

Comment: Transforming Persons, Transforming Places

Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart

Cromie Burn Research Unit, University of Pittsburgh

SPECIAL ISSUE ON:

*Transforming the Self in Public Ritual—Secular and Religious Aspects,
University of Copenhagen, 11 May 2006*

The abstract for the conference in which this set of papers were originally presented follows:

“The scope of the seminar is ritual transformation processes in public space. The boundaries between the religious and the secular in many ritual contexts are blurred as argued in the nearly 30 year old text by S. Moore and B. Myerhoff (*Secular Ritual*, 1977) in which the two authors call for an understanding of ‘the sacred’ as ‘a wider category than the religious’. Much has happened in the business of interpreting rituals since then, but still complexity and hybridization are on the agenda of cultural theory.

The seminar will focus on interfaces between the secular and religious constitution of identity in the public space with reference to ultimate values, i.e. the sacred. The pivotal point for our discussions will be the individual ritual subject in the larger social context: how is the formation of a new self practiced and experience in public rituals covering a wide field from citizenship ceremonies to ordinations. The aim is to uncover, analyze, compare and discuss the complex and ambiguous cultural and social processes involved in ritualizations of public space, imbued with both secular and religious traditions and structures.” Cecilie Rubow, Copenhagen University and Tine Damsholt, Copenhagen University

The papers presented at this conference have been extensively revised and are presented here in their final form. The authors include Cecilie Rubow, Tine Damsholt, Margit Warburg, Simon Coleman, and Jon P. Mitchell. As such, they represent an interesting confluence of scholars drawing on the traditions of British social anthropology and continental / Scandinavian orientations. The overall impression given is very lively, creative, and combinative, providing a good reflection of current theoretical trends in the analysis of ritual.

First, these papers carry a strong flavor of anthropological fieldwork carried out in multiple contexts, especially ones to which the fieldworker belongs or has some affiliative connection. Second, this circumstance leads to a reflexive and reflective disposition toward the ethnographic data, based on the weaving of the researcher’s mind in, out of, and through the materials themselves. Third, the focus is on domains of activity which have a variable connection with the arena of institutionalized religion but in any case are regarded as important enough to imply the presence of the sacred, that is, realms of sig-

nificant public value, as in the rituals of graduation in Denmark discussed by Warburg. Fourth, and finally, these contributions are all concerned with operational practices rather than simply with ideologies, ideals, or discourse about practices. This brings the authors to write in both personal and embodied ways about their topics.

The papers by Rubow, Damsholt, and Warburg form a neat set in topical and theoretical terms. They are primarily ethnographic. They document public rituals invested by both the participants and the institutions of society with value. And they present the participants’ views of their own experiences in going through their rites of passage. Rubow points to the significance of rites of ordination as making social “characters” in accordance with Kirsten Hastrup’s studies of human agency. But she also demonstrates that the individuals involved have a range of different expectations and feelings; and that Protestant theology itself plays down the idea of the Minister as a special category of being within the Church. This latter point may be connected with the ambivalence ordinands felt towards the adoption of special ministerial or eccle-

siastical "voice" in their sermons: an ambivalence that would not be found within church traditions that do set apart religious practitioners firmly from the parishioners they serve. And Rubow also broaches the concept of transcendence, or experience beyond the confines of everyday life (Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas* would fit here), remarking that the sensory experience of the ordination service and its settings serve to set up feelings of transcendence among the ordinands. Considering the recollections of participants, Rubow notes further that there is a mixture of episodic and doctrinal experiences in the terms suggested by Harvey Whitehouse (e.g. Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004), only here the two experiences are not separated, but found together, and the sensory experience may in fact transcend the doctrinal experience, setting up a sense of contradiction – and one which may correspond to contradictions outside of the religious context also, with regard to the expression of the emotions in social life generally.

Damsholt brings to the study of citizenship ceremonies in Denmark and elsewhere a somewhat different suite of ideas, relating to processes of objectification and subjectification of identities, and also studies of performativity and "ontological choreography" including the use of material objects and settings in the creation of identities. As with Rubow's study, Damsholt is concerned with how the participants' agency may spill over the confines of the formal purposes of the ritual. Nevertheless, again as with Rubow's study, the sensory aspects of the ritual do produce shared feelings of being included in the wider realm of society. Perhaps we may suggest that what is engendered in participants is a sense of a cosmos as well as of social inclusion itself. That sense, produced to a good extent though not exclusively, by the surrounding "omnipresence" (Damsholt) of sound, would also be akin to the concept of transcendence, recently explored in transnational contexts by Thomas Csordas and the contributors to a volume he has edited on religion and globalization (Csordas 2009).

Warburg, in her study, pays close attention to the symbolism of material objects and settings, including the caps the graduates wear and the ritual at the equestrian statues in civic centers, along with the implicit celebration of the renewal of generational fertility linked to the age cohort of the graduates themselves. The material symbols are deeply connected with Danish national identity, so each local festival is tied in with the embodied materiality of the nation. Here we may compare the theoretical approach of Boivin, who brings material culture and embodiment together in a study of material cultures and material minds. (Boivin 2008). We can pinpoint ritual as a crucial arena in which different scales and contexts of

agency are brought together, with a considerable focus often on Durkheimian-style solidarity – just as, when for example police officers are killed in the line of duty their death is treated as a sacrifice (a form of transcendence) and their fellow-officers congregate at their funerals to show respect and to make an epideictic display of their combined strength and commitment.

All of these five papers are about crucial transitional creations and assertions of selfhood. The two papers by Coleman and Mitchell explore this topic in a highly reflective and comparative way, following on from the exploration of interplay between the individual and the collective realms delineated by Rubow, Damsholt, and Warburg. Simon Coleman raises the questions of risk and failure in ritual practices, explored by the contributors to Hüsken's edited volume (2007). He finds a space of participation and experience in between commitment and alienation which he identifies as "lateral participation," thus opening up an arena of enquiry that ambiguously sits with both public and private contexts. This form of lateral participation is certainly potentially one that could be identified in any ritual context, but more often in some than in others. It is a concept fitted also to a context of optative action in which people hedge their bets in a sense, aware of the risks associated with too great a commitment and at the same time unwilling definitively to stay outside of the ritual context, to deny ritualization a place in their embodied patterns of action. Mistrust of the "sovereign subject" may be at the heart of the matter here; or it may be that persons are seeking that sovereignty of commitment, but have not reached the putative "amazing grace" of having been lost and now being found. Lateral participation is highly reminiscent of the postmodern subject (see e.g., Rosenau 1992); but performativity as a focus may also give us an alternative perspective on what people are doing with ritual performances.

Jon Mitchell's paper is ambitious and wide ranging, also passing over diverse comparative terrains (Papua New Guinea, Sudan, Northern Ireland, Malta). We can only applaud this enterprise, and it is one that we have ourselves engaged in at various times (see, e.g., Stewart and Strathern 2004). Mitchell's approach to selfhood is thoroughly processual and existential, in line with Csordas's work (e.g. Csordas 1994). Interestingly, transcendence enters again as a theme, since the performativity of ritual, Mitchell argues, has to do with the engagement of its participants with transcendent powers made present through ritual action. These powers may be the ancestors/tradition, and through rituals time and space are transformed by bringing back the ancestors from the past into the present and by transforming streets into spaces of blessing. The element of contestation, however, should

also be noted with regard to Mitchell's example of Orange Order Parades in Northern Ireland. Mitchell discusses this point explicitly in relation to the 1996 Orange Order Parade at Portadown. While the dispute at Portadown does indeed demonstrate the transformational potentialities of ritual movements through space, these potentialities are not always realized, because they may be blocked by opposing forces. Arguably the Parade participants fully realized this, and their displays are to be regarded as epideictic, showing their numbers and determination, as discussed by Roy Rappaport (1968) for the Maring people of Papua New Guinea.

In stressing transformative powers, Mitchell is also stressing agency as a theme, and a further valuable part of his paper is concerned with the production of time as a subject or agent rather than as an object to be measured. Transcendence implicitly enters here again, because public rituals, directed toward spirit agents in the cosmos, bring people into transcendent forms of temporality, drawing them into the putatively expanded cognitive presence of the spirit world. As Mount Hagen people of Papua New Guinea put the matter to us, referring to the spirits of the dead, *ekit pungk rondokl ti kandek titimin*, "going out, they gain a certain different kind of strength."

References

- Boivin, Nicole 2008. *Material Cultures, Material Minds. The Impact of Things on Human Thought, Society, and Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Csordas, Thomas 1994. *The Sacred Self. A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Csordas, Thomas J. ed. 2009. *Transnational Transcendence. Essays on Religion and Globalization*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hüsken, Ute ed. 2007. *When Rituals Go Wrong: Mistakes, Failures, and the Dynamics of Ritual*. Leiden: Brill.
- Rappaport, Roy A. 1968. *Pigs for the Ancestors. Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rosenau, Pauline M. 1992. *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences. Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Stewart, Pamela J. and Andrew Strathern 2004. *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Whitehouse, Harvey and James Laidlaw eds. 2004. *Ritual and Memory. Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Religion*. Lanham: Altamira Press.

Biographical Sketch

Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart are research collaborators in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, and are, respectively, Visiting Research Fellow and Visiting Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Durham, England. They are also Research Associates in the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, and have been Visiting Research Fellows at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan during 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005. They have published widely on the Pacific, Asia, and Europe. Their most recent publications include *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Stewart and Strathern 2004, Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press), *Nouvelle-Guinée. Danses de la couleur* (Strathern and Stewart, with Josette and Charles Lenars, 2004, France, Hazan) and *Empowering the Past: Confronting the Future* (Strathern and Stewart, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and their most recent co-edited books include *Asian Ritual Systems: Syncretisms and Ruptures* (Stewart and Strathern, eds., Carolina Academic Press, 2007), *Exchange and Sacrifice* (Stewart and Strathern, eds. Carolina Academic Press, 2008), and *Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories* (Stewart and Strathern, eds., Carolina Academic Press, 2009). Their most recent research is on the topics of Cosmological Landscapes, Religious Conversion, Ritual Studies, and Political Peace-making.