

RITUAL INTIMACY—RITUAL PUBLICITY: REVISITING RITUAL THEORY AND PRACTICE IN PLURAL SOCIETIES

The majority of the articles collected here were first presented at a one-day workshop entitled *Ritual Intimacy—Ritual Publicity: Revisiting Ritual Theory and Practice in Plural Societies* held at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in 2014. The workshop was organized by a communication scholar (Sumiala) and an anthropologist (Robbins). Our guiding question was: What is the role of ritual in plural societies? Historically, important strands in the sociology and anthropology of religion have focused on studying the contribution of ritual to the creation, maintenance, or restoration of social solidarity. Much of this work assumes that rituals either operate in relation to and/or serve to create a background of shared social belongings, understandings, and values. On this interpretation, rituals foster what can be figured as a strong sense of intimacy between participants. One thinks in this connection, to list just a few key contributions, of the founding work of Emile Durkheim (1995 [1912]), and then the influential writings of Victor Turner (1969) on liminality and *communitas* and Randall Collins (2004) on ritual interaction chains. Even as these scholars tell us rituals often create a sense of intimacy, however, we know from other strands of ritual theory that rituals are, as Don Handelman (1998) refers to the wider class of happenings in which he includes them, generally in at least some respects ‘public events’; even when they take place in spaces that locally count as ‘private’, their shared forms inescapably index a broader world to

which they belong. As public events, rituals often communicate well beyond the circles of intimacy they foster. Focusing on this aspect of ritual, important scholarly contributions have highlighted the authoritative quality of rituals, and the contributions they make toward the definition of public social orders. We have in mind here the work of Erving Goffman (1967) and Maurice Bloch (1974), those working in the performative tradition (e.g., Tambiah 1979; Rappaport 1999), and most recently those who contribute to the growing discussion of ritual and media and related mediated ceremonies (e.g., Bell 1997; Grimes 2014; Meyer 2009; Hughes-Freeland 1998; Dayan and Katz 1992; Couldry 2003] and Rothenbuhler 1998). One key feature of the initial workshop conception was the claim that by bringing these two strands of argument about ritual together, we can suggest that one of ritual’s outstanding qualities might be its ability to produce intimacy and publicity at the same time. If this is so, we want to argue, then attention to the dynamic relationship between these two qualities constitutes an important topic for ritual studies.

The second key feature of the original workshop formulation, its focus on the issue of pluralism, follows from the first. Given ritual’s ability to promote intimacy and a sense of belonging while also making authoritative or at least pointed public pronouncements, what becomes of ritual in plural social formations? In a now classic paper published twenty-five years ago, Gerd Baumann (1992) pointed out

that the tendency for scholars to focus on the solidarity-creating or reinforcing qualities of ritual led them to miss how often, as his title had it, ritual ‘implicates ‘Others’ who are not only either outside the ritual frame or participate in it as ‘outsiders’ or guests, but who often do not feel intimacy or a sense of shared belonging or values with those who are inside of it. Baumann’s research in a heterogeneous London neighborhood led him to this insight and to pose the question of how we might want to rethink ritual theory given the fact that rituals appear to thrive in plural societies as much as they do in the kinds of tight, homogeneous social formations notions of ritual intimacy often presuppose. This collection of articles takes up this question in relation to the intimacy-publicity dynamic we have developed from our reading of ritual theory.

In exploring the role of ritual and plural social formations, we must remember the (contradictory) historical traditions and the related resistance associated with the legitimacy of the concept of ritual in plural societies. As discussed earlier in the introduction, ritual as a concept has traditionally been associated with studies of ‘homogeneous’ social forms and related religious practices and belief systems, whereas sociologists of plural societies associate their work with a history closely connected with the modernization of society, embedded in processes of urbanization, technological development, individualization, and secularization. Media historian Paddy Scannell (2001: 700) formulates this apparent mistrust of ritual in plural societies by stating: ‘A resistance to rituals has a history as old as enlightenment opinion: it is a complex dislike of public life as theatre, a fear (perhaps resentment) of the politics of the spectacle’. Furthermore, Simon Cottle (2006) identifies three fundamental suspicions when thinking about ritual(s) in

plural society: (i) ritual is considered essentially arational (and irrational), and therefore ideologically and/or politically dangerous; (ii) ritual is perceived as anachronistic, referring to pre-modern societies and their pre-democratic cults; and (iii) ritual is assumed to be socially irrelevant within contemporary plural societies. The authors *Media Anthropology*, Mihai Coman and Eric Rothenbuhler (2005: 10), respond to this type of criticism by stating that through applying concepts such as ritual in the study of plural societies, we may achieve ‘more adequate understanding of a world that cannot be disenchanting’. This is to say that regardless of the long historical process of secularization, especially in the Western world, rational cause-effect analyses have not been fully able to replace mythical structures and narrative logics of human sense-making in the world. Choices continue to be made based on values, beliefs, and faith, not only instrumental reasoning; hence, it is crucial to recognize this important dimension in the contemporary reality. Second, Coman and Rothenbuhler maintain that the study of rituals in plural societies offers us ‘new uses in new social worlds for concepts and methods that have already given a century of good service’ (ibid.). In other words, the argument is that a concept of ritual has proven useful for generations of scholars interested in different ways of maintaining social life. This tradition of applying well-tested concepts in new contexts with appropriate adaptations should not go unnoticed. Third, the study of rituals offers an approach to plural societies that is tuned to the particular in the general, the local in the global, the transient and circumstantial in the enduring and universal (ibid.).

We do not work with a rigid definition of pluralism in this collection. In some of the cases discussed it refers to situations in which ritual participants themselves belong to more than

one network or community, each of which has different approaches to some of the core matters taken up in the ritual(s) that are a focus of the article. Thus, for example, Mika Vähäkangas looks at a briefly wildly popular Tanzanian healing ritual in which people from many different religious backgrounds participated, and explores how the design of the healing ritual in question allowed for this widespread participation. In other cases, the focus is on the kind of pluralism that obtains when people from one ethnic tradition draw on rituals from a number of different sources. Along these lines, Marja-Liisa Honkasalo looks at the ways Gengbe people living in the Mono River area of Togo and in Finland draw on a range of ritual practices from different traditions in pursuit of healing, Joel Robbins considers how the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea realize novel and traditional values by (reluctantly) including one traditional rite in a ritual life that is mostly charismatic Christian in character, and Terhi Utriainen considers Finns who engage in 'angel practices' in spite of the skepticism they arouse in many of those amongst whom they live. A final kind of pluralism in play here, which figures centrally in Marianna Keisalo's article on stand-up comedy, refers to the plurality of perspectives often crafted within rituals themselves, and the ways these play with permutations of the intimacy-publicity relationship. Although across these articles no single answers emerge to the questions of how or why ritual achieves its effects, or at least remains compelling, in the face of these various kinds of pluralism, the articles collected here do point to the validity of the questions themselves, and to the value of approaching them with the intimacy / publicity dynamic in mind.

A few further themes cross-cut several of the articles collected here and indicate ways

forward in the project of linking the study of the intimacy / publicity dynamic with issues of pluralism. Utriainen and Keisalo take up the issue of ritual framing. In as much as it is the setting of frames that marks off ritual from other forms of life, creating spaces of intimacy and also constructing ritual as something that can be seen publicly, from outside itself, the topic of framing is clearly relevant to the matters at hand. But both Utriainen and Keisalo want to go beyond more traditional analyses of ritual framing that see the distinctions it sets in place as clear and determining of the definitions of the actions of they enclose. To push beyond traditional kinds of frame analysis, they turn to Don Handelman's (2006; 2012) work on what he calls 'moebius framing'. For Handelman (2012:66), traditional frame analysis, as formulated by Bateson (1972) and Goffman (1974), is hierarchal and 'linear', with frames neatly nested within one another and self-enclosed. In the moebius construction, frames twist between looking inward and looking outward, capturing a fluidity to framing processes that is lost in traditional models. This twisting of inward and outward facing moments is very apt to capturing the intimacy-publicity dynamic, as Utriainen and Keisalo both demonstrate. In Utriainen's article, she examines how Finns who engage angel practices place fleeting frames to check the possibilities of intimacy with their interlocutors, even as they leave open the further development of the passing moment into one of outward looking publicity. The moment-to-moment management of enchantment in a 'secular society' thus becomes visible through its ritual techniques. Keisalo's examination of one of the comedian Louis C.K.'s stand-up routines looks at similarly fast-moving frame deployments, in this case as one actor manages intimate and public views on his own person to comedic effect.

Honkasalo, André Iteanu, Robbins, and Vähäkangas take up a different theme: that of the multiplicity of rituals in which all persons participate in the course of their lives. As Robbins notes, it seems a simple observable fact about the world that no community makes use of only one type of ritual. Ritual life is in this straightforward sense plural for everyone. It is when this simple pluralism of ritual types is cross-cut by folk notions of different religious traditions or social groupings that ritual pluralism of necessity becomes entangled in situations social scientists more often think of as plural. Once this sectioning of the religious field takes place, the existence of the intimacy / publicity dynamics that all ritual performances engage leads to the question of how people negotiate the intersection of ritual and social pluralism. In Honkasalo's and Robbins' articles, these negotiations orient toward values—toward what participants want and expect rituals to produce or the states of affairs they want them to realize. The Gengbe will thus perform all manner of rituals in pursuit of health, while the Urapmin engage traditional rituals to realize traditional values that still solicit their commitment, even as they work more regularly through Christian rituals to realize Christian values. In Vähäkangas' article, the focus is rather on how a new ritual leaves room for older ones, both by adopting some of their forms and by keeping its own cosmological entailments sufficiently abstract to avoid casting suspicion on the worth of other traditions. Iteanu's discussion focuses on two broad types of ritual and their creations of time. There is a reminder here of the fact that rituals not only address publics, but create the background conditions of the dimensions of time and space in which they come to exist; as is often observed in Melanesian anthropology, it is events that make groups, not the other way around (e.g., Schieffelin 1976). Iteanu's claim that rituals can set such background conditions

in at least two ways is a further testament to the inescapability of discussions of plurality—in his argument the plurality of temporalities—in considerations of ritual.

Timo Kallinen's interview with Maurice Bloch rounds out this collection. Though not focused tightly on the themes of intimacy / publicity or pluralism, it is a major review of some of Bloch's seminal contributions, drawing out the coherence that holds in Bloch's position over many different works. Seminal as this work has been to considerations of the public face of ritual, it is fitting that it appears alongside the other articles in this collection. As many contributors to this issue think about the resilience of rituals in different contexts of plurality, Bloch's idea about 'deference' proves insightful. In the interview Bloch defines deference as 'acting or saying in certain ways for reasons which one does not explain in terms of personal volition, intention or understanding but in terms of implicit or explicit trust in others who one 'follows''. In this line of thinking, asking people the meaning of ritual is thus a misleading question. To follow Bloch's argument 'rituals are not, by definition, created or chosen to be done in the way they are done because of the choice or the understanding of those who perform ritual'. Hence, he continues, 'the element of deference in ritual illuminates the attraction of rituals and their capacity to continue historically when everything else seems to be changing or even collapsing'. This approach, we argue, has the potential to open up novel and exciting avenues for revisiting ritual theory and practice in a variety of contexts of plurality; a perspective that comes with an epistemological and methodological challenge as scholars of ritual continue to decipher those practices of explicit or implicit trust and related intimacies and publicities carried out not only in the context of multiple pluralities, but also in a variety of temporalities, as Iteanu reminds us.

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