

How Rituals and Practices Can Influence Society in Émile Durkheim's View; Example of Intercultural Communities from Romanian Society

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Abstract

Émile Durkheim, one of the foundational thinkers of sociology, saw religion—not simply as belief—but as a matrix of rituals, practices, and sacred symbols which perform crucial social functions. In particular, **rituals sustain collective consciousness, reinforce moral norms, create social cohesion, and bridge individual existence with the social order**. This article examines how rituals and religious practices influence society from Durkheim's perspective, especially in contemporary, plural, intercultural settings. It then applies those ideas to examples drawn from intercultural or multiethnic communities in Romania (especially Hungarian and Turkish-Tartar minorities) to illustrate how rituals function in maintaining solidarity, identity, negotiation of difference, and the challenges that arise. Finally, the article considers what these insights suggest for policy, education, and future research in multiethnic societies.

Keywords: sociology, Durkheim, religion, practices, Romanians, ethnicity, rituals, collective effervescence.

Introduction

Modern societies are defined by increasing heterogeneity, a condition driven by rapid globalization, transnational migration, the assertion of minority rights, and ubiquitous intercultural communication. This confluence of factors creates a complex and often tension-filled social environment. Émile Durkheim's sociological perspective on religion, articulated most notably in his seminal work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Durkheim, 1965), remains highly relevant for diagnosing and understanding the mechanisms of social cohesion in this contemporary, complex context. Durkheim famously posited that religion is not merely a system of private, supernatural beliefs but a profound **social fact**: a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, which unite into one single

moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them (Durkheim, 1965, p. 62).

The true sociological significance of religion, for Durkheim, is therefore not theological but **functional**, residing in the **rituals and practices** that generate and sustain the collective life. From this perspective, a **ritual** is a powerful, recurrent social force that cyclically brings individuals into contact and establishes a shared sense of collective identity and moral authority, transcending individual, transient existence. This paper utilizes Durkheim's functionalist lens to explore the dynamics of ritual in a multiethnic European nation. The paper first delineates Durkheim's key concepts regarding the social function of rituals. It then establishes the complex historical and demographic context of intercultural communities in modern Romania, a state governed by the **freedom of conscience** (Constituția României, 2020). Finally, it analyzes how the distinct ritual practices of two major minority groups—the Hungarian and Turkish-Tartar communities—operate as dual mechanisms for the preservation of internal ethnic identity and the external negotiation of peaceful, intercultural dialogue.

Theoretical Framework: Durkheimian Sociology of Rituals

The foundation of Durkheim's sociology of religion rests upon the fundamental, universal social classification between the **sacred** and the **profane**. The sacred refers to those elements, beliefs, or objects set apart by the community, imbued with power, and protected by prohibitions, demanding awe and reverence. The profane, conversely, encompasses the mundane, utilitarian objects, tasks, and activities of everyday life. This division is not determined by any intrinsic quality of the object, but is a **social construction**, a collective representation created and upheld by society itself (Durkheim, 1965).

The primary function of **ritual practices** is to mediate and manage the relationship between these two radically opposed spheres. Rituals are formalized, obligatory, and repetitive modes of action that occur during specific, non-ordinary times and places, enabling individuals to momentarily transition from the fragmented world of the profane to the unifying world of the sacred. This collective movement allows individuals to re-engage with and internalize the very moral authority of the social group (Durkheim, 1965). The intensity of these practices is what separates them from simple customs or traditions.

The central psycho-social mechanism by which rituals produce social cohesion is **collective effervescence**. This term describes the state of intense, shared energy, emotional excitement, and spiritual exaltation experienced by individuals when they gather for ceremonies, rites, or large social assemblies. During these moments, the collective force of the group overwhelms the individual, giving rise to sensations that are often misinterpreted by the participants as emanating from an external, supernatural, or divine power. Durkheim clarifies that this power is, in reality, the

powerful, concentrated moral force of the society being experienced in a heightened state (Durkheim, 1965).

"A religious ceremony is an assembly, a reunion of individuals who share the same beliefs and practices, and who come together to celebrate them" (Durkheim, 1965, p. 51).

This collective effervescence is indispensable because it cyclically regenerates and reinforces the **collective consciousness**—the totality of shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that provide cognitive and ethical cohesion to the social body. Through the performance of rituals, the moral order is externalized, validated, and then internalized by each member, stabilizing the social system. Durkheim's work on solidarity provides a necessary evolutionary distinction: **Mechanical Solidarity**, based on homogeneity and shared beliefs (typical of simple societies), is powerfully reinforced by traditional religious rituals, which generate high-intensity effervescence. However, in modern, complex societies characterized by **Organic Solidarity** (based on interdependence and specialization), this intense religious cohesion often only applies *within* distinct sub-groups (like an ethnic minority). The larger society, therefore, relies on the development of **new, shared civic or intercultural rituals** to generate a broader, albeit often lower-intensity, collective effervescence that is necessary to prevent **anomie**—the state of normlessness and social fragmentation that occurs when social bonds fail.

Romanian Society: Historical and Demographic Context

Romania provides a compelling case study for Durkheimian analysis due to its deep historical roots as a multiethnic and multi-confessional state, particularly in its border regions. While the majority of the population adheres to the Romanian Orthodox Church, the legal environment is pluralistic, with the 2020 Constitution guaranteeing the fundamental **freedom of conscience** (Constituția României, 2020) and supporting the rights of recognized minority groups (Guvernul României, 2018).

The demographic data provides a structural overview of this pluralism. The 2011 census confirmed the dominance of the Romanian Orthodox Church (86.45%), but also underscored the enduring presence of significant religious minorities. This includes Roman Catholics (4.62%), Reformed (3.19%), and Muslims (0.34%) (National Institute of Statistics, 2012). Crucially, in Romania, **religion and ethnicity are often deeply intertwined, acting as proxy markers for identity** due to centuries of political division under foreign empires (e.g., Habsburg, Ottoman). The concentration of the Hungarian minority, largely Roman Catholic or Reformed, in Transylvania, and the Turkish and Tartar Muslim minority in Dobrogea, creates distinct regional contexts for the study of ritual interaction.

The multi-confessional history of these regions ensures that ethnic and religious boundaries have always been actively negotiated. Transylvania, for instance, has historically been home to Romanians, Hungarians, and Saxons, resulting in centuries

of inter-group accommodation. Similarly, Dobrogea's legacy as a major crossroads under the Ottoman Empire fostered a unique culture of coexistence between the local Orthodox population and the Turkish and Tartar communities. This historical reality underscores the necessity of inter-group accommodation and tolerance, which are continuously mediated and reinforced through ritualized social actions rather than simply formal legal mechanisms.

Rituals as Mechanisms for Identity and Dialogue

In complex, multiethnic settings, the rituals performed by minority groups operate on two simultaneous levels: they solidify **internal cohesion** and they manage **external relationships**, thus becoming mechanisms for both identity preservation and intercultural communication.

The Hungarian Minority and Boundary Work

The Hungarian minority, largely concentrated in the Transylvanian region, relies heavily on religious practice to preserve its distinct linguistic and ethnic identity. The choice of the Hungarian language in liturgical services, the deliberate celebration of specific national or historical holidays that often overlap with religious commemorations, and the adherence to non-Orthodox Christian calendars (Roman Catholic, Reformed) are all powerful ritual tools. These practices function to reinforce a specific **collective consciousness** separate from the Romanian majority (Borbély, 2020).

By conducting these public rituals in their native language and observing different sacred times, the group actively performs **boundary work** (Lamont & Fournier, 1992). This sociological process involves the drawing of symbolic lines to maintain cultural integrity and manage the flow of interaction and identity purity between groups. This ritualized maintenance of boundaries fulfills the core Durkheimian function of solidarity for the minority group. However, successful societal integration necessitates the development of **ritual negotiation**. In contexts such as intermarriage or shared civic functions, participation in an "other's" ritual (e.g., a Hungarian family attending an Orthodox baptism) is itself a profound social ritual. The act of *showing up*, respecting the sacred space, and acknowledging the importance of the event becomes the central, unifying social performance, an emergent form of civic effervescence that builds the groundwork for **organic solidarity** outside of the core, exclusive religious practices.

The Turkish and Tartar Minority and Ritualized Hospitality

The Muslim minority in Dobrogea, a historically mixed region, offers a distinct example of effective **"Dialogue through Practice"** (Moyaert & Geldhof, 2015). Their religious observances, such as the fasting during Ramadan, the celebration of Eid al-Fitr, and daily prayer, are highly visible and immutable social facts (National Institute

of Statistics, 2012). In this historical mixed region, the negotiation of difference often takes the form of **ritualized hospitality**.

The core ritual here is not the religious act of worship but the **social ritual of giving and receiving hospitality** (Moyaert & Geldhof, 2015). The majority Christian population is frequently invited to share the celebratory meals of Eid, or a Christian neighbor may take proactive measures to respect the fasting hours of Ramadan by avoiding eating in public. This engagement—which often includes sharing space and food—is a powerful social transaction. It fulfills a crucial Durkheimian need for social bonding through a collective gathering (the feast) but consciously utilizes a neutral space (the neighbor's home, the community square) to transform a potentially divisive religious boundary into a point of positive social interaction. Conversely, the majority's **ritualized silence** or avoidance of eating in public during Ramadan functions as an unwritten, reciprocal civic ritual of respect. This absence of conflict, born of mutual understanding and conscious action, contributes to social harmony just as effectively as the high-intensity collective effervescence of a religious service.

Discussion: Rituals as Bridges, Barriers, and Reflexivity

While the analysis reveals the positive, cohesive power of rituals, it must also address the attendant challenges inherent in multiethnic settings.

A persistent major challenge is **Exclusion and Threat Perception**. When minority rituals are publicly displayed and viewed through a lens of fear or suspicion, they can be interpreted as intentionally "exclusive" and consequently perceived as a direct threat to the majority's collective consciousness (Wuthnow, 1988). This interpretation can lead to the very social fragmentation and division that Durkheim theorized would be caused by a weakened moral order. Furthermore, the reliance on rituals for communication often involves **Linguistic and Symbolic Barriers**. The subtle nonverbal communication, gestures, and symbolic language embedded within rituals are deeply intertwined with specific cultural codes (Herbert & Albert, 2005). Misunderstanding a gesture, the context of silence, or a symbolic object can inadvertently lead to social tension and misinterpretation (Moyaert & Geldhof, 2015).

This situation is compounded by processes of **detraditionalization** observed in modern sociological studies, where commitments and identities are becoming more fluid and less inherited (Moyaert & Geldhof, 2015). As individuals move into a phase of **reflexive modernization** (Giddens, 2006), they must consciously choose and defend their identities rather than simply inheriting them. This means the maintenance of rituals becomes a self-aware, intentional act of identity construction. This **reflexivity** is, paradoxically, key to successful intercultural interaction. Individuals in multiethnic societies are increasingly required to consciously analyze their own traditions and those of others, transforming fixed, mechanical rituals into

flexible, dialogical practices. The resulting grassroots dialogue, based on this daily, pragmatic negotiation of ritual differences, is often more robust and effective than formal diplomatic or academic discussions (Moyaert & Geldhof, 2015).

To ensure that rituals successfully foster positive social change and strengthen organic solidarity, proactive interventions are necessary (Borbély, 2012). Policy and education systems must move beyond simply tolerating differences and must explicitly integrate the sociological function of rituals into civic education. Specifically, governments and civic organizations should actively promote **inclusive public rituals**—such as shared national commemorative events, local cultural festivals, or non-denominational public service days—that are designed to accommodate all ethnic and religious groups equally. These civic gatherings function as neutral spaces where a broader, more diverse **collective effervescence** can be generated, strengthening the shared national (organic) solidarity without diminishing the internal mechanical solidarity of sub-groups.

Conclusion and Future Research

Durkheim's framework, which places the social power of rituals and collective effervescence at the heart of cohesion, provides an indispensable and enduring lens through which to examine multiethnic coexistence in Romania. The ritual practices of the Hungarian and Turkish-Tartar minorities demonstrate that these actions are not merely conservative relics of the past but are active social forces critical for maintaining identity and internal cohesion. Crucially, the evidence suggests that successful cohabitation depends on a subtle dynamic where minority rituals are either **tolerated** with conscious respect or **transformed** into pragmatic acts of hospitality and negotiation that actively build bridges across religious divides. By properly recognizing the inherent functional nature of rituals—their capacity to generate emotional bonding and reaffirm shared moral ties—policymakers and educators can move toward better facilitating positive intercultural dialogue and minimizing the risk of anomie. This approach ensures that Romania's rich ethnic and religious diversity remains a powerful source of strength, enabling the formation of a robust, organically solidary society grounded in mutual respect and shared civic practice.

Future research should focus on three critical areas to build upon these findings: Longitudinal studies are needed to track the actual impact of newly implemented civic rituals (e.g., shared city festivals or public commemorations) on reducing long-term inter-group prejudice across different generations. Secondly, in-depth qualitative research is required on the "ritual negotiation" processes within mixed-faith Romanian families to understand the development and transmission of new, syncretic domestic rituals. Finally, a comparative analysis of the pace of **detraditionalization** in highly urbanized versus rural Romanian intercultural communities would illuminate how density and infrastructure influence the reflexivity and fluidity of religious identities.

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