

On Ritual Effectiveness The Case of Constitution Day*

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Introduction

Norwegian Constitution Day, the Norwegian day of independence, is widely celebrated all over the country. According to a survey on national identity, frequently drawn upon in national presentations of self, 94% of the population participated in the 1994 Constitution Day events (Agedal 1997:512). A more recent inquiry in 1998 revealed a participation rate of 78% (*Aftenposten*, 16 May 1998). Most probably, the latter figure is the most reliable one, since the 1998 inquiry consisted of detailed questions focusing on actual plans for the upcoming celebrations. The other survey, by contrast (Skjåk & Bøyum 1995), posed one single question about participation: "How did you celebrate Constitution Day in 1994?", and provided four possible answers.¹ Although the first of these answers was "did not celebrate", the construction seems slightly preconceived, taking for granted that people normally participate. This said, however, even 78% is a high rate of participation.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how contemporary celebrations of Constitution Day can promote among their participants an embracing of nationalist ideology. From general theory of rituals and ceremonies we learn that such events are capable of affecting, or "operating on", participants in powerful ways (Handelman 1990:16–19, cf. Moore & Myerhoff 1977:7–8). In the context of nationalism, they have been identified as important vehicles for the anchoring of ideology, because of their capacity to transform abstract ideas into a palpable, and moving, symbolic reality (Smith 1991:77). What I want to investigate here are the transformations of ideas into ritual reality that actually take place in

contemporary Constitution Day celebrations, and the ways in which these transformations are experienced and endowed with meaning by participants.

Constitution Day is commemorated annually on 17 May, the anniversary of the ratification of the first Norwegian constitution in 1814. Before 1814, the Norwegian territory had been part of the Danish kingdom for four centuries. The constitution came into being when Denmark was defeated in the Napoleonic Wars, and forced to hand Norway over to Sweden. As a counter-move to this plan, contrived by the victors of the war, Norwegian representatives attempted in the spring of 1814 to establish an independent Norwegian state. Writing a constitution and electing a king of their own were the most salient steps of their strategy. But their effort failed. A few months later the king had to abdicate, Sweden and Norway formed a union, and the constitution was slightly altered to correspond to the new situation. It was not, however, overruled. Norway came out of the turbulence recognized as a political entity, with a national parliament in full charge of domestic affairs. Furthermore, the construction of the union allowed movements of cultural and political nationalism to gain ground and prosper during the nineteenth century. Thereby the way was paved for the establishment of a Norwegian sovereign state in 1905.²

In Constitution Day celebrations, 1814 and 1905 are highlighted as landmarks in the history of national freedom. Additionally, the ceremonies commemorate the loss of national freedom during the Second World War, and the sacrifices made by men and women during the German occupation to restore independence. Thus Constitution

Day celebrations are tied up with a nationalist project; that is, closely connected to an ideological movement whose foundations are notions of national identity and community, and whose ultimate goal is political self-determination.³

At the end of the twentieth century the Norwegian nation-state is, on the one hand, firmly established. Its construction as well as the ideology underpinning its existence are very much taken for granted, supported as they are by institutional frameworks, rules and regulations, and a range of petty routines (cf. Billig 1995). On the other hand, the same construction is fundamentally challenged by global processes of technological, economic, political and cultural change. These processes undermine the power and the legitimacy of nation-states all over the world, and reveal them over and over again as being inadequate for coping with contemporary problems. On the level of ideological reasoning, this challenging is paralleled by a critical rethinking of nationalist ideology *per se*. In the Norwegian case, such a rethinking has affected ideals of sovereignty and self-determination, as well as basic notions about the necessity of cultural homogeneity for the cohesion of the national community.

Likewise in the late twentieth century, there is a strong focus on personal identity, and a great degree of open-endedness in the construction of such identities (cf. Giddens 1991:5). Individuals piece together, as it were, what they are and are not with a certain amount of liberty, and in those dimensions of life where identities are still ascribed, the meaning and the commitment that people invest into them may vary immensely. Thus the meaning of being a Norwegian cannot be taken for granted in contemporary Norway

(cf. Eriksen 1993a). Neither can we take for granted the solidity of people's commitment to the national community.

Against this backdrop, what should we expect of the Constitution Day celebrations? Do they serve as a powerful confirmation of ideas and meanings that are increasingly debated and rejected outside the ritual context? Are they the occasion, once a year, when feelings and sentiments in favour of the nation are to be conjured up, and doubt is to be suspended (cf. Moore & Myerhoff 1977:24)? Or, by contrast, does the re-evaluation of the nationalist project enter into the ritual context as well, to affect and alter the celebrations and the meanings arising from them? The last possibility is as likely, in my view, as the first one. But in any case, the examination of what the ritual does and does not do has to take into account a basic open-endedness, and to pay close attention to participant activities. In the view that I want to advocate here, the outcome of the ritual is contingent on the active involvement of participants, and not least of their bodies.

There are two facets of this. First, bodies are important because rituals are "conspicuously physiological" (Myerhoff 1977: 199). Rituals operate through a variety of media, producing messages to be grasped by a range of human senses and faculties, more or less simultaneously (Tambiah 1979:113–114, 119). Thereby, they catch up and absorb their audiences, and leave little room for distance or withdrawal. Furthermore, bodies are important as performing agents. Ritual activities are highly dependent on the phenomenon that Connerton termed "habit-memory", or, more broadly stated, on bodily practices (Connerton 1989:72–104; cf. Bourdieu 1990:66–79).

These terms refer to skills and knowledge that are sedimented in the body, that is, to those things that you can do without thinking, or reflecting, or questioning. Such behaviour is a powerful way of tacitly affirming cultural ideas and values. It is powerful exactly because it is tacit. If the ideas and values concerned were spelled out, it would be possible to question, alter, and perhaps, reject them. But as long as, or insofar as, they are incorporated, and acted out in habitual ways, they are "below the level of consciousness, expression and the reflexive distance which these presuppose" (Bourdieu 1990:73; cf. Connerton 1989: 102). A similar perspective on rituals and bodies is outlined by Jennings (1996). He emphasizes, even more strongly, that the body is the very source of ritual knowledge: "It is not so much that the mind 'embodies' itself in ritual action, but rather that the body 'minds' itself or attends through itself in ritual action" (1996:327).⁴

The focus on participant activities has some important consequences for the following analysis. For one thing, however clear the symbolic messages presented by the ritual may be, in the approach that I have chosen here they enter the realm of analytical importance only insofar as they are filtered through participant experience, and paid attention to in one way or another by participants. Likewise, any explicit purpose or aim of the ritual can be, as it were, nullified by not being perceived, lived through or acted out by participants. Taking these premises as my point of departure, what I have searched for in the Constitution Day setting are the details as well as the overall moods and atmospheres that make the strongest imprints on the bodies, minds and hearts of participants. Likewise, I have

tried to find out what people take special care to do during the celebrations. Where do they participate most eagerly and intensely, and what actions do they perform at these moments? And what understandings and meanings, finally, may spring from these ritual experiences?

Participant Priorities

Basically, Constitution Day celebrations can be described as a three-part sequence of events. The first part, in the early morning hours, consists of commemorative rites that are formal and carefully pre-planned. They focus on the founding-fathers of the nation, and on those who sacrificed their lives during the Second World War. In the speeches given at graves or monuments, the contributions and sacrifices of the predecessors are related to present-day challenges and problems. Contemporary Norwegians are invited here to identify with previous generations, and to take on their own responsibility for their country. Thereby, the morning events strongly articulate a national unity extending through time.

Later in the morning, a children's parade is arranged. This is the most important single event of the day; it is arranged everywhere, it is highly cherished, and it is frequently drawn upon to characterize the celebrations as a whole, and the Norwegian nation. Around noon, a public gathering is held, which includes the main speech in honour of the day, songs and other performances. Later on, especially in urban areas, more parades will follow, structured basically in terms of age. The parades and the main gathering comprise the second part of the celebration. It is essentially focused, but it is more festive than the morning commemorations.

The third phase of the day is informal and multifocused. It consists of local neighbourhood gatherings, held outdoors, preferably in a schoolyard. Some formal introduction may take place, but most of the time, participants engage in eating, drinking, participating in playful competitions, and socializing. This is the end of the public part of Constitution Day. Later in the evening, some people arrange private parties in their homes, or come together at semi-public gatherings in clubs and organizations.

In the following I will describe and comment upon Constitution Day practice from the point of view of participants who are familiar with the celebrations and, basically, feel at ease in them. The sources of evidence spring from fieldwork in southern Norway, mainly in urban and suburban contexts, in the mid-1990s. I draw on interviews with around thirty adults recounting their own Constitution Day experience, on my own participation, and on media representations.³ Among the persons interviewed, two-thirds were raised after the German occupation, that is, represent post-war generations. All of them are ethnic Norwegians. My initial plan to interview people of immigrant descent as well was not extensively realized. I conducted a few interviews with male immigrants, each of them speaking mainly in the capacity of being a representative of an organization or a category. What struck me most in those conversations, whether the men spoke for others or, occasionally, referred to their personal experience, was the similarities of their accounts to those presented by ethnic Norwegians. These interviews, and certain media representations as well, strongly suggested that you do not have to be an ethnic

Norwegian in order to be part of and enjoy the celebrations. That said, however, there is a lot to add about the ways in which ethnic otherness is highlighted (or subdued) in the formal events of Constitution Day, most notably in the parades.⁶

The versions I report on are insider ones, and we should keep in mind that the celebrations of Constitution Day may also give rise to experiences, expectations, and understandings that do not produce the feeling of being an insider. There are Norwegians who feel that Constitution Day celebrations are tiresome, or superficial, or simply hard to feel comfortable with. When you discuss the celebrations, in interviews or, even more, in informal conversations, people often tell of persons they know to shun the festivities. The perspectives of those persons are not the focus of this paper. Some of them, though, may be grasped anyway, at least by inversion.⁷

The most impressive experiences of Constitution Day are produced by specific features combining to produce a general atmosphere of festivity. Among the most important of these features are the great amount of people gathering in the streets and open places, the music, and the wealth of flags of all sizes. People are supposed to be dressed up, in folk costumes or Sunday best, and decorated with ribbons in the national colours of red, white and blue. Likewise, it is important for the atmosphere that they are good-humoured and in high spirits. The music consists of familiar tunes: the anthem, other national hymns, some secular national songs, and marches. All these tunes are played over and over again in the focused events. Listening to them really strikes a nerve with many participants, and the experience of joining the

singing may constitute one of the peak moments of the day. When someone is really moved, a lump in his or her throat can block the singing after the first few lines. The Norwegian flags are everywhere. Large ones fly from poles and frame tribunes, smaller ones are held by children or planted in perambulators. Like the music, flags move some of the participants to tears. But likewise, or perhaps even more, they bring about an immense sense of festivity. Norwegian flags (like the flags of the other Scandinavian countries) are not only official symbols of state and nation. They are also frequently used for framing important and joyful occasions of private life, and the connotations that they take on in those contexts are by and large retained when they appear in great abundance on Constitution Day (or, for that matter, in other public settings). Almost as important as the flags are the twigs of birch, bearing, at least in the southern parts of the country, the first fresh leaves of spring. Twigs are not carried by individuals, but they accompany the flags in all other kinds of decorations. Likewise, since most of the events are arranged outdoors, the fresh green foliage is an important part of the overall framing of Constitution Day.⁸

Speaking of single events or subevents, the children's parade is highlighted as the most important one. It draws together, as it were, all the components mentioned above: people, folk costumes, flags and music, and additionally, people are particularly moved by the sight of the children performing as main characters. Partly, then, they enjoy the children as a generalized symbolic category. Children parade as representatives of the future, or, as Witoszek has suggested in her essay on Constitution Day, as "the

personification of innocence, purity, truth and nature" (1991a:341). Additionally, though, people look very much forward to spotting and greeting their own children in the crowded parade. Some parents are even reported to run along the route to see and wave at their children again and again. Preferably, they should also be able to photograph the children as they parade by, but this may be hard to accomplish since there are so many people around. Thus, while parades are public and symbolic events, they also mobilize family relations and parental responsibilities in a very concrete way. In those areas where there are additional adult parades, these are enjoyed in much the same manner, with the recognition of relatives and friends being a vital part of the pleasure. But the children's performances are unique, and occupy a position of their own in the hearts and minds of the spectators.

The morning commemorations are important, too, at least to a certain degree. They constitute moments of reflections on central themes and topics, and for those who make sure to join them, they give rise to sentiments that are crucial components of the total Constitution Day experience. At the same time, though, they are not as broadly attended as the children's parades, and not as frequently highlighted as events that you should make sure you do not miss.⁹

One of the least favoured parts of the celebrations is the main speech. Few people declare that they "have to listen to it", that is, that they are really eager to hear it, and many dismiss it frankly by stating that it is always the same. Unlike other components, then, speeches cannot be repeated in more or less identical ways every year, and be cherished because of their familiar char-

acter. On the contrary, the speeches that are appreciated are those that make something new out of the familiar message, by means of reinterpretation or addition of new dimensions. More often than not, those innovative speeches are delivered by children or teenagers.

The informal afternoon gatherings are about as highly cherished as the children's parades. They stand out, most of all, as giant public backstages for relaxing, after the rush and the strain of the morning and midday events. Whether you perform or watch, the commemorations, the parades and the main gathering entail a lot of walking and standing, and call for your continuous attention. When those phases of the day are over, the opportunity to sit down and have a cup of coffee in the sunshine in the schoolyard can be experienced as the utmost peak of delight. For the children, the afternoon gatherings are the Constitution Day settings where they are most free to enjoy themselves. They have done their duty in the parades, and can devote themselves to play and to competitions adapted to their age and capabilities. Small children take part in tricycle races, while elders hammer nails into planks, or try shooting with bow and arrow. In all competitions, small items serving as prizes are generously handed out. Likewise the afternoon gathering is the setting where children consume much of the ice cream that is, according to standard accounts, one of the most important components of their Constitution Day experience. Arranging these gatherings is a duty assigned to the parents of children of a particular grade at the school. The job entails a lot of planning, cooperation, mobilization of local knowledge and resources and, finally, practical chores. Those who

have been through it, that is, virtually every parent of a child above the age of twelve, testify that it is hard work, but simultaneously very rewarding, strongly encouraging a sense of belonging.

In the schoolyards, people cluster according to their own preferences in small groups, focused on various activities. These activities may be pleasurable in their own right, but the overall sociable character adds immensely to the quality of the event. An elderly woman, recounting the Constitution Day practice of her grandchildren, described it clearly. After being part of the parade in the city, she said:

they get home again, and then at four o'clock they go away to the schoolyard, and it is *their* school, and there they experience Constitution Day in another way, because then they are gathered, as it were, the ones they know closely, classmates, and the teachers are there, and the headmaster is there, and the mother and the father and the grandparents. and aunts and people like that, so they are gathered there, and there you can buy coffee, and, well, they sell lottery tickets, and there are competitions, and, well, then it gets somewhat more intimate. Being in the city and watching the parades – then you have to be of a certain size, or be part of it in a particular way, to grasp it, I think.

In much the same way, adults made clear to me how highly they appreciated, for their own sake, coming together in the schoolyard. They go there, ideally, with their own family. But once there, children run off to their own activities, returning once in a while to show their prizes or ask for something. Meanwhile, the parents sit down, have coffee and biscuits, and chat with friends and neighbours. This is the occasion of the year when they can expect to run into virtually everybody in their neighbourhood. Some of the people they enjoy

meeting are close friends, others are acquaintances, still others may be persons that they merely recognize, such as the ones they queue with at the bus stop on weekday mornings. What adults seem to favour so highly in this context is the great amount of interactions, at various levels, including nods from a distance, with a great amount of others. People who have moved a lot, or who have suffered the uncomfortable feeling of being in the wrong schoolyard, can be very articulate on these matters. Even when they were accompanied by their own families, they might feel lonely because there were not enough people around them that they could nod to, wave at, or exchange a few words with.

Describing Constitution Day practice, people often distinguish between being a spectator, that is, watching from the sideline, and participating, that is, really being a part of it. Regularly, then, the experience of participation is related to local community celebrations, while spectatorship is something you experience in city centres. And quite obviously, it is the real participation, and the local arenas, that are preferred. One of the most frequent remarks when people heard that I intended to study Constitution Day was “Oh, you should go to a small place”. What they meant, most probably, was that I should look for a field site in a rural area, or a small town or village. My choice to spend three consecutive Constitution Days in Oslo, Bergen and Stavanger, all urban areas, might have seemed strange to many people. But these urban areas, I quickly realized, contained and were surrounded by their own small places: districts, suburbs, and outskirt communities. Every primary school district, as it were, is transformed on Constitution Day

into a small place, into a community large enough to stage at least its own small parade and subsequent gathering. Hence, if you live in an urban environment, you may divide your Constitution Day between the city centre where you watch the main events, and the local neighbourhood where you really enjoy a sense of belonging. When it is pointed out, in such a context, that participation takes place in the local setting, it may refer to the fact that afternoon gatherings offer a greater range of events where you can actually perform yourself, that is, where you are not assigned the role of spectator. But additionally and, I think, more to the point, the statement contrasts the familiar character of the local setting with the anonymity of the city, and depicts the local setting as the one where you can be comfortably nestled in social relationships, and really feel that you are part of a social universe.

Grasping the National

So far, I have pointed out the Constitution Day practices that attract and absorb participants most of all. In what ways are these practices imbued with a national sentiment? In what ways do they turn the abstract tenets of nationalist ideology into palpable reality?

Not every tenet, in the first place, *is* turned into palpable reality. Commenting upon the meaning of Constitution Day, people in the post-war generations often produce some reticent statements about national freedom. They know that this concept is important, they know that the essence of the meaning of Constitution Day is predicated on it, but they cannot really make it resonate with their own experience. However much Constitution Day may ap-

peal to them, the celebrations do not fill their hearts with an immense gratitude for living in a free country. At the same time, though, they know, or believe, that the older people, those who remember the war, do feel such a gratitude.

This belief is widely supported by texts and speeches presented in the Constitution Day context. Likewise it is by and large confirmed by my interviews with persons belonging to the pre-war generation. But these interviews also intimate a complicated relationship between the appreciation of freedom and the celebrations *per se*. I will explain this by relating at some length the explication offered by a woman in her early sixties.

Unlike most of the persons interviewed, this woman raised the question of meaning spontaneously. She explained that Constitution Day was about freedom, that she felt an enormous gratitude for living in a free country, and that this stood out in stark contrast to her childhood memories of the war. As a small girl, she experienced the occupation as fear and anguish, as limited access to food, as the sound and sight of German soldiers marching in the streets with their helmets on. Her father was imprisoned, and rumours about what happened in prisoners' camps spread even among the children. Her wartime experiences were deeply ingrained in her mind and body. Still fifty years after liberation, she shunned books and movies describing Second World War events, and she had mixed feelings towards the planned commemoration of the liberation that was due to take place some months after the interview.

As impressive as her wartime memories were her recollections of the relief that

liberation brought in early May 1945. The extraordinary atmosphere of "The May Days" (*maidagene*), stretching from Liberation Day on 8 May to the first post-war Constitution Day on 17 May, is an ever recurrent theme in recollections of this moment of history (cf. Eriksen 1995:83–88). During this week, people celebrated by improvised small-scale demonstrations, delighted to be able to present again the national symbols that they had so recently, and for so long, been forbidden to display. Afterwards, everything taking place during those feverish ten days constituted a solid experience of what a liberated country was really like. In this regard, "those who remember the war" had actually experienced national freedom, in stark contrast to the repressive regime imposed upon them by foreigners.¹⁰

The story of this woman presents an example of a strong personal identification with the phenomenon of national freedom. Occupation circumscribed and restricted her life; liberation opened up a world where it was possible to breathe, move and speak normally, that is, freely. The destiny of the nation is simultaneously her personal one. Whatever occurs to the country, subjugation or resurrection, is made palpable as personal realities in the life of the little girl. Constitution Day reminds her every year of these experiences. But – and this is important to notice – there is no seamless connection between her own perceptions of the core of the meaning of the day and the actual forms of the celebration. Introducing her explication of meaning, she concluded her previous description of her celebration practice by stating that those were the things her family *did*. Furthermore, she said, the day had a content, which was

“something in itself” (*en ting for seg*). Content, thus, was not evident from what the family did. It was perhaps not even easily compatible with it. Later on she also raised, in the most polite and cautious way, doubts as to whether all those who enjoyed the festivity could really feel the serious dimensions that she was herself aware of. Similar doubts were echoed, occasionally in less polite ways, by others in her generation. One man, for instance, vehemently denied the proposition that the people joining the festive crowd in the city were out there to demonstrate their love for their mother country. Most certainly, he claimed, they only cared about having a holiday.

For the woman referred to above, the sincere appreciation of national freedom was strongly related to her standpoint against Norwegian membership of the European Union. The idea of deliberately giving sovereignty away was a shocking one to her, and as she remembered the pro-membership agitation during the heated campaign in November 1994, she expressed strong distaste. Had Norway entered the Union, she said, she would never have bothered to celebrate Constitution Day again.

Others in her generation, by contrast, could perfectly well reconcile the ideas of European Union membership, national independence, and continued celebrations of Constitution Day. They, too, related their understanding to their wartime experience. As one man in his early seventies explained it, there were two crucial points to be observed. First, the European Union was an organization that a country (or, rather, state) might enter or refrain from entering of its own free will. Second, inside the Union, people were free to retain and express their

national identities. Thus, in his view, national freedom was never threatened by the Union. It is not hard to detect the logic of his reasoning, once you relate it to his memories of the German occupation. The Germans had done exactly what the prospective European Union partners would not do: enforced their own will upon the Norwegian people, and banned all the expressions of Norwegian nationality that they could not themselves control. At the same time however, we should note what is getting lost in this understanding: the orthodox interpretation that national freedom should be understood, and realized, in terms of the formal sovereignty of the Norwegian nation-state.

Formal sovereignty and national identity, thus, can be identified as two different foci of celebration. And to judge from the overall tendency of the material, identity seems to matter to more people than sovereignty does, and to do so in more direct ways.

In the interviews with persons belonging to post-war generations, reflections upon the national dimensions of the meaning of the celebrations were more hesitant than those reported above, and more directly tied to celebration practice. Their national sentiment seemed to arise, as it were, immediately from the sensation of being part of a cheerful crowd, gathering outdoors in the spring under a wealth of flags. The actual feeling can be specified in terms of satisfaction, joy, and gratitude. “What a gorgeous country we have”, they might say, or, “How lucky we are to be Norwegians”, or even, “How lucky we are to have such a day when we can gather and think about how lucky we are”. Exclamations of this kind summarize a deep satisfaction

with one's own country. The concept of country, then, refers partly to topography and nature. Norway is Norwegian soil, mountains and fjords, apple orchards and woods, and so on.¹¹ Furthermore, many people made clear to me that Norway is particularly beautiful in the spring, and that Constitution Day is also, really, a celebration of the return of the spring. In addition, though, the phrase "a gorgeous country" may refer to social dimensions: to the welfare state, to a basic level of social security offered to everybody, to the absence of severe conflicts and so on. The dimensions of well-being indicated by these reflections may be quite compatible with the experiences and values that other persons sum up in terms of freedom. Nevertheless, freedom was not a main keyword for those in the post-war generations.

It should be added here that the above associations were provoked by me during the interviews. The younger interviewees did not volunteer such reflections as easily as, for example, the older woman referred to above. And in the course of the actual celebrations, needless to say, participants do not verbalize the wider, or deeper, implications of what they are doing. The explications that are offered tend to appear in the speeches, and in the morning commemorations, that is, during events that many people do not care to attend.

To sum up, national dimensions are, if not always articulated, then at least close at hand when people are encouraged to reflect upon the meanings of the celebrations. Thus, we might well conclude that a successful mediation of the national is taking place on Constitution Day. When people engage, once a year, in the activities described in the previous section, they confirm in a most

agreeable way that the Norwegian community exists, and that they are themselves part of it. They may not concentrate on the concept of freedom, and if they do, they can interpret it in different ways, as a concept referring to the political self-determination of the nation, or to the freedom to express a personal national identity. But in any case, they may experience being Norwegians together, as something worth appreciating.

I have some second thoughts, however. They were inspired to me first by a conversation with a woman in her fifties – that is, early post-war generation – in November 1994, just before the referendum on European Union membership. This woman was an ardent supporter of Constitution Day celebrations. She referred to them in terms of adhering to tradition, and she thought of them as something resembling a celebration of a birthday. When a child has its birthday, she explained, we decorate with flags, and we sing songs, and there are presents, and we have something good to eat. Constitution Day celebrations were very much like this; a celebration of the birthday of the country (though it substituted competition prizes for birthday presents). But she frankly declared that she did not really feel that she loved her mother country in the course of the celebrations. Most of all, Constitution Day made her feel at home in her local neighbourhood. It was a good occasion, she thought, for demonstrating a sense of community in local areas. Incidentally, she was in favour of Norway joining the European Union. And when she reflected upon what a hypothetical membership would do to Norway, she noted among its various virtues that it would affect to a very small degree the quality of local neighbourhood life.

About half a year later, I spent some hours talking to a man in his early forties – one of those, by the way, who articulated most clearly the importance of being surrounded by acquaintances, friends and kin on Constitution Day. Reflecting upon the national dimensions, he outlined how all Norwegians belonged to one big family. But the sense of being a part of this collectivity, he stressed, had to be achieved through belonging to smaller social circles: a school, a family, a neighbourhood. The nation was constructed, he explained, by a myriad of small groups, united into bigger ones which were, in turn, united on higher levels, and so on, until you finally reached the national level. From his overall reasoning, though, I got the feeling that the local belonging occupied his mind a lot more on Constitution Day than the national one. And somewhat contrary to his own model, he also envisioned a future when the abstract symbols evoking national history, those that appealed so strongly to the elders, would lose their significance. As the elders gradually disappeared from the scene, he supposed, Constitution Day celebrations would be less focused upon the recognition of the national symbols, and more concentrated upon the recognition of neighbours, friends and children; that is, upon close relationships.

Not everybody verbalized so clearly the importance of local belonging, and few would intimate that it is in fact more important than national belonging. This understanding nevertheless corresponds strikingly well to the priorities of practice described above – which are demonstrated by the vast majority of participants. Thus these practices, if we are to believe Connerton, Bourdieu and Jennings, as they were re-

ferred to above, may tacitly confirm, year after year, the value of close relationships and local neighbourhoods, perhaps to some extent at the expense of national identification.

Concluding Remarks

Constitution Day celebrations are secular rituals; ceremonies that resemble ritual forms in their organization as well as in their ways of working. But how about the parts of the celebrations that I have focused on here – or, more specifically, that the close attention to celebration practice has prompted me to focus on? These parts are not necessarily the most formal or ritual-like. The afternoon gatherings, in particular, have very few formal or solemn attributes, and the activities that they invite people to perform are decidedly mundane. In the schoolyard setting, you are not required to bend your body, or turn your head, or freeze your limbs, in stylized gestures. Rather, you are expected to greet and talk to people much in the same way that you would do outside the supermarket, and sip your coffee as you would do in your neighbour's living room. The children's parades, admittedly, are more focused and controlled. But in practice, they do not demand the children to keep in step, nor to produce neatly coordinated rows. To a great degree, they allow casual performances.

Are the activities that I rely on for my conclusion, then, really ritual ones? Should we not, rather, refer to them as play or diversion (cf. Jennings 1996:325), thereby subtly intimating that they are not part of the core of the ritual and consequently cannot serve what Jennings terms "noetic functions" (ibid.), that is, produce knowledge? I do not think we should. Regardless

of their form, the events highlighted here are marked as special, out-of-everyday-order events, which are furthermore recognized as such by their participants. They take on this character by being acted out in special settings, or, put differently, by virtue of their combination into a whole with those parts of the ceremony that are more formal. Any activity or bodily movement, then, may take on a ritual quality when acted out in a ritual context. And moreover, the premise that bodily activity recalls and reproduces knowledge is not in itself restricted to ritual contexts. At least the way it is spelled out by Bourdieu (1990:66–79), it is a general feature of human life, operating in a variety of settings. Accordingly, even if we did not ascribe to the informal parts of the celebrations a ritual status, we still might have to deem them noetic, in their own right.

But the ritual context is important. Or rather, what is most crucial here is the peculiar combination of everyday practices and ritual context, and the ways in which the everyday practices are incorporated in the ritual. As Kapferer (1988, 1989) has pointed out, any ideology, such as nationalism, has to draw on ontological premises in order to be successfully accepted by people. Ontological premises, then, are basic principles and orientations that tacitly permeate everyday routines. In ideological reasoning, those fundamental principles and orientations are invoked and elaborated, and assigned a special and restricted meaning, which they did not have in the context of everyday life (1988:79–80, 1989:168). And any ideology will seem reasonable and defensible, just and sound, precisely by virtue of its ontological foundations (cf. 1988:82–83). If we keep in mind, then, that

Constitution Day celebrations are manifestations of ideology, we might interpret the inclusion of selected everyday practices as one instance, and a singular one indeed, of establishing ontological connections. The celebrations do not draw on and transform principles permeating everyday life; they transfer elements of this very life into the ritual setting, and invite people, as it were, to keep on performing everyday routines inside this setting. In my view, this amounts to a powerful confirmation of these elements of routine, and of the experiential and social dimensions that they indicate. Furthermore, it is a kind of confirmation that restricts, in its own peculiar way, the range of possible interpretations of the meanings immanent in ontology (cf. Kapferer 1989:168). By highlighting in the ritual centre actual, live human beings forming families of mothers, fathers and small children, the celebrations effectively block out a range of other possible ways of imagining and experiencing the basic notions that the concept of “family” could sum up.

What, then, are the lessons to learn from the celebrations? We learn that the little world of family and neighbours is an important and meaningful one, and we learn that Norway can be conceptualized in terms of billions of small communities; that Norway is, perhaps, nothing but a little community writ large.¹² The core, or the basics, of this message, are children. When children are placed in the ritual focus, their closest relatives, their parents, are mobilized and highlighted, too. For the parents, this is not an altogether convenient position. Rather, Constitution Day is an occasion where they are put to test and publicly examined. They are required to display their children, but in doing so they expose,

more or less deliberately, the whole family as well, whether this family is a well-adjusted, successful or frail one. To some persons this is demanding indeed. But regardless of the quality of the performances of actual families, celebrations remain a strong manifestation of the family as an ideal social institution. Likewise, the children tie the celebrations to the local areas. As a parent, you should stick by your child on Constitution Day, and your child ought to be in his or her home area, together with friends and classmates. Thus the children's parades, and, even more, the afternoon gatherings, are predicated on the children's capabilities. If it had not been for the children, the afternoon gatherings might have taken on another shape, and been located in a different arena. But when they are constructed in their present form, they constitute a powerful message about the quality of the local neighbourhoods and communities. In the same way as families are acknowledged as the normal social entity, local communities are highlighted as the normal wider framework of the social life of families.

Children, families, and local communities, then, stand out as the most important mediators of the nation. This, no doubt, is the clue to the success of the Constitution Day celebrations. Had it not been for the local character, that is, had the arrangements been restricted, for instance, to formal events in the national centre of Oslo, participants would have been few, and spectators many. When celebrations are multi-local and informal, in the ways described above, virtually everybody can be a participant, in his or her home area. Likewise, the mobilization of families and the foregrounding of children contributes greatly

to permeate the celebrations with a sense of intimacy, warmth, and belonging.

Simultaneously, however, the clue to the success may constitute a potential threat to the intended outcome. There is little doubt that Constitution Day celebrations are occasions that "publicly enunciate and index lineaments of statehood, nationhood, and civic collectivity" (Handelman 1990:42). They are paradigmatic examples of celebrations of social belonging; what they manifest and honour is essentially social entities and relationships. But how can we know for sure which entities and relationships they manifest? We cannot know; we are stuck with the basic uncertainty of mediating processes. The local design, on the one hand, secures the broad participation, and the deep involvement, in the celebrations. But on the other hand, local community belonging and close family relationships can be enjoyed perfectly well without reflecting about national dimensions. Consequently, and as indicated by some of my conversation partners in the interviews, local mediations of the national can gradually change their character; cease to be experienced as mediations, and gain ground as privileged foci of celebration in their own right. Thus, the construction that skilfully secures a broad observance of the national ritual may simultaneously pave the way towards experiences that may, in the long run, weaken rather than support the commitment to the nation.

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Notes

- * The problem discussed here is one main issue of my study "Constitution Day and Norwegian Nationalism", supported by Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSFR) in 1994–1997. A shorter version of the paper was presented at the conference "National Cultures in the era of Globalization", arranged in Stockholm, 22–24 August 1998, by the Center for Pacific Asia Studies and the Department of Ethnology, Stockholm University, and the Department of Chinese Literature, Tamkang University.
- 1 The English translations of quotations in Norwegian are mine throughout the paper.
 - 2 Various aspects of Norwegian nation-building in the nineteenth century have been examined by Berggreen (1989), Lunden (1992), Hodne (1994), and by scholars and students at the faculty of Arts at the University of Oslo, cooperating in the project "The Development of Norwegian National Identity in the Nineteenth Century" (for an introduction, see Sørensen 1994). A large number of reports have been issued from this project, as well as a concluding volume (Sørensen 1998).
 - 3 When I identify this as a nationalist universe of ideas, I rely on the definitions presented by Gellner, who states that nationalism is "a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent" (1983:1), and Smith, who claims that nationalism is "an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential 'nation'" (1991:73, italics omitted).
 - 4 Jennings's focus is basically on religious rituals. Most certainly, he would identify the events that concern me here as ceremonies, rather than rituals in a strict sense. The crucial difference between rituals and ceremonies, according to his text, is that rituals "have both a greater radicality (ontological 'depth') and are more comprehensively paradigmatic" than ceremonies (1996:331). This difference however does not affect the aspect of rituals and ceremonies that I will concentrate on here, that is, their ways of working.
 - 5 It should be added here that I was first introduced to Constitution Day at the beginning of the 1980s by my Norwegian husband. For about ten years, we participated in some of the Constitution Day events arranged by the Norwegian minority in Stockholm, or we celebrated the day in private. Thus when I started in 1990 to outline the study reported on here, I had acquired some personal habits of celebrating, as well as a sense of what the day was all about. Entering the Norwegian context during fieldwork, however, I came across an overwhelming amount of practices, dimensions, connections and understandings that had not been present in the Stockholm setting, nor in my private life. Of course this is what fieldwork, and research in general, is essentially about: being overwhelmed by the hitherto unknown. To some degree, though, my previous experience was helpful in the process of identifying problems and perspectives (cf. Blehr 1995).
 - 6 I discuss this aspect in another paper (Blehr, in press).
 - 7 The surveys mentioned in the introduction can give us some idea of the identities and the positions of the relative outsiders. The 1998 inquiry showed for persons above the age of 60 a higher rate of non-participation (32%) than the average 22%. At the same time, though, almost 50% of those over 60 were concerned with the fact that people were indifferent or lacked respect for Constitution Day (*Aftenposten*, 16 May 1998). The following discussion of my data may shed some light upon this seeming paradox. The scholars analysing the 1994 survey found males, singles, urban dwellers and people who do not vote in general elections to be over-represented among non-participants (Agedal 1997:512).
 - 8 Admittedly, much of the country is still covered with snow on Constitution Day. This is frequently remarked upon in reports on the celebrations, most often in a mixed spirit of regret and cheerfulness against all odds, as if the northern spring was nothing but a pitiful deviation from the paradigmatic one of southern Norway. In 1995, however, the state television broadcast of the celebrations (NRK, the morning version) included a report from Alta, Finnmark, where a considerable part of the presentation of the local background was spent on highlighting the excellent opportunities for skiing and other outdoor activities in the northern spring. As a piece of local presentation of self, this clearly contrasted with the standard descriptions.
 - 9 It should be added here that children's parades tend to be framed (preceded or concluded) by miniature commemorations, where

- children are prominent performers. Some of those who care a lot about the children's parade explicitly include those commemorative moments in their concerns; others do not.
- 10 Eriksen, in her study of Norwegian popular history of the Second World War, notes that narratives of the beginning of the occupation are personal and reflective, while the recountings of the liberation depict individuals as engulfed in a collective, national exhilaration (1995:83). It might be added, though, that the experience of rejoicing together was restricted to those adhering to "the right side", as the term was in Norwegian (*den riktige siden*). There was also "the wrong side" (*den gale siden*), the side of those that had collaborated or associated in some way with the enemy. They were identified after liberation as traitors to their country, and prosecuted and convicted in legal proceedings. The additional informal punishment that some of their family members endured in the days and years to come has not received attention until very recently (Olden 1988; Fuglestad 1991; Eggen 1993).
- 11 More than one scholar has insisted that there is something peculiar about the Norwegian way of appreciating, using, and relating to nature (e.g. Nedrelid 1991; Witoszek 1991b, 1998). The Constitution Day reflections on nature may well support such a view, but that is not a main point in my analysis.
- 12 The latter idea fits in well with received notions of the characteristics of Norwegian culture. Anthropologists and others have repeatedly commented upon the pervasiveness, even in modern Norwegian society, of rural community norms, values and principles (cf. Klausen 1984). A trenchant criticism of these (and other) efforts to delineate a particular Norwegian culture can be found in Eriksen (1993b) and Johansen (1995).

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