

Overview of Ritual & Material Culture

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson is an overview of ritual and material culture. You'll learn about ritual and material culture and how it interacts with religious culture. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Material Culture](#)
2. [Rituals](#)

1. Material Culture

Material culture is something that refers to the relationship between artifacts and social relations. As a social science then, material culture is the study of societies and their relationship to material items that people deem important or not. This kind of investigation can tell you about most aspects of a culture, such as its attitudes, value of science, language, education, art, nature, manual labor, and a culture's approach to and integration of religion and religious values.

Anthropologists and archaeologists often look at the physical objects of a culture and make assessments about the value and significance of them. In some of the earliest civilizations in the Indus Valley region in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, archaeologists found this devotional item (shown below) honoring the lord and protector of the animals, or Pashupati. It is considered to be a precursor to the Hindu god Shiva.



The Pashupati seal, circa 2350–2000 BCE



TERM TO KNOW

Material Culture

This refers to the relationship between artifacts and social relations.

2. Rituals

Hindu religion and culture include many **rituals**. In the following picture, someone is performing a Vedic fire ritual called a Homa, in which items such as grains, clarified butter, and incense are offered to one of the Hindu gods. He may also be reciting part of the Brahmana or commentaries on the sacred texts, the Veda.



Brahmana performing fire sacrifice; photo by Ilya Mauter

In Christianity, the ceremony of the Eucharist is a ritual reenactment of Christ's giving his body and blood to the disciples during the Last Supper.



The Last Supper by Vicente Juan Masip, circa 1555-1562 CE

It has been a central element in Christianity since that day. Most churches will have a chalice for the ritual of the Eucharist. It doesn't have to be old and dusty to be a powerful symbol. There are new ones easily available for purchase.



The Gifts (Bread and Wine) prepared during the Liturgy of Preparation before the beginning of the Divine Liturgy;
photo by Alexej Potupin

Objects that have religious and spiritual significance are likely to be all around us. You probably have some kind of sacred object in your home. Maybe you use it for prayer. Certain keepsakes and memorabilia might fit into this category. In any case, as you study the world religions you will come into contact with different beliefs and practices that involve material items that are used in rituals and ceremonies.



TERM TO KNOW

Ritual

A set of actions performed mainly for their symbolic value.



SUMMARY

Today, we looked at a few examples from the East and the West of **material culture** and **rituals**. Human preoccupation with sacred objects has been around forever, and one may even be resting on your

table or your window sill right now.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Material Culture

A term referring to the relationship between artifacts and social relations.

Ritual

A set of actions, performed mainly for their symbolic value.