

# Contradiction of Form and Content in Religious Ritual following in Azerbaijan

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In August 2014 the government of Azerbaijan took, at first sight, a seemingly strange initiative – it outlawed serving any food or other treat in funeral ceremonies, except for tea (Kenan 2014). One may wonder why such specific aspect of personal life, as the regulation of funeral ceremony attracted government attention? Tradition requires that a person serve a banquet for hundreds of people arriving for a funeral of a family member. Relatives often used these banquets to demonstrate generosity, conspicuous consumption and other qualities viewed in a traditionalist framework as meaningful. Often following these traditions required heavy financial indebtedness. Peer pressure and reluctance to be outdone by relatives' and neighbors' generosity to their own diseased, pushed the majority of people – usually having low income status – to borrow money for arranging increasingly extravagant funeral ceremonies. This, in turn led to increasing financial strain on substantial share of population, and growing household tensions.

So, it was a matter of time before the government takes a preemptive measure to dilute social tensions by banning extravagant funeral spending. Additionally, prudent minimalist conduct of rites is viewed by the state as a sign of spirituality – and hence something positive that needs to be encouraged and promoted.

However, it is still puzzling why people invest their extremely limited resources into following traditional rites and rituals without the interference of state. Despite peer pressure, the conduct of rites and traditions usually is not

legally compulsory – people are nominally free either to follow or not traditions as part of their personal life.

My main argument is that in some cases the population emphasizes the **Form** of traditions and religious rites without consideration of their **Content**: there is no in-depth reflection or connection to the religious meaning and substance of these events among the followers. Thus, at the core of the population's attitude toward traditions and rites is what Weber (Buss 2015) and Malinowski (1954) call "magic religiosity" – a fixation on outer appearances of rites and a desire to change world through the manipulation of symbols (rather than self-conscious reflection on specific sacral meaning and axiological substance of rituals). In this situation, the population follows financially disadvantageous rites (by spending limited resources they barely can afford) in order to pacify and win the favor of omnipotent Divine forces that bring luck and good fortune – the only reliable source for a stability and success in a chaotic and volatile world of unpredictable elements. Success in a pre-industrial traditionalist [\[1\]](#) society depends on luck or Divine intervention (Banfield 1958). Therefore, people perceive appeals to saints and other manipulation of symbolic realm, including lavish celebration of rites, as the main guarantee for achieving their material ends. Legal banning and increased fines can of course dissuade people from spending lavishly on private ceremonies. But this does not address a root-cause of the problem – the disengagement between the Form of traditions and their Content. A long-term approach may consider appeal to the facets of local traditions that can support a broad process of self-reflection by the followers of the traditions. This self-reflective approach may inspire people to look into and analyze the meaning of traditions – their message and functional value in earlier historic period when these traditions may have emerged.

### ***Content and Form***

Avessalom Podvodny – a notable Russian psychologist – developed a relevant philosophical framework to study Form and Content of traditional rituals (Podvodny 2012). Symbolic *Content* denotes specific sacral meaning and axiological substance of rituals. Also rites and ceremonies usually have a specific sequence of actions that constitute symbolic *Form* of a given tradition. *Form*-dominated perspective approaches any phenomenon by “considering it as a name, title, label or some media of another object; the latter [i.e., the object] then is viewed as the value, content and meaning of a given symbol” (Podvodny 2012, 269). The focus on Form is bent on social status, label and other positions that emphasizes the external appearance of a phenomenon. *Content* approach sees a social phenomenon through its substance, meaning, immediate qualities, constituent parts and their interrelation. This approach emphasizes efficiency, effectiveness and other intrinsic characteristics of phenomena. Podvodny defines *Symbol* as “something that needs to be defined, incapable of self-description; on the contrary, *Content* implies direct meaning, ... lack of need for interpretation” (Podvodny 2012, 269). Taken together, *Symbol* and *Content* exhaustively describe social reality of traditions from the perspective of the balance of form and content.

An important factor of the decoupling the *Form* of rituals and their *Content* is the appeal to symbolic transcendental forces (i.e., symbolic realm totally decoupled from everyday content of material reality) in a bid to solve material problems. An agrarian society [\[iii\]](#) tends to be less mobile, flexible and opportunity-based than an industrial one. A success in a society like that of Montegrano depends, as Banfield (1958, 109) notes, on luck or Divine intervention (symbolic realm) rather than on hard work and methodical application. As a result, in order to pacify and *win the favor of omnipotent Divine forces that bring luck and good fortune* – the only reliable source for a stability and success in a chaotic world – people prefer to strictly follow rituals, and thus win

moral, spiritual boon and good luck. Thus a society perceives appeals to saints and other *manipulation of symbolic realm* as the main avenue for achieving its material ends.

### ***Religion-specific considerations***

A sizable part of rites and traditions are rooted in local religions. Like non-religious traditions, religion places *psychological sanctions* on population, thus motivating certain type of choices and behavior. Max Weber in his essays on the economic ethics of world religions defines a tradition based on strict following of rituals as a mystical one. Mystical tradition focuses on the word of religious law rather than on its spirit. Rites and events in this tradition are viewed as nothing more than “particularly effective magical performances” (Buss 1989, 251) that guarantee God’s favor and grace. Weber contrasts this intrinsically magical and mystical attitude with ascetic type of religious tradition. The latter is based on methodical, rational and systematic application of religious precepts to achieve personal religious progress on the path to salvation. Ascetic religious tradition focuses on the Content of the rites and traditions, and motivates an individual to analyze texts in self-reflective way.

Islam – the religion of the majority in Azerbaijan – forbids the usage of the translation of its religious texts during religious rituals. Muslim religion requires that the Quran and its prayers be read in Arabic to retain original language in which they were uttered, and thus exclude possible conflicting interpretations of the verses that may arise with the translation. Since the absolute majority of the population concerned is not Arabic speakers, this majority does not understand the content of religious verses used by clergymen during funerals or weddings. Decades-old Soviet anti-religious policies uprooted elementary religious and Arabic-language education, thus even further exacerbating self-reflective usage of Muslim texts in the post-Soviet countries. As a result, the Muslim population concerned may find itself in a

situation, when “without knowledge of the [main religious book], any dogmas, or even the Lord’s Prayer, [people are] accustomed to the rites and saw the essence of [their religion] in them” (Buss 1989, 251). Thus, a combination of the precepts of Islam and the lack of Arabic language skills force the population that we analyze to perceive only the form of religious rituals, without an ability to understand their content.

## **Data and Method**

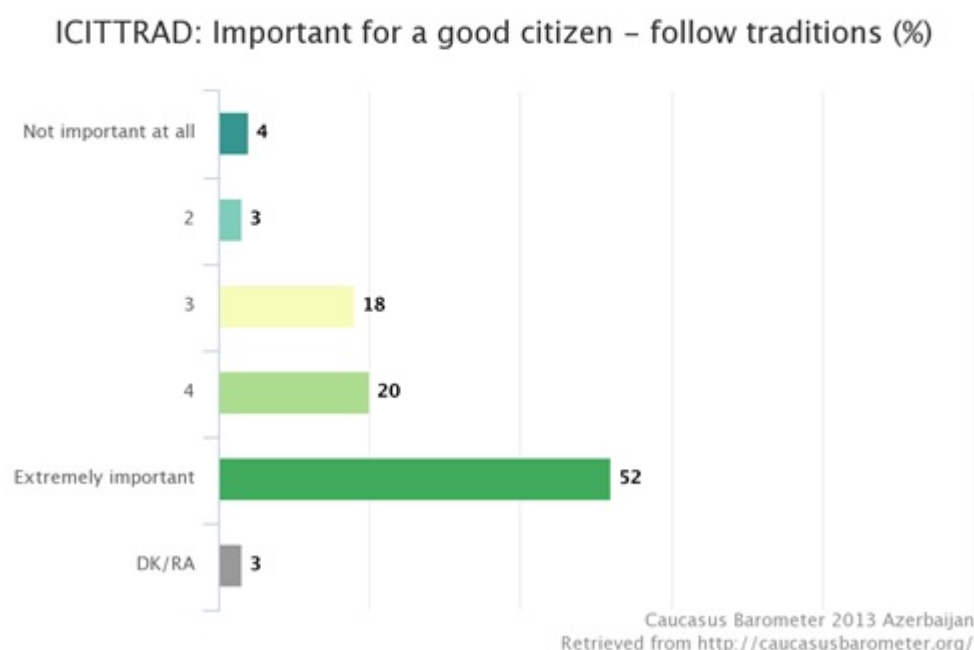
I use the latest Caucasus Barometer (CB) (2013) results for Azerbaijan to identify the degree of the bridging of Form and Content of traditions among the population. For qualitative insights I use personal discussions and conversations in Azerbaijan. Additionally, I draw on reports and research of the World Bank, Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC), and national statistics for the descriptive discussion of background factors.

## **Descriptive highlights**

### ***The stature of traditions in Azerbaijan***

Azerbaijani population has a high level of abidance to traditions. According to the CRRC Caucasus Barometer (CB) survey, more than half of the Azerbaijani respondents view following traditions as extremely important quality of a good citizen (CRRC CB 2013) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. The importance of following traditions for being a good citizen - the position of Azerbaijani respondents.**



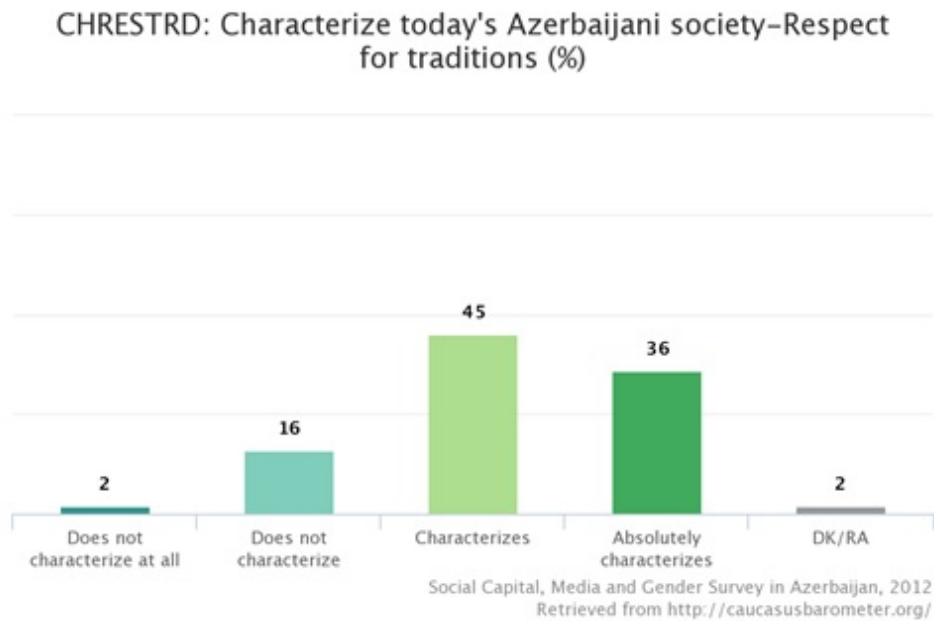
World Values Survey (WVS) wave 6 (2011-2014) results show that 81.0% of Azerbaijani respondents replied positively to the question “tradition is important to this person; to follow the customs handed down by one’s religion or family” (WVS 2011) (Table 1). 81% of the Social Capital, Media and Gender (SCMG) survey respondents in Azerbaijan agree that traditions are respected in the country (CRRC 2012) (Figure 2).

**Table 1. Attitude toward traditions in Azerbaijan (in percent)**

For this person tradition is important to this person; to follow the customs handed down by one’s religion or family	Azerbaijan
Very much like me	51.7
Like me	29.3
Somewhat like me	11.9
A little like me	3.7
Not like me	1.9
Not at all like me	1.5
No answer	0
Number of respondents (N)	(1,002)

Source: WVS Wave 6 (2011-2014) - <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSOnline.jsp>

**Figure 2. Respect for traditions among Azerbaijani population (in percent)**



One of the important indicators of traditionalist society in WVS is a higher status given to men in comparison to women (Inglehart and Norris 2003). WVS wave 6 data indicates that 78.6% of Azerbaijani respondents agree with the statement that “when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women” (WVS 2011-2014). WVS results are corroborated by CRRC SCMG survey in Azerbaijan, with 58% of the respondents agreeing with the earlier mentioned statement (CRRC 2012). This is substantially higher than the WVS global average of 39.04%, with international average of 41.04% disagreeing with the statement. Additionally, while globally 42.02% of WVS respondents agree with the statement “on the whole, men make better business executives than women do,” the share of those who agree with the statement in Azerbaijan is 74.7% (WVS 2011-2014) (Table 2). Similar share (78%) of the respondents of CRRC SCMG survey in Azerbaijan agreed that “men should have the final word about decisions in the home” (CRRC 2012). Gender conservatism, and hence overall traditionalist positions in Azerbaijan are substantially higher than international averages.

*Table 2. Perception of the impact of gender on executive position effectiveness for Azerbaijani respondents (in percent)*

On the whole, men make better business executives than women do.	Azerbaijan
Agree strongly	31.9
Agree	42.8
Disagree	19
Strongly disagree	6.2
No answer	0
Don't know	0.1
Number of respondents (N)	(1,002)

Source: WVS Wave 6 (2011-2014)

High respect for traditions is not surprising given non-industrial and thus pre-modern nature of the Azerbaijani society. Agriculture employs the highest share of active working age population in Azerbaijan (38% – Sadigov 2018). For comparison, average share of those employed in agriculture in the OECD countries is around 3% (Brooks 2003). Despite relatively big share of population engaged in agriculture, farming in Azerbaijan remains highly ineffective, based on extensive techniques devoid of adoption of innovations and best practices. Hence, in Azerbaijan agriculture accounts 6.2% of GDP (IndexMundi 2018).

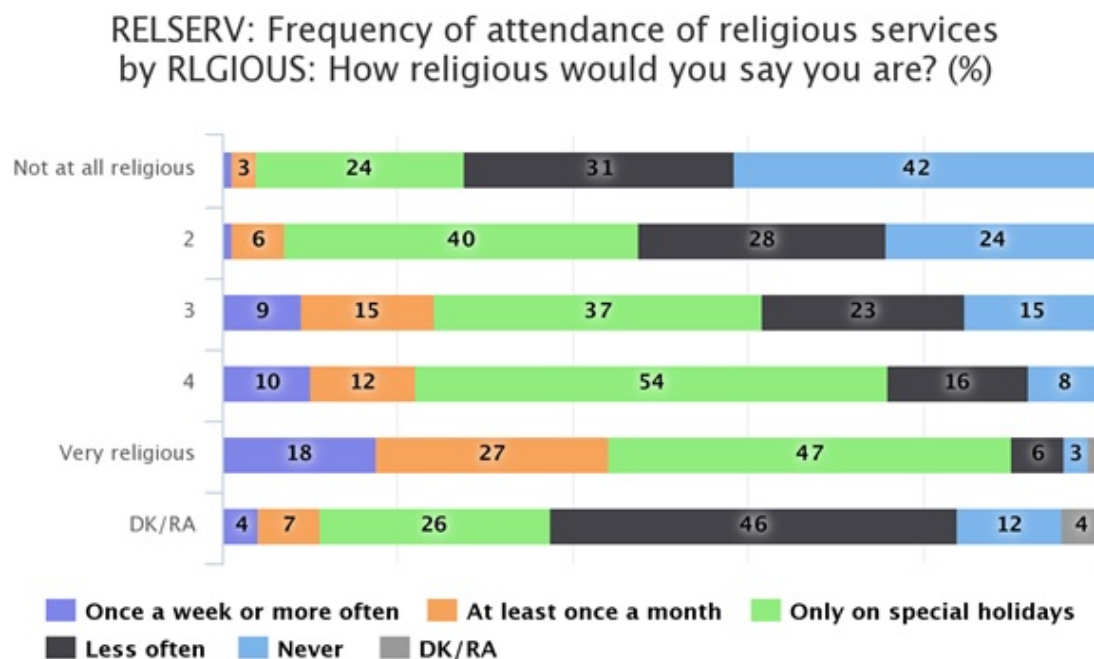
Political economy sees predominantly peasant society, with subsistence production based on extensive methods of cultivation, as social milieu more receptive to superstitions (Marx 2008 [1852]; Lenin 1959 [1905]), conservatism (Moore 1966; Gerschenkron 1943) and nepotism (Banfield 1958, Putnam 1993). Superstitions and conservatism, in turn, decrease a probability of reflective attitude and critical perceptions of traditions, or the attempts to grasp rational substance of rites. Thus, relatively low educated, with poor living standards, and with traditionally highly conservative outlook, population engaged in subsistence agricultural production, as the most numerous social class in Azerbaijan, may be active supporters of conservative traditionalism.



### ***In what mode are the traditions followed?***

Despite high profile of traditions and rites in the lives of people, in its majority, the population follows traditions automatically, without conscious self-reflection, just making sure that traditions are followed in form. CRRC CB (2013) for Azerbaijan shows that throughout all respondent categories with different levels of self-reported religiosity, the majority constitutes the ones who attend religious ceremonies only on special occasions (e.g., on special holidays). For very religious people this means that they do not strictly follow precepts of Islam, according to which a devout Muslim must strive to attend collective prayer at least once a week or more frequently. The very fact that the majority (56%) of people who view themselves as very religious, and attend religious services only on special holidays or even less frequently, may signify that formal holidays tied to pre-determined days may have higher influence upon religious practices of these devout people than subjective religious needs, personal spiritual drives (Figure 3). Even more telling is the data for non-religious people. Among the latter, more than half (58%) do attend religious ceremonies. Moreover, 28% not at all religious people reported attending religious ceremonies at least on special holidays or more frequently. These people thus may attend the ceremonies purely for formal reasons, because they may have no connection to the religious substance of these events.

**Figure 3. Frequency of attendance of religious ceremonies among Azerbaijani religious and non-religious respondents (in percent) (CRRC CB 2013)**



Caucasus Barometer 2013 Azerbaijan  
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

The very fact that often contradicting religious rites and folk traditional ceremonies are integrated is an important evidence for the lack of in-depth reflection of Content (substance, significance and meaning) of the performed rites by the population. An important instance evidencing this integration of incompatible religious and traditional precepts may be a widespread Azerbaijani practice of visiting the graves of diseased ancestors during non-religious Novruz festival (Shahbazov 2016). This is how the tradition goes in Azerbaijan: “People... refer to *Wind Tuesday* [the third Tuesday during a four week period leading to Novruz celebrated on Equinox] as *Fathers’ Tuesday*, *Ancestors’ Tuesday* or *Black Tuesday*. During this evening everyone, including those living in other cities and regions, return to their home village or town to visit the graves of their relatives and loved ones. There they say prayers for them and place flaming torches [\[iii\]](#) on their graves” (Shahbazov 2016).

Since all “otherworldly” matters, including those pertaining to passing away, fall into the domain of religion, funerals

and interment are regulated strictly according to Islam and its precepts. On the other hand, Novruz is not recognized in Islam as a legitimate part of its spiritual doctrine. Islam, as a relatively newer religious system, had consistently uprooted Zoroastrianism. While some Shia scholars may accept Novruz (see Sheikh Tusi's hadith in his *Misbah Al-Mutehajjid* from Mu'allā bin Khanees), there is no unequivocal link between Novruz and visits to the graves of diseased relatives neither in the Quran, nor in the Muslim doctrine. However, this does not dissuade Azerbaijani population from bringing Novruz rituals into the realm regulated by Islam.

Personal communication and informal conversations with more than 28 adults of different age, gender and income in Azerbaijan showed that the absolute majority of the people mixing contradictory Muslim and traditional rites do not have a clear-cut justification for the action from the Muslim point of view. The usual justification given was that they perform the rites "just in case," specifically "in order not to 'offend' the souls of the diseased beloved ones", and win / retain "the favor of omnipotent forces." Apparently, the tradition of visiting graves during Novruz is a very ancient one, hailing back to pre-Islamic times when Zoroastrianism was a dominant religion in Azerbaijan. Therefore, today the population follows these rites (including visits to the graves during Novruz) just to observe the tradition, without scrutinizing the meaning of this tradition and reflecting on whether this tradition is legitimate and does not contradict the Islamic rituals according to which diseased relatives were buried and whose "afterlife" is supposed to be regulated according to Muslim believes.

## **Conclusion**

An interference of Azerbaijani state into the regulation of traditions, apart from socio-economic facet, speaks volumes about the extent to which informal symbolic realm (traditions, rites) wields power over the daily life of the population.

Against every material odds, people participate in a social spectacle to earn cultural capital – to be either on the side of shame or fame. But more importantly, this example also shows a sheer gap between symbolic form and material content of traditions and religious participation: between, on the one hand, the design and requirements of rituals, requiring generosity and conspicuous consumption, and on the other hand, the content of low-income life of millions of people, mired in poverty and not able not only to demonstrate conspicuous consumption, but even to make ends meet.

The clash between symbols of collective values and the content of rational policy-making is an important policy-making problem in itself. In Azerbaijan the gap between Symbolic form and material Content replays itself on a wide variety of socio-economic and political issues: between modernist urban streets and rustic disregard of streetlights by pedestrians (Sadigov 2016); between, on the one hand, state requirements of compulsory education system and the population with 99% literacy rate and, on the other hand, complete inadequacy of the local education to prepare graduates for either university admission or job market (Temple and Petrov 2004; Sadigov 2014a); and, generally, fuzziness and uncertainty about fundamental socio-political problems (Guliyev 2017; Cummings 2013; Sadigov 2014b). Therefore, it is important to take note of essential qualities that permeate different problems faced by a society.

My main finding is that the population reproduces both financially burdensome (like providing expensive funeral feasts) and often contradictory (like visiting graves during Novruz) rituals because of the gap between Symbolic Form and Content in personal belief system. The approach that invests greater attention to the sequence and exact enactment of prescribed words and actions (*symbolic form*), without understanding of semantic meaning and sacral substance (*content*) of traditional rites indicates that the local practice of traditions features a gap between the mentioned

two facets of the traditional rituals. Simultaneously, symbolic Form is given a higher preference with a relative neglect of the Content of rites and traditions. This in turn points to the treatment of religious and tradition rites as an effective magical performance by the population (Buss 1989).

When people split symbolic Form of rituals from their Content, it becomes unimportant for them what pernicious economic consequences will an exact literal observation of traditions have. On the contrary, the exact observation of the *Form* (specific sequence of actions and events) of rituals becomes an end in itself, while the meaning and semantic substance (*Content*) of traditions are sacrificed to this formalism. A religious rite or a traditional ritual is carried out as a magical act – for example, when guests are served food at a funeral or when people visit relatives' graves on Novruz. Strict following of the form of a ritual is aimed at securing a blessing and predisposition of omnipotent transcendental forces. The focus on symbolic form, thus, should serve as a *promise* (but not rational-legal factual securing) of well-being, positive aura, good luck. *It is this boon and good luck that serves as an **ultimate safeguard** for a person in a completely irrational, unpredictable, chaotic life of a traditionalist worldview.* In this context, an immediate economic and psychological burden of spendings on lavish rituals attains a lower significance compared to earning and retaining the predisposition of the higher transcendental forces.

My finding testifies that while quantitatively masses of people may revert to Islam for identity (Roy 2007; Balci and Goyushov 2013; Ismayilov 2014), socio-economic (Finke 2014), or some other personal reasons, qualitatively the majority of the population still does not engage reflectively with substance of Islamic doctrine. There is still a big gap between everyday realities of ordinary people's lives (Reeves 2016) and lofty transcendental precepts of the religion.

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[i] After Weber, we define "traditionalist" society as the one based on following of "the mores sanctified through the unimaginably ancient recognition and habitual orientation to conform" (Weber 1919, 2). In sharp contrast to the qualities



of traditionalism, rational-legal authority is based on the “domination by virtue of ‘legality,’ by virtue of the belief in the validity of legal statute and functional ‘competence’ based on rationally created *rules*... This is domination as exercised by the modern ‘servant of the state’ and by all those bearers of power who in this respect resemble him” (Weber 1919, 2).

[\[ii\]](#) According to a number of researches (Banfield 1958; Maine 1861), pre-industrial societies in general are termed by the disconnection between abstract *Symbolic* principles (constitutions, ideology) and concrete material *Content* of the choices of people in everyday transactions. As Banfield notes of the decoupling of **symbol** and its **content** in mainly agrarian society of south Italy (little town of Montegrano): “in the society of amoral familists there will be no connection between abstract political principle (i.e., ideology) and concrete behavior in the ordinary relationships of every day life” (Banfield 1958, 99). Such social context, thus, is usually characterized by the confrontation between symbol and content of traditions.

[\[iii\]](#) candles