

**RELIGION, ANTHROPOLOGY,  
AND COGNITIVE SCIENCE**

CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS  
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# RELIGION, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND COGNITIVE SCIENCE

edited by

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*Dedicated to the memory of Alfred Gell*



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## SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

# RITUAL STUDIES AND COGNITIVE SCIENCE: ANTHROPOLOGY'S SHIFTING BOUNDARIES<sup>1</sup>

*Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart*

Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw's edited collection, *Religion, Anthropology, and Cognitive Science*, is a valuable contribution to the literature on the Anthropology of Religion and Psychological Anthropology in general. We are delighted to include the work in our *Ritual Studies Monograph Series*<sup>2</sup>. Both editors are well known scholars whose own work has added considerably to theoretical debates on the analysis of religion and ritual, and this co-edited volume is a further impressive testimony to the energy of the discussions which their work has evinced in this domain of theorizing. Their current aptly named and carefully assembled collection poses problems and proposes solutions within the rapidly developing domain of studies of cognitive aspects of ritual and the cognitive explanation of "religion" as an overall category. The volume as a whole is marked by cutting-edge scholarship and debate in this domain, largely, although not exclusively, stemming from innovative recent work on cognitive theory and modes of religiosity (see for example Whitehouse et al. 2002). One of the most interesting meta-features of this highly interesting and engaged volume is that it contains vigorous discussion of the

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1. Substantial parts of this Preface were composed while we were Visiting Research Fellows at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan (21 December 2006 to 8 March 2007). We thank the Director of the Institute, Prof. Huang Shu-min, for the renewal of our Visiting positions, and others of our colleagues in the Institute, particularly Dr. Guo Pei-yi, for their hospitality and help with the provision of an office during the time of our stay.

2. Other titles in the Ritual Studies Monograph Series are listed on p. ii of this volume.

relevant issues. James Laidlaw, as a Co-Editor for the volume, records his clear views about the limitations of the “cognitivist” approach to explaining ritual in the penultimate chapter; while Harvey Whitehouse surveys the terrain for a possible synthesis of cognitivist and interpretivist approaches in his own final chapter.

Whitehouse’s synthesis turns on a very considerable expansion of the term “cognition” itself, so as to include many, if not all, of the factors of conscious reasoning and thought that Laidlaw sees as omitted from a more narrow version of the cognitivist paradigm, which stresses unconscious or habitual (non-reflective) cognitive patterns and foregrounds these as the causes of religious “beliefs”. Whitehouse’s expansion of the term cognition is a notable strategic move in response to Laidlaw’s concerns and can be recognized as such. These matters come up in the Introduction by Laidlaw and Whitehouse, and their contrasting views on the potentialities of cognitive science in the anthropology of religions are admirably set out. Laidlaw in his sole-authored chapter further notes the historical complexity of the category “religion”; Bloch, in his chapter, goes further and considers it to be a general rag-bag category. Most of the contributors, as Laidlaw notes, go with a simple Tylorian “belief in spirits” definition that suits their invocation of the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device and Theory of Mind explanatory concepts (HADD and ToM). These and other debates need to be noticed by readers, so that they can register them and make up their own minds as they go along. Basically, in Laidlaw’s view, cognitive science should be kept in its place, as a means of suggesting underlying universals; while Whitehouse has a more extensive vision of using cognitivist approaches to explain more and more detailed features of particular cases. The individual chapters in the collection provide a range of interesting perspectives on these topics.

These kinds of debates, on the use of models and findings from outside of a currently accepted notion of what constitutes “anthropology” have a long history, and were reviewed in the 1960s in a volume edited by Max Gluckman, called *Closed Systems and Open Minds* (1964). From its very beginnings as an academic discipline, in Europe, anthropology has existed in a condition of dynamic tension between defining itself as a separate subject and taking in ideas from a variety of sources as a means of enrichment. At any given time, anthropologists may have a certain “feel” for their approach to topics which suggests how this approach or perspective lends a distinctive character to their ways of looking at data. Considered over a longer period of time, however, it is quite evident that the approaches and perspectives in question change. Contemporary anthropologists discuss issues of globalization, transnational relations, ethnicity, nationalism, and the like which are in large part shared with

sociologists, historians, and political scientists, Nevertheless, within these shared arenas, perspectival differences do tend to emerge, often deriving from the traditions of long-term study, close ethnographic description and analysis, and the ethos of participant observation, that form a part of anthropology's intellectual heritage. One axis of debate in theoretical terms has often centered on the matter of the relationship between anthropology and psychology. The propositions of the nineteenth century "armchair anthropologists" in Britain, such as Sir James George Frazer and Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, were quite often essentially of a psychological kind, dealing with supposed universal "mentalities" underlying the customary practices of peoples. This tradition was vigorously defended by R. R. Marett, a folklorist who extended his interests into contemporary ideas and practices and sought psychological ways of explaining them (Marett 1920).

The opposite tradition, of course, stems from the work of Emile Durkheim (1982 [1895]), although, as has recently been pointed out, Durkheim's sociological propositions can also be reframed as psychological (Throop and Laughlin 2002). The recent efforts to incorporate findings from cognitive science into anthropological theorizing, or, alternatively seen, to transform anthropology by subsuming aspects of it under cognitive science, have to be understood as the latest expressions of the dynamic tension we have referred to, between the impulse to embrace other disciplinary approaches or to draw a boundary around anthropological theorizing as such. This dynamic and productive tension is well exhibited in the debates between Laidlaw and Whitehouse in the present volume. The consequences of such a debate are not trivial, but relate to the future pathways or trajectories of anthropological thinking in general. One response to such debates is to oppose the widening of the anthropological enterprise. Another is to recognize that this process of widening and narrowing is continuous: what is accepted as "normal practice" by one generation may be rejected by the next, and so on. Even if, at any given time, we advocate, as Meyer Fortes used to do, that we "stick to our last", the last itself changes over time. And running through these debates has been an overarching question, whether anthropology can be a "generalizing science" or whether it is, and should remain, focused on ethnographic exposition and middle-level, grounded, theorizing based solidly on cultural and historical understandings. In Whitehouse's vision, we could, in a sense, "have it all": make anthropology a science, by borrowing from cognitive science, while keeping all of its historical and ethnographic specificities.

We point here briefly to some of the vital issues that are at stake in these kinds of discussions and which recur throughout the volume. One is the issue of conscious versus unconscious thought processes and how these may inter-

act. Another, related, question has to do with evidence from language usages, as for example in Sørensen's discussion of Malinowski's work on Trobriand magic: how are we to know that Malinowski exaggerated the significance of language in this context? Language itself may be seen as an embodied form of action, closely tied in with gestures and emotional expressions, so that in a broader sense the opposition between language and other performative registers of magical activity is neutralized. Sørensen appears to recognize this point, or something akin to it, in referring to Malinowski's pragmatic view of language generally.

Sørensen also raises in his chapter another issue related to language usages which resonates with work that we have been engaged in on expressive genres (Stewart and Strathern eds. 2005a). Sørensen's focus is on usages in magical language, but the issues he raises can be extended also to the presentation of knowledge in balladic and epic forms that are striking parts of the cultural repertoire of aesthetic performance in two parts of the Papua New Guinea Highlands where we have carried out long-term fieldwork, the Hagen and Duna areas (see for example, Strathern and Stewart 2000a and Stewart and Strathern 2002a). Referring to the earlier work of Stanley Tambiah on Trobriand spells (Tambiah 1968), Sørensen asks why ritual forms of language should be deployed in order to convey practical kinds of knowledge that could, he suggests, be conveyed with greater facility outside of such ritual contexts. (Of course, their communication in ritual contexts does not preclude their transmission in other contexts of practical engagement also.) He himself seeks to understand, in the magical context, how features such as iteration and condensation could be especially appropriate to evoke the success envisaged in magic; and he seems to have answered his own question earlier when he notes how one Trobriand magician's spell encapsulates in itself a whole imagined narrative of agricultural activity in which both the dangers and the counteractions against these dangers are vitally delineated. In other words, the emotional power of the narrative, and its detailed exposition, together provide a model for all the practical actions needed to succeed in the agricultural cycle.

Sørensen's question, about why a ritual use of language is employed, is applicable also to verbal sequences in the Papua New Guinea balladic poetical forms which we have ourselves studied. In these, representations of practical knowledge also appear in highly condensed and imagistic forms which parallel in their characteristics the features that Tambiah in his classic formulation identified as belonging to Trobriand spells. We make two suggestions about this correspondence. The first is that such presentations of knowledge undoubtedly gain a greater salience in people's consciousness because of their aesthetic appeal. Listeners attracted to the poetic narrative are likely to regis-

ter also the details of knowledge that the narrative purveys. Second, this process is underpinned by the systematic use of iteration, framing, and condensation which the poetic form itself generates, influencing the listeners at a sub-conscious level and further reinforcing the overt aesthetic appeal which is felt consciously (see Stewart and Strathern 2002b). Given these processes, we can understand better how the poetic forms adopted by ancient Greek and Latin authors to convey practical forms of knowledge would operate in similar aesthetic and computational ways to impress their messages on readers or listeners. Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Virgil's *Georgics* would belong to this genre (Strathern and Stewart n.d.).

Another point that is related to the question of cognition versus language is that language and cognition are not one and the same phenomenon, although they may be interdependent. And how do questions of doubt and uncertainty, so characteristic of human relations, and so productive of patterns of gossip and fears of witchcraft and sorcery (Stewart and Strathern 2004; Strathern and Stewart 2005, 2006), enter into the picture? Sperber's idea of semi-propositional representations is relevant here, but emotional aspects need to be added. In general, cognitivist approaches need to be put together with the kind of embodiment theory advocated by Thomas Csordas and many others (Csordas 2002; Stewart and Strathern 2001a). From the vantage-point of embodiment theory, for example, much more is involved in the actual processes of witchcraft suspicions and accusations than the tendency to think in essentialist categories. And an overall processualist approach to the study of witchcraft, and social life in general, is one that we have advocated repeatedly for some time (e.g. Stewart and Strathern eds. 2000a). It can be applied to Maurice Bloch's remarks about the inter-penetration of individuals as a general phenomenon in human society (not one limited to a particular geographic area, such as "Melanesia" or "South Asia"). Our concept of the "relational-individual," which we developed initially in order to deal with the complexities of debates about personhood in Papua New Guinea contexts, is a processual one, recognizing variations and fluctuations in stresses on the "relational" or the "individual" part of this composite notion, rather than arguing for the dominance of one aspect over the other (Stewart and Strathern 2000b; Strathern and Stewart 1998a). A related approach can be applied to the issue that Bloch mentions in passing, the analysis of kinship: the "tools" we use in investigating this topic need to be flexibly adjusted to the evidence rather than imposed upon it. Our relational-individual concept was designed to be one such flexible tool. Finally, here, and also drawing on Maurice Bloch's chapter, the task of "putting cognition and the social together" is absolutely decisive for the whole enterprise.

In his final chapter, Harvey Whitehouse engages in just such an exercise, via his analysis of the Kivung rituals in New Britain (Papua New Guinea). Whitehouse acknowledges the ways in which conscious reasoning operates in cultural contexts, and this in itself helps to narrow the gap between cognitivist and interpretive approaches to the analysis of rituals. He also stresses the complexity of the cognitive mechanisms that may underpin sequences of ritual action. The example he gives amply illustrates, from an established anthropological viewpoint, the kinds of social values that are likely to be important generally among the people in his area of study. The example also suggests that nuances and resonances from Christian ethnopsychology and ontology have been blended with ideas about sacrifice to the ancestors, although this is not Whitehouse's concern here. He focuses on a different point, that the rituals all exhibit the exercise of care in the face of danger through following rigid rules of conduct: a pattern which Whitehouse relates to the idea of a cognitive "hazard-precaution system" as hypothesized by Lienard and Boyer (2006). (In passing, Whitehouse also suggests cognitive parallels with obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCDs) among individuals: if these parallels exist, we should perhaps also note that the social contexts of rituals differ from those of individual OCDs..) Other aspects of the rituals, viz. the respect shown to ancestors, Whitehouse relates to the by now familiar "agency detection device" concept advocated by Stewart Guthrie and others in the present volume; and other aspects again he links to the pervasiveness of moral rules and consciousness of these rules in the construction of social life in general. And he relates others, finally, to the exercise of a "theory of mind" (ToM) capacity in humans, projected onto the ancestors. To this suite of explanations, Whitehouse further proposes to add conscious, historically situated factors which exhibit the "cross-domain analogical thinking system" pattern (CAT) also revealed in ritual practices. The question of belief in/knowledge of the ancestors which Rita Astuti tests experimentally in her chapter in this volume (chapter 7) can also be looked at in the light of the CAT principle: ideas about ancestors are based on an analogy with, or extension of, ideas about the living, so that the dead and the living are incorporated in a single domain of social relations. Ideas about dreams and the experience of encounters with the dead in dreams operate as crucial interpretive transducers which we can understand as bypassing or obviating formal issues of "belief" (see Lohmann ed. 2003 and Stewart and Strathern 2003, 2005b).

In our own research in the arena of the Anthropology of Religion in the Hagen, Pangia, and Duna areas of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea (see for example, Stewart 1998; Stewart and Strathern 1999, 2000a, 2000c, 2000d, 2001b, 2001c, 2002a, 2002c, 2005c; Strathern and Stewart 1997, 1998b, 1999a,

1999b, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2003, 2004a, 2004b), we have been interested in the ethnographic documentation of the roles of ritual practices within the wider social framework of the groups enacting the practices, so that religious/ritual practices are clearly seen as part of a fluid construction of social practice in general. Other scholars who have contributed to this arena of scholarship within the South-West Pacific (also referenced as “Melanesia”) include: Barker (1990), Bashkow (2006), Biersack (1999), Clark (2000), Engelke and Tomlinson (2006), Gibbs (1994), Jacka (2001), Jebens (2005), Knauft (2002), Lattas (1998), Reithofer (2005), Robbins (2004), and many others.

It is possible to see aspects of the rituals that we have previously analyzed in our own fieldwork in Highlands Papua New Guinea in the light of Whitehouse’s exposition. We will take a few details from the practices directed towards the Female Spirit (Amb Kor) in the Mount Hagen area. Agency detection is strongly at work in ideas about this Spirit. Signs of her coming to a particular man might be the appearance of menstrual blood near to his house; or the discovery of stones that were seen as marks of this presence. Precautions had to be carefully observed in setting up secluded sites for these stones to be installed in a clan area: both respect and fear were involved because incorrect ritual handling would lead to sickness and death in the community rather than health, fertility, and prosperity. The Amb Kor, like the ancestors, was also said to have thoughts and emotions like humans, but to be endowed with superior powers. For example, she was said to be jealous of the human wives of her male worshipers and if one of these human wives transgressively entered her secret enclosure she would turn their genital coverings round to their backs and drive them crazy. Rules, overseen by ritual experts, carefully regulated entrances and exits to the enclosure. Men should never enter or leave singly but always in pairs. At formal times of entry they might enter in single file, loaded with pork to be cooked, each one inspected by a ritual expert again to see that their gear was in order. This sense of order and predictability is, of course, proverbial in ritual; and Hageners themselves gave as its reason the simple view that if the rules were not adhered to, disaster would result. The behavior, in a sense, generated its own explanation. Finally, if asked about the meaning of various actions, participants who had knowledge of these would often say, in a manner reminiscent of the adherents of the Kivung movement, that the behavior was a kind of comparison or analogy: *to tendek etimin*, “they extend a comparison and do it”, in the local Melpa language. *To* here corresponds to the *tok piksa* or metaphorical motif in Tok Pisin which Whitehouse refers to as operative for the Kivung followers. Regardless of the suggestions about the evolutionary development of this capacity, we agree with Whitehouse that it is of great significance in the interpretation of ritual. Indeed,



without it the other mechanisms (agency detection, theory of mind, etc.) could not operate effectively, because the whole construction of rituals is built out of comparisons and analogies. And in this way we find a mechanism to reintegrate the analysis with structural and processual accounts, for the CAT system works precisely to provide mimetic moments and motivations for processes outside of the ritual context as well as within it, and these outside processes are those that constitute the overall social structure and the embodiment of identity. Thus, the pairing and gender complementarity that are marked ritual features in the Amb Kor complex are to be seen as a dynamic part of the wider contextual structuring of gender relations in the society at large (Stewart and Strathern 1999, Strathern and Stewart 1999b).

As a further general point, we applaud Lanman's insistence, in this volume, on the importance of combining interpretive and explanatory approaches. Lanman correctly argues that in the final analysis, "explanation and interpretation cannot escape each other" (Lanman, this volume). This is because explanations themselves depend on prior interpretations of the data; while interpretations depend on underlying assumptions of an explanatory kind, whether these are made explicit or not. Taken as a whole, this volume, for all its tendency to concentrate on specifically cognitive issues, should be seen as a constructive attempt to integrate together different traditions of anthropological work into a new paradigm that harnesses interpretive approaches to an explanatory project. Whitehouse's Kivung case study shows the way to such a possibility; while Laidlaw's astute caveats remind us of the need to recognize different kinds and levels of explanation, in particular of the need to acknowledge that some theories are better for explaining similarities and others for explaining differences. Both are important enterprises; the trick lies in combining them.

January 2007, Cromie Burn Research Unit

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