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Ritual Efficacy

Edited by William S. Sax, Johannes Quack, and Jan Weinhold

The Problem of Ritual Efficacy

Edited by

WILLIAM S. SAX

JOHANNES QUACK

& JAN WEINHOLD

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I

Ritual and the Problem of Efficacy

William S. Sax

Do rituals really work, and if so, then how? This is the question of ritual efficacy, and it provokes a range of responses. Some insist on the efficacy of their rituals, defending them against skeptics and heretics. Others deny the efficacy of rituals in the name of science, or modernity, or orthodoxy, asserting that those who believe in them are victims of ignorance, superstition, or even the Devil. Some scholars of ritual say that rituals do indeed “work,” but not in the way the natives think. Others (e.g., Quack, this volume) argue that the very question of ritual efficacy is misguided. Given all these competing voices, how should we approach the problem of ritual efficacy? How can we clarify the issues involved? In June 2007 a conference was held at the University of Heidelberg in which anthropologists, historians, psychologists, and medical scientists from Germany, Austria, Canada, and the United States met for three days to discuss theories of ritual efficacy, in an attempt to clarify the nature of the problem and the various approaches to it.¹ Our deliberations showed that the question of ritual efficacy, like so many social scientific and historical questions, is more complicated than it seems at first glance, and that it is made even more complex by certain cultural assumptions that have profound effects on both popular and academic ideas about the nature of ritual.

The very idea of ritual efficacy carries a kind of tension, even a contradiction, which relates to both of the key terms “ritual” and “efficacy.” This contradiction derives, first, from the fact that most ritual theorists are guilty of the academic sin of reification. They conduct research on rituals, they teach and write about them, and after some time they begin to think that “ritual” is something out there in the world, whose characteristics can be classified, enumerated, and

analyzed, rather like a crystal or a virus. In other words, they mistake an analytic category for a natural kind. A similar mistake is regularly made by political scientists with respect to "politics," by economists with respect to "economics," by anthropologists with respect to "culture," and so on.

This point was eloquently illustrated decades ago with respect to the category "religion" by the distinguished theologian Wilfrid Cantwell Smith (1964), who showed how, over the centuries, the term *religio*, originally an adjective denoting a kind of mood or attitude, came to be reified as a particular *thing* out there in the world. In ritual studies, the point was made by Jack Goody in his article *Against Ritual* (1977) as well as by the sociologist Stefan Lukes in his brilliant polemic against Shils and Young, and especially their "neo-Durkheimian" analysis of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Lukes points out that in practice, the scholar of ritual recognizes his object—ritual—when he sees certain kinds of activities and beliefs that strike him as nonrational, or certain actions in which the means seem disproportionate to the ends (1975: 290). According to our meteorological theories, dancing cannot really make it rain, and so when someone performs a rain dance, we call it a "ritual." According to our anthropological theories, one cannot change a person's fundamental nature by cutting or tattooing his body, and so when people do such things in the course of an initiation, we call it a "ritual." According to our medical theories, disease cannot be cured by worshiping ancestors, and so when people attempt to do so, we label it "ritual." In short, the problem of ritual is the familiar "rationality problem" in a new guise—old wine in a new bottle.

I have mentioned "our" post-enlightenment theories, according to which "we" label as "ritual" certain activities that seem to be nonrational. But for those performing the rain dance, or the initiation, or the healing, these "rituals" do indeed fit into a cosmology in terms of which they make sense. That is why the "native" participants typically refer to them not as "rituals" but rather as dancing, or healing, or simply as "work". In much of North India, for example, the closest analogue to the term "ritual" would be *devakarya*, "the work of the gods" (a term that, incidentally, echoes the title of Raymond Firth's classic ethnography of ritual, *The Work of the Gods in Tikopia* [1967]). What we see as ritual, they see as technique. The point is that the term "ritual" is *our* (post-enlightenment) term, and it reflects *our* problem—how to classify a certain set of apparently nonrational acts. Or perhaps I should say, "apparently ineffective acts," for, as I shall argue, the popular understanding of ritual is not so much that it is *non-rational*, but rather that it is *ineffective*.

As one may well imagine, Goody and Lukes's line of argument has not found much favor among ritual theorists: after all, if it were widely adopted, it would mean the end of ritual studies. And although I do not intend to defend

their notion to the death, I do think it important to note that their definition of ritual as a type of action in which the ends seem disproportionate to the means has the virtue of being honestly reflexive: that is, it links our intellectual problem and our definition of terms to our own social and cultural milieu. To do otherwise is to fall victim to a subtle but common form of positivism, according to which the cultural assumptions of the observer can and should be bracketed and held distinct from his or her theoretical and descriptive goals.

How and why has the term "ritual" come to refer to a class of actions that are purely formal, external, and above all *ineffective*? To answer this question adequately would require a book in itself, but parts of the story have already been told by W. C. Smith, Talal Asad, and J. S. Uberoi. Smith's book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, documents the gradual transformation of the term *religio* from an adjective to a noun, that is, from an attribute of persons into a separate thing in itself. This process accelerated during the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment, as the doctrinal *content* of religion slowly came to be regarded as being of more central importance than religious *practices*, until finally "religion" was conceived of as a set of beliefs that can and should be evaluated in terms of their internal consistency. How could "ritual" fit into such a scheme? As Asad shows, for medieval Christians ritual was not an expression or representation of theological "beliefs," but rather a disciplinary practice that aided the cultivation of Christian virtues (1993, chapters 1 and 2). He compares medieval Christianity's notion of ritual with the modern, anthropological one and, quoting St. Victor, writes that in medieval times,

the sacraments are not the representations of cultural metaphors; they are parts of a Christian program for creating in its performers, by means of regulated practice, the "mental and moral dispositions" appropriate to Christians. . . . [But] learning to develop moral capabilities is not the same thing as learning to invent representations. (1993: 78-79)

A similar point was made by J. S. Uberoi in his underappreciated classic *Science and Culture* (1978), where he argues that the Protestant separation of humanity from nature, a concept represented most clearly in the writings of Zwingli rejecting the doctrine of transubstantiation, facilitated the dualistic separation of (mental) "symbol" from (natural) "truth." This idea further strengthened the tendency to interpret ritual (e.g., the Christian liturgy) in terms of what it "symbolizes" rather than what it actually does. The final result of these various processes is the peculiar, modern theory of ritual—what we can call the "representational theory"—which seeks to understand or interpret ritual in terms of the underlying ideas, emotions, structures, or relations that it

“represents,” “symbolizes,” or “expresses,” rather than the ends toward which it conduces. The real, external world effects of ritual can be recognized only by the “objective” historian or social scientist and do not correspond its ends as conceived by the “natives,” since these are by definition nonrational.

To analyze rituals as “expressing” inner states of feeling and emotion, or “symbolizing” theological ideas or social relations, or “representing” psychophysical states of the human organism, is to neglect the question of how they might be instrumental, how they might actually *do* things (other than in the trivial sense of representing ideas, social relations, or inner states more or less accurately). This question recalls the distinction between expressive and instrumental action developed by Talcott Parsons and his followers. Instrumental action includes things such as scratching an itch, building a house, or invading a foreign country. It is purposive and goal-oriented and is normally associated with the “hard facts” of economics, politics, and technology. “Expressive” action, on the other hand, is associated with art, religion, and of course ritual. A representational theory of ritual does not merely avoid the problem of ritual efficacy; it *exemplifies* it by assuming that rituals are, by definition, ineffective. One need only go through this week’s newspapers to find statements by public figures that illustrate the point. Shortly before the conference in Heidelberg, for example, in speaking of German–French relations, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, “*Es geht hier nicht um ein Ritual, sondern um die tiefe Überzeugung,*” in other words, “This has to do, not with ritual, but rather with deep conviction.”²

To sum up: ritual has come to be thought of in popular discourse as a kind of action that is ineffective, superficial, and/or purely formal, and this view is the unexamined premise behind much of ritual studies. This attitude explains why, even though we cannot agree on a definition of ritual, we “know it when we see it”—and what we know to be rituals when we see them are acts that are apparently nonrational, in which the means do not seem proportionate to the ends, the intended objects of human action are nonempirical beings, or the theories of efficacy that ostensibly explain the ritual acts are inconsistent with modern, scientific paradigms. This reaction is similar to what an archaeologist does when he discovers a structure whose purpose is unclear—he calls it a temple.

We do not refer to driving an automobile or playing football or taking an examination as a “ritual,” even though all of these activities involve highly formal, rule-bound behavior—we only call actions “rituals” when we do not understand the relation between means and ends, when they do not match our criteria of rationality, or better yet, when they do not correspond to our criteria of efficacy. Ritual is *assumed* to be ineffective, and it is in part this very

ineffectiveness that constitutes the behavior as “ritual” in the first place. That is why the intellectual task that many students of ritual set themselves consists in trying to find out ritual’s hidden logic, its principles of efficacy, the things that it *really* represents—which must by definition be other than those related to us by the natives, since these strike us as nonrational.

Nevertheless, the notion that ritual is ineffective is false, and we can show that it is false. We know that shamanic rituals heal, legal rituals ratify, political rituals unify, and religious rituals sanctify. Rituals transform sick persons into healthy ones, public space into prohibited sanctuary, citizens into presidents, princesses into queens, and according to some, wine into blood. One of our most important tasks as scholars of ritual is to explain how rituals accomplish these things (and how they sometimes fail to accomplish them), but it is important to remember that in pursuing this task, we are arguing against the grain of popular understanding.

I have said that ritual exists as an analytic category and not as a natural kind. If we want to discuss intelligently how it might “work,” we require a working definition of it, and such a definition must acknowledge its unusual relation to the modern episteme. Foucault defined this episteme as the conditions of possibility for what counts as scientific. In my view, “ritual” is precisely the *negation* of the modern, scientific episteme, which is one of the things that make it such an interesting category. Further, because ritual is an analytic category, one cannot define it in essentialist terms. Instead, one requires a family-resemblance type of definition: in effect, a list of characteristics that we ascribe to things we call “ritual.” The idea of family resemblance as developed by Wittgenstein is that, although members of a family are not identical, they do share enough similar features—manner of speaking, facial shape, eye color, and the like—that one can recognize them as belonging to the same family.³ Now, what we call “rituals” clearly are not identical: they consist of different actions and are performed in different cultures and languages for different purposes. Nevertheless we can observe that certain characteristics are widely shared by that class of activities that we label “ritual,” and when a particular activity has a sufficient number of them, it “counts” as a ritual, more or less. That is the sense of the “family resemblance” approach to category definition: membership in the category is a matter of resemblance and degree, not of essence.

What kinds of resemblances are relevant for the category “ritual”? Here I draw on Tambiah’s well-known (1979) definition, in which he provides a list of characteristics that we associate with those actions we label “ritual.” But to Tambiah’s list of features—“patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity),

condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition)" (1979: 119)—I would add that rituals are "often regarded as ineffective or nonrational." None of these characteristics, including apparent nonrationality or ineffectiveness, is *essential* for some practice to be regarded as a ritual; however the more of these characteristics a practice has, the more likely it will be regarded as a ritual. This definition has the advantage of focusing our attention on ritual as a form of practice rather than a representation of belief. I have criticized representational theories of ritual above, and so has Bell (1992), who invokes Bourdieu's insistence that social theory is weakened by its ongoing attempts to reduce human action to, or reformulate it in terms of, language and/or "belief." (These positions are summarized by Quack, this volume; see also Sax 2002, chapter 1). As Bourdieu puts it, practice has its own logic, which is not reducible to propositions expressed in language. Bell applies these ideas to the study of ritual, which she refuses to essentialize as an object with a finite set of characteristics, preferring instead to shift the terms of the discussion by writing of "ritualized actions." She argues that such actions produce a "ritualized agent" and that they do so not by means of representation but rather through embodied practice. This notion is consistent with the fact (noted by many ritual theorists) that rituals, with their emphasis on sensory experience (prescribed bodily postures, music, dance, incense, food, etc.), work primarily on the body and not exclusively by cognitive means.⁴

If rituals were purely expressive, then their efficacy could consist only in the degree to which they adequately expressed beliefs, dogma, and so on. But Asad, Bell, and Bourdieu, along with many others, argue that in order to understand the efficacy of rituals, we should concentrate on embodied cognition rather than on symbolic expression. Several of the essays in this volume support such a focus. Boddy, for example, shows how forms of ritualized "possession" involve new ways of construing one's own identity by establishing links within the kinship system. This is not a cognitive so much as it is a somatic process; in other words, the cognitive effects of the ritual are achieved through new and creative practices of embodied possession. Quack argues that differences in the attitudes toward ritual at an *ashram* in North India, between Indians on the one hand and North Americans and Europeans on the other, can be traced to their respective, embodied "ritual sense(s)." Ambos suggests that the king's bodily experience of imprisonment during his investiture ceremony had powerful effects on his psyche. Roberts shows that a dispute about the use of ritual in Ecuadoran IVF clinics can be traced to a difference between the ritual styles of "spiritual" and "material" Catholics, with the former adhering to something like the Protestant representational theory while the latter exemplify embodied "faith." The concept of "faith" is of particular interest in this regard, since it is

often said by ritual practitioners to be indispensable to ritual efficacy. And as religious persons often remind us, "faith" is not the same thing as "belief." It is an attitude toward religious things, not a proposition to which one assents, so what Bourdieu says of "belief" is clearly true of "faith" as well: that it "is not a 'state of mind,' still less a kind of arbitrary adherence to a set of instituted dogmas and doctrines ('beliefs'), but rather a state of the body" (1990: 68). This view is also borne out by the essays of Brody and Theissen (both in this volume), who, despite their very different disciplines (the former is a medical scientist, the latter a theologian), demonstrate that embodied faith is a prerequisite for ritual healing. For Brody, the patient's confidence in the healer and/or his methods has positive, measurable effects on the likelihood of the treatment's success; while for Theissen, the historical Jesus himself recognized and proclaimed that his healing rituals were successful because of the faith of those whom he healed.

Indeed, ritual healing provides the most interesting as well as the most problematic example of the problem of ritual efficacy. From the point of view of biomedicine, it is based on non- or even anti-scientific theories and practices, while biomedicine guarantees its own efficacy by systematically excluding "ritual" from its therapeutic techniques. Medical journals do indeed use the term "ritual," but they define it as a practice that lacks therapeutic efficacy and should therefore be eliminated.⁵ Although the World Health Organization has encouraged "traditional medicine" in recent years (WHO 1978, 2002),⁶ this recognition does not extend to ritual healing but is limited to nonritual techniques such as bonesetting, herbal remedies, massage, and dietary practices. Evidently, the idea that ritual healing might be therapeutically effective is not thinkable for the WHO.⁷

But what exactly is efficacy, and how should we define or measure it? The answer depends on the standards against which it is measured, and these vary: the biomedical doctor has one set of standards, the Ayurvedic doctor another, and the shaman still another. The patient has his own set of standards, but that of his family may be different. The missionary has one set of standards, and the anthropologist a different one.⁸ It is highly questionable whether one can or should evaluate the effectiveness of one system by the criteria of another, but we do this all the time when we evaluate ritual healing in terms of biomedical criteria. Ritual healing may well be ineffective according to such criteria, but the opposite is also true: in a great many cases, modern medicine is ineffective in meeting those needs that are addressed by ritual healing.

Surveys of "patient satisfaction" show that most of the time, sick people are more satisfied with treatment by ritual healers than by medical doctors. This issue was the topic of an early paper by Kleinman, who argued that "in

most cases, indigenous practitioners must heal," because they treat the human experience of illness, whereas "in most cases modern professional clinical care must fail to heal," because modern clinicians usually limit themselves to disease, defined in strictly biological terms (1979: 24). And that is why, says Kleinman, "healing" is an embarrassing word for the medical sciences, which prefer the term "cure." Like the assertion that ritual is merely expressive and therefore inherently nonefficacious, the biomedical critique of ritual healing is strongly linked to the discourse and practices of modernity. Biomedicine is associated with "development" and "rationality," while ritual healing is associated with lack of development and "superstition" (Kendall 2001, Lee 1982, Dole 2004, n.d., Pigg 1995, Ram 2001: 13). But "superstition" and "modernity" are not natural categories either. Rather, they are relational entities, mutually defined and strategically invoked.

During my own fieldwork on ritual healing (Sax 2008) I encountered numerous examples of the "modernist" critique of ritual healing. The first time I ever spoke about the topic was at the Institute for the Study of Human Behavior and Allied Sciences in Delhi, where I had been invited to give a talk to a group of medical professionals. I told my learned audience of doctors and psychologists about the system of oracles and healers, showed them a brief video clip, and proposed that ritual healing sometimes "works" by addressing the social causes of stress-related disorders. After my talk I expected an enthusiastic round of applause and a stimulating discussion. What I got instead was outrage. "How dare you conduct research on such a topic?" they asked. "This is nothing more than primitive, superstitious nonsense! You should be spending your time stamping it out, not conducting research on it!"

Perhaps I should have expected such a reaction. After all, these were men of science, and the idea that ritual healing might have therapeutic benefits comparable to those of biomedicine seemed ridiculous to them, perhaps even insulting. They reminded me of the Nepali doctors discussed by Adams, who were exposed for such a long time to modern critiques of ritual healing (particularly by exponents of "development") that they began to regard such practices as evidence of backwardness (1998: 12). Such a scenario is hardly limited to South Asia. Mullings has shown how in Ghana, family-based ritual therapy gave way to individual therapy under the modernizing influences of capitalism and Christianity as well as the transformation of villages into towns (1984: 121, 133–185). To be "modern" and scientific is to reject the theories and practices associated with ritual healing, because they lie outside contemporary paradigms of science, modernity, and development. Those who seek to defend or preserve ritual healing thus risk marking themselves—and perhaps even coming to understand themselves—as "nonmodern and deviant" (Nandy and

Visvanathan 1990; cf. Pigg 1995), and this is as true of the “modernizing” cultures of Africa and Asia as it is of Europe and North America. Perhaps it is even truer there, since local elites in such places are surrounded by the practice of ritual healing and must therefore work even harder than their Western counterparts to distinguish themselves from those who engage in it. Kendall cites cases from Cypress and Sri Lanka that illustrate

the middle class’s identification with “science” or with more “rational”-seeming religious practices as a means of asserting and naturalizing class domination. . . . The point here is not that the new elites’ posture toward popular religion is an inevitable consequence of “modernity” so much as it represents the self-conscious inhabiting of new class positions. (2001: 30)

Meanwhile, my friends back in the village where I was conducting my research kept asking me a simple, three-word question: “*Yaham kuch hai?*” Literally, this means, “Is there something here?” but there is more to the question than meets the eye, and I would paraphrase it as follows: “You are a highly educated person and have been investigating these things for years. So tell me: is there some special religious power here? Is there such a thing as miraculous healing? Have you seen it?” After I had been asked this question several times, I found myself wondering if the skepticism it implied was something new. Was there ever a time when local peasants accepted the efficacy of ritual healing without a doubt? Were the modest doubts implicit in this question a result of modern education? Would they grow?

I observed plenty of skepticism in other contexts as well. Particularly memorable was the family settled in Delhi who returned to their ancestral village for a major healing ritual but whose father was so dismissive of the whole affair that he refused to participate in key rituals, while the teenage children found the possession ridiculous and laughable and were unable to participate in it properly.⁹ Then there were the educated persons I knew, especially those in the medical profession, who condemned the practices of the gurus as unscientific and superstitious but who surreptitiously visited them at night when their own problems could not be solved by modern medicine. As I write this introductory chapter in the Himalayas, I have just concluded interviewing local medical professionals about their views regarding ritual healing. Most of them responded to my initial questions by dismissing outright the possibility that it might be effective. But with a little patience and perseverance on my part, they began to talk about successful cases of which they know, and to affirm that, as good Hindus, they would not deny the power of religious rituals to heal the sick. As a result, I have come to share Adams’ view that the overt rejection of ritual

healing is not so much a statement of disbelief in its efficacy as it is an assertion of one's social position: modern, educated, and scientific.

Discourses of modernity are also to be found in the religious realm, where local ritual practices, often involving bloody sacrifice, are challenged by those who wish to replace them with modern, high-caste, vegetarian practices. Once I met a local ritual healer just after he had successfully treated a client, and he shook with rage as he told me how a group of *satsangis* (the followers of a local religious leader) had harassed him as he walked through the bazaar. They had shouted that people like him, along with their knowledge, should be stamped out. "I was coming here last night," he said,

and they started giving me a hard time, shouting "Down with the gurus! Down with the gurus' knowledge!" So I said to them, "You mother-fucking *satsangis*, a girl is in trouble! You go there! You heal her! Take (your) *satsangi* doctors!" What do doctors do here? They give injections. The needle might break and kill the girl! I put the mark on her forehead and forced the god to identify himself and to become present. And once he was there we got the whole decision {*faisla*}: "I live at such and such a place, and so forth; worship me and I will be satisfied, otherwise I will definitely eat this girl {*kha hi lunga*}." Can the *satsangis* do that?

He said that the *satsangis* were making quite a stir and that so many people had joined them that they had multiplied like a bitch's pups. He accused them of hypocrisy, of pretending to be *satsangis* on the outside but continuing to practice the old rituals behind closed doors. And he linked their "modern" rejection of ritual healing to an equally modern refusal to uphold traditional norms of ritual reciprocity.

Just let them come here, and we'll beat them with our shoes! On the outside, those bastards are saying that they're *satsangis*, but indoors they're making all the Brahmans dance [i.e., become possessed]. They worship [the demon] Masan in their houses, and the gods dance there, but on the outside they are all *satsangis*. But they don't do *puja*! The god comes hungry, and he leaves hungry.

The healer's companion reinforced his accusation that the *satsangis* were behaving in a thoroughly modern, individualistic way: "Whatever rice they get, they eat by themselves. They're doing well, but what is the goddess eating? She left as hungry as she came, but their own stomachs are full."

Some "modern" local healers even pursue their calling without ritual, thus making their practice appear more "scientific" and less "religious"—to

themselves as well as to their clients (cf. Press 1971). S. B. Sati was the senior postman in Joshimath at the time of my research, and he was also an oracle—but with a difference. Partly because of his own education and professional status, and partly because of his location at a major stopover on the most prominent pilgrimage routes in India, he had developed an elite clientele consisting of politicians, educators, doctors, and similar persons from all over India. Sati was well known to the learned classes and professionals of his district, many of whom had consulted him, and his style was radically different from the usual oracular style of the area, the most striking difference being the total absence of ritual. Whereas most oracles began their sessions with various ritual techniques intended to induce possession, so that the following consultation is conceived to be one between client and deity, Sati recited no prayers, lit no incense, and did not become possessed. His clients did not even remove their shoes when they visited him! His sessions resembled medical or psychological consultations more than oracular ones. He would begin by drawing a map or a sketch of the client's home and then proceed to diagnose the cause of their problems. The causes he would diagnose (cursing, familial strife, demonic affliction, supernatural "poisoning") were very similar to those diagnosed in other, more typical consultations, as were his therapeutic prescriptions: mostly rituals of a familiar sort, but also the wearing of amulets (which he himself made) and other sorts of astrological and gem therapy. I believe that his highly unusual practice reflected the needs and expectations of his modern, educated clientele. Clearly there is a kind of struggle occurring in Garhwal over ritual healing; but it has little to do with the question of efficacy *per se* and much to do with "modernity" and one's attitude toward it. People may well regard ritual practices as efficacious but still refuse to participate in them because to do so is to stigmatize themselves as pre-modern and nonscientific.

Similar examples are to be found in many of the essays in this volume. Brody begins his essay by pointing out that the term "placebo," like the term "ritual," is a "term of suspicion" for medical scientists, even though it may work in similar ways. Although he asserts that "[m]edicine would lose a good deal of whatever efficacy it possesses, were we somehow to eliminate all its ritual elements and practices," nevertheless most medical practitioners would probably "deny that ritual plays any role in their activities" because of the Cartesian dualism to which they subscribe, with its radical separation of mind and body. I would suggest that such Cartesianism is a hallmark of what I am calling "modernity." Elizabeth Roberts shows how ritual practices in Ecuadoran IVF laboratories are subject to modernist critiques from the standpoint of "science" as well as from the standpoint of "religion." From the scientific side, many medical professionals in Ecuador reject ritual practices

in the lab because they are felt to be incompatible with modern science. From the religious side, they are rejected by more modern, “spiritual” Catholics, who accept the Cartesian separation of spiritual from material and are highly reluctant to acknowledge God’s intervention in scientific processes, much less encourage it as “materialist” Catholics do through their rituals. Boddy mentions the religious critique of Zar cult possession rituals by conservative Muslim clerics, for whom such practices are inconsistent with Islam. As with many other religious reformers (e.g., the Hindu *satsangis* mentioned above), I would argue that such reformist attitudes are fundamentally modern, even though they represent themselves as “traditionalist.” Both Dinzelbacher’s and Töbelmann’s essays describe “orthodox” critiques of ritual that, though they are medieval and not modern, nevertheless illustrate how the taking of a position with regard to ritual efficacy is a strategic act, through which one locates oneself in terms of political, economic, social, and theological disputes. All of this goes to show that the question of ritual efficacy is not just a question about how rituals work. To pose the question of ritual efficacy—and more importantly, to answer it in one way and not another—is also to say something about who one is, to position oneself with respect to a range of issues, from the relationship between mind and body to the difference between modernity and tradition, or the alleged conflict between religion and science. How do rituals work, and if so, how? One should think twice before answering that question.

NOTES

1. The conference was organized by the Collaborative Research Area 619, “The Dynamics of Rituals” (*Sonderforschungsbereich 619 Ritualdynamik*), supported by the German Research Council, to whom we express our deepest thanks.
2. <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/deutschland/artikel/961/64897/print.html>, last accessed 28 May 2009.
3. See aphorisms 66–67 in Wittgenstein 2003.
4. Butler 1990, Connerton 1989, Csordas 1994 and 2002, Douglas 1973, Jackson 1983, Mauss 1979 [1935].
5. This position is reminiscent of the Victorian anthropologist E. B. Tylor’s view that the mission of anthropology was to identify customs that had no utilitarian function and to root them out.
6. See Dole’s description of the Turkish health worker who says she is “not modern enough” for the WHO’s new emphasis on traditional medicine (n.d.: 22).
7. One of the WHO’s more recent policy statements (WHO 2002) adds the category “spiritual therapy” but does not define the term.
8. The complexity of the problem is discussed in a forthcoming paper written by conference participants Quack and Töbelmann.

9. Eventually, their grandmother saved the day—and the ritual—by vigorously dancing for more than a quarter of an hour, which was itself a kind of miracle, since she was more than ninety years old!

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2

Ritual Healing and the Investiture of the Babylonian King

Claus Ambos

Introduction

The political implications of ritual healing will be discussed in this chapter with an example from my field of research, Assyriology, which deals with the civilizations of the Ancient Near East.¹ I hope here to build a bridge between two seemingly different topics: the efficacy of healing rituals and the efficacy of political rituals. The essay focuses on some important elements of Babylonian royal ideology, as attested on cuneiform tablets which were inscribed in the first millennium BCE but which belong to a much older tradition reaching back into the second and even third millennium BCE.

Mesopotamian techniques of ritual and divination were believed to have been transmitted to man by the gods themselves (Lambert 1998), and they could never work against the will of the gods nor force them to perform an action merely because it was desired by the ritual's human participants. The reason is that ritual was not effective in itself but depended upon the gods' collaboration. This concept could also account for occasional ritual failure: the gods simply were refusing any communication with the human sphere and were not inclined to accept a prayer or a ritual (Ambos 2007a). Ritual and cultic texts and prayers were transmitted over centuries or even millennia in the so-called "stream of tradition" (Oppenheim 1977 [1964]: 13) until the end of the traditional Mesopotamian culture.

It should be noted that in the languages of the Ancient Near East there was no specific term for "ritual." In Akkadian (Babylonian-Assyrian), for example, words for ritual are derivatives from the verb *epēšū*—"to act, be active, proceed."²