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Stress and Ritual. December Family Traditions in the Netherlands of Today

John Helsloot

The performance perspective in the study of ritual recently opened up the new research field of ritual failures or imperfections. Following this lead, this article explores the phenomenon of stress that people in the Netherlands report while preparing for and performing the rituals (St Nicholas, Christmas) of the month of December. It appears, from electronic interview data, that this stress is considered by some as a negative and by others as an absent or even positive experience. The author argues that the discourse of stress, therefore, also helps people to position themselves vis-à-vis each other.

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The anthropological study of ritual has witnessed, during the last few decades, an important shift in theoretical perspective. There has been, one might say and elaborating on William Sax, a growing acceptance of the “catholic” stance toward ritual, at the cost of the “protestant” one. The latter adopts “the ‘representational theory’ – which seeks to understand and interpret ritual in terms of the underlying ideas, emotions, structures, or relations that it ‘represents’, ‘symbolizes’, or ‘expresses’”, whereas the “catholic” view focuses on “the ends to which it conduces”, and asks how rituals “might be instrumental, how they might actually *do things*” (Sax 2010: 5–6). As Laurent-Sébastien Fournier wrote acutely (Fournier 2008: 7), the symbolic perspective “understood rituals in relation with what they were not, and nothing was said about their specific dynamics” (cf. Gunnell 2010: 6).

Performance, Risk and Failure

What is now known as the performance perspective has sought to redress this. One of the protagonists turning away from the “meaning-centered examination of ritual [conceived as] text” and advocating instead the study of “nondiscursive rhetorical and performative aspects of ritual” is Edward Schieffelin (Schieffelin

1985: 707). His work is of particular interest here because he was, with Clifford Geertz and Ronald Grimes, among the first to recognize that “genres of performance” are “inherently *risky*. There is always something aesthetically and/or practically at stake in them, and something can always go wrong” (Schieffelin 1996: 60). A ritual may even “fail”, depending on “whether the performance itself is ‘properly carried out’, whether it ‘works’, or on ‘whether the performers and other participants can ‘bring it off’” (Schieffelin 1998: 198). These issues have opened up a new field of research, resulting in volumes like *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy* of 2010, dealing with the question “Do rituals really work, and if so, then how?” (Sax 2010: 3; see also Sørensen 2006; Roodenburg 2010: 13, 20), and *When Rituals Go Wrong: Mistakes, Failure, and the Dynamics of Ritual* of 2007, to which Schieffelin contributed an introduction.

As an analytical category, “ritual failure” may refer to a ritual’s “‘outcome’ (achieving the ends for which ritual is performed)” or, as in most cases, to its “‘process’ (proper performance of ritual)”. Varying on Ronald Grimes’s terminology, in his book *Ritual Criticism* (Grimes 1990: 191–209), of “infelicitous performances”, Schieffelin suggests “ritual imperfection” as an adequate term to denote this procedural aspect. Together with Grimes he stresses the vital importance of connecting to the “attitudes towards ritual performance” and the concepts in which these are framed by the participants themselves in ritual, to “the rhetoric of ritual failure” (Schieffelin 2007: 2–3, 6, 11, 16).

Here, however, as Schieffelin himself recognizes, a strict adoption of the performance approach, or perspective (Handelman 2004a: 16), reaches a limit. Leo Howe has made the point that “stress on the performative dimension slightes the rule-governed nature of much ritual action” and leaves out the wider “context in which future performances are situated” (Howe 2000: 66). In so doing, he advocated a sort of rehabilitation of the text metaphor in the study of ritual. Perhaps a middle ground may be gained by focusing, with Ute Hüsken, the editor of *When Rituals Go Wrong*, on “the process of discussing and explicitly evaluating a ritual”. There, “implicit values or beliefs [concerning ritual] become conscious”. These may concern the “ritual atmosphere” or the “ritual competence” of the enactors (Hüsken 2007: 339, 347–348). As Howe notes, “often the rules are not well known (...) or knowing the rules does not necessarily make it easy to implement them” (Howe 2000: 69). To understand this one has to step “[o]utside the ritual frame” proper (Hüsken 2007: 357), and to pay attention to “the actual play of social forces between the ritual and wider social domain” (Schieffelin 2007: 18). The – risky – competition through ritual for social status, and its loss in case of ritual failure, is a major factor in this field (Howe 2000: 70, 76).

It is from this theoretical framework, and inspired by previous studies of Nils Arvid Bringéus (Bringéus 1978) and Orvar Löfgren (Löfgren 1993) on ritual

as “trauma” (i.e. as a “psychisch anstrengende Angelegenheit” (Bringéus 1978: 36) or eliciting “quarrels”, that I want to draw attention to the phenomenon of people reporting symptoms of stress while preparing for and performing December rituals in the Netherlands today.

Stress

As a mental condition, with negative overtones, stress was identified in psychology in the 1950s. The term soon gained currency in popular discourse in western societies, particularly since the 1980s. It is used, quoting psychologist Steven Hobfoll, “as a basic explanatory mechanism to describe the underpinnings of what we see as wrong with work, family life, and our society” (Hobfoll 1998: 1). As a shorthand definition, stress may be taken as the state of mental imbalance arising from the tension, or lack of perceived fitting, between the demands of the social environment and the response capability of a person (Hobfoll 1998: 8, 94–95). Experiencing stress is a consequence of the appraisal or interpretation of a situation by an individual (Compennolle 1993: 37–38). Different persons may appraise the same situation differently, as a consequence of the differences in their psychological make-up and life history. Reporting psychological or bodily symptoms of stress or not, however, is not merely a matter of individual psychology. As Hobfoll argues, “how people react to stress and what they find stressful is [also] shaped by sociohistorical processes” and by “culturally general interpretations” (Hobfoll 1998: 19–20, 34). This implies that “stress” is also a socio-cultural category, and by that an object of ethnological inquiry too. More precisely, and concurring with SETHA LOW in her study of South-American “nerves”, “stress” is best conceptualized as an “embodied metaphor”, in which “stress” “embodies the lived experience of daily life as a metaphor of physical, social, political, and economic distress that has specific meanings within a variety of cultural contexts” (Low 1994: 142).

Stress is by no means a marginal phenomenon in the Netherlands. The 1990s were said to witness the “rise of stress-society” (WANSINK 1994). During the last few years employees in 96% of companies and organizations had to contend with stress in one way or another, and the same holds true for 80% of all children between eight and fourteen years of age (Cijfers... 2004; Francine... 2008). A special Dutch webportal refers to dozens of web pages on stress, e.g., at work, in personal relationships, and while on vacation, and how to prevent it. There is also a special page on stress at Christmas (*kerst-stress* in Dutch)¹. This should not come as a surprise.

¹<<http://www.stress.startpagina.nl>> [accessed on 09 2010].

“Merry Stressmas”

Nowadays, Christmas is the focal point of the Dutch ritual year. Nearly all Dutch women (88%), a widely read women’s magazine reported in 2008, delight in the prospect of the special “Christmas atmosphere”, in both the public and domestic spaces. This general mood of expectation, of a good time to come, is simultaneously offset, however, by some marked reserves. A 46% of all women fear the coming holiday and a 22% hate the prospect of having guests (Grote... 2008). Another opinion poll in 2000 learned that one in six of every Dutchman considered Christmas a tiresome event (*TNS NIPO*... 2000). To explain this curious contradiction, recourse often is taken, in public and private discourse, to the concept of stress (cf. Pleck 2000: 59). This is effectively epitomized in a witty Christmas card reading “Merry Stressmas” (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. “Merry Stress-Mas”. Postcard (2009)
designed by Dutch illustrator Wieteke Koolhof

Christmas, however, is not alone in this respect. In the month of December three major holidays are celebrated in succession in the Netherlands. Next to Christmas, there is the festival of St Nicholas (*Sinterklaas*), having its pinnacle on the eve of December 6th (Wheeler, Rosenthal 2005: 213–229) and New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day (Doelman 2010). All three attract events and celebrations in the public sphere and in the semi-public sphere of schools, work and voluntary associations. Their primary locus, however, is the family

home, with its members as protagonists, not infrequently joined by relatives and friends. They festively come together, in order to exchange gifts (St Nicholas; Christmas) or to assist at a dinner (Christmas) (van Leer 1997). The celebration of the turn of the year (*oud-en-nieuw*) somewhat stands apart, as having a less tight hold on the family’s involvement, both ritually and emotionally. Just like Christmas, St Nicholas, the New Year (i.e. to a less extent) and the month of December itself may attract the concept of stress: *Sinterklaas-stress*², *oud-en-nieuw-stress*, *december-stress*. To what experiences do these various kinds of stress refer?

² Here I will not consider the stress, of a different nature, that very young children may experience while confronting the imposing live figures of bishop St Nicholas and his servants in blackface, or that may arise from their anxiety about the presents they expect.

Reporting the Experience of Stress in December Rituals

Apart from consulting features on stress in Dutch December rituals in newspapers, magazines or websites (Meertens, Wijckmans 2002; van der Hart 2006; Kooktroep... 2008)³, I asked, in February 2011, three open questions about December stress of the digital panel of informers of the Meertens Institute: 1. Do you experience stress yourself at December rituals? 2. Do you think this is a recent phenomenon? 3. Does the experience of stress affect the success or failure of December rituals? Of the 2683 people enlisted, 1294 (48%) answered these questions. In keeping with the frequent use of the word stress in common parlance, all respondents but one clearly understood what was meant by stress in December rituals. People volunteer to participate in this panel. This automatically implies that the results are not representative for Dutch society at large. Still, the sheer number of data obtained allows for at the least hypothetically sketching the range of conceivable opinions and attitudes, irrespective of their actual occurrence. I summarize the results here.

"[T]he way", Michael Stausberg noted, "in which one deals with rituals – for example, in preparing for a performance – may also require ritualized forms" (Stausberg 2006: 639). Hardly overstretching the concept of ritualization, this holds true for the preparations for celebrating St Nicholas and Christmas in the Netherlands too. They involve, to name the most prevalent, buying parcels for one's children, spouse, relatives or friends, on behalf of St Nicholas or for under the Christmas tree. How to find the "right", "perfect" or "original" presents? Children in particular are asked for a list of the presents they would like to get. What if they fail to produce one, or to send it in time? Will there be a balance in the money value of parcels received by the children of the family, to prevent jealousy arising amongst them? What to present people with that claim "to possess everything"? The traditional funny and often elaborate surprise parcels have to be fabricated, and their accompanying teasing rhymes for the ritual on St Nicholas eve. Christmas and New Year cards must be sent. The women, mostly, are up to devise the Christmas dinner and to schedule the necessary shopping, of preferably extraordinary and expensive food. How to invent a menu that will please children and adults alike? What if items are sold out? The cooking itself of the Christmas dinner – taking on average some two to three hours – often turns

³ <<http://www.vrouwonline.nl/balans/feestdagen/2389/vrouwen-gaan-kerststress-te-lijf>> women fighting *kerst-stress*) [accessed on 09 2010].

<http://www.lekker-in-je-vel.nl/artikelen/tips_kerst_dagen_gezond_doorkomen.html> (getting through the holidays in good health) [accessed on 09 2010].

<<http://www.gezondheidsnet.nl/geest/artikelen/323/hoe-houden-we-de-feestdagen-leuk>> (how to stay happy during the holidays) [accessed on 09 2010].

out to be a formidable task. For the skills of the average housewife prove to be not up to the demands of preparing an elaborate dinner of several courses, and with recipes more complicated than usual. There may be annoyance about the mess in the kitchen, the fear of forgetting an item, the pressure to get the timing right, and the general concern that the food may be spoilt in the end – the frightening discrepancy between the beautiful picture in the cooking book and the actual result of one's efforts. Arrangements have to be made for receiving guests, or for making visits in reverse. How to avoid giving offence, to parents or parents-in-law, grown-up children, or in case of divorcees with children, to ex-partners? Is it necessary to buy a new, fashionable, dress, or new interior decorations? On top of all this there are the worries about the atmosphere at St Nicholas eve or the Christmas dinner table, about the children being pleased with their presents or the guests getting along with each other and of course about their appreciation of the meal served to them. Will the sought after social prestige and enhanced status be achieved (van Leer 1997: 559, 561)? And afterwards, there may be the financial burden of all, sometimes excessive, expenditure involved.

A majority of just over half of the respondents of this internet panel did indeed report experiencing stress while performing the above-mentioned practices – that is, in respect of all of them taken together, or some, or only one particular task. Confirming the variability already commented on in Dutch media and internet in the way stress may affect people in December rituals, however, nearly half of these respondents claimed not to experience stress at all, or only slightly so. Many, significantly, even qualified stress as a welcome experience.

Some respondents of the first category, describing their experiences in their own terms, complained of “edginess”, “restlessness”, “nervousness”, “irritation”, “uncertainty and discontent”, “a bad temper”, or of “feeling rushed” or “agitated”. Bodily symptoms, possibly meant figuratively, were equally referred to, like aches in the stomach, head or teeth, nausea and fatigue, or “sleeping badly”. Stress here, obviously, has a negative charge. This type of stress is multifaceted, and made up by a combination of such forces as time pressure, a sense of obligation, mostly felt towards relatives, and the pressure to meet high standards, with simultaneous fears of impending failure or meeting disappointment. Stress arises from the discrepancy between these inescapable outside demands and one's inner feelings.

Exactly the opposite – a more or less perfect fit between the tasks at hand in December and one's own attitude towards these – is reported by the other group of respondents. They welcome stress as a “pleasant”, “agreeable”, and even “healthy” experience, “a kind of adrenaline”, empowering them to perform adequately. They do not dread the season, but look forward to it. By careful plan-

ning, they manage to do their shopping, buying presents, preparing dishes, etc., in time. They do not experience stress in a negative sense, because they are able to maintain their psychological and emotional independence vis-à-vis the, often combined, pressures of convention, commerce, the media or one's family.

Taking this position to its logical extreme, many respondents reported that they had shaken off celebrating December's rituals altogether. Therefore, they were free from stress. The denial of stress, however, merely delineates its phenomenal existence. This equally holds true for those respondents claiming not to be subjected to stress anymore. Over the years, they have learned to take a more detached view of their duties, in the wake of a new phase in their lives, such as retirement or children leaving the parental home. This is complemented by respondents experiencing stress for the first time, because of their reaching adulthood and the responsibilities it entails, or from having a family of their own with children.

Ritual Failure?

Stress attaches itself mainly to the ritualized preparations for December's family rituals. In the guise of high expectations or, instead, of an inner aversion to feel obliged to partake in festivities, i.e. against one's own will, stress, however, may cross over into the actual performance of rituals. To test this hypothesis, I explicitly asked my informers to what degree this was actually the case. Only a few respondents indicated that thinking in terms of success or failure of rituals was alien to them. Therefore, it was beyond them to measure the influence of stress. All others were able to relate to the question. A grand majority stated that in their view stress did *not* influence the outcome of a ritual. A measured "no", even "no, rubbish!", sufficed for an answer, thereby underlining the sheer inconceivability of such a connection.

To people not experiencing stress in the first place, this goes without saying. But this equally holds true for some of those that do experience stress. "No, in retrospect" – a phrase often used – "everything turned out much better than I had anticipated. The party went off well". "No, that's the funny thing, in the end it [stress] matters little". "It's all part of the game". This seems to corroborate the thesis of Humphrey and Laidlaw on "the paradoxical character of the prescription of ritual (Humphrey, Laidlaw 1994: 128). Ritual is prescribed action, you have to get it right, and yet sometimes it seems that so long as you try, so long as you accept the ritual commitment, it is almost impossible to get it wrong". This is, of course, even more so the case when people have a positive view on the experience of stress. "Without stress, no success". "A bit of stress lends lustre to a festival and makes it work".

Several others, however, doubted the truthfulness of these claims – “stress has an effect, only nobody will admit it” – and stated that stress did impair their rituals. To them, stress and festivity cannot go together. Stress hinders a relaxed, convivial atmosphere, necessary for a successful performance, and prevents the right mood of true enjoyment to reign. “Having worked so hard, it can be difficult for them [women] to feel the right Christmas sensation in their bodies on the morning of Christmas Eve”, Löfgren wrote likewise (Löfgren 1993: 232). But even then, this sensation may come closer to an awareness of ritual imperfection than of outright failure.

Stress, Reflexivity and the (In)Formalization of Social Relations

By focusing, as an ethnologist⁴, not so much on the ritual acts in themselves that make up December festivals, but on the way people manage and confront these, I complied, as an analytical first step, to Handelman’s incitement of “studying ritual within itself and its doing, with its interior dynamics and practices” (Handelman 2004a: 3). However, studying the phenomenon of stress in Dutch December rituals merely from such a performance perspective would, in my view, and concurring with Leo Howe, fail to capture its full ethnological significance. The negative stress people report may be said to result from their felt incapacity to follow the rules they have set for themselves, a mental picture of an ideal, perfect, Christmas. Roni Weinstein is certainly right in concluding that “[t]he ‘messiness of ritual performance’ is not a type of personal or social failure; it belongs to the ritual space in all its variety” (Weinstein 2004: 455). The point is that some performers do not share this detached view of the researcher. The discourse of stress is in one respect a comment on their own personal shortcomings, but can also be viewed as a way of reflexively engaging these perceived rules, a “performative reflexivity” (Turner 1987: 24). “‘Reflexivity’ is not an instance of mastery, but instead points to a loss of control” (Stausberg 2006: 644). To understand this reflexivity one has to look beyond the ritual frame proper and to consider the wider social and cultural setting of ritual performance – as advised by theorists of ritual shortcomings or failure like Schieffelin: “changing social configurations (...) affect the climate and context within which rituals are performed” (Schieffelin 2007: 18–19).

This context is historical and contingent (Bringéus 1978: 45). The wider frame is the rise, since the 1980s, of the importance of Christmas as a season’s festival in Dutch society, at the cost of the more traditional celebration of St Nicholas. This coincided at the same time, as Dutch sociologists have theorized (Post 2000; Wouters 2008), with a growing formalization – after a period of informalization

⁴Psychological research on *kerst-stress* in the Netherlands is lacking. Said professor Ad Vingerhoets, an expert on stress and emotions, of Tilburg University: “How this specific type of stress arises is unclear. It has never been properly investigated” (Martens 2009).

in the previous two decades – of social relations. There is a new interest in “good manners”, in “doing things the right way”. The sociologists relate this to feelings of social insecurity and an ensuing competition and rivalry for social status, triggered by the economic crisis of the early 1980s, and continuing even after the economy recovered in later years. These phases of informalization and formalization do not simply alternate, but interfere with one another, develop crisscross and appear simultaneously in different areas of society. The result of the conflicting demands of these cultural orientations is a high self-awareness or reflexivity, a sense of ambivalence and confusion, and a tendency to deplore that one has “to give in” and to go against one’s own “real” feelings (Post 2000: 471; Wouters 2008: 145–146, 316) – the very complaints respondents report of as “stress”.

To test this model, I asked my informers whether in their view the stressful demand of a “perfect” St Nicholas or Christmas was a novel phenomenon. In line with the general tendency of the results, a substantial number felt that stress always was “symptomatic” of December rituals, inherently requiring a surplus effort to perform them. They remembered their mothers working equally hard to get things done. Some recognized that the mere labeling as stress was a new development. Others, however, pointed out that the nature of this hustle and bustle in fact did change in recent times. “This external pressure grows stronger every year. Even when you try to resist it, you cannot escape it”. It becomes internalized, in that “people entertain ever greater hopes of these festivals, and of their own participation in them”. In December, one witnessed “a kind of mass hysteria”, or an “artificial”, “ludicrous”, “exaggerated” Christmas atmosphere. In particular commerce and the media were said to blame for this. “Even when you are conscious of this, they exert a certain influence”. The high pace of social life in general nowadays in December is equally pointed out to, with celebrations of St Nicholas and Christmas not only at home, but also in schools, associations or work; the obligation to attend the many birthday parties that seem to characterize the month of December especially; and the hectic time in many a company having to close the year. This is contrasted, however, by respondents witnessing the opening up of a more detached climate towards these socio-cultural pressures, i.e. a growing social acceptance of an informal style, in agreement with people’s personal inclinations. This may even be on the increase. Trendbox Market Research noted, based on a representative sample of the Dutch population, a slight growth, between 2002 and 2009, of a more relaxed attitude – or a decrease in *kerst-stress* – towards shopping and family obligations at Christmas⁵. The general picture, therefore, is mixed, agreeing broadly with the sociologists’ theories.

⁵ <<http://www.gezondheidsnet.nl/geest/nieuws/3824/nederlander-heeft-minder-last-van-kerststress>> (Dutchman experiences less *kerst-stress*) [accessed on 09 2010].

Conclusion

Taking as my point of departure new theories about ritual failure or imperfections, I sought to address the phenomenon of stress that people in the Netherlands report while preparing and performing their December rituals. These practices may cause, my internet panel interview results show, a lot of emotional pain. To many others the same feelings work in the opposite direction, enabling them to perform better. Focusing on the inner working of ritual certainly provides a richer picture. Analyzing this stress, however, strictly from a performance perspective runs the risk of failing to problematize the nature of the discourse of stress in itself. Wider cultural processes must also be taken into account. I fully concur with Seta Low's conclusion in her study of the cognate experience of "nerves", that equally the discourse of "stress", as "an embodied metaphor with meanings, not just sensations", "suggest[s] that the bodily experiences are metaphors of self/society relations, with the body acting as the mediating symbolic device" (Low 1994: 157). The discourse of stress, and in particular its articulation and communication as a negative, or conversely, an absent or a positive experience, is a welcome bone of contention that helps people to position themselves against each other, and vis-à-vis society or tradition in general. Perhaps, the whole point of the discourse of stress is to trigger this differential response. The "texts" about stress may therefore, in my view, still profitably be called, varying on Geertz' famous dictum, "a story Dutchmen tell themselves about themselves". Handelman's reservations on this perspective seem to me unfounded, at least in this case (Handelman 2004a: 16, 27; Handelman 2004b: 217). The study of this kind of ritual imperfection opens up an additional window on Dutch society's inner tensions.

This fits in with Orvar Löfgren's analysis of Swedish Christmas celebrations (Löfgren 1993). It seems the Netherlands have now caught up in this respect with Sweden, a country familiar with the plea for a "less stressful Christmas" since already the 1950s (Löfgren 1993: 224). It would be worthwhile to investigate whether Lithuania, and other countries, also know this "stress" in ritual, at Christmas or on other high times of the ritual year.

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Stresas ir ritualas. Gruodžio mėnesio šeimos tradicijos šių dienų Nyderlanduose

John Helsloot

Santrauka

Paskutiniųjų kelių dešimtmečių antropologinis ritualo tyrinėjimas parodo svarbų teorinės perspektyvos pasikeitimą. Užuoat klausus, ką ritualas simbolizuoja ar išreiškia, dabar dėmesys yra nukreiptas į tai, ką ritualas „daro“, kaip jis veikia praktikoje. Vienas iš šio vadinamojo ritualo atlikimo požiūrio (performance perspective) šalininkų yra Edwardas Schieffelinus. Kartu su Cliffordu Geertzu ir Ronaldu Grimesu jis teigė, kad atliekami ritualai yra iš prigimties rizikingi. Visuomet yra tikimybė, kad kažkas gali nepasisiekti, kad ritualas gali daugiau ar mažiau nepavykti. Trokštamas jo rezultatas gali būti nevisiškai pasiektas arba gali būti trūkumų atliekant ritualą. Siekiant tai suprasti, reikia atidžiau pažvelgti, kaip patys jo atlikėjai kalba apie ritualą, kaip jį įvertina ir kokias sąvokas vartoja išsakydami savo požiūrį į jį. Tai taip pat reiškia, kad griežtas ritualo atlikimo požiūrio laikymasis gali imti varžyti ir kad būtinais reikės atsižvelgti į platesnį socialinį ir kultūrinį kontekstą, kuriame ritualas vyksta. Remdamasis šia teorine perspektyva, autorius siekia atkreipti dėmesį į streso reiškinį bei žmonių nurodymus jo požymius. Ši stresą jie patyrė ruošdamiesi ritualui ir jį atlikdami. Šiuo atveju kalbama apie mūsų dienų gruodžio mėnesio šventes Nyderlanduose.

Stresas yra mentalinė būseną, atsirandanti suvokus neatitikimą tarp indivi-dams keliamų reikalavimų ir gebėjimų susitvarkyti su jais. Vakarų visuomenių populiariajame diskurse streso sąvoka plačiai paplito ypač nuo XX a. 9-ojo dešimtmečio. Stresas nėra tik individualiosios psichologijos reikalas. Jis taip pat yra socialinė kultūrinė kategorija, metafora, vartojama socialiniame gyvenime įkūnytoms patirtims apibūdinti (Setha Low) ir todėl taip pat yra etnologinio tyrimo objektas. Paskutiniaisiais dešimtmečiais daug žmonių Nyderlanduose teigia patiriantys stresą ne tik asmeniniuose santykiuose ar darbe, bet taip pat ruošdamiesi gruodžio mėnesio šventėms ir per jas; tai ypač susiję su Kalėdomis.

Šiais laikais Kalėdos yra svarbiausia olandų ritualinė metų šventė. Visi laukia Kalėdų ir nori jas švęsti. Tačiau tuo pat metu daugelio žmonių nuostatos jų atžvilgiu yra dviprasmiškos. Šiam prieštaravimui paaiškinti dažnai pasitelkiama „streso“ sąvoka. „Linksmų streso švenčių“, – skaitome sąmojingą užrašą ant kalėdinio atviruko. Antrasis svarbus gruodžio mėnesio ritualas Nyderlanduose yra šv. Nikolo šventė. Šiuo atveju taip pat kalbama apie stresą. Kada šis stresas atsiranda? Šio straipsnio autorius paprašė Meertenso instituto (Amsterdame) informantų atsakyti į klausimą apie jų patirtą stresą per gruodžio mėnesio šventes. Kadangi žmonės pasisakė savo noru, šios apklausos rezultatai nėra reprezentatyvi visos olandų visuomenės nuomonė.

Gruodžio mėnesio šventės reikalauja daug pasiruošimo. Pavyzdžiui, reikia nupirkti dovanas ir jas tradiciškai suvynioti šv. Nikolo šventei, išsiųsti laiku atvirukus, surengti prašmatnius Kalėdų pietus, dar paruošti mielus pakvietimus. Šiek tiek daugiau nei pusė respondentų iš tikrųjų teigė patiriantys stresą atlikdami minėtus pasiruošimo veiksmus. Kartais ji esant rodė fiziniai požymiai. Stresą sukėlė šių veiksnių derinys: laiko stoka, pareigos jausmas, kuris daugiausia susijęs su giminaičiais, ir stengimasis laikytis aukštų reikalavimų, kartu bijant patirti nesėkmę ar nusivylimą. Stresą sukelia prieštaravimas tarp neišvengiamų socialinės aplinkos reikalavimų ir savo vidinių jausmų. Tačiau beveik pusė respondentų pareiškė iš viso nepatiriantys streso arba tik šiek tiek jį jaučiantys. Daugelis apibūdino stresą netgi kaip pageidautiną patirtį, padedančią jiems viską atlikti tinkamai. Rūpestingai planuodami jie spėja laiku apsipirkti (taip pat surasti dovanas), paruošti patiekalus ir t. t. Nors dažnai daro spaudimą nusistovėjusi tvarka, prekyba, žiniasklaida ar šeima, jie nepatiria streso neigiama prasme, nes sugeba išlaikyti savo psichologinį ir emocinį savarankiškumą.

Stresas susijęs ne tik su ritualizuotu ruošimusi gruodžio šventėms. Turint didelių lūkesčių arba nenorint dalyvauti šventėje, stresas gali persiduoti į pačią šventę. Autorius kaip tik klausė informantų, ar jų nuomone, stresas daro neigiamą įtaką šventei. Didžioji dauguma teigė, kad jis nedaro įtakos šventės rezultatui. Tačiau daugeliui kitų stresas ir šventė buvo nesuderinami. Stresas neleidžia įsivyravai laisvai, linksmi atmosferai, kuri yra būtina, kad šventė praeitų sėkmingai, ir todėl trukdo susikurti gerą šventinę nuotaiką. Bet šis pojūtis yra labiau susijęs su supratimu, jog šventė turėjo kai kurių trūkumų nei kad ji visiškai nepavyko.

Autoriaus dėmesio centre buvo ne tiek gruodžio mėnesio šventes sudarantys ritualiniai veiksmai, kiek tai, kaip žmonės su jais susitvarko. Tačiau, autoriaus nuomone, nagrinėjant streso reiškinį, susijusį su olandų gruodžio mėnesio šventėmis, remiantis ritualo atlikimo perspektyva, nepavyktų teisingai suvokti jo etnologinės reikšmės. Stresas, apie kurį kalba žmonės, kyla dėl to, kad jie jaučiasi nesugebą laikytis sau patiems nusistatytų taisyklių. Tam tikru atžvilgiu

streso diskursas yra savo pačių asmeninių trūkumų aptarimas, bet taip pat būtų galima žiūrėti į jį kaip į minėtų taisyklių apmąstymo formą. Siekiant tai suprasti, reikia pažvelgti anapus ritualo siaurąja jo prasme ir atkreipti dėmesį į platesnę socialinę ir kultūrinę aplinką, kurioje jis vyksta.

Remiantis sociologų teorijomis, nuo XX a. 9-ojo dešimtmečio olandų visuomenei yra būdingas didėjantis socialinių santykių formalizavimas ir naujas susidomėjimas „geromis manieromis“. Priešingai, ankstesnius du dešimtmečius jie nebuvo formalizuojami. Tai ne tik atskiri kintančių procesų tarpiniai, bet ir viena su kita persipinančios tendencijos, tuo pat metu pasireiškiančios įvairiose visuomenės srityse. Jų padarinys yra individams keliami prieštaringi reikalavimai. Tai skatina suvokti ir apmąstyti savo veiksmus. Kad tai patikrintų, autorius paklausė informantų, ar stresą sukeltą „tobulų“ šv. Nikolo ir Kalėdų švenčių poreikį jie laiko nauju reiškiniu. Kai kurie jų tai paneigė, teigdami, kad stresas visuomet yra būdingas gruodžio mėnesio šventėms. Tačiau kiti manė, kad šis stresas iš tikrųjų yra nesenas reiškinys. Kai kurie iš pastarųjų respondentų patvirtino patiriantys naują įtampą, bet jautėsi vis labiau pasiruošę jai nepasiduoti. Taigi nuomonių yra įvairių ir bendras jų vaizdas maždaug atitinka sociologų teorijas.

Straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad ritualo atlikimo perspektyvą, kuria remtasi tyrinėjant ritualą, geriausiai papildo visuomenėje vykstančių procesų nagrinėjimas. Kaip rašė Setha Low panašiu atveju, diskursas apie stresą čia veikia kaip tarpininkas. Akcentuoti stresą ir perduoti jį kaip neigiamą patirtį ar, priešingai, nesamą ar teigiamą patirtį yra sveikintina, tai padeda žmonėms apibrėžti savo požiūrį, kuris skiriasi nuo kitų, ir suprasti save pačius visuomenėje ar apskritai tradicijoje. Galbūt visa streso diskurso esmė yra sukelti šią skirtingą reakciją. Būtų verta patyrinti, ar Lietuvoje ir kitose šalyse taip pat žinomas šis ritualinis „stresas“ per Kalėdas ar kitais svarbiais metų laikotarpiais.

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