Communication and Argumentation in the Public Sphere **ISSN 1843 - 7893**
(2007) Year I, Issue 2
Galati University Press
Editors: Anca Gâță & Adela Drăgan
Proceedings of the Conference *Public Space* vs *Private Space*, SECOND VOLUME
April 12th-14th, 2007 – "Dunărea de Jos" University, Galați Romania
pp. 201-210

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From the Private to the Public and Back to the First

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Introduction

Everyday life offers individuals the possibility of establishing different social interactions that, in their turn, constitute the framework for various social actions/practices. These practices are subject of the individuals' interpretations (they are considered as "reflections" of reality) and get a sense for the members of the community individuals live in. At the same time, all these practices are based on different types of semiotic resources (words, gestures, visual patterns) and semiotic settings (homes, work places, restaurants). Thus, individually or through joint efforts, people make meanings of such practices. Their semiotic analysis brings into discussion the concept of contextualization, as each semiotic sign gets a meaning only in the context in which it appears, being in a close relationship with all the other signs and the social actors using them. The verbal and nonverbal signs contribute to the display of attitudes, feelings and values, that is, to the shaping of individuals' identities.

Social life is a network of rites, ceremonies, conventions and celebrations (birth, marriage, promotions, resignations, and religious holidays). They differ in their degree of formality, number of participants, degree of spontaneity and type of audience.

The main distinction – that interests us – is between the community rites (studied by anthropology) and the micro-rituals (studied by communication sciences), whose characteristic is the fact that they are socially and culturally integrated. The two mentioned practices are different. First, while community rites take place in a formal frame, the micro-rituals take place in an informal one: the ordinary daily life. They permeate everything we do, reflecting a set of symbolic actions in a particular socio-cultural environment. At the same time, they are looked upon as a set of norms that people agree or confide in, during any given situation or special day. This fact forces the participants to such type of ritual know and adapt themselves to a certain code of attitudes and behaviour that is determined by the social and cultural norms of the community they belong.

Taking place in the everyday ritualistic space, they become – according to Goffman (Goffman 1973; 1974) "performances" (within the limits and under the form of small ceremonies) and "action" (connected with the concepts of order, position and social relationship structured by social phenomena and getting a social value). We call them "ritual situations" in which individuals involved in social interaction manifest their presence through ritualized behaviour, being closely connected to models, habits and traditions offered by the family and the whole community. They are "repetitive and collectively structured actions that embody cultural codes, even though they are done in private" (Rothenbuhler 1998: 13). The individuals' performances in such rituals get significance/meanings beyond the behaviour itself,

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beyond what they do every day. Thus, any ritual "is not authorized by the actor; it is to at least some degree, a performance of a script". (Rothenbuhler 1998: 20) Although individuals act according to unwritten rules, their script allows for improvisations. Authenticity comes from the fact that the individuals act normally, without meditating too much on the rules.

The individuals involved in such rituals must confirm their roles so that their own image could be confirmed. They define the situation and the position in front of the others.

Each of the individuals puts onto stage his/her own "I" and expects a confirmation of his "face" [1]. Rituals (be they access, confirmation or remedial ones) promote connectivity in society and among individuals; they help individuals to get closer and establish interpersonal relationships.

1. The wedding as a ritual

Since time immemorial, rituals have developed to carry forward already lived day-to-day life from generation to generation. It is through rituals that any child learns how to develop a relationship with the others belonging to different backgrounds or religious faiths and having personal beliefs. They involve methods of acting on certain occasions/particular times/special days and we may consider them as ideal ways of handling, celebrating or living these different occasions. Rituals are (as mentioned before) repetitive, as others performed them the same way before, as the individual's life is a succession of stages whose beginnings and endings make up a network governed by the same order.

The wedding is the oldest ritual of humanity. It is a "passage" ritual (synonymous with "leaving and entering life", with initiation, development or growing), as the individual passes through three stages (that show him/her that everything in life has a sense): departure from the old status, the proper "passing" to a new stage in his/her lifetime and then, getting a new status. Thus, the wedding represents a good example of individuals' oscillation from private (their parental home) to public (the public stage; the community) and then to private again (the newly married couple' s home). Once engaged in this ritual, the individual passes from one status to another. The wedding imposes a certain stage/setting, certain main or secondary actors, certain clothes, postures, facial expressions and behaviours from the part of the actors, all these being essential for their „face". Through this ritual, „participants construct identity for the public display" (Hurvitz 2002: 131).

The stage, the actors, their roles and the whole ceremonial contribute to the logical development of the action. In fact, the social actors perform on different stages, in order to offer the image of the happy couple that has decided to take an important step in their life.

The wedding as a ceremony and as a ritual has come a long way in terms of change and continuity respectively; as a ceremony, it has experienced significant changes but the religious ritual has maintained its consistency. Such a ritual becomes a performance/show "a way of communication aesthetically marked" (Rothenbuhler 1998: 7) thought of in a special way and performed in front of the audience, always according to pre-existing conceptions.

Weddings "incorporate a variety of codes (liturgy, music, food, clothing and objects)" (Hurvitz 2002: 8) and although they last for a few hours, they generally include a few days of related celebrations and rituals.

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Traditional Romanian weddings are still present in villages, with a large display of norms, rules and pre-established roles imposed by the cultural tradition (wedding songs, dances, poems, particular behaviour of the bride or bridegroom). Things have changed in cities; within the boundaries of tradition, the main actors have some liberty of performing, and this helps them unveil their personality.

The ritual of Indian weddings, which were traditional and orthodox years ago, has acquired a more modern approach in today's celebration. But the core aspect of an Indian wedding is still the same, which speaks of tradition, values and celebrations. In India there is no greater event in a family than a wedding, dramatically evoking every possible social obligation, kinship bond, traditional value, impassioned sentiment, and economic resource. In the arranging and conducting of weddings, the complex permutations of Indian social systems best display themselves.

Generally speaking, the wedding is considered as a show, at the level of which one can usually notice: a prologue (match-making, acceptance, invitations sent to the wedding guests); act I (the bride-to-be and the bridegroom-to-be take „good-bye" from the other unamarried friends, organizing parties); act II (the bride and the bridegroom prepare for the wedding); act III (the wedding ritual as such, during which the couple gets legimization in front of the community and God); act IV (the wedding party).

The actors perform main roles (the bride, the bridegroom, their parents, the Godfather an Godmother, the bestman, the maids, the priest) or secondary roles (relatives, friends, fiddlers, the wedding guests). Their posture offers information about their status and they try to impose in front of the others through their performance and the impression upon the others.

The wedding is also a ritual of confirmation: the married couple gets the community's confirmation, respect and admiration, as well as God's blessing. This means it is conferred stability and certainty.

The setting (the bride's parental home, the groom's parental home, the register office, the church and the place of the wedding party - home or restaurant-) changes according to the acts, and so do the props. The bride and bridegroom's clothes, as well as those of the other social actors who take part to the event are adapted to the situation, suggesting the role and the importance of each actor as well as his/her involvement in the event.

The unwritten script is quite predictable as it is quite the same for all weddings. The linguistic cues (invitations, compliments, vows, wishes, typical expressions, toasts), the nonlinguistic ones (hugs, kisses, handshaking) and the paraverbal one are congruent with the actors' roles. At the same time, because the wedding represents "a unique presentation of a common ritual, each couple has the right to demonstrate their originality in combining whatever symbolic resources are available to them within reasonable fashion."(Hurvitz 2002: 211)

It is also Hurvitz (2002: 11) who mentions the four key symbols to e identified in a wedding: the vows exchanged by the bride and the groom (a symbol for the social code of language); the bridal gown (a symbol for the social code of clothing); the rings (a symbol for the social code of objects) and the wedding cake (a symbol for the social code of food). It is also easy to notice the fact that the ritual objects appear to e more flexible than the ritual language; there is only one wedding cake/gown or ring.

In what follows, we have decided to analyse the ritual of wedding from a double perspective: as a social practice that exhibits elements that mark the glide from the private space to the public one and then back to the first (closing the circle) and as a social practice, socially and culturally integrated

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The method of analysis, which we have chosen in order to support the theoretical points, joins the two perspectives in an attempt of logical presentation and of identifying possible similarities within a diversity of differences between the traditional Romanian and Indian weddings.

2. The wedding, or from the private to the public and then to the private gain

2.1. Conceptions about marriage

In both countries, marriage represents a sacrament and not a contract.

If in Romania both civil and religious wedding are the most common option (or only the first one), a religious marriage ceremony in India is considered a legal marriage.

The Hindu marriage is a life-long commitment of wife and husband. It even goes beyond life limits, as the relationship between a man and a woman is believed to last for seven lives. It is the strongest social bond that takes place between a man and a woman. *Grahastha Ashram* (the householder stage), the second of the four stages of life begins when a man and a woman marry and start a household. For a Hindu, marriage is the only way to continue the family and thereby „repay his debt" to his ancestors. A civil ceremony as per the Special Marriage Act is the option in case of inter-religion marriages or of those who do not get married in a religious ceremony and do not adhere to religious rituals. Such marriages are secular in nature and couples can preserve their religious faith intact.

The religious significance of marriage in India goes far beyond. The concept of the *Kanyadana* (donating a virgin or giving away one's daughter in marriage), is considered the greatest sacrifice a man could perform. *Vivah* (marriage) is one of the sixteen *samskars* [2] in Hindu religious texts.

The concept of arranged marriages is a standard norm in India. The practice of arranged marriage has almost become synonymous with the Indian society and culture. Compared to earlier periods these practices are not so rigid at present. The system of arranged marriage has become widely prevalent to protect caste identity. The caste system is the ranked endogamous division of the society in which membership is permanent and hereditary. Arranged marriages are popular in order to maintain individuals' social status. Parents want their children to marry someone from the same caste and same social background. The rituals and customs of arranged marriages vary depending on the caste and the religion of the people. It also depends on whether the man or woman is a Hindu or a Muslim.

In Romania, nowadays, we cannot really talk about arranged marriages, the way they were, for example, centuries ago. Individuals marry the ones they love and the ones they want to spend the entire life.

Marriages begin with weddings. In addition to the ceremony proper, participants may be actors of various pre-ceremony rituals (bachelor parties, pre-wedding dinners) and post-ceremony rituals (wedding parties, opening presents, honeymoons).

2.2. Pre-ceremony rituals

In Romania, the main key points of the wedding ceremony are certified by ethnographic documents as being similar (with some exceptions) in all the historic regions. The fact that it represents a ritual of confirmation is best put into evidence by the three main stages that may take place during the same day (in most cases) or

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in two separate days (in villages the wedding ceremonies used to last for three or even four days, but this is not the case anymore):

- the confirmation the two main actors get in front of the civil society (in the civil marriage, during which the two ones accept each other in front of the mayor or his representative; it is in fact the first time when the bride signs with the groom's last name, a thing that already suggests the change of her status)
- the spiritual confirmation (their union confirmed beyond the material existence)
- the confirmation in front of the community (through the wedding party).

The preparation for the wedding consists of several steps in Romania (according to the cultural models inherited from ancestors) among which: the matchmaking, the engagement (both denoting the family's agreement upon their decision), the agreement upon the dowry, establishing roles for the ceremony (for the members of the family, especially). These moments are followed by other ritualistic behaviours, all taking place in the private space of the bride's and the bridegroom's parental homes:

a) the bride's "dressing up" (a very important moment during which the bride is helped to put on a white dress/gown and a white veil, to which accessories are added: white gloves, white shoes, as a symbol of her purity). In some rural areas, the bride's clothes represent a proof of her skill and diligence (as they are hand-made by herself; the wedding dress is a proof that the girl knew ti sew and weave, which is a very important condition for marriage). She is also given a bunch of flowers to hold in her hands during the religious wedding. The bride's hair is adorned with flowers. The dress is sprinkled with the same flowers and they have threefold significance: they signify the purity of the young girl (associated with the beauty and purity of the flowers); they promote luck and good health and, at the same time, they are the expression of the bride's feelings for the groom

b) the bridegroom's shaving (as initiation into a new status – that of a man and no longer a lad)

c) the bride's taking farewell from her parents (after having asked for "forgiveness" and after having cried a little).

In India, the rituals during the wedding vary and reflect the cultural diversity of the country, with cultural influences and mutual borrowing of practices. The Hindu pre-wedding ceremony consists of several steps with regional and community variations:

a) a *muhurta* (an auspicious moment) is chosen by the time of the year and the horoscopes of the bride and groom

b) a day before the wedding the palm and feet of the bride are decorated with "Mehndi" and the body is anointed with turmeric, sandalwood paste and oils which cleanse, soften the skin, and make it aromatic

c) the wedding ceremony starts with the erection of a *mandapa* (a wedding altar) – the canopy or marriage stage. It is erected at the marriage venue on the day of the wedding; within it, the ceremony is conducted. The poles of the frame are draped with strings of flowers. A fire is meant to be the witness to the Hindu marriage ceremony. It is a long and elaborate ceremony, with every step rooted in the Vedic tradition, signifying various aspects of the life that follow after the marriage.

Once everybody prepared for the most important moment, the actors enter the public space.

2.3. The religious wedding ceremony

On the public stage (the church), the social actors become solemn and their oath is public. The actions / gestures perfomed are symbolical (they symbolize unity,

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happiness and promise future prosperity). In fact, the nature of the particular context gives a sacred dimension to the whole performance. The priest himself becomes a main actor as, without him, the wedding is not valid.

The Romanian ceremony includes the following important steps:

- The priest reads from the Gospel and addresses prayers to God for the new couple's long life, much love, much faith and blessed children.

- The priest blesses two symbolic crowns. Then he takes one crown, touches the couple's foreheads with it, asks the groom to kiss it and places it on the latter's head. He does the same thing with the second crown, placing it on the bride's head. This is an important moment of the ceremony. The two young people are crowned as king and queen of their future kingdom – their future home –, and invested with the right and power of giving birth to children. The same crown symbolizes the fact that the two young people are no longer under their parents' care. It is the symbolic sign of maturity and responsibility for the new family, for their future children.

- The bride and the groom exchange rings (made of gold and being of the same design, as a symbol of durability and unity), while the priest makes the sign of the cross over their heads; this means that their union is blessed.

- The priest offers the bride and the groom a piece of cake to eat and a glass of wine from which they have to take three sips; the two gestures symbolize the promised future moments in which they will have to share everything: love, joy and sorrow (they are a token of a life in harmony).

- The married couple join their right hands (the image of everlasting union).

- The couple kneel down in front of the Cross and the Gospel, as a supreme commitment (in front of God) for a long-life love.

- The bride and the groom, accompanied by their Godmother(s) and Godfather(s), following the priest, circle the table (on which there are the Gospel and the Cross) three times. The movement suggests the joy on earth and in heaven for those who have united in church, thus confirming their commitment in the eyes of God. At the same time, it is the symbol of a common life in peace, harmony and fidelity.

- All along the ceremony, the Godfather and Godmother hold (each of them) a lit candlein their hand; the significance is related to the couple's promise of always living in religious faith.

- The married couple then kiss the icons of Jesus and of Virgin Mary, and their gesture is to be interpreted as a promise for present and future faith in God .

- The new family receives then congratulations from all those present.

- While they step out of the church, the wedding guests throw rice over the new couple's heads, so that they be always lucky and live an abundant life.

The Indian ceremony is as follows:

- *Baarat* (Wedding Procession): the bridegroom arrives for the wedding along with his family and friends in a procession. They are received by the bride's family and friends.

-MILAN (Introduction) - formal introduction of close relatives takes place and after that only the groom and family enter the bride's house or the venue.

- Varmala- (Exchange of garlands) – the bride is brought to the wedding stage accompanied by female cousins and friend. The bride and the groom exchange garlands.

- The priest commences the ceremony under the canopy. He invokes blessings of God for the couple to be married. The bride offers yogurt and honey to the groom as a token of purity and sweetness. The bride greets the groom by placing a garland around his neck and the groom reciprocates. Both are congratulated by guests. The

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priest invokes the memory and blessings of forefathers of the bride and the groom for this auspicious occasion.

- *Kanyadan* (Giving away of the daughter): the bride accepts her change of status from an unmarried woman to a wife by spreading turmeric powder on her hands. The ritual is perfomed by the father of the bride in presence of a large gathering that is invited to witness the wedding. The father pours out a libation of sacred water symbolizing the giving away of the daughter to the bridegroom. The groom recites Vedic hymns to *Kama* (the God of love) for pure love and blessings.

- *Vivah* (Wedding): the bride and the bridegroom face each other, and the priest ties their garments (the bride's sari to the groom's shirt) in a knot, symbolizing the sacred union. The bride and the bridegroom garland each other and exchange the rings. Next the nuptial fire (symbolizing the divine witness, and the sanctifier of the sacrament) is installed and worshipped. Both the bride and the groom grasp their hands together and pray to God for His blessings. *Samagree* - consisting of crushed sandalwood, herbs, sugar, rice, ghee (clarified butter), and twigs- is offered into the sacred fire to seek God's blessings for the couple.

- *Paanigrahana* (Holding the hand): the bridegroom stands facing west and the bride sits in front of him facing east. He seizes her hand and recites Vedic hymns for happiness, long life, and a lifelong relationship.

- *Laya Homa* (The Oblation of Parched Grain): the bride offers sacrifice of food (poured into her hands by her brother or someone acting on her brother's behalf) to the Gods for their blessings.

- *Agni Parinaya* (The Circumambulation of the Fire): the bridegroom holds the bride by the hand and both walk three times around the nuptial fire. Both offer oblations and recite appropriate Vedic hymns to Gods for prosperity, good fortune, and conjugal fidelity. They touch each other's heart and pray for the union of their hearts and minds.

- *Asmaarohana or Shilarohana* (Mounting the stone): At the end of each round of the nuptial fire, both the bride and the groom step on a stone and offer a prayer for their mutual love to be firm and steadfast like the stone. The bridegroom says (while the bride stands up): "Come, beautiful one." She places the tip of the right foot on the stone, saying: "Come, step on the stone; be strong like a stone. Resist the enemies; overcome those who attack you."

- *Satapadi* (Seven Steps): This is the most important rite of the entire wedding. The bride and the bridegroom take seven steps together around the nuptial fire and make the following seven promises to each other: As per the rituals, the bridegroom prays the following: „With God as our guide, let us take:

- the first step to nourish each other
- the second step to grow together in strength
- the third step to preserve our wealth
- the fourth step to share our joys and sorrows
- the fifth step to care for our children
- the sixth step to be together forever
- the seventh step to remain lifelong friends, the perfect halves to make a perfect whole."

Other rituals are *mangal sutra dharana, suhaag or sindhoordana and Aashirvaad*. The *mangal sutra dharana* is the tying of the thread containing the marks of the Lord Vishnu or Shiva in the neck of the bride by the groom. *Sindhoordana* is the ritual by which the groom places sindhoor (red powder) on the bride's hair symbolizing her becoming a married woman.

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The ceremony concludes with a prayer that the union is indissoluble. At the end of this ceremony, the bridegroom and bride become husband and wife.

The groom's parents bless *(aashirvaad)* the couple and offer cloth or flowers to the bride, a gesture that symbolizes her joining the groom's family. All those assembled shower flowers on the couple and bless them. After the bride and groom are united in sacred rites, the bride may go to her in-laws' home.

2.4. Post-ceremony rituals

Once again the setting changes. The wedding party takes place at the parental groom's home or more usual, in a restaurant.

The whole wedding party is full of happiness and glamour. The guests are warmly receieved (another confirmation ritual) and they take their pre-established seats around tables; they eat and dance and have a good time. The singing and dancing lasts until the daybreak.

There are also some ritualized moments with deep significance for the special event.

One of them is the bride and the groom's sharing of the first piece of cake (a multilayered one, always white in colour and decorated with sugar flowers and quite often with a miniature bride and groom). This is symbolical gesture, too, a sign of the special bond already created between the couple. The other two include the bride's changing her white dress and the veil for an ordinary dress and a headkerchief or an ellegant hat (a sign that she has completely changed her status and has become a married woman) and the new wife's throwing the bunch of flowers over her head towards the other young ladies present at the party. The one who catches the bunch is said to become a bride-to-be. Everybody congratulates the young couple; their congratulations is also part of the ritual of confirmation that the wedding receives.

Usually, the newly married couple receive presents (different useful objects for their new home or, more often, a sum of money). After the wedding the wife and husband go to their new home. Tradition says that the groom has to carry his bride in his arms across the threshhold, so that the latter could enter the room safely.

In India, the post-wedding rituals are equally significant. The ritual of g*rahapravesha* (entering the home) is an important one; the couple depart from the girl's house for the groom's house. The other participants, symbolically carry the sacred fire in a vessel, following the couple.

The new couple is ready to begin a new life within the private space of their home. The circle closes. A new family starts their life together. Their children will surely leave their home one day, in a new procession, towards the public space, in order to get legitimization for a new status, in front of God and the whole community.

Final remarks

Similarities between Romanian and Indian weddings: It is quite easy to notice the fact that despite lots of culturally different things, the two wedding have elements in common. These are to be observed at least at three levels:

- the ritual level: one can identify the actors, their pre-established roles, as well as the unwritten rules/script to be followed (and which is handed down from generation to generation);

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- the semiotic level (semiotic settings and resources have almost the same meanings: for example, the candles in the Romanian wedding and the fire in the Indian wedding);

- the communicative level (the wedding ritual comunicates: it offers information about religious, social, family conceptions; it offers images of individuals performing in a special context; it gives information related to the identities that are shaped during the ritual performance).

Changing facets of Romanian and Indian weddings: Nowadays the wedding ritual in Romania does not display its true dimension, except from different regions in the countryside, where it has remained one of the most important moments in the life of the whole community. Even though many modern elements/"ingredients" have been introduced (the bride does not wear the folk costume any longer; beautiful expensive cars carry the couple and the wedding group to the church or the restaurant), the wedding is considered an important moment in one's life, a moment that concentrates a large number of purification and fertility bringing ritualic moments. There was a time when marriages were arranged by the head the family (father or grand father) and all the other members of the family (including the boy and the girl) were then announced about this (as it was not felt necessary for a girl or a boy to meet each other before marriage). This is no longer a common practice

In time, traditions have suffered changes and many couples choose from among them the only ones they like. Nowadays, in cities especially, more importance is given to the "show" aspect of the ritual; some ritualistic elements have disappeared, others have become stereotypes. Authenticity comes only from the individuals' performance that follows the unwritten scripts.

Indian contemporary wedding celebrations in the cities remind of the gloss and glamour of the film industry popularly referred as Bollywood movies. Like any other commodity in the market weddings have also become commercialized. The grand Indian wedding has spread its impact on the Indian cinema and television. According to the economic stature one tries to imitate the film-version of weddings amongst Indian middle class families.

These days it is possible to draw media into any sort of occasion or function provided the event ensures of being distinct or, away from the routine practices. Once it is sure that the likely event is going to showcase something unique or unseen, unheard or unthinkable the media are present. Wedding occasions are not just a reason or medium to bring people together but also to showcase one's opulence in public. We just cannot ignore such public functions in the modern world, especially when these are meant to revive, develop and exhibit relations with a host of people.

The traditional venue for the wedding has now shifted from home to restaurants where charges are per plate unlike previous times when family used to cook the feast for every one and ceremonies were simple and plain.

Over the years the celebration of Indian wedding has undergone a metamorphosis. With the influence of the MTV culture and the hectic lifestyle, people are going for court marriages, which are hassle free and involve less time. But still there are people who like to get married in the traditional way.

Despite all these changes, the wedding by and large is about tradition, values and celebrations. It is coming together of the bride and the groom but also of their families; it is about the performance of social actors in private and public spaces in their attempt of making explicit statements about who they are. It marks changes of statuses and brings about unity and togetherness. Any marriage signifies love,

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concern and commitment At the same time, any wedding ritual is a socially and culturally integrated event, displaying an integration of symbols from multiple systems, into a coherent whole.

Notes

[1] Erving Goffman considers that the concept of "face" designates the image the individual presents in social interactions (a set of positive elements that any individual "constructs" about himself / herself; he tries to make the others around perceive the same image; otherwise, he/she is in danger of "losing his / her face").
[2] The word *samskar* is evolved from the root *'samskri'* that means to purify or form thoroughly. Samskriti (civilization) is derived from this root *'samskri'*.

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