



The Differential Evaluation of Religious Risk Rituals Involving Serpents in Two Cultures

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Abstract

While serpent symbolism is common in many religious traditions, few traditions have including the actual handling of serpents that can maim and kill in their rituals. Two exceptions are various Manasa sects common in India and the serpent handlers of Appalachia in America. We presented brief descriptions of each of these traditions along with videos of the handling of serpents in each tradition under three degrees of risk, video with no serpents, video with serpents but no bites, video with serpents and bites. Under a fourth condition only for the Appalachian handlers, the video showed a handler dying from a bite. American, largely Christian participants rated assessed each condition for ritual quality and perceived legitimacy. As predicted, serpent handling in America was perceived as less legitimate than serpent handling in India. No differences were found between perceived legitimacy and level of risk except in the condition where a handler was seen dying from a bite.

Key words: Serpent Handling Sects of Appalachia, Manasa Sect of Hinduism, Religious Risk Rituals, Perception, Behavior Evaluation, Psychology of Religion

Słowa kluczowe: wspólnoty praktykujące poskramianie węży z regionu Appalachów, hinduistyczny kult bogini Manasa, rytuały religijne związane z ryzykiem, percepcja, ewaluacja zachowania, psychologia religii

The role of traditionalism in religious ritual has long been noted¹. While traditionalism adds legitimacy to ritual, the actual emergence of what becomes ritual is often associated with a controversial history. Furthermore, if the ritual that struggles to merge challenges other norms of the host culture, the performative aspect of ritual² may be-

¹ C. Bell, *Ritual: perspectives and dimensions*, New York–Oxford 1997, p. 145–150.

² *Ibidem*, p. 159–164.

come problematic. For instance, in the United States while religious belief is protected by the Constitution, religious practice is not³. Thus, while one may be free to believe in handling serpents, most affected states have passed laws the actual handling of serpents, presumably to protect believers from the risk of harming themselves or others.

Our interest in this paper is to explore reactions to religious rituals that entail risk. Given the long history documenting the centrality of serpents in many religious traditions⁴ we choose to focus upon two cultural traditions in which the serpent is actually handled in a ritual that can maim and kill those who perform it. The two traditions are separated by time, culture, and belief, but each shares the practice of actually handling a poisonous serpent and either allowing it to bite (as in the case of the Mansa sect of India) or risking a bite (as in the case of the contemporary Appalachian handlers of the United States). We will briefly present necessary background information for each of these traditions before presenting data regarding the differential evaluation of the handling of serpents based upon culture.

Christian Serpent Handling in Appalachia

Serpent handling as a religious ritual appeared within the first ten years of the twentieth century. The practice appeared in east Tennessee and spread to other parts of the Southern Appalachian Mountain region of the United States. Serpent handling sects are historically linked to three forms of American Protestantism: holiness, fundamentalism, and Pentecostalism⁵. Many serpent handlers simply identify themselves as holiness people insisting that their outward behavior is sufficient evidence to testify to an inward spiritual transformation that both empowers them to handle deadly serpents and to speak in tongues (glossolalia). Furthermore, both these phenomena are justified by specific Bible texts, especially but not only Mark 16:17–18⁶.

The fundamentalists influence among serpent handlers is in their acceptance of a plain reading of the Bible when it is appropriate⁷. The Pentecostal influence among serpent handlers is in their belief that at the day of Pentecost the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit. Many modern Pentecostal groups trace their origins back to the day of Pentecost and belief that Holy Ghost baptism is essential for salvation and that the initial evidence of Holy Ghost baptism is glossolalia⁸.

³ L. Harvey, *Sacramental practices and provisions*, <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/Madison/wp-content/.../vol4ch4.pdf> [accessed: 28.01.2013].

⁴ J.H. Charlesworth, *The good and evil serpent: How a universal symbol became christianized*, New Haven 2010; B. Mundkur, *The cult of the serpent*, Albany, NY 1983.

⁵ R.W. Hood Jr., P.C. Hill, and W.P. Williamson, *The psychology of religious fundamentalism*, New York 2005; R.W. Hood Jr. and W.P. Williamson, *The power and meaning of the Christian serpent-handling tradition*, Berkeley, CA 2008.

⁶ F. Brown and J. McDonald, *The serpent handlers: three families and their faith*, Winston-Salem, North Carolina 2000.

⁷ R.W. Hood Jr., P.C. Hill, and W.P. Williamson, *op.cit.*

⁸ R.W. Hood Jr. and W.P. Williamson, *Ambiguity in the signs as an antidote to impediments to Godly love among primitive and progressive Pentecostals* [in:] *Godly love: Impediments and possibilities*, M.T. Lee and A. Yong (eds.), Lanham 2012, p. 21–40.

If there is a textual foundation for serpent handling it is in Mark 16:17–18 where both glossolalia or speaking in tongues and serpent handling are linked:

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. (Mark 16:17–18, KJV)

Serpent handlers believe that they are continuing a tradition started by the early apostles. Not only do they insist upon glossolalia as initial evidence of Holy Ghost baptism, but also they believe the early apostles handled serpents. They identify handling as one of the signs attributed to the apostles: “And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles” (Acts 2:43, KJV).

While the emergence (or re-emergence) of serpent handling in the United States is associated with the rise of Pentecostalism, one man, George Hensley, is most associated with the spread of serpent handling throughout the southeastern Appalachian Mountains. He was associated with the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) the one Pentecostal denomination most supporting the practice. Although later he resigned his ministry, it remains true that the early Church of God was the greatest driving force for serpent handling with the practice widely promoted by evangelists and Church of God missionaries⁹. After a short time, individuals within the Church of God opposed the practice of serpent handling as persons began to suffer from bites and some became maimed and died. Previous belief that the risk in handling serpents was mitigated by an anointing in which individuals could not be harmed gradually gave way to the reality of bites, maiming and deaths. Eventually the drive to become a mainstream denomination would move congregations away from the controversial signs of Mark 16 as Pentecostals strove to become accepted in a culture that found religious risk rituals involving serpents to be unacceptable. It became more than readily apparent that handling serpents entailed an essential ambiguity in which the belief that one could not be bitten, even when anointed, could not be sustained¹⁰. To this day, the practice of serpent handling is aggressively shunned by the mainstream Church of God.

In most states where handling has occurred, laws were enacted against the practice indicating the hostility of the host culture to a religious ritual that entailed risk. Again, it is important to emphasize that, in America, religious belief is absolutely protected, but religious practice is not¹¹. The brief history of such laws helps frame the logic of our study below¹².

⁹ R.W. Hood Jr. and W.P. Williamson, *The power and meaning...*

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ L. Harvey, *op.cit.*; R.W. Hood Jr. and W.P. Williamson, *The power and meaning...*, Chapter 12.

¹² *Ibidem*; W.P. Williamson and R.W. Hood Jr., *Religious serpent handling and community relations*, “Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community” (in press).

History of Laws against Serpent Handling in the United States

As handling serpents began spreading throughout the Southern Appalachians, the notoriety of serpent bite deaths gained notice¹³. We have continued to document deaths by serpent bite that occurred over a 90-year span, from 1919 to the present¹⁴. Currently we have documented 92 deaths. However, it is likely that this figure is greatly under-represented, as serpent handling communities verified deaths only as they gradually became a matter of public attention and criticism. Though serpent handling (and its related deaths) likely occurred well before the 20th century it was not until the 1920s that newspapers began documenting these deaths with increased regularity. With these reports came a rising tide of public concern for protecting the community from practices that – though they be religious – made widows and orphans of its citizens.

From the 1940s through the 1950s, serpent handling sects faced a barrage of state laws from six Appalachian states that made it illegal¹⁵. In 1940, Kentucky was the first state to draft legislation that illegalized religious serpent handling by making it a misdemeanor with a fine of \$50 to \$100. The most severe sanction, however, was imposed in 1941 by Georgia in response to reports of serpent bites that included children. The law not only prohibited the practice of handling serpents, but also its teaching as a doctrine; those who violated the sanction were charged with felonies that carried from one to twenty years of prison upon conviction. If one died as a result of the practice, the responsible party would be handed an automatic sentence of death upon conviction, unless leniency was recommended by the jury. In 1968, however, Georgia deleted this law in a rewriting of its state code, but not before two preachers – Warren Lipham in 1938 (three years prior to the passage of the law) and Charlie Hall in 1960 – were charged with murder, tried, but then acquitted by juries. Although the state community, which was far removed from commerce with serpent handlers, was deliberate in passing and enforcing anti-serpent handling legislation, it seems that juries, which were more closely tied to the local community in which serpent handlers lived, were far more sympathetic as reasons from defendants for their practice were fairly heard.

In 1947, both Virginia and Tennessee passed misdemeanor laws against serpent handling that carried penalties of fines and/or imprisonment. In 1949, North Carolina also charged serpent handling as a misdemeanor with a penalty similar to that imposed by Virginia and Tennessee; however, the North Carolina law also made it illegal to “exhort” or “induce” others to practice handling – thus even the preaching of serpent handling was outlawed. The last state to pass a law against serpent handling was Alabama, which, in 1950, considered it a felony with imprisonment of one to five years upon conviction, though three years later, the sanction was modified to

¹³ R.W. Hood Jr. and W.P. Williamson, *The power and meaning...*

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 239–245.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*; R.W. Hood Jr., W.P. Williamson, and R.J. Morris, *Changing views of serpent handling: A quasi-experimental study*, “Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 2000, No. 39, p. 287–296.

be more lenient like those of Virginia and Tennessee. In 1975, however, Alabama rewrote its state code and removed all references to religious serpent handling. While four of the above six states made it illegal to practice serpent handling as an expression of religious faith, two states (Georgia and North Carolina) outlawed any preaching, teaching, and exhorting of the doctrine. Despite such legal retaliation from the larger community, the community of believers continued in the practice of their faith, sometimes suffering at the hands of legal authorities and a scornful public that was uninformed.

It is striking that one state, West Virginia, may provide the best counter example to other state communities infringing upon the religious freedom of serpent handlers. Though several serpent handling churches populate the state, perhaps the most well-known was the Church of the Lord Jesus, now defunct, in Jolo. Begun by the late Bob and Barbara Elkins in the 1940s, the church soon gained national notoriety because it welcomed coverage by secular media and photojournalists¹⁶. Barbara herself was converted to serpent handling after seeing the storied George Hensley handle in West Virginia in 1935. Jolo gained further media attention after Barbara's daughter, Columbia Gaye Chafin Hagerman, was bitten by a rattlesnake at the church in 1961. Refusing medical treatment, she died at her parents' home four days later. Given the wide publicity surrounding Columbia's death, West Virginia legislators introduced a bill to ban serpent handling; however, Barbara and others from West Virginia churches testified before the state legislature that they would persist in handling serpents even if it were made illegal. Despite their testimony, the West Virginia House of Delegates passed the ban in February of 1963 that would make serpent handling a misdemeanor with a fine from one to five hundred dollars¹⁷. However, publicity surrounding the ban and support from local communities who were sympathetic to serpent handling churches thwarted the effort. The Senate Judiciary Committee refused to act upon the bill, and since that refusal, West Virginia has made no other efforts to pass legislation against serpent handling.

This public show of community support for serpent handling churches in West Virginia is reflective of other local communities across Southern Appalachia who also accept and support serpent handling groups even in states where the practice is illegal. We offer here two cases, ironically those of a wife and husband, that clearly illustrate this fact. In August 1995, Melinda and John Wayne "Punkin" Brown, a well-renown evangelist on the serpent handling circuit, traveled from their home in Newport, Tennessee, to a church homecoming in Middlesboro, Kentucky, where serpent handling was and continues to be illegal¹⁸. While handling serpents with other believers in the Sunday morning service, Punkin offered a large rattlesnake to his wife Melinda. While observing this event, the second author further watched as the rattler fastened both fangs onto Melinda's forearm. After refusing the offer of medical attention, she died two days later in the local pastor's home. Because of the death, the local authorities were required to investigate the incident to ensure there was no foul

¹⁶ F. Brown and J. McDonald, *op.cit.*

¹⁷ *House okays ban on snake rituals*, "Charleston Daily Mail", February 1963, p. 1.

¹⁸ F. Brown and J. McDonald, *op.cit.*

play, but finding none, they let the matter rest without charges. The junior authors attended Melinda's funeral days later in her Tennessee hometown, where serpent handling is still against the law. More than 200 of the community and serpent handling believers gathered in the funeral home to hear not only the eulogy of a beloved wife and mother, but also a biblical defense for one of their faithful practicing what she believed even unto death.

Three years later, Punkin was preaching on Saturday night in a church just outside Section, Alabama, when a rattlesnake he was handling struck him on the hand. Refusing medical assistance, he died within minutes. Serpent handling by that time was not outlawed in Alabama, but the death required an investigation by local authorities and led to an autopsy report indicating death by snakebite. Back in Newport days later, the junior authors sat in a familiar funeral home with hundreds from the community and serpent handlers abroad, and listened to a brief eulogy for Punkin, which finished with an announcement that the service would conclude at graveside. The police escort led the funeral procession outside city limits to the edge of a country cemetery where they quietly left as the last car made entry. As mourners and the faithful left their cars, they followed the bearers of Punkin's body to the freshly dug grave with guitars and serpent boxes in hand. For nearly an hour, they sang, testified, and made full exercise of their faith before laying Punkin's body to rest – and in all this, being unmolested by local authorities in a state where this religious practice continues to be sanctioned.

Serpent handlers must walk a fine line between freedom of religious **belief** and the right of states to regulate religious **behavior**¹⁹. Despite the laws against handling serpents, believers continue to defy the law and handle as their faith dictates often with tacit approval by communities and authorities who support the tradition and refuse to enforce the law²⁰.

Manasa and Playing with Serpents in Hinduism

Serpent handling sects (SHS) in Southern Appalachia remain unique because of their literal understanding of Mark 16. However, they are not the only religious group to handle snakes as part of religious practice. The Manasa sect of Hinduism is also known for handling (what they call playing with) dangerous snakes, most typically cobras²¹. Within the Manasa sect, the intent behind handling serpents is different than in SHS. Manasa members handle serpents to appease the goddess Manasa. Although the risk is the same as that in SHS, practitioners of Manasa sect will allow themselves to be bitten to please the Goddess Manasa. The practice occurs particularly during the

¹⁹ T. Burton, *Serpent handling believers*, Knoxville, Tennessee 1993; R.W. Hood Jr. and W.P. Williamson, *The power and meaning...*

²⁰ D. Kimbrough and R.W. Hood Jr., *Carson Springs and the persistence of serpent handling despite the law*, "Journal of Appalachian Studies" 1995, No. 1, p. 45–65.

²¹ B. Mundkur, *op.cit.*

rainy season when many serpents and snakes emerge. Many Manasa devotees have died playing with cobras.

Naga or serpent worship was not uncommon in early Vedic India. Some of the first snake rituals were by the Harappa culture within the Indus Valley²². Later Hindu religious sects would invoke different types of serpent worship. One of the more popular religious groups within Bengal and other parts of India is the Manasa sect, a contemporary religious sect popular in India.

The small groups in the sect of Manasa mangal²³ did not appear until around the 1400s. Early textual evidence dates to the Bengali literature and poems of the 1500s²⁴. Manasa is even mentioned in the Puranas, one of the early Hindu texts. Maity²⁵ notes that, out of all the pantheon of gods in Hinduism, Siva is most closely linked with snake worship. Other deities are represented with snakes as adornments around them or on their body. However, in many parts of India, Siva is worshipped as a snake. For many Manasa worshippers, Siva is the father of Manasa. This concept is exemplified in the stories of the poets of Bengal. Within these stories were narratives about the Goddess, lessons on life, and instruction on proper worship for devotees.

Goddess lore varies across India, but most note that Manasa was born from the seed of Siva. One of the more popular stories is that Siva was moving in the universe, became aroused at the sight of something attractive, and ejaculated. Siva's seed ended up near the lake at Kalidala where snakes live. Although the story of the birth of Manasa varies, many devotees believe that a snake came along and swallowed Siva's celestial seed. Born from the snake was Manasa. After interacting with the gods, Manasa later decided to establish her worship on Earth. She manifested herself to humans and instructed them in her worship. Manasa was said to visit her devotees and non-devotees at different times and places. In many accounts, Manasa announces her presence and tells the individuals to worship her. Many individuals rejected her claims of being a deity or denied her worship for another Hindu deity. In every case, human resistance was met with unfortunate circumstances. Some stubborn individuals could meet their doom by the bite of a serpent or serpents. Others may become sick or die suddenly.

While many Hindu households accept the Goddess as the main godhead of worship, others may worship Manasa only when an illness or bad times have befallen a member of the family. Lower caste Hindus stereotypically worship the Goddess as godhead, noting that Manasa is a daughter of Siva but that she has power and control over him. Like the godhead of many other sects of Hinduism, Manasa has the power to take life and revive life. This is important for devotees who handle serpents. They feel their devotion will protect them from a serpent bite. Should a devotee be bitten, only Manasa has the power to heal and to take away injury and pain.

²² K.K. Klostermaier, *A survey of Hinduism*, Albany, NY 1994, p. 38–43.

²³ Mangal in this reference refers to the poems and songs sung by Bengali worshippers of Manasa. The term "Mangal" has also been used in reference to wedding songs and performances (W.L. Smith, *The one-eyed goddess, A study of the Manasa Mangal*, Stockholm 1980).

²⁴ P.K. Maity, *Historical studies in the cult of the goddess Manasa*, Calcutta 1966.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 22–25.

The Goddess takes many visual forms²⁶. She shares some characteristics of Durga and Kali in visual representation. Manasa's true form is said by Mangali literature to be wrathful, although when approaching humans, she sometimes can take a form that is pleasing to the eye. Manasa has an all seeing eye and an eye that is blind²⁷. The blind eye has the ability to kill and the seeing eye has the ability to heal. She will use each eye either to inflict punishment or to heal. This characteristic of the Goddess could be analogous to that of an all-seeing eye that watches the deeds of humanity and punishes when necessary.

The physical context of Manasa worship is typically within a holy place. The performances of the religious practices are not restricted to shrines or temples, but can be done in homes, at the base of trees, by bushes, and at waterside. The trees, bushes, and water are places one would naturally find serpents. Some villages and communities across India have elaborate shrines with beautiful images of the Goddess with elaborate garb, while other villages may have only a simple shrine at which offerings are made. Homes may hold sacred clay pots for worship. Clay pots can also be found near trees and bushes where serpents are commonly found. For many of a lower socio-economic status, a clay pot may be an alternative to an expensive Murti or deity image.

Devotees worship images and clay pots that symbolize the Goddess. Some devotees believe that the Goddess will manifest herself within the clay pot. As stated in the *Vyaribhaktitarangini*, devotees worship Manasa by playing with serpents and making offerings of food, incense and other valuable items²⁸. Those devotees who worship Manasa as Godhead see her permeating the universe as the transcendent force that creates and destroys. During the religious practice, she becomes present with the devotees as they make offerings and play with serpents.

To die by a serpent is to show a lack of faith in Manasa's power. Many Manasa devotees and some high priests will allow serpents to bite them to show the power of the Goddess. If she allows them to live, they are seen as worthy and devoted. Should they die, they lack faith in Manasa and her power²⁹. The religious practice empowers the participant to experience Manasa while honoring her as a protective mother. This empowerment is not limited to devotees or high priests but is open to all who participate in her worship and festivals³⁰.

Manasa worshippers are most known for the Jhapan festival in Bengal³¹. Devotees come from miles around to make offerings and worship the Goddess. The festival serves a communal aspect within the worship of the Goddess. It gives the laity the ability to see the high priests and the devoted play with serpents. It also offers a healing quality for the community by allowing all worshippers to pray with the devotees and high priests and by bringing the religious community together.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ W.L. Smith, *op.cit.*

³⁰ P.K. Maity, *op.cit.*

³¹ *Ibidem*.

The climax of the festival is the ceremonial bathing of the Goddess while devotees handle serpents. Images of Manasa and clay pots are specifically made for the ceremony. Devotees prepare the Goddess to be transported in the clay pot. During the preparation, devotees handle serpents and make offerings to Manasa. The ceremonial clay pot is brought from a Manasa shrine and carried to a local river or body of water. The clay pot is the Goddess herself manifest within. Depending on the community, a vegetable or an animal is sacrificed during the ceremony. The pot is then carried back to the shrine where musicians play and priests tell stories about the Goddess and handle serpents. The festival concludes with chanting and the removal of the clay pots³².

The Goddess Manasa is worshipped primarily in West Bengal and other scattered locations in India. Moreover, there are textual references to her in holy texts such as *Devi Bhagavatam Purana*, Book 9, Chapter 38. The worship of Manasa continues today. For some, Manasa is even Godhead of their community or family. The goddess is primarily worshiped by lower caste Hindus. However, legends point to grave implications for blocking the worship of Manasa by higher caste Hindu devotees. For example, some wives of higher caste Hindus have made offerings and were punished by their husbands for doing so. The husbands were met with adverse results of their punitive reactions from being bitten by poisonous snakes to facing misfortune in the family. The result of such punishment served as a reminder of the power of Manasa over not only lower caste Hindus but also higher caste Hindus as well. Other Hindus, especially those in the Bengal region of India, may participate in the seasonal ritual of Manasa worship which occurs during the rainy season. Bengal is known to have major flooding at this time which causes many snakes and serpents to emerge from their cover. Their emergence in nature increases the chance of bite by villagers and country dwellers alike. Much of the socio-economic conditions determine the ritual instrumentation involved in Manasa worship. In many families, they cannot afford extravagant ritualistic implements in her representation and practice of puja (worship). For many, a clay pot with water is her ritual stand in. It serves as the most valuable item they can use. Since the tradition is very much a “grass roots phenomena”, these implements are enough to invoke and please the Goddess³³.

The aspect that makes Manasa worship so interesting is the practice of serpent handling. As noted before, serpent play is a risky behavior, and some of Manasa’s followers have been injured or killed during this practice³⁴. Some of the high priests will even show the power of the Goddess by allowing themselves to be bitten. In the cases of SHS and Manasa, both are culturally emergent practices within rural and isolated areas of their geography. Each emerged from lower socio-economic class/castes as a means of coping with unpredictableness and changes in nature around them. For both, serpent handling is a commandment by their deity as a sign of the true believer. For each tradition, such belief is risky but necessary to ensure they follow their tenants of faith.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 262–266.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

Empirical Studies of Risk Rituals Involving Serpents

Empirical studies have noted the difficulty in studying SHS in the context of a culture that opposes their central ritual and that has often made it illegal to perform it³⁵. Furthermore, as Holt³⁶ has observed, the SHS of Southern Appalachia are difficult to study because they lack the institutional organization found in many churches within the Pentecostal tradition. Thus, it is not surprising that many of the writers on SHS have spent little time in participant observation of SHS. Most commentary has been made without direct observation of this tradition³⁷. Based upon extensive participation and observation of SHS for over twenty-five years, Hood and Williamson³⁸ have argued that most of what is written on SHS both within the popular media and scientific literature is more stereotypical than factual. If this is true, Hood et al.³⁹ note that observer attitudes toward SHS are likely to be prejudicial rather than based upon factual knowledge.

Using a hypothetical religious conversion vignette and indices, Hood et al.⁴⁰ demonstrated that participants evaluated conversion as more valid when the two most controversial signs of Mark 16 were not involved. Those signs were specifically handling serpents and drinking poison. The more accepted signs of laying on of hands, casting out of demons, and speaking in tongues led to a more accepted form of conversion experience. The reasoned evaluation indices included the following tradition-specific questions: This tradition is sincere in their faith; this religious practice should carry illegal sanctions; and this religious practice should be regarded as unfortunate. Hood et al.⁴¹ found a strong relationship between the prejudice measures and legitimacy of conversion as a function of the more extreme signs of Mark 16. With these results, Hood and his colleagues demonstrated that the rejection of SHS was partly based upon prejudice and not simply upon rational disagreement over the validity of the serpent handling ritual by the study participants.

Based on the above research, attitudes play a vital role in determining what people consider acceptable in a ritual. Hood⁴² suggested that people were less accepting of a dangerous religious practice within their own culture than in cultures more distant and associated in the popular mind with curious beliefs and rituals unfamiliar to a culture heavily informed by Christian perspectives. Unfortunately, there are no data on cross-cultural perceptions of ritual legitimacy or religious risk ritual accept-

³⁵ R. W. Hood Jr., *When the spirit maims and kills: social psychological considerations of the history of serpent handling sects and the narrative of handlers*, "The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion" 1998, No. 8, p. 71–96; R. W. Hood, W. P. Williamson, and R. J. Morris, *op. cit.*

³⁶ J. Holt, *Holiness Religion: Cultural shock and social reorganization*, "American Sociological Review" 1940, No. 5, p. 740–747.

³⁷ R. W. Hood Jr., *op. cit.*

³⁸ R. W. Hood Jr., and W. P. Williamson, *The power and meaning...*

³⁹ R. W. Hood, W. P. Williamson, and R. J. Morris, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁴¹ *Ibidem.*

⁴² R. W. Hood, *op. cit.*

ance within other cultures. However, data does exist on changing the attitudes of those who may lack accurate information about the religious risk ritual involving serpents. Specifically, Hood and colleagues⁴³ sought to alter evaluations of SHS based upon a quasi-experimental design in which naïve participants were confronted with a video of believers handling serpents and giving testimonies that theologically defended and justified their religious beliefs and practice.

In this study, Hood et al.⁴⁴ examined prejudice toward serpent handling as an acceptable religious practice from the outside observer's perspective. Two videotapes were shown: one showed serpent handlers within their interpretative context including testimony and serpent handling; the second (control) tape showed a similar religious service, but with no serpent handling. The investigators showed that all study participants had at least a moderate interest in religion, and found that, prior to observing the serpent-handling video, outside individuals held prejudicial views about serpent handling and favored laws against the practice. When participants observed serpent handling within its interpretive context, however, individuals were more likely to view serpent handling less stereotypically. Participants who understood serpent handling from the believer's perspective were more willing to think that the practice should be tolerated even if it brought the probability of maiming and death to those who believe. Thus, even among individuals who would not practice handling themselves, there was a willingness to permit others to handle based largely on the ability of handlers to persuade others of their sincerity of belief; furthermore, these observers became less likely to support laws that respect belief but deny practice due to risk of harm. The assumption that religious ritual ought not to entail risk can be viewed as a pervasive America cultural bias not found in many secular rituals such as professional sports.

A Comparison of Religious Risk Rituals Involving Serpents in Two Cultures

This study is part of a larger study in which we continue to explore possibilities of training naïve observers to understand religious rituals from the believer's perspective. In this section, we focused upon observer attitudes toward religious risk rituals involving serpents from two cultures. Observers watched specially prepared videos from the Manasa Hindu tradition in India and the SHS of the Southern Appalachian Mountain region of the United States. In this report, we are looking at only at the effect of culture on the acceptance of religious risk rituals. We tested a simple hypothesis with respect to evaluation of risk rituals and perceived legitimacy. We hypothesized that American observers would be less accepting of religious rituals that involve risk, maiming, or death in an American, Christian context than of those in an India, Hindu context. As a corollary to this hypothesis we hypothesized that, as

⁴³ R.W. Hood, W.P. Williamson, and R.J. Morris, *op.cit.*

⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*

the level of risk within a risk ritual was increased, observers would be less accepting of the ritual, regardless of culture. This is based upon the assumption that Americans share a cultural bias that religious rituals ought not to entail risk, a bias Americans are less likely to apply to distant cultures such as India, which is often stereotyped as involving many “exotic” religions associated with curious rituals known to entail risk.

Method

Participants

The study consisted of 291 participants from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Racially, 58% were European American (white), 38% were African American (black), and 3% were alternatively culturally or racially identified (Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Asian, or other).

Materials and Procedure

We constructed scales to assess perceived legitimacy of the two rituals and of awareness of the actual ritual practices. Similar scales were constructed for Manasa and SHS. Each allowed for the rating recognized ritual activities and of the perceived legitimacy of the ritual⁴⁵.

Seven videos of religious ritual practices were identified, each with varying degrees of risk. Four videos were of the SHS tradition and three videos were of the Manasa ritual. For both the SHS and the Manasa, one tape was a control condition that showed a ritual performance where serpents were not shown and ritual participants had no potential for harm. The second tape showed a serpent handling or a Manasa ritual where serpents were shown with potential for harm but no harm occurs. The third tape showed a serpent handling or a Manasa ritual in which a ritual participant is harmed by a serpent bite. For the SHS only, a fourth tape was created, which included the first three levels of risk but, in addition, showed a participant dying as a result of a serpent bite.

Each of these groups was sorted randomly into four subgroups of 32 participants per risk condition. Each of the groups of sixteen participants was shown a cultural condition in reverse order to control for ordering effects. Each group examined two videos (Manasa and SHS) with the exception of those in the SHS condition that showed a handler dying from a serpent bite. Thus, to summarize the various conditions, the first group of 32 participants examined a tape of an SHS church service with no harm and a Hindu service with no harm. The second group of 32 participants examined two videos with the potential for harm, but with no actual harm occurring in the observed ritual. The same group examined a Hindu Manasa serpent handling tape with the potential for harm, but with no actual harm occurring in the observed ritual. The third group of 32 participants examined two videos (one showing SHS, and one showing the Manasa tradition) where the ritual participants are injured as

⁴⁵ Copies of these scales are available upon request.

a result of the religious practice. The fourth group of 32 participants viewed a tape showing a SHS handler who is in the process of dying from serpent bite.

Statistical Analysis

Since the study involves a mixed model analysis of both independent measures and repeated measures, we used a multivariate analysis of variance or MANOVA. The independent variables (IV) are religion/culture (Manasa or serpent handling sect) and risk conditions (degree of risk) and in one case, an actual death condition. The two dependant variables (DV) are ritual assessment scores and ritual legitimacy. An ANOVA or analysis of variance was used to examine the differences between all risk conditions while including the death condition.

Results

There were no effects of ordering. No difference in legitimacy or assessment occurred based upon whether a Manasa or SHS video was viewed first.

Reliabilities (alpha coefficient) for ritual legitimacy scale were Manasa (alpha = .81) and SHS (alpha = .84). For ritual assessment the corresponding reliabilities were alpha = .63 and alpha = .77. As expected, for both Manasa and SHS assessment and legitimacy significantly correlated (Manasa, $r_{(183)} = .40$; SHS, $r_{(244)} = .42$).

Descriptive statistics were computed for ritual legitimacy scores. The Manasa ritual had a higher average mean legitimacy score ($M = 56.06$, $SD = 13.67$) than the SHS ($M = 47.43$, $SD = 16.25$). The difference was significant ($t_{(214)} = 8.02$, $p < .001$). ANOVA results indicated that neither for the Manasa serpent ritual ($F_{(2,212)} = 2.38$, ns) nor for the SHS ritual ($F_{(2,288)} = 2.12$, ns) did legitimacy differ as a function of risk. However, for the SHS when an actual death condition was included, the legitimacy of ritual evaluation with the death condition significantly differed from all other risk conditions ($F_{(3,287)} = 3.24$, $p < .02$).

The ritual assessment mean for SHS was 147.64 ($SD = 21.42$) and for Manasa was 136.64 ($SD = 15.21$). With respect to ritual assessment, SHS had a significantly higher assessment score than Manasa ($t_{(214)} = 9.94$).

Conclusions and Discussion

Our creation of a religious legitimacy scale was to examine whether that study participants could accept as legitimate religious rituals that entailed risk. Our overall sense was that this would be easier if the risk was in another culture with a different religion than in America with a biblically justified ritual that entails considerable risk as serpents are handled based upon a literal reading of Mark. Participants overall felt that the Manasa ritual was more legitimate than SHS ritual. In addition, it is clear that the difference in assessment scores becomes statistically significant when including the actual death condition for SHS. Since there was not a death condition for Manasa, the MANOVA did not include the death condition as a factor. Based on the fact that

there was a significant difference between no risk, injury and death (NRID) and risk, injury and death (RID) groups within SHS but not Manasa, had the death condition been included within the total analysis, the risk condition likely would have achieved an overall effect. Further research would need to be conducted to determine if this prediction is accurate. It may be the case that any handling of serpents is seen as equally risky until and if an actual death is shown.

It appears that risk behaviors outside the observer's own culture are more acceptable than those within their culture. This study suggested for each outside observer certain risk behaviors may be tolerable while others are not, but as a majority, south-eastern American society will accept religious behaviors only that adhere to social norms or deviant behaviors that occur outside of the observer's culture. If individuals view a religious ritual with risk or injury that is not inherent within their own culture, they are more likely to be accepting of it than when a similar religious risk ritual occurs within their own culture. This would be particularly true if the tradition is similar to that of outside observers⁴⁶.

These results are counterintuitive to those of the Hood and colleagues⁴⁷ where participants viewed footage of serpent handling services and interviews. Participants in that study were less likely to view serpent handling stereotypically and understood the rationale for the practice. The present study suggests that individuals judge religious risk rituals by emotion and are less likely to make judgments based on training. In contrast to the Hood et al.⁴⁸ study, participants in the present study did not have a change in attitude after viewing similar footage when educated in ritual theory. The current study seems to concur more with the Hood et al.⁴⁹ study in which participants considered conversion more legitimate when the controversial signs of Mark 16 were not included.

While our focus was upon American observer assessment of risk ritual involving serpents in two different cultures, it is worth mentioning that there also are similarities between the risk rituals within the cultures studied. In outward appearance, the behavior of SHS is virtually the same as the Manasa sect of Hinduism. There are some differences in styles of worship, but the major difference is that Manasa devotees actually want to be bitten where SHS members do not. Yet the overarching sense is that believers are at risk in a religious ritual involving serpents. For both groups risk behavior is essential. The danger of maiming or death does not deter acts of obedience and devotion. However, the observer-participants in this study were Christian from the southeastern United States where the notion that religious ritual, despite entailing risk, may nevertheless be legitimate even if difficult to accept. However, as Hood and Williamson⁵⁰ have argued from the believing participant's perspective, the

⁴⁶ Eg. R.W. Hood Jr., R.J. Morris, and W.P. Williamson, *Evaluation of the legitimacy of conversion experience as a function of the five signs of Mark 16*, "Review of Religious Research" 1999, No. 41, p. 95–108.

⁴⁷ R.W. Hood, W.P. Williamson, and R.J. Morris, *op.cit.*

⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁹ R.W. Hood Jr., R.J. Morris, and W.P. Williamson, *op.cit.*

⁵⁰ R.W. Hood Jr. and W.P. Williamson, *op.cit.*

risk of the possibility of a proximate death is overshadowed by the belief that, in being obedient to a plain understanding of Mark 16, it is not death but eternal life that is assured. It is this religious framing of risk rituals involving serpents that is worthy of further investigation in traditions in which the symbolism of the serpent need not be understood only in its “Christianized” version⁵¹. The rich symbolism of the serpent is universal, but we must not forget that it is also embedded in the fact that serpents can also be a sign of the simple fact they can maim and kill.



⁵¹ J.H. Charlesworth, *op.cit.*