernity or (in the case of courthouses) a modern jurisprudence that the lynch-mob repudiated. But more importantly, lynching necessitated *movement* across territories. The procession itself, as spontaneously as it came together, made lynching a ritualized process; without movement the execution would not gain efficacy.

This effort to fulfill a prescripted notion of lynching without actually having a script or adhering to stated rules—without, in fact, full intentionality involved in the planning and doing—exemplifies the second ritual model developed in this paper: the *ritualization model* of Humphrey and Laidlaw, in which mundane acts are reconfigured—in these cases, often spontaneously—as *prescripted.* It is more a sense of "we *must* proceed in this way, for that's how one does it" than of the purposeful "why not burn him and hang him from the lamp-post?" or even "let us shoot him." The ritualization model looks at the way mundane (if violent) action can be performed in a non-instrumental mode. It presumes that no acts are *intrinsically* "ritual." Ritualization covers this alternative mode of performance that *feels* prescripted, archetypal, even if there is considerable variation among performances. "Script" thus describes not the ways we conceptualize (or are "guided" in) our situational behaviors (Abelson 1981; Scott 1990), nor the ways that actual roles arise in the process of performing violent acts (Fujii 2021: 9–10), but rather a subjective *sense* that the proper performance of a mundane act has an archetypal, *prescripted* character.

The ritualization model thus reflects a communal sensibility that instant execution is insufficient—that the process of expelling the enemy body involves "something more." By focusing on the ritualization of atrocity rather than the symbolism of expulsion and purification, we can see the particular value in gesture, procession, spectacle, spatial and material juxtapositions, and the communal *effort* (rather than ceremonial expectation) to achieve a sense of satisfaction and resolution.

Finally, I introduced a third ritual mode that I termed *performative declaration*: essentially, to act *as if* a new order or dominion were happening, where the enaction itself brings that new order into being, exemplified by the acts and atrocities of the Sierra Leone/Liberian militias, which ranged from carnivalesque attire to mass-murders of villagers, hand-chopping, and public anthropophagy: performances of wholesale transgression that turned the world upside down. The specific acts of atrocities seemed to function—both for villagers and for amped-up militia youth—as demonstrations of social breakdown, hopelessness, and the hegemony of mock-warriors with no social allegiance.

Ritualized Atrocity and Gender

In my discussions of ritual focus on bodily "affordances"—body parts that can impinge themselves on the strategic imaginations of violent perpetrators—I have collapsed gendered and sexual parts into the quite diverse range of affordances to which perpetrators respond: not just penises and breasts but hands, fingers, and eyes. This approach allows for the clear idiosyncrasies (cultural, personal) in processing the enemy body and avoids essentializing or projecting assumptions about sexualized

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

parts. And yet treatments of enemy bodies often involve gendered elements, from rape to sexual mutilation to abuses that intervene in reproduction itself. The Black male body sought for lynching was highly gendered, his masculinity stressed as both cultural and material threat; and the processing of his body often included castration (McGovern 1982: 80; Harris 1985: 5–6, 16–18, 20–24; Brundage 1993: 42; cf. Allen *et al.* 2000: nos. 20, 42–44, 80, 98).

Forced sexual penetration of female (and male) bodies deemed as enemy is extraordinarily well-documented, with a useful literature on its performative contexts (in warfare, for example: Crossette 1998; E. J. Wood 2009; Lamb 2020): as an act of domination of the Other, as an act of sexual self-gratification in the context of war, as an act of revenge on a sexually demonized other (Kakar 1996), and so on. But actual performances usually differ in place, preparation, the intercourse itself, the ensuing treatment of the victim, and the interactions among perpetrators. So it can be difficult to discern ritualization in the performance of sexual abuse and forced sexual penetration.

Two cases stand out, however, and I only mention them here briefly. In the case of Bosnian Muslim women interned in camps during the 1992 Yugoslav war, Bosnian Serb soldiers performed rapes explicitly as the pollution of Muslim wombs or as forced impregnation with future Serbs (Allen 1996; Fisher 1996; Danner 1997: 59, 64; Sharlach 2000: 96–98; Žarkov 2007; Mojzes 2011: 183–87). The very act of rape thus acquired a prescripted mode in focusing "ethnic cleansing" on bodies in their reproductive capacity (Bassiouni and Boutros-Ghali 1994: 58–60). In the second case, of women from the Yazidi people of Northern Iraq who were abducted by the Islamic State in 2019, the IS fighters to whom they were distributed were taught to regard them as *sabaya*s—war-captives—whose sexual exploitation was enjoined in Islamic State shariah as an imitation of the time of the Prophet and thus an enaction of the new "millennial" Caliphate (Revival of Slavery 2014; Callimachi 2015; McCants 2015: 111–14; Ali 2016; Mirza 2017; Nanninga 2019: 141–44). In this context the fighters (settled in homes in IS utopian cities) regarded sex with a Yazidi woman as *ibadah*, "worship," that was accompanied by prayer (Callimachi 2015).

Both cases show features of ritualization, for example transforming the mundane act of intercourse into a prescripted or mandated performance and declaring through the act a new order or dominion: the pollution of the Bosnian Muslim social presence; the reality of the millennial Caliphate. But as gendered atrocities they also *resignify* viable female bodies as (in the Bosnian Muslim case) spaces of reproduction for the new order and (in the Yazidi case) as an alternative class of female body (*sabaya*).

Violence and the Concept of Ritual

Clearly a concept of ritual should be applicable to violent acts, especially those performed in collective, staged, and central ways that exceed what we might reasonably deem "strategic." Yet I have noted an early historiography behind the category of ritual that assumed its propensity for (or, otherwise, masking of) mindless "sacrificial" violence. Thus, as developed in early modern European panics over "ritual murder" (by Jews, of Christian children) and in the 1980s and 1990s panics over "ritual abuse" (by alleged Satanists), the concept of ritual had the discursive function of marking off certain forms of violence as entirely evil, borne of intergenerational "cults" and their "ritualistic" needs (Frankfurter 2006: ch. 4).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417525000076 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The wielding of this category is therefore complex: scholars of many fields are prepared to see ritual in violent acts—indeed, for some as governing violent acts. But what features or patterns *should* be called ritual?

In this article I have set aside traditional models of ritual—as repetitive acts, as symbolic gestures, as the enaction of a belief-system—to develop three modalities: spatial and bodily designation, sense of prescription, and performative declaration. These modalities of ritual operate, for the most part, at a more subtle level than ceremony: subjects would not consider themselves to be practicing ritual in setting up processional itineraries for the enemy body or responding to bodily affordances. They are not consciously adhering to scripts but acting with the *sense* of an archetype.

In the end, we find two patterns: first, when ritual as a category is strictly and critically deployed, it is not a common feature in atrocities and extreme violence (which in modernity often privilege mass-efficiency over theatrical staging); and second, the modes of ritualizing or structuring violence discussed here reflect a social propensity to create or declare *meaningfulness* in deeply fraught situations of conflict and fear, using landscape, enemy bodies, and performativity. This is not meaningfulness in its cognitive sense—creating semantic meaning through symbolic acts—but rather its affective sense: acquiring *feelings* of conviction and confidence through the appropriateness of (often spontaneously conceived) behavior.[9] The affective "payoff" of ritualization for perpetrators of atrocity—of focusing on bodies and spaces as sites of transformation, however lurid—is ultimately that sense of gratification from doing things the right way.

Acknowledgments. My sincere thanks to Kecia Ali, Raphael Frankfurter, Bruce Lincoln, and Elisabeth Castelli for bibliographical input, essential discussions of cases and method, and encouragement as this project has taken shape.

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[9]See James 1936: 242–43, 371, on the primacy of such subjective experiences in religious situations.

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Cite this article: Frankfurter, David. 2025. "Ritual and the Enemy Body: A New Approach to Modern Atrocity." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1–26, doi:10.1017/S0010417525000076