

**PART I**

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**THEORIZING RITUAL**

Against Representation, against Meaning



# RITUAL DYNAMICS AND VIRTUAL PRACTICE

## Beyond Representation and Meaning

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### **Abstract**

Symbolic meaning and representational and reflexive perspectives remain dominant orientations in the analysis of ritual. While these must be crucial, this essay argues that a focus on the perceptual dynamics of rite, especially as these are located in ritual aesthetics, may expand an understanding of the force of rite. The discussion develops critically upon Victor Turner's seminal work, suggesting ways in which ritual analyses may be redirected. The related concepts of dynamics and virtuality (distinguished from the cyber-technological kind) are developed, indicating that these may be critical for understanding how rites change or transform the situations to which they are directed. Ritual as a dynamic in virtuality that has no essential or necessary relation to the ordinary realities that surround it may, because of this fact, be greatly empowered as a force that can pragmatically intervene in ordinary realities.

**Key words:** Aesthetics, dynamics, intuition, process, ritual, virtuality

Ritual is one of the most used, perhaps overused, sociological categories and one of the most resistant to adequate definition. Goody (1961), as Rappaport (1999) recently notes, states that it is an analytically useless term whose definition is best avoided. Undeterred, Rappaport (1999, 24–26) then proceeds to present a formal definition that is designed to overcome some of the grounds for Goody's assertion. He recommends a definition that distinguishes the structural form of ritual from the elements or qualities that constitute it (symbols, performative dimensions, etc.). Thus, ritual is a form *sui generis* that shares many of its compositional elements with other areas of human activity yet is not reducible to these elements. The overall point is similar to Handelman's (1990) observation that ritual is a particular kind of event (of varying types) that, while

sharing much with other kinds of human activity, is nonetheless distinguishable. Handelman remains open to the diversity of ritual forms, but Rappaport is more closed and more impelled towards a general theory of ritual. For me, the search for the definition of ritual has been a lost cause from the outset. Even though, it seems, that anthropologists can recognize a ritual when they see one, they have very diverse criteria for labeling what they see to be ritual. However, the vexing point at the center of this enduring problem for analysts of ritual (regardless of how the phenomenon may be defined) concerns the effects or potencies that ritual participants claim for its practice. Here, as to be expected, opinions are various and divided. Many of these, some of which I will refer to in the following discussion, can be categorized as representational, linguistic, and literary approaches. For example, they have stressed the potency of belief, the force of ritual naming, and the power of metaphor. Psychiatry and psychoanalysis have provided powerful tools of understanding, as has philosophy of numerous varieties, but in particular neo-Kantian and phenomenological existential perspectives. Bell's recent surveys (1992, 1997) on approaches towards ritual blend many of these together, for this commentator, in a less than successful manner. Recently, there has been a positivist swing. Rappaport's attempt to arrive at some kind of scientific universal understanding of religion and ritual is one example, but it is also apparent in the current appeal of psychological cognitivist approaches, and in an attraction to a kind of New Age mysticism that achieves its authority from science. Undoubtedly, all of these approaches are instructive and in varying ways useful, as I will later indicate. But what I will primarily undertake here is an approach that concentrates on ritual practice in itself and, more specifically, the formational dynamics or structuring composition of rite in which experience and meaning are constituted. I will suggest that many of the events that are studied as ritual (but by no means all) demonstrate a dynamic quality that may be highly specific to them. As such they may not be understood by a reduction to apparently similar practices that occur outside events that are categorized as ritual.

The point I am making is by no means original, although I am concerned to extend into areas that perhaps have not attracted as much attention as they deserve. For this reason, I will open my discussion with a consideration of the work of Van Gennep, Hubert and Mauss, and, most of all, Victor Turner. Turner's work brings together many of the orientations to ritual that I have mentioned, although his perspective could be classed as firmly in the literary camp. But what is particularly important in his development is both his focus on ritual events in themselves and especially his concern with the specificity of their internal process. This latter aspect of his work is especially relevant to my concern with ritual dynamics in this essay.

While process and dynamics are mutually implicated, I will contend that a focus on dynamics, rather than process, moves the understanding of ritual beyond an emphasis on symbolic meaning, reflexivity, and representation. An emphasis on ritual as process is of course crucial, but the orientation to dynamics that I ultimately pursue here is directed to those aspects of ritual

practice that may establish not only the perceptual ground for the organization of cognition but, above all, the basis for the construction of meaning and the extension towards new horizons of meaning. I focus on ritual dynamics as a structuration of perception and of cognition in which particular human potentialities both of experience and of meaningful construction may be formed. A concept that I develop is that of the virtual or virtuality, which is to be distinguished from the virtuality of cyber technology. As I will explain, the virtual of ritual is a thoroughgoing reality of its own, neither a simulacrum of realities external to ritual nor an alternative reality. It bears a connection to ordinary, lived realities, as depth to surface. I stress the virtual of rite as one in which the dynamics of cosmological, social, and personal construction—dynamics as a field of force—achieve their most intense concentration.

## The Dynamics of Ritual Process

Victor Turner is chiefly responsible for shifting the analytical focus on ritual from that of representation (which, in his view, stressed statics) to that of process (or dynamics). His use of Van Gennep is significant in this regard, as it was the latter who gave a non-Durkheimian legitimacy to Turner's conceptual move. Although Van Gennep, of course, did not ignore the importance of representation, he did not write of ritual in the Durkheimian sense as a kind of "collective representation," a symbolic formation of the social or expression of society. Rather, Van Gennep's (1960) orientation was to conceive of rite as a conjunctive, transitive, or transitional process—a reformatory or transformational organization of action facilitating change *within* society. Van Gennep highlighted the internal processual stages and shifts within rituals whereby distinct phases were contracted or elaborated in accordance with the problematics of the crisis or transition (e.g., birth, initiation, marriage, death) to be resolved or effected.

Van Gennep had done little more than set out a schema for the understanding of ritual processes and their contribution to the reproduction of social orders and their relations. His concern with process paralleled that of Hubert and Mauss (1964) in their analysis of sacrifice, which likewise focused on the ritual process (isolating stages of separation and conjunction). Although Hubert and Mauss expanded on the Durkheimian distinct and representational symbolic categories of the sacred and the profane, they discerned a constitutive and transformational dynamic in the sacralizing/desacralizing process of rite to be compared with the importance assigned to the liminal by Van Gennep, which Turner developed.<sup>1</sup>

It is one of Turner's major contributions to the analysis of ritual that he recognized the possibility of Van Gennep's approach for understanding ritual as a process that could create or generate original circumstances for human psychological and social existence. For Van Gennep, ritual was demonstrated as a process in the conventional sense of a course of action or a progression of linked events. This view of ritual as process persists in much anthropological

analysis and misses the more radical import of Turner's direction, which went well beyond Van Gennep.

Turner was directed to ritual as process in the more philosophical meaning of becoming. In this way he concentrated on the capacity of ritual to bring forth (in the ancient Greek sense of *techné*) and to change the very ground of being. He grasped the ritual process as not merely a machine for social reproduction or for maintaining the cosmological and cultural categories of meaning within which persons and their social relations were constituted (ritual as a mechanism for repeating the same in the sense of Eliade's notion of "the eternal return"). Rather, Turner concentrated on the process of ritual as the generative source for the invention of new cosmological and other cultural categories within which original constructs of persons and their relations might be created. This was a radical reorientation in the anthropological analysis of ritual. Turner broke away from conventional anthropological approaches that regarded ritual both as a technology of traditional, relatively static societies, a mechanism for their reproduction, and as a means for the delusion and mystification of populations, which facilitated the legitimacy of dominant orders.

Turner effectively made ritual—and especially its "betwixt and between" liminal moments, which he regarded as the potent points of transition, transformation, and creation—a basis for the development of a general cultural, social, and political theory. In his vision, this was all the more so because he understood ritual formations worldwide as embedding the grounded and fundamental ingredients of human symbolic construction and their enduring paradoxes.

The critical importance of Turner's position is that he was not concerned with developing a theory of ritual. This is obviously an impossibility at the very least because of the extraordinary diversity of the phenomenon and the fact that there is wide disagreement as to how the analytical or descriptive construct of ritual should be defined (see Asad 1993; Handelman 1990). Nonetheless, the pursuit of a theory of ritual continues with some interesting but, in the view of this anthropologist, limited and all too frequently overly ethnocentric and occasionally mystical results (e.g., Bell 1992, 1997; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Rappaport 1999; E. Turner 1992; Willis 1999). The great merit of Turner's reorientation is that he considered whatever were conceived to be ritual practices (that is, practices centered first and foremost within the physical, mental, and social beingness of human being) as themselves already including their theoretical possibility.<sup>2</sup> This possibility was not about ritual per se but rather derived from the close analysis of ritual that led to a larger understanding of human being as a whole, that is, as a continuing and endlessly diversifying and differentiating entity in culture and in history. The powerful argument that he began was that processes observable in ritual action—especially those that are creative, generative, and innovative—are constantly repeated (regardless of whether or not they are recognized as being ritual) in the contexts of major moments of social and political change. Furthermore, they often dramatically appear at transformative moments (as Turner [1974] himself described Hidalgo's Mexican insurrection, the European crisis of 1968, and the Vietnam protests—events that no doubt

could include the fall of the Berlin Wall). More than simply expressive of change, they are moments of symbolic formation, perhaps switch points in Weber's sense, which may fashion new ontological grounds and horizontal orientations.

I have concentrated on Turner because his is the main route, within anthropology, for a discussion of ritual dynamics that is grounded in the phenomenon of ritual action itself. Most anthropologists have applied theoretical perspectives that have not been grounded in the observation of rites but in nonritual action. They have borrowed freely from linguistic philosophy (e.g., the application of the Austinian concept of performatives by Rappaport 1999), from drama and performance theory (e.g., Schechner 2002), from Bourdieu's theory of practice (e.g., Bell 1992), from cybernetics and systems theory (e.g., Shore 1999), among numerous others. Such perspectives have proved insightful. However, they subordinate ritual to the logic and rationale of practices that are not necessarily those of ritual, as this may be realized in a diversity of instances. They obscure the theoretical potential that may be abstracted from ritual practice that can extend an understanding of ritual, both specifically and generally, as well as of practices that may be related to rite but which go well beyond it.

Other scholars who are not committed to anthropology as a discipline yet are certainly attracted to the imagination of anthropology's potential (which is founded in the empirical investigation of difference and the unfamiliar) have recognized, perhaps better than many anthropologists, the possibility in ritual for creating a larger understanding of the action of human beings. I mention, for example, the work of Ernst Cassirer (1955) in relation to the mythopoesis of human action which derives from an attention to rite and, in particular, the research of Susanne Langer (1942, 1953), who extends particularly the ideas of Cassirer and Whitehead. Langer (whose work was critical for Turner and other anthropological theorists of rite such as Geertz and Rappaport) concentrates on aesthetic forms in terms of their symbolic and dynamic properties. She conceives of aesthetic processes—for her, the quintessential domain of the symbolic—as demonstrating the capacity for communicating simultaneously the immediately concrete and the abstract, leading to the construction of complexity through relative economy or simplicity.<sup>3</sup> For Langer, as with numerous others, ritual is the major crucible for the development of these potencies. It is through the dynamics of the symbolic in rite and in the aesthetic (in the unity of feeling and form) that the distinct capacities of human consciousness and mind and the potentialities of human creativity (as manifest in the arts and the sciences) are revealed (see, too, Kapferer and Hobart 2004).

## **Symbolic Form and Symbolic Dynamics**

Langer uses the term 'dynamics,' a concept that escapes the progressive, successional connotations of the term 'process,' which, while it accentuates the active, changing, and transformational character of rite, obscures the constitutive force of ritual as this is realized through the compositional forces of ritual action. The

notion of process as used by most anthropologists also maintains a powerful representational stress that reduces the significance of the inner dynamics of rite.

The term 'process,' as Turner particularly engages it, of course, is explicitly opposed to statics. I use the concept of dynamics to encompass both process or change and statics or stasis. As I will develop it later, ritual as a relatively unchanging form, for example, is nonetheless dynamic. That is, it constitutes a dynamic field of force having affect and effect upon those who are involved in its domain. Further, the inner dynamics of a rite—even though it may be repeated in much the same way over long periods of time—are not opposed to statics or change. As I will develop later, the dynamics of what might be conceived as a generally repeatable or unchanging form are the key to the continuing vitality of some rites—their capacity to regenerate participants and their realities, often in original ways (on a similar point, see Williams and Boyd 1993).

Langer engages a Kantian notion of dynamics (which concentrates on the forces creating experience) focused on the specific forces of aesthetic or symbolic forms: music, dance, the plastic arts, language. With Kant, Langer is concerned to break out of a philosophical metaphysics that underlines her interest in dynamics, which in her usage bears close connection to notions in physics (in which dynamics and statics are not opposed). The concentration I place on dynamics (rather than process) is influenced by Langer's direction.

I (Kapferer 1983) have applied some of Langer's ideas to the exploration of ritual dynamics in Sinhala *tovil* or healing rites. In this case, for example, I elaborate some of the particular temporal and spatial dynamics in performance of music and dance, their relation to the production of the trance experience, and then the movement out of trance through the intervention of the particular dynamics of comic-drama. The whole performance of Sinhala exorcism is explored as manifesting a complex interrelational dynamic of different aesthetic or symbolic processes that have perceptual and conceptual effects integral to the (re)construction of experience and the (re)formation of person and self (see Kapferer 1979). One point of such an attention to the compositional dynamics of rite is that it opened up further understanding of a diversity of symbolic processes. This is so because of the particular problematic of the rites (oriented to overcome disruptions caused by demon attack) and the demand placed upon the rites to intervene technically within the existential ground of self-formation. The rites are pragmatically oriented to develop and exploit particular symbolic formations in such a way as to shape human perception and thereby transform experience. In so doing, the ritualists have discovered dynamic potencies in their rites that may have the capacity to transform experience and possibly the situations of experience.<sup>4</sup>

The pragmatist linguistic notion of performatives is now commonly referred to in discussions of the dynamic constitutive potency of rite. But this is an extension of the spirit of the symbolic interactionist dictum made famous by W. I. Thomas that "if people define something as real then it is real in its consequences" and fundamental in most symbolic understandings of the ritual process. The perspective carried through into a discussion of ritual dynamics does not allow for the potency of ritual action independent of its constructed ideational meaningful

scheme. Or to put the point in another way, the potency of the meaningful action of rite may be in substantial part the property of particular dynamics upon which meaningful constructs may subsequently or simultaneously build.

## **Beneath the Symbolic**

Steven Friedson (1996), in a brilliant study of music-trance-dance among the Tumbuka people of Malawi, makes this observation. He demonstrates how a specific cross-rhythmic drumming introduced at a particular moment in a healing rite creates the perceptual illusion of something materially solid entering the body and moving around inside, and then, as the drumming and healing continue, being withdrawn from the body. The force of this illusion and its process is deepened in the meanings that are built into this experiential development. It is important that the illusion—illusion as a physical materiality brought about through immediate perceptual sense experience—is independent of the meanings (the interpretations) that are placed upon it. (Friedson suggests that the basic illusory experience would be grasped by anyone made the focus of such drumming.) The perceptual experience is integral to the dynamics of the ritual event but is further elaborated through other dynamics of conceptual construction (of culturally specific interpretation).

The general point should not be lost. It is that the force of much ritual may be in the dynamics of the rite qua dynamics, in the way sensory perception is dynamically organized, which then simultaneously becomes the ground and the force behind the meaningful constructions that are woven into the dynamics.

Much of the dynamics of rite, and I am concentrating here on those that are internal to it, is a property of its performance structure. This relates to the particular integral dynamics of specific events within the rite (their aesthetic properties, the orientation of participants and the dynamic of their interrelation, the form and content of acts) and to the dynamics of their relation to each other. Here attention to what can be called the structuration of the unfolding performance is important. It is in the performance structuration of ritual that transformational possibilities of the dynamics of rite perceptually and cognitively can occur, an argument that Lévi-Strauss (1963) powerfully indicates in his essay “The Effectiveness of Symbols.” Csordas (1994) carries the idea much further in his phenomenological, rather than structuralist, orientation. He focuses on the dynamics of embodiment in Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) sense, whereby in the organization of the body (body hexis) in the dynamics of ritual action, perceptual and cognitive processes, transitions and transformations are produced. The dynamics of rite in the context of embodiment involve not only the playing out of structure but its creation—the point that Turner stressed in his work, thus countering a static Durkheimian representational orientation that had clogged much anthropological discussion of rite.

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) adaptation of phenomenological perspectives (especially that of Merleau-Ponty) in his development of the concept of habitus in

relation to body hexis requires some comment, especially since he has explicitly attached this practice-oriented perspective to the analysis of ritual (see also Kapferer 1997). In Bourdieu's argument, the habitus is not a set of static or determinant oppositions, as they might be in many structuralist approaches. The dimensions of the habitus that are brought into opposition are dependent on the movement and positioning of persons through, for example, a structured space. Moreover, the meaning that may be emergent through such movement and positioning is embodied (as it is produced) through the (repeated) body movement. One of the first, and most successful, examples that Bourdieu gives of this approach is his analysis of the Kabyle house (see Bourdieu 1977). Such an orientation can be applied to the formation of a ritual space. However, I stress a ritual space as a highly active space (a shifting field of force), a habitus that, as part of its vital dynamic, is orienting and reorienting the bodies of participants, directing them into meanings that they are frequently made to produce and enjoined to bring before their conscious awareness. In Bourdieu's terms, the dynamics of many rites might be conceived of as being simultaneously the construction and embodiment of a lived habitus. This is one way in which I explored the significance of the Sinhala Buddhist anti-sorcery ritual known as the Suniyama (Kapferer 1997). This rite takes the form of a rebirthing or regenerative sacrifice oriented in relation to a building that can be described as being designed in terms of a cosmic habitus, a "house of the ordering dynamic of existence." This building (which the ritualists describe as a cosmic palace, *Mahasammata Maligava*) itself is conceived as having force. Thus, as an aesthetic form itself, it works through participant perception, drawing participants within its space, reorienting and, effectively, reontologizing, embodying within participants the Buddha doxa that the cosmic building and the development of the ritual context in which the building is set come to articulate. I stress the great ontological import of this rite. It is performed to overcome the crisis of sorcery, which is conceived as leading to ontological destruction. Sorcery in its most acute projection is seen—in the context of the Suniyama ritual—as returning its victims to a fragmented condition virtually at the dawn of creation, to a moment before the emergence of human consciousness when human beings invent, or through the imagination construct, their realities into existence (a major import of the cosmic palace and its relevant mythology; see Kapferer 1997).

One aspect of the dynamics of rite that needs emphasis is the way it may organize what Rappaport (1999) refers to as the ritual gathering within its formational motion. The notion of ritual gathering embraces what is otherwise referred to as audience or spectators, but these words are far too passive. They allow for an easy equation of theatre performance with ritual performance, when there are often major distinctions. It is these differences (see below), rather than the similarities, a thrust of so much discussion concerning rite, that demand closer attention. In much ritual, the ritual gathering (that is, those not directly engaged with the production of the rite) is also participant and vital in the production of rite and its dynamics. Schieffelin's (1976) account of *giso* rites among the Kaluli people of the southern highlands of New Guinea is a major

demonstration of this fact. I (Kapferer 1984) have shown for Sinhala healing rites how performance sets up a dynamic of exclusion and inclusion for members of the ritual gathering, using them to achieve various transformations in experience and meaning for the central participants.

## Ritual Dynamics and the Larger Context

Much work on ritual is chiefly concerned with the relation between rite and its larger political and social context. How does ritual, and especially its internal dynamics, effect changes in its embracing context, either for the way persons are (re)oriented within it or for the way social processes within the wider context are directed?

The main way in which this has been addressed is highly dependent on the particular functional integration of rites within larger cosmological, political, and social dynamics or processes within embracing totalities. That is, the rite is part of the dynamic of the whole, enabling various processes to be facilitated within it. Life crisis rites of birth, initiation, and death in such a situation are not merely representative of changes, they effect them. For example, youths are initiated into age grades, and the sociopolitical order of a society at least partly conditioned through an age-grade system is accordingly reproduced. Such rites of initiation, because of their dynamic integration within a larger process, and upon which wider processes are dependent, might be expected to have major personal and psychological constitutive force. Similarly, other kinds of rites, because of the dynamic centrality (and dependency) vested in them of encompassing cosmological, political, and socioeconomic processes, might be critical, not just for the maintenance of sociopolitical orders, but for effecting radical adjustments and transformations or disjunctive transmutations of major historical significance.

Anthropological and historically based ethnographies are replete with examples. Rappaport's (1968) discussion of the New Guinea Maring *kaiko* pig sacrifice is one. The *kaiko*, in Rappaport's argument, is driven to be performed in circumstances of ecological overload that gathers significance in sociocultural terms. The ceremony itself operates along the lines of a cybernetic systemic feedback loop that readjusts the dynamic of the sociopolitical ecological order of the Maring as a whole, potentially setting off sociocultural and ecological processes in new directions. The *kaiko* intervenes through its own internal dynamic that switches and transmutes ongoing processes around it.

Systems structured in relation to cosmic kingship yield great potency to the dynamics of the rites that concentrate on cosmic or divine kings. These are active in (re)forming the realities on which the potency of the king depends (see de Heusch 1981; Geertz 1973, 1980; Gluckman 1954; Heesterman 1993; Sahlins 1980; Seneviratne 1978; Valeri 1985). They are more than merely hegemonic—they are vital in the ideological support of a system of power. Rites of cosmic kingship are critical in the formation of hierarchical structures at all points in the dynamics of the reproductive change of that order (often

extremely complex in its diversity and frequently manifesting forms of contestation and resistance). This is so from the level of the body and person, to the processes of domestic and wider kinship relations, and overall for the formation of a religio-political order. I emphasize the importance of the inner dynamics of such rites of cosmic kingship.

This is demonstrated extremely well when such systems are invaded by forces whose dynamic structure and orientational cosmology are entirely distinct. Thus, the advent of Captain Cook off the Hawaiian Islands at the time of the Makahiki festival (an annual rite of social and political re-formation focused on the king) set the reproductive implications of this rite off in new directions, not merely because of the potency of hitherto external forces as such but because of the mediating potency of the rite itself. It made Cook and the material and social values associated with his presence dynamically internal to the political and social reproductive machinery that were integral to the dynamics of the major rites of Hawaiian kingship, which were condensed into the ritual formation of the Makahiki festival (see Sahlins 1980). Making meaningful the events involving Cook, in Hawaiian terms and through ritual, was a process that involved a revaluation of the conceptual categories engaged in the ongoing production of everyday life. As a consequence, the nature of everyday Hawaiian life was changed by Hawaiians themselves, even as they thought they were maintaining it.

Sri Lanka at the time of the British colonial conquest, although vastly different from the Hawaiian situation, demonstrates some similarities. The invasion by the British of the medieval Sinhala capital of Kandy in 1815 resulted in the deposition and exile of the Sinhala king and the British appropriation of the annual festival of the kingship to support colonial political interests. The festival was continued with the critical difference that it celebrated the British ascendancy over the Sinhalese. Effectively, the rite was transmuted into a festival of British hegemony, a rite that simultaneously represented British sovereignty and became an agency of indirect rule through Sinhala political and social institutions (see Seneviratne 1978). Indirect rule at the time, of course, was not yet a conscious, articulated British colonial policy (Sri Lanka and Fiji were in numerous ways the sites where the policy was worked out). I suggest that, indeed, the appropriation of the Kandy festival did for a while operate as a successful "apparatus of capture" (see Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Through the artifice of this rite, whose inner dynamics condensed forces for the annual regeneration of relations and subjectivities throughout the erstwhile Sinhala realm, the British, perhaps unintentionally, were active in a revaluation of the very cosmological terms of the continued existence and repetition of the rite. Moreover, the British subjugation of a socially and politically central rite, which was integral to the social reproduction of the realities into which they had intruded, was a factor in the creation of a capitalist modernist world vital to the support of British colonial hegemony. The festival would become entirely representative of British power and later expressive of the power of Sinhala elites freed of the colonial yoke. In other words, the festival evolved into a theatre for the display of power rather than the regeneration of its circumstance. But for a

while it did, through its inner dynamics, have force in facilitating the encysting of a new political and economic formation (see Seneviratne 1978).

With social and political processes of demythologization and the gathering secularism associated with modernization and globalization, the dynamics of rite are not likely to have such ramifying effects through social and political space. The major exceptions, perhaps, are rites in those cults that closely define their own sociopolitical realities, as in the total institutional forms of certain new religious movements (e.g., some contemporary Pentecostalism, perhaps cults such as Sai Baba, or Amma in Kerala, and numerous contemporary African cults).

But here I have conceived the effects of inner ritual dynamics as being dependent on what anthropologists once described as the functional integration of the symbolic practice of rite into its larger sociopolitical field. When such functional integration is broken (as in processes of demythologization), ritual is often analyzed as a site of traditionalist irrationalism, perhaps a totalizing form that in post-modernity is incongruent with contemporary realities. There are, of course, bound to be exceptions, for in modern realities ritual forms or practices are routinely (re)invented, often taking the shape of the diverse and heterogeneous realities of which they are a part. This is by no means necessarily a phenomenon of the present; descriptions of rites everywhere indicate that they are often borrowed (sometimes bought). Their very hybridity is a vital dimension of their potency. While this is recognized by students of rite, the tendency is to treat such practices—in the circumstances of contemporaneity—in rationalist terms, for example, as fetishized practice, as mystification. While hybridity, fetishism, and, indeed, mystifying propensities may be conceived as the dynamics of ritual, and often lead to an understanding of the force of rite, they are no less general categories of explanation, founded in modernist rationalism, and do not necessarily demand a close examination of the actual dynamics of rite. Moreover, such understandings continue the totalizing functionalist orientation that assumes the integration of the rite with its encompassing context, although reissued as a malintegration (the concepts of mystification and fetishism explicitly suggest this). As a result, the rite becomes a source of misconception about the nature of larger processes.

Some rites may gain their force—even a continuing potency, despite changes and transformations in the cultural and sociopolitical worlds of their performance—precisely because they are, to a degree, independent of larger realities. Attention to the change of the internal content and structure of rites may occasionally be too strongly based in the assumption that it is in their change that they maintain relevance to the larger context. Undoubtedly, rites change over historical time, but such a fact may be less significant than their relatively unchanging constancy through time. Ritualists themselves frequently insist that their rites—often central or core rites such as sacrifice—are repetitions of the same originary rite. There is ideological and instrumental value in such a claim, which obscures the fact that changes have taken place. Nonetheless, there is much evidence for the broad continuity of ritual form (and content) over time and, indeed, a tension (even an ideological commitment) not only to maintain structure and content but also to force a disjunction of the rite from its embracing context.

Anthropologists and other scholars have often defined a critical dimension of ritual performance to be its radical suspension of ordinary, everyday realities. Such a notion underpins Turner's concept of liminality and is integral to its changing or transformational power. His analysis insists on the liminal as a leveling, a subversion and negation of quotidian lived-in structures of life. Turner's development of this position has yielded much insight, as have discussions in which ritual and festival are seen as expressing crucial dimensions of the ludic or play (e.g., Bakhtin 1988; Handelman 1990; Huizinga 1971; Koepping 1997; V. Turner 1982). These perspectives all indicate important aspects of the internal dynamics of rite, especially its socially critical as well as creative potencies. The comedic and playful character of some rites (as the ludic outside the context of ritual) is an important feature of their capacity to break out of determining logics, to cross registers, and to generate novel meanings and understandings.

But I wish to push ritual as a radical suspension of ordinary realities in a slightly different direction and to suggest that it is the very disjunction of the world of rite from its larger context that contributes to the force of much ritual dynamics. I add to this notion the nonrepresentational character of the world of rite as this is formed in its disjunctive space. I mean by this that the processes of rites are not always to be conceived of as directly reflective of outer realities, as has been the thrust of conventional symbolic analyses. This is not to say that they do not grasp or represent meanings that are integral to broad, abstract cosmological notions, which often give such ideas explicit, grounded, and experienced manifestation in the concretized pragmatics of ritual processes. Such cosmological ideas may be implicated in everyday nonritual practices, perhaps underlying a part of their tacit meaning and, at the least, being available to the construction and interpretation of ordinary and routine occurrences. They may even be metaphoric of larger processes, but this is secondary, frequently an analytic construction made by scholars who maintain themselves as being external to the phenomenon in question and committed to other rationalities. The analytical insistence sometimes holds that rite is an inversion of the real and, in extreme positions, a fetishism, a mystification. Herein is the dynamic function of rite (see, in different ways, Bloch 1986; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Staal 1989; Taussig 1987). Undoubtedly, there is merit in such assertions, but they are often formed from standpoints outside of ritual and unsympathetic to it. These views are founded, as I commented before, in an approach that assumes the functional integration of rite into its embracing polity and society. Thus, rite is either negatively or positively integrated.

### **Ritual Virtuality: The Dynamics of the Virtual**

The direction I take here is one that concentrates on ritual as a virtuality, a dynamic process in and of itself with no essential representational symbolic relation to external realities—that is, a coded symbolic formation whose interpretation or meaning is ultimately reducible to the sociopolitical and psychological world outside the ritual context. The approach to virtuality that I

develop accentuates the internal dynamics of rite as the potency of the capacity of ritual to alter, change, or transform the existential circumstances of persons in nonritual realities. This, I suggest, demands no necessary change in the overall cosmological symbolic shape or practiced elements or events defining the rite (for example, of a particular cultural type and project) as it has been historically developed. Thus, a rite that has been fashioned in the circumstances of specific historical processes (for example, some rites of healing in Sri Lanka that were constructed after the manner of rites of ritual cleansing and regeneration of cosmic kings in ancient Sri Lanka [see Kapferer 1997]) may continue a vital changing or transformational function due to the nature of its inner dynamics. Its traditionality is already a practice of modernity: it is always already modern (see Kapferer 2002b).<sup>5</sup>

My use of the concept of virtuality draws predominantly from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1994) but is also influenced by Langer's notion of the virtual.<sup>6</sup> They develop the term away from connotations of the kind that cast the virtual as somehow less than real or in one way or another a model of reality or else an ideality. These approaches cling to representational forms of argument, driving analysts to discover the meaning of ritual action either in subterranean psychologies or in outer political and social existences. The virtual is no less a reality, a fully lived existential reality, than ordinary realities of life. Yet it is substantially different. I draw attention to two aspects.

First, I stress the virtuality of rite as a kind of phantasmagoric space (see Kapferer 2002a), a dynamic that allows for all kinds of potentialities of human experience to take shape and form. It is, in effect, a self-contained imaginal space—at once a construction but a construction that enables participants to break free from the constraints or determinations of everyday life and even from the determinations of the constructed ritual virtual space itself. In this sense, the virtual of ritual may be described as a determinant form that is paradoxically anti-determinant, able to realize human constructive agency. The phantasmagoric space of ritual virtuality may be conceived not only as a space whose dynamic interrupts prior determining processes but also as a space in which participants can reimagine (and redirect or reorient themselves) into the everyday circumstances of life (see, too, Williams and Boyd 1993).

The virtuality of such ritual spaces and the kinds of dynamics that can be produced in them might be seen as similar to the virtualities of contemporary technologically produced cyber realities. Nonetheless, I consider ritual virtualities of the kind I have been outlining as distinct. They are not attempts to reproduce the existential processes of real realities (and, therefore, the virtually real, simulacra, or the not quite real). I reiterate the earlier point that the virtuality of ritual reality is really real, a complete and filled-out existential reality—but in its own terms. Nor can ritual virtualities be understood as alternate or parallel realities. I have stressed the nonreferentiality of ritual virtuality to external reality. This, of course, does not mean that it is independent of such reality. Ritual is a vital dimension of what I am calling the really real or, for want of a better term, actuality. But this is so in a distinct sense that relates to

what I regard as the critical second aspect of what I take to be the character of many rites and their dynamics of virtuality.

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the virtuality of which they write constitutes a descent into processes of the really real. Herein is the distinction between virtuality and reality, or actuality. Actuality is described as chaotic, and I follow their usage. The ordinary everyday realities that human beings live, construct, and pass through are continuously forming, merging, and flowing into each other. They are chaotic in the sense that they are fractal-like, always changing and shifting, immanent within and structuring, differentiating in form, crosscutting and intersecting as persons move through space and alter standpoint. The structures of life, relevant expectations, orders within which action is framed, the moods and senses of living are relatively seamlessly melding into each other, eased perhaps, and often subconsciously, by rules or mini-rites of entry and egress. This chaotic dimension (or chaosmos) of ordinary lived processes constitutes the reality of actuality. The virtual reality of ritual, in contrast, is a slowing down of the tempo of everyday life and a holding in abeyance or suspension some of the vital qualities of lived reality. This is what Deleuze and Guattari point to as the descent into reality of the virtual, as they employ the concept. I suggest that this is a critical quality of the virtuality of rite. Thus, ritual as virtual reality is thoroughly real, even part of the reality of actuality. However, through its slowing down and temporary abeyance of dimensions of ordinary flow, it is an engagement with the compositional structuring dynamics of life in the very midst of life's processes.

The virtuality of rite can be regarded as critical to what I have referred to as its *techné*. It is not a modeling of lived processes (as is indicated in some ritual analyses) but a method for entering within life's vital processes and adjusting its dynamics. By entering within the particular dynamics of life by means of the virtuality of ritual, ritualists engage with positioning and structuring processes that are otherwise impossible to address in the tempo and dynamics of ordinary lived processes as these are lived at the surface.

This orientation to ritual as a virtual reality (being careful to distinguish it from common understandings in contemporary cyber discourse) expands an understanding of the dynamics of many (if not all) kinds of ethnographically recorded rites. I refer, for example, to what some scholars, such as Geertz and especially Lévi-Strauss, have described as the obsession of ritualists with detail and the exactitude of their operations. These operations I take to be connected with the building—within virtual space—of the compositional formation of reality into which ritual descends. The apparent repetitive dynamic of so much ritual is a dimension of the radical slowing down in the virtuality of rite of the tempo of ordinary life, its speed, continuous shifts in standpoint, changes in perspective and structures of context—the chaos of lived existence. What is routinely described in ritual analysis as the suspension of quotidian realities is not so much suspending as it is holding at bay some of the chaotic qualities of reality, thus allowing the dynamics of reality formation to be entered within and returned, readjusted.<sup>7</sup>

Here it is relevant to recall some of my earlier comments concerning Bourdieu's notion of habitus and its application to rite. Bourdieu conceives of various routine-lived spaces and practices (ritual and nonritual) as exercises of the habitus, whereby the dispositional schemes of life are reproduced, themselves becoming the creative and generating forces in the continuous, differentiating production of everyday realities. While ritual dynamics can be usefully conceived in such a way, the formation of rites as virtual realities highlights them as a means for entering directly within the habitus and adjusting its parameters. The virtual of rite is a means for engaging immediately with the very ontological ground of being. Indeed, I suggest engaging machinically within the habitus so as to reconstruct, restore, or introduce radical new elements into the dynamic structurings of its possibility. The aesthetics, repetitions, careful detailing, slowing of tempo, shifting position of participants, recontextualizations, etc., are major means for readjusting the processes within life that, among many other things, permit life as it is lived to regain its uninterrupted flow. There are numerous examples in ethnography, with initiation rites providing clear instances. Famous examples include those among Amerindians, referred to by Clastres (1989). The *cisungu* girl's initiation rites among Bemba-speaking peoples of Central Africa provide a well-known illustration (see La Fontaine 1985; Richards 1956; the reanalysis by Handelman 1990; and the highly original work of Simonsen 2000).

My own analysis (1997) of anti-sorcery healing rites among the Sinhalese explicitly engages the notion of ritual as virtuality in the twofold sense of an imaginal space and a technical site for entering within the dynamics of reality formation. Thus, the personal and social crisis that sorcery manifests can (within the Sinhala Buddhist context) be grasped as a moment when cosmological unities that are embedded in ongoing practice are effectively shattered, blocking and inhibiting the flow of life and its manifold projects. The dynamic of the virtual space of the Suniyama rite is one wherein cosmological unities are reinsisted as an imaginal order and the hierarchical principles—vital to the differentiating structuring flow of reality—are brought once more to fruition. Participants located in the imaginal space of the rite re-embody its processes as essential to the ongoing generation of life in all its chaotic actuality. The Sinhala Suniyama rite also is explicitly concerned with descending inside space/time dynamics, repositioning participants within such processes and bringing forth their capacity to constitute unselfconsciously dimensions of ordinary life, to move unhindered through its various orders and processes. Within the virtual space of the rite, participants engage in exercises of structuration of relations (via the dynamics of the gift) and of consciousness (via the practice and power of language—the major significance of comedic episodes in the rite [Kapferer 1997, 162–167]), regaining their composure with the flows of actuality.

The ritualists who perform the Suniyama claim that it has maintained its form and content since its invention at the beginning of time and the formation of human sociopolitical orders. Of course, this is an ideological statement among much else authorizing their work. No doubt the Suniyama has changed over

time, although there are clearly major elements within it that can be demonstrated as fairly close to what has been recorded for similar practices well into medieval times. We are all familiar with similar claims in other traditions, such as those of critical rites within Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, etc. The concentration that I have placed on ritual dynamics and especially on ritual as virtuality supports the contention that it is indeed the dynamics of rites (as so many ritualists claim)—rather than the fact of the empirical change of the form and content of such rites—that account for their continued force in many contemporary contexts. The features of rites that for some scholars make them inappropriate to contemporary actualities disguise the crucial potencies of their dynamics that an attention to them as virtualities highlights.

The orientation that I have imparted to ritual dynamics and especially ritual as virtuality extends from other perspectives (specifically, Turner), although it does indicate some redirections. The flat, linear triadic ritual process of Van Gennep and Turner, through the conception of the virtual, as I use it, becomes a descent into the ground of reality rather than a making and a marking of a stage in a linear progression. What I am saying is already strongly implicit in Turner's work. His initial interest in psychoanalysis (both Freud and Jung) is testimony to this, but an attention to the virtuality of rite enables the understanding of ritual to remain with its particular dynamics, to remain with the specific phenomenology of ritual practices, without assigning it to authorities who are at significant distance from those practices. In the approach to virtuality I have essayed here, there is a move away from Turner's anti-structural orientation towards a dynamic of structuration. Although the representational, meaning-driven, symbolic perspective continues to be important, there is a shift to viewing ritual as a dynamic for the production of meaning rather than seeing it as necessarily predominantly meaningful in itself, a perspective that tends to overvalue ritual as representation and places a huge stress on processes such as reflexivity. Frits Staal (1989) has innovatively attacked the obsession with meaning in ritual analysis, but he, as with Lévi-Strauss before him, who is committed to meaning but as abstraction, misses the critical import of the dynamics, repetitions, compartmentalizations, and detailings of rite that this discussion of the virtual suggests.<sup>8</sup>

My attention to dynamics here indicates some reconsideration of various performance approaches as well, while not negating their value. Performance is a greatly overused concept. In many ways, everything can be conceived as a performance in one sense or another—even the relatively self-enclosed practice of writing and reading—which is a factor in the stress on interpretation and reflexivity (often of a highly individualistic kind) in the analysis of ritual. But the dominant notion of performance in ritual analysis is that drawn from the theatre, which I regard as being acutely problematic. Ritual is conventionally seen as similar to the drama of theatre and, indeed, sometimes as the primordial form of theatrical drama (e.g., Emigh 1996; Geertz 1972; Harrison 1997; Schechner 2002; V. Turner 1982). The observation is highly questionable, but even if it were so, an attention to ritual dynamics might reveal ritual as closer to what goes on

behind the scenes in theatrical performance than what is overtly presented. Much ritual is directed to the foregrounding of the mechanics of construction and production, the rules and procedures for the creation and reinvention of the ongoing, shifting illusionary scenes of everyday life. Rather than engaging the theatrical metaphor of performance, an orientation based on the perspective of dynamics as presented in this essay might reconceive ritual performance as a dynamic field of force in whose virtual space human psychological, cognitive, and social realities are forged anew, so that ritual participants are both reoriented to their ordinary realities and embodied with potencies to restore or reconstruct their lived worlds. I note that the conception of ritual performance as a dynamic field is already implicit, if not thoroughly explicit, in Turner's reorientation of the analysis of ritual in terms of his concept of process.

I opened this essay with reference to the difficulty that anthropologists, at least, have in defining ritual. What I have discussed with reference to a concentration on ritual dynamics will apply in highly various ways to what may be described as ritual action. This is especially so with regard to the virtuality of rite. I consider that what I have suggested is likely to be most relevant to rituals that are directed to alter the circumstances (simultaneously social and psychological) in which the experience of participants has hitherto been constituted, that is, to rites that are not so much concerned with presenting the nature of apparent reality (varieties of public and formal ceremonial, rites of commemoration, parades, festivals) as with entering directly within the forces of their production, construction, and reinvention.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Olaf Smedal of the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, read through a draft of this essay and as usual gave me many useful suggestions.

## NOTES

1. In certain aspects, Durkheim's concept of the sacred as developed by Hubert and Mauss can be viewed as a liminal space in the sense developed by Turner. The passage through or towards the sacred in Hubert and Mauss's analysis of sacrifice might be conceived of as effecting both a transition and a transformation.
2. Victor Turner, of course, was highly influenced by "situational and extended-case" analysis developed by Manchester anthropologists who conducted their fieldwork in central and southern Africa. The idea emerged from Max Gluckman's initial inspiration gained from fieldwork in Zululand. Essentially, the idea was that practices themselves already contain their own theoretical understanding. A further idea was that such theoretical understanding, locked within practice, was open horizontal. That is, there were myriad different concatenations of practice that might reveal the "logics" (not the closed system

- of philosophical logic, but practical logic in Bourdieu's sense) integral within and driving the practice. Ritual, I think, for Turner was a kind of natural event, constituted as such by participants. In this sense, it was more primary than the events of Gluckman's situation analysis that were constructed in their significance by the anthropological observer rather than by the participant. Gluckman and his colleagues in their approach to events or situations were concerned with process and dynamics. But Turner, in his consideration of ritual, expanded the idea. The influence of situational analysis as developed by Gluckman and others is clear in Turner's early work, and it should be noted, for it extends an understanding of the intellectual milieu that drew Turner to the work of Van Gennep.
3. Langer argues that the conditions for the formation of language are established in ritual contexts in which the symbolic is elaborated. Symbolic processes reduce complexity, and it is in this dynamic that language can emerge. The simplicity of the symbolic enables the communication of otherwise complex and irreducible experience.
  4. Williams and Boyd (1993) have extended Langer's approach to aesthetics to an understanding of Zoroastrian ritual.
  5. Where ancient rites are seen to continue into modernity, this is often conceived as a "re-invention of tradition" (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Undoubtedly this is so and is well demonstrated in many of the festivals of contemporary Europe that have been explicitly reinvented. It is also true of many ritual reinventions in a diversity of contemporary nationalist movements. But this is not always the case, even though the personal, social, and political import of the ritual is achieved or reinvented in contemporaneity. In this sense, rites through their repetition are always being reinvented simultaneously with the attempt to make them continuous with what was practiced before. Ritual in the sense I am suggesting here is both continuous and inventive. These are not necessarily contradictions or oppositions as appears to be the implication of some invention of tradition perspectives.
  6. Langer's usage of the concept of virtual appears to be distinct from that of Deleuze and Guattari. This is especially so because of her stress on symbolism and symbolic meaning. But as with Deleuze and Guattari, she tries to avoid metaphysics and draws explicitly from physics and, particularly, optics. The virtual, for her, is a dimension of the real, or the actual, insofar as it describes the dynamics, lines of force, etc., upon which human perceptions and meaningful constructions of reality depend. Aesthetic forms achieve their specific potency in their organization of a particular dynamic perceptual field.
  7. The main sorcery rite performed in southern Sri Lanka, the Suniyama (Kapferer 1997), is directed explicitly to repositioning the victims of sorcery within space/time. Much anxiety and suffering understood as sorcery is seen to be a direct result of the inauspicious location of victims in space/time as a consequence of the date and time of their birth. The Suniyama operates to reposition them by developing around them a new organization of space/time coordinates that frees them from previous inauspicious effects.
  8. Both Staal and Lévi-Strauss are arguing for the meaninglessness of ritual but are at considerable distance from the position I have been presenting in this essay. This is that the dynamics of rite establish the structural and experiential bases and formations for the construction of meaning. Lévi-Strauss opposes, for example, the meaningfulness of myth to the meaninglessness of rite. Myth is to music (formation, meaning) as rite is to noise (deformation, meaninglessness). Not only are myth and ritual in crucial relation (ritual might be considered as the ground of myth) but also, in the approach I present here, ritual dynamics, while not essentially meaningful, are the bases upon which meaning is built. Staal and Lévi-Strauss seem to have a meaning/nonmeaning opposition at the root of their thought, while this essay holds that ritual dynamics are integral to the emergence of meaning.

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