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Getting to a General Theory of  
Ritual: The Role of Agency and  
Intention

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## Why has more progress not been made in the development of general ritual theory?

- Background: I argue, at least, for the instrumentalist view that general theory can allow scholars to learn from one another systematically
- I float one possible answer: ethnographers and historians are liable to get distracted by the specificity of their own data, and for this reason fail to engage in a deep or useful way with previous scholarship

## Point of Departure

- I look at 3 papers that cite one general theory of ritual. The idea is to pick representative examples to illustrate common uses of theory in ethnographies.
- General Theory: from Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994)
- Papers considered:
  - Gade (2002)
  - Henkel (2005)
  - McIntosh (2005)
- Method of selection of examples
  - Chosen from cited reference index (ISI Web of Science)
  - 24 citations of Humphrey and Laidlaw, 17 of them substantive

## Humphrey and Laidlaw (H&L)

- Key element of their theory: “the identity of a ritualized act does not depend, as in the case with normal action, on the agent’s intention in acting” (p. 89).
- Example of normal (non-ritual) action: policeman tells a skater “the ice is thin over there”. This is only a warning because he intends it to be (that it is a warning doesn’t follow from the language of the warning).
- Example of ritual: *dip puja* (waving lamp before idol). This is a ritual regardless of the agent’s intentions, by ‘stipulation’.

## Gade

- Fieldwork in Indonesia, 1996-97
- Focus on reading of Koran, esp. as performance
- Three themes: education, variance, and change
- Internalization: education is just the internalization of culture, both of facts and practices, and of norms
- Sets ethnographic tradition (has trouble linking observations with larger cultural patterns) vs. history of religions approach (reifies traditions as unified wholes)
- Cites H&L for how rituals affect agents’ conceptions of themselves and phrase ‘getting it right’; ignores them in discussion of error (p. 357)

## Henkel

- Studies role of ritual in social life and politics of middle-class Turks (Berlin and Istanbul, 2000-02); salāt
- Durkheimian orientation, views H&L as non-Durkheimian
- re: Bowen who argues that different informants give different interpretations, so salāt “is not designed according to a single symbolic or iconic core”, Henkel replies that language of Islamic prayer emphasizes collective meanings, and these contribute to common understandings (which limit variation in local interpretations).

## McIntosh

- Fieldwork in Kenya, focused on choral texts sung at funerals: they can be sexually explicit; sung by women
- Rejects facile interpretations: women’s opposition to patriarchy and traditional social norms
- Explores utility of Goffman’s ‘participant framework’ model (linguistic pragmatics)
- Empirical data restricted to text of songs; ignores social context of performance
- In discussing H&L, M. fails to contrast her view with H&L
  - H&L: reject role of agent’s intention
  - Goffman/McIntosh: intention essential to ritual meaning

## Summary

- Uses of theory
  - Gade: presents the most theory, in form of literature review
  - Henkel: his data trumps his limited discussion of theory
  - McIntosh: develops interesting theoretical approach; ignores it when she introduces her own data
- Gade and Henkel: prior theoretical commitments may clash with sympathetic reading of H&L
- Gade and McIntosh could engage much more substantively with H&L: why don't they?
- I selected 3 papers to contextualize my proposal, facilitate discussion. I encourage criticism of my choice of examples, reading of examples, view of general theory

## References

- Gade, Anna, "Taste, talent, and the problem of internalization: a Qur'ānic study in religious musicality from Southeast Asia", *History of religions* 41 (2002) 328-368.
- Henkel, Heiko, " 'Between belief and unbelief lies the performance of salat': Meaning and efficiency of a Muslim ritual", *Man* ns 11 (2005) 487-507.
- Humphrey, Caroline and James Laidlaw, *The archetypal actions of ritual: A theory of ritual illustrated by the Jain rite of worship*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.
- McIntosh, Janet, "Liminal meanings: sexually charged Giriama funerary ritual and unsettled participant frameworks", *Language & communication* 25 (2005) 39-60.