

Ritual Genesis: Constructing Systems of Belief

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Abstract. Throughout clay's history, material choices directly shape cultural practices and the structuring of ceremonial and mundane living. Within this context, "ritual" is a transient term describing actions covering a broad scope of day-to-day and elevated/special circumstances that retains potency depending on the contexts of the performed action. I will be investigating how rituals rooted in ceramic materials, impact the lives of those who participate in the ritual. References will be made to very personal rituals I have recently created and to those of foreign cultures. I hope audiences will question their associations with their own rituals and will examine how their beliefs shape how they live.

1. Introduction

Clay has been central to human cultural development, linked not just superficially by simply existing along humanity for so long, but by being the very spark that created many of the intrinsically necessary social, economic, and political systems we live with today [1].

It is no surprise then that clay would enhance less secular developments in human existence. The strength of clay through the process of firing and the abilities to decorate clays surface, with a range of textures and materials determined by what is commercially and regionally available, makes it supremely suited as a tool to advance sacred ritual practices and ideologies.

It is the space between the genesis and existence of these disparate structures that the potential for creation of constantly evolving, continually contemporary rituals can be engaged and taken ownership of by everyone who seeks to benefit. By examining the thousands of years old winemaking technique of a foreign culture, and by examining the impetus for and continuation of a very contemporary ritual of my own design this essay focuses on interactions with ceramic vessels that give rise and awareness to ritual experience. My goal is not just to give clay legitimacy through ubiquity, it is for an audience to apply similar reaches of thought to areas of their own lives.

2. Discussion



Figure 1: [Qvevri](#)

To be clear, my definition of ritual distances itself from the panacea described by actions that alleviate anxiety directly or through religious intervention [2] and is instead an act of preparation for a wide range of emotional/physical states as well as an instance of observation of a celebrated or mundane entity. In this manner, a ritual is an entity which operates on the person carrying out the action in the present so that an ephemeral future may be positively engaged. A ritual is any action that is carried out using material and non-material parts repeatedly, with purpose to enhance any persons life through observation of and meditation on the action. By placing emphasis on the material aspect of rituals, we can better understand the environment we operate in because the signifiers we interact with are based in that environment

[3].

For the people of Georgia, clay has allowed them the opportunity to be the first to create wine from grapes [4] granting them an extremely potent cultural legacy and life way coexisting with the cycles of grape growing and fermentation, as well as a major economic export allowing them to compete in the global economy--until recently.

Georgians developed a unique style for fermentations and storage of wine using large egg-shaped vessels called, qvevri (Figure 1). These earthenware vessels, ranging in size from 800 to 3,500 liters, are covered in limestone and lined with beeswax, are buried under the earth where they receive and store wine at different stages of the making process. The results are often considered pure because no flavor from the vessel is imparted in the end product. While this vessel has been around for thousands of years, it's relatively recent associations with Russia have caused the ritual aspect of production to flux. Under Soviet control, Georgia produced wine feverishly to appeal directly to the Russian pallet. As would be expected, this significantly altered the standards of how

Georgians perceive their wine, ultimately a vital part of their cultural existence. At the beginning of 2006, Russia imposed an embargo on Georgian wine and mineral water [5] devastating wine exports and threatening to force traditional methods to hibernate. The closing of easy markets however, has led to greater global awareness of Georgian wine as well as a curious interest in the unique methods it is created by; even to spark similar practices in Virginia at Castle Hill Cider. This severance could lead to a renewed ownership of a very environmentally specific ritual culture of Georgian winemaking that provides initiative to keep a Georgian way of life contemporarily relevant and continually sustainable.



Figure 2, *Plate*, Linda Christianson

As part of this investigation I set out to create my own ritual, and upon analysis, I'm surprised to find that clay played a larger role in the ritual's existence than I anticipated. Beginning in January of 2012, I invited a friend to my house to share food served on handmade vessels. I chose this as a central focus because we both believe very deeply in the importance of ceramic vessels (Figures 2 and 3). My intentions were for this to become a patterned experience that would ultimately prepare the foundation for an extensive friendship. With the first iteration of this action being a huge success, this action has fully become a ritual part of my existence serving as a necessary instance of communion where we listen to and share ideas, we play games, and we prepare ourselves for the imminent and projected future. Our individual personalities and values are what sustain the relationship, but it's through our belief in clay as a potent material capable of building and retaining community that we even had the opportunity to meet; to share a bit of space and time in a meaningful way. Regardless of

our personal compatibilities, we would not have had the opportunity to meet without our involvement in the ceramic arts. In this way clay will continue to be a relational material exerting incredible communal force on the rest of our lives.

3. Conclusion



Figure 3, *Cups*, Sequoia Miller

Material associations invite and give guidance to ritual practices that sustain and enhance areas of existence. These rituals of material maintain our emotional/physical wellness. For many Georgians they secured cultural existence and for myself they provide personal wellness. Clay is the genesis material of our existence, an extremely powerful material in the pantheon of human material importance. Clay allows for established rituals to persist, and for infant rituals to grow and it is in the vast cultural and historical space between these stages of existence that our beliefs are constructed.

4. Acknowledgements

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[2] "ritual." *The American Heritage® Stedman's Medical Dictionary*. Houghton Mifflin Company. 01 Mar. 2012. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/ritual>

[3] Boivin, Nicole, *Grasping the Elusive and Unknowable: Material Culture in Ritual Practice, Material Religion*, Volume 5, Issue 3 (Nov., 2009), pp. 10-20

[4] Keys, David, "Now That's What you Call A Real Vintage: Professor Unearths 8,000 Year Old Wine", Dec. 28, 2003 *The Independent*, online resource, February 15, 2012

[Figure 1] Georgian Wine Legacy, <http://georgianwinelegacy.se/eng/qvevri>

[5] "Russian Wine Move Draws Protests", March 30, 2006, *BBC Online*, February 15, 2012, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4860454.stm>

[Figure 2] Christianson, Linda. *Plate*, 2012, <http://www.redlodgeclaycenter.com/piece-detail.php?rc=33&rm=25&aid=22&type=artist>

[Figure 3] Miller, Sequoia. *Mugs*, <http://64.33.35.14/sequoia-miller-amb10.htm>