

RITUAL PLURALISM AND VALUE PLURALISM: ON WHY ONE RITUAL IS NEVER ENOUGH

ABSTRACT

It appears that every religious tradition contains within its repertoire of enjoined or encouraged actions more than one ritual. This article pursues the question of why this should be so. It develops an answer by making two basic claims. The first is that all societies are marked by the presence of more than one value. The second is that one thing rituals do is allow people to realize one value at a time in fairly full form—something people rarely accomplish in daily life, but that is important for them if they are to come to understand and develop a genuine attraction to these values. If both of these claims hold, then one reason religions need to offer more than one ritual is that people hold more than one value and they need separate rituals to be able to learn about and to experience what it is like to realize each of them in full form. The article concludes with a brief reflection of the importance of its analysis of value and ritual for the study of situations of religious pluralism.

Keywords: ritual, ritual theory, values, value pluralism, religious pluralism, Papua New Guinea

‘... each ritual has its own teleology. It has its explicitly expressed goals ...’ Said of Ndembu rituals (Turner 1967: 32)

I want to begin with an observation that is so simple that it is likely to come off as banal. Every religious tradition I can think of contains within its repertoire of enjoined or encouraged actions more than one ritual. In trying to think of exceptions, I thought about the liberal Christian Sunday service, but even in this case, one in which ritual itself is in general downplayed, the routine Sunday event is complemented by bigger productions at Christmas and Easter, and

by baptismal services, weddings, and funerals. So I will stick with my general statement that it appears hard to find a religion that features only one ritual. On the face of things, however, there seems to be no necessary reason why all religions should offer their adherents a number of different kinds of rituals. One could imagine, for example, a society in which one big ritual a year takes care of ensuring that everything good will come about and that everything bad will be held at bay. And given that we know from the anthropological record that rituals can be time-consuming, stress-inducing, and expensive, this might even be a rational way to

go about things. But in fact, no religion does go about them in this way. In this essay, I want to develop one line of argument about why this should be so.

The argument I am going to pursue, which is only the most tentative of hypotheses at this point, is based on two claims. The first is that all societies are marked by the presence of more than one value. The second is that one thing rituals do is allow people to realize one value at a time in fairly full form—something people rarely accomplish in daily life, but that is important for them if they are to come to understand and develop a genuine attraction to these values. If I can sketch convincing versions of both claims, then the conclusion would follow that one reason religions need to offer more than one ritual is that people hold more than one value and they need separate rituals to be able to learn about and to experience what it is like to realize each of them in full form.

Since ritual is our focus here, I will go quite quickly over what I want to say about value pluralism. I take values to be those ends that are culturally defined as worth orienting action toward. Scholars sometimes emphasize the importance of cultural definition in this scheme by saying that values are ‘desirable’ ends and not merely ones a person might happen to desire at any given moment (Kluckhohn 1962 [1951]: 395). When people are conscious of their values, this is to say, there is a kind of second order thinking involved: not only do I want X, but I understand that it is good to want X. To get a feel for what values as I am defining them are like, think of the social formation that shapes conduct in academic settings such as conferences. Two of the values in play in such settings are a general value of politeness and one of truthfulness and honesty. In the academic settings in which we spend much of our time, we sometimes want to be polite, and we feel that

is it good to do so, and we sometimes want to be honest, and feel that it is good to behave in this way as well. There are other values that shape our behavior in academic settings, of course—values such as those of intelligence and success—but the two rather humble examples of honesty and politeness may help give a sense of what I mean by values in this essay.

The co-existence of the values of honesty and politeness in academic settings allows me to make two other important points about values. The first of these points is that in all social formations there are a number of values in play. I cannot take the time to argue here, as I have elsewhere, that there are theoretical reasons why it must be so that every social formation contains a multiplicity of values, reasons I take from the work of the anthropologist Louis Dumont (Robbins 2013). But I hope that by considering the social settings readers know well they might be able to take it as self-evidently true that this is the case, as I have just shown in very broad terms that it is for academic settings like conferences.

The second point I want to make with reference to my example of the existence of the academic values of politeness and honesty is that often the values that are relevant to a given social situation appear to those involved in them to be in conflict with one another. Sometimes we feel that being polite in an academic context means forgoing a chance to be honest, as, for example, when we politely tell someone we very much liked a paper they just presented when in fact we did not. And sometimes we feel that being honest means forgoing a chance to be polite, as when we tell someone we very much disliked their paper, despite knowing that this will upset them. In our second order reflection on our desires, we find that it is good to be both honest and polite—both are values for us—but in fact there are many situations in which we can

realize only one of these values and must let the other go. Or, perhaps more often in situations when values conflict, we try to compromise on both values, so that we can realize each one to at least a limited extent. We are a little bit polite, say, by focusing our response on the parts of the paper we like, but also a little bit honest, expressing a few doubts about one aspect of it. And so it is that we mostly go through daily life partially realizing lots of different values, but rarely getting a chance to realize any one value in something like a complete form.

It is possible to imagine that there is nothing wrong with such a life of partially realized values, and indeed I think most people live such lives most of the time. But I think there are at least two reasons it does not work for people to go through life without ever fully realizing any of their values. I am going to have to just mention these reasons here, without arguing for them—a partiality for which I apologize (even as I take my need to apologize to support the point I am making). First, it is in the nature of our relation to values that we want to realize them fully—it is the hope of doing so that binds us to them. Second, and this is a point about socialization, without ever encountering and better yet experiencing the full realization of a given value, it is hard to know how we would ever learn about or come to be attracted to these values. We likely encounter fully realized *images* of values in lots of places (say in myths and fictions and maxims and in learning about exemplary lives). There are fewer ways in which we can experience for ourselves what such full realization feels like.

This point brings me to the claim I want to make about ritual. I think rituals are one of the places where people are able at the same time to encounter single values clearly expressed and to participate in their full realization. Think again of academic conferences where one is

sometimes polite and sometimes honest, often moving between realizing one of these values and then the other in the same interaction, and finishes the day neither having been a fully polite nor a fully honest person. In ritual, things are different. At the end of an academic lecture, for example, in some places one engages in a ritual of applauding the speaker. In this ritual act, one accomplishes politeness with a clarity and completeness one rarely achieves at other times in a conference setting. The ability to engage with one value at a time in this way is, I am arguing, a large part of what makes rituals appealing and important to those who participate in them.

In theoretical terms, I base my argument that rituals allow people to encounter and realize single values in unusually complete form on a synthesis of two important branches of ritual studies that I will call the representational and the performative streams respectively. Working quickly, let us say that representational theories are those that focus on the ability ritual has to represent aspects of the social world in unique ways. To remind ourselves of what the core assertions of representational theories of ritual sound like, we can recall Roberto DaMatta's (1991: 24, 25) argument that rituals provide a 'dramatization of certain elements, values, ideologies, and relationships in a society' in a way that brings to light aspects of people's social lives 'normally submerged by everyday routines, interests, indifferences, and some other similar complications'. Or consider Don Handelman's (1998: 9) suggestion that it is in ritual that 'cultural codes—usually diffuse, attenuated, and submerged in the mundane order of the things—lie closest to the behavioral surface'. Or, finally, we can take note of Jonathan Z. Smith's (1982: 63) definition of ritual as 'a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are

in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled course of things'. As these brief accounts demonstrate, DaMatta, Handelman, and Smith all suggest that rituals accomplish a kind of highlighting and perhaps we might say perfecting of social representations that people often only vaguely or incompletely apprehend in social life (see also Valeri 1985: 244–245; Kapferer 2006). To this kind of argument, I would add only the specification, already anticipated explicitly by DaMatta, that one kind of representation rituals routinely present in clear or perfected form is that of values. Rituals allow people, that is, to suspend the complex and often conflicting relations that hold between the many values they confront in everyday life, and instead experience what it is like to apprehend and realize a single value fully.

While representational theories of ritual help us recognize that rituals present values in the ways I have discussed, it is performative theories of ritual, of which Roy Rappaport's (1999) is probably the currently most influential, that explain how they are able to do this. Performative theories of ritual, to simplify matters significantly, hold that like all performative acts rituals bring things about by the simple fact of their performance. Because this is so, and I am following Rappaport in particular here, those who participate in a ritual commit themselves to intending to accomplish whatever the ritual is understood to bring about performatively. In making such commitments to realizing ritual outcomes, I am suggesting that people also commit to and experience the process of realizing the values these outcomes embody. If we participate in a healing rite, for example, we commit to the notion that it is valuable, or good, for the patient for whom the rite is held to be healed. Because each ritual, as a performative action, commits those

who participate in it to the achievement of its particular goal, each ritual also at least presupposes and often also explicitly expresses the value that this goal realizes. To participate in a healing rite, for example, is to commit to the value of health as opposed to that of disease. This is why rituals tend to offer such clear representations of the values they express and why they provide opportunities to realize single values quite fully.

I am now finally in a position to explain why I think even single religions contain a plurality of rituals. Some religions, like the rituals they contain, may also aim at the realization of a single value, but I do not think they routinely achieve this aim as often as rituals do. Perhaps because religions are charged with being applicable to many or all areas of social life, even those that make an effort to focus clearly on a single value end up reflecting the value multiplicity that marks social life as a whole. Rituals, by contrast, can be more specialized, but only at the cost of being necessarily multiple.

This way of thinking about the relationship between ritual pluralism and value pluralism also, I would suggest, has something to say about how we might think of the role of rituals in religiously plural societies—one of the themes of this collection. But before exploring this issue, let me give a quick example of the kind of ritual analysis this approach to ritual and values can support.

I have carried out fieldwork among the Urapmin, a group of roughly 400 people living in the far Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea. In 1977, the Urapmin, who were never directly missionized, converted en masse to a Charismatic form of Christianity that was at the center of a revival movement then sweeping through Papua New Guinea. I have described the conversion of the Urapmin in great detail elsewhere and, more crucially for my discussion

here, I have argued that Urapmin Christianity defines salvation as ultimately an individual matter—something each person has to work out for him/herself (Robbins 2004). In Urapmin, Christianity thus promotes a particular brand of individualism as the most important value one can dedicate oneself to realizing.

At the same time as the Urapmin have come to take a version of Christian individualism as their most important religious value, much of their social life continues to be shaped by the value that was traditionally paramount in the community. This is the value of what I have called ‘relationalism’—a value that defines the creation and maintenance of relationships as the most important goal one can work toward achieving (Robbins 2004). In contemporary Urapmin life, people often find themselves caught between realizing the value of individualism, which in their understanding requires something of a withdrawal from social life in order to avoid sin, or realizing the value of relationalism, which requires sustained social engagement directed toward bringing others into relationships and keeping them involved in relationships once one has connected with them. People’s failure to realize either value fully most of the time leaves them in a state of moral frustration, a frustration they describe in Christian terms as a strongly felt sense of their own sinfulness. This feeling of moral frustration well illustrates my point that in daily life people generally find their actions fall short of fully realizing any one of the values they hold to be most important.

Yet even as most Urapmin find it difficult to realize any of their values very fully in daily life, there are ritual settings in which they are able to do so. To make this point, I want to consider two of the rituals Urapmin find most dramatic and important—a Christian ritual called a ‘Spirit disco’ (*Spirit disko*)¹ and a traditional

one referred to as a ‘pig sacrifice’ (*kang anfukeleng*). These two rituals make a nice pair in terms of the argument of this essay, for the Spirit disco is an unusually complete realization of the value of individualism, while the pig sacrifice fully realizes the value of relationalism.

I will begin with the Spirit disco, a key rite of Urapmin Christianity. Spirit discos are circular dances performed at night inside the church. Most members of the church attend when one is held. During the dance, some of the dancers become possessed by the Holy Spirit. Once this happens, they begin to flail wildly and will be ‘controlled’ by other dancers who hold them and do their best to prevent them from hurting themselves or others. During a successful dance, several people will become possessed in this way for up to an hour. At the height of the rite, the scene inside the church can be chaotic, with all of the possessed people careening wildly around the room as others struggle to keep up the circular pattern of the dance. Eventually, the Spirit will leave the possessed dancers one by one. When the Spirit leaves a dancer, he/she collapses on the floor, completely limp, unconscious, and, as the Urapmin see it, at peace. After possession, people will lie on the church floor in this state for some time as the dancers slow down and eventually stop. Participants remain in church with those once possessed until the latter regain normal consciousness. Then everyone will pray together and the ritual ends.

In Urapmin understanding, the violence of possession during the Spirit disco is due to a battle within the possessed person’s heart between the Holy Spirit and his/her sins. The conclusion of possession happens when the Spirit finally succeeds in ‘throwing’ the person’s sins out of his/her body—this cleansing the person of sin is the performative goal the ritual accomplishes, leaving the person ready for

salvation. As the Urapmin see it, the previously possessed person lying still and alone on the church floor represents the full realization of the saved individual. As someone once crystallized the general Urapmin understanding for me, ‘Once people leave the church building they will start sinning again’—they will, to put it otherwise, be caught again in the sinful snares of trying to realize a range of different values at once. For this reason, it is only at the climactic moment at the end of the Spirit disco that one can be sure of one’s own or someone else’s salvation. It is thus the only time in Urapmin social life that the value of becoming an individual worthy of salvation is fully realized. The Spirit disco is, then, an experienced example of the value of Urapmin Christian individualism worked out in its fullest form.

We can now consider pig sacrifices, which are offered to nature spirits (*motobil*) whom the Urapmin formerly believed owned every significant part of their natural environment: land, major trees, rivers, large rocks, and the game animals people hunt. In the past, the nature spirits allowed Urapmin people to use these resources provided they observed various taboos the spirits who owned them put in place. Among other things, these taboos forbid the Urapmin from talking loudly or laughing while they hunted and gardened, lest they offend the spirits. If the Urapmin offended the spirits by violating these taboos, the spirits would ‘hold’ (*kutalfugumin*) them and make them sick. As Christians, Urapmin now say that God created and owns everything and that he wants people to use the resources he provides. There are no more taboos. Instead, they say, now is ‘free time’ (*fri taim*), and people should in principle be able to use the earth’s bounty without fear of the nature spirits’ retribution.

Yet even as the spirits have lost their position as the original owners of all of the

resources of the Urapmin landscape, the Urapmin continue to recognize their existence. As in the past, whenever people become sick, it is assumed that they have disturbed the spirits in some way. Generally, friends and family respond to sickness by praying to God to remove the offending spirit from the sick person, and sometimes they engage Christian ritual specialists to help them in this endeavor. Yet when illnesses linger, especially in children (who unlike adults can die from illness caused by nature spirits), people will sacrifice a pig to them, asking them to take the ‘smell’ (*tang*) of the pig and let go of their human victim. This gift of a pig to a spirit is a very full expression of Urapmin relationalism—which is similarly elaborated through gift exchange in many other ritual contexts—because it realizes this value in the face of the nature spirits’ general failure to do their part in the making and maintaining of relations. Unlike people, spirits do not give generously. They hedge their gifts with taboos, and their generosity is unreliable. Mostly they would prefer to be left alone. It is by virtue of realizing the value of relationalism in connection with the spirits, and this despite the spirits’ lack of strong commitment to this value, that pig sacrifice stands as a key performance of relationalism in Urapmin culture. Through this ritual, the Urapmin participate in performing a thoroughly worked out version of the relationalism that continues to figure in so many areas of their lives.

I hope this quick sketch of the two Urapmin rituals of the Spirit Disco and the pig sacrifice help put some flesh on my bare bones account of the link between ritual pluralism and value pluralism. But I also want to use it as the basis for making a very brief concluding point about ritual and religious pluralism more generally. To do this, I need to introduce one further piece of ethnographic data. The

Urapmin are very uncomfortable carrying out pig sacrifice—they think of it as the one ‘traditional’ ritual they still undertake despite their commitment to Christianity, and even as they work hard to Christianize it in ways I have not been able to discuss, they remain worried that it is a sinful practice. If I were to approach this fact with the tools anthropologists generally use to look at religious pluralism, I would focus on the fact that these two rites can be seen as belonging to two distinct religious traditions that are in conflict with one another. But in fact, the conflict surrounding pig sacrifice is fairly low-grade and intermittent and for this reason in ethnographic terms it does not call for the lion’s share of our analytic intention. An analysis from the point of view of the ritual management of value multiplicity would be useful in this case, then, because it in fact leads us away from the temptation to devote too much attention to this conflict, and instead encourages us to explore what both rituals tell us about the multiplicity of values that shape Urapmin life. It leads us, that is to say, to ask different kinds of questions than we would if we were carrying out an analysis framed in terms of religious pluralism. These new kinds of questions could fruitfully be asked in other settings, such as those studied by Marja-Liisa Honkasalo (2016) and Mika Vähäkangas (2016) in their contributions to this collection, in which people regularly move between rituals that ‘belong’ to different traditions without worrying overly much about the coherence of their religious identities. The usefulness of exploring these kinds of questions about the relationship between ritual and value pluralism is the final point I hope to have begun to suggest here.

NOTES

- 1 In this article, terms given in Tok Pisin, the most common lingua franca of Papua New Guinea, are underlined, while those in the Urap language are given in italics.

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