

The experiencing body

— Ground for understanding of soul and embodied self Contemporary ritual practice in the San Francisco Bay Area

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This essay offers some material from a marginal, contemporary group ritual which brings attention to the individual body as a passageway to experience and connect with “internal spiritual sources” and “self-awareness”,¹ based in understandings of soul, self, the world and ones body as interconnected. In this essay I will especially put forth some aspects of how this group ritual practice places direct experience – not language – as the modality for exploring spirituality and oneself.

Brief theoretical setting

This essay can be situated in relation to recent works on the anthropology of the body, and the theory of embodiment. A seminal work in the development of anthropological theory on the body was Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s (1987) article on the three bodies. They developed an analytical distinction of the three aspects of the body; the individual body, the social body and the body politics. The “individual body” encompasses the concepts of self, mind and body, and such phenomenological issues as the lived experience of the body and the embodied self. The “social body” refers to the representational uses of the body and symbolic dimensions of the body and social relations, while the “body politic” deals with the directive power over individual and social bodies (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, Oths 1999). The level of primary concern in this paper is the individual body; “the lived experience of the body-self” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987:7).

Models of embodiment were further developed by Csordas (1990, 1993, 1994), who called for a more corporeal understanding of the body in the world, and embodiment as the existential ground for culture and self. My focus is here on the inner spiritual self, the world as it is a part of the self, and experience as a knowledge foundational to language.

Specifically relating to reflections made in this essay is an article by Davis-Floyd (1996), where she elaborates on what she calls the hegemonic-technocratic model and the alternative-holistic model. In the technocratic model the mind is more important than the body, active participation is characterized by a mind that is aware, and the self is separated from and should control the body. All these notions are challenged by the holistic model, which sees mind, body and environment as intimately interconnected, the self and the body as integrated, and the body and life in general as uncontrollable, where letting go of control can be a basic condition for active participation and empowerment. All these notions from the alternative-holistic model may be recognized in the ritual practice that provides the empirical material for this essay.

Empirical setting and method — “ritual without dogma”

The fieldwork that provides the empirical case was done in the San Francisco Bay Area between fall 1998 and summer 1999. People come to this area to seek out alternative life styles and therapies, which are a prominent part of local life and identity, as well as big business. The search for well being and personal development encloses a wide range of practices and therapies. The quest can be sought through various alternative means such as tarot readings, massage, Zen meditation, yoga and expressive art therapy. In this field we may situate the Ritual Lab, a group practice of evocative and expressive movement and sound, from which this presentation will draw its empirical material.

I was allowed into this group practice, fully participating, during two series of gatherings. Each series had 13–15 sessions of about 3 hours each. We were 8–15 participants, all between 20 and 50 years old, and both men and women, mostly white middle-class. The sessions would take place in rented studio spaces, empty of furniture, which could hold us all moving around. The group ritual process is facilitated by a man, who has developed this practice during a period of more than 20 years, and at times takes initiatives to realize such lab series. In this essay I draw upon some of his statements to present the Ritual Lab to the reader. The sessions has a basic structure of different phases, consequently the participants become acquainted with the stages, their succession and transitions, as the work progresses. The repetitive and simple structures of the Ritual Lab are tools for “dropping out of the mind”,² and as the participants gradually learn the sequences we also become more responsible for exploring the depth of our own experience.

I became involved in the Ritual Lab activity after I had found a flyer at an overcrowded bulletin board in a dance studio center in Berkeley. The heading read “ritual without dogma”. The word ritual attracted my atten-

tion. But at the moment I didn't understand why it would say "...without dogma"; to me ritual didn't have a necessary connection to dogma. So why negate the connection? Later I would understand this negation as situating this ritual work in contrast to mainstream, hegemonic and hierarchical religious practices, or, as the facilitator might put it: "a struggle (...) against all social dogma, spoonfed religion and/or externally imposed belief systems."

But, the "socially-accepted dogmas and conditionings must be replaced by a fierce commitment to your own truth". This personal truth is based in experience of internal spiritual sources and self-awareness. Arto,³ the facilitator of the Ritual Lab, has given the formulation that "ritual is not what you think; it is how you act." He comments that this ritual practice takes as one of its purposes to deepen the participants' capacity for direct experience and expression, and that it provides a fertile ground for evoking experiences which may serve as corrections to ones current understanding of oneself and "what you are living for". The ritual is a tool to "strengthen each participants center", understood as "internal spiritual sources" which give guidance, inspiration and purpose to ones life, or "the knowledge of what is most essential to our lives".

The form of the ritual is based on awareness of space and rendering the body receptive to what the facilitator calls "existing forces", which often are set up as polarities, such as habit/will, mother/father, compassion/judgment, what brings you to life/what kills you. The space is divided into areas, each area being designated an "existing force". The task is then to render yourself receptive, step into one area and "surrender to that force". You "give your body over"; the intention can be said to be on improvisation – or "being moved" – from the source of inner sensing or inner emotional and physical state. The facilitator would never move in front of the group to demonstrate a movement or technique, and never do hands on work to guide an individual body into a "right" position or movement pattern; the value was on the inner experience and whatever movement was true to the emotional state of the mover.

The Ritual Lab and its grounding of insight and self understanding in the experiential, active body, echoes the issues that Davis-Floyd tries to come to grasp with in her distinction between hegemonic technocratic and alternative holistic models. The technocratic notion of a self that is situated in the mind, that controls the body, is radically challenged through the ritual practice. The foundation, however vaguely articulated, of the ritual work bears strong resemblance to the qualities Davis-Floyd ascribe to the holistic model of birth. Important aspects here are the high value given to intuition/inner knowing, and the appreciation of letting go of control of the body.

Enactment in space — direct experience as an alternative to conceptual knowledge

The facilitator prefers a minimal amount of speech during the “lab sessions” not to lose the physical momentum, where the body may take over. A substantial amount of the sessions are dedicated to the building of physical heat and momentum, which is a tool to depart from mental control and enable you to “feel the depth of the intensity of the force”.

Some words and phrases are used repeatedly by Arto to guide the participants; these direct the awareness, focus the process and mark the stages and transitions between them. This group of key concepts is vaguely definable, with some phrases being more central to the work than others, but they have in common that they are short, and come to be understood not by elaborate definitions but through the experience that each participant may connect to this “verbal vessel”.⁴ In general the “phrases” support the set, repetitive and relatively simple structure of the ritual practice, and in several ways can be seen as tools in the ritual process and the intention to explore direct knowledge of embodied spiritual experience, created through a process of escaping one’s own mindful analysis, “fixation on explanation”, and social conditioning to seek approval from others.

The phrase “drop out of your mind” (or “drop into your body”) invites to let go of conceptual understanding and the attempt to “categorize everything with previous beliefs”, to move the awareness from the cognitive towards the senses, what is felt in and through the body. The phrase “feel your body deeply” could be used several times during one session, I found it especially said when we participants tended to lose connection with the physical experience of the moment, or avoided to go further into sensing what was happening to us as we moved in the space. The phrase “feel your body deeply” fundamentally gave attention to sensitizing the body, the medium for our research and expression. This ethnography can be understood through Csordas’ term “somatic modes of attention”, which are “culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others” (Csordas 1993:138).

Seen as a practice that explores alternatives to verbalization as a mode for knowledge production, one may locate a shift in focus from talk to movement in space. Instead of talking about our values and what is important to us, we imagine that these “entities” are projected into defined areas of the space; we then enter this space being receptive to how these projected “entities” can inform our movements. The intention is to experience through the body rather than analyze with the mind.

Throughout the session we were repeatedly made aware that the intention is to “relate to reality”, to challenge our idealistic construction of how

we want to understand the world, and become more aware of how we actually directly experience our surroundings. The idealistic notions of who we are may be conveyed through talk, but this modality now became challenged in the practice. In short, enactment in space replaces verbalization as a primary tool for exploration of oneself and one's lived-in world. This relates to a basic understanding/worldview in the ritual work: that the spiritual does not communicate itself to us through language. Language is to connect with others, we can use language to communicate our understandings to each other.

Understood in this manner, the Ritual Lab is a practice that challenges social constructionism and acknowledges the materiality of our bodies. Further, the practice serves to open the participants to a more kinetic or embodied experience of their cognitive ideas or beliefs, which might also bring surprises, as to one man in a ritual around the polarity creature/spirit. He commented that he had thought, before entering the space designated to these forces, that his creature would be very noisy and with unsteady movements, while his spirit would be more calm and silent. But it had come out the other way around, and this surprised him, and he also commented that he was the only one in the group having this kind of physical expression of the creature/spirit. He had found his ideas being met by an opposing experience. As one moves into space, one embodies what might previously have been perceived as mental concepts, operating through language in a cognitive realm separate from the body. One's understanding of an aspect of one's life may now be expanded by this movement experience.

An experiential ground for an embodied self

One fundamental experience that persons bring into this activity as a motivation for participating, and which is also created during the process, is of the body as a passageway to self-understanding. This may also include the more radical notion that the body is not only the gateway to get knowledge of oneself, but where the self resides.

When the experience of what is available as kinetic, embodied knowledge is expanded, the understanding of oneself may be profoundly challenged. The understanding of self – one's personal self image and a general notion of the self – may expand as one's sensed lived experience expands into previously unknown realms. Through the embodied experience of self, the western dualistic notion of the self as an entity connected to a superior mind becomes questioned. The body-self expands into connection with forces that are seen as not controlled or even understood by the mind. These forces are by the Ritual Lab participants often understood as spiritual energies.

Much anthropological writing on agency seems to assume that agency involves control over the process. Davis-Floyd notices that in the technocratic model, “life is controllable” and “active participation and control in life are good” (Davis-Floyd 1996:150). Data from women giving birth at home constitutes contrasting examples of the holistic model of birth, where “the most active participation can involve giving up control” (Davis-Floyd 1996:150). This experience of home-birthers, as conceptualized by Davis-Floyd, enables me to solve a “dilemma” in my own material. It has seemed as a conflict that the “letting go of control” in the ritual setting was coherent with the experiences of empowerment and increased involvement in ones own life that was also articulated by the participants. We may here grasp a wider understanding of a self that is active, though not controlling; a self which surrenders to larger transpersonal forces felt in the moving body, and through that experiences insight, spiritual connection and empowerment.

Closing remark

I have given some examples from a contemporary ritual, developed in an urban setting, which brings up discussions about social conditioning and religious dogma, the relationship between experience and language, and the experiential ground for understanding the self. This essay hints at how “reflexivity is grounded in embodiment” (Csordas 1994:277), and how letting go of control of the body may bring new insights and experiences of the self and the body as integrated (Davis-Floyd 1996), in ways spiritually fulfilling to the participants.

Notes

¹These concepts, in quotation marks, are used by the facilitator of the ritual practice.

²Dropping out of ones mind indicates letting go of mental analysis, the constantly “controlling” of ones perceptions and interactions by trying to fit them into mental maps/categories.

³This is a pseudonym.

⁴I understand this way of verbal guidance as somehow “transcending” the ordinary use of language; bonding language more directly with the embodied experience, the “verbal vessel” being filled with meaning through the experience coming out of the embodied practice it was situated in.

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