

Introduction



In 1826, during its first session, the new Brazilian empire's parliament instituted five national holidays or "days of national festivity," a literal translation that better captures what deputies and senators understood as these days' purpose. Four of them were closely connected to Emperor Pedro I (1822–31): 9 January (the date of his 1822 decision to stay in Brazil in defiance of the Portuguese parliament that had called him to Lisbon); 25 March (the day on which he swore his oath to the constitution that he had granted in 1824); 7 September (the date of his Grito do Ipiranga [Cry or Shout from the Ipiranga (River)], his 1822 declaration of "Independence or Death," which had been constructed as Brazil's independence day in the previous years); and 12 October (his birthday and the date of his acclamation as emperor in 1822). The fifth day of national festivity, 3 May, commemorated the annual opening of the legislative session, mandated by the constitution for that date.¹

The institution of national holidays was, of course, one of the many symbolic attributes of statehood. Throughout the Americas, the newly independent countries produced their own flags, coats of arms, and currencies, and they designated days on which to celebrate their independence and sometimes also their principal political institutions. Through this invention of national traditions, to paraphrase Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's familiar phrase, Brazilian senators and deputies, like their counterparts in Spanish America, sought to perpetuate the collective memory of their nation's institutional origins or to create what Pierre Nora has called *lieux de mémoire*, or memory spaces, to anchor the new nation.² Nation, for them, meant a political community. As José Antônio Pimenta Bueno (the future Marquis of São Vicente), the great jurist of nineteenth-century Brazilian constitutional law, put it in 1857, "the empire of Brazil" was synonymous with "the Brazilian nation"; both terms referred to "the civil and political society of a free American people."³ The men who had assembled as the Brazilian nation's representatives understood the creation of what Benedict Anderson calls the

“imagined community” of the nation in this political sense.⁴ The insights encapsulated in Hobsbawm’s and Ranger’s and Anderson’s compelling phrases (though not the latter’s limited and misleading empirical work on Latin America) have stimulated a vast literature and a broad consensus that all traditions are in some way or another invented and that all nations are imagined, fostered by the state.⁵ Certainly for Latin America, no serious scholar argues for the existence of primordial ethnic nations, and approaches that stress the rise of national feeling before independence have largely been discredited.⁶

Moreover, to understand nation in its early nineteenth-century political sense moves discussion about Brazilians’ collective memory to the political realm. Condé Raguet, the U.S. minister and a keen observer of Brazilian politics, well understood this when he reported that parliament had instituted five “days of political festivity.”⁷ This was no slip of the pen—Raguet knew Portuguese and understood Brazilian politics too well for that. Rather, it reflected his judgment that the days of national festivity were and would be politically controversial. Four of them celebrated the actions of Pedro I, while the chamber of deputies had insisted on adding 3 May to underscore parliament’s importance, thus foreshadowing the tensions between emperor and chamber that would contribute to his decision to abdicate in 1831. In fact, only two of these days of national festivity (25 March and 7 September) would endure until the end of the imperial regime in 1889.⁸

Following Raguet’s insight, my central argument in this book is that the celebration of days of national festivity served as the occasion for Brazilians to debate the meaning and nature of the political institutions of the constitutional monarchy established in 1822–24. Each of the principal days of national festivity—25 March, 7 September, and 2 December (Pedro II’s birthday, celebrated starting in 1831)—spoke to key aspects of imperial Brazil’s institutions. Pedro I’s declaration of independence could be interpreted as the act of a heroic prince who created the nation (in the sense of a political community), but there were many ways to downplay his role and seek other origins for Brazil. The constitution, which endured until 1889, established the rules of the political game and was either a product of its authors’ great wisdom and foresight or a document hopelessly vitiated by its origins and by its terms, which centralized power in the monarch’s hands (the charter had not been passed by a constituent assembly; rather, Pedro I granted it after forcibly closing the assembly). To celebrate the emperor’s birthday meant considering his role in government, for he was no mere figurehead; the moderating or regulating power charged him with maintaining the balance among the other three powers, one of which—the executive—he also held.

Thus, in the following pages, I present a political history of the Brazilian empire as seen through the commemoration of its days of national

festivity (and a few other civic rituals) in the capital of Rio de Janeiro. Some of the story is generally familiar; at other times, my reading of civic rituals has led me to unexpected conclusions. I provide a history of both “official” and “popular” celebrations on days of national festivity and study the debate over these days’ meaning. The contemporary distinction between official and popular celebrations is an important one. Official festivities, organized by the state, involved mostly the court, members of government, and the armed forces, with the populace primarily cast as spectators. Popular festivities, by contrast, were organized by private groups—sometimes political parties, other times apparently apolitical patriotic associations. Somewhere in between stood the entertainment for the populace provided by the authorities.

The periodic surges of popular celebrations reveal a significant engagement with the state and the political system on the part of broad swathes of the urban population. Sometimes this derived from political conflict as parties and other groups mobilized their followers in the streets. At other times, the “popular” celebrants displayed greater autonomy from political parties, and then the popular festivities followed their own logic. The sometimes bitter debate about the significance of days of national festivity and their civic rituals—or better, the institutions celebrated on these days—reveals these festivities’ importance to politics and highlights the very different understandings of the imperial regime in the capital. In other words, the regular celebrations of days of national festivity on Rio de Janeiro’s streets and in the palace, the imperial chapel, and the theater, as well as the often lively discussion about these rituals in the press, formed integral parts of imperial Brazilian politics and may well have brought more people into politics than did voting or other political activities.

RITUAL AND POLITICS

Many scholars have pointed to the importance of ritual in politics, even in modern societies. In so doing, they have moved away from the structuralist or functionalist approaches to ritual exemplified in the work of classical anthropologists and sociologists typically based on small-scale societies. To be sure, the successful performance of a ritual builds what Victor Turner called *communitas* (social solidarity), defines the boundaries that mark inclusion or exclusion from a community, and legitimates authority by visibly enacting social and political hierarchies or associating them with the divine (Émile Durkheim’s insight). It may also provide a socially sanctioned release of tensions or the occasion to enact stylized conflicts resolved in ways that uphold social hierarchies.⁹ The centrality of ritual to demonstrating power holders’ authority has

been observed in numerous societies, perhaps most boldly by Clifford Geertz in his study of the so-called Balinese theater-state; he argues that this state “was a device for the enactment of mass ritual. Power served pomp, not pomp power.”¹⁰

Such approaches to ritual can leave little room for politics; Geertz’s analysis of Negara, for instance, implies an unchanging, broadly accepted culture and does not allow for change or contestation. Analyzing rituals (civic or otherwise) outside of their political context misses the key point that every ritual, every collective celebration, amounts to a claim that can be (and often was) contested. This contestation frequently remains muted, even invisible to historians. The surviving accounts of medieval and early-modern rituals in Europe and those in the colonial Americas consist mostly of what Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly has called “festival books,” a genre of description whose tropes leave little space for conflict and much less for challenges to the assumptions and values that structured these celebrations. Indeed, on these grounds, one medievalist has forcefully cautioned against anthropological readings of these texts that use them as raw data for analysis of rituals.¹¹ Those who promoted a ritual or benefited from its message usually managed to control the public accounts of it and to present it in congenial ways, especially before the Age of Revolution.

While it is relatively easy to determine the purposes of those who promoted civic rituals, normally power-holders but sometimes also opposition groups, it is much more difficult to determine how the intended audience received these messages. The poststructuralist insight that rituals, both civic and others, have multiple meanings to promoters, participants, and observers moves the question away from simply determining what a ritual’s promoters intended or what social function it served but does not offer a ready way to determine whether, for example, the celebration of a Brazilian emperor’s birthday awed the populace or left observers unconvinced of his magnificence and the legitimacy of his authority. Ritual efficacy and the implication that rituals can fail remain difficult to elucidate on a theoretical level except by recourse to the larger external context, which ultimately reduces ritual to a variable dependent on, in the case of civic rituals, the political context.¹² For civic rituals, especially in the contested political environment after the Age of Revolution, this is a workable theoretical formulation and one that avoids circular functionalist or structuralist analysis.

On some basic level, the civic rituals discussed in this book undoubtedly reinforced state power (it is inconceivable that authorities would have continued them if they had undermined state power). They likewise certainly contributed to the population’s self-identification as Brazilians and subjects of the monarchy. However, Brazilians extensively debated

the nature of their nation or political community. The questioning of the monarchy that periodically surfaced and gathered strength in the 1870s and 1880s meant that assessments of the regime's civic ritual changed significantly. In this sense, civic ritual, however much it may seek to present the image of an enduring political order, is very much dependent on the political strength of those in power and their ability to impose their hegemony or at least secure acquiescence to their rule.

Much of the civic ritual analyzed in this book had a long history in the Western world. A medieval burgher, an early-modern European townsman, and even a citizen of the Roman Empire would have found much that was familiar in imperial Rio de Janeiro's public life. Politics in medieval and early-modern Europe was intensely ritualized. A vast literature examines how medieval and early-modern towns constructed their civic identities through rituals, how monarchs asserted authority through ceremonies, and how seemingly arcane and petty squabbles over protocol constituted integral parts of power struggles.¹³ The rediscovery of the classics during the Renaissance, and particularly the accounts of Roman triumphs, offered rulers new celebratory forms through which to assert their authority. Ephemeral triumphal arches and processions entered the Western civic ritual lexicon where they would remain centrally important to the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Absolutism did away with civic autonomy; the rituals that demonstrated it, such as the *joyeuse entrée* (joyous entry) of French monarchs into Paris (last held in 1660 for Louis XIV), disappeared or lost their political importance.¹⁵ The French Sun King created a lavish court and divulged a carefully designed image that exalted his power, even if court ceremony did not always proceed as smoothly and effectively as its organizers desired. Nevertheless, Versailles served as a model for monarchs throughout Europe.¹⁶

The eighteenth century saw a decline in ritual and a certain desacralization of European monarchy. Enlightened monarchs sought to escape the stifling confines of royal ceremony; the very concept of ritual gained connotations of emptiness and insincerity, part of the larger questioning of the value of outward forms.¹⁷ Louis XIV's successors could not stomach Versailles's oppressive formality; the English kings George I, II, and III abandoned the sacral aspects of monarchy and adopted a more modest, domestic style.¹⁸ Public ceremonies, however, continued to thrust "representations of Church and monarchy before the populace" of eighteenth-century Toulouse and countless other cities; proposals to do away with France's ancient coronation ceremonial in 1775 failed, but their very existence indicated that much was changing.¹⁹ Eighteenth-century Iberian court and civic ritual has drawn little attention from historians. There are indications of elaborate ceremonies surrounding royal weddings, accessions, and entries; flush with Brazilian gold, Portugal's

João V (1707–50) emulated the Sun King, but his successors could not afford his lavishness, especially when faced with the costs of rebuilding Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake.²⁰

Colonial American versions of early-modern European royal, Church, and civic ritual flourished in Mexico City and other Spanish-American capitals, although on Corpus Christi and in other festivals, space was made for Indians and other social groups not present in Europe, a reflection of their (subordinate) membership in the colonial body politic.²¹ The viceregal entries echoed the royal entries into European towns and allowed municipal elites both to express their devotion to the monarchy and to demonstrate their privileges and their claims to autonomy. They gained “cultural capital” from these manifestations of power in ostentatious ritual.²² The occasional celebrations of monarchs’ accessions (and the funerals of their predecessors) served much the same purposes. The vibrant and rowdy popular diversions that surrounded these civic rituals increasingly troubled eighteenth-century reform-minded Bourbon bureaucrats and Church authorities dubious about the prospects for salvation through baroque Catholicism, but they found it extraordinarily difficult to do away with these manifestations of popular culture.²³ Indeed, despite Enlightenment reformers’ best efforts, these ritual aspects of early-modern culture persisted longer in the Americas than in Europe.

The French revolutionaries’ attempts to transfer sacrality to a new nation born of revolution through civic festivals, as traced by Mona Ozouf, foundered on the rocks of local cultures and values but also failed because of the eighteenth-century weakening of the association between rulers and the divine.²⁴ As numerous historians of France have traced, civic rituals and symbols became sites of explicit political conflict after 1789 as the French fought over the Revolution’s legacies. Napoleon I’s empire, the restoration monarchy, Louis-Philippe’s bourgeois kingdom, the short-lived Second Republic, Napoleon III’s empire, and finally the Third Republic wrought dramatic changes in France’s civic ritual culture as they sought to impose their symbols, rituals, and court ceremonial (in the case of the two empires and the restoration).²⁵ As Peter Burke has put it, after the Revolution, regime after regime found it necessary to “persuade the people,” now “the main targets of propaganda.”²⁶ Persuasion through civic ritual, however, requires the populace’s acceptance of the claims to authority enacted in these ceremonies. Opponents of the established order turned their backs on the rituals or found ways to subvert them. In this sense, civic ritual depends on the larger political context; it is not an autonomous realm, capable of creating reality, however much its promoters desire that their message be accepted (and sometimes go to great lengths to foster the illusion of acceptance).

In their efforts to create a new ritual calendar for France, the revolutionaries of the 1790s presaged in an extreme form the invention of new

national traditions and political rituals that would take place throughout the nineteenth-century Atlantic World, adapting past traditions to new needs and inventing new ones. Newly independent states found it necessary to celebrate their founding. Many scholars have shown how celebration and public ritual, as well as the extensive press discussion about them, constituted integral parts of party politics and helped forge national identifications strongly mediated through politics in the United States. Early celebrations of 4 July often looked like “boisterous rallies for the party faithful” as Federalists and Democratic-Republicans struggled to define the nation.²⁷ David Waldstreicher emphasizes that national celebrations have long demonstrated “that America’s common political culture consists of a series of contests for power and domination, contests over the meaning of the Revolution, the development of the United States, and who counted as truly ‘American.’”²⁸ In these respects, the celebration of Brazilian days of national festivity was no different. The senator who, in the 1826 debate about the institution of days of national festivity, held up the enthusiastic celebration of 4 July as an example for Brazilians to emulate failed to recognize just how contested early republican U.S. civic ritual was.²⁹ And many aspects of North American politics were also conducted through rituals. Through parades and other public demonstrations that follow the forms of civic ritual, members of ethnic groups, workers, and other social groups displayed their identity and their public claims for recognition and incorporation into the nation.³⁰

COLONIAL PORTUGUESE AMERICAN RITUAL

Like early-modern cities throughout the Catholic world, Portuguese America’s towns had an annual cycle of sacred and secular celebrations, punctuated by the occasional nonrecurring celebration of important events in the lives of the royal family. Processions on saints’ days and Corpus Christi brought together all members of the community and were sometimes the occasion for conflicts over precedence among competing authorities. Over the course of the eighteenth century, as this ritual life flourished in growing towns, Church and state sought to control the popular celebrations that accompanied these rituals.³¹ Many aspects of colonial Brazilian civic ritual remain obscure. Because of the ban on publishing in Brazil, only lifted in 1808, there are few examples of festival books, and much analysis has focused on a handful of well-documented celebrations, such as those in honor of the future João VI’s 1786 marriage to Carlota Joaquina promoted by Viceroy Luís de Vasconcelos e Souza in Rio de Janeiro. Thanks to a manuscript description, complete with sketches of the allegorical floats drawn through the city, we know much

about this celebration, which José Ramos Tinhorão describes as the direct descendant of the “fifteenth-century Florentine *trionfi* [triumphs].”³² The celebrations also included a stage at the Passeio Público (the public park) for dances, illuminated ephemeral structures, and equestrian displays (*cavalhadas*) in a specially constructed arena. The remarks about this civic ritual in a nineteenth-century history of Rio de Janeiro indicate that it was a singularly elaborate affair that lived on in popular memory; folklorist José Vieira Fazenda reported in 1901 that an octogenarian had once told him that no nineteenth-century celebrations could compare to Vasconcelos’s “festival at the Passeio.”³³

The Portuguese monarchy’s flight to Rio de Janeiro in 1807–08 to escape the French occupation prompted an intensification of monarchical ritual in the empire’s new capital; in 1878, Joaquim Manuel de Macedo described the decade after the monarchy’s arrival as “almost entirely [filled] with official and popular festivities.”³⁴ Prince-Regent João (King João VI after 1816) sought to create what Manoel de Oliveira Lima called a “tropical Versailles” in what had hitherto been a colonial backwater.³⁵ The metaphor is, in fact, somewhat misleading, for European monarchs had already long abandoned the Versailles model, and João’s modest court fell very far short of Louis XIV’s ideal. Nonetheless, royal ritual and commemoration were now much more immediate, visible, regular, and spectacular than they had been before 1808, especially in 1817–18 when João was formally acclaimed king and his son, Pedro, married Leopoldina, an Austrian princess. Furthermore, it was much better documented. The new *Gazeta do Rio de Janeiro*, the first newspaper published in Brazil, devoted ample space to royal rituals; memoirists documented them in detail, and the genre of festival books flourished. The so-called French artistic mission of 1817 brought unemployed artists associated with the Napoleonic regime to Brazil; they produced elaborate ephemeral architecture and allegorical paintings for royal ceremonies and designed stage sets for theater galas. The historical painter Jean-Baptiste Debret, highly conscious of his role, not only contributed to these festivals but also documented them in watercolors that he later lithographed and published.³⁶

Historians have devoted considerable attention to this efflorescence of royal ritual in the Brazilian capital and have shown that it drew on the early-modern traditions of the Portuguese monarchy adapted to the American environment and modified by the influences of Napoleonic neoclassicism brought by the French artists. Wealthy merchant-planters financed much of the ephemeral architecture, particularly the illuminated triumphal arches and allegorical façades, thereby associating themselves with the monarchy. The city council also actively promoted these celebrations. Such festivities offered spectacular sights and sounds to the populace, as well as entertainment such as bullfights and equestrian displays.