The Problem of Ritual Efficacy

Edited by
WILLIAM S. SAX
JOHANNES QUACK
& JAN WEINHOLD
8. Ritual, Medicine, and the Placebo Response, 151
   *Howard Brody*

9. Bell, Bourdieu, and Wittgenstein on Ritual Sense, 169
   *Johannes Quack*

Index, 189
Bell, Bourdieu, and Wittgenstein on Ritual Sense

Johannes Quack

Introduction

In 2006 at Heidelberg University, the French anthropologist Michael Houseman gave a workshop on divination rituals. Instead of giving a lecture, however, he presented the participants with a pair of shoes and said that they had belonged to Marcel Mauss and that the group should try to come up with a ritual using them. No further instructions were given.

This chapter is concerned with the notion of “ritual sense.” In relation to this topic it is interesting to note that within a short period of time the participants found it easy to invent a ritual that seemed appropriate to all of them. How did they manage to do this? Further I wonder whether, during this process, any of them thought of how to make the ritual efficacious (or deliberately pointless, for that matter)? In order to clarify this problem, I want to raise some further questions: Does it help to state here that all the participants shared a “ritual sense”? If so, is the ability to invent rituals based on a universal human ritual instinct (as Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests) or is it based on a culturally specific, embodied ritual sense (as Catherine Bell suggests)? And what might the answer tell us about the notion of ritual efficacy?

In her book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* Catherine Bell claims that “[i]t is through a socially acquired sense of ritual that members of a society know how to improvise a birthday celebration, stage an elaborate wedding, or rush through a minimally adequate funeral” (1992: 80). The first part of this chapter will deal with Bell’s argument. It will examine her concept of ritual sense (or “sense of ritual”) as a “socially acquired” sense, a form of embodied knowledge about
how to perform a ritual. I will then demonstrate how she relates her arguments to Pierre Bourdieu's work, and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of her use of the concept of "ritual sense." This discussion and critique of Bell will draw on ethnological fieldwork I conducted in 2005 in Rishikesh, India.

My argument concerning Bell will be that in many cases it is helpful to look at a socially acquired sense of ritual but is problematic to focus explicitly on ritual, since Bourdieu's much broader notion of "habitus" is more important here. I will further argue that Bourdieu's own use of the term "ritual" also leads in a different direction: not toward a culturally specific ritual sense, but toward Wittgenstein's concept of a "ritual instinct." In his "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough" (henceforth referred to here as Remarks) Wittgenstein writes about the invention of rituals as well. He gives the following example:

Recall that after Schubert's death his brother cut some of Schubert's scores into small pieces and gave such pieces, consisting of a few bars, to his favourite pupils. This act, as a sign of piety, is just as understandable to us as the different one of keeping the scores untouched, accessible to no one. And if Schubert's brother had burned the scores, that too would be understandable as a sign of piety. (1993: 126)

The second half of this chapter will focus on aspects of Wittgenstein's and Bourdieu's use of the term "ritual." Both seem to claim that human beings are in a certain way "ceremonial animals" (i.e., that they have a ritual instinct). They also claim that there are limits to the possibility of explaining rituals and that one should first and foremost acknowledge the ritualistic elements in one's own practices. The argument here will be that there are some considerable overlaps in Wittgenstein's and Bourdieu's approaches to ritual. Their central arguments, however, are not about rituals understood as ceremonies, but rather about ritual understood as a basic element of various human actions. Nevertheless certain problems of ritual theory—for example, the problem of efficacy—appear in a different light if one accepts Wittgenstein's Remarks as a conceptual basis. Further, we shall be able to identify some of the shortcomings of Bell and Wittgenstein by looking at them in terms of the concept of ritual efficacy. Hence the question of ritual efficacy will be the vehicle for the summary of the discussion of the notion of "ritual sense" in the light of Bell's, Bourdieu's, and Wittgenstein's comments. The general direction of my final argument here is that the question, "How do rituals work?" either implies the problematic notion of some kind of ritual efficacy sui generis, or posits that it should be reformulated in a much more specific manner. For this discussion, the use of the notion of intentionality seems to be unavoidable, whether one talks about ritual sense or ritual efficacy. But before considering Bell, Bourdieu, Wittgenstein, and ritual efficacy, I will give an empirical example of the notion of ritual sense.

Different Performances of Pujas in Sacha Dham
Ashram, Rishikesh

In 2005 I spent several months in Rishikesh, where the holy river Ganges flows into the north Indian plains as it leaves its Himalayan home. Rishikesh is famous for it as shrines and meditation centers, most of which are located in one of two neighborhoods of Rishikesh called Ram Jhula and Lakshman Jhula. The precise location of my fieldwork was in an ashram in Lakshman Jhula called Sacha Dham. The Sacha Dham ("abode of truth") ashram was perched on a small cliff overlooking the Ganges. Its actual area was about 200 meters long and 100 meters wide, including five major buildings and a small, beautiful garden. In spring 2005 another large building was under construction to extend the guest house facilities, all of which are exclusively for Indian disciples who come to stay in the ashram. Non-Indians were asked to stay in one of the countless hotels, guesthouses, and ashrams around Sacha Dham. Older members of the ashram told me that building and renovation work has been going on in the ashram continuously for many years. Although a lot has changed and grown in the last decades, especially since an American woman now called Shanti Mayi came some twenty years ago to stay with Guru Shri Maharajji, it was always emphasized that Sacha Dham is a "traditional Vedic ashram." This means, for example, that visitors were advised to be particularly careful to observe traditional rules of dress and behavior, but it also refers to the important lineage of Gurus to which Shri Maharajji and Shanti Mayi belong, and which is served by eight additional priests (pandits).

The male Indian Guru Shri Hans Maharajji and the female American Guru Shanti Mayi were then guiding the Sacha Dham ashram. One of the peculiarities of the ashram was that many Indians came to visit Shri Maharajji, while Shanti Mayi is visited almost exclusively by non-Indians, mainly people from Western Europe, but also from the United States. Both Gurus stood in the same lineage and their "theological accordance" was emphasized by both sides. Nevertheless, the daily religious practices—mainly pujas—were not performed together by the two groups of disciples. During my stay, Shanti Mayi's disciples' program of activities—which was not compulsory and from which she
herself was usually absent—started generally at 5 A.M. with silent meditation to greet the dawn. The Gayatri mantra, which was seen as “a universal prayer for the awakening of all beings,” was chanted daily at 9:30 A.M. together. Pujas or devotional rituals were also offered daily in various forms—a Shiva-puja at 6 A.M., the Havan-puja at 7 A.M., the Durga-puja at 7:30, and two Ganesh-pujas during the day—usually in the garden right beside Shanti Mayi’s house. Central to all of them was a variation of the arati-ceremony, honoring the Sanga lineage of Gurus and “the Guru within.” About four days a week Shanti Mayi offered satsang (also referred to as “Dharma Drum”), an opportunity to ask her questions about spiritual matters, to talk about personal experiences, and “to drink in the wisdom of her words and the silence between the words.” Bhajans, or devotional hymns, were usually sung before the satsang began and were seen “as a chance to dissolve the thinking mind in the pure joy of singing heartfeltly, melting with others.”

For the Indians by contrast, the day started with a Havan-puja in the morning. Furthermore an Arati-puja was performed at the beginning and end of the day in the temple of the ashram, complemented by the reading of extracts out of the Ramayana and the singing of bhajans before or after the arati. Additionally, the statue of Sri Sacha Guru in the main temple of the ashram was fed, put into bed, woken up, and so on, on daily, acts that were not, however, part of a special ceremony one could somehow attend. For arati, the reading of the Ramayana, and singing, the attendance of Westerners was allowed, and a few used this opportunity from time to time to listen only to the singing of the bhajans.

One focus of my fieldwork was to describe the differences between these performances of what, in principle, were the same rituals. My main focus was on the performance of the Havan-puja, so one day I would perform the havan and probably some other rituals with the Indians and the next day would do so with the Westerners. I tried to make sense of these differences in terms that might be relevant to ritual theory.

The term puja is commonly applied to a combination of rites of worship, honor, or welcome of a deity in any of its manifestations and in any context in India, such as in front of the shop, or in large, elaborate temple ceremonies (cf. also note 2). It is often emphasized that at the center of the phenomenon of puja lies a transaction between worshiper(s) and the deity(ies) (see Fuller’s The Camphor Flame). This becomes noticeable through the fact that the prevailing metaphors for puja are hospitality, servitude, service, and blessings. The aspect of the deity being treated as a guest, and the mutual interaction between the deity and the devotee, are also mentioned in most scholarly descriptions of puja. Attention is thereby often drawn to the question of to what degree puja mirrors the hierarchical relationships in Indian society. Further an attempt is often made to describe what happens when the worshiper meets the deity, since the borders between the mundane and the godly realm, in the context of Indian religiosity, are said to be not as strong as in other religions.

If one compares this perspective on pujas to the stance taken by the non-Indians in the Sacha Dham ashram, it is striking that the emphasis shifts from metaphors of hospitality, service, and blessings with respect to the relationship with a deity to the experience of a general “spiritual feeling” that is experienced in the same way during pujas, satsang, or meditation. One man from England wrote on my questionnaire:

As I walk across Laksman Jhula towards Satsang, my alignment has already begun. Almost every time that I have gone to Satsang, as I begin my walk towards Sacha Dham [sic], my expression calms, quietude comes, and sometimes I do not even make eye contact on my way. Often I will not speak, my intention becomes more and more focused. This is because...? I left Satsang yesterday rich in Loving Neutrality. Wandering the street for a couple hours I was open and mostly at peace.... Time would pass. I was quite content.

Statements referring to the daily pujas were very similar to this one. None of the Westerners spoke of a “transaktion,” but rather of the “self,” which becomes “focused,” “at peace,” or “one with everything else.” The following statement about the performance of pujas is but one example:

I associate [with puja] feelings of openness being connected to everyone and everything, a sense that there is more to live than just living, more harmony, peace inside myself, warmth from myself towards all living beings, and an understanding of people.

In order to discuss such differences, it is necessary to go into more detail. However, my focus here will be primarily not on “theological interpretations” but rather on the actual practice of puja.

To summarize my findings, I see the performance of the “Western pujas,” relative to the “Indian pujas,” as being concerned with “togetherness” as well as being “closed” and andächtig. For example, the Westerners put great emphasis on each participant’s harmonizing with the others, thereby stressing “togetherness.” One person, for example, said, “We sing together, in harmony, but [the Indians] neither have the same melody nor the same rhythm.” Another person commented, “It is the fact that so many people sing with just one voice which makes our singing so powerful. Everybody is melting into it.”
Certain aspects of the Westerners’ ritual practice seemed to be “closed”—for example, their sitting in a circle facing inward, and their concern to ensure that the rite had a clear beginning and end, so that people felt that it was inappropriate to come late or leave early. One Swami of Shanti Mayi from the Netherlands told me that she felt it very disrespectful and disturbing when an Indian woman performed her own puja right beside her while she was performing her Ganesha-puja. The Indians in the ashram seemed to have a far more “open” attitude to the performance of pujas. I observed several times how people performed their own puja at the same time and place where another public puja was being performed, and that anyone could join or leave the major performances anytime.

The term that captures the last difference best is the German andächtig, that is, “devout, prayerful, or pious.” Once again, little incidents are exemplary. While performing the fire ritual (havan), one was told not to point the feet toward the fire. Hence the normal sitting position was cross-legged. Since I was not accustomed to sitting like this, to do so for about an hour was in the beginning quite a challenge for me. This was not the case for most of the other Westerners, some of them having practiced yoga for years. From time to time I felt that because of the specific andächtig atmosphere of the ceremony, I was disturbing the others by moving around too much. In contrast, a German woman said, “In Indian pujas there is a lot of traffic going on. I mean the whole atmosphere is kind of confusing and chaotic.” A further point of illustration is the fact that the Westerners performed the arati without blowing a conch shell or striking a gong or metal plate. A Dutch woman said, “They [the Indians] spill water everywhere, bang extremely noisy on metal plates while blowing a horn and ringing a bell, throw rice and flowers everywhere—and in the end it looks more like a battlefield.”

The Westerners often used the same adjectives in referring both to everyday life in India and to the Indian pujas: for example, “chaotic,” “noisy,” “strange.” None of these qualities are conducive to the kind of atmosphere they saw as central to their puja—which I call “prayerful” (andächtig). In all these respects the Indian pujas contrasted with those of the Westerners, and the sense of these small individual differences makes the two pujas quite distinct from each other. Accordingly the Westerners were reluctant to join the pujas of the Indians, claiming, for example, “The Indians’ puja does not work for me.”

Of course, there were other reasons why Indians and Westerners did not perform the pujas together: for one, the groups were separate in various ways—not at least due to language and other cultural barriers. But there was no obvious disharmony between the two groups, so how do we explain such radically different concepts about what constitutes an appropriate puja? Following Bell, one could argue that one important reason for the different performances is a difference in the groups’ respective “ritual senses.” Accordingly one could conclude that a common “ritual sense” existed among the Westerners about what is appropriate in a puja (that is in their puja). Hence the concept of ritual sense could play an important part in explaining the separate performances.

Bell, Bourdieu, and Ritual Sense

Bell’s opus magnum Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (1992) begins by arguing that traditional theories of ritual are based on a problematic hierarchical opposition between thought and action, an opposition she seeks to avoid by focusing on the concept of “ritualization,” that is, focusing on ritual practices rather than on rituals as reified “things.” I will ignore here Bell’s argument that ritualized actions reproduce power relations, which she sees as implemented in hierarchical oppositions constructed through the process of ritualization. I will focus instead on the very basis of her position: her concept of ritual sense and its relationship to “ritualization.” Bell writes that “the implicit dynamic and ‘end’ of ritualization…can be said to be the production of a ‘ritualized body.’” A ritualized body is a body invested with a ‘sense’ of ritual” (1992: 80).

Having a ritual sense, in her terminology, amounts to having a culturally specific “ritual mastery” inscribed in one’s body, which generates a feel for what is or is not acceptable in ritual. A ritual sense is a culturally dependent and “situational” disposition (1992: 81). Further, we are dealing with a flexible set of schemes and strategies acquired and deployed by a ritualized agent (cf. 1992: 80), and third, the use of the ritual sense shows how ritual activities generate a sense of what is or is not acceptable in ritual. In this respect the basic function of the ritual sense is presented as creating a distinction between ritualized and nonritualized—thus, acceptable and unacceptable—ways of doing the task at hand (cf. 1992: 74). As with Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, such an incorporated knowledge consists of dispositions that are based on past experiences, find their expression in the present, and, thereby shape the future.

Hence for Bell, the notion “ritual sense” is not merely classificatory: she also sees it as a causal-explanatory notion, similar to Bourdieu’s habitus. In a nutshell, the culturally dependent “ritual sense” produces ritualized agents as well as new schemes of what counts as ritual. All of these aspects seem to be at stake in Bell’s remark that one’s ritual sense allows one to “rush through a minimally adequate funeral.” This idea evokes Clifford Geertz’s famous essay “Ritual and Social Change” in his The Interpretation of Cultures (1973) on a failed ritual in Indonesia. His essay is concerned primarily with showing that
functionalism is not able to deal adequately with social change, but Bell wants to make a different point:

[A] focus on the sense of ritual would shift the emphasis ... to how minimal ritual procedures were improvised with sufficient respect for tradition that the child was considered buried more or less satisfactorily. (1992: 80)

Bell’s theoretical concepts—like ritual sense, ritual mastery, embodied strategies, and so on—are based implicitly or explicitly on Bourdieu’s work, and in particular on his central notion of habitus.

For example, scholars from abroad who visit the University of Heidelberg should not have problems interacting with academics whom they have never met before, at places they have never seen before. They just “know what one does” in a particular situation, because they are all representatives of the species Homo Academicus. Because of mental and corporal schemes of action that function as the basis for the generation and ordering of their interactions, they act like “fish in the water” in a familiar academic milieu. Such an unconscious mechanism, which enables us to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations, is what Bourdieu (1990, chap. 3) calls habitus. It is the basis of the “knowledge” of “what one does” in a given situation, a knowledge so deeply bred into our bones that we do not even think about it—at least as long as we are in a familiar environment, that is, as long as our habitus fits the milieu, in this case the university. Returning to Rishikesh, one could say that even the Westerners who had never performed a puja before were able, without any problem, to participate in one conducted by the disciples of Shanti Mayi. I expressly asked those who were participating for the first time, and all of them told me afterwards either about their “deep” and “powerful” personal experiences or at least how much they liked it. As for myself, I can say that the procedure and the singing, indeed the whole style of the “Western puja” felt somewhat “natural” to me.

However, the pujas performed by the Indians in the ashram were experienced differently by the disciples from the United States and Europe. Most Westerners I talked to felt strange and rather uncomfortable during the “chaotic” and “noisy” Indian-performed pujas. In line with Bell’s application of Bourdieu, one can argue that the implicit “ritual sense” of the Westerners, their ritual habitus, their sense of what “one does” in a ritual did not fit the milieu of the “Indian pujas” but instead matched the “closed” and andächtig rituals conducted in the West. So far it seems to be helpful to look at a socially acquired sense of ritual to explain similarities or differences in the way rituals are performed. I will argue here, however, that Bell’s limiting her focus to ritual

is problematic for two reasons. First, we lose more than we gain if we limit Bourdieu’s much wider notion of habitus in such a way. Second—and more important—Bell’s concept of ritualization is problematic with respect to the explanation of the differences between ritualized and nonritualized actions.

I hope that my brief account of the pujas in Sacha Dham ashram suffices to indicate the relevance the concept of habitus might have for ritual activities, especially with respect to the differences in performances in a cross-cultural setting. To paraphrase a passage from Bourdieu’s book Distinction:

A [ritual] has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded... A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colors and lines, without rhyme and reason. (1984: 2)

My paraphrase involves substituting “piece of art” with the word “ritual,” indicating that these socially inculcated bodily senses Bell stresses by drawing on Bourdieu are not specific to rituals in any way. A similar point could easily be made with respect to differences in the choice of clothes, of hotels and restaurants, of music and schools of art—in Rishikesh and elsewhere. Indeed, one of the central and most interesting points of Bourdieu’s social analysis is the linkage he uncovers between apparently different realms of society. Thus, in Distinction Bourdieu relates—within one theoretical framework—the preferred drink of people with the way they dress, their political views, their financial background, and other factors. In the ethnographic section above I mentioned that in addition to their divergent senses of ritual, there were other reasons why Indians and Westerners did not perform the pujas together. These reasons will be lost from view, however, if the theoretical focus is limited to the ritual sense. The similar descriptions of pujas, sat-sangs, and meditation practices, for example, point toward a shared “sense” of the Westerners that is not confined to rituals but extends to other religious and social practices. Hence, my first point of criticism is that Bell’s application of Bourdieu omits one of the most interesting aspects of his theorizing and thereby misses important connections and interrelations between different spheres of social action.

One could of course argue that for a scholar of ritual it is still interesting to limit Bourdieu’s discussion of practical sense to ritual sense. Doing so, however, brings in the notorious problem of the definition of ritual, which Bell refugured only as the problem of the conceptualization of “ritualization.” So for the present discussion, the relevant question is, what are the specific characteristics of ritualized actions that justify Bell’s focus on the “ritual sense”?
There are two ways in which Bell tries to answer this problem. On the one hand she describes the terms she uses (ritual sense, ritualization, etc.) in a way that comes close to defining them, and on the other hand she gives some examples of how these terms can be applied. In her account, agents possessing a ritual sense are able to ritualize everyday actions in such a way that they become ritualized actions. The participation in ritualized actions in turn is what produces and shapes the ritual sense of the people involved. This amounts to asserting, in a rather circular fashion, that ritual activity is the result of the practice of ritualization and the other way round. In her words: “Essential to ritualization is the circular production of a ritualized body which in turn produces ritualized practices” (1992: 93). Besides the implicit danger of reifying the process (described by Bourdieu with respect to habitus as a structured and structuring process) by which individuals acquire their sense of ritual, these formulations do not explain anything with respect to the specific characteristics of ritualized actions. Moreover, the few examples Bell does provide of processes of ritualization do not solve the problems at hand, but instead raise further questions. She writes:

An even simpler example might contrast the routine activity of buying some regularly used article of clothing for a spouse or child (such as gym socks) and the ritualized version of buying a similar but different article (argyle socks) and giving it as a gift. These activities are differentiated in the very doing and derive their significance form the contrast implicitly set up between them. Routine giving plays off ritualized giving and vice versa; they define each other. (1992: 91)

This might be a good example for the difference of doing something routinely as opposed to doing it carefully, but not for the ritualization of buying a pair of socks. Acting with care is characteristic of many different sorts of actions, only some of which would be considered ritual—learning a new piece on the piano, for example—leaving aside the question of why one would ritualize the buying of a pair of socks in the first place.

Clearly she is aware of the problem. She writes that “this is not to say that ritualization is simply acting differently. Otherwise, buying mismatched socks at a bargain table...would qualify as ritual” (1992: 91). And later she adds that “ritualization can be characterized in general only to a rather limited extent since the idiom of its differentiation of acting will be, for the most part, culturally specific” (1992: 93). So we are left where we started: “strategies of ritualization” that draw “privileged distinctions” between ways of acting in a “culturally specific” way. This problem of how to differentiate ritualized from ordinary actions is only underlined by Bell’s later book, Ritual: Perspectives and

Dimensions (1997), where she again draws attention to how the ritualization of an activity establishes its own ritualized frame. She states that ritualization, given a voice, would say: “This is different, deliberate, and significant—pay attention!” (1997: 160). Yet also here she fails to answer the obvious question regarding the difference(s) between ritualized actions and other actions that are also different, deliberate, and significant—but are not rituals. This is not merely a problem of terminology and consistency but relates to her use of Bourdieu as well. Given the similarity of ritual sense to Bourdieu’s practical sense and habitus, Bell has to somehow “claim” or mark out the ritual field or respective milieu of the application of the ritual sense, since this is what is at stake.

Of course, Bourdieu himself uses and discusses the notion of ritual throughout his writings, but I would argue that when one looks more closely at such statements, one recognizes that he pursues Wittgenstein’s rather than Bell’s view of ritual. So I turn now to consider what Wittgenstein had to say about “ritual instinct” and how this view articulates with those of Bourdieu.

Wittgenstein, Bourdieu, and Ritual Sense

The concept of ritual instinct13 is central to Wittgenstein’s Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough. Wittgenstein had at least two encounters with different editions of Frazer’s Golden Bough and there are several versions of his Remarks, none of which he released for publication. Here I refer to the most comprehensive edition of Wittgenstein’s writings on Frazer (edited by Klagge and Nordmann in 1993) and to the very interesting interpretation by the French philosopher Phillip De Lara in his article “Wittgenstein as Anthropologist” (2003).13

A striking claim of the Remarks is that a “ritual instinct lies at the bottom of all rites,” that “one could almost say that man is a ceremonial animal” (Wittgenstein 1993: 128). But in order to understand what Wittgenstein hints at with such statements, we first have to differentiate between several intertwined arguments within his Remarks. I will focus here on two. First, Wittgenstein holds that there are limits to the explanation of rituals, notwithstanding the fact that they can be explained in various ways. The second point is a kind of moral argument developed by Wittgenstein: that one must recognize (as Frazer conspicuously did not) that “our” way of thinking and acting is not very different from that of “the natives.”

Concerning the first argument, Wittgenstein is convinced that the demand for a full explanation of ritual actions betrays a misunderstanding about what rituals are.14 But it would be a further misunderstanding to think
that Wittgenstein suggests that reference to an instinct is all one can say with respect to ritual action. He does not mean that explanations or elucidations of any sort are impossible. His point is rather that some features of human life cannot be thoroughly explained, for they are a constitutive part of the human predicament. "Here one can only describe and say: this is what human life is like" (1993: 121). In this respect, an example clarifies his point:

Kissing the picture of one’s beloved. That is obviously not based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it aims at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied. (1993: 123)

The self-correction here is central to an argument to which I will later return. In a first step Wittgenstein suggests that the intention to produce causal consequences as well as the intention to express some emotion or desire is not a primary quality of ritual action. One kisses the picture of one’s beloved neither because one expects a causal consequence nor in order to express one’s feelings directly. Here Wittgenstein tries to overcome the false dichotomy between intellectualist and expressive or symbolic accounts of ritual by employing the concept of “instinct.” But he seems to go one step further. When he writes that “it aims at nothing at all,” he seems to be suggesting that there are unintentional human actions—such as an involuntary twitch of the eyes—which are to be understood as more than simple “behavior.”

According to Wittgenstein, if we want to understand such actions adequately, we have to realize that we simply behave this way; it is an “instinct-like reaction” to a significant phenomenon. If one compares such statements to some of Bourdieu’s statements on rituals, one cannot miss the similarities. Bourdieu writes on ritual practices:

Rites are practices that are ends in themselves, that are justified by their very performance; things that one does because they are “the done thing,” “the right thing to do,”…they may have, strictly speaking, neither meaning nor function, other than the function implied in their very existence. (1990: 18)

There are also striking similarities between Bourdieu and Wittgenstein with respect to the second, moral argument, namely that it is wrong to oppose our way of thinking to the magical, mystical, ritual thinking of the natives. Bourdieu writes that the anthropologist would probably give a better account of rituals or kinship relations if he introduced into his theory the "understanding"—in Wittgenstein’s sense of the ability to use them correctly—that is evident in his…skill at performing the social rituals of academic life. (1990: 18)

He claims that there are analogies between the “practical logic of ritual” and “our way of using the opposition between right and left in politics,” all of which leads us to discover that “mythological thinking is quite often nothing but the logic of three-fourths of our actions” (Bourdieu interviewed by Lamaison 1986: 114). Wittgenstein, on the other hand, writes about “our kinship to those savages” and states that the principle according to which these practices are arranged is a much more general one than in Frazer’s explanation and is present in our own minds, so that we ourselves could think up all the possibilities. (1993: 127)

All of this goes to show that Wittgenstein’s “ritual instinct” and Bourdieu’s “practical sense” are parallel concepts and that both are useful for interpreting ritual practices. The point is that we are dealing with a very basic, prereflective aspect of human beings, which can be part of various actions. A well-known example is that of bowlers who see that their bowling ball is heading too much to the left, and then move their upper body to the right.17 Neither do they seek to express their feelings to the people around them nor do they think that their movement has some influence on the direction of the bowling ball. They do it instinctively.

Hence the concept of ritual instinct is to be seen only as the basic level of ritual practice. On a second level one could investigate the expressive and instrumental aspects of any given practice. Such a differentiation of levels is problematic, however, and at the end of this chapter I will discuss how Wittgenstein sets out to differentiate between the two levels, and whether it is helpful to introduce a level of a basic action that, while not intentional in any way, is still more than mere behavior.

Coming back to my fieldwork in Sacha Dham asram, I want to add that the two arguments outlined above in the name of Wittgenstein would find agreement among most of the Westerners, including Guru Shanti Mayi—in particular the claim that there are limits to the explanation of ritual practices. With respect to my work, they frequently told me that I was searching for explanations of things where there are no explanations—only experience. Yet they made this comment with respect to rituals as well as to other actions. One could argue that their position was akin to Bourdieu’s statement that
the “thinker” betrays his secret conviction that action is fully performed only when it is understood, interpreted, expressed, by identifying the implicit with the unthought and by denying the status of authentic thought to the tacit and practical thought that is inherent in all “sensible” action. Language spontaneously becomes the accomplice of this hermeneutical philosophy which leads one to conceive action as something to be deciphered, when it leads one to say, for example, that a gesture or ritual act expresses something, rather than saying, quite simply, that it is “sensible” (sensé) or, as in English, that it “makes” sense. (1990: 36–37)

Some problems involved in this statement will be addressed when we turn to the question of the efficacy of rituals. First, however, I want to conclude my discussion of Wittgenstein. At first one has to see that a different notion of ritual is at stake here. When Bourdieu compares ritual actions to the “logic of three-fourths of our action,” he seems to be thinking in Goffmanian terms about ritual, rather than in terms of the sorts of ceremonies that puja, mass, baptism, and the like exemplify. A similar point can be made with respect to a central problem of Wittgenstein’s account of “ritual instinct.” The example of the bowler (as well as some of Wittgenstein’s own examples in the Remarks) makes it more than clear that here we have left the realm of rituals conceived as ceremonies. If the movement of a bowler exemplifies the ritual instinct at work, it is hard to argue that we are still talking about rituals as they are usually conceived in social theory (for example by Bell). Rather, Wittgenstein is reminding us about one aspect of human life and the dispositions it produces, trying to make us see that there are many aspects of our day-to-day life that have nothing to do with means and ends as this relationship is usually conceived.

This observation implies that the opposition set up at the beginning of this chapter between a universal human ritual instinct (as suggested by Wittgenstein) and a culturally specific, embodied ritual sense (as suggested by Bell) is only apparently contradictory, since the respective conceptualizations of “ritual” are on different levels. Hence, it is not problematic for Bourdieu to be involved in both understandings of ritual sense.

But—to come back to Wittgenstein—it would be silly to suggest that he did not notice that many of our actions are means to ends. In fact, I expressly omitted parts of the quotation in this respect. Wittgenstein writes, “One could almost say that man is a ceremonial animal,” but he immediately adds, “That is, no doubt, partly wrong and partly nonsensical, but there is also something right about it” (1993: 218, my italics). What seems right to me is that there are aspects of human behavior for which what Weber called Zweckrationalität (“instrumental rationality”) is not an exhaustive explanation. Along these lines one probably could say with Bourdieu that an action makes sense to the actors merely because they have an appropriate sense of it, because it “makes sense” to them. The ritual performed by the Westerners in the ashram makes sense to the other Westerners because they share a common ritual sense, or better, because their habitus fits the milieu. But—and here I diverge from Wittgenstein—such an interpretation does not mean that such actions are not intentional. They might not be based on Zweckrationalität, but although they are not in this sense goal-oriented, the point of such actions is still understandable to other people. Central to such an argument is that “understanding” means to understand the intentions behind the action.

What Wittgenstein sees as being wrong (about the statement that man is a ceremonial animal) is to think that this is the case for all human actions. And he would probably see the attempt to ascribe those features to a distinct class of actions as nonsensical. The argument of Wittgenstein is therefore against the category “ritual” as it is commonly used in the social sciences. In a Wittgensteinian perspective ritual action must be understood not as a distinct class of actions or behavior, but as central aspect of some human actions.19

Ritual Sense, Efficacy, and Intentionality

What has all of this to do with ritual efficacy? To make my point clear I want to start with a very basic question: Is it helpful at all to talk about the efficacy of rituals? Does the question, “How do rituals work?” make sense? Some of the participants at the conference that led to this book seemed to imply that rituals (whatever we consider them to be) have a special kind of efficacy. To my mind it is wrong and misleading to suggest that there is something like ritual efficacy sui generis (cf. Sørensen 2006 for the most recent formulation of such a position). I do not think that there is one answer to the question of “how rituals work.” Shamanic rituals may heal, legal rituals may bind, political rituals may resolve difficulties, religious rituals may cleanse or bestow grace, and so on—or they may not. But how and when they succeed cannot be explained by a general theory of ritual; nor is the efficacy of such actions, when they are successful, specific to rituals.20 Speech acts, general causal relations, placebo effects, catharsis, rhetoric, and luck can and do help explain the efficaciousness of an action—but this fact does not depend on whether or not the action is ritualized. Such a position regarding ritual efficacy is, for example, underlined by Howard Brody’s paper on the placebo effect in this volume. Brody could have written the same article without mentioning ritual at any point. His important
contribution to the topic of ritual efficacy is based not on a general theory of ritual efficacy, but rather on the way in which he shows how ritual performances might enhance a certain kind of efficacy (placebo effects).

What I have said about Bell and Wittgenstein is intended to underline this basic point. In her introduction to *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Bell writes that that she wants to provide “potentially more fruitful questions about the origins, purposes, and efficacy of ‘ritualized actions’ than are accessible through current models” (1992: ix). I am skeptical about whether she succeeds in this goal. Here again one has to ask what, precisely, she means by the “efficacy of ritualized actions”—how, for whom, and against what are they efficacious? I assume that she wants to say that it is fruitful to ask how ritualized actions are efficacious in the production of a ritual sense (which in turn is relevant to a reproduction of power relations—misrecognized by the actors themselves). Recall her earlier quote that “the implicit dynamic and ‘end’ of ritualization…can be said to be the production of a ‘ritualized body.’ A ritualized body is a body invested with a ‘sense’ of ritual” (1992: 80). I argued that her approach is problematic since she seems to be talking primarily about the fitting of a ritual habitus to a ritual milieu and that the mechanisms at work in such an effect are not at all specific to the process of ritualization. It is telling that Bell herself at decisive points does not speak about efficacy but rather states that the focus on ritual sense helps to show how the child from the example of Geertz was “considered buried more or less satisfactorily.” The notions of adequacy or appropriateness—although the analytical value of these terms might be even less than that of the notion “sense” or “instinct”—bring us back to the example at the beginning of this chapter. I claimed that, while it was no problem for participants in a seminar on ritual theory to invent, within a short period of time, a ritual that seemed appropriate to all of us, none of us even thought of the question of how to make it efficacious.

This observation points in the direction taken by Wittgenstein: the idea that rituals are not primarily about efficacy. For him, the most basic feature of rituals is that they are based on an instinct-like reaction to a significant phenomenon. The belief in causal consequences, like the explicit expression of emotions or desires, is a secondary quality of ritualized actions, and so therefore is the question of efficacy. Since the question of efficacy can only be added to ritual action, any talk about ritual efficacy, and even more so any talk about an efficacy specific to rituals, is misguided, because these are properties of human action in general. You would not ask Schubert’s brother or the man who kisses the picture of his beloved whether their actions were efficacious.

But Wittgenstein’s observation that instrumental or expressive theories of ritual are not always sufficient ways to make sense of a ritualized action (they rather are based on a false dichotomy) does not imply that such actions are pointless. This is where Wittgenstein’s position (as well as De Lara’s interpretation of it) that such actions “aim at nothing at all” needs to be discussed further, primarily since the word “aim” bears much theoretical weight here. I only want to hint at an alternative approach, one that takes on the problems debated above but that is not based on the notions of sense, instinct, efficacy, instrumentality, or expression but rather on the notion of intentionality.21

To use an earlier example, the question is whether an (instrumental) basic action is performed by a bowler by moving the upper part of the body to the right or by a lover who kisses the picture of his beloved. If one looks at it this way, one sees that the lack of instrumental rationality as well as the lack of an intended expression of feelings does not necessarily make the respective actions “pointless,” nor is it appropriate to say that such actions “aim at nothing at all.”22

I have attempted to show that one must treat the efficacy of rituals on a case-by-case basis, and must acknowledge that with respect to efficacy, ritual actions do not differ from other sorts of action. The latter point was exemplified in the discussion of Bell when I argued that one has either to defend a concept of ritual efficacy sui generis based on a sufficient conceptualization of ritual/ritualization, or acknowledge that there is no ritual-specific efficacy. The discussion of Wittgenstein’s position raised the question of whether efficacy is in any sense a primary feature of ritual activities. This led me to consider them not only as similar to other actions having multiple relations to the lives of human beings but also as intentional and, because of this intentionality, as understandable to other human beings. With respect to all the problems raised in this chapter concerning ritual sense as well as ritual efficacy, I finally argued that a discussion of intentionality is unavoidable.

So, although I introduced and discussed the notions of ritual sense and ritual instinct, I feel that they help us neither to answer “the problem of ritual efficacy” nor to understand specific aspects of ritual actions in general. Bell’s formulation of a ritual sense depends on an inadequate conceptualization of the term “ritual(alization).” Wittgenstein’s idea of a prereflective, instinctive and unintentional reaction to “significant phenomena” did not explain how to conceptualize the mental states of the persons performing these actions (rituals). With respect to ritual efficacy, my conclusion is that different rituals call for different considerations of their efficacy, because they are primarily species of action. In short, when it comes to ritual efficacy, we must follow another piece of advice from Wittgenstein and resist our “craving for generality.”
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I want to thank Don Gardner and William Sax for their valuable comments, and the German Research Council and the German Academic Exchange Service for their financial support.

NOTES

1. In our context, the term ashram refers to a more or less secluded residence or "hermitage" of a religious community gathered around a guru. There are, however, other ashram concepts—for example the one propagated by Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi.

2. The performance of a puja normally employs the use of a statue or image (murti). It is often emphasized that pujas bring together the human and the divine worlds at specific times and places by actualizing the presence of deity in a physical form from that in some way embodies the reality of that deity. In most of the pujas there are at least three actions involved. The devotee first presents an offering to the murti, then the devotee is granted the blessed sight (darana) of the deity and receives the deities' blessing in the form of a mark (tilak) as well as a blessed article from the worship (prasad).

3. Gayatri is a name of a goddess as well as the name of a verse of the Rig-Veda. The gayatri Mantra is uttered by many Brahmins at dawn as well as in the brahmanic initiation ritual. It is often presented as being a condensed form of whole Veda.

4. In the havan or hawan-puja, ritual ablutions are offered into a sacrificial fire.

5. Arati is the honorific passing of a flame (lit lamp, piece of camphor, etc.) in front of a guest, deity, or statue of a guru. The essential gesture of arati is that of moving the object in a circular, clockwise fashion before the statue. In temples, usually a conch shell is blown, a gong is sounded, or a bell is rung continuously at the same time.

6. Satsang can be translated as "association of the true," that is, of persons who are devoted to the truth. The term is used for devotional groups who meet, sing hymns, listen to sermons, and so forth.

7. All unreferenced quotes in this paragraph are taken from Shanti Mayi's homepage "The Un-Spun Web" (http://www.shantimayi.com/ch1/sach-adham.html) on 09.09.05.


9. The position of Chris Fuller is here most clear. He writes: "Puja, at its heart, is the worshipper's reception and entertainment of a distinguished and adored guest. It is a ritual to honour powerful gods and goddesses, and often to express personal affection for them as well; it can also create a unity between deity and worshipper that dissolves the difference between them." (1992: 57). According to Fuller, the aspects of hierarchy as well as the transgression of borders are "two of the most critical features of Hindu religion and society" (1992: 3) and he keeps them in mind throughout his book The Camphor Flame (1992), especially in the chapter on pujas.

10. Lacking a tantamount translation, I used the German term andächtig. It can be loosely translated as devoutly, prayerful, docile, pious, etc. and in German it is kin with Andächt (Engl.: devotion, prayer).

11. Cf. on this point one of Fuller's descriptions of pujas: "Puja in a large temple, especially in the blackness enveloping the innermost shrines, has a powerful sensual impact, often amplified by the press of a large crowd of devotees in a hot, confined space. Frequently there is a deafening and even discordant sound as the music of pipes and drums combined with ringing bells and the chanting of sacred texts" (1992: 57).


14. The frame of explanatory reference is here Wittgenstein's general aversion to "theories" in philosophy and his view that explanations always come to an end somewhere. For the point of the argument of this paper it is, however, not necessary to elaborate on this view.

15. "Intentionality" is to be understood here as a specific state of the mind that plays a distinctive role in the etiology of actions and not as a kind of "concept" (what would be called "intension" in the philosophy of mind).

16. It is not surprising that Bourdieu's position resembles Wittgenstein's, since he openly refers to Wittgenstein throughout his writing, most famously on his discussion of "following a rule." But in an interview conducted in 1986 by Pierre Lamaison, Bourdieu gives the impression that he read the Remarks after he formulated his position on rituals (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986: 118).

17. Cf. Ahern (1979: 16), where she quotes Piaget, who used the example of the bowling player to describe "spontaneous magical ideas in the adult" and relates this example to Wittgenstein's Remarks.


19. Cf. De Lara (2003), to whom the reconstruction of Wittgenstein's position given above owes a lot.

20. Cf. Skorupski's critical remarks in Symbol and Theory: "What does a term have which brings together a man shaking hands, a man praying to his god, a man refusing to walk under a ladder, a man clapping hand at the end of a concert, a man placing medicine on his crops?" (1976: 171).

21. Not only is the notion "intentionality" well discussed and substantiated in the pertinent areas of philosophy, but it is further central to the respective debates in the classical as well as recent debates in ritual theory (cf. Skorupski 1976, Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). In my perspective, basic actions in general are expressive of the mental states that cause them, irrespective of the question whether these actions were undertaken in order to express these states (they might not even be conscious to the actor while performing them).

22. De Lara (2003) discusses the notion of "intransitive expressions" where we do not have to proceed by saying what, for example, a piece of music might be an expression of. To my mind it is not satisfactory either for a music concert or for a ritual to say that it is merely expressive (not to mention the grammatical/logical reasons involved, since expressing is a two-place predicate). Beattie's "expressivist" position that ritual activities are better to be compared to a ballet performance (Beattie 1986) seems to loom here still in the back, although De Lara is conscious of some of the problems involved.
REFERENCES


