The ambiguities of rituals: Introduction

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<th>Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology</th>
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<tr>
<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>RETN-2018-0097</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Special Issue Paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>ritual, ambiguity, liminality, aporia, efficacy</td>
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The ambiguities of rituals: Introduction

Abstract

That rituals are ambiguous phenomena has been long established in anthropology. However, while this ambiguity is often assumed to be resolved in one way or another through the course of a ritual and taken as contributing to the efficacy of rituals, we propose in this introduction that much can be gained by studying ritual ambiguity apart from its relevance for efficacy. We argue that while rituals often depend on and helps create a sense of ambiguity, this ambiguity is far from always resolved. Rituals can instead highlight and intensify ambiguity, making it an enduring feature. While rituals often are seen as potential problem solvers, by participants and many anthropologists alike, we argue that much can be gained by look at rituals as highly problematic phenomena.

Keywords: Rituals, ambiguity, aporia, liminality

Introduction

The study of ritual was for a long period considered a key aspect of anthropological analysis and was central to the development of anthropological theory, particularly in its British Social Anthropological incarnation. The attempt to understand ritual was central to Frazer’s (1894) masterpiece The Golden Bough, and despite the revolution in methods brought about by Malinowski, it was at the core of much of his analysis of Trobriand Island life that went on to re-shape anthropology as a discipline. As the 20th century went on Durkheim’s analysis of ritual as the way in which ‘Society’ impressed itself upon individual members exercised a strong influence on the
discipline, largely via the work of Radcliffe-Brown, whose work went on to have a strong influence on the ritual analysis of such major figures as Bateson and Evans-Pritchard. In the years after the war, ritual continued to be a central component of the new anthropological theories that sought to deal with the social changes of global industrialisation and urbanisation, most associated with the foundation of the Manchester Department of Social Anthropology in 1947, as evidenced in the work of figures such as Gluckman, Turner and Mitchell.

Today the study of ritual occupies a different position; one that arguably reflects the more fragmented nature of anthropological theory and the imagined objects of anthropological study more generally. Ritual has not disappeared as an object of study but it is no longer fashionable or possible to imagine it as an integral part of self-replicating social systems of behaviour and belief, alongside other factors such as the kinship ‘system’ as in earlier 20th century models. The study of ritual has become an optional focus not a central and indispensable factor of a holistic study of a particular Society. As a consequence, much as Collier and Yanagisako (1987) observed for the study of kinship, it has not disappeared, but now occupies a more marginal place in a discipline whose fragmentation means that there are no longer central shared foci of study of the kind that topics such as ‘kinship’ or ‘ritual’ used to provide. This also means that the study of rituals appears more fragmented than in the past. Those who choose to pick it up, pick it up for very different reasons and to address different agendas, often seemingly speaking past each other as a consequence.

The marginalisation of rituals in anthropological theorising notwithstanding, rituals are still vibrant social phenomena that engage people in various ways and that people often turn to with an expectation that the rituals will in one way or another work their efficacious ‘magic’. The question of how this efficacy actually comes
about is something that has been central to much anthropological theorising on rituals, but as we demonstrate in this introduction, questioning the usefulness of assuming that ritual is by definition efficacious, if not always in practice as the notion of ‘failed rituals’ indicates, has not itself been questioned. In this special issue, we step away from the implicit assumption of ritual efficacy and instead explore how rituals are as much problematic or productive of indeterminacy as they are problem solving or resolution creating mechanisms. We propose to approach rituals as highly ambiguous phenomena in which indeterminacy and uncertainty are enduring features that may be, but are not necessarily resolved or even always intended to be resolved.

Destabilised Society and the Division of Ritual Studies

Throughout much of the twentieth century, the analysis of ritual was central to the discipline’s understanding of what Gluckman (1955:2) referred to as, ‘man in society’. What all these approaches shared, despite their manifold differences, was a concern to understand ritual’s role in the reproduction of social forms. Gluckman (1963:18) may have taken Radcliffe-Brown to task for assuming that the purpose of ritual was, ‘expressing cohesion and impressing the value of society and its social sentiments on people’, but the purpose of his alternative emphasis on ritual’s role in, ‘exaggerating social conflicts’ lay precisely in, ‘affirming that there was unity despite these conflicts.’ Even Turner’s (1969) development of the ‘rituals of rebellion’ theory to argue that the liminal phase of ritual marks the dissolution of conventional social structural forms arguably still ultimately remains within this trope. In conventional ritual, the anti-structural communitas that liminality enables is ultimately exercised in the service of structure, enabling initiands to re-enter with a fresh understanding of the social and symbolic structures that will organise their lives. And even in those cases where revolutionary spiritual-political movements try to make communitas their
final goal, the effort to sustain it inevitably leads to the re-creation of social structural forms.

The idea of separate and self-contained social structures that underpinned ‘primitive’ or ‘simple’ societies that in their different ways provided a common foundation for these approaches has been out of fashion for several decades. The critique of this vision, that it tended towards a denial of global forces, placing non-Western people in a ‘savage slot’ outside of history, is one with which we are now well-familiar. Ritual became one of the areas of traditional anthropological research most associated with an outdated exoticism that many in the discipline were now desperate to exorcise, and hence almost open to suspicion as an object of study per se. As Comaroff and Comaroff (1993:xiv-xv) queried in a ground-breaking volume on the role of ritual in modern Africa,

... why this choice of topic for a volume dedicated to breaching the division between tradition and modernity, to resisting the Western tendency to separate simple, sacral societies from those with Reason and History (cf. Dirks 1990:25)? Does not such a focus on ‘ritual’ – with its own evocation of the opposition between the enchanted and the secular – inevitably return us to the typologies, teleologies, and theoretical discourses from which we seek to escape?

Ritual seemingly evoked a series of analytical assumptions that anthropology had worked hard to rid itself of. When anthropology dismantled the idea of self-reproducing social structures, rituals suffered, it seems, from collateral damage. While
rituals tended to be seen as at the core of society’s self-reproduction, there was no longer anything for them to be a core of.

The Comaroffs’ need for legitimising their choice of topic is telling as is their response to their question of ‘why this topic’. Ritual had to, they argued, be studied through its role in the political economic lives of different peoples, conceived not as living in isolated societies but as part of changing global economic patterns of colonialism, industrialisation, urbanisation and so on.

In this regard, their intervention already had a long provenance in African anthropology via the work of the Manchester School that had a profound influence on their own project but also in other parts of the world, such as Latin America where the work of June Nash (1979) and Michael Taussig (1980) had in very different ways explored ritual relations with devils and earth-spirits as being in large part a creative intervention in processes of resource extraction and capital accumulation conducted with a global market in mind. Likewise, in Asia, Ong (1988) had already described the demand by women factory workers that management in newly established multinational factories conduct shamanic rituals in their workplaces to protect them from demons as being in large part due to a desire to control the threatening experiences of bodily and spiritual alienation unleashed by the dislocation from traditional cultural norms introduced by externally driven ‘proletarianisation’ and production for the global market. It might have been true that many people who wished to draw anthropology away from models of bounded culture towards a more global and historical perspective might have harboured suspicion of ritual as a topic in the manner described by Comaroff and Comaroff. The work of Nash, Taussig, Ong and others illustrated that there were many who shared that concern whose response
was to attempt to, ‘conceive of ritual’ differently, in a manner that made it a key element in reflecting and reconstituting those very global historical tendencies.

When these approaches made it clear that rituals were in various ways implicated in global historical forces, they at the same time retained the idea central to much of the earlier ritual theory that their power and efficacy lay in how they related to – reflecting, reconstituting or otherwise – the society around them, however destabilised and connected to global forces that society had become.

**Critiques**

Whilst the global historical perspective advanced by authors such as Comaroff and Comaroff in an attempt to move the study of ritual beyond its association with functionalist models of bounded exotic cultures has been influential in many quarters and the attempts at taking rituals and ontologies seriously have both engaged and provoked, they have both been met by critique from the opposite side of the divide.

The attempts to explain particular local rituals in terms of their relation to global political economies can be criticised as attempts to ‘explain away’ or to refuse to ‘take seriously’ the purported meaning that they have for those involved in them. In this reading, the attempt to move beyond exoticising functionalist accounts of ritual as the glue of bounded self-replicating cultural systems, is itself problematic for its tendency to read such rituals through the prism of a predetermined set of causal factors (alienation, proletarianisation, commodification, neoliberalism etc) that are of particular interest to the (presumed) Western social theorist who sees in ritual an attempt to symbolically resolve the contradictions unleashed by these fundamental underlying social forces. One could easily build such a criticism on the basis of statements such as Ong’s (op cit:38) that the spirit possessions among factory workers that shamanic rituals attempt to counter are,
expressions both of fear and of resistance against the multiple violations of moral boundaries in the modern factory. They are acts of rebellion, symbolizing what cannot be spoken directly, calling for a renegotiation of obligations between the management and workers.

Rather than ‘taking seriously’ the reality of spirit possession and the rituals that surround them, Ong’s approach could easily be characterised as reducing that reality to an ‘expression’ of something else, namely the ‘violations of moral boundaries’ brought about by ‘modern’ industrial production, or as merely ‘symbolising’ the fundamental antagonism in a capitalist society that is revealed to be, not as the informants mistakenly believe between devils and humans, but between capitalist managers and oppressed workers. This critique of political economic approaches as being based on the attribution of some kind false consciousness to informants who failed to fully grasp that ritual ‘represented’ something in a manner that they themselves were not fully aware of was a key implicit or sometimes explicit component of many that came to be gathered together under the label of ‘ontological’ theories in the 2000s (e.g. Henare et al. 2010; Holbraad 2012; Viveiros de Castro 2003, 2007; Willerslev 2007).

Others developments in anthropological theory questioned the usefulness of this focus. Anthropologists who emphasised the significance and even agential powers of the aesthetic and sensorial dimensions of rituals (Hobart and Kapferer 2007) argued against presuming that rituals are ‘constituted through representations of the sociocultural surround’ (Handelman 2005:2) and suggested instead to look at rituals in relation to themselves, i.e. exploring their interior dynamics and practices.
Locating the power of ritual to organise and effect transformation primarily within these internal dynamics and not in the relation between rituals and whatever societal forms they were parts of, these approaches distinguished themselves from the more political economy oriented approaches discussed above.

The destabilisation of the idea of a self-reproducing society in which rituals operated as some sort of core device, thus led to a divergence in the field of ritual studies. On one side, anthropologists attempting to carve out a space for rituals within a new understanding of society, on the other, anthropologists responding by turning inwards towards detailed analyses of rituals’ internal dynamics or attempting to rescue the idea of radical cultural differences that the destabilisation of the idea of society had challenged.

We are left with a situation in which ‘political’ and ‘ontological’ approaches to ritual largely speak past each other, in what serves as an exemplar for a dead end debate that has characterised much of anthropological theory more widely for a decade. For those keen to stress the ontological reality of ritual forces, political economic approaches continue the tendency in the older approaches that they critique to view ritual in terms of symbolising other social forces. For Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown ritual symbolised ‘Society’ as a self-replicating stable unit. For the more contemporary political theorists it allegedly symbolises or represents different social forces, such as ‘capitalism’ or ‘neoliberalism’. Even if these are profoundly disruptive of those older more stable models of society, the critique is that by analysing these phenomena in terms of representation or symbolism, contemporary political analyses equally fail to do justice to their reality for those who engage in them. Likewise, for those engaged in political approaches to ritual, such ontological approaches can seem like continuations of a different set of failings from the past. For
all their talk of transcending representation and relativism, they seem to have an uncanny similarity with older approaches that focus on ahistorical difference in which particular actions of non-Western peoples, such as ritual are cast as the exotic Other of modernity in the manner drawn attention to by Comaroff and Comaroff. No wonder then, from this perspective, that where rituals of the type that used to exercise the anthropological imagination continue to be central, it is often in those areas of contemporary British anthropology that can appear remarkably nostalgic for this past in their deliberate cultivation of exoticised radical difference from what we might imagine ourselves to be in order to then contemplate ourselves in a mirror of our construction. So when we do come across ‘ritual’ of the old type it often is in reassuringly familiarly exotic locales – the Amazonian shaman, the Caribbean voodoo priest and the Siberian spirit-hunter. For those interested in the kinds of contemporary perspectives encapsulated by concepts such as globalisation, neoliberalism, identity and so on, then ritual of this kind with its strong association with an older kind of anthropology is rarely first place to situate ethnographic analysis.

There is, however, no reason why this should be the case; provided we dislocate the association of the kinds of ritual traditionally studied in British anthropology with the kind of model of self-replicating social forms that they were designed to ethnographically illuminate.

**Enduring Ambiguities**

The differences between these approaches to rituals notwithstanding, there seems to be one presumption about rituals they all share and that they also share with the more traditional view of rituals as at the core of social self-reproduction. Rituals tend to be approached with an assumption that they are, in one way or another, efficacious. The
exact character of this efficacy differs, of course. Rituals may represent society or cultural values (Geertz 1973), reconstitute or transform experience, resolve contradictions (Turner 1969; Kapferer 1991; Levi-Strauss 1966; La Fontaine 1977), empower the normative (Bloch 1986), invert it in licenced parodies (Gluckman 1963) or bridge the chasm between desire and impossibility (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993).

An assumption of ritual efficacy has persisted throughout the history of anthropology’s engagement with rituals and continues to do so also within the diversity of approaches mentioned above. It is the idea of rituals as means to some particular ends, as some kind of problem solvers, that has guided much of anthropology’s theorisation of rituals and led to different suggestions about how ritual is efficacious.

Assuming that rituals harbour some kind of efficacy and power to handle such situations – providing models for transformation out of misery (O’Neill 2015), for instance, or working as tools for coping with insecurity (Salemink 2010; Telle 2011) – could easily prompt inquiry into the ‘how’ of ritual efficacy: How do rituals respond to historically specificities of precarity? How do rituals help to deal with socio-political, climatic, epistemological and ontological insecurities? How are rituals mobilised in attempts at ordering chaos and indeterminacies? What kind of certainty do they offer to various indeterminacies and uncertainties? How do they provide safety in an insecure world?

More ‘ontologically’ oriented approaches also rest upon the assumption that rituals do some kind of work, that it has some sort of efficacy that needs to be accounted for. And also here they are often seen as potentially offer order, differentiation and determinacy. It is pointed out that in many societies, myths tell of the indeterminate and uncertain conditions antecedent to the creation of cosmos and
of how order, certainty and determinate differentiations developed from this condition (Handelman 1990:63; Viveiros de Castro 2007). Instability, uncertainty and indeterminacy are in these approaches seen as integral part of social order and existence itself, and although tamed by rituals they remain always present as a potential behind or a condition of social formations. Rituals thus become ways in which to deal with these indeterminacies, enabling for instance a radical interruption of them in order to descend into the existential dynamics through which they can be re-ordered (Kapferer 2005; Seligman et al. 2008).

As the articles in this issue demonstrate, rituals are in many cases fundamental to people’s attempt at carving out a possibility for existence amidst harsh and unpredictable living conditions.

However, this should not necessarily incite us to only inquire how rituals work to do this.

For whilst rituals may on the surface seem like attempted solutions to uncertainties and insecurities, the articles in this special issue make evident another aspect of rituals which is not so easily reconciled with the assumption that rituals are efficacious, namely that they are actually fraught with indeterminacy, uncertainties, conflicts and doubts. What the articles show is that rituals are highly ambiguous social phenomena in which certainty and uncertainty intertwine in various ways. As the articles will demonstrate, rituals often depend on and helps create a sense of ambiguity, but far from always resolve it. Indeed, rituals can highlight and intensify ambiguity.

The claim that rituals are closely related to notions on insecurity and uncertainty and thrive on ambiguity is of course neither a new nor a particularly radical claim. Already at anthropology’s early stages was this association pointed out,
epitomised in Malinowski’s observation that in the Trobrianders used magical rituals to secure safety and good results in situations associated with unpredictability and insecurity, like for instance open-sea fishing (Malinowski 1992:31). And of course, the concept of liminality and rebellion so central to Turner and Gluckman’s studies of ritual processes are all about ambiguity and uncertainty; cross-gender imagery, anonymity, and the shifts between structure and anti-structure.

However, while ambiguity and indeterminacy are recognised features of many rituals, there is a tendency in former approaches to see these features as somehow contributing to the efficacy of rituals, thus forming part of what we might see as an almost functional legacy within ritual studies (Bastin 2013). It is an ambiguity that eventually is dissolved, that is put to the service of structure and that is built into the ritual design.

In this special issue, we attempt to move anthropological studies of rituals beyond the assumption of efficacy in the sense of providing resolution to particular problems and explore the analytical purchase of approaching rituals through their enduring ambiguity. While we do not reject the idea that ambiguity might be crucial to the presumed efficacy of rituals, we show how ritual ambiguity can be understood as problematic, how it creates tensions with regards to how the ritual is experienced, how different interpretations of ritual actions and entities engender uncertainty and conflict and how this ambiguity is not necessarily resolved but rather seems to be an enduring aspect of them, at least when viewed from certain perspectives.

Attempting thus to move anthropological studies of rituals beyond the question of their efficacy, we focus on how ritual ambiguity makes rituals contentious and sources of uncertainty and doubt, in a manner that has parallels to Bubandt’s (2016) recent theorisation of witchcraft and doubt. Many earlier accounts of
witchcraft have argued that witchcraft, much like ritual, provides reflections on the
ambivalences and crevices of social orders, that it offers explanations and certainty,
and that it is unproblematically real for those who believe in it. In contrast, Bubandt
argues that Buli witchcraft is from the outset fraught with doubt, inaccessibility, and
uncertainty. Indeed, witchcraft is an experiential aporia, an endless doubt that is both
an inherent part of the experiential, sensorial and mythical conventions of their
engagement with witchcraft and embedded in shifting historical and political
conditions.

This never-ending quality of Buli witchcraft does not make them passive,
Bubandt emphasises, but rather incites them to take action, seeking a way out of
doubt through converting to Christianity, engaging in state led modernisation
programs and turning to technology. But the enduring quality of witchcraft’s doubt
entails that it reappears in the midst of these attempted solutions. Thus, while
appearing as redoubts against witchcraft, these efforts re-generate it in new ways,
making doubt an aporia in Derrida’s sense of ‘an interminable experience’ (1993:16),
that is, as Bubandt states, ‘an experiential conundrum that has no resolution and that
cannot be determined, categorised, or placed within a meaningful order’ (2014:6).

As the articles in this issue demonstrate, this aporetic quality of doubt and
uncertainty may also be operative in many rituals. Although they may be seen as tools
against particular doubts and uncertainties of everyday life, they often engender other
forms of doubts and uncertainties. Rituals may thus leave people puzzled and
doubtful, creating as much uncertainty and precariousness as that to which they were
seen as redoubts against. What then emerges is a view of rituals in which certainties
and doubts, determinacies and indeterminacies, coalesce in various and often shifting
ways, the outcome of which may be as much problematic as problem solving. This
thus incites us to move the issue of ritual ambiguities beyond simply the question of
efficacy and rather explore how ritual provides a space for the endless ‘working
through’ of the creation of new and enduring uncertainties and doubts, through their
involvement in political strife and the ways in which historically situated precarities
impinge on the uncertainties of specific rituals and vice versa.

The implication of this is that we should not necessarily see ritual ambiguity
neither as inherently productive, i.e. as contributing to ritual efficacy nor as a
negative, i.e. as something that necessarily causes ritual failure for instance. While
ritual ambiguity may be problematic, it may also open up what Turner called “a realm
of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise”
(1993:16). The imaginary crevices, contradictions, doubts and uncertainties of rituals
may thus very well engender social creativity (Turner 1967:97, see also Engelke
2007). In any case, the shifting certainties and doubts of rituals are not givens, but are
worked out in historically situated and contested situations. The specific
configurations of relations between certainty and uncertainty within rituals and
between ritual and non-ritual domains are shifting and emerge through historically
embedded practices. ‘Working through’ here might not necessarily mean the
unambiguous resolution of a paradox or contradiction but instead an ongoing process
more akin to the use of that phrase in some psychotherapeutic practice, in which a
space is created for the ongoing reconfiguration of relations and objects in order for
them to be appreciated and experienced in new manners. Such a process does not
necessarily imply an end point or cure, although moments of an experience of
resolution or stability might well be part of the process, but rather the creation of a
space of possibilities in which the elements are recombined to create both new
certainties and new openings and possibilities.
The Articles

That rituals are deeply immersed in and adapted to wider socio-economic and political processes is clearly evident in Benedikte Victoria Lindskog’s article on the revival of *obo* offerings in Mongolia. The political and economic transitions that followed the demise of socialism in 1990 have led to what Mongolian herders refer to as ‘the unstable time of the market economy’ and a sense of having been abandoned by the state. Lindskog describes how these transformations, along with a series of winter calamities, have led to a wide spread sense of social and economic insecurity, for which the herders seek different solutions, including reviving ritual offerings to spirits at *obo* sites to draw upon the spirits’ ability to provide prosperity and security. But these rituals must also be seen also in relation to understandings of ‘balance’ in nature and how relations between spirits, humans, animals and land affect it. This situating *obo* rituals in relation to both political and economic insecurity and ontological conundrums, Lindskog demonstrates how these rituals create a space in which current insecurities can be redirected and combatted.

The involvement of rituals in conflict laden social changes is also apparent in Keir Martin’s article on the *namata* ritual that is conducted in some Tolai villages in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea. In these rituals, first born sons are secluded for a period in the bush before being presented with amounts of shell-wealth. Whilst, the ritual makes apparent and highlights relations of dependencies and obligations, this does not necessarily mean that it reproduces social order. Martin shows that the dependencies and obligations that the ritual highlight as desirable or social effective are a source of constant anxiety. The *namata* ritual thereby becomes a site that not only ‘reflects’ troubling political economic social changes, but is itself a site in which these kinds of tendencies, often characterised as ‘wider’ or ‘global’ are themselves
brought into being. The case also illustrates that the idea that the ritual solves particular social problems may well be held by some actors but it is a perspective that is always open to conflicting interpretations or perceptions that need to be explained ethnographically.

Confession rituals have traditionally been seen as means for expiating sins. For the Scottish Protestant Christian Brethrens we meet in Joe Webster’s article, confession rituals are addressed more towards the world around them than their own sinful behaviour. They see the world with its spread of militant Islam, global economic recession and, on a more local level, the increasingly problematic conditions for the town’s fishermen, as a ‘sin sick’ world. For the Brethren, it becomes important to identify and confess these signs of the times and doing so becomes a way of confessing one’s own belief and enacting oneself as among the saved. By showing how Brethren rituals of confession are targeting the ‘darkness’ of the world, Webster questions conventional anthropological understanding of the ritual of Christian confession as a way of letting things out that reside inside the body and suggests instead, that for these Scottish Protestant fishermen, confession is about letting the outside world in all its sinfulness into the body, thus ambiguating the notion of confession.

A world of uncertainty, moral decay and increasing climatic unpredictability is the backdrop of the ritual practices of the Filipino Pentecostals we meet in Jon Henrik Ziegler Remme’s article. Church members see the congregation’s Sunday service as a remedy against these precarious conditions, as it is only by engaging in close relations with God that these problems may be solved. Remme describes how the participants in these rituals use various sensorial and exchange practices such as giving testimony, singing and dancing, preaching, crying and speaking tongues to enact these relations.
While these practices potentially made God present in the here-and-now, they also carried a potential for the emergence of Satan. Moreover, what kind of power actually manifested itself through these practices was never quite ascertained, and while being certain that Christ was the only answer to the problems at hand, this certainty therefore always coalesced with uncertainty and doubt. By thus showing how the Sunday service, which on the one hand was seen as the only solution to the society’s problems, was on the other hand also potentially problematic, Remme demonstrates how these rituals were highly ambiguous ritual events.

Insecurity took a slightly different form in Vanuatu, and as Tom Bratrud describes, neither did the ritual attempts at dealing with it here offer a very secure alternative. Addressing concerns about political strifes, land disputes, the disappearance of the usually strong communal community work, and perhaps most urgent, the sorcery that was rampant nationwide, a Christian revival was called upon with the hope that it could help restore strong Christian lives and solve their community’s troubles. Visions received from the Holy Spirit formed the core ritual practice in the revival, and while religious authority normally rested with male elders, it was mainly children and youth who received revival visions. For many of the male islanders, participating in the revival’s demand for full submission to God entailed conflict with Ahamb values of masculinity. Moreover, participating in the revival also conflicted with another ritual domain, namely kava drinking, which is a core social institution prohibited by the revival. While kava drinking is a practice through which relations of respect and friendship are enacted, the demand for abstaining from it caused quite a dilemma for the islanders. Should they choose God or should they cultivate friendships? Through his detailed ethnography on the conundrums created by the expectations put on the islanders to participate in two co-existing but
conflicting ritual domains, Bratrud thus demonstrates with clarity how ritual solutions to social and cosmological insecurities such as sorcery might lead to others forms of insecurity.

Choosing to drink kava would not let them off the hook, however, at least if we should take Matt Tomlinson’s word for it. For in his article on kava drinking on Fiji, Tomlinson argues that this traditional drinking practice, steeped as it is in procedural formalities, is a highly ambiguous ritual event that can be seen as both beneficial and harmful. While being constitutive of particular ritually defined social orders, kava drinking is also socially risky in the sense that it involves a close association with non-Christian spiritual figures, with whom contact is potentially dangerous. Kava drinking is thus semiotically omnidirectional as it tends to point in different and often paradoxical directions at one and the same time. A successful kava drinking ritual can thereby paradoxically undo some of its own effectiveness. Furthermore, by looking at how ritual efficacy often depends on repetition and replication, Tomlinson suggests that there lies a potential in all rituals to threaten their own purpose, as they tend to balance on a fine line between being considered effective replications on the one hand and evaluated negatively as clichés on the other. The ambiguity of rituals must therefore be seen also in relation to the ideology of replication within which they operate.

In his article on Ethiopian Orthodox exorcism rituals, Diego Malara shows how rituals attempting to redraw social and religious boundaries risk exposing the very porosity they aim to combat. Ethiopia has increasingly been drawn into a wider international network of global forces, and from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church’s point of view, Protestant spirits and their possession of Orthodox Christians is a tangible manifestation of these forces. Expelling such spirits has become vital for the
Orthodox Church and their attempts at policing religious and social boundaries. However, as Malara demonstrates, the means by which this is done make the potential for becoming overpowered by Protestantism all the more evident. Moreover, the means are often suspiciously similar to those used by the Protestant themselves. The result is that Orthodox exorcism rituals become hazardous events that balances on the edge of the ever-present potential for becoming-Pentecostals.

In Martin Demant Fredriksen’s article, we are invited to a Georgian wedding that ends – as such social occasions often do, in Georgia as elsewhere – with a veritable fist fight. This time the fight is between two members of a brotherhood who clash together because one of them had planned to give a certain amount of money as gift, an amount others in the brotherhood found excessive and even conspicuously so. The man giving the gift had been away in prison for a couple of years, and the excessive amount he intended to give, was seen by others in the brotherhood as an attempt to shortcut his way up the brotherhood’s hierarchy. The events that followed the man’s transgression, the way the breach led to crisis, the redressive actions taken and the eventual reintegration of the man into the brotherhood, in many ways fit neatly with Turner’s theatrical approach to social dramas. However, Fredriksen argues that by drawing on theatrical traditions like absurdist theater the ambiguous, hazardous and inadvertent aspects of rituals are revealed more fully.

As this and the other articles in this special issue make clear, rituals are hazardous affairs. As is the case with so many other potentially rewarding social phenomena, rituals’ potentiality moves in mysterious and highly unpredictable ways; sometimes in ways that pay off, sometimes in ways that do not, but most often in many different and indeterminate ways at one and the same time. Ritual’s ambiguity may often be a
problem or a riddle to be solved, as it can on occasion be presented by informant and
ethnographer alike, but as the articles collected here demonstrate, its enduring
ambiguities can just as easily be the source of its enduring fascination and power.

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