
AN OVERVIEW OF RITUAL THEORIES: RITUALIZATION AND HUMAN AGENCY

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Theories of ritual all similarly function to resolve the complex problems posed by an initial bifurcation of thought and action. (Bell 1992:06)

It is generally held that there is something, in every society, which can be referred to as 'ritual.' The anthropological interest in ritual extends as far back as the 19th-century emergence of anthropology as an academic discipline. However, the various definitions, approaches and theoretical explanations of ritual shows a lack of agreement on how to define, rather understand, ritual as a distinctive analytical category in anthropology. According to most theories, ritual either involves different forms of action, 'meaningful action' from everyday life, or at least different purposes. Paraphrasing Clifford Geertz's definition of culture, David Kertzer defines ritual as "action wrapped in a web of symbolism" (1988: 9). Victor Turner defines ritual as "formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers" (1967: 19). Somewhat differently Edmond Leach defines ritual as "Almost every human action that takes place in culturally defined surroundings is divisible in this way, it has a technical aspect which does something and an aesthetic, communicative aspect which says something, in those types of behaviour that are labelled ritual" (1968: 523).

For Tambiah, "ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication" (1985: 128), and also Mary Douglas states that "ritual is pre-eminently a form of communication" composed of culturally normal acts that have become distinctive by being diverted to special function where they are given magical efficacy (1973: 41). Gulckman presents ritual as "a type of safety valve that formally arranges the diffusion of social tensions and personal emotions generated by social conflict" (1963: 110). However, in general all definitions of ritual are mainly derived from Durkheimian notion of the integrative function of ritual. According to Durkheim (1915), ritual is a direct representation of society to itself, studying ritual tells us important things about society. Thus, where Durkheim saw ritual as representation of social structure, Turner saw it as a process that transcends it. However, although both Gluckman and V. Turner emerged from the Durkheimian tradition, they significantly altered the thrust of its approach to the issue of social control by addressing the ways in which ritual deals with conflicts. Maurice Bloch, a Marxist critique of theories of ritual, sees ritual as a form of ideology, which provides an alternative to everyday life. Because it is highly formalized, ritual restricts debate or contestation, and there is a certain predictability

to the ways in which people construct ritual across different social and cultural contexts (1989:10-12). From this, we can see, that accounts on ritual vary as to the purpose, function and meaning of ritual.

Whatever the conventional anthropological definitions of ritual the notion of ritual first emerged as a formal term of analysis in the 19th century to identify what was believed to be a universal category of human experience (Asad 1993: 56-62). Over the centuries the meaning of ritual has changed from discipline to symbol, from practising distinctive virtues to representation by means of practices.

My objective in this essay is to discuss how ritualization theories describe human agency or 'self.' I will do so by examining two major works on ritualization theories by Catherine Bell (1992), and Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994), with particular attention to Bell's work and to different ethnographies. Furthermore, I will look at how their views on ritualization help to understand human agency apart from the conventional understanding of ritual in (post) modern anthropology.

An underlying opposition between thought and action fundamentally organizes the most theoretical discourse on ritual. This fundamental dichotomy helps to generate a series of homologized oppositions that come to include the relationship between the theorist and the actors. At the same time, ritual is portrayed as mediating or integrating all these oppositions. The work of Clifford Geertz (1973,1983) provides an extended illustration of these dichotomized relationships within the structure of ritual theory. Geertz's theoretical approach is the explanation of "meaning" in cultural phenomena. With this focus, he goes beyond the functional analysis of human activity that he correlates with the reductionism of subordinating either the social to the cultural or vice versa (1973: 143-44). Basis to this project is a distinction between "ethos" and "worldview." The former designates the moral and aesthetic aspects of a culture which underlies people's attitudes (mood and motivations) toward themselves and their world. The latter is the conception of the general order of existence and tells one what to believe through (Geertz 1973:89-90), for example, putting certain experiences into a larger perspective.

Geertz explicitly correlates religious ritual with ethos and religious belief with worldview, and he argues with regard to ritual that "any religious ritual no matter how apparently automatic or conventional...involves this symbolic fusion of ethos and world

view" (1973: 89). Thus, the dichotomous nature of conceptions of order (worldview) and dispositions for action (ethos) is fundamental to Geertz's approach, as is their resolution in such symbolic systems as ritual. This analysis of Geertz has simply invoked the two structural (thought and action) patterns that I discussed earlier. However, Geertz is setting up a third structural pattern and a third permutation of the thought-action dichotomy. That is, he brings ritual participants to act, whereas those observing them think (1973: 48). Slipping in by virtue of its homologization with the other two structural patterns, the third one organizes the argument in such a way that the theoretical explanation of 'meaning' is itself a fusion of thought and action, the theorist's thought and the activity of the ritual participants. The fusion of thought and action described within ritual is homologized to a fusion of the theoretical project and its object, ritual activity. With this third pattern, the thought-action dichotomy has differentiated native ritual as activity from the thought of the theorist, while casting the resolution of this thought-action opposition in a theoretical grasp of the meaning of the ritual acts (Bell 1992: 32).

The theoretical discourse that I have outlined above has organized ritual as a coherent whole by virtue of a logic based on the opposition of thought and action. However, there has been profound disagreement in literature between different ways of stressing what ritual is about. As Bell pointed out, the thought-action dichotomy not only differentiates ritual as activity, as an object of theoretical attention, it also differentiates a 'thinking' subject from an 'acting' object and its logical conclusion is a 'thinking' subject from a 'non-thinking' object (1992: 47). In other words the conventional discourse on ritual implies a subordination of action to thought, actors to thinkers. Symbolic anthropologists such as Victor Turner and Grimes, aware of this imbalance, attempted to change this relationship by creating new forms of cultural knowledge, but they did not escape the thought-action dichotomy because they could not transcend the relation of domination that it implied (Bell 1992: 54).

Bell attempts to overcome this dichotomy with a theory of practice inspired by Bourdieu, mainly his metaphor of 'orchestration' is used to describe the development of a structured and structuring ritual environment. Bell rejects the conventional definition of ritual and focuses on the notion of ritualization in which the intention of the actor plays a central role. This has been seized by Humphrey and Laidlaw in an effort to free the study of ritual from what they see as fruitless dichotomies (1994: 64). While Bell stresses ritualization as practice which produces ritualized self, then Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) emphasize ritualization as a mode of action (mimicry), more precisely 'meaningless action,' which enhances the self:

In anthropology, and in the human sciences more generally, we all tend to speak rather loosely about 'meaningfulness' of social action, if we are to be clear about the peculiarity of ritualised action we need to distinguish different meanings of 'meaning.' (1994: 90)

They present a new theory of ritual action and ritualization that is grounded in phenomenology and based on ethnographical work on the *puja* as practised by the Jains of modern Jaipur. The *puja* is a rite consisting of a number of specific and named acts in which a deity is worshipped with sincerity and piety through prayer, offerings, and associated rituals (1994: 24-26). Contrary to existing anthropological theory on ritual and the idea that rituals are essentially systems of meaningful action or primarily means of communicating meanings, the *puja* was consistently described by its practitioners as being 'empty of meaning' (1994: 36). However, their new theory, which is based on the Jains' *puja*, does not disparage or discourage the impotency of the history, social functions, economic importance, religious symbolism, cosmological ideas, and ethical value of ritual. But they insist that these various aspects will not serve as a theory of ritual and they stress that it is to approach ritual either as a distinct category of events or, as Edmund Leach once defined it, as a given aspect of all actions (1994: 71-73). Much of the cultural and social content expressed in ritual action does not in fact define it from other kinds of activities (non-ritual action), such as theatrical performance, habit, games, etc., and also the same content can be expressed in other ways in and out of a religious context (1994:3-4). Ritualization itself creates a different form of knowledge: a different way of thinking about, and a different way of organizing acts, and ritualized action also encompasses both "as a social phenomenon" and "as individual phenomenon" because reactions of ritual occur at both levels, "the two cannot be understood separately" (1994: 6).

According to them action may be said to be ritualized when the actor has taken up what they call "ritual commitment," a particular stance with respect to his or her own action. The ritual commitment consists of four main aspects, namely, 'non-intentional,' 'stipulated,' 'elemental' (or 'archetypal'), and 'apprehensible'—these are logically interdependent and are actually just different ways of getting at the same transformation (1994: 88-89). According to them, ritualized action is non-intentional, in the sense that while people performing ritual acts do have intentions, the identity of a ritualized act does not depend, as is the case with normal action, on the agent's intention in acting. Ritualized action is also stipulated, in the sense that the constitution of separate acts out of the continuous flow of a person's action is not accomplished, as in the case with normal action, by processes of intentional understanding, but rather by constitutive rules which establish an ontology of ritual acts (1994: 89). However, Humphrey and Laidlaw point out that in order to understand ritualization (a mode of action), it is further required that the action in question be enacted with an intention that means it will be in the above sense non-intentional. The person performing the ritual aims at the realization of a pre-existing ritual act, as not of their own making, such acts are perceived as discrete with their own characters and histories and call such acts elemental or archetypal because ritualized acts are felt, by those who perform them, to be external. Ritualized acts are also apprehensible, in the sense that they are always available for a further re-assimilation to the actors' intentions, attitudes, and beliefs (1994: 89).

Above all, Humphrey and Laidlaw argue that ritualization is the process of transforming (1994: 99). Nevertheless, at this point, Humphrey and Laidlaw do not make the mistake of separating action from, or opposing it to, thought. They explain: in ritual as in few other human activities, the actors both are, and are not, the authors of their acts and it is not possible to explain or identify the ritual acts which people perform only by their individual motives, intentions, or purposes (1994: 5).

In the shifting from ritual to ritualization, Bell describes ritual in terms of 'practice,' "a term that is designed to represent the synthetic unity of consciousness and social being within human activity, to be a powerful tool with which to embrace or transcend all analogous dichotomies" (1992: 76). According to Bell, 'practice' as the focus of human agency is characterized by four features of human activity necessarily shared by ritualization: situational, depending entirely on context, it is strategic in that it is manipulative but in a way that defies intellectual logic, misrecognition and redemptive hegemony. The third and fourth features are of particular importance; it is essential to the functioning of ritual that participants not see what the ritual is doing, and ritualization leads participants to mistake the group's reformulation of itself for straightforward communication and enactment of its traditional values (1992: 210).

Following Bourdieu and Foucault, Bell focuses on the relation between practice and the body, identified with the social person. According to Bell "It appears we are now reappropriating the image of the body: no longer the mere physical instrument of the mind, it now denotes a more complex and irreducible phenomenon, namely, the social body" (1992: 96). The concept of the social body leads to that of the ritual body, (a body invested with a sense of ritual). The emergence of a focus on the social body has entailed a close consideration of ritual. Bell argues that any discussion of the social body presupposes some theory of how the human psychophysical entity is socialized, and therein empowered, as a cultural actor, and often a special appeal is made to ritual to 'model' this whole process of socialization as the transformation of nature into culture (1992 96). Bell goes beyond the conventional dichotomist understanding of the ritual and develops the notion of "the natural logic of ritual, a logic embodied in the physical movements of the body and thereby lodged beyond the grasp of consciousness and articulation" (1992: 99). Hence, ritualization, as the production of a ritualized self (agent) via the interaction of a body within a structured and structuring environment, always takes place within a larger and very immediate socio-cultural situation.

According to Bell "ritualization cannot be understood apart from the immediate situation, which is being reproduced in a misrecognized and transformed way through the production of ritual agents" (1992:100). Bell stresses that ritualization always takes place in a socio-cultural situation, but she pays insufficient attention to ways in which research on the ritual environment is to be conducted. Instead she concentrates on interaction and, more particularly, on the manipulation of the ritual environment in the

process of ritualization. However, the ultimate purpose of ritualization is the production of ritualized agents who have an instinctive knowledge of the schemes embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex microrelations of power (1992: 221). Bell uses participation in Catholic Mass to depict how ritualization works. The act of going to the church forms a collective community that stands in opposition to the community outside church. Within the church this community further differentiates into hierarchical oppositions—the priest positioned higher than the laity, standing against kneeling in praying and so on. All generate a contrast between a higher reality (spiritual) and a lower one (mundane). Through its strategic choice of action the body organizes these oppositions in relation to a particular context. Different types of rituals incorporate a number of specific strategies but they all privilege differences, giving rise to a taxonomy of oppositions that reflects the wider social cosmos.

Bell, therefore, criticizes the notion of the action of the body as an automated exact performance, arguing instead that these acts are themselves strategies because they are determined by the context. Littlejohn (1979) provides an ethnographical account of this amongst the Temne in Sierra Leone, and he depicts a central axis on the body that corresponds to the bodily parts considered most important to Temne life, for instance, mouth, hands, and sexual organs, and this division corresponds to the homologies of society at large. For the Temne, the right hand of their body is stronger and more active than the left because right is associated with purity, the upper part of the body, gift-giving, the east and so on. The left hand is homologous to concealment, superstition, unclean, the west and so forth. However, Littlejohn demonstrates that when it comes to power the Temne tell us the left hand is stronger because it is spirited and will cross into spiritual world, and it communicates with God but also dares to be evil leading to the right-hand. It is important to note here that these strategies are located at the body's agency that interacts with its particular socio-historical environment with the result that it does not require systematic thinking. This is when the ritualized agent acquires what Bell calls 'ritual mastery':

Ritual mastery implies that ritual can exist only in the specific cultural schemes and strategies for ritualization embodied and accepted by persons of specific cultural communities. Ritual mastery also indicates something of the 'work' of ritualization, specially, the production of a ritualized social agent in whose body lies the schemes by which to shift the organization of many other culturally possible situations. (1992:107-108)

Bell combines Althusser's notion of a 'strategic blindness of practice' with her concept of 'redemptive hegemony' to arrange a framework for discussion about the capacity of the ritualized social agent to deploy. She says, "redemptive hegemony denotes the way in which reality is experienced as a natural weave of constraint and possibility, the fabric of day to day dispositions experienced

as a field of strategic action" (1992: 84). Bell argues that in the right circumstances, ritualization is a possible strategy of power whereby the body has the ability to deploy the schemes it has internalized within the redemptive hegemony. Bell suggests that the action of the body can be a strategic act of resistance where the participants think they have found a meaning for their actions, as their common sense tells them that it is the most effective action within their place in the system of power. The idea that ritualization produces 'practical knowledge' and "the ability to deploy, play, and manipulate basic schemes in ways that appropriate and condition experience effectively" (1992:221). Ritualization implies an agent's adoption of a particular attitude to his or her action, and the enaction of what he or she does, therefore, in a particular, qualitatively transformed way.

To sum up, ritualization clearly shows us ritual's interweaving with other social action rather than seeing ritual as a distinct class of action. Bell suggests moving the emphasis from ritual to ritualization in order to accomplish the understanding of this interweaving. The particularly interesting point that she emphasizes is the way in which ritualization is tied to the human agency, as a purposeful or 'strategic' production of ritualized agents, persons who have an instinctive knowledge embedded in their bodies, in their sense of reality, and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both maintain and qualify the complex microrelations of power. Another pertinent formulation stressed the sense of fitting between the main spheres of experience; body, community and cosmos. Although the stress on strategy which produces ritualized agents and the link to power structures raised by Bell can certainly be questioned, an outcome of such questioning will, among other things, depend on the understanding of 'strategy' and 'power.' Bell never quite explains when something is ritualization and when it is not, when it is a strategy of power and when it is not. There is also a problem with reducing everything to the level of bodily practice because it does not allow us to look for the absolute reasons for human action. However, ritualization takes arbitrary or necessary common interest and grounds them in an understanding of the hegemonic order; it can empower agents in limited and highly negotiated ways. This is not to say that ritualization is the only form of practice that defines the human agency.

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Prof. N. Shanmugaratnam's article in the last issue of *Pravada*, "Linking Peace and Development in Sri Lanka, Facing the Challenges," was the keynote paper presented at the Symposium on Globalization, Peace and Development, in April 2001, at the Institute of Social Development, Kandy.