

FESTIVALS

AS THE MYTHICAL LANGUAGE OF SELF-TRANSFORMATIVE HISTORY

Ignatius Jesudasan*

The above title represents and is a thesis. In academic circles, which deal with hypotheses, proof is a methodological law and necessity. Academics, therefore, expect and demand proofs for every thesis as well. But not every thesis needs a proof. Nor can theses be proved in a strict logical sense, because most theses are statements of facts. After all, facts cannot be proved any further. They can only be shown or demonstrated as facts for observers to see and hear for themselves. The above thesis is one such a statement of facts. Therefore, I do not attempt to prove it. Instead, I simply point to experience and call upon the reader to see it for himself or herself by looking into his or her own experience of participation in the festivals of his or her own community, even as I do by looking into myself, in my participation in one major festival celebration of my community. In this process, I try also to clarify the different concepts, which are being employed in this discourse.

As the great scholars in the study of religious language, such as Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell and Paul Ricoeur, have shown us, dreams and rituals belong to the symbolic world and language of myth. We know that, of their periodically and rhythmically repetitive nature, festivals belong to and with the remembrance or recitation of cyclical myths. But the one thing, which we may not know or recognize, perhaps, is the intentionally self-transformative nature, function, dynamics and purpose of myth, which accounts for its repetitiveness. Hence, I shall focus on why festivals are repetitive, without becoming on that score a meaningless ritual. I shall also try to show how what I have termed mythical language effects a self-transformation.

*Ignatius Jesudasan, an Indian Jesuit, is a faculty at Arulkadal, a regional theologate in Chennai, TN, and regularly contributes his rich and reflective articles to many Indian and International journals.

I presuppose, and I trust the reader will agree with me, that rituals and festivals are a form of action-language, and symbolic like every other form, which language takes. Hence, festivals are also a symbolic form of language, and, therefore, also symbolically meaningful. The thrust of this essay is to try to demonstrate this symbolic meaningfulness of festivals. But symbolism itself would need to be clarified in terms of language.

Language is structured as word or communication between speakers and hearers, and about the speakers and hearers, or their inter-relationships through and in the intermediation of third parties or objects. Speakers are the subjects of language; hearers are the objects of language. Speaking subjects are in the first person, and the hearing subjects in the proximate, face-to-face second, and the remote or absent subjects or objects become, and are reasonably assigned the position of the third person. Not only is language structured as communication between subjects and objects, but also as communication across different chronological or experiential historical timeframes. The speakers and hearers are not all and always of the same age and experience or knowledge level. Society always consists of people of differing ages, experience and skills. The elders have a past, which the children do not have. The children have a future, which the elders do not have either. In these social terms, then, language consists of the mutual fusion of the older and the younger generations into each other's timeframe of the past and the future. Therefore, language is essentially and functionally historical, set in a timeframe of movement, here and now, from the past into the future.

Symbols are creative and created products of intelligent and intellectual beings like us human beings. To create or make a symbol is basically to create language. It is in and through language that we are able to communicate symbolically. We are in a position to do this unlike the animals, because we are able to differentiate individual and class or group, where an individual or a part becomes for us the symbol or specimen, representative of the whole class or species. A symbol is one thing, which stands for or represents another. It is one meaning carrying also a second or third and fourth layer of meaning. Symbol has connotation of multi-layered meanings, associations and thoughts. Whatever in a symbol stands for an identity. Identity is a quality of uniqueness in number or quantity. All words are basically symbols. This is how words are able to identify and stand for individuals and groups of beings or realities. This is the

meaning of being a noun or substantive. It is by standing for or denoting the particular individuals and groups that words symbolize or identify them. They are the symbols of those individualities and groups.

Festivals are a mythical language of symbolic words. Most *words* at festivals are, and consist really of repetitive and ritualistic actions, related to mythical history, which is myth with a history-making élan and purpose. We shall come to the why of it by first considering the how of festivals, by way of observation of what happens at festivals. Festivals are festive or celebrative actions and occasions. Celebrations themselves are acts of recollection or remembrance of events, experiences and relationships of and to persons from one's (ancestral) past. As such, the celebrants establish and affirm or reaffirm and reestablish continuity with the past of their own origin or history in the celebration itself. Thus, celebration is and becomes a social pedagogy in the history of a group's collective identity, serving to integrate the celebrating persons into that historically continuing social identity. Historical remembrance is an important function and purpose of festivals as celebrations. It is psychologically through knowledge or remembrance of one's roots or origin that one knows and identifies oneself for who one is and where one socially belongs, namely, to and through such affinities as family, kinship, clan, caste, social location, race, language, culture, religion, nation, etc.

Festivals become festive or celebrative in three ways: 1) by halting from normal work; 2) by assembling and being together with the rest of one's family; kin, clan, caste, race, language, religion or nation in the common ritual function or action; 3) by making merry and rejoicing with special, new or unusual items of food and clothing and other related forms of fun and entertainment.

Repetitive work generally tends to narrow one's consciousness and vision, thereby also one's creative energy into a mechanically thoughtless and slavishly dull and numbing drudgery of boredom and meaninglessness. By breaking this drudgery and monotony, festivals become occasions of recovery and recuperation from the drudgery, making the normal work more personally and socially directed, meaningful and purposive. It is by being or coming together with family, kin, clan, caste, parish, location, language or religion that one recovers the faith, sense or meaningfulness of belonging to and identity with one's community even in and for the work itself. The merry making in food, drinks, dress, sport,

music, dance, drama and ritual or worship brings and adds pleasure to the joy of cessation from work and to the joy of social solidarity. It makes the social identity or belonging and the occasion of its celebration a joy to remember and look forward to the next such occasion, in turn. The ritual or worshipping part of the festival expands the social identity or solidarity to the depth and height dimensions of and into the divinity itself, as its ultimate cause, guarantee and justification. Thus, festivals have and manifest the threefold economic, social and politico-religious dimensions of the celebration of identities, which are historical and history making.

The historic function of festivals is yet to be explained. We stated above that festivals celebrate the group's founding ancestors and their relationship to the group in and through the remembrance, which constitutes the festival. The remembrance itself is an acknowledgment of the personal-historical origin of one's social identity in group in thankful joy and determination to maintain and build it up further through loving solidarity with and among all the members of that group. This is what the celebration of historical remembrances of events of ancestral history effects and is supposed to bring about. Remembrance is a history-making power and faculty. It does it by creating or fostering a strong group identity-consciousness in historical perspective. Remembering a past which is no more the present, but making it vivid as though it were present, through ritual actions, makes of remembrance a sacrament of the presence of the absent ancestors, making them present in the remembering ones themselves. Physical ancestors are, indeed, present in their progeny through their physical genes, which have been transmitted through successive psychosomatic generations. Spiritual ancestors are present, and made spiritually present in the celebrating group, through their significant word-signs spoken and performed by it in remembrance of them. This remembrance of the ancestors gives the remembering group the future-oriented thrust of determination to stand together in weal and woe, and in peace and war, as the characteristic of a continuing historicity. This is the socio-psychological and political process of how the apparently social or religious celebrations help to make collective or common group history, enabling tribal or ethnic identities to aspire and grow into national or state identities.

What we mean by the mythical quality of language and history is yet to be elucidated. Myth is the symbol or metaphor of the history-making

subject. We have seen above that the history-making subject is the group, which celebrates the memory of its ancestors in festivals, and that the group's history is made precisely in the memorial recall itself, wherein the dead ancestors are made alive and present in and to the remembering group. Thus, remembrance has a mystical quality about it, of direct communion of the living and the dead in a continuous social and sacred history. I wager, therefore, to assert, at this point, the identity of both the mythical and the mystical in the history-making symbolic memorial. Myth expresses objectively what the subject experiences and is expected and enabled to experience subjectively, by virtue of the memory. It is either already in physical and spiritual communion with the dead ancestors, or else it is on the way to and in the process of such communion and identification with them and their spirit, through the very act and power of remembering them. To the extent it communes with them, it is transformed from within itself into the image and likeness of the ancestors. It is taken over, possessed and directed by the spirit of its ancestors, and is rendered a fit instrument to continue the kind of history they initiated. The extent, to which a group departs to make a different kind of history than its founding ancestors, is a measure of the change of paradigm it has adopted over against the paradigm of its own founding fathers. The way any festival is celebrated will also reflect the modifications, which have come over the group's understanding of its own paradigmatic models. The mythical quality of history then means that the kind of history that a group makes will reflect the kind of myth, as the pre-historic model or paradigm of the kind of history it seeks and wills to make.

Festival as mythical or self-transformative language remains to be explained, even though we have pointed to the transformation, which takes place in the act of remembering the clan or group ancestors. The explanation will consist of an elaboration of the symbol as an objective expression of the celebrating group or subject itself. Symbolic communication is the revelation of the essence of the speaker to the inner or spiritual essence of the hearer. It is an aesthetic-mystical pursuit at unifying and integrating the hearer with the speaker. The mythical-mystical speaker in the festival is the self-same remembered ancestor. The hearers are the very celebrating group itself. In doing the remembrance of its founding ancestor, the celebrating group is taught and reminded that its essence is the same as its founder's, and that, therefore, it is bound to, and

capable of making a history like the very founder-ancestor. This is the symbolic-realistic communication or revelation of the festival. The act or way of remembering the ancestor is itself the sign and occasion of the strength and energy received to continue the ancestor's way of history further.

With this clarification, theoretically I have made a concisely sufficient explanation and exposition of the concepts of the thesis asserted in the title. It now remains for me only briefly to illustrate them with one example. As a Catholic priest and thinker, the obvious illustrative example, which comes to my mind in this connection, is that of the memorial of the death of the Lord, Jesus Christ, otherwise called the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass.

The Mass or the Eucharist is a ritual replay of the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples on the night before he suffered death on the cross on Good Friday. The synoptic gospel writers and St. Paul speak of it as an act of remembrance commanded by Jesus himself. They speak of what Jesus did and said, when he commanded them to keep it in his memorial. When he had eaten the Jewish Passover meal with his disciples, which he knew was going to be his last meal with them, he took bread, gave thanks to God, broke it and gave it to them, saying, "Take and eat it all of you: for, this is my body which will be given up for you." Likewise he took the cup of wine, gave thanks to God and gave the cup to his disciples, saying, "Drink from this, all of you: this is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for the forgiveness of sins of the many. Do this in remembrance of me."

The disciples understood only some time after his death that Jesus had anticipated that death in and through the signs of the bread and wine at his last supper. It was at such memorial meals, in which they recalled his person, words and deeds, that they experienced his coming and being present in and with them as their life-giving spiritual energy source, enabling them to stand every prison and persecution they were subjected to for his name's sake, even to the point of glorying and rejoicing in such suffering, as their own share in the cross of Christ. This is how they experienced themselves transformed by and into Jesus himself, and into his body as the Christ.

It was on the first Sunday following Good Friday, which was the third day from the day of his death, that the disciples had their first experience or vision of Jesus as risen from the dead. In memory of that Sunday, every Sunday in the year has been a holy day of remembrance and celebration in the Christian calendar, just to encourage and enable the believers to rest from their weekday work, and experience in the sacramental signs of bread and wine, their own inner communion with Jesus through their participation in the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ.

The sacramental symbolism of the Eucharist is created and constituted in and by an act of food and drink. This food, here, consists of bread, and the drink consists of wine. Bread is the life of the grain crushed into flour and kneaded and baked into a more easily edible and digestible form of food. Wine is the life of the vine and its grape crushed into juice and fermented into a soothing and smooth-going spirituous drink. In its form as bread, the grain is sown into its eater, to be digested, germinated and enabled to sprout and grow into a full-fledged plant, which will and is to yield an abundant harvest of many more grains. In its form as drink, the wine is poured like water into the stomach-field, to irrigate it and moisten the injected seed, enabling it spiritually to germinate, sprout and grow up to yielding a more manifold return of the life it has consumed and taken in. Thus, eating and drinking are not mere acts of consumption. They are acts of transformation of the consumed food and drink into the productive life of the consumer, arousing, reminding, calling upon and driving the consumer into a producer and supplier of food, becoming food, in turn, to many more other lives than he, she or it has lived upon. Thus, the life that became food sustains other lives and thereby lives vicariously in those who consume it.

This is the meaning of Jesus' own death. He lived and died for others, forgiving even the sins of those who had put him to death on the cross. In this he had revealed and witnessed to God as a forgiving Father of sinful humans, calling upon his believers also and enabling them to live and give their lives in the service of fellow humans, as their own brothers and sisters in him, through him and with him. That was to be the way they should remember Jesus, becoming his own body, moral-mystically true to the memorial of Jesus they celebrated in the sacred signs of bread and wine. Eating the body of flesh of Jesus in the signifying form of bread, and

drinking the blood of Jesus in its signifying form of wine were symbols of the consumers' own transformation into the dynamic, life-giving and life-sustaining body and blood of Christ.

Together with the other sacraments, the Eucharist is a complete language of symbolic word and action by itself, with the mystical signification of communion with Jesus and reliving his life, to be mirrored in the moral striving towards compassionate and forgiving service to and in solidarity with all of one's weak and sinful fellow human beings. The Mass is repeated day after day, or Sunday after Sunday, Easter after Easter and Christmas after Christmas, in order to remind the believers that the task and the striving is towards nothing less than the fullness of God himself, and that this, despite all human effort, can find its fulfillment only in the fullness of God's own time. So the Christians are to continue their history of unrelenting striving in the joy of expectation and hope of God's own possibilities, which exceed all that humans can calculate, and will be manifested on the day of Christ's coming again in glory, to glorify with himself his disciples, who have learnt enough from him to be transformed into his own body.

Thus, Christian festivals have a past, present and future socio-historical reference in terms of a time of God's own grace and truth of salvation offered to humans and all fellow humans, integrating history into the eternal life and plan of the Godhead. Time and eternity, thus, meet and are reconciled in a mythical fashion in the Christian worldview. The moral imperative implied in this Christian vision is one of being reconciled to the world as it is, by taking suffering prophetically the sin of the world and its consequences on oneself without a sense of victimization, but rather in the spirit of triumphant optimism, faith, love and forgiveness, thereby, creatively enabling a new and sinless world of human solidarity to emerge under God, as the children of God's own family.