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

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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 Owuoro

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 to 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 Hsüen 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 (Strathern 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 subsumed by another. As the essays here collected implicitly, 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 - including those more immediate - as 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 interpretation, 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, we must 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 another set is replaced; or, 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 stop off, exercising caution, into the next phase of discussion of the text, rather than immediately, 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 ritual is indeed 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 of the New Guinea Highlands, ritual wellbeing for the dead is intended in part to send the spirit 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 of the walkway is the papers' consideration of whether or not they are deployed 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 oustline others, or to hold a dance on a day of their choosing rather than with a neighboring sub-group (see Strathern and Stewart 1999). In the end, however, the aims of the collectivity had to be recognized as car- rying 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 dirivatory 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 integration, and joins with efficacy in the union of the Radcliffe-Brownian "act of sending" 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 efficacy of rituals 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-

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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 2004-2005, 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 relevant publications include Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rituals, and Gossip (Stewart and Strathern 2004, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Newelle-Gaitane, Danses de la couleur (Strathern and Stewart, with Jostee 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: Syncretism and Ruptures" (Stewart and Strathern, eds., Carolina Academic Press, 2007), "Exchange and Sacrifice" (Stewart and Strathern, eds. Carolina Academic Press, 2008), and "Religious and
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Introduction: The Efficacy of Rituals

Johannes Quack & William S. Sax

Many rituals appear to be efficacious by definition: when a criminal is sentenced by a qualified judge for example, or a president is publicly inaugurated, then the efficacy of the corresponding rituals is axiomatic. This is, however, not necessarily the case for other kinds of rituals. Do shamanic rituals really heal the sick, as many anthropologists have claimed? Can oracular rituals really predict the future? Do the Christian sacraments really bestow grace? Given the great variety of rituals that are practiced around the world, it is even possible to make general statements about "ritual efficacy"? Although the question of efficacy—do rituals really "work," and if so, how?—is one of the first questions that comes to mind when thinking about rituals, it has merely been explicitly addressed in ritual studies. Indeed, there is a long tradition within the social sciences of implicit skepticism with regard to the very idea of it.

For a long time, the question of how and why rituals might be effective was evaded by assigning ritual to the category of "symbolic" or "expressive" as opposed to "instrumental" action. According to this dichotomy, rituals are associated with an internal psychological realm of feeling and sentiment which they serve to "express" or "communicate," while "instrumental" action is associated with an external realm: purchasing a new car for example, or invading a foreign country. This idea was implicit in Durkheim's reaction to the arguments of Tylor and Frazer (summarized in Skorupski 1976; cf. Quack and Töbelmann, this volume), and can also be found in the works of Beattie (1986), Canadine (1984), Schieffelin (1998) and Stallybrass and White (1986). The problematic nature of this dichotomy was recognized and thoroughly critiqued by Skorupski in his 1976 book Symbol and Theory, and there have been other challenges to it as well, of which Stanley "laneibals" "performative approach to ritual" (1979) is arguably the most influential. Other demonstrations of the efficacy of ritual include Victor Turner's discussions of conflict resolution by means of rituals (1974, 1982; cf. Lounsbury 1985) and ritual healing (1981; cf. Sax 2001 and 2008; Whitehouse 2004), and Thomas Cook's "phenomenological" approach to ritual self-transformation (1990, 1994; cf. Boddy 1989). Because most of these attempts approach to show that rituals are effective in an instrumental sense, they can be read as implicit critiques of earlier theories which classified ritual as a form of expressive action. But in our view, the very urge to explain the efficacy of ritual derives from a more fundamental problem in ritual theory that has seldom been explicitly addressed: the fact that ritual is assumed to be a kind of irrational or non-rational activity (see Sax 2009a: 231–247; 2009b: Introduction). As Jack Goody pointed out, social scientists use the concept of ritual as "a category of standardized behaviour (custom) in which the relationship between the means and the end is not intrinsic; i.e. is either irrational or non rational" (1961: 159) cf. Sax, Weinhold, and Schweitzer, this volume). If the actions of ritual are seen to be non-rational by definition, they must be explained by the ritual theorist, usually in terms that are inconsistent with native models. In this special issue, we too grapple with this dichotomy. In the first essay, Quack and Töbelmann propose an "interpretive grid" that is also applied by some of the other contributors. At its core lies the idea that ritual should be understood in terms of a general theory of action, not a theory of "ritual action" sui generis. According to Quack and Töbelmann, actions, whether or not they are labelled "ritual", can have a potentially infinite number of effects, while the term efficacy is best reserved for certain kinds of effects identified or postulated from a certain perspective. Examples of such perspectives are the intention of the people acting in ritual, the expectations and interpretations of witnesses, historical explanations, or other analyses made by a researcher. On the basis of this they emphasize that any attempt to deal with the broad and complex question of "ritual efficacy", should ask a simple question first, viz., "In ritual, what or who (efficients) is seen as affecting what or whom (efficience) by whom (perspective)?" and they go on to suggest further differentiations with respect to sphere (levels) within, means by, and conditions under which a ritual is seen to be efficacious.

Quack and Töbelmann stress that the primary point of their discussion is not to "solve the problem of ritual effi-