

THE ARCHETYPAL ACTIONS OF RITUAL

CAROLINE HUMPHREY AND JAMES LAIDLAW, 1994

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Can a theory be extrapolated based solely on a single ethnographic study? Can the examination of a single form of ritual suffice to create a blanket research method which is applicable to all forms of ritual? Is meaning merely a construct which participants lull themselves into believing that ritual possesses? And does intentionality have an effect on the consideration of meaning within ritual? I will attempt to elucidate several aspects of the responses to these questions within the context of James Laidlaw and Caroline Humphrey's work, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual*. I will also comment upon and demonstrate the difficulties inherent in the creation of the authors' model of ritual theory.

By definition, a scientific theory is a framework within which all aspects of a specific topic may be explained. It is the best model to date, one which has been scrutinized and found to be most true. A hypothesis, in contrast, is an idea of how a topic might be explained. It is not yet thoroughly explored or tested, and it remains to be seen whether it will stand up to all tests necessary to verify it as true for all cases to date. Laidlaw and Humphrey propose what they call a new theory of ritual, one which they feel is more fully explicative of ritual, compared with other models currently working in the anthropological world. They create this theory based largely on a single case study – that of the Jain faith of India, using informants' responses as the preponderance of evidence to support their new idea. I will demonstrate that, while some of their modes of thinking about the ritual in question (the *puja*) are indeed unique, application of a single ethnographic study is insufficient to cover the broader topic of ritual throughout the world.

I will briefly describe what I believe are the two most important elements of the Jain rite which Laidlaw and Humphrey stressed as keys to understanding ritual: meaning, and the relationship between action and intentionality. I will also discuss the authors' view of what they call the 'ritual stance' or 'ritual commitment'. And I will conclude with an elucidation of the problems I encountered in the formulation of their theory.

Clearly, most people in both the lay and anthropological communities would agree that ritual has meaning, on some level, to its participants. In fact, I believe most would also agree that if ritual were lacking in meaning, no one would bother to participate in the first place. Laidlaw and Humphrey believe that this is not necessarily the case. They argue that while participants believe there is underlying meaning to the rituals they perform, in actuality there is none. They assert that “people attempt to counteract the meaninglessness of ritual by imposing religious meanings which they have been told about, have read about, or have thought up for themselves” (p. 6). The authors base this conclusion on informants’ testimonies. When asked, participants gave often widely differing explanations as to why they performed the *puja*, prompting the authors to believe that this indicated a true consensus of meaning. For them, this demonstrated that there was, in fact, no meaning to the participants’ performance.

Humphrey and Laidlaw also note that anthropology has in general neglected looking at actual acts of worship as their own entities, instead favoring a more holistic view. This is seen as contributing to the lack of understanding of the meaning of ritual (p. 80). As an antidote to this more traditional way of thinking, the authors have offered their theory as an alternative that they believe is more applicable, and will shed more light upon the subject.

Further, they believe that meaning is also not “provided by the acts themselves”, and state that their “main objective...is to establish that there is an important sense in which the action in general has meaning, but ritualized action does not” (p. 91). But if ritualized acts have no meaning, is there no mitigating circumstance which can give one meaning? For Humphrey and Laidlaw, the relationship between action and intentionality is the key to understanding this aspect of ritual.

For the authors’ respondents, acts within the context of the *puja* ritual were merely empty movements; “meanings must be put into ritual, to infuse its emptiness with spiritual significance” (p. 2). For the participants, the most important aspect of the rite is the internal spiritual attitude and transformation which is the essence and purpose of the acts. Humphrey and Laidlaw, therefore, view intentionality as the cornerstone to understanding ritual and placing meaning within it.

Where, then, do the intentions lie in ritual actions? The authors argue it is within the context of ritualization. “Action is ritualized if the acts of which it is composed are constituted not by the intentions which the actor has in performing them, but by prior stipulation” (p.97). For Humphrey and Laidlaw, this does not negate the absence of meaning, but puts the meaning squarely in the hands of the agent as he or she is performing. They describe this as the ‘ritual commitment’.

A “ritual commitment [is] a particular stance with respect to [one’s] own action” (p.88); it is a desire to participate in a proscribed action, whether one believes there is any meaning behind it. Participation shows others of the group that one is willing to comply with the stated and unstated precepts concerning the act. It shows solidarity with the group, and implies a belief in the same ideology. One’s intentions are never questioned, only assumed to agree with those of the others present. It may indeed be the case that all participants believe, but it is not required. The only important factor is whether the acts are performed properly, according to proscription.

But that having been said, when a participant uses a widely defined act as a ritual performance, the agent is no longer the author of their own acts (p. 99). The argument is that “it is you as yourself who actually performs these acts...who constitutes your action as ritualized and thus *make it the case* that you are no longer, for a while, author of your acts” (p. 99). The authors believe that in following the strict guidelines of the actual performance of the acts, you are too busy following to be able to make the action truly your own. If you are pre-occupied with “getting it right”, you give up your autonomy in the act, which would give it meaning; “the actor...mimics an idea of what should be done” (p. 103). But, ironically, with the loss of authorship of your actions, Humphrey and Laidlaw believe you also lose meaning.

With these observations in mind, what is the theory which the authors propose? They see it as “a new *kind* of theory”, one in which “ritual is [discerned] as a quality which action can come to have – a special way in which acts may be performed” (p. 64). Humphrey and Laidlaw also believe that “cultural symbolism...is particularly likely to accrete around ritualized acts...having social functions” (p. 180-1). And, lastly, they argue that “it is better to see the discursive models and meanings of rituals as one of the possible responses to ritual, rather than as underlying its constitution” (p.265).

While some of the authors’ perceptions have merit, I believe their theory is fundamentally flawed for a number of reasons. Some of these include: the use of one ethnographic study alone, consensus as a determinant of meaning, and their criticism of other anthropological models’ use of informant information. I will attempt to discuss these flaws, and show how they create a shaky foundation for the authors’ theory.

Beginning with the manner of the development of their theory, I think the use of only one ethnographic example is a major detriment to their argument. It is widely accepted among physical science practitioners that one does not proclaim a theory to be accurate after only one experiment. This is true, also, among

anthropologists. One case study is woefully inadequate to demonstrate any theoretical model, as human culture is a highly varied entity. It is much more efficacious to use a case study to refute a theory, since in practice, it only takes one exception to any scientific rule to cast doubt upon its accuracy. If Humphrey and Laidlaw had used the Jain study as an example to question a current theory, it would have worked very well. However, it is highly premature to posit a new theory based on such scant evidence.

Another flaw is Humphrey and Laidlaw's use of consensus among participants as a determinant of true meaning within a ritual. They say that "most influential anthropological studies of ritual have tended...to portray closed, local communities with a shared culture and symbolic code, and symbolic consensus has come to be seen as characteristic of ritual" (p. 80). This is true in many cases. The authors use a similar tactic, however, when arguing their theory. They stress throughout the work that they did not find a consensus, and that this lack indicates no underlying meaning. But this tack is simply a mirror image of the polemic they argue against. It is illogical to argue that one extreme is incorrect, and then proceed to say that the opposite extreme is correct. In a world where culture comes in infinite variety, the correct approach often takes the middle ground, with peripheral extremes still allowed for.

The final flaw I will mention involves the authors' criticism of researchers' use of informant information. In aiming for honesty in reporting, Humphrey and Laidlaw complain that not all anthropologists use informant information appropriately. They feel that "[a]nthropological interpretations have commonly covered up ...unhelpful replies in order to produce a reading from their own deductions" (p. 180). This is also likely a true statement. However, I feel the authors are guilty of using the same device. There are many instances in this work where the authors note their informants' responses to queries regarding the meaning of the *puja* they have performed. In all cases, only those which represent disparate views are mentioned. One would assume that there were at least some instances where responses were, if not identical, at least similar enough to constitute an agreement on the meaning of the rite. If so, why were these not noted as well? If Humphrey and Laidlaw wished to accurately represent their informants' responses, and if they felt so strongly about honesty in reporting among anthropologists, then similar answers should also have been noted.

In sum, I believe that Humphrey and Laidlaw have made some interesting comments regarding ritual, which should be further developed through study by others as well as the authors. Is ritual truly meaningless? How important a role does the relationship between action and intentionality play? These are intriguing questions, and their book should serve as another vehicle for examining them. But

as to whether or not their conclusions truly can be said to constitute a theory, that is another matter. It would seem that by only relying on a single case study, their notions would be more appropriately deemed an hypothesis. It remains to be seen whether it can be shown to elucidate ritual in other cultures beyond the Jain. But their ideas are certainly useful in giving yet another frame of reference for study.

RITUAL AND RELIGION IN THE MAKING OF HUMANITY ROY A. RAPPAPORT, 2004

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Roy A. Rappaport systematically presents an intriguing theory on ritual and religion in his book Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity. The book is a culmination of Rappaport's life's work. He insists that a reader should view this book as a work in progress, because it does not say exactly what he wanted it to say (p. xxi). Rappaport argues his theory on ritual and religion using an ecological and structuralist approach. He provides extensive cohesive descriptions using evolutionary theory, systems and communications theory, information theory, semiotics, and more. He provides illustrations from anthropology, history, philosophy, and comparative religions, such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Judaism. He cites from his own field work done with the Maring people from the highlands of New Guinea, and from other authors who have studied religion and ritual with other cultures, such as the Sioux, Navajo, or Australian Aborigines. Rappaport says, "Because ritual is taken to be ground from which religious conceptions spring, the preponderance of the book – chapters 2 through 12 – will be devoted to its analysis. These chapters will, as it were, "unpack" a definition of ritual..." (p.3). In the "unpacking," of his definition of ritual, Rappaport presents one successful piece out of the anthropological theoretical pie when his theory is kept within its ecological, structuralist, and evolutionary context. In this paper, I will focus on a few key elements that Rappaport uses in his literary style that make his theory cohesive and his book successful.

To "unpack" his theory, Rappaport provides the reader with a skillfully written definition of ritual. The literary style he uses to convey his definition seems to be a tool for understanding and he systematically defines ritual in an unfolding or evolving manner. Rappaport predominantly uses a formal causal or structural argument (p. 28). He defines ritual twice, first in a