Art-Ritual: Connection, Flow, Oneness, and Unification

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In the smaller traditional societies of the vast majority of human history, art is not separate from ritual and religion does not exist as a separate institution. Life's individual and social activities range from the more instrumental to the more expressive with art-ritual being toward the expressive end of this continuum.

The expressive dimension of culture is itself a continuum ranging from the partial "time outs" in activities of relaxing, sharing meals, chatting, joking through more continuous playful behavior to full "time outs" in music, song, dance, game, story telling, birth to death rituals, etc. What is common to all of these expressive behaviors/events is a mental shift away from intellect/verbal thinking/analysis toward intuitive/visual thinking/syntheses and a behavioral shift in the direction of the exploratory "as if" more than the present fixated "is." In this shift we first highlight the sense of being connected to one another and/or the natural world and then invite the experience of flow into the situation.

Flow is the sense that something inclusive is happening largely without effort. Individuals experience flow in personal events of long range running, swimming, skiing, etc. when they pass through first and second "wind" and allow the activity to become "automatic." Groups of individuals experience flow when their collective behavior unites them to the point of participation becoming effortless at the same time it is all consuming.

Flow is experienced to different degrees in different "time out" expressive culture activities when the conditions are conducive. In its extreme form – when everything goes "right" – this flow experience leads to the sense of connection becoming so complete, inclusive and strong that it leads to the experience of unification. Of course, ingestion of certain drugs can produce the same range of flow experiences – one reason drug use is so common in many ritual traditions. While flow and unification are central in expressive culture events, these experiences are not restricted to these events. In this regard, the deep experience of Love results when the ultimate pursuit of Flow carries the participants to the profound sense of oneness – all else "disappearing."

Understanding and experiencing the unity of reality by generating flow in "Time Out" expressive events is the primary function of expressive culture – Art-Ritual. There are many other more specific social and psychological functions of expressive culture, but unification is the key underlying function. It is this function that serves to balance the understanding and experience of reality that

prevails in everyday instrumental activities – everything as separate and subject to manipulation to benefit individual and social needs – the ME values of survival. Very importantly, by promoting connection, flow and unification, expressive culture supports the alternative WE perspective of communal and ecological values.

Human societies are most successful for the long term when they appropriately balance input from the ME and WE perspectives. Expressive culture plays a critical role in this regard. Art-Ritual is the time out expressive culture realm of behavior where individuals experience the sense of self and the rest of the social and natural world as connected with this experience, scaling from belonging to sharing to caring to flowing to oneness to unification.

Expressive Culture/Art-Ritual in Complex Society

In complex societies expressive culture is initially absorbed by the institution of religion. Ceremony then separates from ritual to celebrate social issues while art becomes more secular in orientation. Eventually, entertainment separates from art when expressive culture becomes less participant and more audience oriented. Entertainment then trends toward the sensational to engage the secondarily involved audience. In later complex societies, artists and entertainers often become full time specialists rather than ordinary community citizens with expressive talents as in traditional societies. In its latest iteration, entertainment becomes a media based industry – popular culture – catering in large measure to sensational secular themes of sex and/or violence to meet the goals of economic enterprise more than anything having to do with the unification perspective. Art in this modern context becomes “fine art” where the pursuit of technological and “artistic” innovation develops as the primary goal and unification in most cases moves to the periphery. And as secular materialism comes to dominate the complex culture worldview, religion descends into subculture fundamentalism with the unification experience being used to reify dogmatic belief. For the most part, traditional expressive culture gets converted in modern complex culture to entertainment and ceremony with traditional Art-Ritual being sustained in “alternative” subgroups.

Conclusion

Retrieving a “modern” version of unification oriented traditional expressive culture is an important goal in behalf of promoting greater ME-WE balance in modern complex societies. Justifying pursuit of this goal in terms of modern theory about the nature of reality is a primary goal of my worldview conception – Dynamic Humanism. Revival is possible in the modern context of universal energy theory, human energy fields, and the combined input from studies in intuition, creativity, psi phenomena, psychedelic drugs, and mindfulness.