Pushing Ritual Frames Past Bateson

Michael Houseman

Pushing Ritual Frames Past Bateson

Michael Houseman
Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris

The articles brought together in this Special Issue, drawn from a session of the 2009 meeting of the American Academy of Religion, are concerned with the concept of "frame" as introduced by Gregory Bateson, specifically in its application to ritual. They are also directly inspired by Don Handelman's critical reworking of Bateson's concept and his ensuing proposals of "moebius" and "braided" frames (Handelman 1998, 2001, 2004, 2006b). The authors follow Handelman's lead by marshalling arguments in which notions such as denotative shifts, fractal permutations and dissipative systems are used to "remap", "reframe" and "pressure" Bateson's frame still further. Interestingly, the concept doesn't collapse under the weight of so much critical attention. This in itself attests to the ongoing relevance of the issues framing brings to the fore: the specificity of ritual, its ability to introduce and incorporate change, its relationship to everyday behaviour, its connection with play, and so forth. In coming to grips with the intuitively self-evident yet surprisingly slippery notion of "frame" in order to address these issues, this set of papers makes for an engaging, wide-ranging discussion that explores new avenues for the analysis of ritual phenomena.

Bateson proposed the concept of frame as a meta-communicative, context-creating device whereby a particular kind of social action is defined by the manner in which it is distinguished. The canonical example is the paradoxical message "This is play", rendered as " 'These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote.' The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (1972 [1955]: 180). In Bateson's understanding, a frame does not just separate a special type of behaviour from that which it is not (e.g. play from not-play, ritual from not-ritual); by connecting the two in a distinctive fashion, it orients the perceptions and expectancies of those involved in such a way as to bring this special type of behaviour into being. In more interpersonal terms, a frame is akin to an invitation that is consonant with the tenor of the activity it elicits: ritual frames are presumably ceremonial, play frames ludic, and so forth.

Handelman has taken issue with what he sees as Bateson's overly linear conception of framing. In drawing a distinction between inside and outside, it implies a series of hierarchical relations that sharply curtail the possible impact of the framed activities themselves. Not only is

behaviour and meaning within the frame (the nip denoting feigned aggression) held to be logically and instrumentally subordinate to behaviour and meaning without (the bite denoting violent assault), but also, the frame itself, presumed to be of a higher level of abstraction than that which it separates, can not be expected to be affected by that which it contains. To the degree that this is indeed the case, Bateson's model is hard put, for example, to account for what he himself recognized as the reflexive, creative and potentially subversive quality of play and the highly labile nature of the play frame, the fact that the distinction between nips and bites may become blurred, a breaking down of the play frame that may then be incorporated into play activity itself. A strictly linear, hierarchical model of framing faces other difficulties as well. It makes it hard, for example, to account for performative situations in which different types of frame seem to overlap, and leaves little room for ritual innovation that is not the result of outside influences, but derives from ritual action itself. In order to provide the conceptual grounds for a more dynamic, "fuzzier" understanding of framing, Handelman has proposed that the ritual frame be thought of as a moebius ring. By making the inside/outside opposition a local, relative discrimination, rather than a global, absolute one, this allows ritual performance to be envisaged as interpenetrating with non-ritual activities so as to acquire recursive qualities that can account for its change over time through its practice. Going a step further, he has also suggested that the ritual frame be seen as a multitude of "braided" strands or moebius-like frames ("each indexing an aspect of cosmology, symbolism, ritual practice, ritual practitioners, etc." [Handelman 2006b: 590]) that together amount to the ritual performance itself. These analytical propositions, relating to the boundary conditions and the mutability of ritual, are the backdrop against which the present papers seek to problematize still further the notion of frame.

Mark Engler and Steven Gardiner's contribution takes up Handelman's critique of Bateson to concentrate on the semantic issues raised by framing, notably those pertaining to the fact that a given term (e.g. the eucharistic "body" of Christ) or item of behaviour (e.g. the baring of teeth) can mean something different within the frame as it does outside it. In Bateson's model, this difference is one of logical subordination, such that ritual or play

activities, defined as other than what they are said or appear to be (Christ's "body" is *not* a living body, the nip is *not* a bite), may be deemed to be less "real" or "true" than those outside the fame to which they explicitly or implicitly refer. For the authors, this hierarchical ordering is the unfortunate result of Bateson's misdirected use of Bertrand Russell's Theory of Logical Types. They propose to replace it with Gottlob Frege's more dynamic notion of denotative or referential shift, whereby the "sense" attributed to a given term (e.g. "body") shifts from one context to the next in such a way as to swing free from its "reference" (the actual object it denotes). Thus, Bateson's key insight — for them, the fact that frames change the denotation of language — is preserved but without the troublesome paradoxes engendered by his appeal to logical levels; his model is thereby made compatible with the back-and-forth, in-and-out processes favoured by Handelman's moebius scheme. From this point of view, ritual (or play) is analogous to any number of other types of activities that also entail explicit markers of denotative shifts whereby words, objects and actions acquire meanings that are different from those they have "normally": work, leisure, camaraderie, courtship, lovemaking, combat and so forth. In this respect, Engler and Gardiner's position regarding frames is similar to that developed by Goffman (1974). However, if the recognition of ritual as such no longer relies on the formal properties of its frame, in what ways is it distinctive? The authors suggest that ritual frames are best specified with reference to their instrumental function in particular social contexts. Proposing a pragmatic rather than a representational understanding of map/territory distinction introduced by Korzybski and metaphorically used by Bateson to explicate the relationship between what is inside and outside the frame, they emphasize the guiding qualities of maps, their usefulness in selecting and calling attention to particular aspects of the terrain to be travelled. In the same way, "the dynamic interplay between ritual and its frame […] guides ritual participants and observers in achieving certain ends" by highlighting particular aspects of both the virtual reality which ritual enacts and the broader field of social relations to which it is related.

Jens Kreinath's paper covers a great deal of ground. The various arguments it presents provide a linked series of complementary perspectives on two recurrent issues in Bateson's and Handelman's work on framing: modelling the inside/outside boundary as a dynamic process, and accounting for changes arising from the pursuit of framed practices themselves.

A careful reconstruction of Bateson's analysis of the Iatmul *naven* ceremony (1958 [1936]) and of his theory of play, leads Kreinath to argue that Handelman's recourse to the construct of the moebius strip is not so much an alternative to Bateson's play frame as it is a topological model that supports its main insights. He rightly points out that the ideas developed in Handelman's earlier work are very close to those advanced by Bateson. Indeed, in these articles (1977, 1979, but also 1992), play, seen as questioning the validity of the social order by communicating about "what can be", is held to be framed by a self-referential paradox (a "tangled hierarchy") entailing a dynamic interplay between play and not-play. Ritual, by contrast, is taken to validate the social order by communicating "what should be", and although the exact mechanics of the ritual frame remain unclear, it is posited as significantly less flexible and permeable than that of play. In his later work, however, as Kreinath argues, Handelman espouses a more static interpretation of Bateson's approach to framing, as entailing an unyielding hierarchy of nested logical levels for play and ritual alike. To explain this development, I would suggest that as Handelman's increasing emphasis on the ludic features of ritual practice (e.g. in ceremonial clowning and contemporary neo-shamanism) led him to question the analytical usefulness of distinguishing between play and ritual (2004, 2006a), a conceptual cross-over occurred. Ritual events took on for him the inherent reflexivity he associated until then with play to become the self-organizing agents of their own transformation, while reciprocally, the play frame he inherited from Bateson acquired the hierarchical rigidity previously associated with ritual. In this respect, the moebius model of framing (which, as Kreinath mentions, stems from Handelman's [1981] analysis of the ritual clown as a Symbolic Type) goes together with the idea that insofar as framing is concerned, play and ritual are well nigh indistinguishable. This assumption also seems to underlie Kreinath's use of Neuman's work in semiotics to show how Bateson's original intuitions are not only modelled but also extended by the figure of the moebius strip. The latter's paradoxical logic allows for an understanding of the frame as "a process constituting differentiated systems rather than static entities that lead to categorical distinctions and higher levels of abstraction". The dynamics of boundary construction thus revealed by Neuman's moebius modelling of Bateson's (play) frame, suggests Kreinath, are to be appreciated as a general characteristic of all semiotic systems of social interaction.

The second half of Kreinath's paper begins by drawing on Houseman and Severi's (1998) "relational" analysis of the *naven* ceremony originally studied by Bateson, in which ritual is understood as enacting "higher-order" relational configurations entailing the condensation of nominally antithetical modes of relationship. On the one hand, Kreinath identifies such configurations, which in

the case of *naven* involve contrary processes of progressive differentiation (what Bateson called "schismogenesis"), as instances of the complex interplay between similarity and difference at work in framing. On the other hand, he sees this approach's emphasis on the emergent qualities of social interaction as opening the way for a model of ritual transformation based on random fractal dynamics. The latter is proposed as a more interactively grounded conceptual alternative to the moebius strip to account for variability originating in the course of ritual practice. Modifications in ritual behaviour, envisaged as unpredictable outcomes resulting from the initiatives of individual participants, are understood as the fluctuations characteristic of all complex self-organizing systems which, like *naven*, entail the reiteration of relational patterns at several embedded levels. Kreinath thus proposes a conceptualisation of ritual framing that makes use of a general morphogenetic model in which the self-similar replication of overall patterns is inseparable from the recursive integration of "random", cumulative change.

In his paper, Eddy Plasquy is less concerned with incremental adjustments as an inherent aspect of ritual practice, than with the occurrence of dramatic and potentially disruptive changes as a result of transformations in the larger social field in which the ritual is embedded. The yearly procession of the Virgin Mary in the Andalusian village of El Rocio starts with members of the Almontese lay brotherhood tumultuously jumping over the altar fence to bring the Virgin's statue out of the chapel. However, beginning in the 1950s and especially from the early 1970s onwards, prompted by the anti-authoritarian and anti-clerical sentiment that swept Spain with the decline of the Franco regime, Almontese youths and other pilgrims raucously joined in the fray. As a result, by the late 1980s, the procession's starting hour had been violently taken out of the clerics' hands and progressively pushed back from noon to 2 o'clock in the morning, the accompanying disorderliness threatening to disrupt the entire event. Towards the end of this period, the Almontese brotherhood began introducing a number of innovations that displayed their locally recognized authority over the proceedings, and allowed them to regain some new measure of control, such that the procession's starting time became once again stabilized.

An equilibrium model involving circuits of negative feedback, such as that suggested by a moebius-like frame, is hard put to account for this type of radical transformation in which positive feedback mechanisms that amplify rather than correct "random disturbances" within the system, obviously play an important role. A more appropriate model, Plasquy argues, is that of dissipative systems in which the breaking down of existing patterns of behaviour is followed by the appearance of new forms of interaction one or more of which then provides the grounds for a global reordering process and the emergence of a higher-order configuration that integrates previously disruptive elements, such as the ascendancy of local identity and authority, as constitutive features. From this point of view, the idea of Andalusian locality and the pre-eminent status attributed to Almontese people by other pilgrims as well as journalists and social scientists, may be thought of "as an added braid, intertwining, intersecting and definitely adding more complexity to the ongoing framing process".

These three papers provide fairly different understandings of the relationship between ritual and framing. For Engler and Gardiner, the frame, construed as denotative shift, is at once essential and of little consequence in and of itself: a ritual's distinctive qualities are held to derive not from the fact that such a shift exists but from how, in each case, it directs participants' attention to certain features of the enacted performance and its connexions with the wider social field. For Kreinath, the formal characteristics of framing and of ritual design are clearly interdependent, such that in the case of *naven*, boundary-making and the internal dynamics of this event are presented as aspects of a single semiotic process. Although Pasquy does not address the issue of boundary conditions, the ritual frame, as made manifest in the Almontese celebration's capacity for radical realignment, seems to reside almost entirely within the organisation of ritual practice itself. At the same time, all three papers prompt the question: what is specific about ritual framing? Do denotative shifts take place in rituals in distinctive ways, such that their "guiding" qualities are significantly different from those found in other types of activities such as work, courtship, or combat? Are random fractal dynamics realized in ritual enactments in the same way as they are, say, in playground activities or in the adherence to everyday social conventions? Does the dissipative model apply differently to the transformation of ritual practices than it does, for example, to changes in the organisation of lunch breaks in the corporate workplace, or to the introduction of "offside" rules or penalty shoot-outs in association football (soccer)? In short: is there such a thing as a generalizable ritual frame?

Bateson is of very little help here. The fact is that he was not very interested in ritual as such. His analysis of the *naven* ceremony allowed him to bring into sharp focus certain issues that he deemed essential: interactive patterns and their cumulative effects, the co-presence of alternative points of view or levels of explanation, the ideational versus the emotional dimensions of culture, and so forth. However, these aspects of *naven*, far from being specific

to ritual, were for him the expression of general principles pertaining to the organisation of social life and the emergence of what might be called "mindful" form.

As Kreinath's paper makes clear, Bateson's analysis of framing is almost exclusively concerned with play. The one time he speaks explicitly of the frame "This is ritual" (in reference to Adaman Islander peace-making ceremonies), it is treated as equivalent to that of "This is play" (1972 [1955]: 182). This, incidentally, is in keeping with Iatmul usage, where "the word we would translate as 'play' includes ritual in general, especially spectacular ritual; that is, the category would seem to be translated by 'symbolic activity' or something of the kind" (1956: 203). Indeed, ritual is taken by Bateson to be part of a wide-ranging field of phenomena, epitomized by play, "in which the discrimination is drawn, but not completely, between denotative action and that which is to be denoted" (1972 [1955]: 182); these "sorts of communication which involve both emotional significance and the necessity of distinguishing between orders of message […] include play, humour, ritual, poetry and fiction" (1972 [1956]: 222). More exactly, ritual is seen as a kind of flattened or smoothed out version of play, in which uncertainty has been more or less eliminated: "the [play] sequence is really playable as long as it retains some elements of the creative and unexpected. If the sequence is totally known, it is ritual" (1979: 151; see also 1972 [1956]: 222). In sum, ritual is held to be simpler than play in that it leaves little room for the type of paradoxical meshing of logical levels that Bateson thought so essential to systemic explanation.

Another related reason which may have led Bateson to discuss framing almost exclusively in reference to play and hardly at all in reference to ritual, is, as Engler and Gardiner emphasize, the importance he attributes to matters of meaning. This derives in large part from his involvement in cybernetic modelling and its emphasis on messages and circuits of communication. For Bateson, frames are very much centred on the issue of interpretation, and in this respect, play offers far richer grounds for the dynamic models he was trying to develop. Whereas the practice of play hinges upon participants' aptitude to recognize and relate different registers or levels of meaning (the fact that the nip denotes the bite, but not that which is denoted by the bite), the practice of ritual depends less on their interpretative abilities than on their capacity to undertake certain stipulated patterns of action. While ritual participants presume their acts to be meaningful, as Rappaport (1974) has remarked, the meanings these acts might have often remain obscure. Whereas in play, action is subordinate to meaning, in ritual, the reverse would seem to hold true.

It seems, then, that for Bateson, play is characterized by an intrinsic complexity that is lacking in ritual, making the latter a poor candidate for his concept of frame. In this light, Handelman's work marks a major turning point in thinking about the relationship between ritual and framing. In his earliest writings on play and ritual as alternative meta-communicative frames (1977), Handelman remains fairly close to Bateson's ideas when he characterises play as "inverting", and thereby complexifying a paradox which ritual simply "bypasses" or "overrides". However, with the introduction of the moebius ring, notably to account for ceremonial events in which reflexivity plays a significant role, Handelman began moving away from the batesonian position to propose other, non-linear conceptions of framing. His lively Postlude to the present collection provides a particularly well worked-out statement of where this new perspective might lead.

Without spoiling the fun, let me just say that in retracing his intellectual itinerary and in discussing the contributors' papers, Handelman outlines a position that is largely founded on two radical propositions: (1) the essential characteristic of moebius framing is not paradox but reflexivity, and (2) "There is no universal frame for 'ritual'". Both arguments proceed from the idea that the way in which rituals are framed relates not only to the nature of the effects their performance is purported to bring about (e.g. transformation vs. representation), but also to the cosmological premises and cultural conceptions of personhood entertained by those who perform them, in which binary schemes (such as inside/outside, before/after, true/false, etc.) do not necessarily apply. In this way, Handelman at once resolutely distances himself from the notions of hierarchy and paradox that are so central to Bateson's play paradigm, and opens the way for a multitude of possible, locally grounded forms of ritual framing, of varying depth and intensity, the limits of which have only begun to be explored.

References

Bateson, Gregory. 1956. The Message "This is Play". In *Group Processes: Transactions of the Second Conference held October 9-12, 1955, at Princeton, New Jersey*, edited by Bertram Schaeffner. New York: Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation, 145-242.

———. 1958 [1936]. *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*. 2nd ed. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

———. 1972 [1955]. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. San Francisco: Chandler Pub. Co.

———. 1979. *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. New York: E. P. Dutton.

Goffman, Irving. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Harper Colophon.

Handelman, Don. 1977. Play and Ritual: Complementary Frames of Metacommunication. In *It's A Funny Thing, Humour*, edited by Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot. London: Pergamon Press, 185-192.

———. 1979. Is Naven Ludic? Paradox and the Communication of Identity. *Social Analysis* 1: 177-191.

———. 1981. The Ritual Clown: Attributes and Affinities. *Anthropos* 76: 321-370.

———. 1992. Passages to Play: Paradox and Process. *Play and Culture* 5: 1-19.

———. 1998. Preface to Second Edition: Theorizing through Models and Mirrors. In *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events*, edited by Don Handelman. New York—Oxford: Berghahn Books, x-liv.

———. 2001. Framing, Braiding, and Killing Play. *Focaal: Tijdschrift voor Antropologie* 37: 145-156.

———. 2004. Re-Framing Ritual. In *The Dynamics of Changing Rituals: The Transformation of Religious Rituals within Their Social and Cultural Context*, edited by Jens Kreinath, Constance Hartung and Annette Deschner. New York etc.: Peter Lang, 9-20.

———. 2006a. Conceptual Alternative to 'Ritual'. In *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, edited by Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek and Michael Stausberg. Leiden: Brill.

———. 2006b. Framing. In *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, edited by Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek and Michael Stausberg. Leiden: Brill.

Houseman, Michael, and Carlo Severi. 1998. *Naven, or, The Other Self: A Relational Approach to Ritual Action*, *Studies in the History of Religions*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Rappaport, Roy A. 1974. The Obvious Aspects of Ritual. *Cambridge Anthropology* 2 (1): 3-69.