

Comment: Functions, Effects, and Efficacy: A Moving Walkway of Analyses

Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart

Cromie Burn Research Unit, University of Pittsburgh

This issue of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* is Part I of a collection of essays on this topic. The papers that will be included in Part II (*Journal of Ritual Studies* 24(2), 2010) are:

- **Healing, Efficacy and the Spirits**, Geoffrey Samuel
- **Possession, Embodiment, and Ritual in Mental Health Care in India**, Frederick M. Smith
- **Revisiting the Concept of Karma: Lessons from a Dhanvantari Homa**, Mark Nichter and Mimi Nichter
- **Modernity and Efficacy in Kenyan Ritual Healing**, Ferdinand Okwaro

This collection of papers is carefully focused on an emergent set of approaches to an old problem in the analysis of rituals: do rituals work? If so, how? And from whose viewpoints?

These essays tackle this problem by making some useful methodological suggestions. First, they argue that rituals are instrumental, not just expressive. Second, they distinguish between the many overall effects of ritual actions and the question of their specific efficacy as envisaged by the intentions of their performers or the evaluations of the ethnographers. We may comment here that both performers and ethnographers refer the rituals' purposes to a concept of order: what we may call the "cosmos" for the performers, and often the "society" for the ethnographers. To what extent society and cosmos coincide is an empirical matter for the ethnographer as analyst to determine or speculate about. The two come together in the construct of socio-cosmic order.

The authors of these essays also seek to transcend numbers of dichotomies. In addition to the instrumental/expressive device of interpretation, there is the rational/irrational division, the magic/religion contrast, and the personalistic versus naturalistic dichotomy in the study of medical systems. The rational/irrational issue depends very much on the perspectives and analytical tools brought

to it. Certainly the performers of rituals are likely to think of them as effective in some way and must therefore regard them as rational in that sense, i.e. as a set of means adapted to produce intended ends. Of course, however, room must be made for doubt, radical or contingent uncertainty, anxiety, and the recognition that mistakes were sometimes made (i.e. ritual failure, see Hüsken ed. 2007). It is the ethnographers and analysts, if belonging to a different world view or sense of the cosmos from the performers, who may be inclined to see the rituals studied as irrational or non-rational. But for what? As is well known, anthropologists have often shifted their stance away from identifying rituals as ineffective or non-rational by identifying different ways in which they are effective, whether these are intended by the performers or not. Here is where we come to functions.

Anthropological foci of interest in rituals, as in social life general, have seemingly shifted from function and structure to performance and practice. The focus on performance stresses the dramatic character of ritual and the actors it is intended for. That on practice claims both rationality and variability, allowing for agency to be exercised. Rituals thus come to be situated in history, as types of events and action among events, or as belonging to long-term processes. Within this context, the question of functions re-arises, like a ghost in the machine of interpretation (including the domains of sphere, means, and conditions as established by the essays presented here). And it does so especially when there is what we have called (Stewart and Strathern 2002a: 15) the problem of the "epistemological switch", in which the observer "brackets" the views of the insiders and is thus led to advance a different view of what the ritual is "all about". This is the situation referred to in the old anthropological joke about rain-making ceremonies, that they didn't bring rain but nevertheless were "one helluva ceremony." In other words, if the observer does not believe that the stated aims of a ritual can come true, he or she may step into the breach

and offer alternative suggestions as to what the ritual either does achieve or may be supposed in some way to achieve. One function is thus substituted by another. As the essays here collected imply, this simply acknowledges the gap between observer and actor, while attempting to bridge the gap by arguing that the effects of rituals include their "latent functions"; in the terminology of the sociologist Robert Merton (see Merton 1968 [1957] on his concept of the "net balance" of consequences of actions, where consequences = effects). The idea that rituals, like other forms of action, may have consequences or effects other than those stated by the performers, has of course opened up the grand arena of anthropological interpretations, starting with Durkheim's proposition that religious rituals amount to forms of worshipping society itself (meaning the values that animate it and inform its structure). Thus, if a rain-making ceremony didn't make rain, but alleviated anxiety, restored confidence, and reaffirmed group solidarity, these effects would be among its latent functions. Efficacy, however, would more plausibly refer to either the stated or the imputed intentions of the participants in the ritual themselves, together with an assessment of results in relation to those intentions.

Here, however, we also encounter the moving walkway of analysis (as well as practice). Ritual systems tend to have built in safeguards: if the intended results do not follow, then something was done wrongly, and the ritual must be repeated; or, the wrong experts were employed, and must be replaced; a taboo was broken; or, simply, the ritual's power is worn out and a new ritual must be adopted or invented to renew that power. As we proceed in the walkway, the view changes; until we come to the end, and must step off, exercising caution, into the next phase of discussion of longer-term, rather than immediate, consequences of actions in the ritual sphere.

The essays brought together here exhibit a strong awareness of these, and comparable, points. They bring a fresh look at ritual action by applying new methodological lenses to it. Depending on how the aims of a ritual are formulated, these lenses can help assess the degree of efficacy of a given ritual. Sometimes the views of the actor and the observer may coincide. At a funeral, for example, the aim of rituals may indeed be to close the gap in social life left by the death of a person by reaffirming ties among the living and at the same time helping the spirit of the dead person on its journey to another part of the cosmos, as this is perceived. So, among the Duna people of the Papua New Guinea Highlands, ritual wailing for the dead is intended in part to send the *tini* or spirit of the dead away from the community of the living and up to limestone rock shelters in the mountains that are the proper abode for spirits (see, Stewart and

Strathern 2002b, Strathern and Stewart 2004). Coincidentally, these rituals appear also to strengthen and renew ties among the mourners (though one would be hard put to it to measure this strengthening). The Duna would not necessarily articulate this latter effect as a part of their intentions. They would be more likely to refer to the aim of settling the spirit by sending it on its way, i.e. to stress cosmology rather than solidarity. But their united voices are needed to bring this alignment of cosmology into being on the occasion (see Stewart and Strathern 2005).

Another helpful distinction that the writers of these essays deploy is the difference between the aims of a ritual and the uses to which it is put. Individuals taking part in a ritual may manipulate or change it for their own purposes. They may pursue conflicts with others during it. They may try to exclude some participants. They may seek to gain personal wealth or power through it. Use suggests strategy, manipulation, individual action; aim suggests a collectivity of purpose. But there are internal effects that are seen to influence ritual efficacy. In the historically performed Female Spirit rituals in Mount Hagen, for example, particular performers might try to outshine others, or to hold a dance on a day of their choosing rather than with a neighboring sub-group (see Strathern and Stewart 1999, 2000). In the end, however, the aims of the collectivity had to be recognized as carrying legitimacy, and this for a straightforward reason: if the ritual failed, as it inevitably would if not enough people took part in it, or they did not bring out enough wealth for the occasion, this would in itself be a sign that the Spirit did not support it, and the consequences would be bad fortune and sickness for all of those taking part. Anticipating this loop-back effect, people often turned up at meetings or to contribute wealth to a payment, knowing that if they did not do so, the whole group would suffer, the ancestors and/or other spirits would in turn be annoyed, and misfortunes would be sure to follow. These auto-reflections correspond, we suggest, to the overall *divinatory* efficacy of complex rituals. They correspond also, in general, to the importance of the "socio-cosmic order" referred to in the introductory paper to this collection by Johannes Quack and William Sax. The concept of functions thus emerges, out of the moving walkway of analysis and interpretation, and joins with efficacy in the union of the Radcliffe-Brownian concept of "society" and the latter-day concept of the socio-cosmic order.

The problem of functions or efficacy becomes more complex when, as is often the case, it is not only general values of order, fertility, or prosperity that are at stake in a ritual event but also the specific healing of a patient. The significance of faith, the placebo effect, and the actual functioning of the mind-body organisms, are all in-

volved here. In general, the moving walkway of analysis has to lead us across the mind-body dichotomy, so that it is not longer surprising to understand that many circumstances (all affecting the immune response) can affect a person's state of health and whether they recover from or succumb to an illness. Included here are the concepts deployed by one of the contributors to this set of essays (Geoffrey Samuel): that is the idea of the body-image and the notion of the narrative self. Spirits enter the walkway because they come into people's own narrative. In turn, such narratives themselves must refer back to the socio-cosmic order that we have mentioned as central to the general analysis of rituals (an order, of course,

that cannot be seen as static but as a part of ongoing changes). The narrative may also turn on "faith"; and, although anthropologists and ritualists may be divided by faith, this is not necessarily the case, as the writings of Edith Turner illustrate (e.g. E. Turner 2006 and our review of it, Strathern and Stewart 2007).

The essays in this volume explore the field of efficacy in fresh and detailed ways. They bring to bear on it methodological innovations. And in doing so they contribute, with considerable theoretical efficacy, to the understanding of ritual practices in general. We are very happy to present them in the pages of the Journal of Ritual Studies.

References

- Hüsken, Ute ed. 2007. *When Rituals Go Wrong: Mistakes, Failures, and the Dynamics of Ritual*. Leiden: Brill.
- Merton, Robert K. 1968 [1957]. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: Free Press.
- Stewart, Pamela J. and Andrew Strathern 2002a. *Violence: Theory and Ethnography*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Stewart, Pamela J. and Andrew Strathern 2002b. *Re-making the World: Myth, Mining and Ritual Change among the Duna of Papua New Guinea*. For, Smithsonian Series in Ethnographic Inquiry, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Stewart, Pamela J. and Andrew Strathern 2005. Cosmology, Resources, and Landscape: Agencies of the Dead and the Living in Duna, Papua New Guinea. *Ethnology* 44(1): 35–47.
- Strathern, A. and Pamela J. Stewart 1999. *The Spirit is Coming! A Photographic-Textual Exposition of the Female Spirit Cult Performance in Mt. Hagen*. Ritual Studies Monograph Series, Monograph No. 1. Pittsburgh.
- Strathern, A. and Pamela J. Stewart 2000. *The Python's Back: Pathways of Comparison between Indonesia and Melanesia*. Westport, Conn. and London: Bergin and Garvey, Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Strathern, Andrew and Pamela J. Stewart 2004. *Empowering the Past, Confronting the Future, The Duna People of Papua New Guinea*. For, Contemporary Anthropology of Religion Series, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Strathern, Andrew and Pamela J. Stewart 2007. Healing practices, creative words. Review of E. Turner, *Among the Healers. Anthropology and Humanism*. 32(1): 101–102.
- Turner, Edith 2006. *Among the Healers: Stories of Spiritual and Ritual Healing around the World*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.

Biographical Sketch

Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern) 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 re-

cent 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.

[Note: All authors in this special collection (24.1 and 24.2) were asked to ensure that their Reference lists included all works cited in their texts. Readers should consult authors directly for any further information needed.]