

An Untimely Lifework

A review of Rappaport's *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*

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Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity (1999)

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1. Introduction

It is always challenging to start reading a 500-page book, only to read on the first page that the writer thinks it 'still doesn't say quite what [he] would like to say' (xxi). These are, however, the precise words of anthropologist Roy Rappaport, in the preface of his unfinished, yet fascinating magnum opus *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (*RRMH* from here on). On the one hand, such an introductory remark is all the more peculiar in Rappaport's case, since he has worked on the book's content ever since the late 1960's, making it the culmination of half a lifetime's investigation. On the other hand, it is not so surprising that Rappaport was not satisfied with his work yet. As will become clear from this review, *RRMH* does not shy away from the big questions concerning ritual and religion, and can be seen not only as the culmination of a single man's career, but as a recapitulation of roughly 150 years of anthropological, sociological and philosophical inquiry into ritual and religion, standing firmly in the tradition of structural semiotics. Can such a book really ever be finished? Perhaps it can, but Rappaport died from lung cancer in 1997, before he could finish his lifework. In this review, I will try to determine whether Rappaport's dissatisfaction with the book was justified, or whether it was not as insufficient as he thought.

At its core, the book is concerned with a semiotic analysis of how ritual helps constructing human society. Throughout the first two parts of the book (chapters 2-12), Rappaport unfolds his definition of ritual and its entailments, working towards a more ideological conclusion in the last two chapters. In this review, I will focus mainly on the first two parts, because *RRMH* gets most of its gravity from these chapters. What is more, I consider it safe to say that very few books have been written that analyze ritual as thoroughly as these chapters.

2. Accepting the canon

Rappaport focuses on ritual because for him it is 'the social act basic to humanity' (31), without which 'humanity could not have emerged from its pre- or proto-

human condition' (1). As such, ritual is a much older and more universal phenomenon in nature than religion, and forms 'the ground from which religion grows' (24). The first twelve chapters explain how this works. In short, the ritual act fuses a number of ritual's opposed features into a whole, therein establishing and constructing, among other things, a conventional order and society (27).

Before we can elaborate on some of these features, we need to briefly discuss Rappaport's account of 'meaning's hierarchical structure', and how the semiotics of Peirce are related to this, partly because this 'outlines (...) the general trajectory of th[e] book's argument' (74). Rappaport distinguishes three levels of meaning: low-order, middle-order and high-order meaning. Low-order meaning is everyday semantic meaning, grounded in distinction: *symbolic* signs ('dog' and 'cat') differentiate their signified concepts from each other. Middle-order meaning is grounded in similarity and is therefore metaphorical in nature. The signs on this level are *iconic*, in that they signify through similarity, 'enriching the world's meaningfulness' and coherence. High-order meaning, finally, is 'grounded in unity', in that it erases all the distinctions of low-order meaning, fusing the self and the world into a unity. This is the level of ritual, where signs refer *indexically*, through direct participation and experience (71-72).

What, then, are the contrasting features of ritual that the ritual *act* fuses into a unified whole?

The first opposition to focus on here is a semiotic/semantic one. Ritual involves two types of messages: self-referential and canonical messages. Starting with the former, these are self-referential in that they express the status of the individual and of the group (52). Such messages can be found throughout the entire animal kingdom. Although they are of low-order meaning (which is generally conveyed *symbolically*, cf. supra), Rappaport relates, a bit confusingly, that they are often indexical too. For example, participation in the performance of a ritual indicates membership (76). Also, when the member of a tribe 'gives away large numbers of pigs', he therein 'not so much claims as *demonstrates*' his prosperity and influence (56). Such indexical displays transform vague concepts such as membership, prestige or power into concrete entities. Perhaps most importantly, the occurrence of a ritual conveys a 'binary yes/no-distinction'. For example, rites of passage (such as circumcision or tattooing) 'reduce ontogenetic vagueness' (92), drawing a sharp line between two life-stages. A boy who has undergone the rite that indicates his sexual maturity, has *become* sexually mature to himself and the other members of the tribe *because* of the rite. The same goes for the participation *in* a ritual: a person does or does not participate, and both choices will function as an indexical signal to himself and his fellow people.

Canonical messages, as opposed to self-referential ones, are found only with humans, and more precisely in 'the invariant orders of liturgy'. They represent

‘the general, enduring or even eternal aspects of universal orders’ (53). Since they refer to spatial and temporal locations beyond the here-and-now, canonical messages are necessarily *symbolic* in nature. For example, the Jewish creed ‘The Lord Our God the Lord is One’ (cf. *infra*) is ‘devoid of any material significata’, and can thus be paradoxically ‘unverifiable and unquestionable’ at the same time (281). Whereas the truth of self-referential messages is directly verifiable (by counting someone’s pigs for example), the truth contained in canonical messages cannot be verified, and this is precisely what makes them suited to be part of a never-changing liturgy. Such a liturgy is necessary, according to Rappaport, because ‘if the world is to have any words at all it may be necessary to establish *The Word*’. This gives rise to the question ‘how humanity grounds the truths it must fabricate and how it distinguishes them from falsehood’ (p.21). That is, *the symbolically represented, canonical messages of the liturgy need to be grounded in indexically represented, self-referential messages*. Precisely this is the magic trick of ritual.

Rappaport turns to the notion of the performative speech act, as worked out by Austin and Searle. ‘Conventional effects’, Rappaport writes, ‘can only be achieved by meaningful acts’ (112). That is, the universal order represented in liturgy has to be acted out in ritual to keep functioning. Because of this, ritual shares a number of fundamental characteristics with performative speech acts, of which the most important one is that they are both ‘self-fulfilling’ and able to disguise ‘institutional facts’ as ‘brute facts’ (117). Here, in the fourth chapter, we approach ‘the heart of the relationship between the self-referential and canonical’. Liturgies rely on acts and words, i.e. liturgical orders are only made real when they are being performed, with all the necessary acts and utterances in place. In this way, ‘the relationship between the act of performance to that which is being performed’ inherently specifies ‘the relationship of the performer to that which he is performing’ (118). The roles of ‘transmitter and receiver’ are both taken up by one and the same actor, namely the performer. Therefore, the performance of a liturgical order means at the same time the acceptance of ‘whatever is encoded in the canon of that order’ (119) *and* an indication of this acceptance to the performers themselves and to others. In other words, the performing of the ritual means the acceptance of the canon, as ‘the canonical guides, limits and defines the self-referential’ (115).

Furthermore, as the ritual act is public, and participation in the act is a binary yes/no signal (cf. *supra*), there can be no ambiguity as to whether the participants accept the canon or not, which makes participation ‘morally binding’ (122). Through these mechanisms that are inherent to ritual’s form (cf. *infra*), the performers in a ritual transcend the personal dimension of their own joys and concerns, and enter into social life. On top of that, ritual has a ‘meta-performative’

function (124), in that, by performing the conventions of a ritual over and over again at invariant intervals, the conventions themselves are re-established over and over again too.

3. Form and substance

A second set of ritual's opposed features is that of form and substance. It is the *form* of ritual that Rappaport focuses on most. In his 1979 article 'The Obvious Aspects of Ritual', he already pointed out that ritual's surface should not be overlooked, a mistake that many of his colleagues tended to make in his opinion (1979: 174). The features of ritual's form, such as the relationship of performers to their own performances discussed above, adds something to ritual that cannot be entailed by its substance. Whereas the substances of ritual are 'infinitely varied, its form is universal.' Rappaport compares this to how the form of a declarative sentence is 'conceptually distinguishable but inseparable in practice' from the statement it shapes (30).

How, then, are form and substance fused in ritual? Rappaport addresses this issue in the fifth chapter (one of the more impressive chapters in the book), continuing to adopt semiotics and speech act theory as his methods. As we have seen, rituals consist of words and acts. Rappaport asks the question as to why human beings need acts in the first place, when they possess the powerful tool that language is. The answer lies with the power of acts to 'substantiate the non-material' (141). That is, in the performance of an act the content of the performance is 'made heavy by material representation'. So, for example, the acts of kneeling and bowing are performative in the sense that the performer of such acts is not merely symbolizing or 'stating his subordination (...) but actually subordinating himself' (142). Similarly, a cathedral does not only symbolize 'the endurance of a liturgical order' but also 'demonstrates it' (144).

In sum, objects used in rituals 'substantiate the canon' (145). This is where it gets really interesting. Of all the possible objects we can use in performing a ritual, our own body is of course the most real, palpable and direct object thinkable. Whereas *saying* that one is subordinate to a higher order is a symbolization of this subordination, the physical act of kneeling *is* subordinating oneself. In the physical ritual act, the metaphor is made substantial.

We have seen above how the participation in a ritual indicates the acceptance of the canon for each of the performers. The acceptance itself is therefore, as it were, a 'metamessage'. Now we see how the use of the body in the ritual act is a 'meta-metamessage' concerning the nature of the acceptance. The performer becomes 'a living metaphor of the union of form and substance (...) as the self-referential and canonical come together in the ritual act' (153). In this process, all

the distinctions of low-order meaning are wiped out, as the performers themselves become the embodiment of the truths of the liturgical order, revealing to themselves the high-order meaning that unifies the self with the other participators in the ritual, and with the world.

In a sense, the first part of *RRMH* can be contrasted with one of its main ancestors, Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), with a single sentence by Rappaport: 'In enunciating, accepting and making conventions moral, ritual contains within itself not simply a symbolic representation of social contract, but *tacit social contract itself*' (ibid.: 138, my emphasis). For Rappaport, ritual does not merely allow a society to reflect on itself, as Durkheim thought, but it is because of ritual that society can even exist in the first place.

4. The Holy

The establishment of convention and the sealing of social construct are only two among a number of entailments of the *form* of ritual (23). Although in my view the other ones are of lesser importance than those discussed above, I will briefly touch upon Rappaport's analysis of 'the Holy' here, due to its importance for the conclusion at the end of the second part of the book.

I already mentioned the Jewish creed 'The Lord Our God the Lord is One'. Rappaport calls this an 'Ultimate Sacred Postulate' (cf. *infra*). Furthermore, I mentioned the 'metaperformative' nature of ritual, i.e. its ability to reaffirm existing conventions by being performed at regular intervals. Ultimate Sacred Postulates, then, are 'established by ritual's metaperformativeness' (279). Such postulates appear as statements, but are really 'devoid of any material significata', as with the Jewish creed. Therefore, they can be 'verified neither objectively nor logically', and 'yet they are taken to be unquestionable' (281). For Rappaport, sanctity, as opposed to divinity, is a 'property of religious discourse and *not* of the objects signified in or by that discourse'. For example, Christ himself was perhaps divine, but 'the liturgical works and acts proclaiming his divinity' are not divine but sacred. The importance of this insight is related in chapter 11, when Rappaport describes how the 'act of creation by word' relies on an 'inversion of the usual relationship' between the signifier and the signified: 'Ultimate Sacred Postulates, by being 'truly said' in liturgy bring into being metaphysical facts or states of affairs corresponding to themselves' (344). In a chapter enriched with a lot of amazing etymological reflections, Rappaport explains how the concept of a Logos corresponds with liturgical orders in this respect (346).

Rappaport contrasts the sacred with the non-discursive, ineffable aspects of religion, which he calls 'the numinous'. Comparing the views of Otto and James on personal experiences of the divine with the more social approach of Durkheim,

and touching upon concepts as transcendence, grace and belief, Rappaport concludes that ‘numinous experiences are (...) actual physical and psychic states’ (404). The Holy, then, is defined by Rappaport as ‘the union of the sacred and the numinous’, in that ‘the most abstract of conceptions are bound to the most immediate and substantial of experiences’. In other words, the Holy comes into existence when experiences of the divine are directly linked to the universal order encoded in a liturgy:

‘The unfalsifiable (the sacred) supported by the undeniable (the numinous) yields the unquestionable (the Holy), which transforms the dubious, the arbitrary, and the conventional into the correct, the necessary, and the natural.’ (The bracketed interjections are mine).

At the end of a lifetime of investigation, in the final paragraph of the second part of his magnum opus, Rappaport concludes that this ‘remarkable spectacle’ is ‘realized in ritual’, and forms the ‘foundation upon which the human way of life stands’ (405).

5. An answer to Durkheim’s question

In the concluding chapter of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim wrote that ‘the former gods are growing old or dying, and others have not been born’ (1995: 429), and that ‘science tends to replace religion in everything that involves the cognitive and intellectual functions’ (ibid.: 431), pointing out the spiritual void that has remained after the secularization of Western society. However, Durkheim never attempted to determine if and how it was possible to fill up this void again, prophesying only that ‘there is something eternal in religion’ (ibid.: 429). Nearly a century later, the void seems ever so wide, leaving the question as to what role religion can play for modern man and society unanswered. In the third part of *RRMH*, Rappaport seems to take up the torch, in order to shed some light into the darkness.

Following Toulmin, Rappaport suggests a ‘postmodern cosmology (...) grounded in ecology’ (458). Man must prioritize the ecosystem over capitalistic profit, and to do this we need to incorporate a new sense of the *sacred* and an awareness of our ‘enormous responsibilities’, with our ‘dominant position in the ecosystem’. In a passage that is strangely moving due to its almost naïve utopianism in the globalized and overpopulated world of the 21st-century, Rappaport relates how ‘the moral responsibilities of humanity’s unique place are nowhere more profoundly realized than in the religions of aboriginal Australia’ (460). Mankind must return to a relation with the natural world as responsible as

that of the Aboriginals, and this necessarily involves some form of sanctity, or ritual, or even religion. On its final page, *RRMH* suggests ‘a view of human nature very different from and (...) nobler than *Homo economicus*’ (ibid.: 461). I think anyone would have to agree with the reviewer who concluded that *RRMH* is a ‘deeply ideological book’ (2001: 382).

6. Timing of publication

In the introduction of this review, I described *RRMH* as a recapitulation of 150 years of scientific inquiry into religion. The book was first published in 1999, at the end of the century that brought forth practically all of Rappaport’s oft cited fellow academics, such as anthropologists Victor Bates, Gregory Bateson, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Arnold van Gennep, and Stanley Tambiah, but also linguists and philosophers such as J.L. Austin, John Searle and Martin Heidegger and the great scholars of religion Geertz, Lévi-Strauss and Eliade. Furthermore, Rappaport builds his theory on a large number of 19th-century thinkers, using Peirce’s semiotics, referring to James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* and relying heavily on Durkheim (a pre-World War and therefore 19th-century thinker in my book). Moreover, simple counting tells us that, of the nearly 400 publications in the index of *RRMH*, only 17 were published in or after 1990.

The point here is that if Rappaport had lived ten or even twenty years longer, he would perhaps have been able to bridge the gap between the 20th and 21st century more easily, for this would have allowed him to get familiar with more recent works, and to pick up on some of the groundbreaking developments in the cognitive, neurological and linguistic sciences in the past thirty years.

For example, when Rappaport discusses ritual as a means of communication in chapter 2, the most recent work on this topic that he refers to is a work by Tambiah from 1985 (51). However, the advancements in communication and information theory over the past twenty years have been so interesting and rapid, that nearly all of the cited works are by now a bit ‘old school’, if not entirely outdated. If Rappaport had lived long enough, he would have been able to enrich his theory with references to more recent work in this field. Peter Godfrey-Smith, for example, has written a number of brilliant articles¹ on topics such as symbolic behaviour and the relation between signals and beliefs, which would have given Rappaport’s paragraphs on ‘performers as both transmitters and receivers’ a much fresher look. Likewise, in the chapters on the establishment of convention, there is

¹ -Godfrey-Smith, Peter (2010) Signals, Icons and Beliefs. In D. Ryder and J. Kingsbury, and K. Williford (eds.), *Millikan and Her Critics*. Blackwell, pp. 41-58.

-Godfrey-Smith, Peter (2013) Signs and Symbolic Behaviour. *Biological Theory* 9 (2014): pp.78-88.

no mention whatsoever of David Lewis' groundbreaking book *Conventions* (1969) or Brian Skyrms' *Evolution of Social Contract* (1996), although both are still widely read.

Rappaport also missed out (by a few years) on many developments in the cognitive sciences. When he writes that 'the more extraordinary a ritual movement or posture the more easily it may be recognized as a signal' (50), the reader would wish that Rappaport had lived to see the publication of Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained*, if only to see how the theory of Minimal Counter Intuitiveness would fit in with Rappaport's ideas. Furthermore, when Rappaport, in the introduction, discusses the emergence and evolution of human language, he refers to communicational experiments with apes and gorillas that were conducted in 1955, 1971 and 1986. If Rappaport had lived to read Tomasello's *Origins of Human Communication* (2008), this would doubtlessly have given him a very different and more modern starting point.

Finally, Rappaport makes no mention of Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory nor of Conceptual Blending. These theories, however, would have been highly interesting to take up in the fifth chapter, on how the use of the body (dance, tattooing, circumcision) serves to 'substantiate the metaphors' encoded in ritual.

To sum up, *RRMH* would have been a far more interesting book if it had been published ten or fifteen years later, and if the direction in time was forward. The contrary is the case: Rappaport looks back on a lifetime of work. The semiotic approach and Durkheimian influence, the focus on the role of ritual and the empirical data from fieldwork among the Maring Tribes of Papua New Guinea – the ingredients that made up Rappaport's first monograph, *Pigs for the Ancestors* (1968) – are all still there in *RRMH*. Although insights have been added from several articles and other books that Rappaport published throughout his career, it does not seem like all this gathered material culminates in a whole new theory.

I do not expect this book to be very widely read in the coming decades. The timing of its publication had a big and not so good influence on *RRMH*: it came too early to make a smooth transition into the 21st century, and too late for the writer to finish it before he died.

7. Conclusion

Can we infer from all this that Rappaport was right in believing that *RRMH* was an unsatisfactory work? I am afraid we can. Due to the structure of the book – the gradual unfolding of a definition of ritual – the book has a nice climactic feel. However, the many digressions (such as an entire appendix on Peircian semiotics at the end of chapter 2), repetitions and unevenly distributed chunks of quotes

from other books, transform the book into something of a labyrinth at times, making it hard to keep track of the main argument. Also, a number of past disagreements and misunderstandings between the writer and some of his colleagues are addressed, discussions that are probably of great importance to the author, but needlessly distracting to the reader. So, although the book has a very clear structure, reading *RRMH* at times feels like browsing through a heap of notes, that could easily have been condensed to half its size.

As is the case with *Pigs for the Ancestors*, the accounts of the Maring Tribes' rituals are fascinating and well-written. Also, the passages with etymological backtrackings are brilliant, especially in chapter 11, on the concept of 'Logos'. Other segments of the book, however, are not that easy to read, and yet others are downright tedious.

Nevertheless, in view of its analysis of ritual, I think this book deserves to become a classic. The only way for this to happen, I believe, would be if it can inspire contemporary scholars to apply some of the recent theories and works (as suggested above) to Rappaport's work. Let that count as a suggestion for further investigation, and as a recommendation to read this book.

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