

Introduction: The Efficacy of Rituals

Johannes Quack & William S. Sax

Many rituals are efficacious by definition: when a criminal is sentenced by a qualified judge for example, or a president is publicly inaugurated, then the efficacy of the corresponding rituals is axiomatic. This is, however, not necessarily the case for other kinds of rituals. Do shamanic rituals really heal the sick, as many anthropologists have claimed? Can oracular rituals really predict the future? Do the Christian sacraments really bestow grace? Given the great variety of rituals that are practiced around the world, is it even possible to make general statements about “ritual efficacy”? Although the question of efficacy—do rituals really “work,” and if so, how?—is one of the first questions that comes to mind when thinking about rituals, it has rarely been explicitly addressed in ritual studies. Indeed, there is a long tradition within the social sciences of implicit skepticism with regard to the very idea of it.

For a long time, the question of how and why rituals might be effective was evaded by assigning ritual to the category of “symbolic” or “expressive” as opposed to “instrumental” action. According to this dichotomy, rituals are associated with an internal psychological realm of feeling and sentiment which they serve to “express” or “communicate,” while “instrumental” action is associated with an external realm: purchasing a new car for example, or invading a foreign country. This idea was implicit in Durkheim’s reaction to the arguments of Tylor and Frazer (summarized in Skorupski 1976; cf. Quack and Töbelmann, this volume), and can also be found in the work of Beattie (1986), Cannadine (1984), Schieffelin (1998) and Stallybrass and White (1986). The problematic nature of this dichotomy was recognized and thoroughly critiqued by Skorupski in his 1976 book *Symbol and Theory*, and there have been other challenges to it as well, of which Stanley Tambiah’s “performative approach to ritual” (1979) is arguably the most influential. Other demonstrations of the efficacy of ritual include Victor Turner’s discussions of conflict resolution by means of rituals (1974, 1982; Cf. Lan 1985) and ritual healing (1981; Cf. Sax 2001 and 2008; Whitehouse 2004), and Thomas Csordas’ “phenomenological” approach to ritual self-transformation (1990, 1994; Cf. Boddy 1989). Because most

of these approaches attempt to show that rituals are effective in an instrumental sense, they can be read as implicit critiques of earlier theories which classified ritual as a form of expressive action. But in our view, the very urge to explain the efficacy of ritual derives from a more fundamental problem in ritual theory that has seldom been explicitly addressed: the fact that ritual is assumed to be a kind of irrational or non-rational activity (see Sax 2009a: 231–247; 2009b Introduction). As Jack Goody pointed out, social scientists use the concept of ritual as “a category of standardized behaviour (custom) in which the relationship between the means and the end is not intrinsic; i.e. is either irrational or non rational” (1961: 159; cf. Sax, Schweitzer, and Weinhold, this volume). If the actions of ritual are seen to be non-rational by definition, they must be explained by the ritual theorist, usually in terms that are inconsistent with native models. In this special issue, we too grapple with this dichotomy.

In the first essay, Quack and Töbelmann propose an “interpretive grid” that is also applied by some of the other contributors. At its core lies the idea that ritual actions are quite diverse and should be understood as a type of action; there is no such thing as “ritual action” *sui generis*.¹ According to Quack and Töbelmann, actions, whether or not they are labelled “ritual”, can have a potentially infinite number of *effects*, while the term *efficacy* is best reserved for certain kinds of effects identified or postulated from a certain perspective. Examples of such perspectives are the intention of the people acting in ritual, the expectations and interpretations of witnesses, historical explanations, or other analyses made by a researcher. On the basis of this they emphasize that any attempt to deal with the broad and complex question of “ritual efficacy”, should ask a simple question first, viz., “In ritual, what or who (*efficiens*) is seen as affecting what or whom (*efficiendum*) by whom (*perspective*)?” and they go on to suggest further differentiations with respect to *spheres* (levels) within, *means by*, and *conditions* under which a ritual is seen to be efficacious.

Quack and Töbelmann stress that the primary use of their questions is not to “solve the problem of ritual effi-

cacy,” but rather to propose a clearer formulation of the problems and issues at stake. They illustrate how this can be done by discussing Bell’s approach to ritual efficacy in her 1992 book *Ritual Theory—Ritual Practice*. In addition to this application of their general “interpretive grid” to Catherine Bell’s theory, Quack and Töbelmann further argue that Stanley Tambiah did not succeed in overcoming the Durkheimian opposition between “instrumental” and “expressive/symbolic” in his “performative approach” to ritual (efficacy). This is where important parallels as well as discrepancies between their and Hardenberg’s paper are to be found.

One of Hardenberg’s two interrelated arguments regards the legacy of Malinowski’s distinction between “magic” and “religion” in anthropology. For Hardenberg, the central point with respect to ritual efficacy is that this opposition resulted in a differentiation between two kinds of rituals. ‘Magical rituals’ that are considered to have very practical or instrumental aims (for example healing rituals) were distinguished from ‘religious rituals’ that seem to have no practical aim. Since researchers assumed that such rituals were not instrumentally effective, they addressed instead the rituals’ symbolism or their social functions. By and large this differentiation parallels the opposition between instrumental and expressive/symbolic accounts of ritual efficacy traced back to Durkheim. According to Hardenberg “by the 1970s anthropologists began to bridge the gap between these two approaches and bring together what Malinowski had separated.” He mentions Geertz as “one of the authors who attempted to join these two aspects” but goes on to focus on the way that Tambiah’s performative approach allegedly overcomes this distinction (a point that is disputed by Quack and Töbelmann).

Hardenberg’s second argument is strongly connected to his rich ethnographic material on mortuary rituals in present-day Kyrgyzstan. According to Hardenberg, the Kyrgyz people desire to achieve through their mortuary rituals the renewal of the socio-cosmic order that incorporates both the living and the souls of the dead. For Hardenberg, Malinowski’s statement that people use funerals to “create a social event out of a natural fact” (1950 [1925]: 52) accurately captures the main characteristic of Kyrgyz burial rituals: death sets society into motion. In order to fine tune this perspective, Hardenberg applies the analytical tools developed by Tambiah, Bell and Bloch. He applies Tambiah’s definition of ritual to the funeral, analyzing it as a public event with the “use of multiple media”, “redundancy” and “involution” (concepts that are also employed by Sax, Schweitzer and Weinhold). He further uses Bell’s concept of “ritualization” and Bloch’s analysis of the “regenerative” function of rituals and his concept of “rebounding violence”²

So as not to reproduce the Malinowskian distinction criticized in the first half of his paper, Hardenberg focuses in the second half on what he calls the “aim” of the funeral, which he (following Gerholm) distinguishes from its “use”. The performance of the funeral ritual may depend on non-ritual factors, for example political aspirations of certain party members. In this case the burial of an opposition leader may for example be *used* for agitation against the ruling party, but this is not the explicit *aim* of the ritual. What then is the aim of the ritual? The answer to this question is rather complex. According to Hardenberg, Kyrgyz funeral rituals achieve certain important social consequences by indicating the relative social status and even political influence of the deceased’s family and kin, by turning the soul’s departure to another world into a public event. They thus cause an intensified experience amongst the Kyrgyz in which social structures and values are embodied and internalized (cf. Bell 1992). This in turn results in the reorganization of their social web by shifting various responsibilities to the descendants of the deceased, thus empowering people and providing them with means to achieve certain desired ends. This “chain of efficacy” might, following Quack and Töbelmann, be further specified by highlighting which of these effects are intended by the Kyrgyz when they perform these actions. Or—to use Hardenberg’s language—we might ask whether the “aims” of the ritual are always what the people aim at, or whether we are dealing here rather with effects that the anthropologist identifies as “useful” in the larger socio-historical context of the ritual. Do the Kyrgyz aim to express and intensify a web of social relations, or is this something that is seen only by the anthropologist?³ In any case, the detailed ethnography outlines how efficacy can be located on many levels, including the transfer of a soul from this to the other world, entertaining good relations with the spirits of the deceased (*arbaktar*), renewing and reaffirming social ties through exchange of gifts and money, the general reconstitution of social relations, etc.—all of which are related to each other (see our remarks on Nichter, below). The Kyrgyz themselves identify as the primary efficacy of attending the funeral the fact that they gain merits bestowed on them by the soul of the dead (*arbak*). Hardenberg reports that when asked why people come to attend a funeral they usually answer: “for *soopčuluk*” (“spiritual merits”). And he explains that the food prepared at the funeral becomes a material representation of these merits. Applying the interpretative grid proposed by Quack and Töbelmann, Hardenberg concludes that

(b)oth anthropological analysis and Kyrgyz ideas about relations with the dead lead me to the conclusion that the main aim (or *efficiendum*) of the

elaborate performance consists in renewing the socio-cosmic order threatened by the death of a member of society. To the relatives, friends and neighbours (who are the *efficiens*) gift-giving, mourning and feasting are the main *means* to achieve their end.

Egyptologist Joachim Quack's paper is based on "magical handbooks" that were found in the western necropolis of Thebes and can be dated from the second to the fourth and fifth century AD. Quack suggests that their original context was a situation of a tolerant polytheism, and in them practitioners themselves recorded what they judged to be important with respect to ritual efficacy. The handbooks consist chiefly of spells used by "magicians" to invoke deities who had proven to be efficacious in particular rituals. In order to give a detailed description and analysis of these elaborate prescriptions Quack focuses on one group of divinatory spells aiming at "gaining knowledge." In this category various kinds of rituals are found, for example the "vessel divination" or rituals aiming at gaining truthful dreams. Applying the interpretive grid suggested by Quack and Töbelmann, Quack reconstructs the classical structure of "magical rituals," and his analysis thus resembles the anthropological literature of the so-called "intellectualists," Tylor and Frazer.⁴ For the magicians, says Quack, efficacy takes place on a "spiritual level" since all is based on the "belief in gods and demons, and conceptions of how to induce them to help." The "conditions" for ritual efficacy Quack extracts from the handbooks are also reminiscent of classical discussions of magic: the importance of the right time of the performance, the purity of the ritualist, etc. All this goes to show that if one changes the perspective from that of the practitioners to that of the contemporary observer (who questions the existence of gods and demons) the rituals cannot work in the way in which the ancient magicians thought they would. And Quack leaves no doubt about his position when he writes: "I do not suppose that actual gods or spirits can be induced or coerced to reveal the future by the means described in the rituals in question".

Quack diverges "explicitly from other scholars who have refrained from discussing their effectiveness and declared that it was neither the role of a modern scholar to dismiss them as ineffective nor to reduce them to delusional acceptance of personal experience, e.g. in dreams. "After all, the data shows that the magical practitioners did take the rituals to be efficacious in some cases. Here we have a paradigmatic case of the dilemma so central to many debates on ritual efficacy: Why do people perform such apparently in-effective actions? Drawing on ***Goodman, ***Laski and **Neher as well as dream re-

search, sleep experiments and modern research on psychological and physiological effects of ritual (Neher 1980; Laski 1961; Hollenback 1996), Quack argues that these practices might indeed have been efficacious, albeit not the way in which the ritualists believed. Practitioners' belief in the efficacy of the ritual (though based on assumptions not shared by Quack and many of his contemporaries) may have even contributed to its efficacy as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy (a point to which we will return below). This explanation stresses the use of different levels of sensory experience⁵ (cf. Nichter, Okwaro, and Sax, et al., in this volume). The important point is that "these answers came from their own minds" and not from the spiritual sphere the practitioners thought they would come from. In summary: The different divination techniques employed in the Late Antique divination rituals were seen by the practitioners as being effective on a spiritual level, inducing and coercing gods, while from a modern perspective taken by Quack they should be seen as efficacious on a different level. His point is "that they are actually highly conducive to achieving altered states of consciousness. As such, they are certainly efficacious in an objective way."

It is instructive to keep Quack's point in mind while reading the comparison of two kinds of ritual healing, one from Germany and one from India, by anthropologist William Sax and psychologists Jochen Schweitzer and Jan Weinhold. "Family Constellation" is a mode of psychotherapy that is commonly practiced in Germany, though it is rather outside the mainstream owing to its focus on families rather than individuals, and its ritualized elements. Sax, Schweitzer, and Weinhold compare it with a "classical" healing cult from the Central Himalayas involving trance, possession, animal sacrifice, and other religious rituals. Though these practices are found in radically different contexts and are based on highly divergent theories, according to the authors they nevertheless share many common features, viz., 1) the unity of the family is a central principle, since family disunity is frequently regarded as both cause and symptom of illness, while the strengthening of family unity is a fundamental aim of both systems; 2) the healing that take place is usually the healing of a group (e.g. a family), and rarely of an isolated individual; 3) relationships between living and dead family members are of great importance, and causes of illness are often seen to lie in unresolved relationships with the dead; 4) space and spatial relationships are thought to be crucial to ritual efficacy, in ways that are mysterious to both practitioners and patients; 5) the efficacy of the ritual often depends on revealing "secrets" from the past; and 6) both these systems of ritual healing foster a traditional, conservative morality.

Like most forms of ritual healing, Family Constellations and Central Himalayan ritual healing have the advantage of clarifying the issues involved in a discussion of ritual efficacy. The goal of the ritual is “healing,” which in both cases is understood to consist of symptom reduction as well as the fostering of a sense of wellbeing and harmony. However there is clearly a—perhaps unbridgeable—gap between the theories of efficacy of Central Himalayan peasants on the one hand, and modern Europeans (including the authors of the article) on the other. While the former attribute the efficacy of the ritual to the actions and intentions of supernatural beings, the latter invoke social and psychological factors instead, thus asserting (implicitly at least) that the supernatural explanations of the peasants are unscientific. So although the authors take the radical step of taking seriously the notion of ritual efficacy, they remain within the explanatory parameters of modern anthropology and psychology.

Geoffrey Samuel attempts to go further. His argument starts by contrasting two approaches to the causation of ill-health, the ‘naturalistic’ and the ‘personalistic’ (the distinction is taken from George Foster). For Samuel, the naturalistic mode of explanation can be characterized in terms of “linear causality within the external world,” so that surgery would probably be a paradigmatic example of it. The personalistic mode of explanation (which he also calls “religious” and “magical”) is grounded in moral-ethical judgment, a typical case being that of “spirit affliction” (see the contributions of Sax et al., Okwaro, and Nichter) but also that of family constellation work (introduced also by Sax et al.). Samuel argues that “almost all human societies” include “elements of both kinds of explanation” since he sees them as “deriving from basic modes of human functioning that are common to all societies and perhaps inbuilt into human biological equipment.” Accordingly, he attempts “to see naturalistic and personalistic styles of explanation as alternative modes of explanation, each with truth content, validity, and usefulness.”

Samuel sets up his position against two different ways of explaining ritual efficacy. He is sympathetic to both, but sees that neither is able to overcome the mind-body distinction, which he regards as a prerequisite for an adequate understanding of the efficacy of healing rituals (Cf. Sax and Weinhold in the Brosius volume ****??).⁶ So, for example, anthropological approaches that try to explain “spirit action” on a purely psychological or social level are as incomplete as medical approaches emphasizing the “placebo” effect. The main example Samuel gives for the problems of the first group is Kleinman’s portrayal of the *tàng-ki* (with whom he worked) as an effective psychotherapist. (Samuel makes a similar criticism of Csordas in this respect.) Samuel says that this position is a

kind of “psychological reduction,” since the practices associated with healing rituals are reduced to dealing merely with minor psychological disorders. The same problem is also apparent in Kleinman’s well-known distinction between “disease” and “illness,” since the realm in which the spirits and rituals act is “that of the subjective meanings of illness, not the organic processes of disease.” On similar grounds Samuel would probably have objected to many of the explanations given in this volume. In his perspective they, too, are “constrained and limited by our acceptance of the mind-body dichotomy”, at least to the degree that they do not explain how rituals can also deal with “genuine organic problems.” The claim that the social or psychological realm has interconnections and repercussions with the physical realm would probably not satisfy Samuel, since a modified dualism is still a dualism. The second position Samuel criticizes is represented by series of writers from within the medical profession itself, ranging from Adler and Hammett (1973) to Daniel Moberman and Wayne Jonas (2002) as well as Ted Kaptchuk’s group at Harvard Medical School, who seek to investigate the mechanisms behind the ‘placebo effect’. Here, too, Samuel holds that “none of these approaches really . . . explain how the placebo effect (or more generally, spirit-based therapies) might affect body as well as mind.”

At the heart of Samuel’s own account lies a rethinking of how human beings experience their bodies. This perspective Samuel finds to some degree formulated in the work of Thomas Csordas, as well as in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s classic study of a Cuna shamanic healing ritual for a breech birth ([1949] 1977). Samuel aims to extend their approach by introducing the notion of “body-images” which he himself admits to be a “far from simple matter, and talking about it is also not simple.” Although some illustrations are given of this aspect, Samuel relies on his previous work, so that the reader not familiar with it has to take his word: “Here I shall simply take it as read that such a concept can be postulated in a way that does not assume a reduction to either physics or psychology.”⁷ Samuel’s central point is that such “body-images” are shaped by “narratives of selves,” parts of which are also (following Laderman) narratives of illnesses that themselves operate in a realm where the physical and psychological are not separated. In Samuel’s words,

(i)f we turn now to how we experience the body-image over time, we could say that our experience of ourselves forms a kind of ongoing narrative, in which we are a central actor, interacting with other figures within the story. Some of these figures, including but not restricted to other human beings, have person-like qualities.

For Samuel this “narrative” is “deeply intertwined with our body physiology” but functions at the same time (“un-separated”) on the level of the psychological and spiritual. This observation brings him back to the personalistic-naturalistic distinction he started with. For Samuel these are examples of

different ways of thinking about and operating with one’s own mind-body complex, and with those of others: one, the personalistic, essentially based on the inner narrative through which we largely perceive our existence in the world, the other through the relatively objectifying aspect of sensory perception in which we view (and hear, smell, feel and taste) the world as an external field upon which we act.

After outlining this theoretical perspective, Samuel goes on to exemplify its consequences for ritual efficacy by discussing a class of Tibetan healing practices. He compares the *ts’ewang* or (long) life empowerment rituals to the so-called *ts’edrup* or (long) life realization rituals in which the central process consists of the practitioner identifying himself or herself with a healing deity (cf. Samuel 2005: 235–241).

To conclude: Samuel sets out, ambitiously, to overcome the mind-body dualism by understanding the efficacy of healing rituals as “healing of the system as a whole”.⁸ Central to his approach is the “healing narrative,” since he understands human beings as experiencing themselves in “narratives” that form “body-images” which are neither psychological nor physical but both at the same time. If “spirits” are understood as part of this narrative, then “spiritual” healing can be understood as an imagery to construct an effective personal narrative of healing.” The spirits as “key personalities” in the ongoing work of the narrative of the self, can link mind to body, just as placebos do. Accordingly Samuel concludes that

we need to take the language of spirits, of magic, sorcery and ritual healing more seriously; not in terms of occult forces, but as providing tokens and images for operating on the structure of human life at all levels, within a framework which does not dichotomise between mind and body.

Indologist Fred Smith also deals with the relationship between mind and body, in his attempts to interrelate philological and historical material with fieldwork-based insights. His aim is to show affinities between the earliest compendium on Ayurveda, the *Charaka-Samhita*, with ritual healing practices in contemporary India. He does this by focusing on the Sanskrit term *sattvavajaya* on the one hand, and “traditional” ways of dealing with mental health problems in the healing shrines of Muthuswamy

in Tamilnadu and Balaji temple in Mehndipur, Rajasthan, on the other.

In order to contextualize the healing practices found at Muthuswamy and Balaji, Smith opposes Western psychiatry and psychology to indigenous ways of dealing with mental health problems in India (as well as related issues in other parts of the world, especially Thailand). His engagement with the healing practices at Muthuswamy is primarily based on the discussion of the findings of Raguram et al. in their article “Traditional community resources for mental health” (2002). Acknowledging the importance of their study, he argues, however, that they have failed to grasp the nature of the temple activity in relation to the patients who resided there “by underestimating the ritualistic elements of their daily routine”. Smith’s point is that traditional ways of understanding “mental illness” give more importance to embodiment than do modern ones. This becomes clear in his discussion of healing practices at a healing temple called Balaji. Here Smith draws on an extensive autobiographical account of “spirit healing” given by a woman who had visited Balaji several times to deal with her problems. This woman was diagnosed by a *tantrik* as being the victim of black magic, and she went to Balaji to perform the appropriate rituals which led to her being “possessed”. These rituals resulted not only in her conviction of being cleansed from all “bad energies” but also stopped her suicidal thoughts. Smith conjectures “that the ritual ‘worked’ (that is, the healing was successful) because it altered the consciousness of the woman within the ritual setting; equally, it literally re-oriented her body.”

These two examples of healing practices in the area of “mental health” are finally related by Smith to certain Ayurvedic texts on the basis of his earlier argument (Smith 2006), that “possession” was a legitimate nosological category at that time. This argument in this article is based on a literal translation of the term *sattvavajaya*—often regarded as Ayurvedic “psychological” therapy—as “conquest or submission by *sattva* or by a *sattva*”.

For Smith, contemporary ritualised actions dealing with possession and “mental health” issues as well as the ancient Ayurvedic practices related to the notion *sattvavajaya* are comparable because both propose a kind of therapy that can be analysed by stressing the notions of possession in the sense of “embodiment of an ‘other’”. Smith understands the notion of possession as “imposing essences and conceptual structures onto or, better, into an individual’s sense of physical, psychological, and social presence,” so that all three of his cases studies point to ritual performances that penetrate “into the individual’s sense of physical and psychological presence”.

Anthropologist Mark Nichter's contribution also deals with Ayurveda, and is based on his rich anthropological research experience, and situates the "great traditional" Hindu concepts of *karma* (and to some extent *dharma*) with concrete ethnographic material on a Brahman *vaidya* (Ayurvedic practitioner) called Narayan, along with his wife and extended family. Based on this case study, "karmic reasoning" is analysed with respect to the performance of a fire sacrifice (*Dhanvantari homa*) and in the context of the relationship and conflicts of the *vaidya* with his family members. One can read this ethnography as an attempt to emphasise that in this particular setting, the issues differentiated by many of the other contributors to this volume (including for example the expressive/instrumental dichotomy) should not be separated in the first place, but rather seen as co-constituting each other.

With respect to "efficacy" there seems to be one general explanatory structure in the background, that of "karmic reciprocity". In its simplest form this means that in past or current life every person gathers sin (*papa*) or negative karma. For a *vaidya* much more karma accrues because he regularly and unavoidably receives it from his patients. If this karma comes to fruition (*karma vipaka*) it can result in affliction (*dosha*). To avoid such affliction a *homa*-ritual can be performed. The priests conducting the ritual have the capacity to take on significant measures of negative karma on behalf of the person in whose name the *homa* is conducted because of their practice of *japa* (daily prayers and recitation of sacred mantra).

In the terms of Quack and Töbelmann this means that the *vaidya* Narayan (*efficiendum*) organises the performance of a *homa*-ritual (*efficiens*) to wash off his negative karma. Accordingly Nichter holds that the ritual was

transformative in the sense that it lessened the residual karma that Narayan had incurred from his own practice of medicine and his wife's negative karma given that their *atma* are conjoined. The importance of repaying these debts and lessening his karmic load cannot be overstated.

The first point to note is that Narayan's wife seems to be also part of the *efficiendum*. But even after including her, the complexities of Nichter's ethnography show the limits of the interpretive grid developed by Quack and Töbelmann. Multiple concepts related to fortune and destiny are interrelated for those dealing in this particular case with *karma vipaka* through the performance of a *Dhanvantari Homa*. If one aims to specify, for example, the question of the level on which efficacy takes place (physical, psychological, spiritual, social, cosmological, etc.) or the question for whom or what the ritual is efficacious (Narayan, his wife, his extended family, his karma,

the god *Dhanvantari*, the priests, etc.) no single answer can be given. The answer must rather, as Nichter shows, stress the interrelatedness and co-constitutive aspects of all these issues. This point is exemplified by simply listing what various participants see as being "affected" by the ritual. Through the performance of the ritual the healing powers of the *vaidya* increase and he gains esoteric knowledge hidden in ancient Vedic texts (cf. J. F. Quack's essay, this volume). The ritual affirms a sense of conviction that what we do in life does matter (Babb), or as Nichter puts it, "[t]hrough ritual, Narayan aligns himself with the morality, intentions, and expressed wishes of his forbearers. This ritual performance gives a profound sense of meaning to his life."

His wife, along with other members of the family, see the *Dhanvantari* ritual as a major accomplishment in the life of Narayan and a measure of his moral identity that also has great relevance for their lives. This recognition is in part because the ritual at least partially resolves deep-seated family disputes (Cf. Sax, Schweizer and Weinhold, this volume). More generally, the ritual affects the whole moral order in Narayan's life, it brings the world in which the family lives into a state of moral and cosmic order which includes mitigating or eradicating the anger of the ancestors, social tensions, etc. Finally Nichter makes the argument, drawing on autobiographical work and narratives, that the *Dhanvantari* ritual changes 'the storied nature' of Narayan's identity.

Here, as well as with respect to the holism of the ethnography, a comparison with Samuel's attempt to approach ritual healing as "healing of the system as a whole" is fruitful. The physical side of the efficacy is highlighted by Nichter through an assessment of sensory experience and associative states triggered by sounds, smells, the sight of evocative symbols, and all manner of cues triggering embodied memories. Although Nichter does not deal with Samuel's question of how to avoid theorizing this as a separate sphere, his ethnographic accounts of the informants' perspectives avoid any such separation. In this respect, both authors stress the work of Gregory Bateson. For Nichter it is relevant to show the way in which the *Dhanvantari* ritual was felt to be efficacious in that it resonated in visceral as well as cognitive ways for Narayan and his wife. Following Bateson the term "resonance" should "capture the systemic totality of experience." This stresses the general idea that if one part of the system is changed all other parts of the system will be changed as well. So for example, Nichter shows that the concept of *karma* is to be seen as much more than a cosmological entity used to rationalize misfortune. Informants stress that it must also be seen as a moral, religious and cosmological principle, in its interrelationship with *dharma* through the notion

of “ritual expiation” (*prayascitta*). All this goes to show that the notion of karma spreads from the individual through the social to the cosmic and religious sphere—finally bringing redemption to Narayan as well as others. To understand what “redemption” means in the context of this particular ethnography one has to understand the life worlds, along with the social, religious and cosmological context of the *vaidya*.

Ferdinand Okwaro offers a similarly rich ethnographic account of the Kenyan ritual healer Mtumishi Barasa. The thrust of Okwaro’s essay is to show how Barasa has adapted his practice to meet the expectations of his clients, incorporating various “modern” features such as a medical clinic-like organization of activities at his compound, including the so-called “X-Ray Room,” where oracular diagnosis takes place. According to Okwaro, Barasa’s unique mixture of traditional and modern elements not only confirms the arguments of other scholars regarding the ‘modernity’ of

witchcraft and related phenomena, but also helps to explain the efficacy of his technique. Drawing on the work of Comaroff, Kirmayer, Whyte and others, Okwaro argues that for ritual healing to be effective, it must be able to effectively and convincingly place the client’s affliction within a meaningful cosmology. Further, it must in the African case be able to restore a feeling of control over events to the client. Okwaro observes that most of Mtumishi Barasa’s clients are quite convinced of the authenticity and accuracy of his diagnoses, and that his techniques do for the most part give them an enhanced sense of control over their lives. For these reasons, argues Okwaro, they are effective. Thus like the rest of the contributors to this volume, Okwaro takes the efficacy of the ritual seriously and attempts to explain it; however his psychological explanation diverges from the supernatural explanation of those who practice it. Evidently the Rubicon of religious belief cannot be crossed by academic students of ritual.

Endnotes

1. Therefore Quack and Töbelmann would deny that it is possible to make general statements about ritual efficacy (cf. Quack 2009). In this respect they agree with Humphrey and Laidlaw that ‘ritual’ is a quality which can in theory apply to any kind of action (1994: 71). But they disagree with Humphrey and Laidlaw’s main contribution to ritual theory since they regard rituals as just another type of action (and not as actions where the “intention-in-action” is of no relevance to identify what kind of action takes place, as do Humphrey and Laidlaw).

2. “Bell’s and Bloch’s approaches offer us ways of understanding how rituals not only reproduce the status quo but also change and empower people—or at least the ruling elite. Furthermore, while Malinowski presents insights into how funeral rites “reintegrate” society, modern theories of embodiment and structuration help us understand how and under which conditions this effect is actually achieved.”

3. A similar question would be to ask in what way and for whom the exchange of things of almost equal value that may not be used in daily life between the people “symbolises” the will of both parties to continue the relationship?

4. Tambiah deals in his *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (1990, 2006) with what he calls “Tylor’s list of answers” to the question why such “magical” rituals persist at all? Tambiah’s point is that the list of answers given by Tylor “foreshadows” and “enabled, advances in interpretations suggested by phrases that are in vogue today such as ‘self-fulfilling prophecy,’ ‘psychosomatic efficacy,’ ‘psychodrama and sociodrama,’ ‘secondary rationalizations,’ ‘negotiated cures’ between doctor and patient, ‘impression management,’ ‘placebo effect,’ and so on” (2006: 46). In this sense, many of the papers in this special issue are “Tylorian.” Quack writes that, “the more things there are to be done right, the easier it is to explain individual failure of a ritual without doubting the procedure as a whole” (***). A similar point was advanced by Tylor and

systematized later by Skorupski under the label of “blocks to falsifiability” (1976: 5).

5. Quack argues that sound, light, and smell helped to induce visions and altered states of consciousness in which the practitioner or his medium found the answers they were seeking. The incense might also have worked as a drug, inducing hallucinations, while the general “sensory deprivation as well as sensory overload” might have induced trance.

6. Other approaches to which Samuel objects along the way are the “cognitive approach” in anthropology (originating in Dan Sperber’s and Pascal Boyer’s work) and what he calls “positivist” and “scientist” positions. Samuel sees the latter as exemplified by the movement of Evidence-Based Medicine. Characteristic for this group, according to Samuel, is the claim “that there can be only one truth, and that if one model is successful all other models are valueless.” Against such a perspective Samuel sides with people like Thomas Kuhn, Michael Mulkey, Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway.

7. The postulation of an unseparated body-mind level raises several complex questions about this notorious dichotomy. A detailed discussion of Samuel’s contribution would not only require an extended engagement with his book *Mind, Body and Culture: Anthropology and the Biological Interface* (1990) and his subsequently published articles on that matter but also, as Samuel puts it in this paper, with the “structure of the English language and the habits of Western discourse”. For now, we merely note his assurance that the “modal-state language provides a more detailed account of how one might describe such processes (Samuel 1990)”.

8. In a larger frame Samuel is working across two dichotomies, that between mind and body and that between the individual and the social. The interrelated problems in this respect are discussed extensively in his book *Mind, Body and Culture* (1990).

References

- Beattie, J. H. M.
1986 On Understanding Ritual. In Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 240–268.
- Bell, Catherine M.
1992 *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Quack, Johannes
2009 Bell, Bourdieu and Wittgenstein on Ritual Sense. In William S. Sax, Johannes Quack and Jan Weinhold (eds.), *Ritual Efficacy?* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Raguram, R.
2002 Traditional Community Resources for Mental Health: A Report of Temple Healing from India. *British Medical Journal* 325:38–40.
- Sax, William, Johannes Quack, and Jan Weinhold
2009 *Ritual Efficacy?* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Skorupski, John
1976 *Symbol and theory, a philosophical study of theories of religion in social anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr.
- Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja
2006 [1990] *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Biographical Sketch

Johannes Quack studied Religious Studies, Philosophy and Anthropology at the Universities of Bayreuth, Edinburgh and Heidelberg. Currently he is working as a lecturer at the Department of Religious Studies as well as at the Department of Anthropology, South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg. His PhD on “rationalist” and anti-religious movements in India is sponsored by the *Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes*, he is part of the Collaborative Research Centre “Dynamics of Ritual” (SFB 619 “Ritualdynamik”) and edited with William Sax and Jan Weinhold the volume *Ritual Efficacy?* (OUP, New York, 2009).

William Sax completed his PhD in Anthropology from the University of Chicago in 1987. After two years at Harvard University, he fulfilled a lifelong dream by moving to New Zealand, where he taught Anthropology and Religious Studies for eleven years before taking up the Professorship in Anthropology at the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg, Germany. He has published extensively on popular Hinduism, ritual theatre, women and religion, and ritual healing. He is currently Professor and Head of the Department of Anthropology at the South Asia Institute, and Co-ordinator of the Research Area *Health and Environment* at the Karl Jaspers Centre.