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# RELATIONALITY

MICHAEL HOUSEMAN

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My aim here is to outline and, in passing, briefly illustrate an approach largely inspired by the work of Gregory Bateson, in which ritual performances are envisaged as experiences afforded by the enactment of special relationships.<sup>1</sup> Particular emphasis is thus placed upon the interactions that occur between ritual participants and the relational configurations these interactions imply.<sup>2</sup> By concentrating upon the patterns of relationship ritual performances bring into play, my intention is to speak to a fundamental issue which the two dominant approaches in this field of study fail to address: the very nature of ritual behaviour itself.<sup>3</sup> Almost everyone agrees to two things about ritual. First, rituals have social and psychological effects: they may be seen as a means of defining or maintaining group boundaries, of bestowing status, of settling conflicts, of bringing about catharsis and so forth. Second, rituals are meaningful, that is, their symbolism can be understood as expressing cultural values and ideas. What has become increasingly evident, however, is the degree to which these complementary perspectives, in spite of their undeniable usefulness, leave important things unsaid. Ritual as an observable phenomenon far exceeds the sociological and/or affect-related functions that may be assigned to it. Conversely, the meanings that may be attached to aspects of ritual performances far exceed the limits of the ritual itself. In other words, only some aspects of the ritual are taken into account by functionalist explanations, whereas in the case of symbolic interpretations, what calls for analysis first and foremost are categories, values and so forth, extraneous to the ritual proper. Thus, even when they are combined, as is often the case, these two approaches, the one concerned with the consequences of ritual, the other with its ideational premises, leave the specific complexity of ritual action itself unaccounted for: what are the distinctive organizational features of ritual as such?

## *Acting out Special Relationships*

Perhaps the most obvious property of ritual is that it is a quality of action. There are two aspects to this statement. First of all, what participants may feel or say about the rituals they undertake remains subordinate to what they actually do. It is above all the participants' outward conduct that is prescribed. Thus, ceremonial performances leave less room for the type of ongoing, behavioural negotiation so characteristic of ordinary intercourse: one has to kneel at appropriate times, pour libations in a particular fashion, put on certain masks and not others, and so forth. This does not mean that a given ritual is always performed in exactly the same way. Items of behaviour may vary from one performance to the next; indeed, as we shall see, ritual is no stranger to improvisation. However, the overall pattern of behaviour of which

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<sup>1</sup> G. Bateson, *Naven. A Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe Drawn from Three Points of View* (Stanford, 1958 [2<sup>nd</sup> edition]); G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> See Houseman and Severi 1998.

<sup>3</sup> As should become clear, I use the word 'ritual' (or the expression 'ceremonial performance') to refer to a particular modality of embodied social action, defined by a number of presuppositions pertaining to the organisation of such action and to the experience of those participating in it. This term thus covers both certain named events in which these presuppositions explicitly hold sway ('rituals'), as well as the process whereby these presuppositions are, often implicitly, put into effect ('ritualization').

these items form a part remains recognizably the same. As Humphrey and Laidlaw have recently stressed, the foremost object to be attended to in the study of ritual is neither exegetical commentary, nor doctrinal precepts, nor even speculations regarding the feelings or ideas ritual experiences may afford, but the structure of ritual practice itself, as an organized sequence of acts.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, rituals do not tell stories; they enact particular realities. They do not so much say things (“God, who is like a father, is in heaven”, “This young person has attained manhood”, “Your neighbour’s witchcraft has been neutralized”) as *do* them. For this reason, linguistic communication is a poor model for understanding what is going on in ritual. Some rituals may be largely comprised of liturgical formulae. However, spells, chants and other ritual utterances are characterized by a marked diminution of their semantic properties; they are often obscure or highly ambiguous. Thus, ritual discourse is used less to convey information than to accomplish certain acts,<sup>5</sup> to demonstrate the presence of certain non-human agents,<sup>6</sup> to establish undeniable authorities,<sup>7</sup> or to define the speaker’s identity.<sup>8</sup> What exactly is meant when a priest pronounces the phrase “This is my body” during the Catholic mass, for example, or when a village elder invites a deity to “take part” of a sacrificial animal, is of less import for the participants than the particular conditions in which these words are spoken: by whom, with what authority, when, in what manner and so forth. Thus, rather than treating ritual as analogous to discursive phenomena—as assertions *in loco verbi*,<sup>9</sup> as enacted recitations,<sup>10</sup> as ‘performative’ statements<sup>11</sup> and so forth—we should attend to ritual as a mode of action whose distinctive communicative entailments are to be identified in their own right.<sup>12</sup>

Now, the ‘particular realities’ people enact when they participate in rituals are relationships: an ongoing reciprocal involvement between subjects implying, for all parties concerned, the attendant qualities of agency, interaction, intentionality, affect and accountability. Here again, two general remarks are in order.

First, because ritual relationships are acted out and not merely referred to, they are not, in the manner of myths for example, reducible to logical or metaphorical connections between abstract terms or categories. In other words, ritual relationships, like relationships generally, are not merely, as some ‘relational’ approaches might suggest,<sup>13</sup> the expression of or vehicle for certain values or ideas; they constitute lived-through experiences sustained by intentionally and emotionally laden events. Consider for instance the complex ritual relationship established during a marriage ceremony between the couple, their respective families, the celebrating official and the witnesses. It is difficult, one might say impossible, to know exactly what attitudes and feelings these different parties may have. However, it seems

<sup>4</sup> See Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994.

<sup>5</sup> See Tambiah 1981.

<sup>6</sup> See Schieffelin 1985.

<sup>7</sup> See Bloch 1974.

<sup>8</sup> See Severi 1993.

<sup>9</sup> See Lévi-Strauss 1990.

<sup>10</sup> See Staal 1979.

<sup>11</sup> See Tambiah 1985.

<sup>12</sup> One implication of such an approach is that communicative intention, that is, perception of and participation in interaction, is distinct from and instrumentally prior to language using capacities (see G. Airente, “Le rôle des représentations dans le développement de la capacité communicative”, *Intellectica* 32 (2001), 155-183, for a developmental argument along these lines). To the degree that this is indeed the case, questions regarding the relational forms governing communicative intention become extremely relevant. It should be noted in passing that one of the pernicious results of treating linguistic communication as primary and basic, is a tendency to envisage emotion essentially in terms of intensity – as expressive frosting on the semantic cake, as it were – rather than in terms of relational form.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Barraud and Platenkamp 1990; Strathern 1988.

fair to assume that because it is they themselves who are actively involved in the ritual's performance, their participation can never be entirely neutral. In other words, ritual relationships are immediate, personally invested and, for lack of a better word, alive.

Second, while the relationships ritual participants enact are mainly with each other, they may also involve various non-human entities: spirits, gods, ancestors, animals, objects, places, liturgical formulae and so forth. In the perspective outlined here, however, analytical precedence is given to ties between persons, whose quality as actual subjects is, in principle, unproblematic. Links with non-persons, while often playing an essential role (think of rings and wedding vows in the case of Western marriages for example), are thus envisaged as being dependant upon ties between persons. Specifically, non-human entities acquire the attributes of agency, becoming virtual subjects with whom a 'relationship' may be possible, precisely to the degree that the participants' encounter with them is causally embedded in a network of interpersonal ties. The establishment of an intimate, significant connection with, say, a ceremonial song or image is inseparable from and dependant upon the network of relationships between those who recite or exhibit this song or image, those who revealed it to them, those who listen to or observe it, those who are knowingly excluded from this recital or exhibition, those who are held to be unaware that this recital or exhibition even exists and so forth.

The relationships which come into being in the course of ritual performances, be they between persons or with non-persons, stand out as exceptional in at least three respects. To begin with, ritual relationships are notoriously polysemous<sup>14</sup> or multiplex.<sup>15</sup> The actions which define them bring together a plurality of pre-existing ties, generally drawn from a wide variety of domains: subsistence, life cycle events, kinship, other ceremonial occasions and so forth. During the funerary ritual among the Beti of Cameroon for instance, women who are not members of the deceased's lineage (i.e. potential wives), brandish spears made of branches of 'sweet' plants commonly used for blessing; a talking drum alternately beats out phrases of insult and praise while the women execute a warrior dance around the tomb. In this sequence, war and killing, affinal ties, sexual antagonism and healing and sacrificial practices are inextricably combined. These disparate elements are drawn together as the interdependent components of a new totality, namely, the ritual relationship that is acted out between the dancing women, the 'sweet' spears, the dead man's cadaver and the living members of his lineage. Ritual performances characteristically involve such an interplay of several communicative modes (song, music, dance, speech, gesture, etc.<sup>16</sup>). However, as such, they are not only richly evocative, bringing a broad range of social phenomena to mind, but exceptionally integrative as well. They reframe salient features drawn from different realms of experience in such a way that these features may be appreciated as the interconnected aspects of a novel, ordered whole, namely, the ritual performance itself. Ritual action, by situating existing aspects of social life within a new, shared context, imbues them with further significance.

The context defined by ritual action, however, is a highly peculiar one, for the disparate features it brings together are often if not always articulated in an apparently paradoxical fashion. Indeed, an additional property which makes ritual relationships so exceptional is that they typically entail a condensation of nominally incompatible modes of relationship.<sup>17</sup> Thus, during the Beti funerary dance, blessing and warlike aggression,

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<sup>14</sup> See Turner 1967.

<sup>15</sup> See M. Gluckman, "Les rites de passage", M. Gluckman (ed.), *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations* (Manchester, 1962), 1-52, here 27-31; V.W. Turner, "Three Symbols of Passage in Ndembu Circumcision Rites", *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations*, 124-173, here 125.

<sup>16</sup> See Kapferer 1983.

<sup>17</sup> See Houseman and Severi 1998.

ordinarily antithetical, are dramatically fused, as are praise and mockery, and male/male and male/female relations. The culminating ‘grooving’ episode of the *naven* ceremony, undertaken among the Iatmul of Papua New Guinea by a (classificatory) mother’s brother in celebration of a young person’s accomplishment, provides another, particularly straightforward example of this.<sup>18</sup> The celebrant, adorned as a laughingly dishevelled widow, wanders through the village looking for his “child”; upon finding him, following a ribald interchange with women (the young person’s father’s sisters) decked out as ludicrously vain warriors, he rubs his buttocks down his sister’s child’s outstretched leg before presenting the latter with food in return for shell valuables (recalling the bridewealth transferred on the occasion of the sister’s child’s father’s marriage). In this singular act, which may be held to evoke, at the very least, at once childbirth (the mother’s brother is identified as his sister’s child’s mother) and coitus (the sister’s child is identified as his mother’s brother’s husband), parent-child ties and those between sexual partners, normally irreconcilable, are inextricably merged, as are cross-sex and same-sex relations.<sup>19</sup> Such paradoxical situations, entailing the simultaneous occurrence of contrary relational patterns, may, of course, take place in the course of everyday behaviour. In ritual, however, they represent the norm. Indeed, rituals abound in seemingly anomalous episodes in which, for example, affirmations of identity are at the same time testimonies of difference, displays of authority are also demonstrations of subordination, the presence of persons or other beings is at once corroborated and denied, secrets are simultaneously dissimulated and revealed, and so forth. To the degree that ritual performances incorporate such exceptional situations, they become readily recognizable as distinct from everyday interaction: they can not be fully accounted for in terms of ordinary intentionalities and patterns of relationship.

Finally, the various modifications of everyday behaviour that can be accounted for in terms of ritual condensation are not put together either haphazardly or in a purely lineal manner. This is a still further feature of ritual relationships: the actions which define these relationships are undertaken in accordance with an interactive scheme that provides the ritual episode as a whole with a particular relational form. The Beti funerary dance, for example, seems to be founded upon a pattern which we might call embedded complementarity, in which an asymmetrical, antagonistic relationship between the dancing affinal women and the dead person’s immobile kin on the one hand, and between these two living parties together and the deceased individual on the other hand, are conjoined in a single episode. The *naven* ceremony, during which expressions of ascendancy and subservience are conflated and male and female participants compete in the caricatured portrayal of their opposing gender roles, appears to be grounded in a pattern of dual schismogenesis: symmetrical and complementary differentiation are pursued simultaneously.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the overall relational dynamic governing ritual condensation will vary from one case to the next. Among the configurations that have been proposed for other ritual events are “cumulative inclusion” for Kuna shamanism,<sup>21</sup> the

<sup>18</sup> See Bateson, *Naven*; M. Stanek, “Les travestis rituels des Iatmul”, F. Lupu (ed.), *Océanie : le masque au long cours* (Paris, 1983), 163-182.

<sup>19</sup> A methodological assumption underlying this approach in which ritual actions are regarded first and foremost as ways of defining particular relationships between the participants, is that one must always look beyond the meanings or functions that may be ascribed to any particular item of ritual behaviour in order to identify the relational conditions for its appearance. A useful strategy in this respect consists in discovering the ritual identifications that characterise these behaviours.

<sup>20</sup> See Houseman and Severi 1998. Bateson, who introduced the neologism ‘schismogenesis’ meaning literally “birth of a separation”, defined it as “a process of differentiation [...] resulting from cumulative interaction” (*Naven*, 75). He distinguishes between two basic types: ‘symmetrical’ in which the relational responses that comprise the interaction are identical (e.g. rivalry), and ‘complementary’ in which these responses are different (e.g. dominance/submission).

<sup>21</sup> See Severi 2002.

systemic interplay of avowed and concealed secrecy for male initiation rites,<sup>22</sup> the embedding of play within itself for scholastic hazing,<sup>23</sup> rebounding or reversing identification for Amerindian homicide<sup>24</sup> and torture,<sup>25</sup> and cumulative symmetry for Jivaro face-painting.<sup>26</sup>

According to this view, then, a ritual performance's quality as a distinct, structured totality derives less from a pre-established sequence of behaviours (i.e. a script), than from the relational configuration of which these behaviours form a part. This higher-order, interactive integration, whereby the participation of different parties is systemically orchestrated in a mutually reinforcing fashion, provides the experiential scaffolding by means of which ritual relationships are progressively put into place. Such underlying relational form allows a given ceremonial event to be readily recognized as such; at the same time, by virtue of its systemic qualities, it overrides, and thereby accommodates the personal and historical variations that inevitably occur. Similarly, by accentuating the participants' attunement to the affective rhythms and scenic effects their coordinated activities bring about, this form accounts for both the overall emotional tone or 'style' of the ritual performance and the appearance of certain emergent, expressive features in the course of its enactment.

### *Unusually Meaningful Experiences*

Ritual performance, as an enactment of exceptional relationships, imposes itself upon the participants as an incontestable personal and social experience, numerous features of which contribute to its presumed meaningfulness. The interactive coordination such performances imply, the affective qualities and bodily attitudes they afford, the perceptual irregularities and unusual modes of expression they call for, their ostensibly mandatory nature as well as their observable, pragmatic outcomes, all attest to the fact that more than mere play-acting is involved. However, because the actions whereby ritual relationships are realized involve the condensation of ordinarily antithetical modes of relationship bringing together a diversity of pre-existing ties, they are difficult to conceptualize in terms other than their own enactment. From this point of view, the distinctive evocative qualities of ritual acts (including ritual speech) and their inherent conceptual uncertainty are two sides of the same coin. Ritual participants are thus engaged in concrete, prescribed performances whose exact meaning, in terms of everyday intentionalities and patterns of intercourse, remains nonetheless unclear. One important consequence of this is that the intelligibility of these performances requires the supposition of some other, extra-ordinary significance, instantiated in the ritual events themselves. In other words, the meaningfulness of ritual performances involves a degree of self-reference: the special relationships acted out in them and the integrative contexts these relationships imply are upheld by circuits of recursive allusion which confer a measure of indisputable authority upon them. They appear as necessary, appropriate repetitions rather than as arbitrary inventions.

According to this view, the participants' commitment to the supposed effectiveness of the ceremonial performances they undertake, that is, to the reality of the relationships these performances actualize, derives less from the optional and partially idiosyncratic, substantive interpretations they may ascribe to them, than from the well-defined pragmatic conditions of

<sup>22</sup> See Houseman 1993; Houseman 2000.

<sup>23</sup> See M. Houseman, "Is this play? Hazing in French Preparatory Schools", *Focaal* 37 (2001), 39-47.

<sup>24</sup> See E. Viveiros De Castro, *From the Enemy's Point of View. Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society* (Chicago, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> See M. Houseman, "Quelques configurations relationnelles de la douleur", F. Héritier (ed.), *De la violence II* (Paris, 1999), 77-112.

<sup>26</sup> See A.-C. Taylor, "Les masques de la mémoire. Essai sur la fonction des peintures corporelles jivaro", *L'Homme* 165 (2003), 223-247. See also Handelman 1998, 138-156, for what might be termed cumulative inversion in the case of Newfoundland mumming practices.

their execution. It is the performances themselves—the fact of doing them—that serve as the experiential grounds for the irrefutable yet difficult-to-define ‘truths’ they are held to enact.<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that participants go through ritual actions in an unthinking fashion. As exegetical traditions suggest, ritual performances often incorporate a significant degree of conceptual speculation and reflexivity. However, the relational configurations and perceptual circumstances that constrain the participants’ experience of ritual events, while acting to structure and sustain their supposed significance, at the same time preclude the participants from forming definite, shared, non self-referential ideas of these episodes.<sup>28</sup>

This self-validating character of ritual performances is further upheld by the distinctive pragmatic premises that, intuitively, underlie people’s participation in such events. Everyday interaction proceeds in large part from the tacit presupposition that, in principle, behaviours express or notify dispositions: if I get angry it’s because I’m irritated, if I apologize it’s because I’m sorry and so forth. However, because a person has no direct access to another’s motives and feelings, this equation is often uncertain: the relationship between personal dispositions and outward behaviour may be deliberately modified or concealed. As a result, everyday interaction inevitably entails a process of negotiation in which the participants’ positions with respect to each other are being continually worked out. On the basis of their own immediately experienced feelings and intentions and on the basis of inferences regarding the feelings and intentions of others, people are involved in co-constructing a mutually accommodating social reality. In a ritual situation, however, the connection between personal dispositions and overt actions seems to be oriented in the opposite direction. The patterning of behaviour, rather than being continually negotiated, is sharply constrained: it is the participants’ actions, rather than their private motives and emotions, which are presumed to be stipulated and clearly defined. In short, dispositions proceed from behaviour rather than the other way around. This does not mean that real feelings and intentions are not involved, but rather that these are as much informed by the conventional actions participants undertake as they may be said to provide the basis for these actions. Consider, for example, the case of wailers in funerary ceremonies. They are rarely, if ever, those persons nearest to the deceased. Indeed, their unrestrained outpourings often stand in sharp contrast to the silent stoicism exhibited by the dead person’s closest kin. In many societies, it is, among other things, the reciprocal patterning of these two parties’ behaviour that furnishes the basis for the participants’ distinctive, shared experience of ritualized mourning.

The problem, however, is that, as has been stressed, ritual actions are generally highly ambiguous, such that the feelings and motives which may be said to be appropriate to them are difficult to determine. We might indeed say that while for ordinary interaction, the overriding question is “given what I feel (and what I can infer about others’ feelings), what should I be doing?”, in the case of ritual it is “given what I am doing (and what I perceive others doing), what should I be feeling?”. Whereas in the case of everyday intercourse, the presumption of individual dispositions provides the definite starting point from which negotiated social behaviour proceeds, in the case of ritual, it is, on the contrary, well-defined patterns of social behaviour that are taken to furnish the tangible basis for the partially idiosyncratic construction of individual participants’ dispositions. Thus, for example, it is not because the women are upset and angry that they scream and cry when young men are snatched from the village to be brought to the initiation camp where a monstrous being is said to devour them. Certain of these women may indeed be more or less angry or upset; others

<sup>27</sup> See Rappaport 1979, 173-221.

<sup>28</sup> See Houseman 2002 for an illustration of this with regard to two recurrent forms of ritual reflexivity: ‘dissimulation’, centred upon a perceptual divergence within the context of interactive complementarity, and ‘simulation’, founded upon a recursive circularity mediated by the manipulation of material (or discursive) artefacts.

will be proud, anxious or even bemused. Chances are that they experience a mixture of contradictory feelings, all the more so because—unlike what young men themselves, who hear the women's desperate wailing, might well assume—a fair number of these women, who have participated in this episode any number of times, are well aware that the reality of the monster in question is far from certain. On the other hand, the women's prescribed screaming and crying imposes upon them a common performative crucible within which their individual experiences of this moving episode are constructed. Their stipulated behaviour provides a shared wellspring from which the private emotions and intentions of each of these women are drawn.

In order for ritual performances to be effective, that is, for the participants to acquire a measure of commitment to the realities they enact, it is necessary that they be personally involved in the actions they undertake. In other words, it is important that they experience emotional and intentional states in connection with these actions. However, the exact nature of these states, while informed by the prescribed behaviour they pursue and regulated by (at time conflicting) cues provided by the actions and discourse of others, remains underdetermined. Each participant is involved in fashioning his or her own inner experiences in an individual, and therefore, partially idiosyncratic fashion. In much the same way that what seems to count is less the precise interpretations participants may make of their behaviour than their presumption that this behaviour is meaningful, what is crucial is not the particular private dispositions the participants' acts may give rise to but the fact that their acts are invested with personal feeling and intentionality.

#### *Emergent Effects*

As an unusually meaningful acting out of special types of relationship, a ritual event is perhaps best viewed neither as producing precise messages to be deciphered, nor as buttressing existing social structures directly, but as a particular process of recontextualization. On one level, this recontextualization derives from the polysemous or multiplex character of ritual action and concerns the unitary integration of the disparate elements it brings together. The Beti women's funerary dance, for instance, does not orient participants towards any particular understanding of the connection between, say, a man's death and his affinal relations; nor does it guarantee lineage-group solidarity or a resolution of conflictual relations between the sexes. Rather, it provides experiential grounds for the participants' commitment to the presumption that these various aspects of their social life are related to each other in a circular fashion. In other words, this ritual event acts as an emotionally and intentionally invested touchstone for representations to the effect that blessing and warlike aggression, marriage alliance and descent, the living and the dead and so forth, are not joined in a theoretically contingent, external or causal relationship, but in an internal or constitutive one. In short, it makes these diverse phenomena easier to communicate about as mutually reinforcing, inescapable features of the participants' social world.

The recontextualisation conferred by ritual action, however, relates not only to such comprehensive, conceptual concerns, but to particular, concrete situations as well. This second level of recontextualization is founded upon the two complementary, tangible operations ritual enactments invariably entail. To begin with, because ritual actions involve the condensation of nominally contrary modes of relationship drawing upon a plurality of domains, they give rise to complex, highly evocative behaviours: distinctive acts, utterances and artefacts. In other words, they entail the definition of a specific symbolism. The main symbolic features of a given ritual are thus simply that which the participants are given to experience in the course of its execution: the golden rings exchanged during a Western marriage ceremony for example, the words that are solemnly pronounced, the spatial placing

of the participants, their dress, the order of events and so forth. As has already been mentioned, the particular meanings that can be attributed to such features (e.g. gold's precious, untarnishable character bearing witness to the treasured and presumable permanence of the matrimonial tie), are generally founded upon cultural ideas and values which are current beyond the ritual enactment itself. However, what makes these features instances of a *ritual* symbolism, deriving specifically from the ceremonial enactment itself, is pointedly not such precise interpretations, but the fact that they serve as the auto-referential vehicles for designating the system of relationships acted out in the course of the rite (e.g. gold wedding rings 'stand for' matrimony). In this respect, the particular actions, utterances and objects that emerge as the symbolic expression of a given ritual performance constitute less a definite code signifying particular messages than a special idiom indexing a privileged context.

At the same time, to the extent that ritual behaviour consists in the acting out of relationships, it presupposes the designation of particular agents, namely those between whom these relationships are acted out: persons occupying particular positions (e.g. the bride, the groom, the in-laws, the officiants, the witnesses, etc.), but also, causally embedded in a network of interpersonal ties, other, non-human entities such as spirits, gods, ancestors and other 'powers' (e.g. government, the law, 'society', etc.) as well as animals, objects, texts, formulae or locations.

The designation of particular agencies on the one hand, and the emergence of a specific idiom whereby the relationships between these agencies may be expressed on the other, comprise what C. Severi and I have called the "work" of ritual.<sup>29</sup> This two-fold work constitutes the instrumental grounds for the characteristic efficacy of ceremonial performance: the provision of indisputable, highly integrative contexts in the light of which the myriad relationships that make up the participants' social world may be conventionally reappraised and redefined.

In this perspective, ritual efficacy may be understood as the emergence, subsequent to and beyond the ritual performance itself, of discourse and behaviour which, drawing upon the idiom this performance gives rise to and implicating the agencies designated in it, are predicated upon the relationships realized in the course of the ritual's execution. The occurrence of such speech and action tells the tale of the participants' commitment less to abstract 'beliefs', than to the ongoing reality of the relationships they ritually enact. According to this view, as a result of people's (central or peripheral) participation in ritual activities, the relationships acted out in the course of these activities—undying faithfulness, mutual responsibility, social recognition of change of status, subordination to legal authority and so forth in the case of marriage—are more easily entertained, in speech and conduct, as unquestionable references for the evaluation of particular persons and situations in the world at large. Indeed, once said and done, such evaluative items of discourse and action, while anchored in ritual experience, take on a life of their own, acquiring the distinctively naturalized, self-evident quality which is the hallmark of everyday interaction. Ritual action, if it is efficacious, thus irreversibly affects ordinary intercourse in perceptible ways: the participants' overt behaviour attests to the fact that 'before' and 'after' are not the same. From this point of view, ritual is serious business: its efficacy is quite different from the gratification that results from playing (or observing) a game or from observing (or participating in) a spectacle.

According to this view, then, rituals do rather less than more. Specifically, they do not create anything *ex nihilo*. The presumed faithfulness of cohabitating couples, their joint responsibility towards each other and towards any children they may have, the distinctive ties with parents, friends and the government authorities this cohabitation implies, are, for example, as much premises as they are results of the modern Western marriage ceremony.

<sup>29</sup> See Houseman and Severi 1998, 254, 263.

However, what ritual does do is lend new life to such principles of relationship by grounding them in the largely irrefutable yet difficult-to-define experience afforded by the ritual performance itself. From this standpoint, ritual appears as a distinctive mode of cultural transmission geared to the organisation of action: it facilitates the ongoing relevance of certain cultural values and ideas by packaging them in the form of highly memorable relational enactments the experience of which provides participants with self-referential contexts in whose light these values and ideas may be justifiably put into effect.

Finally, it is worth remarking that in the perspective outlined here, it seems hardly accidental that ritual activities intervene, for the most part, in connection with situations in which a conventional reevaluation of existing social connections is most vital, that is, in those relating to change and, notably, to relational change. In everyday circumstances, change generally takes place by means of incremental adjustments governed by linear feedback processes taking place between particular individuals or collectivities: as a person (or a collectivity) adopts new attitudes and patterns of behaviour, others respond by altering their own attitudes and behaviour towards him or her, alterations which, in turn, may prompt the person concerned to introduce still further modifications and so forth. The type of change or relational reappraisal mediated by ritual events is of a more holistic nature: when a youth undergoes initiation or when two people become married or when a sacrifice or a healing ritual is performed, it is an entire complex of interrelated relationships that are simultaneously affected and, in many cases, transformed. Whole sets of new, interdependent social redefinitions are brought into play. On the one hand, change brought about through ritual entails a definite break: as has been mentioned, one of the hallmarks of ritual actions is that, for those who perform them, before and after are not the same. At the same time, however, in so far as such change implies a confirmation of a prior set of interconnections between the various persons (and other entities) involved, it corroborates the pre-existing order it presupposes. In short, in the type of recontextualization favoured by ritual action, local discontinuities (e.g. the change of social status entailed by becoming husband and wife) are systemically embedded within the predication of wider continuities (e.g. the system of social statuses as defined through connections with and between family members, friends, government representatives, etc.). This is not to say that such systemic revaluations can not take place in the absence of ritual, but only that ritual is particularly well-suited to bringing them about.

### *Conclusion*

To sum up: by means of stipulated behaviour enacting highly evocative and fundamentally ambiguous relationships (entailing the condensation of opposites), structured by interactive patterning (overall form) and implying an inversion of certain pragmatic suppositions governing ordinary interaction (actions tend to inform dispositions rather than the other way around), ritual performances afford participants with the immediate, personal experience of highly integrative, extra-ordinary realities, sustained by self-reference and by the introduction of designated agencies and of special idioms (symbolism); in doing so, these performances provide the participants with largely unassailable contexts for the conventional reappraisal of the coordinate relationships that make up their social world.

Ritual has been envisaged here as a distinctive way of enacting relationships. As such, it is neither a straight-forward, objective feature of the world (a given item of behaviour is ritual regardless of how it is perceived), nor a purely subjective phenomena (anything can equally well be appreciated as ritual), but something in between. Specifically, ritual is one of what must surely be several basic organisational poles or attractors governing the perception and patterning of embodied social action.

According to this view, ritual is less a particular category of behaviour *per se* than it is an interrelated a set of interactive premises pertaining to intentionality, degree of systemic closure, the link between feeling and action, the constitutive attributes of relational condensation and so forth. Within the framework of any particular enactment, these pragmatic presuppositions may be intuitively entertained by individual participants to a greater or lesser degree: what is resolutely a ritual for some may, for example, be more of a spectacle for others. At the same time, however, the exigencies of ongoing coordinated action will tend to minimize such disparities, orienting participants' perceptual and performative expectations along similar lines. The closer these lines match those implied by the premises of ritual, the more their interaction gives rise to events having the qualities described above. Indeed, because ritual consists in a particular experience of relationships, its identification hinges essentially upon personal participation. It is impossible, for example, when witnessing an heretofore unknown sequence of behaviour from a totally detached standpoint, to determine whether this sequence is a ritual rather than, say, a game, a spectacle or a simply a peculiar instance of ordinary interaction. On the other hand, even the slightest active involvement in such an episode is often sufficient to allow one to correctly evaluate it in terms of these different interactive modes. Finally, it should be stressed that if ritual is indeed an elementary mode of communicative intention, it is hardly alone in this respect. Play and spectacle, for example, represent other, equally distinctive means of enacting relationships which, in many concrete situations, are associated with ritual and with each other in complex ways.<sup>30</sup> Recognition of this plurality is required if we are to go beyond the sacred/profane dichotomy (and its contemporary avatars) that continues to hold sway in the study of ritual.

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<sup>30</sup> See M. Houseman, "Vers un modèle anthropologique de la pratique psychothérapeutique", *Thérapie Familiale* 24 (2003), 309-332.

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