

WHY RITUAL?¹

ABSENT-MINDEDNESS IS A HUMAN SPECIALITY. Professors in particular are known to get lost in theoretical problem solving, unaware, perhaps, that they are crossing a busy road. Or think of a Siberian shaman, lost in trance, forgetting entirely to eat.

Other primates apparently avoid such problems, and in convening the conference, *Ritual and the Origins of Culture* (School of Oriental and African Studies, March 18/19th 1994), I had in mind particularly to ask what could have driven humans to begin systematically mapping “invisible worlds”. At a preliminary meeting on “gesture, speech, time and contract”, convened in December 1993 in Ann Arbor (Michigan) by Professor Paul Wohlmuth of the University of San Diego Law School, a small group of sociologists and psychologists joined forces with anthropologists and others in an attempt to shed light on how and whether human communication differs from that of other animals. The event on March 18th/19th is a sequel, focusing specifically on ritual.

Why ritual? Let me try to explain why this topic seemed to me so important. Imagine an astrophysicist modelling the origins of the universe whilst journeying to a conference of specialists. Her bus stops at traffic lights, at which point she makes an intellectual breakthrough. No word is spoken. Regardless of her elation, she simply cannot explain her excitement to those in the vehicle around her. She may be fluent in her native language; they may be equally fluent. But this doesn't help at all with communication. Like any scientist, she has spent years mapping “invisible worlds”, and it has been a secret, esoteric experience. If she tried unburdening herself to the uninitiated, even with the best translator of scientific terminology in the world, her words would come across as gibberish. In order to feel intelligent and coherent, she needs to arrive at that conference. Then, possibly, people might understand.

The point of this story is that behind every language is a universe of shared experience, the generation of which must be accomplished by life itself, not language. To achieve communication, it is necessary to inhabit the same planet, or

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at least the same corner of the universe. If the shared meanings are those of modern science, then experiments have to be replicated accurately, and reported in terms commensurable across the globe. In order to communicate intelligibly with one another, astronomers - for example must know that they are seeing the same red giants, white dwarves, black holes and other marvels. You can't just look skywards. You must know where to look, and with which instruments. Protocols therefore have to be agreed - common standards imposed by authoritative bodies and accepted worldwide. All this involves conventionality, deference to established custom, punctilious formality. In short – ritual.

Corresponding to the research practices of modern scientific communities are the communal rituals of traditionally organised peoples. Rituals – standardised communal procedures for organising experience – generate shared life-experiences which in turn make possible cryptic mutual reference, which we call “speech”. To confirm that things are this way round, try teaching a clever, well-trained “talking chimpanzee” the meaning of a word such as “God”. It will never understand. In chimpanzee eyes, since you can't eat, touch or see such a thing, it can't be taken seriously. “Banana”, yes, but “God” – no. The problem here is deeper than linguistic. No primate can be expected to relate to “God” if it lacks the appropriate ritual experience. Only communal ritual could ever have rendered intangible entities such as gods, spirits, goblins etc. meaningful entities for evolving humans to converse about. This in turn has profound implications for theories of human cultural, linguistic and religious origins.

To a chimpanzee, all humans must seem literally incomprehensible. Like mad scientists as observed from a bus queue, we're all hopelessly absentminded. You don't have to be a scientist to walk through the streets blind to this world's sights, smells and sounds, deep in conversation, guiding a friend (or perhaps yourself) through the features of some absent landscape. Instead of minding the traffic, watching where we are going, and conversing to one another about that, we remain for most of our lives wrapped up in invisible worlds. As we discuss with friends, we rarely refer one another to real things – this momentary internal mood, that delicious smell etc. We may do so, of course. But “here and now” reference isn't what human language is for. Unlike primate calls, the words of human speech refer to communal constructs, maintained and sustained via ritual action outside the dimensions of personal space/time – constructs such as “god”, “justice”, “the rainbow snake”, “positrons” and so on. We talk about such things for all the world as if they were real. Even when we mention trees, rocks or people, we are by primate standards playing with illusions – virtually everything under discussion just isn't there. We discuss future events, past events, imagined events – just about anything but what's under our noses. This communicative penchant of humans – known technically as “displacement” – is zoologically bizarre, being apparently unknown among any other animals with the possible exception of bees!

To be “symbolic” is to be “on another level”, “absent” to this world – hence quintessentially human. Other large-brained animals may vividly imagine or dream; but they don’t take such hallucinations seriously enough to expend time and energy in guiding one another through their dreamscapes. Humans do. We map our communal dreams. Languages are such maps.

But if our dreamscapes are communicable in the first place – if their basic dimensions render them commensurable – it is thanks to our shared rituals. These enable us not only to dance but to experience our dreams together, acting out the communal fantasy that we are, say, an immense “rainbow” which is also a “snake”. We may paint images of this fantasy with pigments on bark, conjuring up shimmering patterns along the creature’s tail. Part of us – the individual, chimpanzee-like, materialist, no-nonsense part of us knows it’s all a game. But no matter. Communally, we maintain the fiction. Moreover, like all science, it then becomes emphatically more than a fiction. We make the Rainbow Snake, conjuring it up from our shared Dreamtime through dance. It then becomes for us a genuine experience of community, of communal dreaming, of mental oneness. Like any other form of science, it feels powerful, and the power – at least – is very real. Then, once the ceremonies are over and we’re back in the humdrum world of perceptible experience - experience which tends to divide us, wrapping each of us in our own personalised space/time – we can still recall the Dream. We can even share the memory and agree on words labelling its features – provided we were truly in communion during that dance.

To those excluded from the innermost dances and revelatory rituals of science, a paradigm-shift within that science will always appear as simple madness. The words explaining the new findings will seem meaningless. This is as it should be. Outside communal ritual it is, after all, human language itself which is gibberish. As Professor Roy Rappaport put in Michigan at a high-point of our December proceedings: “Ritual is the basic social act. Each time we re-enact the sacred drama – we’re back in that moment when language and culture were born!”

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