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The Rhetoric of Ritual

"Till the present day, the History of Religions has survived on a baggage of unclear ideas." This *dictum* by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss in the *Année Sociologique* for 1902–03 (repr. Mauss 1983: 138) is certainly less true today than it was a hundred years ago. But when it comes to the "unclear ideas" they had in mind: religion and magic, prayer and incantation, sacrifice and offering, myth and legend, god and spirit etc., we have to admit that unclear ideas are still around and often blur the description of empirical observations. And what is worse: our discipline tends to abandon – not this inherited vocabulary, but – the theoretical discussions which might lend some clarity to these notions or perhaps supersede them with new and less ambiguous concepts. During the hundred years that have passed, attempts have been made both to abandon and to clarify the traditional stock of ambiguous and overlapping concepts, and in this way at least, a number of important critical points have been made – perhaps so many that we have more or less lost the ambition of Hubert and Mauss: to establish "natural classes of facts" (Mauss 1983: 138) to supersede the unclear ideas. They had done precisely this for sacrifice in their famous essay from 1898, probably still the best general work on the subject. What they set out to do in 1902 was to extend their theory to what was – and sometimes still is – called magic. They were aware that their researches tended towards a general theory of rites, but their primary concern in the *General Theory of Magic* they published was with the social setting of so-called magic. Since they had convincingly shown the collective nature and basis of sacrifice (with general implications for communal ritual), it was important for them to ascertain whether the private rites they called magic would conform to the pattern already established for communal rites.

Hubert and Mauss were aware that the distinction between magic and communal rites was not, as some later anthropologists believed, a matter of efficacy. Efficacy is a constituent of ritual as such, and they rightly defined rites as "actes traditionels d'une efficacité *sui generis*" (Mauss 1983: 12). The main result of their inquiry was that generally speaking private, individual rites conform to the pattern already established for communal rites, i.e. the "magician" uses (or usurps) the collective representations also

employed in communal ritual. The only substantial basis for a distinction between magic and communal ritual, then, remains the social setting. Communal rites are communal; magic rites are private, but in both cases the rites make use of collective representations in very much the same way. *Vis-à-vis* this state of affairs, Hubert and Mauss perceived two "natural classes of facts": communal rites and magic rites. Thus, in an endeavour to replace unclear ideas with more clear-cut ones, they ended up supporting one of the most dubious distinctions ever made, that between magic and religion.

Disregarding for a moment all the difficulties we might nowadays have with the idea of "natural classes of facts", would it not be equally, or even more natural, to perceive *one* class of facts: rites, or the use of collective representations for the sake of efficacy? That would mean to pursue the other line of inquiry, of which Hubert and Mauss were aware, but which was not their immediate concern, that of a general theory of ritual, communal as well as private. It would also mean that we need a name for that use of collective representations for the sake of efficacy which constitutes ritual no matter what is its social context or setting. The name I propose for this purpose is the rhetoric of ritual. Rhetoric refers to form, but not only to the various embellishments of speech through alliteration, metaphors etc. An important and in fact much more fundamental part of rhetoric, classical and modern, is the whole staging of the speech and the points to be made. Greek and Roman rhetoric distinguished *heuresis/inventio*, the research for an adequate topos, as an important part of an orator's preparations. The word *topos*, lit. "place", is difficult to translate into one modern concept. It may in fact sometimes be translated as "commonplace", for orators often had recourse to banalities and shared motifs. It may even sometimes coincide with the Durkheimian notion of "collective representations". But above all, the *topos* is the motif that stages the argument. It is, of course, also a topic on which the orator speaks, but what the orator looks for in his research is not just some subject matter to speak about; it is a leading topic, which may serve as a point of departure or even as the plot of his speech.

The rhetoric of ritual is clearly different from the rhetoric of politics or law. In parliaments and public assemblies, as well as in the courtroom, the aim of rhetoric is to convince or persuade. Ritual, however, is formally constructed to achieve its aim directly, without human intermediaries. Ritual is performance and enactment, not information that will motivate listeners to promote its aim. It is true that a ritual may deeply impress participants and possibly motivate them in various ways. But that is not the formal aim of ritual. In an earlier contribution, at the Donner Symposium of 1991, I argued that the formative principle of ritual is efficacy (cf. Podemann Sørensen 1993: 20). Local and individual confidence in the abil-

ity of a ritual to produce a certain outcome varies a great deal. But rituals are invariably designed to work directly on the world, without human intermediaries. The rhetoric of ritual is thus a rhetoric of efficacy, not a rhetoric of persuasion. And ritual efficacy is a matter of rhetoric, not necessarily a local belief, and certainly not a fact that the scholar should account for beyond the study of rhetoric.

In her two important books on ritual, Catherine Bell speaks of ritual efficacy also in the sense of positive latent functions (Bell 1992: 210, cf. 140f.; 1997: 81–83). She is inspired by Bourdieu (1982: 121–34) who points out that the real importance of the male circumcision ritual is not what it does to the boy, but the fact that it contributes to shape a world, in which male and female are thoroughly distinguished. The "true efficacy", as it were, of the rite is thus its contribution to social structure. This contribution, however, heavily depends on the public acceptance of a formal rhetoric, according to which this rite is the act that makes the boy a man. Public acceptance is, at least in some societies, a variable, and it would therefore not be superfluous to distinguish between the formal efficacy of ritual rhetoric and the actual role of ritual in shaping a culturally postulated social world.[1] The latter field of study is certainly an important one, but one of the points in speaking of the rhetoric of ritual is to single out exactly those formal features of ritual texts and actions that postulate efficacy.

The simplest type of ritual rhetoric is the mere postulate that the ritual is able to cause the desired outcome. An ancient Egyptian spell for the preparation of an amulet for the protection of a child thus addresses any ghost that might attack the child:

šp.k! s3.w pw!	Vanish! This is a ritual protection!
	(Erman 1901: 39.)[2]

The explicit reference to ritual protection and, by implication, ritual efficacy within the ritual is highly unusual. The regular rhetoric of efficacy may be equally simple, but is much more implicit. The following Danish ritual from 1665 against mice, which eat up people's stores, is my favourite example: on a piece of tin or copper is engraved the picture of a rat with a mouse in its mouth. In order to activate the piece before it is buried in the middle of the yard, wrapped in a rat's skin, the following spell is recited over it:

Ieg tuinger alle Mus	I coerce all mice
i dette Hus,	On this farm,

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1   There are rituals, e.g. marriage, where the two kinds of "efficacy" coincide, but also rituals where they are much less closely related.
2   For the transl. cf. Roeder 1915: 119.

at ingen paa sit Sted   That none in its place
skal blive til Fortræd   Shall do any harm.
(Ohrt 1917: 320.)

This ritual text implicitly stages the speech of the user in a position from which he may exert control over nature, at least as far as the mice are concerned. The sentences that state the purpose of the rite also serve to situate the speech and the action of the ritual in a privileged position that makes for its efficacy. This way of implicitly situating speech may be compared to a feature characteristic of fiction: the so-called presupposition error. Consider the following opening passage of a novel:

"Olga!" the baron exclaimed, suddenly looking across the Corso towards a tall, elegant lady, whose features and dress betrayed her Russian origin...

In these passages some acquaintance with the baron and the whole scene of the story (obviously somewhere in Italy) is implicitly, but erroneously, presupposed in the reader. Olga is unknown to the reader, but obviously known to the baron. The reader is already anxious to learn more about this mysterious woman from an earlier period of the baron's life and hardly notices how two definite articles and a proper name got him into this story. The implicit presupposition of the reader's closeness to the milieu of the story situates the narration and makes for the reader's realistic and sympathetic interest in the events of the novel.

Ritual texts have no reader in the sense fiction has, but they nevertheless implicitly situate themselves and the ritual action they accompany in an analogous manner. I shall speak of such implicit claims to a privileged, efficacious position of speech and action in rituals as *situating elements*. There would be little sense in setting up a rhetoric of ritual if these situating elements were always as simple as we have just seen in the mouse-formula. But as a matter of fact, such naked postulates of efficacy are very rare and represent an absolute minimum of ritual rhetoric. The vast majority of rituals elaborate and support this postulate in numerous ways. Some of them are already well known from comparative studies of ritual, e.g. the use of myth in ritual. Whenever a myth or some element of a myth is re-enacted or otherwise displayed in ritual, this serves to situate the action at the beginning of things and sometimes also to provide an example of the outcome of the ritual. Myth in itself often embraces both the chaotic state of not yet being and the resulting cosmic order. These aspects of myth, ritual, and result are very explicit in texts recited at the Maori sweet-potato planting ritual: a small part of the field is delimited as a sacred field, and this is where the ritual, prototype or exemplar potatoes are planted. They are carried in a basket to the field, which is addressed in the following manner:

Be pregnant, be pregnant!
Right into the country, right out to the sea...
(Prytz Johansen 1958: 147.)

This is a representation of the intended outcome of the ritual, expressed in terms, which are continuous with the mythical exemplar of the ritual, but also emphasize how results of the ritual on the sacred field will spread throughout the country. The imperative is a postulate of efficacy, quite analogous to "I coerce all mice..." It is further elaborated as the text continues:

This is a carrying which carries,
This is a lifting which lifts.
Who is lifting?
It is Rongo who is lifting,
Rongo-uakina, Rongo-who-steals.
(Prytz Johansen 1958: 147.)

These lines elaborate the situating element of the ritual, insisting that the action going on is the primeval deed of Rongo, when he stole the sweet potatoes, hid them in his penis and impregnated his wife with them. The act of carrying the potatoes into the field in a basket is "a carrying which carries", i.e. an efficacious carrying because it is formally situated as Rongo's primeval deed, which first brought the potatoes to the Maori. The logic of this rhetorical staging of the action is that at the very beginning of things it is possible to act upon the world. The ritual assumes the character of a new creation, because it situates itself at the turning point from where things come into being.

Constructors of such rituals may almost be said to follow the advice given to the daoist adept in the *Daode jing*: "Deal with things in their state of not yet being" (Ch. 64, transl. in Waley 1977). Although ritual is not ultimately the subject of the *Daode jing*, it is conceivable that the book exploits traditional ways of thinking about ritual. The idea of dealing with things in their state of not yet being is closely connected with the daoist idea of *wu wei*, "non-action" or "non-intervention". In classical daoism, *wu wei* is contrasted with the Confucian idea that a very conscious work of cultivation, based on ancient traditions, will restore order in the society and the world. To the daoist mystic it is important not to engage in any effort to save society or the world, but to let things happen, as it were, of themselves. In this way the *dao* will prevail and the mystic will achieve the bliss of union with the dao, "without really trying", i.e. through *wu wei*. There is, however, a Confucian text in which *wu wei* appears in the context of a theory of ritual:

> The master said: "If there was a ruler who achieved order without taking any action (*wu wei*), it was, perhaps, *Shun*. There was nothing for him to do but to hold himself in a respectful posture and to face due south. (*Lun Yu* 15, 5; transl. in Lau 1986: 132.)

An idea common to Confucianism and Daoism is that in ancient times, the sage kings ruled without effort, by their mere *de*, "virtue". This text envisages a prerequisite for the rule in question: the correct ritual posture. In his classic interpretation of Confucius, Herbert Fingarette (1972) pointed out how crucial the idea of ritual efficacy was in Confucius' vision of a harmonious society. While later Confucians seem to have adopted an almost functionalist view of ritual, Confucius himself insisted on the efficacy of traditional rites. His belief in the ritual competence of the ancients and its potential as a means of government appears from another passage in the *Lun Yu*:

> Someone asked about the theory of the *ti* sacrifice. The Master said: "It is not something I understand, for whoever understands it will be able to manage the Empire as easily as if he had it here", pointing to his palm. (*Lun Yu* 3, 11; transl. in Lau 1986: 69.)

Being in a position to manage the Empire as if it was in one's hand is a ritual position, very much like the position of *Shun* on his throne, facing south, in the correct ritual posture. It is this position which is characterized as *wu wei*, "without taking action". To Confucius and his time, the secret of this position was lost, and all there was to do was to study the tradition and adhere to it in all one's doings in order to restore the harmony of the past.

In Daoism, *wu wei* becomes a matter of the inner life and the attitude of the sage, but it is still understood as a position that allows the dao to be realized in the world. It imposes nothing on the world, but makes for a new beginning and thereby a fulfilment of the immanent order of the world. This is well expressed in the daoist paradox of doing non-action and thereby leaving nothing undone, "(wei) wuwei ze wu buwei". In chapter 48 of the *Daode jing*, Arthur Waley rendered the paradox and its immediate context thus:

> The practice of Tao consists in subtracting day by day,
> Subtracting and yet again subtracting
> Till one has reached inactivity.
> But by this very inactivity,
> Everything can be activated.
> (Waley 1977: 201.)

Again, this text is not specifically about ritual, but deals with daoist prac-
tice in general. Anyway, if we take "inactivity" *(wuwei)* in Waley's inter-
pretation as the turning point, the privileged position of ritual speech and
action, we may understand the text as a statement on the universal effi-
cacy of counting down to this ritual point zero.

As we have seen in the Maori planting ritual, such a rhetorical count-
down is possible through the use of myth, which is about the beginning of
things. When the ritual situation is identified as the very beginning of po-
tatoes, the ritual situates itself at the turning point from which new pota-
toes may be produced. The Maori planting ritual is a communal and
calendrical ritual, and the literature of our discipline is rich in examples of
a similar character, in which a mythical exemplar or prototype secures the
efficacy of the rites. But the same countdown to a mythical exemplar pat-
tern is also found in crisis rites for more particular purposes, e.g. in what is
still sometimes called magic. Let us consider an ancient Egyptian formula
to prevent crocodiles from attacking a person or a head of cattle in the
water. It exploits the myth of Osiris, who was thrown into the Nile by Seth:

> Osiris is lying in the water, the Eye of Horus being with him and the great
> Sun-beetle spreading over him. (...) O ye who are in the water! Your mouth
> shall be sealed by Re, your throat shall be choked by Sekhmet, your tongue
> shall be cut out by Thoth, your eyes shall be blinded by Hike! Yonder four
> mighty gods who were in charge of the protection of Osiris, they are the
> ones who will be in charge of the protection of what is lying in the water, all
> men, all cattle that lie in the water, on this day of protection. (Sander-Hansen
> 1956: 31–32.)

The regressive, situating element of the ritual formula is the myth of Osiris
lying in the water, protected by the four gods. The productive element
almost takes the form of a legal argument that, pursuant to the mythical
precedent, anybody who falls into the water will be under the protection
of the four gods. The crocodiles are adressed euphemistically as "ye who
are in the water" as a dramatization of the reciter's command of the situa-
tion, not, of course, to engage in an act of persuading or intimidating the
crocodiles.

Such coercive formulas or spells are often contrasted with prayer to
make up that distinction between religion and magic which has haunted
ritual studies since the days of Sir James Frazer. This distinction is really a
matter of religious polemics. Frazer refers to early man's belief in magical
efficacy as "this truly Catholic creed" (Frazer 1936, I: 235), contrasting it
with the later religious attitude in prayer and offerings which seek to win
the consent of gods for their purpose. Probably unwittingly, he thereby
paid homage to the central Protestant idea of "Ohnmacht des Gebets", the
powerlessness of prayer, as the ultimate religious situation of man. One of

the most disastrous consequences of this distinction was that prayer, and sometimes ritual in general, came to be regarded as an act of persuasive communication with superhuman agencies. But the seafaring nation to which Sir James belonged has a Common Prayer Book with a chapter for use at sea. It prescribes the following prayer to be used in storm:

> O Most powerful and glorious Lord God, at whose command the winds blow, and lift up the waves of the sea, and who stillest the rage thereof; We thy creatures, but miserable sinners, do in this our great distress cry unto thee for help: Save, Lord, or else we perish. We confess, when we have been safe, and seen all things quiet about us, we have forgot thee our God, and refused to hearken to the still voice of thy word, and to obey thy commandments; But now we see, how terrible thou art in all thy works of wonder; the great God to be feared above all; And therefore we adore thy Divine Majesty, acknowledging thy power, and imploring thy goodness. Help, Lord, and save us for thy mercy's sake in Jesus Christ thy Son, our Lord. Amen. (*Book of Common Prayer* n.d.: 352.)

There is nothing here to offend the principle of "Ohnmacht des Gebets". In fact, the prayer is one long exhibition, or better, a dramatization of this idea. It is also conspicuously a countdown: those who pray characterize themselves as miserable sinners, whose only refuge in their distress is the Lord. Before him they stand, empty-handed and powerless, without any religious merit, nay even with the humble confession that they have been religiously forgetful and are right now extemporizing the worship that was always due. The regressive, situating element of the ritual is this countdown to the very powerlessness of prayer, the turning point in the Christian relation with God and in that tension between sin and grace which in the relevant Christian tradition is the source of salvation. The productive element is the wish to be saved, backed up by the example of Christ as the universal soteriological paradigm in the sense of the fourth gospel.

Just as the Egyptian formula identified the present crisis with a mythological pattern, the Anglican prayer reduces distress at sea to a traditional pattern of sin and salvation. In both cases the patterns of religious representations were mobilized to count down to the turning point and obtain ritual efficacy. The religious representations were not information, communicated to crocodiles or to God, but means to secure that efficacy. Rituals may represent communication even with superhuman beings, and to a person sincerely engaged in prayer it is, of course, an act of communication, just as to the Maori, the planting of the ritual potatoes *is* Rongo's primeval act of impregnating his wife with the stolen potatoes. But viewed from outside, both the supplicant and his god are part of the ritual, which has no further addressee.

In fact, to address a superhuman being as happens not only in prayer, but also in hymns and incantations, is already to situate speech and acts somewhere beyond the normal human condition. It is to obtain a privileged, and therefore efficacious, speech situation, which may imply that the matter in hand is reduced to its "state of not yet being". There is, however, also another, equally well known way of counting down. The liminal period in rites of passage has much in common with mythical beginnings, above all with the state of not yet being. Victor Turner (1967: 93–111; 1969) has given an excellent description the rich symbolism of liminality: inverted structures, suspense of distinctions and borderlines, situation of the ritual object "betwixt and between", in an intermediate ("interstructural") stage between the clearly defined structures that make for its preritual and its postritual status. Representations of antistructure and communitas situate the act as anterior to the changes aimed at in the ritual and serve to dramatize the openness and susceptibility of the ritual object. Strange enough, the opposite procedure is also a possibility. Meticulous control of every detail in a ritual may also serve to dramatize the openness and extreme vulnerability of the situation. Controlling what is usually left to itself demonstrates that natural order is no longer or not yet established, and in this situation efficacious or creative action may be taken, often by representing an exemplar of the desired change or renewal.

Turner's analytical descriptions are well known and need no exemplification. I would also like to add that the formal analytical devices they offer have served us well for many years. At the theoretical level, however, Turner tends to think of liminality as a fact of social psychology (Turner 1969: esp. ch. 5), and he may even seem to approach the standpoint of liberal theology, that human psychological needs prove, if not the truth, then at least the relevance of religion.

Within the framework of the rhetoric of ritual, no such assumptions are necessary. Liminal symbolism is nothing but the countdown to the turning point that makes for ritual efficacy. The study of the social and psychological impact of such a rhetoric on participants in a ritual may then be left to its own premises. The rhetoric of ritual furthermore unites two theories or analytical devices that have served us well in ritual studies: that of the myth-ritual relationship and that of liminal symbolism. Both may be regarded as the rhetorical countdown to the turning point, from which a new beginning is possible.

There are in fact numerous other ways to situate ritual speech and action in that efficacious turning point. One of them is sacrifice. Sacrifice is a ritual in which some material, an animal, part of a harvest, some kind of food or equipment is consumed – killed, eaten, destroyed, given away. The sacrificial material provides a fixed point for the rhetoric of sacrifice. It is made to refer to those who sacrifice, to the general order of the world, to

the source of the blessings they hope to obtain. Across Northern Europe and Asia, from Sami-ætnam to Hokkaido, a bear sacrifice represents human participation in the divine and divine presence among humans. (Paulson, Hultkranz and Jettmar 1962: 190–91, 288; Paproth 1976; Kitagawa 1961.) The bear is the sacrificial victim, the divine recipient of the sacrifice, and the human ambassador among the gods. It is rhetorically made to represent the whole process of exchange between gods and men that make the world go round. The famous Purusha hymn in Rigveda X, 90 exposes, in the form of a myth, a very similar theory of sacrifice. The primeval, exemplar sacrifice is made up of the order of the world, but it also produces the order of the world; and Purusha is both the sacrifice, the recipient of the sacrifice, and the order produced by the sacrifice.

A sacrifice of quite analogous circular sophistication was carried out every day in ancient Egypt, as part of the daily temple liturgy: the sacrifice of Maat (Hornung 1971: 209–12; Assman 1990: 184–95), a goddess, but also the Egyptian concept of the immanent order and principle of the world or the essence which qualifies things for existence. Maat is the worship of the gods, the divine capacity for creating and upholding the world, and also the ordered world resulting from the creative and upholding activity of gods as well as from the daily worship. The long chapter that accompanies the rite[3] makes ample cross-references to the various ways in which maat makes the world go round. The aim of making the sacrifice point in all these directions is to situate the act at the turning point, from which the world may be operated.

Still other ways of counting down to the turning point are purification and fasting. I am indebted to one of my students, Kate Østergaard Jacobsen (1996), for having pointed out that the muslim fast in the month of Ramadan is not just a pious excercise, but serves to situate the body in point zero. The fasting serves to prepare the night, and what goes on during the night is what is going to be. Every night in Ramadan – and particularly the 27th – imitates the *lailat al-qadr*, the night in which the Koran was sent down, or we might almost say the night of the incarnation of the *logos*. The fast is the ritual means of counting down to that critical moment, where everything that happens will determine the future. In that situation it becomes extremely important not only to recite the Koran, but also to eat and to eat well, and this is in fact what is done during the night. In a certain sense, every ritual is, to a greater or lesser degree, a regress to the *lailat al-qadr*, the point zero or the new beginning which is the source of all ritual efficacy. And in that sense, ritual is pure action, bound to produce whatever it represents because it is situated at the very beginning of things, it deals with things in their "state of not yet being".

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3   Daily Temple Liturgy Ch. 42, published with translation and commentary in Moret 1902.

From ancient Egypt to modern Japan, purity is one of the most wide-spread expressions of ritual competence. The act of purification is, of course, a way of reducing things to an original state and ensuring that no alien influence is present in the crucial, efficacious moment. But it is often more: when hot water is sprinkled over the participants in a shinto ritual, a symbolic gesture serves to load the water with the blessing of the *kami*. The resulting purity is not just absence of dirt, but a positive quality. The water used to purify priests and statues in ancient Egyptian temples was taken from the sacred lake belonging to each temple, or from the Nile. Both were conventionally identified with *Nun*, the primeval ocean. The resulting purity would thus also be a primeval quality, and a competence to work new beginnings. In this positive sense, ancient Egyptian priests were engaged in pure action, and in fact the most common term for "priest" is w^cb, "pure". When the w^cb $^c3$, the "great priest" or "great pure one", officiating in the daily temple liturgy, aproached the naos of the god with the words *jw.j* $w^cb.kwj$, "I am pure",[4] it implied also that he had become primeval, he was acting in the primeval darkness of the sanctuary and dealing with the world outside in its "state of not yet being".

And now, to conclude this sketchy comparative excercise, this is what I think ritual is: an activity formally situated at that point zero where every move and every word become efficacious because they deal with things in their "state of not yet being". The role of religious representations in ritual is to dramatize the countdown to that turning point and sometimes also to express and secure the order of things the priest wishes to see when he re-emerges from the primeval darkness of the sanctuary. There are multiple ways in which rites thus rhetorically situate themselves at the turning point, from which things may be produced, renewed, or controlled. This paper could not account for more than a few, theoretically significant varieties, and neither have I been able to discuss details of any single interpretation. What I may perhaps hope to have demonstrated is that the framework of the rhetoric of ritual may serve not only to unify important theoretical issues and analytical devices in ritual studies, but also to clarify and reformulate a consistent approach to the comparative study of ritual. If unclear ideas have really haunted our discipline for more than one hundred years, these aims might not be without importance.

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4   The Daily Temple Liturgy, chs. 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 17, 24, in Moret 1902.

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