Political myth: the political uses of history, tradition and memory

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NOTE

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Chapter 6

Commemoration
1. Introduction

I argued in chapter 2 on the Kosovo Myth that it was the commemorative process that transformed Serbian collective memories and tradition about Kosovo into a modern political myth. The importance of ritual and ceremony to communicating political myth was recognised and developed by Cassirer in *The Myth of The State*. Cassirer’s approach to ritual focussed on the psychological impact of ‘living out’ a political myth. For Cassirer, participation in ritual performances undermined awareness of personality and replaced individual responsibility with collective responsibility. While not underrating the psychological impact of participation in ritual performances, my emphasis is to analyse commemoration in terms of the social construction of political myth. I have already argued that it is through collective memory and tradition that a community constructs an image of the past and gives that past normative meaning. However, it is in the commemorative process that this past is sacralised and it is a sacralised past that is communicated through political myth.

I will therefore focus in this chapter on how the commemorative process transforms collective memory and tradition into political myth. I argue that, in the commemorative process of communicating collective memory and tradition, a political myth gains its coherence and unity and thereby the potential to evoke a sense of historical continuity, to define common identity and to justify a political community’s legitimacy claims. A political myth communicates the norms, values, interests and legitimacy claims of the group with the power to shape, re-shape and
interpret historic events of symbolic importance to its maintenance. Because the
'meaning' of a political myth is shaped by commemoration, the ability to control it is
an essential factor in the success of legitimacy claims for any political elite. What is
commemorated is therefore highly selective. Only those historic events of symbolic
importance to the collective memory of a political community are selected. The
selection and presentation of subjects of commemoration is part of the political
process. As such, commemoration is often challenged by those whose legitimacy
claims are based on a counter-memory or alternative interpretations to an existing
political myth. Relationships between collective memory, tradition and
commemoration are dynamic. I shall argue that such dynamic tension is the very
essence of political myth.

In this chapter I develop a conceptual framework to analyse commemorative
processes which specifies relations between collective memory, tradition and
commemoration. Moreover, the nature of commemorative ritual, and its narrative
cycle is based on significant anniversaries which can reinforce existing collective
memories or create counter-memories. Hence, my discussion of commemoration is
critical in establishing the essential elements which constitute a successful political
myth. My synthesis of the relationship between collective memory, tradition and
commemoration, is central to understanding the nature of modern political myth.
2. Commemorative Ritual and Collective Memory.

The commemorative process has the potential to transform collective memory and tradition into powerful legitimating political myths. In turn, the transformational process has the capacity to reframe both collective memory and tradition. I have already stressed that the dynamic relationship between collective memory, tradition and commemoration is the essence of political myth. It is important first to examine the nature of the interrelationship. I will argue throughout this chapter that the identity of a political community is largely communicated and constructed through the process of commemorative ritual. Moreover, this process also defines the core of a political community's collective memory; those symbolically significant historic events that structure a community's beliefs about themselves. Hutton conceptualises the structuring of a community's beliefs through commemorative ceremony as,

a mnemonic technique for localising collective memory. .... By enhancing the structure of mnemonic imagery, commemoration lends clarity and stability to collective memory. It throws into bold relief the paradigmatic designs of collective memory, and thereby reveals its propensity for synthesis .... It serves the need of a community to resist change in its self-conceptions.¹

Such mnemonic imagery provides a sense of stability and continuity linking commemorative ritual with the creation and recreation of collective memory and tradition. There are three aspects of the interrelationship between commemorative

¹ Hutton, P.H. 'Collective Memory and Collective Mentalities: The Halbwachs - Aries Connection', op cit, p.315
ritual, collective memory and tradition that need to be examined, however, before analysing the nature of ritual and commemoration in greater detail. First, commemorative ritual is a dynamic process that both reaffirms and recreates collective memory. Second, commemorative ritual sacralises those symbolically important people and events that underpin the legitimacy claims of a political community. Third, commemorative ritual provides an opportunity for these symbolically significant events to be collectively re-experienced through performance. Through repetition, commemorative ritual provides a community with a sense of historical continuity while emphasising those key events that define a common identity and justify a community’s legitimacy claims. It is from these three aspects of the interrelationship between commemorative ritual, collective memory and tradition that the formation of a political myth can be conceived.

The first point to note about the interrelationship between commemorative ritual and collective memory is that commemorative rituals both communicate and structure the collective memory of a political community. Rituals are also most often associated with a calendrical cycle of commemorative ceremonies, “which present the past to the present and justify and strengthen the one by reference to the other.” 2 Commemorative activity brings the past into the present while at the same time infusing the past with the present. Commemoration transforms both past and present

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to serve the current needs of the political elite. The presentation of the past through structured repetition of the symbolic acts found in all commemorative ceremonies led Braithwaite to conclude that “the purpose and function of the ritual is to affirm shared cultural identity.” As Kaplan further argues, however, ritual not only affirms, “for collective rites (also) create a sense of community.” Burke calls it the ‘collective representation’ of the past, for while commemorative “rituals are re-enactments of the past, acts of memory,... they are also attempts to impose interpretations of the past, to shape memory. They are in every sense collective re-presentations.” While commemorative ritual, in form and structure is relatively fixed, its content, the collective memory of a community, is more open to negotiation and modification. The commemorative process therefore not only provides the opportunity for a political community to reaffirm and endorse those memories central to its identity, but also provides the opportunity to either revivify or modify those memories. It gives collective memory its essentially dynamic and fluid quality. Collective memories can

5 Burke, P. ‘History as Social Memory’, in Butler, T. [Ed.] Memory : History, Culture and the Mind, op cit, p. 101. Handelman warns against oversimplifying rituals as only re-presentations of some form of social reality. Semioticians and symbolic anthropologists of all persuasions likely would insist that any and every public occasion is necessarily a ‘re-presentation’ of some reality - at the very least, as metaphor or trope that, commonsensically, remain the basis for ordinary language usage of the terms, ‘symbol’ and ‘symbolic of’. But they should recognise that this is so if one focuses only on the immediate relationship between social order and public event. This focus necessarily entails, in all cases, the utter privileging of social order over its own creations - public events - thereby denying and phenomenal autonomy to the design and practice of the latter. Then public events of any type are reduced to mere ‘expressions’ of social order. D. Handelman, D. Models and Mirrors : Towards an Anthropology of Public Events, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p.45-46.
6 Handelman notes that ritual “structures have relatively high degrees of replicability. That is, whenever a particular occasion is enacted, it is put together from more-or-less similar elements; it is performed by more-or-less the same cast of characters; and it passes through more-or-less the same sequences of action” ibid, p.12.
thus be revised or reordered and recast in a form that better suits the current needs of a political community.

The second aspect of the interrelationship of commemorative ritual and collective memory is that it sacralises the people and events commemorated thereby contributing to the creation of a mythic rather than an historic past. Acts of commemoration and ritual re-enactment of symbolically significant events from a group's past, are essential to the whole process of constructing and shaping collective memory. The act of commemoration most often sacralises events and personalities that both define and legitimate the claims of a political elite. Furthermore, the act of commemoration is not just confined to ritual performances. Collective memory is not only shaped by the symbolic re-enactment of commemorative acts associated with anniversaries, festivals, burials and memorials, for “commemoration takes place in discourse as well as practice, and may take the form of explicit or coded references to cult figures and events which signal shared political assumptions.” Commemorative discourse can be embedded in school curricula, film and theatrical presentations, literature, song, the print and electronic media, and the political landscape in general. As Gildea notes, “both discourse and practice serve to define a mythical past which promotes the interests of the community that constructs it.” It is a mythic past that is both created by and informs collective memory. However, it is not the past in general

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7 Gildea, R. *The Past in French History*, op cit, p. 10.
8 *ibid.*
that is mythologised but only those heightened 'islands of time'\(^9\) that define the
unique identity of a political elite. These 'islands of time' can be conceptualised as
existing at the intersection of linear and cyclical representations of historic time.\(^{10}\)

The third aspect of the relationship between commemorative ritual and
collective memory is the transformative nature of the performance of commemorative
ritual. In itself it is a shared experience that contributes to the creation and recreation
of collective memory. Because a commemorative act is performed collective
practices are endorsed and enhanced. Common experiences are provided "where
individuals being closely united to one another reaffirm in common their common
sentiments."\(^{11}\) Commemorative ceremonies can therefore signal the shared political
assumptions of a group. Such events are used to symbolise those points in the
historical narrative that explain and structure a political elite's self-image and its idea
of community. An historic event re-experienced through the ritual performance of
symbolic acts both reinforces and reshapes collective memory. Ritual performance
also extends the collective memory beyond the living memory of individual
members. The continuity of an historical narrative is thus emphasised while the

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\(^9\) This concept will be more fully explained in 6.2 'Master Commemorative Narrative'.

\(^{10}\) For example Yael Zerubavel suggests that "the tension between the linear and cyclical perception of history
often underlies the construction of collective memory." Zerubavel, Y. *Recovered Roots : Collective Memory and
The Making of Israeli National Tradition*, op cit, p. 7.

signposting of specific events, "indicates the recurrence of historical patterns in the group's experience."\textsuperscript{12}

These three aspects of interrelations between commemorative ritual and collective memory emphasise the importance of ritual to creating, communicating and maintaining identity in a political community and in sustaining its political elite. However, the question of just how the commemorative ritual process transforms memory and tradition into political myth raises a number of conceptual problems. The actual process of communicating through ritual, is much more complex than the mere assertion of its importance can identify. It is therefore necessary to analyse more precisely the nature of commemorative ritual and some of the difficulties associated with its conceptualisation.


The question of precisely how commemorative ritual transforms memory and tradition into political myth is problematic. For a start, not only is there no clearly accepted definition of ritual, but also there is considerable dispute over whether the term can be applied to modern, secular society. For example, Robert Bocock’s 1974 study of \textit{Rituals in Industrial Society} was based on the “assumption … that ritual is

\textsuperscript{12} Zerubavel, Y. \textit{op cit}, p. 7.
more important in industrial societies than has been usually thought." There is also some difficulty with conceptualising ritual in terms of a 'model of' or 'model for' existing or desired social relationships as such models tend to obscure the actual politics of constructing a dominant model. Such difficulties will be touched on but not dwelt upon, as the debate over the subtle nuances associated with ritual behaviour is not central to this study.

Crucially, there are two aspects of ritual that form the core of the commemorative process. First, ritual is a symbolic activity which is both expressive and presentational. Second, ritual is performative and designed to be experienced rather than reflected upon. It is the capacity of commemorative ritual to shape memory through participation in a structured collective experience that I will emphasise, for it is this that substantially defines the relationship of the individual to a polity. It is also the experience of ritual as symbolic communication that gives political myth its power to shape collective memory and tradition.

3.1 Defining Ritual.

Commemorative ritual needs to be understood in relation to modernity which, however, leads to considerable conceptual difficulties. Modern anthropological and sociological studies of the role of ritual in traditional societies can provide new insights into the political significance of ritual in both early modern societies and

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However, proferring an ahistorical concept of rituals associated with traditional pre-modern societies or with religious observance can lead to conceptual difficulties when such analyses are applied to any society, especially modern secular societies. Moreover, Connerton notes that "there is substantial disagreement as to how the word ritual should be used." It is born out in most studies, such as Peter Burke's statement that, "ritual is a difficult term to catch in a definition," or Christel Lane's comment in her study of ritual in a modern industrial society that, "the task of clarifying the concept of ritual presents an unusually large problem." The conceptual problem arises mostly because ritual is regarded as

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14 Peter Burke's analysis of festival and carnival in Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, New York University Press, New York, 1978, stressed that while "carnival was a holiday, a game, an end in itself, needing no explanation or justification. It was a time of ecstasy, of liberation." (p.186) Carnival also "celebrated the community itself... a dramatic expression of community solidarity." ibid, p.200 The dramatic presentation of community solidarity is also picked up in the detailed analyses of Renaissance Venice in Muir, E. Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981, Muir, E. & Weissman, R.F.E. 'Social and Symbolic Places in Renaissance Venice and Florence', in Agnew, J.A. & Duncan, J.S. (Eds.) The Power of Place : Bringing Together Geographical and Sociological Imaginations, Unwin Hyman, Boston, 1989 and in Renaissance Florence by Trevxler, R.C. Public life in Renaissance Florence, Academic Press, New York. For example in writing of Florence, Muir comments that, "these regular communal affairs reveal an indigenous civic identity and ideology based upon broad consensus about social values. Civic rituals were commentaries on the city, its internal dynamics, and its relationship with the outside world." Muir, E. Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice, op cit, p. 5. The survival of ritual practices in modern societies is examined by Bocock, R. op cit, and Boym, S. Common Places : Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994 while Lane, C. op cit, analyses the conscious use of ritual in the former Soviet Union.

15 In his study of civic ritual in Renaissance Venice, Muir observes that "the difficulty exists because most social science theories about ritual are notably ahistorical. To a large degree such theories emphasise how rituals function to reduce intra-group violence, to serve as communal bonding systems, to communicate shared values, to underline the exclusiveness of cultural units and to assign an emotional value to handed down customs. Such an approach tells much about social stability and cultural equilibrium, but little about the processes of historical change or the discontinuities between society and culture. It is least satisfactory in explaining how rituals change in meaning". Muir, E. op cit, p. 58-59.

16 Connerton, P. How Societies Remember, op cit, p. 44.


18 Lane, C. op cit, p. 11.
fundamentally incompatible with modernity. Accordingly, Bocock notes that, "there is an attitude held by some liberal rationalists towards nearly all rituals and ceremonials which sees them as unnecessary and unfortunate. They are unnecessary for mature, adult people, and they are unfortunate in that the basis of their appeal is emotional, and not intellectual."\(^{19}\) Despite the weak premises of such value judgments and Bocock's argument that, "ritual action should not be seen as necessarily irrational, or non-rational"\(^{20}\), most writers assume that modernity makes ritual behaviour largely irrelevant. For example in an extensive survey of the current literature on ritual, Christel Lane concluded that,

one of the clearest points emerging from the current debate among Western scholars on ritual in modern industrial society is the conclusion that ritual sacralising the social system is on the wane in contemporary society. It is held that both the structure of that society and the dispositions of its citizens have contributed to its weakening appeal and militate against any further creation of such rites in the future ..... It is argued by these diverse authors that a general value system, the precondition for a system of rituals sacralising a social system, can no longer be sustained by a modern industrial society. In such a society, it is said, values do not differ only between various functional sub-groups but even within them, and constant support for them from authoritative institutions is no longer available.\(^{21}\)

It is beyond the scope of this study to analyse the 'ritual debate' Lane refers to, other than to take from it those aspects of ritual that have a direct bearing on the way political myth is communicated. It should be noted that, although Lane's study of the Former Soviet Union up to 1980 presents a strong case for disproving the above assertion, the general sense of her summation of the weakening appeal of ritual is

\(^{19}\) Bocock, R. \textit{op cit}, p. 21.
\(^{20}\) \textit{ibid}, p. 48.
\(^{21}\) Lane, C. \textit{op cit}, p. 253.
basically correct. The mass, highly visible rituals that characterised Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, for example, have largely disappeared from current politics, but it does not mean that ritual itself no longer plays a role in modern society. Recent scholarship on commemoration and memory\textsuperscript{22} has refocussed attention on more subtle and less visible forms of ritual that persist in all political systems. For Connerton, the more subtle forms of ritual serve as facades of apparent stability in a rapidly changing world. Bocock also argues that the facades erected by rituals mask the realities of political power.

Not all rituals serve such an overt function however. For example, in England, participants in rituals involving the Royal Family "do not see that the Coronation, and other rituals surrounding the Royal Family, such as the giving of honours and decorations, the State Opening of Parliament, serve to legitimate the existing set of families who rule economically, politically... and militarily."\textsuperscript{23} These highly visible 'public' rituals in fact mask the realities of the political process. As well as masking political realities, Connerton states that the whole \textit{raison d'être} of a commemorative ritual is to establish direct continuity with the past. The calendrical repetition of the commemorative narrative reinforces such continuity. However, Connerton also strongly argues that the process of constructing rituals of continuity is logically inconsistent with the very idea of modernity.

\textsuperscript{22} See in particular Handelman, D. \textit{op cit}, and Zerubavel, Y. \textit{op cit}.
\textsuperscript{23} Bocock, R. p. 103.
Under the conditions of modernity the celebration of recurrence can never be anything more than a compensatory strategy, because the very principle of modernity itself denies the idea of life as a structure of celebrated recurrence. It denies credence to the thought that the life of an individual or community either can or should derive its value from acts of consciously performed recall, from the reliving of the prototypical. Connerton argues therefore, that the conscious creation of rituals that claim direct continuity with the past can never be more than a compensatory substitute for the uncertainties of modernity. For Connerton such rituals are palliative facades that mask the realities of modernity in a formalised, rigid structure.

That is why invented rites, involving sets of recorded rules and procedures, as in modern coronation rites, are marked out by their inflexibility. By virtue of their procedural inflexibility they are held to represent, as nowhere else, the idea of the unchanging for a society of institutionalised innovation. Their intention is reassurance and their mood is nostalgic. It is not, therefore, the experience of recapitulative imitation, of mythic identification, but the display of formal structure that is the most evident mark of such rites. This formal display of continuity is therefore no more than a simulacra; an empty set of ritual gestures that lack the cognitive power and multivocality of a fully developed ritual symbol. For Connerton therefore, "although the process of modernisation does indeed generate invented rituals as compensatory devices, the logic of modernisation erodes those conditions which make acts of ritual re-enactment, of recapitulative imitation, imaginatively possible and persuasive." Connerton is overstating his case when he claims that the 'logic of modernisation' negates the effectiveness of ritual in modern societies. However, his argument that modern rituals are highly structured,

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24 Connerton, P. op cit, p. 64.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
formalised, compensatory devices used to mask the social and political realities of rapid change will be further developed in chapter 7 on myth and political legitimacy.

As well as the problematic relationship between ritual and modernity, there are also some conceptual difficulties in relating ritual to ceremony, tradition and myth. Because “commemorative ceremonies share two features of all other rituals; formalism and performativity”\(^{27}\) and because no distinction is being made between the religious and the secular as implied by the terms ritual and ceremony, my study uses the two terms interchangeably.\(^{28}\) However, the symbolic acts that constitute a ritual should not be confused with tradition.\(^{29}\) The ritual is not in itself a tradition. As Shils points out, “the reenactment is not the tradition; the tradition is the pattern which guides the reenactment.”\(^{30}\) Ritual is also often distinguished from myth, although even here the distinction is sometimes blurred. Ritual and myth are often used interchangeably or as Muir states that, “myth and ritual are considered two different ways of expressing the same thing.”\(^{31}\) It is the close connection between myth and ritual that is also supported by Bruce Lincoln who writes, “the difference between the two, although hardly negligible, are in large measure a matter of genre,

\(^{27}\) ibid, p. 61.
\(^{28}\) This follows Lane’s approach to ritual and ceremony in the Soviet Union where she decided to “abandon a consistent analytical distinction between ritual and ceremony and instead to use the two interchangeably. The word ‘ritual’ is used both to refer to a single act and as a collective noun referring to the whole genre”. Lane, C. op cit, p. 15.
\(^{29}\) Shils is quite emphatic about distinguishing between the actual performance of a ritual and the message that performance conveys. See Shils E. op cit, p. 31.
\(^{30}\) ibid.
\(^{31}\) Muir, E. op cit, p. 58.
ritual discourse being primarily gestural and dramatic; mythic discourse, verbal and narrative." There are also structural differences between myth and ritual. Myth is mutable and subject to variation, whereas even though the structure of ritual gradually evolves over time, in general ritual is fixed and invariable. It is this structural difference which determines the relationship between what is being communicated and how it is being received. A difference highlighted by Connerton.

Ritual and myth will then be seen to differ structurally in at least one major respect. A myth can be narrated .... To recite a myth is not necessarily to accept it. What the telling of a myth does not do, and what the performance of a ritual essentially does do, is to specify the relationship that obtains between the performers of the ritual and what it is that they are performing. It follows from this that there is an element of invariance encoded into the structure of ritual that is not present in myth. While recognising structural differences between myth and ritual, my study will not pursue such fine distinctions. Rather, both myth and ritual will be treated as symbolic modes of discourse that essentially communicate, in different ways, the myths of a political community.

3.2 Ritual as Cultural Management.

Commemorative ritual is more than just a palliative facade that generates a reassuring nostalgic glow to mask the harsh realities of institutionalised change. Commemorative ritual is also a form of cultural management that communicates the

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33 Connerton, P. op cit, p. 54.
norms and values of the political elite. Ritual enactments present symbolic representations of relationships between an individual and a group and relationships between groups of differing status such as are found between political elites and non-elites. The ritual enactment of social relationships presents both a 'model of' that relationship as well as a 'model for' managing that relationship. Lane’s analysis of ritual in the former Soviet Union focussed on its institutionalised use to legitimate changed social and political relations in a society undergoing rapid social transformation.

In such societies it serves both the ends of political elites, who need to instil the new values on which the changed socio-political relations are based, and the wishes of many social groups, who want to express their affirmation of the changed socio-political circumstances. Ritual is thus a tool of political socialisation, a means of communicating the dominant ideology of the political elite. Lane argues that,

ritual ... expresse(s) the norms and values of those who created it. Ritual performance at the societal rather than the small group level consequently expresses the values of the political elite, that is the dominant ideology.... Ritual is also regarded as a means of increasing group solidarity. The common performance of ritual, it is assumed, can transform a collective of the associational kind into a political community which is able to mobilise individual members on its behalf. This potential both to communicate the dominant ideology and create a common sense of identity through group solidarity explains the centrality of ritual to those regimes,

demand(ing) fundamental changes in the value orientations of all citizens and their total mobilisation in pursuit of these goals. In both cases this reorientation has entailed above all a

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34 Lane, C. *op cit*, p. 279.
35 *ibid*, p.18 – 19.
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changed relation of the self to the collective, a willingness to exalt the State above all and to subordinate and even sacrifice the interests of the individual to those of the big collective.36 The use of ritual to inculcate such a change can be clearly seen in its extreme manifestation in Nazi Germany. Both the ‘model of’ and the ‘model for’ functions of ritual may be blended, “where value consensus is strong and where all members of the group have a major interest in keeping conflicts at bay. Ritual thus strengthens or restores the pre-existing value integration.”37 These values are expressed symbolically through ritual action.

It should be noted however, that such a functionalist approach to ritual performance tends to stress the internal logic of ritual action, especially its capacity to model desired social outcomes such as group solidarity. While recognising the limitations of a functionalist approach, Handelman insists that public events38 can only be understood in terms of function.

As a theoretical position, functionalism depends first and foremost on the premise that the elements and activities of social order are organised as an integrated, homeostatic social-system. It is this premise, of the universal existence of social orders as social systems, that is dubious. But a public event is goal-directed, if it ‘does’ something, then likely what it does - whether as a product or byproduct - is consequential to social life in some way. This ‘functional’ relationship lies at the epistemological core of any conception of public events.39 It should be recognised however, that taking such a functional approach to the capacity of ritual to model desired social outcomes can limit the scope of any

36 ibid, p. 271.
37 ibid, p. 15.
38 Handelman used the term public events rather than ritual performance or commemorative ritual.
39 Handelman, D. op cit, p.12
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analysis. While viewing ritual only as a model for behaviour can be important, it can obscure the politics of the model under observation, including questions of how and why one particular model predominates over others. The functionalist approach, therefore, tends to mask conflict and the way the model can be manipulated to serve the political needs of a political elite, especially as the meaning inherent in a ritual practice is established by it. In times of legitimation crisis, and during periods of forced rapid social transformation, political elites consciously use ritual as a 'model for' both defining social relationships and for reinforcing the current political status quo. Rituals are therefore either 'invented' or adapted from existing ones to provide a 'model for' communicating the political elite's definition of desired social relationships.

Rituals that provide a 'model for' are a form of cultural management; a tool for inculcating the norms and values of the political elite. For example, in the great flowering of commemorative ceremonies that underpinned nation-building in the Nineteenth Century the commemorative rituals were "largely for, but not of, the people." Commemorations reflected the predominantly male values of the nation

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40 Although he is writing about Fascist ritual, Berghaus' observation is appropriate to this point. "The main function of rituals is to ease this transition form one state into a new one. They serve as a medium of equilibration, providing stability in change, allowing the development and preservation of complex organisms. More specifically, rituals are an adaptive technique of individuals and social groups faced with a situation of crisis." Berghaus, G. 'The Ritual Core of Fascist Theatre' in Berghaus G. Ed. Fascism and Theatre op cit, p.41.

and progress. It should also be noted that where social meaning is contested then an officially sanctioned, even a long institutionalised ritual, can have its meaning subverted by rival subordinate political communities. It is this aspect of ritual as a tool of cultural management that is most relevant to conceptualising the legitimating role of political myth.

3.3 Ritual as Symbolic Communication.

Commemorative ritual works as both a tool of cultural management and as a device for instilling an apparent sense of continuity through the employment of expressive and presentational symbolic acts. There may be considerable scholarly disagreement about a definitive definition of ritual but there is general agreement that “symbolism ... is what distinguishes ritual from other types of social action and is therefore the nucleus in its structure.” A focus on symbolism predominates in my study with ritual conceived as having a clearly defined internal structure made up of a structured sequence of formalised, rule governed symbolic acts, which taken together define the relationship of the individual performer to the social collective or to an event or object.

42 Gillis comments that “the role of women in national commemoration was largely allegorical.... the figure of Liberty came to stand in both France and the United States as a symbol of national identity, but the history of real women was systematically forgotten.” ibid, p. 10.
43 Lane, C. op cit, p. 191.
Commenting on the common assumption that underpins all definitions of ritual, Connerton notes that, "all explain ritual as a form of symbolic representation. All seek to understand the hidden 'point' that lies 'behind' ritual symbolism by an act of translation in which the encoded text of the ritual is decoded into another language." Handelman argues that it is not just a matter of understanding a 'hidden point' within a ritual performance for each event "points beyond itself; in other words, it is symbolic of something outside itself." The 'meaning' of a ritual symbol must be found beyond the ritual itself.

A symbol stand for, evokes, or brings into being something else, something absent. Therefore it denotes that type of relationship where certain components exist elsewhere, but are brought into some sort of connectivity with others that are present. These relational qualities, between presence and absence, are those which constitute a public event as a symbolic structure.

The relationship between the performance of symbolic acts and the referent for these acts either elsewhere or elsewhen can be 'read' to decode the symbolic content of a ritual performance. It also implies that there can be many 'readings' of the same symbolic act leading to debate about the precise 'meaning' of any specific ritual act. However, the ability of a symbol to encapsulate a number of meanings is its strength. But ritual symbolism is not just the 'practical symbolism' of language and sign; it is 'expressive' and 'presentational' symbolism which is individually and collectively

44 Connerton, P. op cit, p. 53.
45 Handelman, D. op cit, p. 12.
46 ibid, p.13.
experienced through performance. In the sense that ritual is a performative symbolic language, ritual belief can be conceived as "collective power individually felt."\(^{48}\)

The communicative power of ritual symbolism lies not only in its capacity to convey a number of messages, but to do so in a highly condensed form. Ritual actions cut through and close off the fine nuances and ambiguities of written and spoken language. A point succinctly expressed by Connerton:

> The resources of ordinary language, its semantic range and flexibility of tone and register, the possibility of producing statements that can be qualified, ironised and retracted, the conditional and subjunctive tense of verbs, language's capacity to lie, to conceal, and to give ideational expression to that which is not present - all these resources constitute, from one vantage point, a communicative defect. The subtlety of ordinary language is such that it can suggest or imply finely-graded degrees of subordination, respect, disregard and contempt. Social interactions can be negotiated through a linguistic element of ambiguity, indeterminacy and uncertainty. But the limited resources of ritual posture, gesture and movement strip communication clean of many hermeneutic puzzles ... one executes the movement necessary to perform the Nazi salute or one does not.\(^{49}\)

It would be foolish to deny that the reasons an individual participates or not in such a ritual act may be complex and inconsistent. Connerton, however, highlights how the vagueness of semantic meanings is replaced by symbolic action whose reference point lies outside the ritual act itself. It is therefore not so much the meaning implied by the ritual performance itself that is important, but what the ritual performance symbolically stands for. What it stands for is a 'model of' and/or a 'model for' the social order which structures the meaning of the ritual itself. Handelman argues that

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\(^{49}\) Connerton, *op cit*, p. 59.
such meaning is most commonly communicated through presentation; that these models are in fact proclamations or statements that, “publicly enunciate and index lineaments of statehood, nationhood, and civic collectivity”. 50 As such, commemorative rituals act as mirror images that selectively reflect and re-present the values and norms of a political elite.

The event of presentation holds up a mirror to social order, selectively reflecting versions of the latter that largely are known, if in more dispersed and fragmented fashion. Within the event, these reflections are delineated with greater clarity and precision. In their play of images, uncertainty has little or no role. Events of presentation deal in the substantiation of affirmation. They are, in the main, societal icons in which connections among the whole and its parts are visibly displayed and open to inspection51.

The clear presentation of symbols of affirmation and certainty is thus a characteristic feature of commemorative ritual. Furthermore, the ritual performance of the beliefs, values and political program of a political elite through “the manipulation of symbols permits an economy of action which intensifies the conveyance and heightens the impact of meanings,”52 without having to fall back on the vagaries of written and spoken language. It is a condensation of meaning reinforced by ritual symbols acquiring multiple layers of meaning and association over time. The emotional property of symbols is known as their multivocality. The rich associations evoked by a well established and accepted symbol gives it an emotional depth and enhances the power of the symbol in directly communicating its message. Lane’s study of Soviet ritual suggests that recently invented ritual symbolism that did not tap already

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50 Handelman, D. *op cit*, p.42.
51 *ibid*, p.48.
existing symbolic associations lacked the underlying emotional depth to allow ritual
to flourish. In such cases,

some rituals are rituals in name only; or the symbols developed have not yet acquired their
multivocality, that is reference to a wide and disparate number of phenomena and meanings,
which give them their special power. Consequently, it then becomes difficult to distinguish
between what are claimed to be symbols and what are merely signs.\textsuperscript{53}

Signs still communicate but lack a symbol's multivocality and condensation of
meaning. This is perhaps what Connerton is implying when he argues that the 'logic
of modernisation' erodes the construction of a fully developed ritual symbol.

3.4 Ritual as Performance

The final aspect of successful commemorative ritual I wish to emphasise is its
essentially performative nature; designed to be experienced by active participants
and spectators. The collective memory of a polity is both conveyed and sustained by
the ritual performance of representations of the past during commemorative
ceremonies. A distinguishing feature of commemorative ceremony from other
representations of the past is its performative aspect. Performances can take the form
of highly dramatic spectacles involving mass formations of people, carefully
choreographed by ritual specialists. Aesthetic principles including the use of colour,
sound, light and movement add considerable depth to such performances heightening
their emotional impact on both performer and spectator. Christopher Flood suggests

\textsuperscript{53} Lane, C. \textit{op cit}, p. 193.
that closed circuit television adds a new dimension to the theatricality of such events. "The staging of many large scale political rituals now incorporates closed circuit television, so that the mass of participants can not only see the central events more clearly but can simultaneously have the gratification of becoming reflexive spectators of themselves."  

Less spectacular performances, such as local dawn services to commemorate the nation's war dead, are also based on a sense of theatricality that is designed to evoke an emotional response. Dramatic performances can also evoke an emotional resonance by being presented in places of symbolic significance. These memory sites may be directly related to an historical event highlighted by the commemorative narrative or a formal ritual space purpose built for such performances. Ritual symbolism is thus *expressive* and *presentational*; it is structured to be *experienced*: to communicate meaning through action rather than through words or images. The symbolic nature of these actions means that "ritual is of its essence expressive rather than informative and mystical rather than rational." Mystical does not necessarily imply religious, although many scholars acknowledge that beliefs engendered by ritual practices tend to be metaphysical.

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55 Hollis, M. 'Reason and Ritual' op cit, p. 222.
Rituels are conducive to expressing and communicating sacred values, whether these be religious in the traditional sense or the veneration of an event or object or the sacralising of the social order itself. These sacred values are communicated directly through action because the message is experienced rather than reflected upon. Kaplan argues that rituals actively shape political perceptions because, "experiences structure the way people think about the future, and thus even ceremonial occasions can shape political thought." This capacity to shape political thought is a consequence of ritual performance of symbolic acts being directly experienced by the actor and therefore "rites have the capacity to give value and meaning to the life of those who perform them." Achievement through direct individual experience and by the actuality of the ritual process having the additional authority of collective experience enhances a feeling of being at one with the whole.

These theatrical performances can also be seen as forms of social drama. Social dramas contain ritual elements and often employ ritual symbolism, but they are not rituals because their performance lacks the repetitive, pre-determined quality of ritual. In social dramas complex issues are presented in the form of a simplified dramatic plot structure. For example, Richard Merelman argues that, "ideologies cast the world in dramatic terms by employing such dramaturgical techniques as

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57 See, Lane, C. op. cit., p13, 252.
59 Connerton, P. op cit, p. 45.
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personification, identification appeals, symbolism, catharsis, and suspense." When enacted in the form of social drama such techniques can successfully convey both the form and meaning of the master commemorative narrative. However, just as social drama can be used by a dominant group to enact its political vision, so social drama can be used by subordinate groups to challenge this vision. Using the same theatrical techniques employed by a dominant group, subordinate and opposition groups can subvert the ‘official plot structure’ by publicly enacting their own political vision. The most spectacular form of social drama, usually performed in contested symbolic sites, would be the mass demonstration.

As John Berger has argued: ‘a mass demonstration can be interpreted as the symbolic capturing of a capital ... The demonstrators interrupt the regular life of the streets they march through or the open spaces they fill. They ’cut off’ these areas, and, not yet having the power to occupy them permanently, they transform them into a temporary stage on which they dramatise the power they still lack’.

The plot structure of such social dramas is often predictable but the resolution is always in doubt. Such social dramas are therefore ‘open ended’, adding an edge of suspense to all participants and so heightening the dramatic intensity of the unfolding drama. Where the playing out of such a social drama fundamentally alters the social order it can become the subject of commemoration itself. If such is the case it is the sense of dramatic intensity that the ritual re-enactment of the event tries to recapture.

60 Merelman, Richard, op cit, p. 288.
My discussion of commemorative ritual has raised a number of points that are important to my interpretation of how the interrelationship between collective memory, tradition and commemoration can give rise to successful political myth. I argued in the previous two chapters that it is through collective memory and tradition that a community constructs an image of the past and imbues that past with both normative value and 'authenticity'. My central argument in this chapter is that in the commemorative process a view of the past is sacralised and that this symbolic sacralised past is communicated through political myth. To establish my argument about commemorative processes sacralising the past it is first necessary to reiterate the four aspects of commemoration already discussed that are important to understanding it as a process. First, commemorative ritual provides a compensatory substitute for the uncertainties of modernity. Despite the very logic of modernity apparently denying the relevance of the calendrical repetition of commemorative narrative, the fundamental objective of commemoration lies in reinforcing a sense of continuity with the past. I analysed the perceived incompatibility of modernity with collective memory and tradition in chapters 2, 3 and 4. My conclusion was that the persistence of the past in collective memory or tradition served the legitimating needs of a political elite or interest groups. I also suggested such a simulated or ersatz form of legitimacy could never be more than compensatory. Accordingly, commemorative ritual offers a formal display of continuity and stability that compensates for the uncertainties of modernity.
Second, commemorative ritual is a form of cultural management that communicates the norms and values of a polity, or the dominant ideology of the political elite. Norms and values are communicated through rituals to provide shared emotional experiences to create a sense of cohesion, unity and group solidarity. Third, commemorative ritual is a performative symbolic language structured around a sequence of formalised symbolic acts, which when taken together define the relationship of the individual performer to the polity as a whole. Ritual symbolism is both presentational and expressive, and reflects and re-presents the collective memory and traditions of a political community. Finally, commemorative ritual is essentially performative, meaning is communicated through action rather than through words and images. The actuality of the ritual process with its sense of theatricality, communicates meaning through structuring a shared collective experience. All four aspects of commemorative ritual are important components of the commemorative process that transforms collective memory and tradition into successful political myth. Before analysing this process it is necessary to discuss the importance of ritual space in providing the stage and backdrop for ritual performances.

4. Ritual Space.

Commemorative ritual is usually performed within what can be called the symbolic core of a city. The symbolic core is made up of public space such as
squares, piazzas and parks, public buildings representing the seat of government, official memory sites such as museums and sacred buildings and often the private buildings of the ruling elite such as palaces.\textsuperscript{62} Public commemorative monuments are often situated on sites of historical significance but they are also commonly located within the symbolic core of the city. The cluster of monuments and buildings that make up the symbolic core of a city becomes its political landscape. Commemorative monuments that make up a political landscape derive their significance from the fact that they are constructions of symbolic significance representing an important aspect of the collective memory of a polity. Monuments can therefore be said to represent memory inscribed upon the landscape; an attempt to perpetuate memory by locating its artifacts within the shared public spaces of a community.

Because monuments tend to dominate public space, the space itself can take on a symbolic significance. Micea Eliade refers to such an area as ‘sacred space,’ but to achieve this quality of meaning, a place must transcend individual life-experiences. It needs to represent the meaning attached to it in the collective meaning of a community. ‘Profane space’ can also be transformed into ‘sacred space’ by staging ritualised commemorative and religious performances which temporarily suspend an otherwise utilitarian use of such a space. ‘Sacred space’, especially if it is represented as a “material witness of history”\textsuperscript{63} adds authenticity to the performance

\textsuperscript{62} Or more recently, corporate headquarters.
\textsuperscript{63} See Lane, C. \textit{op cit.} pp. 222 - 223.
of a ritual act just as the performance of the act reinforces the sacred nature of the space. Detailed studies of the use of 'sacred space' within the symbolic core of Renaissance cities suggest that these spaces were once the focus for elite competition for domination.

Elites competed to dominate sacred places by patronage of churches and chapels, placement of arms, and sponsorship of feasts. Given a culture in which strongly-rooted traditions of civic obligation and private loyalties coexisted, it is not surprising that there remained competing conceptions about the proper uses of sacred spaces for private and public purposes, conceptions that reveal the elasticity of meanings and differing notions of decorum within the same culture.

Agnew and Duncan argue that in more modern societies, the symbolic core of the city still represents a focus for mediating the often conflicting needs of the nation and the individual.

Both in the past and in the present, both in the third world and in the first, (place) serves as a constantly re-energised repository of socially and politically relevant traditions and identity which serves to mediate between the everyday lives of individuals on the one hand, and the national and supra-national institutions which constrain and enable those lives, on the other.

Ritual space situated within the political landscape that forms the symbolic core of a city is therefore an important component of commemorative ritual.

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64 "(In Florence) the significance of the symbolic core of the city was always more important and more meaningful for the males of the patriciate than it was for women, youth, disenfranchised artisans, immigrants, and foreigners". Muir, E. & Weissman, R.F.E. 'Social and Symbolic Places in Renaissance Venice and Florence' in Agnew, J.A. & Duncan, J.S. [Eds.] The Power of Place: Bringing Together Geographical and Sociological Imaginations, Unwin Hyman, Boston, 1989, p. 98.
65 ibid, p. 99.
The symbolic core of a city usually contains a number of 'sacred spaces' which together make up the political landscape of a city. Within this core the identity of a polity is situated. It not only makes the symbolic core the focus for acts of commemoration but also the focus for groups challenging the legitimacy of a dominant group. Interpretative and physical control over the symbolic core is therefore an important dimension for the legitimation or delegitimation of a political community. The importance different members of the polity place on utilising and controlling 'sacred space' to stage commemorative or counter-commemorative rituals can be taken as a gauge of the symbolic value political landscape represents to a specific group. While political myth is often 'located' within a symbolic core and its rituals are performed within 'sacred space,' it is also true that a political myth is often closely tied to an external site such as a battlefield or archaeological site. Whatever the location, the performance of a commemorative ritual is given a sense of authenticity and added meaning by being performed in what is considered as a 'sacred space'.

5. The Commemorative Process.

My discussion to this point, of how the commemorative ritual process provides a political community with a sense of historical continuity, while focussing on those key symbolically significant events that define a common identity and justify a community's legitimacy claims, is now extended to include specific
categories of commemoration. I conceive such categories in terms of a commemorative narrative that provides the structure for a political community's ritualised remembrance. My typology of the commemorative cycle is based on Yael Zerubavel's categories of commemorative narrative, master commemorative narrative and commemorative density. It provides a necessary framework for understanding how the process gives rise to political myths.

First, a commemorative narrative provides a structure that 'explains' the meaning of symbolically significant events for a political elite. A commemorative narrative is usually focussed on a specific event, which is disembedded from chronological historical time and exists as an 'island of time'. Second, a number of 'islands of time' usually exist, often representing apparently disparate events which are given a unified and coherent structure by a master commemorative narrative. The master commemorative narrative provides the thematic link that explains the 'meaning' of each commemorative act within the broader context of a community's collective memory. Third, within the master commemorative narrative, events that were central to the structuring of a political elite's collective memory, are usually clustered around symbolic turning points, especially those events said to represent the 'birth' of a community. Such clustering I shall call commemorative density.

Commemorative density serves as an indicator of the relative importance of different events to a political elite's identity and claim to legitimacy. Because control
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over the presentation and interpretation of symbolically significant events is essential in a political elite's claim to legitimacy the act of commemoration is often fiercely contested. Such is important during times of legitimacy crisis when the master commemorative narrative itself is challenged.

5.1 Commemorative Narrative

Commemorative narrative structures the 'meaning' of selective historical events in terms of the collective memory and tradition of its protagonists. Every performance of a commemorative act offers political actors the opportunity to affirm and revitalise their collective memory. The repetition of each act over time reinforces the participants' sense of continuity. The resulting sense of continuity is not synonymous with actual historical continuity as measured chronologically, but with repetition only of those events of symbolic significance to the political actors themselves. Furthermore, the calendrical nature of the commemorative cycle is reflected in its sense of continuity that is also being socially constructed.

Zerubavel argues that acts of commemoration should create a commemorative narrative loosely based on historical events appropriated by collective memory, and that only those events that tell the story of a particular group are included. The historic sources drawn upon are therefore highly selective and doubly fragmentary in nature. Moreover, such fragments become the focus of
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ritualised remembrance and so frame collective memories. The potency and vitality of commemorative processes therefore rest in memory. As Zerubavel notes:

Although history serves as a source of legitimation, memory shapes the representation of the past. A dual process of 'recovery' thus takes place at one and the same time: while some aspects of the past are uncovered or shift from the margins to the centre of our historical consciousness, other aspects of the past are marginalised or fade into oblivion. Any remembrance thus entails its own forgetfulness, as the two are interwoven in the process of producing the commemorative narratives. This interplay and constant tension between these two forces contribute to their dynamic character and explain why memory has not vanished in the modern era in spite of the rise of history.67

Hence the commemorative process is always susceptible to adaptation and change.

While history has the capacity to form and structure collective memory, ‘historical truth’ is generally not a crucial factor in the creation of a commemorative narrative. A commemorative narrative ‘explains’ the uniqueness of its creator’s identity within the context of its remembered historical development. However, this uniqueness is not based on historical development per se but on an event imbued with symbolic significance. Because “the substance of memory is the extraordinary”68 the commemoration of events fateful to the identity of a polity transcends everyday reality.

Assmann refers to such events as forming “‘islands of time’, islands of a completely different temporality suspended from time.”69 The historical context of a

67 Zerubavel, Y. op cit, p.214.
68 Smith, B.J. Politics & Remembrance : Republican Themes in Machiavelli, Burke, and Tocqueville, op cit, p. 17.
69 Assmann, J. 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', op cit, p. 129.
Commemorative narrative is made up of symbolic ‘islands of time’ that ‘float free’ of any lineal conception of historic time and it is these ‘islands of time’ that become the highly charged symbolic core of the commemorative process.\textsuperscript{70} Taken together such ‘islands of time’ make up the commemorative narrative that defines a political community, establishes its cohesion and legitimates its claims.

5.2 Master Commemorative Narrative.

A commemorative narrative narrates the significance of a specific event to a specific political community, but Zerubavel also suggests that each commemorative narrative contributes towards ‘the master commemorative narrative’. The master commemorative narrative creates a framework for each specific commemorative act and provides thematic linkage between symbolically significant events in a group’s history that are seemingly disparate or separated chronologically by thousands of years. The master commemorative narrative therefore transforms historical time into what can be conceived as commemorative time. The suspension of historical time is one characteristic of those myths whose structure allows for the contemporaneous existence of highly disparate historical events within a single mythic plot structure.

The ability of myth to conflate historical time is well illustrated in the development of the Kosovo Myth. For example a nineteenth century Serbian writer

\textsuperscript{70} Connerton shows that it was this sacred quality of remembrance that was so effectively manipulated by the Nazis as “it was through acts performed at a sacred site that the illusion of mundane time was suspended.”
Ljubomir Nenadovic, commenting on the people of Montenegro, wrote that, “when you talk to these people you have the impression that the Battle of Kosovo took place yesterday.” Memory of the loss of Kosovo had been kept alive by women wearing black mourning scarves and men wearing caps embroidered in black. The same ability to conflate historical time was also commented on during the war in Bosnia. In an interview with General Mladic in Bileljina, Bosnia on St Vitus Day in 1995, Robert Block commented, “there is no difference between past and present for General Mladic. He talks about both in the same breath. For him time is a seamless continuum. The Serbs are still fighting to turn an Islamic tide away from Europe.”

The lost battle of Kosovo therefore enjoyed a contemporaneous existence with battles six centuries later, with the ‘meaning’ of these conflicts given a coherent form by a unifying commemorative narrative.

In conflating events the master commemorative narrative therefore gives a unified and coherent structure to the collective memory of a polity while each commemorative narrative exemplifies the symbolic significance of a specific event. Because the core of the master commemorative narrative is the unique social identity of a particular community, control over it was an essential precondition for nineteenth and twentieth century nationalist movements.

Connerton, P. *op cit.*, p. 43.


Nationalist movements typically attempt to create a master commemorative narrative that highlights their members' common past and legitimates their aspiration for a shared destiny. Indeed, the establishment of such a narrative constitutes one of the most important mechanisms by which a nation constructs a collective identity for what Benedict Anderson calls an 'imagined community'.

For those who do not share the assumed political assumptions of the 'imagined community', whether they be sub-national or ethnic groups, religious minorities or opposition groups, the legitimacy of their claims largely depends on their ability to undermine or appropriate the master commemorative narrative and substitute their own dissenting version.

5.3 Commemorative Density and Political Myth

To establish the basis for analysing commemorative density it is necessary to recapitulate aspects of my argument thus far. Commemorative narratives making up the master commemorative narrative usually cluster around the events or periods of history most symbolically significant to legitimacy claims of the claimant. Because such historic events form the very core of the community's identity they are often transformed by collective memory and tradition into potent political myths by the commemorative process. Resulting political myths also form the symbolic core of the master commemorative narrative. The master commemorative narrative itself does not communicate the historical development of a political community but rather

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73 Zerubavel, Y. *op cit.*, p.214. Well before Benedict Anderson's concept of an 'imagined community', Robert Bocock stressed the importance of national rituals in the construction of identity "because national identity depends almost wholly on the symbolic level for its maintenance. This has been successful to such a degree that most people seem to believe in the 'naturalness' of nations." Bocock, *op cit.*, p. 99.
Conmemoration constructs a self-contained paradigm for relating the past to the present. The paradigm is self-contained in that the cyclical representations of the past are unencumbered by any concerns for historical context, historical accuracy or the constraints of chronological time. Specific commemorative acts therefore do not derive their meaning from a historical context but from being embedded in the master commemorative narrative. In reality each commemorative act is a discrete ahistorical symbolic representation of a past whose order of presentation in the commemorative cycle is not tied to an actual historical sequence but to the implicit needs of the master narrative structure. The needs of the narrative structure reflect the pattern of events that structure the identity and legitimacy claims of the political elite or interest group.

It should be emphasised that the selection of a pattern of events and the relative emphasis of some at the expense or suppression of others is not arbitrary. Zerubavel calls the articulation of such commemorative events, 'commemorative density'.

Commemorative density ... indicates the importance that the society attributes to different periods in its past: while some periods enjoy multiple commemorations, others attract little attention, or fall into oblivion. The commemorative density thus ranges from periods or events that are central to the group's memory and commemorated in great detail and elaboration to ones that remain unmarked in the master commemorative narrative. Commemorative density is thus an indicator of the relative importance of different events to the structuring of a group's collective memory. Because points of origin or symbolic turning points are held to be central to the creation and
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shaping of a group’s sense of common identity, such events usually become associated with a higher degree of commemorative density. Furthermore, a high degree of commemorative density is reinforced by adapting events to a mythic plot structure to give them greater symbolic significance in the master commemorative narrative.

The high commemorative density attributed to certain events not only serves to emphasise their historical significance. It may also elevate them beyond their immediate historical context into symbolic texts that serve as paradigms for understanding other developments in the group’s experience. Thus, collective memory can transform historical events into political myths that function as a lens through which group members perceive the present and prepare for the future. Because turning points often assume symbolic significance as markers of change, they are more likely to transform into myths. As such they not only reflect the social and political needs of the group that contributed to their formation but also become active agents in molding the group’s needs. 75

Political myths therefore become most likely to be associated with those clusters of symbolically significant events that define and structure the identity and meaning of a specific political community. Moreover, the meaning of a political myth is derived from its embeddedness in the master commemorative narrative rather than an historical context. What is most likely to be found at the core of the commemorative process is therefore a political myth rather than an actual historical event.

However, the existence of a political myth at the core of the

74 Zerubavel, Y. op cit, p. 8.
75 Ibid, p. 9.
Commemorative process should not be construed as an indicator of a high degree of consensus on the meaning of each event being commemorated. While the event might be 'fixed' to an historical event, its received meaning may be contested or even basically ignored. Hence, controlling presentation and interpretation of events is essential in sustaining any group's claim to legitimacy.

Commemorative density can therefore also be just as much an indicator of political contention as a celebration of group identity and solidarity. It is especially true of national days whose traditional observance does not always reflect the current needs of a polity or significant dissident elements within it. Consequently, the day can become the focus for subordinate groups to challenge the whole structure of the master commemorative narrative itself.

A commemorative narrative can be 'read' in the same sense as a fictional narrative in that the 'story' is consciously structured between a beginning and an ending. A commemorative narrative is similar to fiction because meaning is independent of a chronological referent, but it differs from fiction in having meaning which cannot be severed from the event chosen to begin the narrative.

The decision of where to begin and end the story defines what constitutes the relevant event and determines its meaning. Since the event is retrospectively identified, the act of imposing those points of beginning and ending upon an open-ended historical sequence is essentially interpretative.76

76 ibid. p.221.
The ability not only to 'fix' the narrative boundaries of the master commemorative narrative, but to structure 'historic' events constituting the 'middle' of the narrative in such a way that the ending is a logical extension of the beginning is critical to a group's legitimacy. As Zerbavel notes "narratives that have a high textual integrity can clearly produce a more persuasive closure."^77

Accordingly, the event of greatest symbolic significance in a master commemorative narrative is that moment when a group comes into being. The moment is usually given the defining quality of a 'birth' rather than the broader conception implied by 'origins'. 'Birth', whether it be real or imagined also gives the commemorative process a precise point of focus, whereas the celebration of origins would necessarily be more diffuse. Origins can also imply a sense of continuity; an acknowledgment that a political community's identity might have been derived from multiple sources. Modernity, Nora argues however, breaks the continuum implied by the term 'origins'.

Just as the future - formally a visible, predictable, manipulable, well-marked extension of the present - has come to seem invisible, unpredictable, uncontrollable, so have we gone from the idea of a visible past to an invisible one; from a solid and steady past to our fractured past; from a history sought in continuity of memory to a memory cast in the discontinuity of history. We speak no longer of "origins" but of "births". Given to us as radically other, the past has become a world apart.78

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77 ibid, p.222.
78 Nora, P. Between Memory and History : Les Lieux de Mémoire op cit, p. 17.
On one hand, modern nations consciously strive to draw on broad origins to create an image of continuity, on the other hand they celebrate their ‘birth’ symbolising not only the inception of a new society, but a conscious break with the past. The ‘birth’ of a nation therefore, exists as an ‘island of time’, marking a historical discontinuity and investing it with symbolic significance. Such an ‘island of time’ has a contradictory coexistence to the broader concept of historical continuity used selectively and coterminously in the construction of the master commemorative narrative.

The act of commemorating the ‘birth’; of recalling the group in its nascent, inchoate form, re-establishes its unique identity and distinctiveness in the present. It is often referred to as a creation, or founding myth and is discussed further below. The subject of commemoration is in fact, the present. A present, given greater stature and symbolic meaning by being directly linked with a sacred event, the act of ‘birth’ itself. Whether the ‘birth’ being celebrated represents a clearly defined event of momentous historical consequences for society, an insignificant event with no apparent consequences or an ‘event’ constructed to fulfil the need for a symbolic ‘birth’ is not in itself important. What is important is that the symbolic significance of the event is conferred on it retrospectively, and its significance is continually reinforced by performing commemorative ritual acts. In time, commemoration of beginnings, can so structure collective memory that even an event of no real historical significance is infused with the ‘greatness’ and aura of a sacred ‘birth’. Alternatively, it may be the collective memory of a community which singles out a particular event
worthy of being venerated and elevates this event to a status which represents the 'birth' of that community. In either case, what is significant, is the celebration of a 'birth' date that is deemed so important to framing the collective memory of a community that controlling interpretation of the event becomes a crucial dimension to any group's claim to legitimacy.

The symbolic 'birth' of a political community is not connected to the present in terms of a logical chronology, but as symbolically significant turning points that together make up the master commemorative narrative. Turning points encapsulate historical change as single events marking out stages in the historical development of a group which legitimate its current political claims. Historical explanation of the development of a political community based on gradual historical change over a period of time is eschewed in favour of a framework of symbolic turning points, presented within the context of the master commemorative narrative. Zerubavel argues that because turning points are highly symbolic they take on mythic qualities.

Like other rites of passage, the commemoration of these turning points is imbued with sacredness but also with tensions. This symbolic state of liminality, of being between and betwixt historical periods, contributes to the ambiguity of turning points on the one hand, and to their ability to function as political myths, subject to different interpretations, on the other hand. 79.

Turning points, especially those representing the 'birth' of a political community are essential features of most political myths. As turning points, real or imagined, they

79 Zerubavel, Y. op cit, p. 10.
are disembedded from chronological historical time and 'stand alone' as 'islands of time', encompassing contemporaneously past, present and future.

5.4 Contested Commemorations.

Discussion of commemorative narrative has so far focussed on the importance it plays in structuring a political community's collective memory. I have only touched on the fact that the commemorative narrative itself is often contested. Master commemorative narratives should not be envisaged as static, unchanging and unchallenged. Where a political community is composed of a number of competing groups, such as within the nation-state, there will be multiple commemorative narratives focussing on different events and offering divergent, even conflicting interpretations of the same events. Unless a dominant political group has the power to impose its own master commemorative narrative upon the whole nation, the form, structure and meaning of a national commemoration is usually the result of negotiation and compromise. A continual process of building consensus and structuring common memories builds around specific events of national significance. The actual commemorative act may only present an illusion of consensus, but even illusion is important to the viability of an 'imagined community'. The master commemorative narrative and questions of how a commemorative act should be performed is therefore part of the political process; a point emphasised by Gillis.
Commemorative activity is by definition social and political, for it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, whose results may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest, struggle, and, in some instances, annihilation.\(^{80}\)

While Gillis emphasises construction of master commemorative narratives as intense political contests, Michael Kammen reminds us that some national commemorations are performed out of a sense of obligation rather than any sense of ideological or national necessity. "There are events so central to a nation's history that they cannot be neglected even if a non-coercive government did not feel an obligation to make some sort of fuss about them."\(^{81}\) Because obligatory commemorations often don't meet the current needs of any particular group they have little impact on structuring collective memory and are received with apparent indifference. The symbolic significance of such events may change, however, when the master commemorative narrative is contested.

Commemorating historical events of symbolic significance inevitably means commemoration of events reflecting the vision of the past held by the political elite. By aligning their vision as closely as possible with the master commemorative narrative of the nation, the elite legitimates their own primacy in 'representing' the nation as well as their own political program. Challenging the master commemorative narrative is therefore not just a symbolic struggle to control representation of the past but a potential challenge to the legitimacy of the political elite itself. In cases where a

\(^{80}\) Gillis, J.R. Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship, op cit, p. 5.

\(^{81}\) Kammen, M. Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture, op cit, p. 694 -95.
strong nexus exists between a national master commemorative narrative and the political elite, challenge to the elite can potentially delegitimate the inclusive claims of the nation. The emergence of multiple and exclusive master commemorative narratives may lead to the development of "sectoral identities' and the corresponding inability of the national to represent an inclusive collective identity."\textsuperscript{82} Any failure of the master commemorative narrative in projecting an inclusive collective identity can therefore have implications for the viability of the nation.

The master commemorative narrative can be undermined by forming any counter-memory which "is essentially oppositional and stands in hostile and subversive relation to collective memory."\textsuperscript{83} At one level counter-memory can challenge the meaning and interpretation of historic events of symbolic significance without actually challenging the significance of the events themselves. On another level, counter-memory may challenge the symbolic significance of an event itself and substitute its own master commemorative narrative in direct opposition to the 'official' one. Such divergent interpretations of a political community's past are generally 'contained' within the overall mythic plot structure, which can 'accommodate' multiple commemorative narratives. Significantly, its ability for restructuring within its mythic plot structure gives collective memory vitality in forging and reforging the collective consciousness of a community. However, vitality

\textsuperscript{82} Wood, N. 'Memory's Remains : Les lieux de mémoire' op cit, p. 143.
\textsuperscript{83} Zerubavel, Y. op cit, p.10.
depends on general agreement about a common political myth that provides a broad framework for containing and synthesising multiple commemorative narratives.

The ability of political myth to negotiate fundamentally different interpretations of the past breaks down when the legitimacy of the political myth itself is challenged. Accordingly, political struggle to control the commemorative process becomes intense as the commemorative act becomes itself the focus for symbolically representing legitimacy claims of both the master commemorative narrative and counter-memory. In extreme situations commemorative ceremonies are disrupted or oppositional ceremonies staged. Counter-memory potentially can first, refocus and reinforce existing collective memories; second; modify and restructure existing collective memories and, third; completely replace existing collective memories by having its own master commemorative narrative accepted as the valid representation of the political community's past.

6. Conclusion

My argument is that commemoration makes up the final component of what constitutes a political myth. I analysed the first component, collective memory, in Chapters 3 and 4, and the second component, tradition, in the previous chapter. The central argument of these chapters was that through collective memory and tradition a community constructs an image of the past and gives that past both normative value and a sense of 'authenticity'. I have argued that through the commemorative process,
the past, as appropriated by collective memory and tradition, is sacralised. And it is a symbolic sacralised past that is communicated through political myth. The commemorative process forms the key to my account of the process by which memory and tradition are transformed into political myth. Commemoration accounts for the potential strength and resilience of a mythologised past by drawing upon a sacralised representation of the collective memories and traditions of a community. I argue that it is through the commemorative process of communicating collective memory and tradition that a political myth gains its coherence and unity. Thus political myth gains the potential to evoke a sense of historical continuity, to define common identity and to justify a political community's legitimacy claims. The capacity to evoke a sense of historical continuity enables political myth to communicate the norms, values, interests and legitimacy claims of elites with the power to shape, re-shape and interpret historic events of symbolic importance to its own maintenance. My main contention in this thesis that the past, as represented and communicated through political myth, represents a powerful source of legitimation, is therefore reinforced.

In this chapter I analysed the transformation of collective memory and tradition into political myth by discussing the interrelationship between commemorative ritual and collective memory and tradition; the nature of the ritual process and the development of a commemorative narrative. I stressed that each aspect of commemoration drew its content and normative meaning from collective
memory and tradition while the commemorative process as a whole reframed and refashioned both collective memory and tradition. The relationship between collective memory, tradition and commemoration is thus a dynamic one with each ‘feeding’ the other. And in turn collective memory, tradition and commemoration are continually restructured by the interrelationship. I shall argue, in the next chapter, that it is the dynamic nature of the relationship which underpins the capacity of political myths to communicate symbolically important events essential to political legitimacy.

The first strand of my argument in this chapter was that commemorative ritual sacralises symbolically important people and events essential to the legitimacy of a political elite or interest group. Because commemorative ritual provides the opportunity for symbolically important events to be collectively re-experienced through performance it is especially potent. A collective re-presentation of the past as experienced through the structured repetition of symbolic acts creates shared experiences that reaffirm and recreate collective memory. Collective re-presentation of the past through commemorative ritual, also brings into focus the shared political assumptions of a group. The group’s choice of events to act as symbols in the commemorative narrative explains and structures their collective self-image. By establishing interrelationships between collective memory and commemorative ritual I was able to offer a theoretical examination of ritual and sacralisation of the past.
The second strand of my argument was that ritual structures give a sense of theatricality to the series of performative acts that make up a commemorative ceremony. Through participation in commemorative rituals, symbolically important events are collectively re-experienced. Commemorative rituals in turn, are given 'meaning' by being embedded in a commemorative narrative. Consequently, it is crucial to see commemorative ritual as a form of cultural management communicating the norms and values of a community. Ritual manages the way norms and values are communicated to ensure that 'meaning' is found within shared experiences that create a sense of cohesion unity and group solidarity. The actuality of the ritual process, with its sense of drama and theatricality, actively communicates the norms and values of a community by structuring shared collective experience. The structure of ritual is essentially performative, where meaning is communicated through action rather than words and images. In addition, meaning is communicated through the performative symbolic language of ritual being structured around a sequence of formalised symbolic acts, which as a whole define the relationship of individual performers to the collective. Underlying my analysis of ritual is my proposition that commemorative ritual serves to provide a compensatory substitute for the uncertainties of modernity. I shall amplify this point in my discussion of the persistence of political myth in the next chapter.

On one hand, commemorative ritual provides the means by which the past, as represented by collective memory and tradition, can become sacralised. On the other
hand, I argued that the commemorative cycle itself can sacralise the past and communicate it through political myth. The main argument in the final section of the chapter is that collective memories and traditions are contained within and structured by a master commemorative narrative. A master commemorative narrative constructs a self-contained paradigm which relates the past to the present by providing a thematic link that 'explains' the 'meaning' of each commemorative act within the broader context of collective memory. A master commemorative narrative is self-contained in that it suspends historical time and transforms it into commemorative time. Consequently, cyclical representations of the past are unencumbered by any concerns for historical context, historical accuracy or the constraints of chronological time. An important characteristic of political myth, is that myth can accommodate highly disparate historical events within a single mythic plot structure. A master commemorative narrative gives a unified and coherent structure to the often apparently disparate but symbolically significant events that go to make up each commemorative narrative.

Each symbolically significant event important to defining the identity of a political community, is 'explained' by a commemorative narrative. The commemorative narrative usually focuses on a single event which has been disembedded from chronological historical time and so transcends everyday reality. Such representations of the past form the symbolic core of the commemorative process and are the focus of ritualised remembrance. It is important to note, that
because symbolically significant events derive from collective memory and tradition, they do not draw meaning so much from historical context, but their place in the master commemorative narrative. While each commemorative act is a discrete ahistorical symbolic representation of the past, its significance to collective memory and tradition is provided by the master commemorative narrative. Within the master commemorative narrative significant events central to a political community’s collective memory and traditions, are clustered around symbolic turning points. It is especially the case if the event comes to symbolise the ‘birth’ of a community. I showed that such clustering of commemorative narratives around symbolic turning points gives rise to a degree of commemorative density that can serve as an indicator of the relative importance of events to collective identity and consequent claims to legitimacy. Control over the presentation and interpretation of such symbolic turning points as the ‘birth’ of a community is thus an essential prerequisite for any group’s claim to legitimacy. I have used the contested commemoration of the Columbus Quincentennial in Appendix 3 as a specific example to illustrate the importance control over the interpretation of a commemorative event has for the presentation of a political myth. The link between a group’s capacity to shape, re-shape and interpret historical events of symbolic importance to the maintenance of political myth and legitimacy claims is the subject of the next chapter.