

Getting to a General Theory of Ritual: The Role of Agency and Intention
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Some people here might disagree with the view that ritual studies can or should aim at general theories. It certainly is possible that the field could progress usefully in the following way: one person describes a particular ritual culture, citing ethnographic or historical evidence and perhaps proposing ad hoc explanations or conclusions derived from those data; other people listen and perhaps take some lesson away that they can use in their own research; but everyone may derive a different take-away. In such a situation, we could say (in the language of Plato) that studying ritual is a matter of art rather than knowledge – the ability to give a practitioner's account rather than an account of the way things are. Such a view would be consistent with the sceptical epistemology that is so common in the academy today, and I don't intend to argue against such an approach to ritual.

However, this minimalistic approach to theory is not one that I follow. This doesn't mean that I feel the need to go so far in the other direction as to argue that ritual is a distinct type of thing (that's the kind of view that Catherine Bell has argued against so strongly): I think many people who study ritual would agree that some midpoint between these extremes is acceptable. And in the midpoint we'd probably agree that some general account of ritual is desirable. This would allow us to learn more systematically from each other, and would allow us to be working on some common project rather than all working on our own projects, and hoping to take some inchoate inspiration from one another's work.

But a general theory of ritual is still a desideratum. If most of us can agree that some kind of general theory is desirable, why have we had so much difficulty achieving it? Part of the answer, no doubt, is that most general theories come out of the analysis of a particular ritual culture – most good ones, at any rate, since the day of armchair theorizing is over – and it is always tough, when trying to understand contingent facts in situ, to pull apart general and specific causes.

This is a deep methodological problem, which in a short paper I can only begin to approach by means of examples. Let me therefore focus on one general theory of ritual, that of **Humphrey and Laidlaw**; and let me focus on a key aspect of their theory, namely the view that ritual is a mode by which (quote) “the identity of a ritualized act does not depend, as in the case with normal action, on the agent’s intention in acting”¹. The idea is this: in the case of everyday, mundane actions, what I am doing is determined by my intention in acting. Humphrey and Laidlaw give the example² of the

¹ p. 89

² p. 91

policeman telling the ice-skater "The ice is thin over there". The policeman means to warn the skater that he could be in danger, but the statement is only a warning because that is how the policeman intends his utterance. It doesn't come directly from the language of the statement, and we could envision situations where the same sentence is not used as a warning at all: if we were preparing ice for use in carving, for example, and we need a certain minimum thickness, the sentence would simply communicate that we had not yet waited long enough for all the ice to form.

Humphrey and Laidlaw argue that ritual action is "stipulated" (that's a technical term): once a person decides to perform a ritual in the context of a particular ritual culture, then there are rules within that culture that stipulate what she has to do. From this it follows that one of the most common ways of understanding ritual is misguided: namely, the view of ritual as symbolic communication. Ritual is not maleable like natural language, allowing the officiant to express particular ideas through the manipulation of symbols. Consider three Jains waving a lamp before an idol (a ritual known as *dip puja*). Ask them what they are doing, or what they intend to accomplish, in waving the lamp. One might say "offering the lamp to the idol", the second "shedding light on the idol", and the third "shedding light on myself" (all these are interpretations that Humphrey and Laidlaw were offered by informants). Regardless, all three are performing *dip puja*, because in their ritual culture waving a lamp before an idol just is performing *dip puja*, and the gloss or interpretation given by the performer doesn't change that. Contrast this with the case of the policeman. His utterance is a warning only if he intends to warn, and something else otherwise.

What I'd like to do in this paper is look at some interesting examples of how Humphrey and Laidlaw's theory has been received in the ritual studies literature, and try to identify some of the problems that interfere with the development of general theory as we move from the culture from which the theory derived to other, perhaps very different, ritual cultures. I'll summarize, then, briefly, three papers that I think are illustrative of what we'd find from a more thorough survey of scholarly practice, and which, in various ways, are quite good papers: we won't learn much after all from looking at poor scholarship. I've picked two papers that examine Islamic ritual: by Henkel and Gade, and one with an African focus, by McIntosh. Full bibliographic references are given at the end of the handout. We can talk later about how I chose my examples if you're sceptical that they aren't sufficiently representative.

Or we can discuss another observation that I'll make now parenthetically: namely, that Islamicists seem have been drawn to Humphrey and Laidlaw's theory well beyond their representation in the ritual studies literature.

The paper by **Gade** reports on fieldwork performed during 1996-97 in Indonesia. The subject of Gade's research was reading of the Koran – I emphasize the word 'reading' because the term has a special sense as she uses it. Gade is less concerned with the meanings that people associate with the text, so it's not in a hermeneutical sense that she uses the word; instead, she focuses mostly on reading out loud, and in particular reading as performance. During the 1990s in Indonesia, there was widespread interest in

memorizing the Koran and participating in local and national Koran recitation contests. People bought and listened to audiotapes designed to teach recitation, they took classes, and they followed the careers of famous performers.

Gade looked at this phenomenon from a variety of angles. She examined the history of Koran recitation, looking for example at the reception in Indonesia of an Egyptian system of melodic recitation. She considered the gender-marking of different practices. She considered the pronunciation of Arabic in different contexts, showing that a standardized pronunciation was increasingly used in Koranic recitation whereas greater variation and more influence from local vernaculars were found in the reading of devotional texts in Arabic. Throughout, she focused on three themes: education, the means by which people learned to read the Koran; variance, how widely distributed certain practices were; and change, with a focus on the contingent factors that affected the distribution of practices over time.

So that's the subject of her research. To understand her subject, she develops a broad vocabulary of technical terms, the most important of which is internalization. This picks up on the theme of education. Education is just the internalization, by an individual, of culture: it is both the internalization of facts and practices (memorizing the text of the Koran and learning how to pronounce it) and also of norms (the standards by which one judges whether one's pronunciation is adequate). Along with this focus on norms comes an interest in the affective quality of experience, and consequently on the subjectivity of individuals.

When we move to her rather lengthy literature review, we find that it ends up focusing on one contrast in particular: she sets the ethnographic tradition on Indonesia against the history of religions approach, the ethnographic tradition providing (and these are quotes) "weak contextualization in terms of transregional traditions" and the history of religions being too "often invested in named traditions"³. So the ethnographer has trouble linking his observations with larger cultural patterns, whereas the historian of religion reifies traditions and treats them as unified wholes to the point of missing both variation in space and change over time. So Gade is clearly trying to find a way to generalize beyond individual, contextually rich ethnographies, as manifested in her criticism of what she calls the "hermeneutical approach" of, for example, Geertz. And it is here that she discusses the theory of Humphrey and Laidlaw. She cites two components of their theory.

First, where they discuss⁴ how the performance of ready-made ritual actions affects how agents think about themselves. This is the final chapter of their book, and it's looking at some of the implications of their theory. So in some sense it's peripheral to their main argument, and perhaps rather provisional. But it presumes the developed theory from the core of the book. Gade is interested in the self, in affective experience, in the specificity of individual experience. And this is consistent with the tradition she's operating in. As

³ p. 367

⁴ Gade, p. 342; Humphrey and Laidlaw, p. 249

she points out⁵, the self is a highly theorized concept in the anthropology of the Pacific and Southeast Asia, and it's not surprising that it's central to her analysis. Second, she makes two references⁶ to Humphrey and Laidlaw's phrase "getting it right" (the title, for example, of their Chapter 5). For Humphrey and Laidlaw the phrase is shorthand for the notion that performing a ritual just amounts to performing a set of prescribed acts. But Gade uses the phrase as a synonym for 'orthopraxy', which is an entirely different understanding of the phrase.

Perhaps we should conclude that this is just a bad example of someone who is referencing Humphrey and Laidlaw's theory, and that I shouldn't have mentioned it at all. But there's at least one place where she could usefully refer to their theory, and doesn't: namely when she says, on p. 357, that (quote) "a 'mistake' in musical practice is not the same as a ritual or Qur'ānic 'mistake.'" This gets at the problem of what constitutes a ritual action, and how ritual differs from other types of action, for example musical performance, which on the surface appears constrained in ways similar to ritual. This cuts right to the heart of the problem that drives Humphrey and Laidlaw's analysis, and is a point where Gade's data could usefully shine light on theirs. The reason she doesn't go this way, I'll propose, is because she is interested in the uniqueness of human experience, and this takes her away from general ritual theory; in fact I think there's a tension in her analysis on this score because in places she does seem interested in general theory.

Now, in these examples I'm looking for hints about why scholars fail to engage with general theories of ritual. Perhaps Gade's interest in contingent over general causes is driven by her own theoretical commitments, perhaps by the Southeast Asianist interest in the individual, perhaps by her informants' emphasis on their own subjectivity and affective experience. Maybe all of these.

Henkel (the second paper I'll discuss) studies the role of ritual in the social life and political commitments of the middle-class in contemporary Turkey. His argument is structured around two dynamics: one in which religion is rooted in, and reflects, local culture and local concerns; and another in which it forms bonds that cut across local differences, thereby helping to produce and reinforce collective representations. He allows that the Islamist movement in Turkey does reflect local concerns, but he argues that, beyond this, it also (this is a quote) "inserts a fixed point of reference into the diverse and changing lifeworlds of religious Muslims"⁷. The paper focuses on the five-times daily prayer (salāt), and is based on fieldwork in Istanbul and Berlin between 2000 and 2002. As his language indicates, he is explicitly Durkheimian in approach, and he introduces Humphrey and Laidlaw's book as an example of (another quote here) "the anti-Durkheimian approach of British anthropology"⁸.

Now, Humphrey and Laidlaw mention with approval a paper by John Bowen in which he argues that, since different informants gave him different interpretations of salāt, it

⁵ p. 338

⁶ p. 362, 364

⁷ p. 488

⁸ p. 498

(quote) "is not designed according to a single symbolic or iconic core" (unquote); consequently, the symbolic approach, according to which rituals marshal symbols to express certain views of the world, cannot constitute a general theory of ritual. Henkel disagrees. He points to what Humphrey and Laidlaw call the "stipulation" of ritual action, arguing that this points away from whatever local interpretations of Islam are found in particular contexts, and towards a common understanding of the tradition, which can be found in the very language of prayer. The call to prayer emphasizes the unity and power of God; and these themes are found again in the *fatihah*, and in other verses recited in the *salāt*. Thus, the very ritualization of ritual, the fact that there are rules for how to perform rituals, points to collective meanings, and these are clearly inscribed in the ritual itself by the tradition. By focusing on particular theological claims, the *salāt* serves to form a shared Moslem community that cuts across local differences over, e.g., the headscarf or economic liberalism (these are examples given in Henkel's paper).

Now Henkel might have entered into his research with a prior commitment as a Durkheimian, but clearly the contrast between local differences and pan-Islamic unity was emphasized to him by his informants. He's read Humphrey and Laidlaw, but again his citation of their work misunderstands or ignores the positive theory they develop in their book. It almost appears as though the desire to faithfully represent the concerns of his informants keeps him from engaging seriously with the theoretical literature that he brings to bear.

McIntosh's paper (the third one) is based on fieldwork conducted in Kenya. She looks at choral texts sung during funerary rites – texts that are notable for being quite sexually explicit. Though the author or leader of the song may be male, this is largely a female enterprise, and the content of the songs stands in stark contrast to the reserved sexual mores imposed on women in the society. The obvious theoretical context for her data, McIntosh proposes, is the study of women's 'oppositional rituals', in which liminal occasions provide the opportunity for the expression of 'resistance' against patriarchy and traditional social norms. But she fears such an approach will not be sufficient, so she looks to the 'participant framework' model of linguistic pragmatics developed largely by Erving Goffman.

The idea here is that the meaning of an utterance is not solely a function of syntax and lexicon; one also has to consider multiple relationships between utterances and people. The participant framework model typologizes large numbers of such relationships, so as to disambiguate the meaning of utterances that, removed from their social contexts, are irredeemably ambiguous. What's interesting from our perspective is how the process works. Goffman, as interpreted by McIntosh, argues that participant frameworks are a function of two things: the speaker's intention and the interaction of all interlocutors. Unfortunately, McIntosh loses track of the participant framework approach by the end of her paper: the data she references are the texts of particular songs, and she does not provide any information on contexts of performance.⁹ Instead, she looks just at the texts

⁹ The songs themselves are composed by individuals (they are not anonymous) but they appear capable of being reused (they are not composed afresh for each performance, like Greek lyric); in any case, they are

sung, and finds (unsurprisingly) that they are ambiguous. Her ultimate explanation ends up sounding almost structural-functional when she argues that the ambiguity of the songs mirrors the ambiguous attitudes towards women's sexuality in the larger society.

We thus see why McIntosh might want to reference Humphrey and Laidlaw's book: they argue that the identity of a ritual act does not depend on an agent's intention; rather, it is stipulated by the culture itself. Goffman-slash-McIntosh's approach, in contrast, goes in exactly the opposite direction, making the agent's intentions a clear component of ritual meaning (though, albeit, intentions aren't the whole story, because pragmatics of the ritual act can't be ignored). Unfortunately McIntosh never develops this line of argument. In any case, her reference to Humphrey and Laidlaw¹⁰ is clearly apposite, but unfortunately parenthetical as well. The reference occurs in a footnote, and she draws no conclusions directly from it. It looks like she's choosing to avoid a theoretical confrontation, or perhaps it doesn't occur to her to do so, even when she's looking at theories that seem to call for it.

Summary. Gade's paper devotes the most space to theory, and considers a widest range of theory. Of the three papers I've considered, this is the one where, my intuition inclines me to say, prior theoretical commitments contribute the most to her failure to properly engage with Humphrey and Laidlaw's theory. But other people might have different intuitions. Henkel's paper focuses primarily on his data, and while he does seek to generalize from his observations, his theoretical discussion just isn't as sophisticated as what we find in the other papers. He's focused on his data, and maybe that's where he intends to focus. McIntosh has a strong interest in theory, and she develops a good, positive argument in the first part of her paper, based on her reading in linguistics and ritual studies. The citation of data from her research seems to me somewhat artificial, as though she felt she was expected to cite some particular examples from her fieldwork. And I'm inclined to think that this is why she loses track of the positive argument she had begun to develop: because her evidence doesn't really help her with the analysis that she wants to perform.

All three papers cite Humphrey and Laidlaw; and Gade and McIntosh, at least, adduce evidence that would have allowed them to engage substantively with Humphrey and Laidlaw's theory. You can say that they don't need to engage it at any significant level, just as they don't need to engage with any other particular theory. That's certainly true, but this ignores two points: (1) that they probably would have benefited from doing so, and in any case, (2) if general theory is important (and all three seem to think it is) then significant engagement with other people's theories does need to be done, whether with this theory or some other.

largely traditional in form and content, but they do have an identifiable social context both of composition and of performance. p. 48

¹⁰ p. 47, n. 2