Questioning "Ritual Efficacy"

Johannes Quack & Paul Töbelmann

Abstract

This paper highlights the importance of making explicit claims and statements about efficacy in the study of ritual. It argues against any general account of ritual efficacy, given that all kinds of actions can be ritualized without adding thereby a specific efficacy sui generis. To situate their position in the history of ritual theory Quack and Töbelmann first take stock of some of the most influential positions in this field (Frazer; Durkheim; Tambiah) and stress their commonalities and differences.

The authors then put forward their own "interpretive grid", establishing a series of questions as a necessary precondition of any attempt to form a comprehensive statement about ritual efficacy. While the *efficiens* (that which brings about a change in ritual) and the *efficiendum* (that which is acted upon in ritual) are important parts of any such statement, other significant categories are the *sphere* in which a ritual is assumed to take effect, the *means* by which it is said to be efficacious, and the *conditions* which it must assertedly meet. Of further importance is the perspectivity of such a statement and the special role of the intentions of the ritual practitioners, given that rituals are understood as a species of the genus action.

In a final section, Quack and Töbelmann apply their "interpretive grid" to Catherine Bell's influential monograph *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992). They show how Bell's ideas are built on mostly implicit notions of ritual efficacy. Explicating these notions, the authors not only find Bell's thought subtly influenced by Durkheimian ideas (notwithstanding her claims to the contrary). They also develop an understanding of two mutually dependent levels on which Bell finds ritualization to be efficacious.

Introduction[1]

Certain questions concerning the problem of ritual efficacy are notorious. Do people who perform rain dances actually attempt to produce rain? Is it better to analyse the efficacy of rituals as "expressive" or "symbolic" rather than "instrumental"? Can the efficacy of a healing ritual be explained as analogous to the efficacy of an illocutionary speech act? Can rituals generally be conceived of as inefficacious actions, or is this only an unspoken presupposition of some ritual theories? In what ways—if any—does the efficacy of ritualized actions differ from the efficacy of other kinds of actions? Is it reasonable to assume that the answer to the question, "Why are rituals performed?" has to do with their efficacy, their ability to actually effect changes in the world? All these questions are related to the observation that many rituals are seen by analysts as actions that fail to accomplish the ends for which, according to their practitioners, they are performed. Emily Ahern (now Emily Martin), in her article *The Problem of Ritual*

Efficacy (1979), calls this the "problem of efficacy," viz., "For some cases, we might want to say participants think their rituals have a certain effect; in actuality the effect they have is quite different" (1979: 6).

Rain dances do not necessarily have an impact on the weather, nor do healing rituals necessarily eliminate the patient's symptoms.[2] Should we then say that these rituals are ineffective? What is actually held to be affected by the ritual, and by whom? Some might argue that a particular healing ritual is ineffective if it fails to reduce the patient's symptoms. Others may hold that symptom-reduction is not a necessary condition for ritual success, and that there are other things the healing ritual in question has actually accomplished. Some anthropologists might claim that the practitioner's aim is to "heal the soul" of the patient while others might say that healing rituals primarily "heal social relations" by resolving disputes over land, inheritance or social station. What, then, is the relationship between different assessments of ritual efficacy

and the intentions of the people performing the rituals? The main contention of this essay is that with respect to "ritual efficacy" it is of the utmost importance to be as precise as possible about what affects what, how, and according to whom. We will show the complexity involved in such an attempt, and argue that unless one does justice to these complexities, the vague and indeterminate notion of "ritual efficacy" should be dropped.

All theories of ritual—implicitly or explicitly—adopt a perspective on ritual efficacy, including those that dismiss the issue. But much of the work done in the field of ritual studies seems to tacitly pursue rather specific notions of what ritual does and how. These notions greatly influence possible results and are strongly interconnected with the methods used. This finding notwithstanding, the question of ritual efficacy has rarely been explicitly raised.[3] Therefore, this article has two interrelated aims. On the one hand we aim to trace aspects of Emile Durkheim's influence on ritual theory. This becomes visible most clearly with regard to ritual efficacy. On the other hand, we will highlight the complexity of the problem of ritual efficacy. The first aim we pursue primarily by discussing Durkheim's influence on Tambiah's notion of "performative efficacy" and "conventional acts." To reach our second goal, we will discuss the central terms "effect" and "efficacy". This discussion leads to a framework of questions which we hope will provide a guideline to help us understand and criticize explicit and implicit statements about ritual efficacy. The interpretive grid we will propose is intended to be an instrument that can be used to identify the assumptions of any theorist regarding ritual efficacy, a claim we will illustrate by applying it to Catherine Bell's position on ritual. At first, however, a brief and selective summary of the history of the problem of ritual efficacy will set the scene for our discussion.

Intellectualists, Symbolists and Performativity

In anthropology the earliest explicit positions on ritual efficacy were those of Sir Edward B. Tylor and Sir James Frazer, leading figures of a group of anthropologists latter dubbed the "intellectualists."[4] Frazer became famous for his positions on magic, science, and religion, as outlined in his voluminous work *The Golden Bough* (1993 [First ed. two vols. *1890*]). He understood religion as "a propitiation or conciliations of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life" (1993: 50). In contrast to religion, science and magic assume "that in nature one event follows another necessarily and invariably without the intervention of any spiritual or personal agency." Frazer felt it important to add that the "fatal flaw of magic lies not

in its general assumption of a sequence of events determined by law, but in its total misconception of the nature of the particular laws which govern that sequence" (ibid: 49).[5] Frazer did not develop a specific notion of ritual, but used the expressions ritual, rite, and ceremony as synonyms. Although rituals could be found in the realm of religion, Frazer's main focus was on ritual as an aspect of magic. The characteristics of primitive or magical rituals are, amongst others, that (a) the performers are not drawn from any special class of persons, (b) nor are special places set aside for the performance of the rites, and (c) the magical rituals "are believed to influence the course of nature directly through physical sympathy or resemblance between the rite and the effect which is the intention of the rite to produce" (ibid: 411). In contrast to religious rituals, magical rituals are indifferent as to whether they invoke an agent or an inanimate thing. For the intellectualists, the people who perform a magical ritual conceive of their actions as a means to influence the course of nature. So, rain dancers do indeed expect the weather to change as a consequence of their actions (unless interfering factors are at work). According to Frazer, they are simply wrong.

Emile Durkheim developed a rather different approach to religion, magic, and rituals. He insisted that in order to understand rituals, the emphasis must be shifted from the individual to social context. Rituals are to be explained and interpreted in terms of particular social contexts, not universal human psychology. Religion, according to Durkheim, is an effect of social life, but it also symbolizes the structures and processes that constitute a given social environment. It is functional with respect to society, and therefore to the people, because it provides the moral foundation without which society could not exist.

In his classic work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim argued that religious phenomena fall into two basic categories: beliefs and rites:

> The first are states of opinion and consist of representations; the second are determined modes of action. Between these two classes of facts there is all the difference which separates thought from action (1965: 51).

His main aim in this respect was to study rituals as symbolic expressions and to analyze their social functions. The distinction between 'religion' and 'magic' is set up by Durkheim quite differently from the intellectualists: for him, religion is something collective in its origins and its social function; it is collective, but "there is no church of magic" (ibid: 50) because magic pertains to the individual. It is important, nevertheless, to see precisely where he agrees and disagrees with the position of the intellec-

tualists. In fact, Durkheim agrees that the distinction true/false is important to ritual theory. While the explanatory beliefs stated by ritual practitioners are usually wrong, science discovers the true reasons for the ritual actions of the practitioners:

> The most barbarous and the most fantastic rites and the strangest myths translate some human need, some aspect of life, either individual or social. The reasons with which the faithful justify them may be, and generally are, erroneous; but the true reasons do not cease to exist, and it is the duty of science to discover them (ibid: 15).

He charges that the intellectualists take the position of the practitioners literally, and that this leads to a consideration of the "apparent" or "physical efficacy" of rituals only, while ignoring their "real" or "moral efficacy," which is of much greater importance to him (ibid: 402). To quote but one of many passages in which he develops this opposition between an "apparent" and a "real" efficacy of rituals:

> The real function of a rite does not consist in the particular and definite effects which it seems to aim at and by which it is ordinarily characterized (…) the real function of the cult is to awaken within the worshippers a certain state of soul (…). Thus the apparent efficacy will seem to change while the real efficacy remains invariable" (ibid: 431).

Thus, for Durkheim, though the people who perform rituals have an account of what they do, this is of secondary interest to the scientific observer, who establishes their "true reasons" for performing ritual actions by establishing the "real efficacy" of their ritual actions. The position of Durkheim was central for the establishment of two very different kinds of efficacy, namely, symbolic and instrumental efficacy.[6] This opposition was at the centre of the so-called "rationality debate"[7] and has, in various versions, continued in anthropology to the present day either by equating "symbolism" with an exclusive focus on rituals as "expressive"[8] or for a set of reasons that are perhaps best exemplified in Stanley Tambiah's well-known discussion of the "performative approach" to ritual.

Tambiah claimed to solve a "classical anthropological chestnut that has exercised, to give a few examples, the minds of Tylor, Frazer, Evans-Pritchard, and, more recently, Horton" (1981: 128) by criticizing explanations of ritual as "expressive/symbolic" as opposed to "instrumental." Tambiah tried to overcome this opposition through the notion of performativity, where "performance" was regarded as having *both* expressive *and* in-

strumental aspects (cf. Kippenberg 1995: 265). The concept of performativity is discussed at length in his article "A Performative approach to Ritual" (1981), reprinted in his book *Culture, Thought and Social Action*, where Tambiah emphasises the conventionality of ritual acts as opposed to "ordinary" behaviour, where an "intentionality theory of meaning" is supposed to be appropriate for the latter and not the former (1985: 132). While an extended discussion of "conventionality" and "intentionality" in the realm of ritual theory will have to take place elsewhere it will suffice in this article to raise the question whether Tambiah succeeds in overcoming the opposition "expressive/symbolic" vs. "instrumental." Adapting aspects of Austin's *How to do Things with Words* (1971 [1962]) Tambiah states that

> ritual acts and magical rites are of the "illocutionary" or "performative" sort, which simply by virtue of being enacted (under the appropriate conditions) achieve a change of state, or do something effective.

And he adds:

> The performative aspect of the rite should be distinguished from its locutionary (referential, information-carrying) and perlocutionary (consequences for the participants) features (1985: 79).

The separation of the (perlocutionary, instrumental) consequences of a ritual for the participants from its (illocutionary, conventional) "performative" aspect constitutes the core of Tambiah's explanation of the efficacy of ritual actions (understood as "constitutive acts") as far as he relies on Austin's insights. He states that

> there are also constitutive acts which, although they realize their performative dimension, may yet be uncertain of realizing their expected perlocutionary effects. A classic example is curing rituals in case of spirit possession, which, though performatively valid, may or may not induce a cure in the patient" (ibid: 135).

In cases like this Tambiah adds the instrumentality ("perlocutionary effects") of a curing ritual to its "performative dimension" and we understand this as a replacement of the notions of symbolism and expressivity with his concept of performativity,[9] all the while maintaining its opposition to instrumental efficacy, which Tambiah prefers to call "technical-causal" efficacy most of the time.[10] He further accuses what he sees as the "main-line tradition" in anthropology — "Tylor, Frazer, Evans-Pritchard, and

more recently, Horton"—of judging "rites solely against the perspective and truth canons of Western scientific rationality" (1985: 135). If adherents of this tradition

> insist on seeing magical rites as acts launched by the actors to achieve practical results by suspending the laws of motion and force as we understand these laws in modern physics, then obviously such acts must be declared false. But insofar as anthropologists are open to the proposition that magical rites are *conventional acts* which should be examined within a performative frame of social action, then a new horizon opens for viewing the logic of such purposive acts and the canons for their validity from the actors' point of view (1985: 136—emphasis ours).

In our view, Tambiah's perspective leads to several problems. First of all, "the actor's point of view" regarding their own rituals is sometimes based precisely on the will "to achieve practical results by suspending the laws of motion and force as we understand these laws".[11] A second problem is that Tambiah himself provides his performative explanations only in cases where "the perspective and truth canons of Western scientific rationality" tell him that a technical-causal explanation will not work. In a first, implicit step, our Western standards of verification sort the "rational" from the "irrational" practices. In a second step, these "irrational" practices are 'rescued' from the stigma of irrationality by the concept of performative efficacy. Tambiah's separation of the "performative dimension" from the actors' aim "to achieve practical results", i.e. "inducing cure in the patient", resembles Durkheim's attempt to look for "real function" and "true reasons" of ritual actions opposed to reasons the actors themselves give. Like Durkheim (and, indeed, like so many ritual theorists), Tambiah replaces the "erroneous" indigenous model with his own, exogenous model since "the reasons with which the faithful [actors] justify them may be, and generally are, erroneous" (all quotes above).[12]

Our position is, firstly, that most people do not distinguish between instrumental and other (symbolic, expressive, performative) kinds of actions when it comes to actions that are commonly labelled as "ritual". Secondly we hold that if a ritual is performed in order to effect a cure, then the actors' point of view concerning its efficacy is as instrumental as it would be in the case of taking medicine. Such a perspective looks at the intentions of the actors in order to explain the coherence and rationality of magical and ritual practices according to the actors' point of view, i.e. without making statements about the truth-value of the underlying premises. Even though

Tambiah claims to open a "new horizon" for "viewing the logic of such purposive acts and the canons for their validity from the actors' point of view" (1985:136) he fails to do so, because he opposes and privileges an exogenous perspective ("conventions") over an indigenous one ("intentions") and reproduces the opposition between instrumental and symbolic efficacy.

We will return to the Durkheimian heritage in Tambiah and the discussion of the efficacy of "conventional acts" below. It is, however, necessary first to differentiate the complexities involved by introducing more specific questions with respect to the notion of "ritual efficacy."

Questions Regarding Ritual Efficacy

To understand how rituals might be efficacious, it is necessary to be clear about the terms used. Effect, effectiveness, efficaciousness, efficacy, side-effect and consequence are all pertinent here, as are ineffectiveness, inefficacy, and inconsequentiality. We wish to limit ourselves to a discussion of "effect" and "efficacy" since no more differentiation is needed for the problems at hand.

An *effect* is usually understood as the *actual* result of a cause. For the time being it can be said with respect to ritual that an effect of a ritual is that which is causally linked to the ritual. Such effects of the performance of a ritual are potentially infinite. The effects of a marriage ceremony in a church can include, among others, the following: the establishment of a kinship relation; a decrease in the number of oxygen molecules in the church; the earning of a small amount of money by the organist; the community's being blessed by the priest; the elevation of a bridesmaid's status amongst her peers; and so on. Most such effects are usually beyond dispute.

An alternative point to make is to say that an effect of a ritual is that which is *asserted* as causally linked to the ritual by its performers, participants, witnesses and/or researchers. This differentiation between *actual* and *asserted* efficacy brings us straight to the problem of ritual efficacy: What about a couple being transformed into a new ontological state before God through a marriage ceremony? Or what about the claim of the rain dancers that the weather changes as a consequence of their ritual performances? Here, it seems, one cannot avoid acknowledging that the distinction false/true is important to ritual theory as put before by Frazer and as implicit in the position of Durkheim and Tambiah. This differentiation is central for the "problem of ritual efficacy" introduced above, i.e. when rituals are seen by analysts as actions that fail to accomplish the ends for which, according to their practitioners, they are performed. But—as we want to argue here—the distinction false/true is neither impor-

tant for a differentiation between "effect" and "efficacy" nor for our aim to speak of ritual efficacy relative to the interests of some agent.

Our proposition for the usage of the notion of (ritual) efficacy as follows: *efficacy* refers only to some effects—whether they are actual or only asserted effects. To state that a ritual is efficacious is to relate a particular effect or set of effects to the intentions, expectations and/or perceived functions of the ritual. Such statements are always necessarily relative to the perspective of the respective agent.

This is a two-step process: first, a phenomenon is identified or postulated to be an effect of the ritual, usually implying some form of causality. At the same time this effect is connected with certain notions of what the ritual in question is supposed to do—be these in the intention of its operators and participants, in the expectations of witnesses, in historical explanations, or in the functions ascribed to it by researchers (which should cover just about everyone likely to comment on a given ritual at all). The statement that is produced is one about the ritual's effects in relation to some model regarding what "should" have happened. Efficacy is perceived in degrees: great or small, total or absent.

Thinking about ritual efficacy entails picking and choosing among the myriad of effects a ritual is asserted to have. It is all about picking and choosing which aspects of ritual one wishes to identify in a statement about efficacy. It comes as no surprise that usually the most important difference in this regard is that between academic observer and native practitioner. This difference reflects a number of discrepancies in belief about the workings of the world in general and the focus of the ritual in particular. One difference between observers' and practitioners' perspectives can be crucial, namely that the practitioners' beliefs about the effects of a ritual, in the context of their desires, provides a sufficient reason to perform it, but this might not the case for the observer.[13] It is, however, not at all necessary to make statements about the truth-value of the underlying beliefs about the effects of a ritual in order to understand why people hold such beliefs in the first place and how these beliefs are reason enough for them to perform ritualized actions.

A simple question suffices to summarize all of the above considerations concerning ritual efficacy: "In ritual, what or who affects what or whom and according to whom?" This seems to be the baseline. One cannot talk about ritual efficacy without providing answers to this triple question. There always needs to be something or somebody that produces some important change for ritual to be efficacious: the *efficiens*. And there always needs to be something that is acted upon in ritual: the *efficiendum*. Finally, there needs to be an interpreting observer to ascribe the quality of efficacy to the ritual in question. *Efficiens* and *efficiendum* are for logical and language reasons—"to affect" is a two-place predicate—necessary compounds of theories of efficacy in general. As such these two are also necessary for ritual theory in general, except perhaps for those who would hold that ritual does not affect anything at all.[14]

Yet in many cases, to understand any given perspective on ritual efficacy much more is needed. For example, a researcher might be very much in agreement with a practitioner that the healing ritual they have just witnessed cured a patient of his illness. Both would assert that the shaman's actions (the *efficiens*) affected the patient (the *efficiendum*). But the shaman ascribes the ritual's efficacy to the spirits, who were placated by the offerings made: since the spirits have been reconciled to the patient, they no longer plague him with bad dreams and hallucinations. The researcher, on the other hand, is certain that the ritual addressed certain anxieties rooted in the patient's psyche and removed their origin. How do we account for these differences in perspective? The healing that was witnessed by both shaman and researcher referred to different "spheres" or "levels" of efficacy. The shaman's understanding is concerned with what we call here—only for the sake of the argument—the "spiritual sphere". The spirits are what caused the patient's condition, and any ritual action taken to remedy it must take place in their sphere. For the shaman, the healing ritual was efficacious solely on a spiritual level. The researcher's position, on the other hand, is concerned with the individual's psyche. Thus, the researcher in this example locates the efficacy on the level of psychology. It follows that the sphere or level at which a ritual is efficacious might be relevant for statements on ritual efficacy.[15]

In a similar vein one could distinguish among different means by which a ritual can be said to be efficacious. In our example, the shaman may have used singing, dancing and herbs to induce a trance-like state in the patient. In the shaman's perspective, this trance-like state was not instrumental in healing the patient—it was merely a prerequisite to get in touch with the spirits. The means of making the ritual efficacious was, to the shaman, the attitude of the spirits, as mediated or altered by the offering that placated them. Of course this offering had to be made using the proper forms, which happen to include trance. A researcher might agree that it was the offerings that were the instrument of ritual efficacy in this case: they were symbolic to the patient and helped him sublimate his anxieties.[16] Making offerings was instrumental in the purely psychological process that healed the patient. A different researcher might agree that the ritual

took effect on a psychological level, while still asserting that it was not the offerings but the dance, singing and ultimately the trance, as well as the presence of the community, which allowed the patient to tackle the roots of his problems. This distinction should serve to make clear what we intend by the term *means*, as opposed to *sphere* or *level*, of ritual efficacy.

There is in our view one final, particularly helpful question that can be asked of a statement about ritual efficacy. Certain *conditions* are often perceived as necessary for a ritual to be efficacious. These include the places where and times when a ritual is performed, but also other variables of context, such as the status of certain performers or participants. The way in which these variables of context influence the ritual's efficacy can vary, too. To stick with our example, the shaman might state that the ritual cannot be efficacious in healing the patient if the patient's relatives are not present, for the spirits are ancestral ghosts tied to the whole family. The researcher may accept this idea in part, but rather connect the necessity of the family's presence with the patient's psychological need to address certain problems that have arisen from personal relations between the relatives. Other conditions might seem absolutely necessary to the shaman and totally meaningless to the researcher, such as the time of day or the color of the sacrificial goat's hair.

So we end up with the following questions that should be asked of every statement about ritual efficacy:

1. Who or what is held to be efficacious in the ritual? (*efficiens*)
2. What is held to be affected in the ritual? (*efficiendum*)

These are the necessary questions, the ones that define any statement about ritual efficacy to a large degree. They are supplemented by further questions that need to be asked in order to specify particular statements about ritual efficacy, viz.,

3. In what sphere/on what level is the ritual efficacious?
4. By what means is the ritual efficacious?
5. Under which conditions is the ritual efficacious?

But the five questions posed by us are not as clear-cut as it might seem. Each of them can be further broken down. For example, it is important to note that the media in which the means of ritual efficacy are employed play a role about which it is hard to generalize. The words of a spell can be employed in the form of singing or chanting, but they can also be written down or inscribed in a ritual object. This is one of many instances in which the broad categorization given here must be enhanced by detailed distinctions.

The problem is that most theorists who have addressed the question of ritual efficacy have remained at too general a level. Our argument is that any discussion of ritual efficacy only makes sense if this vague, indeterminate notion is more clearly specified. All this goes to show how complex and far-reaching a statement about ritual efficacy actually is. It should provide more or less consistent answers to all these questions, and probably several more that we did not see fit to include here. Hence asking these questions not only systematizes but also problematizes any discussion of ritual efficacy. Because of the complexities involved we do not ourselves attempt to come up with a new theory of ritual efficacy. Rather, we want to suggest how one can break down statements about ritual efficacy, by developing and applying a set of questions. We will be giving an example of how this can be applied in the final part of this paper, where we will undertake to demonstrate the uses and limits of this pattern, by identifying and deconstructing Catherine Bell's approach to ritual as practice.

It may seem to the reader that these questions can be asked about all kinds of human actions. This impression is correct, and it is connected to our general understanding that ritual or ritualized actions cannot be seen as a category *sui generis*, which is set apart from other social phenomena and only to be studied on its own.[17] Instead, we see ritual as a part of human action in general, and hence no less defined by its concern with efficacy than any other human action. However, there are theories about ritual efficacy which try to establish that it is subject to a specific logic relating cause and effect, a logic that is peculiar to (and only to) ritual. Following Tambiah's lead, such theories (e.g. those of Moore and Myerhoff and Sørensen) often put particular emphasis not on causal relations, but on the conventional aspect of the speech-act as set out in a different context by J. L. Austin.

The influence and appeal of Tambiah's application of Austin's framework rests on the view that some actions seem to have a sort of "constitutive efficacy", which means that they are constitutive of the transitions they bring about. The utterance (by the right person, under the right circumstances, etc.) of the sentence "I pronounce you husband and wife" is not the mere description of a relationship, but actually brings about that which it describes. A Vedic sacrifice, for example, is said to be bring about a desired transformation by simply performing it.[18] The same could be said for the transforming words during the holy communion of the Catholic Church. Further it is claimed that some magic spells bring about a desired transformation by nothing more than uttering ("performing") them. In Sørensen's words:

Austin's illocutionary acts provide a good basis for a theory of ritual; they may explain at least part of what is hidden in Hubert and Mauss's 'efficacy *sui generis*'. For an illocutionary act must by definition be efficacious […]. Furthermore, it is efficacious not only in the sense of a local confidence that it works, but it does in fact work, and all it needs in order to work is the local agreement that this is the way to do it (2006: 526).

Sørensen's statement rests on Tambiah's work, where rituals are seen as "conventional acts"; it boils down to saying that getting rid of ghosts, or healing through a ritual performance, is merely a conventional transition or a "local agreement".[19] This relates to Austin's argument that an illocutionary act is "felicitous" (not "effective") if it effects the transition from one conventionally defined state to another.[20] In opposition to this we argue that it makes sense to ask of a curing ritual why it went wrong, since this is central for those who perform it. We are aware of the fact that not all changes between conventional states are necessarily to be seen as matters of cause and effect.[21] We want to draw attention here to those cases where conventions can be seen as conditions of efficacy, which are necessary for a relationship between *efficiens* and *efficiendum*. A prominent example for this is a Catholic marriage ceremony. Here two perspectives are usually taken. To the truly believing couple, the *efficiens* which joined them in marriage is divine grace, conferred by the priest in the performance of the sacrament of matrimony.[22] In this "insider's" perspective, conventionality never enters the picture (given that this "inside perspective" is independent of the question whether the couple would say that their marriage is *also* a socially-recognized convention). However, an "outside perspective" that does not rest on the belief in God will probably put the couple's faith and the priest's actions down under "convention." Such a position could for example be in line with Sørensen's and Tambiah's application of Austin's illocutionary acts to ritual theory. From this "outside perspective" the conventions of the catholic community, reflected in the couple's faith, can be described as the *efficiens* that makes the priest's actions efficacious. Yet, if one aims to include the "actors' point of view" it has to be emphasised again that the outsider's description of the couples faith as "conventional" is inappropriate.

Moore and Myerhoff have tried to characterise a related problem by the opposition between doctrinal and operational efficacy:

What Moore calls the *doctrinal efficacy* of religious ritual is provided by the explanations a religion it-

self gives of how and why ritual works. The explanation is within the religious system and is part of its internal logic. […] It lacks the dimension of outcome or consequences which is attributed to *operational efficacy*. Results, success, failure are part of the operational effects of a ritual. These are empirical questions (1977: 12).[23]

We hold that the fact that "the explanation is within the religious system" does not change how one would go about explaining ritual efficacy. Instead, we would make the point that "the explanations a religion itself gives" can be seen as the *efficiens* in this case, while the *efficiendum* is simply another part of the doctrine, no matter whether the doctrine as such is true or false. Note that a doctrine *about* efficacy is not a kind of efficacy but a kind of doctrine; while "operational efficacy" is neither a form of operation nor a form of efficacy, but a way of designating the *causal* consequences of a ritual that matter to an observer. "The explanations a religion itself gives" are what motivates faith and its effects on, say, a Catholic's belief. Whether one argues that the sacrament of marriage constitutes an ontological transformation of the relationship between the couple or a mere matter of conventions: both can be described concisely by applying the framework outlined above.

We have suggested a framework in which questions about ritual efficacy could be posed. We further problematized any attempt to make statements about ritual efficacy by highlighting the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the term "efficacy" and the complexities involved in making explicit what one holds to be efficacious, and on what, in ritual (*explanans* and *explanandum*). Yet, our framework helps also to find (sometimes implicit) statements about ritual efficacy in the works of other scholars. We propose to use our framework to assist in this picking-apart of works of scholarship. As an example, we have chosen Catherine Bell's rather complicated meditations as a playing field. Her theorizing was meant to open a door for research about ritual, and to do away with unrealistic assumptions, oversimplification, and "false dichotomies". But actually Bell did establish a ritual theory of her own, which was, on many levels and in many ways, fraught with considerations of ritual efficacy. Because the analysis of Bell's theory will go into greater detail than the above discussion of other scholars, we have divided it into several short sections that address specific questions. After this, we attempt to show how Bell's complex theory can be broken down into simple arguments using the five questions.

Catherine Bell's Approach to Ritual Efficacy

Preliminaries

In her 1992 monograph, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell criticized the way in which supposedly basic distinctions and categorizations had hampered general understanding of ritual behaviour.[24] In particular, she inveighed against the distinction between thought and action, where the former is the preserve of the ritual analyst and the latter of the unreflective insider. She argued that there needed to be more awareness of the linkages between ritual and other human activity. To this end, she turned to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice. These ponts then provided her with a way of thinking about ritual acts that satisfied her need for a more comprehensive use of the concept of ritual: namely, that ritual is not deed as opposed to thought, nor does it create a bridge between these ostensibly separated realms. Rather, it incorporates both in a way that makes it fruitless, even dangerous, to separate them at all, albeit in a purely analytical fashion. Her aim is to make use of Bourdieu's approach, and understand ritual activity as the result of the practice of ritualization — or better, as *one* result of ritualization, since Bell does not stop here. Apart from applying Bourdieu's concept of practice along with his conception of human habitus, she also works out a complete, if still somewhat sketchy, mechanism of how ritual(ization) might work in practice. This move was founded on the idea that ritualization does not (only) do what is ascribed to it from the native point of view — e.g. placating gods, marrying people, purifying the spirit — but something on a whole different level of analysis: that it produces, reproduces, and reconfigures power relations. Keeping in mind our objective, the analysis of ritual theories in accordance with our ideas on ritual efficacy, this presents a challenge. We will now try to show, however, that it merely adds a further level of intricacy to our observations — one that will hopefully prove more of a boon than a hindrance. To this end, we must first explain Bell's approach in more detail, especially with respect to ritual efficacy. Second, we will discuss the different levels of ritual efficacy that are implicit in her model. Third, the questions we have outlined above will be put to the test in a concise analysis of Bell's overall understanding of ritual efficacy. The paper will be rounded up with some general concluding remarks.

Practice

Practice is arguably the most important term in Bell's theoretical lexicon. Unfortunately, its common usage is also highly ambiguous and often seems to strengthen the basic dichotomization between thought and deed that Bell has set out to overcome (Bell 1992: 75–79). Taking more than one page from Pierre Bourdieu's book *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (2002, [1977]), Bell claims that "practice must be taken as a nonsynthetic and irreducible term for human activity" (1992: 81). Practice, while not actually defined by Bell herself at any point in her 1992 work, can be understood as following Bourdieu's notion of a dialectical relationship between an objectified, structured environment and the social activity of people (1992: 78; Bourdieu 2002: 3, 79, 87). Bell is most interested in what a theory of ritual as practice has to offer. She puts it like this:

> [T]he study of ritual as practice has meant a basic shift from looking at activity as the expression of cultural patterns to looking at it as that which makes and harbors such patterns.... [P]ractice theorists tend to explore how ritual is a vehicle for the *construction* of relationships of authority and submission (1997: 82; original italics).

Studying ritual as practice means studying what ritual "really" does, on a deeply sociological level. Ritualization, then, is efficacious in that it constructs and/or reconfigures the society — in Bourdieuian terms, the field — in which it takes place.[25] The reader will already suspect that Bell follows some of the notions established by Durkheim. The idea that ritual is all about constructing hierarchies as opposed to, say, marrying a couple or healing a patient, supports this suspicion. But before we go into this further, it will be well to develop an understanding of Bell's central stipulation: the sense of ritual.

Sense of ritual

The reconfiguration of the society through ritual practice is, according to Bell, rooted in its power in and over the body. In practice, it is the individual's socially informed body that acts and is acted upon. The body is informed by its own cultural habitus, as well as its environment as perceived by its senses (1992: 80). For Bourdieu, the socially informed body encompasses all the traits and quirks that make up an individual-within-society. Its senses include all "tastes and distastes, compulsions and repulsions" (2002: 124) that grow over time, adding to the traditional five powers of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. The socially informed body develops additional senses with which it gauges socially constructed categories such as beauty, justice, or even business opportunities. For Bell, it is clear that "in most societies the 'sense of ritual' would be a vital addition to this list" (1992: 80).

It is this ritual sense that enables ritualization to work—and that is in turn created by it. Ritualization's main function is, in the first instance, to set a ritualized activity apart from everyday activity. It follows that ritualization must (meta-) communicate, in the act of ritualizing, that ritualization is taking place right here, right now. This is closely connected to the concept of *framing* as developed by Gregory Bateson and others (Bateson 1973: 157–163; 1991). Ritualization, given a voice, would say, "This is different, deliberate, and significant—pay attention!" (Bell 1997: 160).[26] The basic function of ritualization is to create a distinction between ritualized and non-ritualized, and thus, acceptable and unacceptable, ways of doing the task at hand (Bell 1992: 81f.).

The ritual sense is one of the central parts of Bell's argument, and it seems to be related to the logical distinction between *efficiens* and *efficiendum*. But what does Bell's ritual sense actually do? In ritualization, is it efficacious, a causer of effects, or is it affected, a receiver of effects? The answer to this simple question is complicated, for Bell, following Bourdieu, sees social action as a "dialectic" relationship. On one hand, ritual sense enables participants to create ritualized space, because without it, this space could not be perceived as ritualized. On the other hand, it confers the means, namely what Bell calls the "schemes"—another term borrowed from Bourdieu—of ritualization, to the performer. The distinction, the perceived extraordinary quality which an activity or situation derives from its ritualization, is dependent on the sense of ritual. Therefore, in one perspective, ritual sense can be seen as an *efficiendum* of ritualization, while the ritual-sense-imbued performance is the *efficiens*. But ritualization does not just set an activity or situation apart: according to Bell its main efficacy is sociological in nature. Thus, there is more than one level of efficacy that could be identified in her work. The conclusion that the ritual sense is the main *efficiendum* holds true for only *one* of the levels of ritual efficacy assumed by Bell—based on Bourdieu's concept of sense and aesthetics one might call it the "aesthetic level".

Ritual and Power

The sense of ritual not only lets the participant understand what is going on in a given ritualization, it also allows the individual to participate in an appropriate and meaningful way, and, to borrow Bell's term, "empowers" him (ibid: 181). This empowerment usually takes the form of what she calls "redemptive hegemony" (ibid: 83f.).[27] The empowerment takes the form of passive knowledge rooted in the ritualized body: each and every participant

in a ritualization knows what to expect, and how to act properly and productively.

This knowledge is an integral part of the individuals' ritual sense and leads to the production, reproduction and, sometimes, reconfiguration of power relations. For in the practice of ritualization, an activity is made out to be not only important, but significant, meaningful, and legitimate (ibid: 193–196). Thus, being able to apply the "schemes" of ritualization to an activity allows domination of the ritualized situation, provides a rule set tacitly followed by all participants—including the performer—and legitimizes that activity. For this reason, power relations constructed in ritualized space are likely to endure in the participants' understanding of social reality.

A second *level* of ritual efficacy has now opened up. The actors or performers still constitute the *efficiens*, but what they do in ritualization is not only to make their actions extraordinary, but also to use this conferred extraordinariness to bring about sociological effects. The *efficiendum* is no longer the individuals' ritual sense per se, but their understanding of how society is structured, and of their own role in this structure. Collectively spoken, one could also say that, on the sociological level, the *efficiendum* of ritualization is the sum of societal power relations addressed in it.

Understanding Schemes of Ritualization

The concept of redemptive hegemony is founded on the assertion that power structures displayed in ritualizations are perceived as universal truths of societal relationships by the practitioners. If this display were seen to be a mere product of ritualization, it would be nothing more than this: a mere show of power, not an activity instrumentally aimed at specific goals, e.g. marrying people or healing a patient. But to Bell one of the most fundamental features of human practice is that it is "embedded in a misrecognition of what it is in fact doing" (ibid: 81). This misrecognition is one that misinterprets "the relationship between its ends and its means in ways that promote its efficacy" (1997: 81). Practice is "known" to be the proper, acceptable way to act. And it is this "embodied knowledge" that is reflected in the individuals' ritual sense. Ritualization, to quote Bell again, "is a particularly 'mute' form of activity. It is designed to do what it does without bringing what it is doing across the threshold of discourse or systematic thinking" (1992: 93). It is the special "design" of ritual schemes which makes them usable to bring about the effects of ritualization: they are designed to promote the image of ritual practice being "useful" for instrumental purposes, while keeping their "real agenda"—namely, affecting power relations—hid-

den. Schemes of ritualization are, generally speaking, the *means* by which it is efficacious.[28]

Privileged Dichotomization and Encryption of Meaning

So how do schemes of ritualization work as a means to ritual efficacy? Bell's fundamental approach here is one that corresponds closely with that of the first part of *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. She holds that ritualization is founded on certain basic dichotomies, which she calls "privileged oppositions" (1992: 101). These she takes to be constructed in a way that facilitates further hierarchization (hence "privileged"). Ritualized space is structured by these oppositions that are then, in the course of ritual, reinterpreted as hierarchical differentiations. Spatial dichotomies like below/above, outside/inside, right/left, and so on are associated with dichotomous concepts outside ritual space. Such dichotomous concepts could be: mundane/spiritual; unclean/clean; female/male; outsider/member of the community; and so on. It is easy to see how these dichotomies can be turned into hierarchical systems. In ritualized space, they would be represented by the simpler, more tangible physical-spatial distinctions, which are perceived by the participants' sense of ritual. Furthermore, the relationship between two terms or principles, such as male-female, is understood as being homologous to another relationship between two principles, such as strong-weak, pure-impure, soul-body, spiritual-mundane, powerful-powerless, and so on.

This deferral of meaning is one in which one set of oppositions in ritual stands for another in daily life, not wholly unlike Radcliffe-Brown's "double oppositions" (for a summary, see Singer 1984: 11–14): in ritual, a purely logical or "symbolic opposition" is used in such a way that the participants unthinkingly insert a "structural opposition" of the natural world that is connected with it (see Radcliffe-Brown 1948: 234f.). According to Bell it is by this Derrida-like "endless *différence*", that is, endless deferral of meaning that never actually reaches a conclusion, that ritual can keep the lid on the secret of what it "really" does (1992: 104–107; cf. Derrida 1978 *passim*). The meaning of ritual is encrypted by many layers of meaningfulness that never arrive anywhere and thus allow ritualization as a practice to function. If this endless deferral of meaning is to function, there must be a certain amount of common understanding among the participants. Each step of meaning-deferral must occur automatically and unconsciously, and for this to happen, the participants must be embedded in similar semiotic fields (language, sym-bolism, body language, …). The existence of this semiotic common ground (which could be summarized as a shared "culture") seems to be the most significant *condition* for ritualization to function. This *condition* is quite independent of the *level* of efficacy, whether aesthetic-psychological or sociological. But it seems clear that Bell is mostly interested in the "real", i.e. sociological efficacy of ritualization. A shared ritual culture is therefore to be understood as a condition of bringing about social effects in ritual.

Summary of Bell's Theory with respect to Ritual Efficacy

Although one cannot but form the impression that Bell's approach is largely concerned with power relations (esp.1992: 131ff.), we want to stress that it is strongly related to general issues of ritual efficacy. From one perspective, Bell's assumed *efficiens* is ritualization as performed by those persons who manage to dominate a situation by ritualizing it. They are not aware of it, but the ritualization they enact confers power on them. From this perspective the object on which ritualization must have an effect to work is the commonly shared ritual sense. This is Bell's *efficiendum*, since ritualization acts on the ritual sense of everyone present. However, it does so only if there is enough common ground and if these individuals already possess an acute sense of ritual. Here the self-referentiality of ritualization in Bell's position becomes obvious. The sense of ritual is produced and producing by taking part in ritualization. Hence, ritualization is also its own object, in the sense that it leads the way to its next instance and therefore the ritual sense can be seen as the *efficiens* from another perspective.

Based on these observation one can see how ritualization works, i.e. is efficacious, on two distinct levels that are mutually dependent. First, ritualization works on the level of individual perception and misperception. Ritualization works by creating in the participants' perspective on actions a differentiation between the ritualized and the non-ritualized. These are never expressed clearly as such, but worked into a structuring of ritualized space, which in turn imprints itself on the participants' bodies—what we have called the *"aesthetic level"*.

On a more refined level, though, this efficaciousness of ritualization in individual bodies is the means to an end. Ritualized bodies in ritualized space make up a matrix of social hierarchies, and it is here that social change can be effected, since the differentiation between the ritualized and the non-ritualized is a distinction from which flow all the other privileged dichotomies in ritualized

space. Hence, the second level on which Bell finds ritual efficacy at work would have to be recognized as the fabric of hierarchy and authority in a given society: the "*sociological level*" of Bell's ritual efficacy.[29]

On both of these levels the most important independent variable in understanding ritualization would be the different "schemes" employed in specific ritualizations. These schemes can be read as generalized strategies of ritualization, or better yet as a kind of "practical mastery", to borrow Bourdieu's term. They are the *means* by which the success of a given ritualization can be ensured: depending on the situation and on the ritual sense of those present, the schemes employed in a ritualization make or break its efficacy. As discussed above, the most important schemes revolve around certain privileged dichotomizations and their involvement with semiotic systems. These are subject to great cultural variation, but we cannot pursue this matter here.

Finally, one might argue with respect to the *conditions* under which ritualization can be efficacious that all participants must be fitted with a ritual sense, and that this ritual sense must be largely convergent where important matters are concerned. At times Bell seems to imply that she does not consider this a necessity, e.g. when she talks about the construction of a ritual sense through participation in ritualizations. There must, however, be a sufficiently great common pool of cultural dispositions among all concerned for any one given ritualization to work.[30] Schemes of ritualization cannot function when the senses of ritual they modify and create are too diverse. Ritualization, for Bell, does not wholly cross cultural boundaries—although this crossing might be facilitated by taking part in cross-cultural ritualizations. In summary, one can say that Bell seems to understand the relation of ritualization to power relationships almost as a simple cause-and-effect one:

> Relationships of power are drawn from the social body and then reappropriated by the social body as experience. Specific relations of domination and subordination are generated and orchestrated by the participants themselves simply by participating. Within the intricacies of this objectification and embodiment lies the ability of ritualization to create social bodies in the image of relationships of power, social bodies that *are* these very relationships of power (1992: 206; original italics).

So, in comparison to our earlier examples, how does Bell tackle the "problem of efficacy" posed by Ahern? To repeat Ahern's phrase once more: "For some cases, we might want to say participants think their rituals have a certain effect; in actuality the effect they have is quite dif-

ferent" (1979: 6). It seems that Bell quite agrees that one can identify a dichotomy between what participants "think" ritual does, and what it does "in actuality". We have identified two *levels* on which ritualization, according to Bell, is efficacious: on an *aesthetic level*, ritualization is efficacious in that it addresses, manipulates and creates the participants' ritual sense. On a *sociological level*, it is efficacious in that it constructs, reconstructs and manipulates societal power structures. Another level remains completely uninvestigated, namely, the level that is directly concerned with the participants' perceptions of what they are doing. By introducing Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Bell can eliminate the participants' perspective from the equation: Since, in her opinion, ritualization is "embedded in a misrecognition of what it is in fact doing" (1992: 81), the actual (non-mis)recognition of what ritual is (supposedly) doing, as seen through the participants' eyes, goes missing. Thus, in certain crucial respects to do with efficacy, Bell seems to follow Durkheim.

Conclusion

We set out to show how the notion of ritual efficacy is—largely implicitly—constantly at work in the study of ritual. A brief discussion of the work of some of the most famous scholars in this field (Frazer, Durkheim, and Tambiah) showed how much they were struggling with the "problem of ritual efficacy": while Frazer was of the opinion that ritual, to put it bluntly, simply does not work, Durkheim tried to avoid the "problem of ritual efficacy" altogether. This, however, led to the unfortunate distinction between instrumental and symbolic/expressive efficacy. A variation of this problem shows prominently in Tambiah's work and also made an impact on other scholars such as Moore and Myerhoff and, most recently, Sørensen. We stressed the point that it is important to see how some authors in their positions try to get to "the actors' point of view" while others claim it is the "duty of science" to discover the "real efficacy".[31]

Besides tracing this line of theorizing, we argued that the efficacy of ritual is not different from the efficacy of other, more ordinary action. Rather than postulating an efficacy specific to ritual actions we proposed a set of five questions that can also be applied to other actions. The application of these specific questions to ritual efficacy makes obvious precisely where—to come back to one example we used—a researcher and a shaman, or two different researchers, differ. The anthropologist says that a healing ritual was efficacious because the family was united through the ritual, the

shaman says it was efficacious because the gods accepted the offerings, while a second researcher states that it was not efficacious because it did not remove the symptoms of the patient. Thus, very often we do not deal with "the problem of ritual efficacy" but with the problem of what "ritual efficacy" does and does not mean in each case, which we suggest to tackle by application of our five specific questions.

These considerations come together in our final discussion of Bell's position in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. We have shown that an application of our five specific questions can also help a great deal to analyze and unfold complex and multi-layered positions in regard to ritual efficacy such as Catherine Bell's.

Our five efficacy-related questions show the complexities involved in any statement about ritual efficacy. Our argument is that given these complexities, we should avoid the broad and general notion of "ritual efficacy" and instead ask more specific questions about specific rituals — as a species of the *genus* action — in the first place. Having said this we still hold that the application of the interpretative grid we proposed above is a helpful instrument to identify positions and problems in statements about rituals with respect to ritual efficacy. Our systematic way of questioning statements about ritual efficacy in other theories proved to be helpful. However, our analysis showed that general statements about ritual efficacy are highly questionable.

Endnotes

1. We would like to thank Don Gardner, William Sax, and Jan Weinhold for their very helpful critical reading and remarks on earlier versions of this paper.

2. In his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* (1993) Ludwig Wittgenstein charges Sir James Frazer with not taking seriously the context of ritual performances. The rain dance Frazer refers to is, for example, supposedly only danced during the rainy season. All the rituals we describe in this paper are more or less stripped of the specificities and complexities that figure prominently in good ethnographic descriptions of them. But this reduction serves our purpose, since we argue that even with respect to such simplified examples an attempt to give a precise attribution of ritual efficacy is highly questionable. In the complexities of social life the problems we outline here in the abstract are only further complicated.

3. Exceptions are besides Ahern's article "The Problem of Ritual Efficacy" (1979), for example Jesper Sørensen's "Efficacy" (2006), and Sax 2004, 2008a and 2008b — all strongly influenced by Tambiah's positions.

4. The term intellectualists refers to the fact that these scholars saw religion as an attempt to provide "intellectual" answers to a set of questions centrally involving specific intellectual operations such as observation, explanation, etc. These intellectual operations, grounded in our basic cognitive capacities, were further asserted to be universal, part of the common heritage of human beings.

5. Skorupski argues that the analytical aim of Tylor "that we ought always to look for practical and intelligible motives for the habits and opinions we find existing in the world" ([1866: 86] quoted Skorupski 1976: 3) can be separated from the question whether these motives are based on true or false beliefs about the world. We argue that this is possible, but it is clear that Tylor's and — even more so — Frazer's rhetoric focussed on the falsity of most "primitive beliefs".

6. Other famous symbolists include e.g. Leach, who, in his book *Culture and Communication*, distinguishes "technical actions, which serve to alter the physical state of the world out there — digging a hole in the ground, boiling an egg," from "expressive actions, which either simply say something about the state of the world as it is, or else purport to change it by metaphysical means" (1976:

22). In *The Forest of Symbols* (1967) Victor Turner writes: "By 'ritual' I mean prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers. The symbol is the smallest unit of ritual" (1967: 19). Radcliffe-Brown, to give another well known example, writes in his *Frazer Lecture on Taboo* (1939) that "all ritual acts differ from technical acts in having in all instances some expressive and symbolic element in them" (Reprinted in Lessa & Vogt 1979: 52). In all three cases, ritual can be distinguished as a symbolic (or expressive) rather than a technical (or instrumental) act.

7. The main positions within the rationality debate are compiled in the books *Modes of Thought* (1973) edited by Horton & Finnegan, *Rationality* (1970) edited by Wilson and the volume *Rationality and Relativism* (1982) edited by Lukes and Hollis. In Germany the debate was revisited in the books *Magie* (1978, 1995) edited by Kippenberg & Luchesi and *Der Wissenschaftler und das Irrationale* (1981) edited by Dürr.

8. See fn. 6; cf. Skorupsky 1976.

9. Compare Tambiah's statement that "ritualized, conventionalized, stereotyped behaviour is constructed in order to express and communicate, and is publicly construed as expressing and communicating certain attitudes congenial to an ongoing institutionalized intercourse" (1985: 132).

10. In the introduction to his collection of essays *Culture, Thought, and Social Action* he summarizes his position on ritual efficacy and causality: "I have become increasingly hostile to attempts that place ritual acts … solely or mainly within the framework of 'causality.' Such an approach entails declaring something 'true' or 'false' in terms of verification rules as postulated in positivist science — or even in terms of Popper's criterion of 'falsifiability'" (1985: 2).

11. Cf. the examples given by Ahern in direct contestation of Tambiah's position (1979: 2) along with many more examples of people who seek to achieve by means of rituals things that are impossible in terms of "ordinary forces" as they conceive of them.

12. We thank Don Gardner for drawing our attention to this point, and to the fact that Skorupsky (1976) made the same critique as ours against Leach and Beattie, with respect to their opposition between the symbolic-expressive and the technical/instrumental.

Jack Goody also observed (1977) that in many cases the term "ritual" is used by researchers only for those practices where the means used seem inappropriate to the intended. Asad (1993: 55) advanced similar positions and cf. also Sax (2008) for a variation of the point of Goody.

13. To reformulate our position in other words: Actions, whether ritualized or not (and like all other events in the world), produce effects. This is, after all, what gives point to taking action. But not all of the effects are those at which the action aims at, i.e. what the people performing the action intend to do. The effects of a marriage ceremony in a church can include, among others, the following two: the establishment of a kinship relation and a decrease in the number of oxygen molecules in the church. Both are a consequence of the ritual action but the latter is, so to speak, a collateral effect of the action and therefore it is not part of the action, for it is entirely unintended. In the explanation why people perform rituals the perspective of the actors (their intentions) can be seen therefore as having a privileged status, since only they can explain why the people performed the ritual action at all.

14. The discussion of this problem would deserve a further article since it would have to address two different lines of debate. On the one hand there is the "meaninglessness debate" initiated by Fritz Staal (1979) and carried on till the present day by scholars like Humphrey and Laidlaw (1992) and most recently by Axel Michaels (2006). On the other hand there is the position outlined in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* (1993) and discussed, for example, in Ahern (1979), De Lara (2003) and Quack (2009).

15. Of course the sphere or level of ritual efficacy (as well as the further differentiations we will make) can be subsumed in a sufficiently complex definition of the relationship between the efficiens and the efficiendum. Yet in this case it seems to be more helpful to state that both agreed that the point of the ritual was to cure the patient's illness, while the differentiation between different levels of illness (spiritual and psychological) draws attention to the discrepancies of perspective.

16. The classical statement of this theory is James Dow's article "Universal Aspects of Symbolic Healing" (1986).

17. By this claim we deliberately take issue with Humphrey and Laidlaw's view that ritual actions are qualitatively different from ordinary actions (the difference is, according to Humphrey and Laidlaw, that the identity of ritualized actions does not depend on the intentions of the agents in action cf. 1994: 89ff.) as well as with any other attempt to approach ritual "sui generis" or "in its own right," the latter being famously argued by Don Handelman (2005).

18. Cf. for example Humphrey and Laidlaw who characterize the vedic sacrifice as a "classic example of an automatically efficacious ritual" (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 13, 37).

19. For the first formulation of this criticism see Gardner (1983): "Both Tambiah and Ahern have made the mistake of characterising the whole of a complex sequence of acts in terms of the properties of certain parts of them. A ritual to exorcize ghosts or to enlist the aid of the ancestors may involve illocutionary acts but this does not mean that the ritual as a whole is performative in the required sense. For an act to be performative there must be conventions governing the procedure *and* the state of affairs in which it effects; being a naturalised citizen is to have undergone the requisite ceremony in a way that being someone who has been cleansed of demonic influence is not. […] Tambiah and Ahern have apparently taken the nonempirical nature of the entities that figure in the rituals to entail that they are merely constructions of conventions" (Gardner 1983: 349). The main argument of the article

is that this observation is equally true with respect to the initiation rituals of the Mianmin of Papua New Guinea.

20. As Austin put it: "There must exist an accepted *conventional procedure* having a certain *conventional effect*, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances" (1971: 26—emphasis ours). Tambiah, in turn, objected the view that "in their magic and ritual the primitives tried to achieve results through 'causal' reasoning and failed" (attributed to Frazer as well as Popperians) (2006: 358). He rather holds: "The corresponding objectives in (magical) ritual are 'persuasion,' 'conceptualization,' 'expansion of meaning' and the like, and the criteria of adequacy are better conveyed by notions such as 'validity,' 'correctness,' 'legitimacy,' and 'felicity' of the ceremony performed" (2006: 359).

21. See Skorupski's discussion of causality and conventions where he states that "we need carry out no statistical investigations to discover whether all men who get married become husbands; not because there is here an obvious causal relationship, but because the relationship is not causal at all. Being a husband (judge, peer) is a social status in my sense of being a rule-constituted condition; and it is in *this* sense that operative actions can be said to take non-causal effect on social states of affairs" (Skorupski 1976: 104).

22. Many church members might question whether this mediation is to be seen as a real manifestation of the invisible. If in this case the actors agree with the explanation of the researcher no problem arises. But in our case we speak of a "truly believing couple." In another context the ritual practitioners do not even make the distinction between symbolic and instrumental efficacy that many Catholics and most researchers might make nowadays (cf. e.g. Skorupski's discussion of Evans-Pritchard's account of the installation of the divine king of the Shilluk parallel to the catholic marriage ceremony 1976: 102–107). In any case, our point is that the fact that one theological explanation is not shared by all the believers cannot legitimize an approach in which the researcher declares what is symbolic or conventional and what is not while still aiming to describe or reflect the "natives point of view."

23. Cf. for the application of Tambiah in this respect Moore (1977: 167f.).

24. The 1997 monograph, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* will not be taken into account much in this paper, since that work's aim was not to provide a new theoretical framework for understanding ritual, but to present up-to-date ritual theory in a comprehensive way and analyze it following certain criteria and categories. We are more concerned with Bell's own theoretical approach, which was based on the idea that in ritual, thought and action are non-distinguishable categories. We shall see that Bell herself does not strictly adhere to this baseline in her 1992 work. However, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* does offer a concise summary of Bell's own, older thoughts, of which we will take advantage now and then.

25. Although Bell relies heavily on Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' she never discusses how one could establish the complementary—and equally necessary—'field' or 'milieu' to which the 'ritual habitus' corresponds.

26. Unfortunately Bell never makes it clear what it is that makes ritualization a specific way of setting up action from everyday action. Cf. Quack (2009) for a further critique and an extensive discussion of her notion of ritual sense.

27. This concept is partly based on an understanding of hegemony as a system of sub-conscious, ascribed qualities and meanings (Gramsci 1957: 174ff., 186f.). Its other root is the concept of "redemptive processes", the basic idea being that in all social processes, power relations give something back to the people that construct

them, namely, knowledge about their proper place and behaviour (Burridge 1986: 6f.). Ritualization empowers individuals by defining a sphere of action: a space, time and scope in which their actions must take place. This definition is common knowledge among individuals possessed of a sense of ritual, thus helping each one gauge the effectiveness and likely outcome of different possible paths of action.

28. Bell devotes a large part of *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* to a description of their properties and characteristics. It seems clear that ritual schemes and their properties demand much more attention than we can give them in this paper. Unfortunately, Bell never explicitly developed a typology or categorization of ritual schemes. For this reason alone, we cannot delve very deeply into this matter.

29. Bell writes: "Ritualization is first and foremost a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations" (1992: 197). That this can be so follows straight from Foucault's idea that the place where power takes effect is the body (Foucault 1979: 25, 28). Nat-

urally, then, ritualization can be used to great effect in creating and manipulating power relations. Sadly, Bell seems to have missed her aim "to confront the act itself" (1992: 80), delving into the sociological level of efficacy, which derives from a highly etic perspective, instead of taking a view closer to that of the practitioners.

30. See the ethnographic example of Quack (2009), who discusses spiritual seekers from the West in an *ashram* in Rishikesh. They lack a pool of cultural dispositions in common with the Indians in the ashram. Therefore they take to performing the same rituals at the same time, but separated from each other.

31. Of course it is not our intention to disparage the sociological approach to ritual activities in general. Rather, we would like to clarify how much perspectivity must—almost by necessity—be expected in any statement about ritual efficacy. The practitioners' perspective seems to be sorely lacking in many of them, even if this is explicitly claimed not to be the case, as we tried to show in our discussion of Tambiah's work.

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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).

Paul Töbelmann is Research Assistant at the Historical Seminar at the University of Heidelberg. Study of Chemistry, Philosophy, Political Sciences and History at Heidelberg, M.A. 2005. Ph.D. thesis on "Staff Symbolism in Mediaeval Ritual", finished March 2008. Currently working on a monograph on ritualization of political assemblies and early parliaments in mediaeval Europe (as PostDoc). Fields of study: history of ideas, religious history, and political history in the Middle Ages.