Rhythm as Form of Social Process (Part 1)

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Sommaire

- Rhythm of Duration, Sociation, or Religion-Making? (The Durkheimian School – 1904-1912)
- Morphological Rhythms in Eskimo Societies (Mauss – 1906)

Previous chapter

In the 1900s emerged a new way to address the growing fluidization of the world which was based on a quite different rhythmological ground. Unlike the economists, who were using—at least most of them—a naturalistic paradigm of rhythm partly derived from physiology and life science, the sociologists and anthropologists, who wanted to account for the production and reproduction of the society as a whole, of the various social groups, and their individual members, rejected any continuity between nature and society, and therefore transformed the concept of rhythm in a way that is of a much greater interest to us. This chapter will be devoted to analyze and discuss the main features and consequences of this remarkable conceptual transformation.

Rhythm of Duration, Sociation, or Religion-Making? (The Durkheimian School – 1904-1912)

In 1904, Henri Hubert (1872-1927) published a study on "The Representation of Time in Religion and Magic." His aim was to show how each society builds, in a particular way, the category of time through its calendar of festivals, ceremonies and rituals. Time was not a frame that was simply produced by the succession of states of consciousness. It was an impersonal form, a "rhythm," that enveloped our intimate existence and was derived from social life.

> Divisions in days, weeks, months, years, etc., correspond to the periodicity of rites, festivals, public ceremonies. A calendar expresses the rhythm of the collective activity and, at the same time, its function is to ensure its regularity. (*The Representation of Time…*, 1904, my trans.)

In 1906, Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) published his famous essay entitled *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo: A Study in Social Morphology*. [1] Although it seemed apparently very close to Hubert's contribution, its object was, in fact, significantly different. Mauss, as we shall see below in detail, was not primarily interested in the Eskimo's ritual or religious calendar, but in the *morphological variation* of their social groups during the year. As he indicated in the introduction to his study, he defined their "morphology" as

> the material substratum of societies: this includes the form that societies assume in their patterns of residence, the volume and density of the population, the way in which the population is

> distributed, as well as the entire range of objects that serve as a focus for collective life. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 19, trans. James J. Fox)

Its explicit aim was to understand, by taking advantage of the exceptional amplitude of the variations of Eskimo societies, the way in which,

> the material form of human groups—the very nature and composition of their substratum—affects the different modes of collective activity. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 20, trans. James J. Fox)

Based on his painstaking study of the Eskimo societies, the annual cycle of ritual life appeared to Mauss as a mere constituent—alongside the alternations concerning the legal and technological life—of the more global cycle of society functions. The variations of the social life of the Eskimo did not only provide the basis for a collective construction of the category of time, but also and mainly for the production-reproduction of the group as well as the individuals who composed it. The social rhythm, which for Hubert gave its form and organization to duration, ensured in Mauss, first and foremost, a socio- and psychogenetic function.

In 1912, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) integrated, synthesized, but also arbitrated between the works of his disciples. On the one hand, like Mauss, he pointed out that sociogenesis was rhythmically organized. He described, in terms close to those used by Mauss concerning the Eskimo, the morphological variations of Aboriginal societies.

> The life of the Australian societies passes alternately through two distinct phases. Sometimes the population is broken up into little groups who wander about independently of one another, in their various occupations; each family lives by itself, hunting and fishing, and in a word, trying to procure its indispensable food by all the means in its power. Sometimes, on the contrary, the population concentrates and gathers at determined points for a length of time varying from several days to several months. This concentration takes place when a clan or a part of the tribe is summoned to the gathering, and on this occasion they celebrate a religious ceremony, or else hold what is called a *corrobbori* in the usual ethnological language. (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912, p. 215, trans. Joseph Ward Swain)

On the other hand, his interpretation of these morphological data was quite different from Mauss'. After having very briefly shown that individuals enjoyed alternately a fairly "independent" life and a more "collective" life, Durkheim insisted on the very dissimilar psychological atmosphere of the respective phases: asthenia, monotony, on one side ; enthusiasm, effervescence, of the other. What the most interested him was the particular psychic state into which the participants entered during the phases of social concentration. The description was then almost explicitly based on the notions of imitation and influence and the anthropological dualism, peculiar to the crowd psychology of Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931) and the early Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904)—which he yet sharply criticized. When in the group, the "Primitive" was under the influence of "passions," "emotions," "enthusiasm," "exaltation," and "collective suggestion." He behaved like a "madman"—Le Bon, who followed this line of argument to its ultimate conclusion, added "like a woman and a child"—and it

was from this madness that religion was born.

> These two phases are contrasted with each other in the sharpest way. In the first, economic activity is the preponderating one, and it is generally of a very mediocre intensity. Gathering the grains or herbs that are necessary for food, or hunting and fishing are not occupations to awaken very lively passions. The dispersed condition in which the society finds itself results in making its life uniform, languishing and dull. But when a *corrobbori* takes place, everything changes. Since the emotional and passional faculties of the Primitive are only imperfectly placed under the control of his reason and will, he easily loses control of himself. Any event of some importance puts him quite outside himself. Does he receive good news? There are at once transports of enthusiasm. In the contrary conditions, he is to be seen running here and there like a madman, giving himself up to all sorts of immoderate movements, crying, shrieking, rolling in the dust, throwing it in every direction, biting himself, brandishing his arms in a furious manner, etc. The very fact of the concentration acts as an exceptionally powerful stimulant. When they are once come together, a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation. Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others, and is re-echoed by the others. The initial impulse thus proceeds, growing as it goes, as an avalanche grows in its advance. (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912, p. 215-216, trans. Joseph Ward Swain)

Such was the argument by which Durkheim arrived at his famous thesis on the origin of religion. Moments of social concentration were moments of “effervescence” which, through reciprocal influence, transformed the psyche of individuals and made them collectively aware that “something” dominated them.

> One can readily conceive how, when arrived at this state of exaltation, a man does not recognize himself any longer. Feeling himself dominated and carried away by some sort of an external power which makes him think and act differently than in normal times, he naturally has the impression of being himself no longer. It seems to him that he has become a new being: the decorations he puts on and the masks that cover his face figure materially in this interior transformation, and to a still greater extent, they aid in determining its nature. And as at the same time all his companions feel themselves transformed in the same way and express this sentiment by their cries, their gestures and their general attitude, everything is just as though he really were transported into a special world, entirely different from the one where he ordinarily lives, and into an environment filled with exceptionally intense forces that take hold of him and metamorphose him. How could such experiences as these, especially when they are repeated every day for weeks, fail to leave in him the conviction that there really exist two heterogeneous and mutually incomparable worlds? One is that where his daily life drags wearily along; but he cannot penetrate into the other without at once entering into relations with extraordinary powers that excite him to the point of frenzy. The first is the profane world, the second, that of sacred things. So it is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born. (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912, p. 218-219, trans. Joseph Ward Swain)

This “thing” that imposed itself upon them was only society as an all-encompassing totality, but the

individuals interpreted it as a sacred principle, separated from the profane and the everyday life by a set of interdicts, a principle that they would figure in many ways and whose manifestations they would take great care to respect.

> In fact, we have seen that if collective life awakens religious thought on reaching a certain degree of intensity, it is because it brings about a state of effervescence which changes the conditions of psychic activity. Vital energies are excited, passions more active, sensations stronger; there are even some which are produced only at this moment. (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912, p. 422, trans. Joseph Ward Swain)

In lectures presented near the end of his life, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) gave many counterexamples drawn from ethnographic observations that contradict most of Durkheim's claims. But he also noted the methodological difficulty that I have just mentioned. Durkheim actually constructed his entire theory of religion and, more broadly, of the sacredness, that is, *de facto* his entire theory of society, on an argument drawn directly from the crowdpsychology.

> It contravenes his own rules of sociological method, for fundamentally it offers a psychological explanation of social facts, and he himself has laid it down that such explanations are invariably wrong. It was all very well for him to pour contempt on others for deriving religion from motor hallucination, but I contend that this is precisely what he does himself. No amount of juggling with words like "intensity" and "effervescence" can hide the fact that he derives the totemic religion of the Blackfellows from the emotional excitement of individuals brought together in a small crowd, from what is a sort of crowd hysteria. (*Theories of Primitive Religions*, 1965, p. 67-68)

Starting from the well-known descriptions of morphological rhythms—those by Mauss on the Eskimo or those by the Anglo-Saxon anthropologists who studied the Aboriginal Australians—Durkheim framed them into an interpretation marred by the vicious circles of collective psychology.

> What is the evidence that the Blackfellows are in any particular emotional state during the performance of their ceremonies? And if they are, then it is evident that the emotion is produced, as Durkheim himself claimed, by the rites and the beliefs which occasion them, so the rites and beliefs which occasion them cannot convincingly be adduced as a product of the emotions. Therefore heightened emotion, whatever it may be, and if there is any particular emotional state associated with the ritual, could indeed be an important element in the rites, giving them a deeper significance for the individual, but it can hardly be an adequate causal explanation of them as a social phenomenon. The argument, like so many sociological arguments, is a circular one—the chicken and the egg. The rites create the effervescence, which creates the beliefs, which cause the rites to be performed; or does the mere coming together generate them? Fundamentally Durkheim elicits a social fact from crowd psychology. (*Theories of Primitive Religions*, 1965, p. 68)

This little detour by the Durkheimian theory of sacredness explains, in my opinion, why the interest

for rhythm, as form of the movement of singular and collective sociation, was finally covered in Dukheim's thought by the conception, already expressed by Hubert, who defined the rhythm as simple organization of the duration. It combined a psychological description with a neo-Kantian goal. His primary concern was to determine the "basic forms of religion," that is, to provide a description of the historical as well as systemic origins of sacredness, which was for him the image and foundation of all society. Thus, in the conclusion of *The Elementary Forms…*, the rhythm retained a certain sociogenetic dimension that allowed for "collective renewal," but it supported above all the social construction of the category of time through which the group coordinated its actions and the individuals organized their intimate "duration."

> It is the rhythm of social life which is at the basis of the category of time. […] The rhythm of collective life dominates and embraces the varied rhythms of all the elementary lives from which it results; consequently the time which it expresses dominates and embraces all particular durations. It is time in general. […] This impersonal and total duration is measured, and the guide-lines in relation to which it is divided and organized are fixed by the movements of concentration or dispersion of society; or, more generally, the periodical necessities for a collective renewal. If these critical instants are generally attached to some material phenomenon, such as the regular recurrence of such or such a star or the alternation of the seasons, it is because objective signs are necessary to make this essentially social organization intelligible to all. (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912, p. 440-442, trans. Joseph Ward Swain)

Morphological Rhythms in Eskimo Societies (Mauss – 1906)

To enter the gigantic work of Marcel Mauss, we can start from the few lines that Evans-Pritchard devoted to him. According to the latter, Mauss, in his essay on the Eskimo, aimed at demonstrating, from a thoroughly studied example, the veracity of Durkheim's theses on the determining character of ritual rhythms for religion.

> The general theme of this essay was a demonstration of Durkheim's thesis that religion is a product of social concentration kept alive by periodic gregariousness, so that time, like things, has sacred and secular dimensions. (*Theories of Primitive Religions*, 1965, p. 69)

But this criticism seems much less justified than that directed towards Durkheim. It is true that, in his lectures, Evans-Pritchard was interested only in the theories of religion. But this perspective led him to be quite unfair to Mauss, or at least to oversimplify his approach of the Eskimo, and to neglect all subsequent studies that revealed, in retrospect, how far he already was from a simple application of Durkheim's theories on religion. In his study of the seasonal morphological variations of Eskimo societies, Mauss naturally appropriated a certain number of Durkheimian ideas, especially those concerning the close link between social morphology and the forms of law, enunciated in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893).

However, the whole study seemed to be going in a very different direction from that indicated by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Without being entirely erased, the questions of sacredness, ritual calendar and category of time became secondary. The questions that

came to the fore were those of singular and collective sociation. Whereas, guided, at first, by the postulate that religion was of social nature, Durkheim ended up by reversing his original perspective and making the ritual calendar the true cause of social alternation, Mauss postulated the primacy of the morphological alternation and made the cycle of religious life one of the expressions of this alternation among others—like those of legal life or technological life. One may find this opposition a bit farfetched, and it depends, admittedly, only on a difference of emphasis in symmetrical interactions, but this difference exists and I allow myself to ask the skeptical reader to re-read the texts.

For Durkheim, "the religious life of the Australian passes through successive phases of complete lull and of superexcitation, and social life oscillates in the same rhythm" (*The Elementary Forms…*, p. 219, trans. Joseph W. Swain), whereas, for Mauss, the argument was the exact opposite: "The religion of the Eskimo has the same rhythm as their social organization" (*Seasonal Variations…*, p. 57, trans. James J. Fox).

I apologize for here again recapitulating the content of the essay on the Eskimo, but it is so often cited second-hand and abusively simplified, that this little effort of patience required from the reader should not be useless. He or she will better appreciate what distinguished or brought Mauss closer to Durkheim before him, or to Evans-Pritchard or Granet after him.

The Eskimo lived and still live in regions characterized by a clear climatic opposition between summer and winter. In summer, the sunlight lasts for a very long time, the temperature rises above zero, the seas are no longer covered with ice, sea animals (seals and walrus in particular) but also the terrestrial animals (wild reindeer, polar bears, musk oxen, etc.) are scattered throughout the territory. In winter, the sunlight is very short, the temperature drops below zero, the ice is re-forming, the animals become inaccessible except those that concentrate on certain spots of the coast.

Following these climatic and biotopic variations, the small Eskimo societies which, at the end of the 19th century, were installed along the coasts in series of independent and sometimes rival "settlements," regularly took entirely opposite social forms. In the summer months, they lived scattered in small family groups independent of each other. They lived in isolated tents and nomadized on huge stretches of coast in pursuit of game and fish. During the winter, all families gathered in one station. They lived in houses made of stone, skin or snow *(igloo)* which were close to one another and which always sheltered several related families—that is, combined in a very large family extended to all collaterals. The number of these families could sometimes rise to ten. In some cases, all members of a settlement lived in a single long-house. In the center of the resort, there was also a common house, the *kashim*, which served as a meeting and ceremony venue for the entire community.

Mauss showed that this morphological opposition had an "impact" on the ritual life, the representations and the legal life (personal and real)—he also mentioned consequences on technology, without however developing them (*Seasonal Variations…*, p. 57, n. 1). In summer, the religious life was minimal.

> The religion of the Eskimo has the same rhythm as their social organization. There is, as it were, a summer religion and a winter religion; or rather, there is no religion during the summer. The only rites that are practiced are private, domestic rituals: everything is reduced to the rituals of birth and death and to the observation of certain prohibitions. All the myths that (as we shall see) fill the consciousness of the Eskimo during the winter appear to be forgotten during the summer. Life is that of the layman. Even magic, which is often a purely private matter, hardly appears except as a rather simple sort of medical science whose rituals are minimal. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 57, trans. James J. Fox)

The jural life was organized on an individualistic basis. Weapons, tools, clothing, amulets, kayaks were clearly identified as individual properties. In the same way, each woman owned the family lamp, the pots and all the household instruments.

> All these household objects are identified, in a magico-religious way, with the person. Eskimo are reluctant to lend, give or exchange objects that have already been used. They are buried with the dead. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 71, trans. James J. Fox)

The personal law was characterized by a patriarchal power, which gave the head of the family all authority, but women were so important in the domestic economy that they actually enjoyed a great deal of freedom. Heads of family had almost absolute independence. Except for the whale, they hunted alone or with their children.

> Each daring fisherman or adventurous hunter brings his prize to his tent or stores it in his “cache” without having to consider anyone else. The individual is therefore as sharply distinguished as the small family. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 70, trans. James J. Fox)

In winter, everything changed. First, religion came back to life.

> By contrast, the winter settlement lives in a state of continuous religious exaltation. This is the time when myths and legends are transmitted from generation to generation. The slightest event requires the more or less solemn intervention of magicians, *angekok*. A minor taboo can be lifted only by public ceremonies and by visits to the entire community. At every possible opportunity these events are turned into impressive performances of public shamanism to avert the famine that threatens the group. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 58, trans. James J. Fox)

All these ceremonies and rituals most often took place in the *Kashim*, but they could also occur in the open air, like the “Bladder Festival” during which the bladders of all the marine animals killed “by the entire group” during the year were thrown into the sea, in the hope that the souls of the animals, which they were believed to contain, would go back to be reincarnated in female seals and walruses. Masked dances were performed before the entire community. In some cases, these ceremonies would give rise to some exchange of women. In Cumberland Sound, a mask representing a divinity coupled men and women regardless of their kinship but by their names, that is to say, as in

the past the mythical ancestors after whom present individuals were named and whose persons they were living representatives. The festival of the dead was one of the most important, along with those which bound the group with the wild animals, because it ensured the continuity of the group in time and integrated its dead into it through a complex trade of gifts between the living and the dead.

> Since it is customary that the latest child to be born takes the name of the last person who has died, the feast begins with a request to the souls of the dead to become reincarnated for a short time in the namesake which each of the dead has in the settlement. Next, these living namesakes of the dead are laden with presents, gifts are exchanged among all who have assembled, and then the souls are dismissed and they leave their human dwellings to return to the land of the dead. Thus, at this time, the group not only regains its unity but sees itself re-formed, through this same ritual, as an ideal group composed of all successive generations form the earliest times. Mythic and historic ancestors, as well as recent dead, come to mingle with the living and all are in communion through the exchange of gifts. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 59, trans. James J. Fox)

The jural life also changed and took a much more collective, almost communist aspect.

> The nuclear family, so clearly individualized during the summer, tends to disappear to some extent within a much wider group […] the group who together occupies the same igloo or long-house. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 64, trans. James J. Fox)

Property no longer had the individualistic or domestic character particular to summer. Movable objects might be borrowed without any obligation of precise return.

> In contrast to the egoism of the individual or of the nuclear family, a generous collectivism prevails. […] The long-house belongs to none of the families who live in it; it is the joint property of all the “housemates.” It is built and repaired jointly. Even land appears to be collectively appropriated. Collective rights over food, instead of being limited to the family as in the summer, extend to the entire house. Game is divided equally among all members. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 72, trans. James J. Fox)

Finally, the authority was no longer patriarchal and was incarnated in the person of a chief whose powers were very limited and who served only to facilitate the functioning of the group.

> The head is designated not by birth but because of certain personal characteristics. He is generally an old man, a good hunter or the father of one; a rich man, often the owner of an *umiak*; an *angekok* or magician. His powers are not extensive; his functions are to receive strangers and to distribute places and portions of meat. He is asked to regulate internal differences. But his rights over his companions are, in the end, quite limited. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 66, trans. James J. Fox)

When he existed, this chief was firmly controlled by the community and must redistribute his wealth.

> A mystic efficacy is attributed to these exchanges and to this redistribution: they are necessary for success in hunting; for without generosity, there can be no luck. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 73, trans. James J. Fox)

Thus Mauss concluded.

> This economic communism of winter is strikingly parallel to the sexual communism during the same season; it shows, once more, the degree of moral unity that the Eskimo community attains at this time. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 73, trans. James J. Fox)

Next chapter

Footnotes

[1] The text was published in *L'Année sociologique* under the heading "Année 9 (1904-1905)" but actually printed by Felix Alcan in 1906. I will therefore use this second date. Page references to James J. Fox's translation.