DEALING WITH DEVIATIONS IN THE PERFORMANCE OF MASONIC RITUALS

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To err is human. Therefore, the question is not whether deviations in the performance of rituals occur, but how they are dealt with. In most cases, deviations in the performance of masonic rituals will not result in a failed ritual. But there are many different strategies to prevent undesired escalation, resulting in a real failure. Since masonic Grand Lodges are autonomous and independent, and since roughly speaking each country has its own Grand Lodge, some of which are several hundred years old, each developed in the course of time its own style, also in respect to dealing with deviations. Little is documented about such issues, but being a mason myself now for over 30 years, I can report also from my own experience. What follows claims to be no more than a collection of examples, which could be extended ad libitum. I have grouped them under the headings ‘Prevention of deviations’, ‘Correction of deviations’, ‘Acceptation of deviations at the level of the participants’, ‘Acceptation of deviations at an official level’, ‘What if there is something wrong with the candidate?’, and ‘Abolishing rituals, degrees or Rites’.

1. The author’s position

Having specialised as a scholar in the research of masonic rituals, while being a mason myself, has forced me over the last two decades to constantly reflect conscientiously about my position as an outsider, yet also insider. To discuss such issues, the emic/etic-distinction, introduced by Harris in 1968, is useful. He defines these terms as follows:

Emic statements refer to logico-empirical systems whose phenomenal distinctions or ‘things’ are built up out of contrasts and discriminations significant, meaningful, real, accurate or in some other fashion regarded as appropriate by the actors themselves (Harris 1968: 571).

Etic statements depend upon phenomenal distinctions judged appropriate by the community of scientific observers (Harris 1968: 575).

It follows, then, that ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ are adjectives to qualify statements, formulated by someone in order to communicate with someone else.
Emic statements, then, are formulated by an insider in order to communicate with other insiders, whereas etic statements are formulated by a scholar in order to communicate with other scholars. I have therefore concluded elsewhere, that “an emic scholarly approach is a *contradictio in terminis*. Scholarly discourse is always etic and should therefore be conducted in etic terms” (Snoek 1987: 7). A scholar, thus, is in his scholarly work always obliged to translate emic statements into etic ones, no matter whether these emic statements are uttered by others, or thought out by himself. That is part and parcel of our profession. Since this article intends to be a scholarly one, I consciously choose an etic—that is, scholarly—position, rather than an emic—that is, insider—one. I am not writing here as a mason to other masons, but as a scholar to other scholars. Therefore, when I report about my own experiences as a mason, I do this as if I, a scholar, would have interviewed me, as a mason. For example, when I report on a change in a ritual which I once introduced myself, the fact alone that I do report this betrays an etic position: as a mason amongst masons, I would not normally disclose this, since among masons, one is generally not supposed to change the rituals: they are regarded to have “always been so”, although it is well known, that this is in fact not the case.

However, being a mason, I can report what I know that masons, at an emic level, regard as ritual failures, mistakes or errors. Such a judgment is possible only at an emic level; from an etic perspective, one can only observe deviations, either between script and performance, or between different performances. And, as we shall see, such deviations need not be experienced, at an emic level, as failures.

2. Prevention of deviations

The performance of initiation rituals forms the heart of Freemasonry. Indeed, whatever Freemasons may further do in their lodges (and that differs from country to country and sometimes even from lodge to lodge), without these rituals it could not be considered Freemasonry. It is through these rituals that candidates become members, and members get a higher status. There is by definition no official interpretation of the meaning of these rituals, but the members are encouraged to seek for an interpretation which is meaningful to them personally. In the course of time, the form of these rituals has changed in different ways in different countries, resulting in different systems, generally referred to as Rites.