

INTRODUCTION TO PART II: RITUAL PRACTICE

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Initially the division of this collection of papers into two parts, labelled “symbolic categories” and “ritual practice,” followed merely pragmatic reasons for grouping papers which seemed to share some similarities. There was no explicit overarching theory demanding such a division into two parts except for the entrenched habit of anthropologists to divide the study of religion into that of “symbolism” and “ritual.” This is not the place to review the history of this distinction in anthropological thought. It should suffice to remind us that after protracted debates about the primacy of myth (read: symbolic categories) versus that of cult (read: ritual practices) studies of mythless rites - and riteless myths - were established as fields of enquiry in their own right (see Stanner, 1989 [1966]). It was then considered common ground that symbolism could not be reduced to ritual activity or vice-versa. As a consequence, research in the two fields developed more or less independently of one another. In this context it is interesting to note that, at least implicitly, the papers of this collection do comment on the relation between the two fields of enquiry. Sugawara defines symbolism as that which is “non-tangible,” i. e. that which cannot be heard, felt or smelled, after all hallmark properties of ritual experiences. Conversely, in my own paper I note that ritual is not just a message clothed in a particular format but that it adds something to whatever is being encoded symbolically. Or, to repeat R. Rappaport’s recent definition, ritual is “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances *not entirely encoded by the performers*” (Rappaport, 1999:24, my emphasis).

Tsuru’s contribution in this volume gives very detailed evidence for the fact that Pygmy rituals tend to move from their source of encoding once they have been created. In fact the spirit rituals are exchanged and even sold in a way that many practitioners of rituals in other religions would consider to be shocking and disgraceful. This Pygmy example not only exemplifies that attitudes to rituals may differ considerably in different contexts and that rituals need not be ceremonial to proliferate. It also shows that unceremonially acquired rituals meet the desires of their Pygmy performers and that they work well for those who practice them even after they have been disconnected from their original setting. Whatever meanings may be encoded in these rituals, a full encoding is not sought after by practitioners who value these rituals to the extent that they spend their scarce resources on acquiring something that was encoded by someone else who may not even be known to them personally.

Symbols and rituals both play fundamental roles in human evolution. With language comes not only the human ability to communicate meanings, to allow for concerted social action and cooperation, to enlarge the pool of available information but also the possibility to create categories that have no necessary and pre-determined link to empirical events and objects (Rappaport, 1999:21). In other

words, language, including the ability to create symbols, not only creates new possibilities for humans but it also creates problems, above all the problem of lying and of representations which are misleading and possibly harmful to social relations of the present and detrimental to survival in the future. Rappaport argues that ritual, with its emphasis on repetition and form and on disallowing the practitioners to fully encode all meanings themselves, is the prime tool for dealing with lies. Rituals provide some security and some supra-individual means for taking action against the fact that for all that symbolically matters to humans, for instance the existence of a God or the desirability of a moral order, there is the possibility of formulating alternatives and the opportunity for lying (Rappaport, 1999:18). Here the scope of individual human creations and imaginations has potentially harmful effects. Unfortunately, Rappaport and many other theorists of religion discuss their thesis only with regard to the ritual practices of Australian Aborigines and other groups with particularly embroidered and elaborated religious systems but not with regard to African hunter-gatherer cases. We consider this volume to be a first step in redressing this bias.

Approaching ritual as a safety net against harmful lies, not only has repercussions for our study of human origins but also for our study of current processes and of the future prospects of human life. In my own contribution to this volume I have outlined how the current changes that affect the Hai om medicine dance may well produce a particular ritual format, with voluntary participation and forceful ritual experiences that are connected to everyday life. I suggest that these may well be very successful in a future civil society, at least as it is envisaged by some social thinkers. “Enlightened” thought now takes relations and practices of hunter-gatherers as a model, not as a romantic look back to unspoiled origins but rather as a forward-looking attempt to deal with the most pressing problems at hand. Dealing appropriately with the environment is probably the most urgent of these problems and hunter-gatherers have a reputation for being successful in this field, incorporating animals and plants into their considerations without disregarding their own needs as human beings. The two contributions dealing with southern African hunter-gatherers, Imamura’s and my own, underline that hunter-gatherers are preoccupied with death and suffering. With rituals like the medicine dance, the Hai om hope to be “on the winning side,” not necessarily overcoming “nature” but also not forfeiting their peculiar situation as human beings.

Imamura, in her contribution about Gui and Gana rituals, emphasizes that their rituals are typically not preventative but that they are curative as they deal with events after they have occurred. That is to say, rituals are not an escape from the “real world,” nor are they a means of preventing anxiety and wrong behaviour. Rather, they are an everyday complement to the everyday social practice of the

Gui and Gana which is full of contingencies and choices that need to be made. The rites of the Central Kalahari Bushmen do not exempt individuals from deciding as to whether they want to eat the meat of a particular animal and whether they want to enter an extra-marital sexual relationship but it helps them to mutually assure one another that they have done everything in their power to prevent any negative spin-offs that these decisions may entail. It is noteworthy that in the search for useful means for carrying out their curative rituals the Gui and Gana do not

primarily make use of wild plants, as some may expect from hunter-gatherers, but of bodily fluids as well as of items taken from animal bodies. This suggests that hunter-gatherer rituals are not marked off from the rituals of their neighbours with regard to the substances that they use but rather through the way in which they connect the experience of their own body, and other embodied entities, to ritual procedures. At this point the papers on ritual seem to match closely the contributions dealing with symbolic categories in the other part of this volume.

The contributions to this volume do not explicitly investigate the relation between ritual and cognition but at least implicitly anthropological research on ritual suggests a new conception of cognition, namely as a process which is not limited to the confines of individual human brains. The re-conceptualization of cognition as a process of propagating representations across different media - of which human brains are but one such medium amongst other embodied media - has recently been formulated in detail by E. Hutchins and readers are referred to his work (Hutchins, 1995). Here it is sufficient to point out that the assumption that rituals do alter reality and not only express meanings, need not lead to mysticism if we allow for the possibility that the cognitive processes that do alter reality, make use of media which are outside human brains, media which alter the representations that are propagated across their particular forms. Cognitive problems get solved as representations are transported, or propagated, across a number of media and as these media are brought into correspondence with one another. Hutchins' ethnographic example is the navigation of a large ship a task solved by making use of spatial arrangements, procedural routines, pre-defined social rules, tools and documents created by humans of previous generations whose problem solving has been captured in these products and so forth. But what he writes about shared cognition would equally well hold true if we were to consider rituals to be parts of larger cognitive systems. Rituals may not be particular good media through which to express oneself, even among hunter-gatherers where the distance between those who create rituals and those who practice them is rather short. But rituals may be very suitable tools to alter reality in a way that is desirable in the long run, going beyond individual rationalism. Rappaport has pointed out that individual rational thought is unlikely to bring about the necessary protection of ecological resources and the desired balanced exchange between humans. Rituals, by contrast, because they take place in the public (or at least supra-individual) space outside human brains, provide an opportunity for achieving ecological and social effects that rational individual thought does not produce.

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