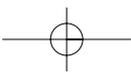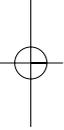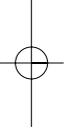PART THREE

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

ACTION

James Laidlaw & Caroline Humphrey

Not much about ritual is incontrovertible, but that rituals are composed of actions is surely not open to doubt. To view ritual as action might therefore seem to be an obvious and a reasonably promising starting point for analysis, but it has been a comparatively rare one both among general theorists and among anthropologists and historians who have sought to understand and interpret specific rituals.

The most important reason for this is probably the distinctive inflection given to the sociological traditions descended from Émile Durkheim, by the central but problematical place of ritual in his mature writings. The awkward duality, which Durkheim's polemical critique of utilitarianism created for him, between hedonistic individual inclinations on the one hand and social facts on the other, was addressed in *The Elementary Forms* by a theory of the supposedly social genesis of values in ritual.[1] This polemical context is reflected in the fact that he views ritual, in its role as the paradigm and the practical origin of the social, as the direct antithesis of a utilitarian understanding of action.[2] Thus, as action, it is symbolic *rather than* rational, expressive *rather than* effective. It may be something that people do, but its theoretical importance lies in what 'it', and 'society' through it, does to those people. In this sense it is a kind of anti-action. Its ostensible subjects are in fact its objects, since through it 'society' acts upon them.

Durkheim's account of just how this was supposed to happen was remarkably slight and unpersuasive, but insofar as succeeding generations of social scientists have shared his holistic and collectivist starting-point, they have also been faced with the conceptual gap he used ritual to fill. They have accordingly followed his lead in regarding ritual as the medium through which 'society' somehow or other

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[1] See É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), trans. J.W. Swain (London, 1915).

[2] See H. Joas, *The Creativity of Action* (Oxford, 1996), 40–42.

speaks to the individuals who make it up, and does so in a uniquely authoritative voice. Thus consideration of the characteristics of ritual as action has often been eclipsed by a view of ritual as essentially a means of communication, in which participants are more or less unwitting transmitters and ultra-receptive receivers. The full logical development of this approach occurs where it is observed that this communicative function is not restricted to ritual actions. Analytical primacy is therefore given instead to a wider category of all public events that can be interpreted functionally in this way, and 'ritual' is assimilated to that.[3]

This essay will describe some recent attempts to theorise the distinctive or specific characteristics of ritual as action, attempts that depart from the Durkheimian view of ritual as communication. But first it is worth considering the characterisations of ritual action that emerged from within that paradigm.

Ritual Action as Coercive Communication

When ritual has been viewed as communication, attention has been concentrated either on the *content* of the message, to be arrived at through hermeneutic interpretation or structural decoding, or on the *effect* of the message being received and/or resisted by the participants, as revealed in functional analysis (this includes Marxist and neo-Foucauldian functionalisms). These two strategies have between them permitted anthropologists and others to use rituals as keys to understanding the societies in which they are performed, often to brilliant and illuminating effect. But they involve a projection onto participants of the analyst's own stance and interests, as if the rituals were performed *so that* the analyst could interpret them.[4] And they have proved much less productive of theoretical understanding of ritual, since the class of events they give rise to is hopelessly capacious and ill-defined.[5] So one alternative strategy has been to define ritual not as a putatively separate class of actions but as an aspect—the expressive or communicative aspect—of all actions. This was

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[3] See Handelman 1990.
[4] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 261–264. See also Bell 1992.
[5] See Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 64–72. See also Goody 1977; Needham 1985.

most famously argued by Edmund Leach.[6] On this view the fact
that Europeans greet by shaking hands and Japanese do so by bow-
ing is in both cases the 'ritual aspect' of greeting. Similarly it is a
'ritual aspect' of eating that Europeans use knives and forks and
Japanese use chopsticks. The aspects of an action that are arbitrary
with respect to practical instrumentality are 'expressive', and what
they express is aspects of the social order.

If the consensus on seeing ritual as communication substantially
eclipsed, it did not entirely preclude, attention to the characteristics
of ritual as action. But as Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi have
observed,[7] such attention as authors writing within these traditions
gave to the distinguishing characteristics of ritual action tended to
be restricted either to an exceedingly generalising or to a radically
particularising level. In the first case, they proposed overarching
schemas to which all or very large categories of rituals allegedly con-
form, certain meanings they all share or effects they all bring about.
In the second, they enumerated the features of ritual action that, it
was argued, explain the power these actions have, which ordinary
actions do not, to be so efficacious.

The most influential theories of the first type have been direct
descendants of Arnold van Gennep's three-stage analysis of rites of
passage.[8] These include Victor Turner's contention that the middle
stages of such rites promote a condition of 'anti-structure' as a rem-
edy for the ills of formality and hierarchy;[9] and Maurice Bloch's pro-
posal that ideologies of timeless order emerge from symbolic structures
of 'rebounding violence'.[10] Bloch explicates what he means by 'rebound-
ing violence' with reference first to male initiation rites among the
Orokaiva in Papua New Guinea. The boys are first identified with
pigs and symbolically killed. The time-bound, reproductive, biologi-
cal aspects of their being having been destroyed, they become, like
the ancestors, transcendent and immortal spirits. These spirits then
return from the timeless realm of the ancestors and conquer and
consume biological life (again represented by pigs). The process as

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[6] See S. Hugh-Jones and J. Laidlaw (eds), *The Essential Edmund Leach. Volume 1:
Anthropology and Society* (New Haven, 2000), 149–209.

[7] Houseman and Severi 1998, 165–202.

[8] See A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1909), trans. M.B. Vizedom and
G.L. Caffe (Chicago, 1960).

[9] See V.W. Turner 1969.

[10] See Bloch 1992.

a whole establishes the transcendence and domination of legitimate (male) authority over (female) native vitality. And just as Turner's original schema was later found by Turner himself and his followers to be embodied not only in ritual but in almost every social process they cared to analyse,[11] so Bloch's rebounding violence, which begins ambitiously enough as the "irreducible core of the ritual process",[12] turns out to be the underlying logic of the whole field of religion, and indeed also of marriage and the state.[13]

Attempts to characterise how it is that meanings contained in ritual come to be compelling (thus 'social' for Durkheimians, 'cultural' for Geertzians, 'ideological' for Marxists, and 'discursive' or 'hegemonic' for various kinds of neo-Marxists) have for the most part used one or more of three analogies. Ritual is like a written text, which people in the culture read, so that it is more persuasive for them than the ephemeral speech of everyday action.[14] Or it is like theatrical performance: the colour, drama, comedy, music, and dance persuade and move in the way that a powerful piece of theatre does.[15] They thus "can transform the world of experience and action in accordance with their illusory and mystifying potential".[16] (Analogies with carnival are a sub-category here). Or it is like performative utterances: those speech acts that can bring about changes in status, obligations, and social relations ("I now pronounce you", "I sentence you", "I name this ship", "I promise", "Be warned", etc.). The theatrical and performative analogies especially have led to quite detailed considerations of the specific techniques by which rituals may be said to have their persuasive effects. The last has particularly been used to interpret magical rites in such a way as to acquit those who practise and believe in them of apparent irrationality, and to suggest how, through ultra-effective persuasion, even organic effects of healing rituals might be brought about.[17]

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[11] See V.W. Turner 1974a; MacAloon (ed.) 1984.

[12] Bloch 1992, 1.

[13] See Bloch 1992, chs. 4 & 5.

[14] See Geertz 1973. See also P. Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text. Meaningful Action considered as a Text", *Social Research* 38 (1971), 529–62.

[15] See V.W. Turner 1982a; V.W. Turner and Bruner (eds) 1986; Kapferer 1983; R. Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia, 1985); M.E. Combs-Schilling, *Sacred Performances. Islam, Sexuality, and Sacrifice* (New York, 1989); Schechner and Appel (eds) 1990.

[16] Kapferer 1983, 5.

[17] See Finnegan 1969; Ahern 1979; Tambiah 1968; Tambiah 1973; Tambiah 1981; Rappaport 1999. For a perceptive critique see Gardner 1983.

An unusually comprehensive and multi-dimensional attempt to explain the compulsive persuasiveness of ritual is to be found in some of the work of Maurice Bloch.[18] In a separate series of publications from his theory of 'rebounding violence' (indeed the possible connection between the two is an intriguing matter), Bloch argues that the various kinds of formalisation of language in ritual—speech-making, chanting, singing—reduce semantic content, because possibilities of alternative utterances are closed off, and at the same time increase the illocutionary force of those utterances. This combination creates an unusual kind of communication, where content is reduced almost to zero, but persuasiveness is maximised. It therefore becomes difficult for participants to resist authoritative utterances made in ritual contexts by any means other than repudiation of the whole ritual order. No rebellion, only revolution is possible. Thus ritual is an extreme form, indeed it is the most important legitimating device, of what Max Weber called traditional authority. In this work Bloch draws extensively on speech act theory. But insights from the philosophy of language and pragmatics are also integrated in his work, along with extensive ethnographical and historical contextualisation, as in his demonstration (1986) of the way, over time, the same Merina circumcision ritual has been authoritative legitimation for diametrically opposed meanings.[19]

Formal Features

Several authors have attempted to characterise the distinctiveness of ritual action by developing catalogues of features in terms of which it is, to some degree, marked out from non-ritual action, features such as formalism, invariance, and so on.[20] Rodney Needham has very cogently pointed out how attempts at this kind of definition, aiming at a list of necessary and sufficient features, are bound to founder on the variations and combinations in which these features are in fact found.[21] In this vein Catherine Bell emphasises the fact that not all of her own catalogue of features are found in all

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[18] See Bloch 1986; Bloch 1989.
[19] See Bloch 1986.
[20] For example Tambiah 1981.
[21] See Needham 1985.

rituals,[22] in support of her contention that the category of 'ritual is anyway an artificial and largely academic category, imposed on variable practice.[23]

Roy Rappaport, by contrast, seeks to argue that the features he identifies coalesce into a universal 'ritual form'. He defines ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers".[24] He describes how the fact of ritual being inherited, its formality, invariance, the fact that it is performance, and the fact that it may not have direct physical effects, all are open to considerable variation. In the case of formality, for instance, he recognises that it is very difficult to say anything substantive about what this consists in.[25] But he argues that nevertheless this 'form' is distinguishable from whatever overtly symbolic meanings might be found in particular rituals. The form of ritual action itself has definite characteristics and effects. It transmits its own messages. These are of two kinds. Self-referential messages communicate to participants about their own social status. Canonical messages refer to the fundamental commitments of the social order, and the important thing about these, for Rappaport, is that participants in ritual are inescapably bound, by the fact of participation, to accept these commitments. He points out that in order to regard ritual as communication, one has to accept that the distinction between transmitter and receiver does not apply. While others have concluded from this fact that the language of communication is inappropriate and unenlightening in this context,[26] Rappaport prefers to press ahead with communication language and to note a further conflation: "transmitters-receivers become fused with the messages they are transmitting and receiving".[27] It is this general collapse of distinctions that Rappaport sees as responsible for the compulsory quality of ritual action. He continues, "for performers to reject liturgical orders being realized by their own participation in them as they are participating in them is self-contradictory, and thus impossible". This 'acceptance' occurs irrespective of the private state of belief of the participant

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[22] See Bell 1997.
[23] See Bell 1992.
[24] Rappaport 1999, 24.
[25] Rappaport 1999, 33–36.
[26] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, ch. 3.
[27] Rappaport 1999, 119.

and irrespective of whether he or she goes on to abide by the commitment, though Rappaport thinks that participation does make this more likely. What is created in ritual is obligation. This Rappaport describes as the 'fundamental office' of ritual, and it is the starting point for the distinctive characteristics of humanity: convention, morality, and the sacred.

Beyond the Communication Pradigm

Unlike Rappaport, most recent authors who have attempted to analyse the distinctive formal characteristics of ritual action have departed from the Durkheimian view of ritual as representation or as a means of communication. Claude Lévi-Strauss,[28] for instance, criticises Turner and others for confusing the aim of understanding ritual 'in itself and for itself' with the interpretation of mythology, fragments of which are often found in ritual, but which can only properly be understood in the context of the whole corpus from which it comes. In order to understand ritual, on the other hand, this fragmentary and often implicit mythology must be stripped away and attention must be devoted instead to the formal procedures of ritual and the effects these bring about. Lévi-Strauss identifies two such formal procedures, repetition and parcelling out, by the latter of which he means the breaking down of action sequences into constituent fragments. But he offers no sustained analysis of how these two processes operate in specific rituals and points instead to a single function they are deemed always to fulfil. By the untiring repetition of disconnected fragments of action, ritual, he claims, creates a kind of imperfect illusion of continuity. It seems to overcome the clear conceptual distinctions established in mythological thought, making possible the comforting illusion that the logically opposed are instead continuous, an effect which is interestingly not so very dissimilar to Turner's notion of anti-structural liminality.

Detailed exploration of the formal features of ritual action, which Lévi-Strauss seems to suggest but does not pursue, is to be found in the work of Frits Staal.[29] Drawing as he does on structural linguistics

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[28] See Lévi-Strauss 1990.
[29] See Staal 1979; F. Staal, *Agni. The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar* (Berkeley, 1983); F. Staal, "The Sound of Religion", *Numen* 33 (1986) 33–64, 185–224; Staal 1989.

and analogies between ritual and music, Staal's intellectual resources indeed overlap with those of Lévi-Strauss, but his most important source is detailed study of the traditions of Brahmanical ritualism in India. Staal argues that while meaningful symbols are employed in ritual, what is distinctive about ritual action is that it is organised according to purely formal rules. Semantics are incidental, and insofar as they are present at all are systematically undermined by purely formal syntactic rules. Ritual is "pure activity, without meaning or goal",[30] structured by rules that call for the breaking down of sequences, the repetition of elements, the embedding of one sequence in another, and similar formal operations performed, recursively, on the higher-order sequences formed by the application of those rules. Thus, as with phrase structure rules in linguistics, infinite variation can be generated from the repeated application of relatively simple rules. Staal's analysis is undoubtedly enlightening, as in his study of the Indian *agnicayana* ritual,[31] and draws attention to aspects of ritual that are routinely ignored in much symbolic analysis.

Lawson & McCauley

Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley, whose approach also draws directly on generative linguistics, point out that Staal's analysis of these sequencing rules includes nothing about the basic constituent acts to which they are applied.[32] They argue that the internal structures of religious ritual acts are also amenable to formal analysis, and that indeed these internal structures explain some of the most important constraints on ritual sequences. They refer to their own approach as 'cognitive' and as a 'competence model', since it seeks to explain observable features of rituals with reference to participants' implicit knowledge and intuitions about which rituals are and are not well-formed and thus permissible. They claim that these intuitions derive from participants' 'action representation system' and that this system applies to all action, ritual and non-ritual alike. Indeed, Lawson & McCauley have in effect no definition or char-

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[30] Staal 1979, 9.
[31] Staal, *Agni*. See also Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 103–105.
[32] See Lawson and McCauley 1990, 59. See also E.T. Lawson's chapter in this volume.

acterisation of ritual action as such. They refer always to 'religious
ritual actions' and this is because ritual is for them a derivative term.
It is action that is predominantly 'religious', which in turn means
action in which the agency of gods—'culturally postulated superhu-
man agents' or CPS-agents—is of significance. According to what
they refer to as their 'postulate of superhuman agency', only the
input of these CPS-agents distinguishes ritual from other action. This
is why they maintain, against Staal, that what they call the 'inter-
nal structure' of ritual actions is so important. They do not seriously
consider the possibility of secular ritual, or whether anything other
than the 'religious' postulate of superhuman agents distinguishes rit-
ual from other modes of action.

Lawson & McCauley distinguish two basic structures internal to
ritual action, depending on how directly the CPS-agent appears in
the representation of a ritual. If the effective agent who makes the
religious event happen is a CPS-agent (a shamanic séance for exam-
ple, or the 'hypothetical' ritual in which Christ founded the Church),
we have what they call a 'special-agent ritual'. Derivatively, any ritual
that requires the agency of a specially sanctified participant (a priest
etc.) is also a special-agent ritual, since the 'special-agent' is always
postulated to have been qualified ultimately by the agency of a CPS-
agent (at the ordination of the priest who ordained the priest . . . etc.).
Special-agent rituals are always central to any ritual system, com-
pared with the second kind of rituals, where either the person on
whom the ritual is performed, or some object employed, is more
directly connected than the ostensible agent of the ritual to the
gods. These latter are referred to respectively as special-patient and
special-instrument rituals. Thus Lawson & McCauley arrive at a
second and overriding 'postulate', that of 'superhuman immediacy'.
Special-agent rituals will always be more central to a religious ritual
system than special-patient or special-instrument rituals, irrespective
of the ostensible purposes or meanings of the rituals. And they put
forward a number of hypotheses about properties of rituals in all
religions, such as that special-agent rituals, unlike special-patient and
special-instrument rituals, do not need to be repeated, and that
special-agents cannot be substituted for. These predictable regulari-
ties are to be explained by the internal structure or form of the
actions (whether they are special-agent or special-patient/instrument
rituals) and not by symbolic meanings: "We think that the religious
ritual form and the properties of rituals it explains and predicts are

overwhelmingly independent of attributed meanings".[33] And ritual form also explains widespread patterns of the distribution and transmission of rituals: why some are more emotionally arousing and less often repeated than others.[34]

Humphrey & Laidlaw

Our own work on ritual,[35] like that of Staal and Lawson & McCauley, departs from the widespread assumption that ritual is fundamentally a system of communication in which participants receive pre-existing meanings and messages. Instead, we argue that the attribution of meanings is a *response* to ritual, which is called for and developed to different degrees in different cultural settings and religious traditions at different times. Thus meaning is at best a derivative feature of ritual—highly variable and indeed sometimes effectively absent. This is of course a fact that many practitioners of ritual have themselves often observed. They might condemn this as 'empty ritual' or venerate it as evidence of the agency of God. These variable reactions to the perception that ritual can be 'meaningless' play a part in our analysis.

We provide a detailed case study of the rite of temple worship (*puja*) among the Jains of India. We describe how the rite is performed today, and also the history of controversy about it, various interpretations of it, and in particular the simultaneous presence of the widespread idea that ritual somehow has automatic effects, and the equally widespread ethical and spiritual objections among religious practitioners to just this possibility. Concerns that ritual, and enjoying the benefits of ritual, are somehow ethically or religiously illegitimate, have given rise in Jain thinking to doctrinal insistence that participants should know and, as they perform it, should actually *mean* certain propositional meanings for the actions of which the *puja* is composed. Comparable, but in detail crucially variable complex reactions are found in other religious traditions. These are the contexts in which the 'meanings' ethnographers and historians report

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[33] McCauley and Lawson 2002, 10.

[34] See McCauley and Lawson 2002 arguing against the alternative hypotheses in H. Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity* (Oxford, 2000).

[35] See Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994.

for rituals must be understood, rather than being regarded as potential solutions in themselves to the riddle of what a ritual is or 'means'.

We also argue that it is not analytically productive to attempt to define rituals as a class of events, since such an attempt brings with it a series of familiar but unproductive questions about whether for example football matches or student demonstrations are or are not 'rituals'. It seems obvious that in some cultural practices almost everything that happens is highly ritualized, in others ritualization may be less complete and may vary from occasion to occasion; and it seems obvious that whatever it is that makes these events notable can also happen in a more fragmentary way, as a small part of other activities, and even individually. Something remarkably like it can even occur as part of individual psychopathology.[36] Which of these events one calls 'a ritual' is not analytically significant. In all these cases at least some of what is going on departs in recognisable ways from normal human action. The challenge is to describe and account for this transformation, where it occurs.

We emphasise the fact that rituals are composed of many actions that can and frequently are often done in non-ritualized ways in other contexts. Thus an adequate analysis of ritual must provide an answer to the question of what is the difference between an action performed so to speak 'normally' and the same action when it is ritualized. Drawing on an avowedly eclectic range of ideas from the philosophy of action and language, phenomenology, and cognitive science, we argue that the distinctive quality of action we recognise as ritualization can happen in a number of ways, some of which we illustrate in some detail, but that in each case it involves a specific modification in the intentionality of human action. Ritual is action in which intentionality is in a certain way displaced so that, as we summarise the matter, human agents both are and are not the authors of their ritual actions.

Normal human action is intrinsically intentional. In order correctly to identify what kind of action certain behaviour counts as (Is that man waving to me or practising his tennis serve? Is he giving or lending me that? Why is she telling me this?), an interlocutor or

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[36] See A.P. Fiske and N. Haslam, "Is Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder a Pathology of the Human Disposition to Perform Socially Meaningful Rituals? Evidence of Similar Content", *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 185 (1997), 211–222. See also the discussion in P. Boyer, *Religion Explained* (New York, 2001).

observer needs correctly to identify the intention that is directing the action: not a prior intention or purpose, but the intentionality that animates the action. This is sometimes called the 'intention-in-action' and, for linguistic examples, it is also sometimes referred to as the 'illocutionary force' or 'point' of the utterance. It is the aspect of the utterance that makes it an action, and it is crucial to establishing the identity of the action—what kind of action it is. So, to use a standard example, a policeman who calls out to an ice-skater on a frozen pond saying 'the ice is thin over there' will have failed in his purpose if the other man does not apprehend that his point in saying this is not idly to convey information, or to strike up an acquaintance, but to warn him not to go 'over there'. It is the policeman's intention-in-action that makes his utterance a warning. (Much else is needed, of course, to make it a successful one, but that is a different point).

To grasp the intentions-in-action (or, as we more often say in our book, 'intentional meanings') of a person's activity is not an optional extra in human interaction. It is how we understand what they do as the actions of an intentional agent, and the only grounds we have for distinguishing nameable and comprehensible 'actions' within the continuous flow of their outwardly observable movements. If we do not attribute intentionality to each other in this way, if we do not see others' activity as embodying intentions, then we have no more grounds for understanding what they are doing than a hearer of an unknown language has for distinguishing words and sentences. So in order correctly to understand the actions of a human agent we normally have to be able to discern what their intention-in-action is: how they themselves would identify what it is they are doing. Of course, we normally do not need to wonder very hard, and there is often not much room for doubt. We generally and routinely do this correctly without even being conscious of the question.

For ritualized action, we argue, this is not so. First, the identity of the person's actions may not be at all intelligible on the basis of observing what they do. A Jain woman in a temple, performing *puja*, stands before an idol, takes a small oil lamp in her right hand, lifts it up and holds it towards the statue. Is she shedding light on the idol? Is she offering the lamp to it? Or is she shedding light on herself? Is she representing the 'light' of Jain religious teaching and saying non-verbally that this derives from the teacher whose statue is before her? If we imagine her doing something of this kind in a

'normal' action context then any of these might be the case, and which of them is the case would be a matter of what her intentions actually were. We would look to how she did what she did, with a view to working out what this was. In the ritual context, however, there is only one answer to the question. So long as we are sure that she is in the temple to perform this ritual (she has not wandered in by accident and she is not just 'playing along'), we know that what her action may count as must be one of the known constituent acts of which this ritual is composed. In this case it is the *dip-puja*, or lamp-worship. Now there is not just one simple list of these actions, and there are some varying views within the Jain community about what these are and how they are related. But nevertheless, insofar as this is a ritual action it remains the case that where we have to look in order to be able to name and identify her action is not to the woman herself, her thoughts and feelings, or to the nuances of her comportment that might give us access to these, but to the shared public knowledge that precedes her performance and that stipulates what kinds of actions this ritual is made up from and therefore what her activity as part of it ever could be.

This then is the sense in which ritual action is non-intentional. This is not to say that it is unintentional. This woman is conscious and aware of what she is doing. It is non-intentional in the specific sense that the *identity* of her action is fixed by prior stipulation, where normally, in unritualized contexts, it would be a matter of her intentions-in-action.

The second aspect of the ritualization of action, in our analysis, is therefore this feature of stipulation. Ritual, as many analysts have observed, is governed by rules that tell performers what they may and may not do, in which order, and so on. But more fundamental than these regulative rules are constitutive rules that stipulate what is to count as an instance of the restricted set of possible actions of which any ritual is composed. (Constitutive rules also occur in games: a 'serve' in tennis is when you . . .). In performing an action as ritual one accepts these constitutive rules, and it is these rather than the normal "steady buzz of intentional activity"[37] that are constitutive of the identity of one's action. As a result—this is the third feature—ritual actions appear to those who perform them as somehow

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[37] S. Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (London, 1959), 97.

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pre-existing and coming from outside themselves, so that they inherit or receive them and have to aim at achieving or accomplishing them, at making their activity count as one of them. This we refer to as the elemental or archetypal quality of ritualized action: the fact that to those who perform them these actions can seem not to be the outcome of what they do so much as a pre-existing, indeed often eternal and archetypal entity, which they somehow aim at replicating, or achieving, or entering into.

Drawing on recent work in cognitive psychology, we suggest that the representations celebrants hold of ritual actions may therefore be different from those they hold of other actions. Psychologists have shown that even very young children represent the categories of natural kinds (animal and plant species, naturally occurring substances, etc.) differently from how they represent artefacts or the products of human convention. So for instance, children understand intuitively that a badger cannot 'become' a skunk, even if it were to be surgically altered to that in all respects it resembled one. Equally, they understand that a chair that had its back removed and its legs extended could become a stool. Natural kinds are represented mentally as if their identity depended on an unseen 'essential' quality rather than observable features. ('Fools' gold' is not gold, however much it resembles it). Our suggestion is that a similar difference to that between natural kind and artefactual terms underlies the representation of ritualized and unritualized actions.[38]

So the ritualization of action, we have argued, consists in it becoming non-intentional, stipulated, and elemental or archetypal. At this point in the argument, we need to remind ourselves of an observation we made at the beginning. Human action is intrinsically intentional and reflexive. It is constituted, in part, by the conscious ideas that agents have of what they are doing. So their own self-descriptions are an intrinsic and constitutive part of their activity.[39] This fact has two consequences for the ritualization of action. The first is that, to a person acting ritually, the fact that they are acting ritually is available to them to be apprehended, and may become the subject of conscious reflection. The second, which follows from this, is that the way and the attitude with which they respond to this apprehension

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[38] Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 133–166.
[39] See C. Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge, 1985).

of their own action as ritualized will constitutively affect that action. People generally know and indeed intend that, in ritual, they are acting differently from normal. Terminology varies cross-culturally, of course, but this does not show, as anthropologists have often mistakenly thought, that there is not a universal perception that is shared.[40] What is profoundly variable, however, is the reaction to this and the different ways agents go about apprehending and appropriating the ritual actions they perform.

For the Jain case, we describe the way worshippers seek to 'apprehend' their own ritual actions by learning and rehearsing certain propositional meanings that they attach to each named action; and how some, answering injunctions from religious teachers, seek through prayer, or song, or meditational techniques to experience such meanings emotionally as the acts are performed. This we refer to as 'meaning to mean', and we note that it is a widespread reaction in many religious traditions, especially their 'protestant' variants. We also describe how some worshipers apprehend their ritual actions without recourse to explicit, propositional, or symbolic meanings but through a direct engagement with the physicality of certain ritual acts, and in this way achieve emotional or dissociated states. This is marginal to Jain religiosity, but central, of course, to many other traditions.

So the fact that the agent performing ritual remains conscious and reflective is intrinsic to our account of ritualization. It is important not to describe ritual as if the person performing it becomes an automaton or unaware. We know this is generally not so: spirit possession and ecstatic trances may occur in ritual, as a result of versions of the last of the strategies of 'apprehension' we have just described, but they are not necessary to it. Persons in ritual remain human agents. It is most obviously the quality of *inter*-action that is affected by ritualization. When we take part in ritual, we do not seek to understand each other's actions in the same way as we do normally, for we know that it is to the stipulated order of possible consituent acts, and not directly to the intentions-in-action of those we interact with, that we must refer to understand what it is they are doing.

This is the sense then in which, in ritual, an agent both is and is not the author of his or her acts. It is his or her doing that the

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[40] M. Bloch, *How We Think They Think* (Boulder, 1998).

action is performed 'as ritual', as are whatever symbolic or emotional identifications he or she makes, but the fact that the actions are non-intentional, that their identity comes from a stipulated ontology, means that in another sense they are not the agent's own. Bloch has recently taken up this point,[41] and developed the arguments he made in earlier work about ritual as traditional authority.[42] He argues that it explains the 'deference' intrinsic to ritual as well as the fact, which we also stress, that the attribution of meaning to ritual is always uncertain and never final. Bloch also agrees with us, and with Houseman & Severi,[43] that ritual is not a medium for the communication of meaning, although this does not mean that meanings are not attributed to it. It is a mistake to see ritual action as merely the means of illustrating or displaying pre-existing religious ideas, although this is often how religious authorities prefer to see things. Rather, ritual action is itself a distinctive medium of religious tradition.

In a perceptive discussion,[44] Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi make the point that there is an equivocation in our book about how our theory applies to what we call, following Jane Atkinson,[45] 'performance-centred rituals'. These are rites, paradigmatically shamanic seances and exorcism rites, in which some kind of dramatic performance, such as of the unseen actions of gods or spirits that are believed really to be occurring, is central. At one point we describe these as being more 'weakly ritualized' than liturgy-centred rituals, such as the *puja*.[46] We consciously set out to correct the relative neglect in anthropological theorising of ritual of the comparatively undramatic rites that are central to liturgical practice in all the great religions.[47] But elsewhere (in our discussion of the Indian festival of *holi*), we suggest that performance-centred rites may differ from the

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[41] M. Bloch, "Ritual and Deference", H. Whitehouse and J. Laidlaw (eds), *Ritual and Memory. Toward a Comparative Anthropology of Religion* (Walnut Creek, 2004), 65–78. See also Bloch's chapter in this volume.

[42] See Bloch 1989, 19–45.

[43] Houseman and Severi 1998.

[44] Houseman and Severi 1998, 231–232.

[45] J.M. Atkinson, *The Art and Politics of Wana Shamanship* (Berkeley, 1989).

[46] See Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 8.

[47] On this see also J.R. Bowen, "*Salat* in Indonesia: The Social Meanings of an Islamic Ritual", *Man* (n.s.) 24 (1989), 600–619; J.R. Bowen, "Imputations of Faith and Allegiance. Islamic Prayer and Indonesian Politics Outside the Mosque", D. Parkin and S. Headley (eds), *Islamic Prayer across the Indian Ocean* (London, 2000).

liturgical not in being less ritualized but in ritualization applying at a more inclusive and higher-order level, to larger and more encompassing actions.[48] Houseman and Severi themselves take up the latter suggestion, a choice we concur with as we now agree that this is the correct way to try to see the relationship between liturgical and performance-centred ritual. The notion that performance-centred ritual is 'weakly ritualized' is, we now think, misleading. Houseman and Severi also suggest that our characterisation of ritual action as non-intentional, being a contrast with normal action, is negative and residual. There is some truth in this, although our account of the ontological stipulation provided by constitutive rules is the positive and substantive other side of this coin. But the more substantive point is that our account is designed to accommodate the dual fact, as we see it, that ritual does differ from normal action in certain invariant respects, yet that just how ritual is reflexively constituted and apprehended is variable. Hence our account of the different modes through which Jains constitute their action as ritualized, such as 'meaning to mean'.

Houseman & Severi

Houseman and Severi's book, like ours, is an attempt to theorise ritual as a 'mode of action' through detailed interpretation of a single ethnographic case. The case they choose is not one they themselves have studied directly, but the *naven* ceremonies of the Iatmul people of Papua New Guinea, which have been documented several times since Gregory Bateson's path-braking ethnography.[49] The *naven* is a much more performance-centred and also more labile ritual than the *puja*. A variety of different episodes of behaviour, between persons in certain kinship relations, count as *naven*. Yet still all acts of *naven* have a discernible 'ritual form' when taken as a whole. All count as instances of *naven* insofar as the performers realise this form, which because it is a more encompassing action, includes additional elements to those found in elemental liturgical acts such as those in the Jain *puja*. So in addition to reproducing certain definite—transvestite—behaviours in a certain distinct—caricaturing—style,

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[48] See Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 120–121.
[49] See G. Bateson, *Naven*. 2nd ed. (Stanford, 1958 [1st ed. 1936]).

naven creates distinct relational contexts. It is performed between definite pairs of classificatory kin, and the behaviour always identifies one party with another kin category. So for instance a mother's brother (*wau*) behaves towards his sister's son (*laua*) in a way that also identifies him with the latter's mother, which is to say his own sister. This process, which Houseman and Severi call 'ritual condensation', creates simultaneous but contradictory relationships. It is important to emphasise that their argument is not that these relationships are represented, symbolised, or communicated in the ritual. They do not exist independently outside of it and so are not there to be represented. Rather the ritual creates a new relational context by associating in the same sequence of action modes of relationship which, outside the ritual, are mutually exclusive.[50] Houseman and Severi argue that these features of the ritual form of *naven* action are "constitutive properties of ritualization in general".[51] They end their book[52] with brief discussions of some other 'performance-centred' rituals from other parts of the world: American Indian shamanism, which Severi has studied ethnographically, and African male initiation rites, on which Houseman has conducted his own ethnographical research.[53]

The main and most interesting difference between Houseman and Severi's account of ritual and our own, we think, derives from the fact that unlike the Jain *puja*, *naven* is intrinsically interactive. This means, as we would see it, that it shows more clearly some of the consequences for interaction of the non-intentionality of ritual action than are evident in the Jain case, and we would see some of the features they identify, such as 'ritual condensation', in this light.

Recent attempts to theorise ritual action have drawn on a number of different theoretical resources. The philosophy of language and the study of pragmatics remain important, especially so-called 'speech act theory' (important for Bloch and Humphrey and Laidlaw); and generative linguistics has influenced Lévi-Strauss, Staal, and Lawson and McCauley. Phenomenology, especially the phenomenological understanding of action, is important for Humphrey and Laidlaw and Houseman and Severi. But in addition cognitive science

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[50] Houseman and Severi 1998, 207.
[51] Houseman and Severi 1998, 264.
[52] Houseman and Severi 1998, 271–85.
[53] See Severi 1993b; Houseman 1993.

has been important, influencing as it has in different ways Bloch, Lawson and McCauley, Humphrey and Laidlaw, and Houseman and Severi. Dan Sperber's radical reinterpretation of symbolism away from a straightforwardly communicative model has for instance been seminal.[54]

Concluding Questions

There is considerable overlap between many of these theories, as well as clear points of convergence and disagreement. It would be an advance if clarification could be achieved about the latter. Is Rappaport's explication of the commitment intrinsic to ritual participation bound conceptually to his view of ritual as communication, or can it be detached from this (we think it probably can) and reconciled with our own and Bloch's accounts of commitment and deference in ritual? Are Lawson & McCauley's hypotheses about the effects of religious postulates on ritual form compatible with characterisations of ritual, such ours or Houseman and Severi's, that begin by defining ritual in terms of mode of action rather than with reference to religious representations? We can see no compelling reasons why they should not. Can Lawson and McCauley's ideas be adapted or interpreted so as to cope with secular ritual? The centrality to their thinking of CPS-agents makes this appear intractable. Are our own and Houseman and Severi's characterisations of ritual form complementary, one applying better to liturgical and the other to performance-centred rituals? And does this distinction coincide with that drawn by Lawson & McCauley between special-patient and special-instrument rituals on the one hand and special-agent rituals on the other? If so, what then becomes of the broader category of ritual?

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[54] D. Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge, 1975).