Comment: Transforming Persons, Transforming Places

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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." Cecille 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 Cecille 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 significant 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 eccl-
also be noted with regard to Mitchell's example of Or-
ange Order Parades in Northern Ireland. Mitchell dis-
cusses this point explicitly in relation to the 1996 Orange
Order Parade at Portadown. While the dispute at Porta-
down does indeed demonstrate the transnational po-
tentials of ritual movements through space, these po-
tentialities are not always realized, because they may be
blocked by opposing forces. Arguably the Parade partic-
ants fully realized this, and their displays are to be re-
garded as epideictic, showing their numbers and deter-
mination, as discussed by Roy Rappaport (1968) for
the Maring people of Papua New Guinea.

References


Biographical Sketch

Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart are research collaborators in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, and are, respectively, Visiting Re-
search Fellow and Visiting Professor, Department of An-
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ology, 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. Duree de la couleur (Strathern and Stewart, with Josette and Charles Lenars, 2004, France, Hazan) and “Empowering the Past: Confronting the Future” (Stewart and Strathern, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and their most recent co-edited books include “Asian Ritual Systems: Syncretisms and Ruptures” (Stewart and Strathern, eds., Carolina Academic Press, 2008), and “Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmol-
gies and Histories”, (Stewart and Strathern, eds., Carolina Academic Press, 2009). Their most recent research is on the topics of Cosmological Landscapes, Religious Con-
version, Ritual Studies, and Political Peace-making.

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 mea-
ured. Transcendence implicitly enters here again, because public ritual, 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 tell the mate to us, referring to the spirits of the dead, eki pungk rendok i kandek tittim, “going out, they gain a certain different kind of strength.”

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