

Summer 1990

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### Recommended Citation

Bell, C. M. (1990). The Ritual Body and The Dynamics of Ritual Power. *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 4(2), 299–313.

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## THE RITUAL BODY AND THE DYNAMICS OF RITUAL POWER

Catherine Bell

Early rationalist attempts to deal with ritual could only imply the so-called "primitive" or poetic futility of nonutilitarian "magical" activity. With the somewhat different questions raised by functionalism, however, ritual was recognized as having a type of efficacy or power—not the power that it might claim, but a special ability to shape social organization and thereby the dispositions of individuals. When the limits of functionalism became more apparent and cultural anthropology began to focus on the dynamics of symbolic communication, new questions about the power of ritual emerged. As the present volume and the conference on which it is based testify, we are now disposed to find ritual powerful not only in the shaping of a social ethos, but also in the articulation, redefinition, and legitimation of cultural realities. Thus, quite in contrast to the early rationalists, we now suspect ritual of great power.

Several of the essays presented in this volume explore ritual as a powerful ideological arena in which symbolic images and gestures exercise a particularly persuasive effect on the participants' sense of identity and social reality. Indeed, there is a temptation to swing from the pole of considering rites powerless to the opposite extreme of characterizing ritual as all-powerful, using the term "ritual" in this context to designate either the most fundamental of social activities or the most ideologically determinative. This volume thus provides an excellent opportunity to gain analytical clarity through refining our concepts and to articulate tentative theories for practical testing. Moreover, consideration of the issue of ritual and power, which raises the obvious question of what is distinctive about the power exercised by ritual activities, inspires a fresh uncovering of the very nature of ritual activities themselves.

This essay will attempt to address the distinctive qualities of ritual power so as to explore both ritual and power. To do so, I will bypass the frameworks of rationalism, functionalism, and expressive symbolism (or "symbolic communicationism") in order to focus on the construction and deployment of the "ritual body." The "body" has recently emerged as a major focus of analysis in a number of disciplines, reflecting the development and convergence of several lines of thought. First, a tradition of ethnographic and theoretical exploration of body symbolism stretching from Marcel Mauss to Mary Douglas has explored how social categories, particularly as highlighted in ritual, shape the perception, disposition, and decoration of the body. Second, a shift in the dominant models employed by the humanities and social sciences has led to the gradual abandonment of the dualities of mind/body, individual/society, and even message/medium. Instead there are attempts to deal with the "embodied" mind, the "socially-embedded" person, and the media-massaged message. Finally, the recognition of gender as a fundamental condition of experience and category of analysis has promoted attention to the cultural constructions involved in the socialization of one's most basic physical sense of biological identity. It is noteworthy that even philosophy, a relative stronghold of the detached mental self, has recently contributed two studies of the body, George Lakoff's *Women, Fire and Other Dangerous Things* (1987) and Mark Johnson's *The Body in the Mind* (1987). Likewise, the work of historians such as Peter Brown (1988) looks beyond the social construction of institutions to the construction of the "social bodies" that mandate such institutions. No longer the mere physical instrument of the mind, it appears that the image of the body is being re-appropriated to denote a more complex and irreducible phenomenon, namely, the social person.

It is striking but not altogether surprising that the emergence of the conception of the social body has entailed a close consideration of ritual. Indeed, any discussion of the social body presupposes some theory of how the psychophysical entity is socialized and thereby empowered as a social presence

and actor. Among the studies that raise these issues, three in particular address the body, ritual, and power as intrinsically interrelated. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu discusses the "ritual mastery" of the social actor in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), the late historian Michel Foucault correlates "rituals" of penal discipline with "economies of power" and changing constructions of the human person in his *Discipline and Punish* (1979), and the anthropologist Jean Comaroff compares the ritual constitution of personhood in the pre-colonial rites of the Tshidi and the postcolonial native Zionist churches of South Africa in her *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (1985). Although these studies differ in many ways, they present a provocative consensus for linking the distinctive power of ritual action to the construction of the social body. In the sections that follow I will first describe how the ritually constructed body, as the means and end of ritual practices, involves the mastery of specific strategies of power. I will then consider the effective extent of this form of power, that is, the conditions and limits that define ritual power as such.

### The Ritual Body

Bourdieu, Foucault, and Comaroff address the conception of the body within the context of larger analyses of social practices. Social practices are, to use Bourdieu's terms, both structured and structuring (1977:78-90). They structure the body and therein construct "social beings" via the internalization of basic schemes and values (Comaroff 1985:5). The socialized body in turn gives rise to dispositions that generate similarly, although not identically, structured and structuring practices. The body thus "mediates" all action. It is the medium for the internalization and reproduction of social values and for the simultaneous constitution of both the self and the world of social relations (Comaroff 1985:6,124). The mediation of the body, according to Bourdieu, is a "dialectic of objectification and embodiment" involving schemes that pass "from practice to practice" without becoming explicit either in

personal consciousness or social discourse (1977:87). Social practice as such always sees itself addressing a particular situation—that is, the particular historical moment or, more precisely, the particular problems posed for the cultural system by the historical moment (Althusser 1979:24-25; Jameson 1972:135). Practice does not so much propose a solution to the situation as it effects a complete change in the very definition of the situation itself—a change that practice does not see itself make. It does not see what it does in the very act of producing: the definition of a new situation instead of providing an answer to the old one.<sup>1</sup>

In discussing this construction of the social body, all three authors glide neatly from a discussion of social practices into a discussion of ritual ones with little, if any, explication of the implied relation of ritual practices to social practices in general.<sup>2</sup> Of course the implication that ritual is a form of social practice is a contribution with many ramifications, most immediately perhaps as a corrective to the tendency to isolate ritual from all other forms of social activity. However, the very interesting question remains of how specifically to characterize ritual in terms of social practice.

Ritual practices certainly appear to be distinctive social practices simply insofar as they deliberately work to contrast themselves with other forms of practice. In this perspective ritual is not a set of distinct acts, but a *way of acting* that draws a privileged contrast between what is being done and other activities aped or mimed by the contrast. It is thus probably more appropriate to speak of "ritualization" when referring to a way of doing certain activities that differentiates those activities from other more conventional ones. Such differentiations may be drawn in a variety of ways that are culturally specific, but always in ways that the ritualized activities expect to dominate, which means that insofar as ritualized activities can effectively establish this type of contrast they gain a special status. Thus, for example, distinctions between eating a regular meal and participating in the Christian Eucharistic

meal are redundantly drawn in every aspect of the ritualized meal, from the type of "family" gathering to the distinctive periodicity of the meal, highlighting of course the privileged status of spiritual nourishment over physical nourishment, and so on. This aspect of ritual (or social) practice has been variously described by a number of scholars, as seen, for example, in Gregory Bateson's notion of "schismogenesis," Terence Turner's study of dual opposition, and Jonathan Z. Smith's observation that "ritual is, above all, an assertion of difference" (Bateson 1958; Turner 1984; Smith 1987:109).

Bourdieu attempts to elucidate this aspect of ritual practice in contrast to other social practices in terms of the particular logic that ritual uses. He finds that the logic by which ritualized practices generate and establish basic and privileged oppositions is not a theoretical logic, but a "logic of practice" in which ritualization is an expedient solution, effective in part due to the sheer economy of its logic (1977:109-113).<sup>3</sup> This practical logic is essentially a matter of several simple operations. First, initial oppositions are established based on a fundamental but unexpressed dichotomy. Second, different symbolic schemes will be applied to a single object. For example, a young girl going through initiation may engage in a series of activities involving schemes of opening/closing, swelling/shrinking, and so on. Third, a single scheme will be applied to a variety of logical universes. For example, yin/yang is generally used to differentiate female and male but may also be applied to each gender to differentiate subsystems within the female or male body. Using these operations, whole systems of interrelationships can be orchestrated by means of a small number of oppositions, which ultimately allows certain symbols or sets of symbols to dominate others. Thus in the Christian Eucharistic rite the symbolism of spiritual nourishment from on high takes precedence over physical nourishment below.<sup>4</sup> The relationships among symbols are given a loose sense of systematic completeness not only through synchronic homologies of the various pairs of oppositions or diachronic chains of

metonymic reference, but also through the implicit structuring effect of the underlying dichotomy.

The work of ritualization as a strategic mode of production is to dominate a constructed contrast in a certain way. It is concerned to alter the current state of the sociocultural taxonomy, causing shifts in dominance among various symbolic schemes while simultaneously licensing such alterations (Bourdieu 1977:124). Yet this description of ritual does not explain how ritualization per se is perceived as the appropriate or effective thing to do under certain circumstances. To determine the specific empowerment of ritual, it is also necessary to investigate how ritualization is mobilized to address a particular situation in such a way as *not to see* its strategic redefinition of that situation. It is with regard to this aspect of ritualized practices that a focus on the body is most illuminating.

Bourdieu's discussion of social practice suggests that the end and means of ritualization are specifically the production of a "ritualized body." A ritualized body is a body aware of a privileged contrast with respect to other bodies, that is, a body invested with schemes the deployment of which can shift a variety of sociocultural situations into ones that the ritualized body can dominate in some way. The strategic effectiveness of ritualization lies in this unarticulated production of a ritualized body that is able to embody and produce these schemes without bringing any of the operations to the level of explicit discourse. The process is thus a circular one in which the ritualized body possesses a "practical mastery" of the strategic schemes for ritualization, for drawing contrasts mutely embedded in the body that can afford the agent a sense of contrast and control. Bourdieu stresses that this ritual strategy is not self-conscious knowledge of the rules of ritual, rather it is a "cultivated disposition"—a "sense" of ritual—embedded in the instincts of the acculturated body (1977:87-95,118-120).

This, then, is the distinctive dynamic of ritual practice. Ritualization is a way to generate privileged contrasts between the acts being performed and those being contrasted or mimed so as to produce ritualized bodies—actors imbued with the

dispositions to engender practices structured by such privileged contrasts—which are perceived in turn to promote the restructuring of the larger cultural milieu. How does ritualization produce the ritualized body? To quote Bourdieu:

It is in the dialectical relationship between the body and a space structured according to mythico-ritual oppositions that one finds the form par excellence of the structural apprenticeship which leads to the em-bodying of the structures of the world, that is, the appropriating by the world of a body thus enabled to appropriate the world (1977:89).

In other words, through a series of physical movements ritual practices construct an environment structured by practical schemes of privileged contrast. The construction of this environment is simultaneously the molding of the bodies within it—a process perceived, if at all, as values and experiences impressed upon the person from without. Thus, through the orchestration in time of loose but strategically organized oppositions, in which a few oppositions quietly come to dominate others, the social body internalizes the principles of the environment being generated. Inscribed within the social body, these principles enable the ritualized person to generate strategic schemes that can appropriate or dominate other sociocultural situations. Hence, the distinctiveness or ritualization as a type of social practice involves schemes of privileged contrasting as well as the process of internalization and objectification that occurs mutely in the interaction of a body and a ritually structured environment.

### Ritual Power

Bourdieu suggests that the "practical mastery" invested in the ritualized body—or what he terms "cosmogonic practice"—is an effective social practice for people "who cannot afford the luxury of logical speculation, mystical effusions, or metaphysical anxiety" (1977:115). To possess this practical



ritual mastery is to possess the tools for ordering and reordering the world, for perceiving and not perceiving, for evaluating, for unifying, and for differentiating—not as rules to follow, but as a flexible social instinct for what is possible and effective. As such, ritual mastery is the ability to generate culture deftly and appropriately nuanced and in a peculiar tension with other forms of cultural production. Apart from contrasting ritual strategies with the strategies used by scholars to claim theoretical knowledge of others, Bourdieu goes no further in delineating the circumstances in which ritual strategies of social production emerge as an option, whether effective or not. For Foucault and Comaroff, on the other hand, this social issue is more explicit.

Foucault finds that "the techniques, technologies or strategies of power" exist no place else but as fixed in "rituals" that generate the body as the "space" where minute and local social practices are linked, or put in relation, to the large-scale organization of power (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:111). Foucault speaks of "meticulous rituals of power" that produce a body that internalizes and reproduces the schemes that localize power. He describes not only how the body is invested with and defined by power relations, but also how the body itself is transformed by changes in the way power relations are ritually constructed in it (Foucault 1977; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:109-119). Power, therefore, is neither a matter for coercion nor a thing to be possessed and deployed by particular institutions. It resides only in practices themselves, that is, in the strategic acts of the social body.

. . . [I]t is always the body that is at issue—the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission. . . . [T]he body is . . . directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs (Foucault 1977:25).

Thus for Foucault power is what comes to exist by the shaping of the social body through ritualization. The "economies of power" that result can be analyzed only in terms of how various forms of ritualization have constructed the body throughout history.

Foucault specifically explores a shift in "rituals of punishment," from public executions in which the power of the state was displayed for all by being carved upon the body of the criminal, to the hidden rituals of discipline central to the prison system wherein new forms of power more effectively came to reside in the social bodies forged there. His analysis brings a whole new body of rituals to our attention and provides rich detail on the use of space, temporal routinization, and physical movement in the production of ritualized bodies. Of most immediate interest, however, is Foucault's implicit assumption that "ritual technologies," as the means for defining the body and localizing power relations, are the basis of an individually internalized economy of power. He thus suggests that rituals are those activities intrinsic to the creation of the social body that mold the body as an autonomous local sphere for the struggle of social forces—a struggle that defines the person in relation to the system of power he or she has internalized. This perspective constitutes a provocative reformulation of ritual in terms of the construction of the body and the delineation of power.

While Foucault demonstrates the embodiment of more constricting power relations in the development of modern rites of discipline, Comaroff explores ritual practices as modes of resistance to the large-scale organization of power in the state of South Africa. She compares the precolonial rites of the Tshidi with the rituals of the postcolonial native Zionist churches. This comparison underscores how each ritual complex constructs a social body befitting the specific historical circumstances in which these rituals operate, each addressing different concerns and ritualizing different contrasts. Yet in both political contexts, ritual affords a type of social empowerment. Specifically, Comaroff finds that ritual affords

the orchestrated expression—and therein the symbolic domination—of key experiences of contradiction between the assumptions of the cultural order and the conditions of everyday life (1985:1-5,81).

In precolonial rites the social body was ritually constituted in the image of the hegemonic cultural order, with native classifications of gender, space, and time inscribed in mnemonic form in the human body (1985:8,81). The post-colonial ritual practices of the Zionist churches, on the other hand, within the context of competing ritual formulations by other churches and competing forms of social practice by the nonreligious, attempt to construct a social body that is a metonym of the social world—a body repaired and refashioned through rites of healing and thus invested with schemes to "repair" an aberrant social order. Comaroff notes that although these schemes have little impact on the large-scale organization of power in South Africa, they effectively provide a vision of the dominant political order as sick and potentially curable (1985:8-9). Thus for Comaroff the post-colonial ritualized body is a subversive one, struggling to appropriate and control key symbols.

Comaroff draws attention to an important feature of ritual practice that is characteristic of its power and the limits of its power when she observes that ritualization replicates much of what it seeks to transform. Yet the replication of a "sick" hierarchy of power in rites that seek to cure it simultaneously functions to defy the penetration of the oppressive social order into the native's sense of the natural reality of the world (1985:261). This ritual replication affords a form of resistance that does not threaten the resister with physical destruction or cultural anomie.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the obvious contrasts between Foucault's description of the nearly overpowering rituals of discipline and Comaroff's description of the modest empowerment of rituals of resistance, their analyses share some important ideas about ritual and power. For both ritual is the social construction of a body by which "the person" is afforded a particular sense of identity vis-à-vis other groups in which power is also

localized. This is the construction of an identity that simultaneously empowers the person, by indicating his or her individuality and the basis of it, and limits or constricts the person, by defining that individuality as circumscribed by others, that is, as located within particular tensions making up the economy of power. Thus for both Foucault and Comaroff ritual practices are those social practices that localize power relations within the social body, creating an economy or hierarchy of power relations inscribed as a whole within each person.

Two other points are common to the theories of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Comaroff. The first is the idea that ritualization is concerned with contradictions. All three theorists explore how ritual practices express fundamental experiences of contradiction by setting up a pragmatic set of terms that cast the contradiction as a basic dichotomy underlying the rite. The ritual never names the contradiction, yet it provides the means for the body to embody and dominate it. Through ritual the contradiction is not resolved, but the experience of contradiction, as contained by the orchestrated symbols, is regularly transformed into the basic constructions of the culture—for Bourdieu, the superior mastery of cultural knowledge and instincts over theory; for Foucault, the shifting locus of the self and ultimately the human sciences; for Comaroff, the diagnosis of illness and the promise of healing.

Thus ritualization cannot be regarded simply as a means for the human cloning of social power relations, for society's appropriation of the person, or for the person's appropriation of the constituent principles of the social order. Rather, ritualization clears the space in which such dynamics can take place. That is, it is the creation of an arena for the interplay of forces—an interplay that delineates the social body vis-à-vis the larger social organization of power by inscribing, or localizing, their configurations in the very dispositions of the social body.

A second point is equally important to these theories of ritual and power. As structured and structuring social

practices, and as the localization or substantiation of an economy of power, ritual practices produce their historical milieu each moment. The social or cultural context of ritual does not exist separately from the act; the context is created in the act. In other words, ritualization is *historical* practice—historically structured, historically effective, and history-producing. Interpreting ritual is thus not a matter of establishing cultural referents or experiences that a rite enacts or expresses, nor is it a matter of decoding an internal logic. For Bourdieu and Comaroff in particular, interpretation consists of restoring ritual's practical necessity—the material (economic and social) conditions of the production of these practices and the collective understanding of the practical function they serve.

### Conclusion

The distinctiveness of ritualization as a form of social practice lies in its particular strategy of power. Similarly, the distinctiveness of the power of ritualization lies in its particular strategy as a form of social practice. Ritualization addresses a situation, namely, the experience of a contradiction between the cultural order and the conditions of the historical moment. It does not see what it does to this situation, which is to redefine it. This redefinition is the production of a ritualized body with instinctive schemes for perception and evaluation that can dominate the contradiction. Ritual does not talk about the contradiction, nor about dominating the historical circumstances that engender it. Although far from silent, ritual is a particularly mute form of social production. By virtue of the interaction of a body and a structured environment, ritual works to dispense with conceptualizations or articulations of the relation between its means and ends (Bourdieu 1977:116). Ritual may thus be the most powerful arena in which the processes of internalization and objectification can remain relatively unconscious of themselves as such. It is from this perspective that we need to reassess the ideological aspects of ritual. Ritual is more than a medium for the simple domination of one group by another.

Ritual practices can also afford resistance within acts of subordination.

When is ritualization an effective strategy of limited empowerment? Although this question is beyond the scope of the present analysis, some suggestions emerge from the foregoing discussion that might be developed further. Ritualization may be a particularly effective strategy for the social construction of a limited form of empowerment when explicit discourse is impossible or counterproductive, or when consensus is more assured on the basis of shared assumptions about the universe than on the basis of shared discourse. It may also be effective when the power to be localized is understood to derive from beyond individuals and the group as a whole, when pluralism is unknown as is any alternative to the economy of power at least minimally replicated in ritualization, or when domination or resistance must be particularly mute even to itself in order to be able to rationalize continued domination or resistance. Finally, ritualization may be effective as a strategy of limited empowerment when the contradictions to be domesticated are not ones that threaten beliefs, values, or personal identity, but ones that threaten the very possibility of beliefs, values, and personal identity.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although this generalized description of social practice draws on the formulations of the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1979:19-22), it represents the basic ideas variously elaborated by Bourdieu, Foucault, and Comaroff.

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu takes pains to note that rituals are not composed of unique acts that occur only in the context of rites. Rather, his work implies that if ritual practices are distinctive social practices, then they will be distinctive either in terms of the types of schemes that are internalized and reproduced by the social body, or in the way these practices involve the mediation of the body (1977). This essay attempts to indicate the distinctiveness of ritual practice on both grounds, while also characterizing its more general nature as social practice.

<sup>3</sup> See also Smith's "economy of signification" (1987:114).

<sup>4</sup> This analysis of the ritual logic of the Christian meal is developed more fully in Bell 1989, while the larger issues and propositions raised in this essay are developed more fully in my forthcoming book, *Strategic Practices: Ritual in Thought and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Precolonial rituals generally involve the synchronic ordering of cosmic realms by which the microcosmic social body internalizes the schemes for controlling and restoring this order. In many postcolonial rites, on the other hand, the strategy of healing dominates: the alienation of a diseased or possessed limb replicates the macrocosmic power structure, even as the restoration of health or practice of preventative rites engenders the schemes for a vision of restoring the defended social body. It would be interesting to compare these two forms of ritual as practiced in South Africa with the pre- and postcolonial rites of the American Plains Indians, for example.

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