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Pictures Making Beliefs:

A Cognitive Technological Model for Ritual Efficacy

Camille Wingo

PICTURES MAKING BELIEFS

*A Cognitive Technological Model
for Ritual Efficacy*

Camille Wingo

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Ritual as Technology: Cognitive Widgets, Pictures, and Efficacy

*Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart**

Advances in ritual studies have been made by looking at rituals as processes as well as structures; as practices in addition to forms of symbolic meaning; and as efficacious in their own way rather than as illusory from some viewpoint of an observer (see Stewart and Strathern 2010). In this challenging and rigorously argued work, Camille Wingo builds on, and pushes beyond, these recently established perspectives by mounting a sustained exploration, and exposition, of ritual actions as kinds of cognitive technology. While Wingo draws on ethnographic examples from classic anthropological writings such as those of Gilbert Lewis and Audrey Richards, her theoretical inspiration appears to come most powerfully from the ideas of cognitive scientists such as Andy Clark (for technical debates on the cognitive scientists' views of 'mind' see also Menary ed. 2010), and from those thinkers in the sphere of the analysis of religion such as Maurice Bloch, Pascal Boyer, and Dan Sperber, who base themselves firmly in anthropology but seek to transform it from within by using cognitive science approaches. To this theoretical blend Wingo adds an interesting perspective on imagination, aesthetics, and picture-making and their role in the construction of ritual motifs.

The overall result of her treatment of these themes is that she has carved a different pathway into the question of ritual efficacy. Agreeing that rituals are

* Prof. Andrew J. Strathern and Dr. Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern), will also be presenting a set of lectures as the DeCarle Distinguished Lecturers in New Zealand in 2012 where they will be discussing their research on issues in contemporary anthropology, peace-making, diaspora relations, and also their current writing on political actors, groups or individuals who attempt to intimidate and silence the voices of others with what some have called "agenda driven violence." Their book "Peace-making and the Imagination" (2011, University of Queensland Press) has just been published.

(or can be) efficacious in terms of their overt aims, Wingo concentrates on how they manage this, and proceeds to build up an analysis of rituals as examples of competence-based cognitive technology for “conjuring up” particular kinds of imaginative worlds. In this analytical vision, the people who perform rituals know what they are doing and know how they set about doing it; but they cannot, from within this experience of their own know-how, explain how in general ritual actions work. In evoking the idea of the widget as a prime means of how ritual attains its ends, Wingo is drawing on information science, particularly as it is applied to bits of computer software, for example the bits that enable ‘apps’ to operate. In electronics and mechanics knobs and switches do this, for example by turning operations on and off or changing their levels. It is interesting that the widget is like Roy Rappaport’s idea of the Maring *kaiko* ritual as a homeostatic device and a transducer, shifting “changes in the state of one subsystem into information and energy that can produce changes in the second subsystem” (Rappaport 1967: 229). However, in Wingo’s formulation, the widget is a piece of a wider construction (as a knob or lever is in a machine); whereas Rappaport’s example suggests that at a wider or macro-level a whole ritual complex may serve as a widget in a broad information system and within a particular ecological frame (see also Strathern and Stewart 1999a).

Another line of comparison with widgets might be to set them alongside the concept of a symbol, or perhaps with the idea of making symbols. Symbols employed in rituals such as those described by Victor Turner in his work on the Ndembu, for instance the symbol of the *mudyi* tree (Turner 1967), could certainly be considered complex widgets in the mental architecture of the ritual process as a whole. In a sense, then, every symbol could be considered a widget in this way. The particular feature of the symbol as a type of widget would be that it ‘stands for’ something else, and hence is able to import into the ritual acts a wider set of meanings, linked to cultural values. Symbols, therefore, would be important components in the postulated or putative means-ends relationships between actions in a ritual sequence. In at least one ethnographic case with which we ourselves are very familiar, the Melpa speakers of Mount Hagen in Papua New Guinea, a linguistic concept functions as what we may call a ‘meta-widget’ (see, Stewart, Strathern and Trantow 2011).

Ritual actions, as well as imaginative statements generally, are signaled in the Melpa language as examples of *to*, ‘comparisons’, ‘measures’, ‘parallels’, ‘approximations’, ‘extensions’, or, if you will, ‘metaphors’. A *to* is a shifter, like a transducer in Rappaport’s formulation; it brings together realms of reference to create a new meaningful situation, influenced by ritual framing. The term *to* also refers to bits of ritual actions. A *to* is therefore certainly also a widget. Wingo notes Maurice Bloch’s point that ritual actions and processes are not,

however, simply metaphors: they carry metaphors with them (by transduction, again in Rappaport's terms), so that meanings change as the ritual is enacted. In Bloch's example, trees become houses, and houses then become symbols of continuity among the Zafimaniry (Bloch 1993). This is exactly how a *to* works. Bloch's point is that the embodied quality of hardness and durability found in trees is harnessed to the value of expressing, and indeed constituting, social continuity. As the tree is transformed, it too becomes a widget in the service of creating a social value. We are dealing not just with metaphors but with substitutive progressions of meanings. Perhaps we may speak of a 'meanings-end' relationship here.

Wingo is single-minded in pursuing her emphasis on the cognitive technology of rituals. Her approach can be usefully supplemented by other dimensions of theory. Embodiment is one such dimension. Rituals are like embodied metaphors, or picture-worlds of 'make-believe' ('prelief' in Wingo's own formulation). They are expressive and emplaced loci of the workings of the imagination. They function within, and regenerate, contexts of social relations, and therefore enter into politics and collective life. Wingo's concern is with the technology of rituals. Other approaches might deal with their sociology or the specifics of their cultural production of meanings. Holistically, however, Wingo is also interested in the summation of ritual actions: the production of images. Here, her approach seems akin to Clifford Geertz's well-known definition of religion as a prime means of producing compelling images that impress people with their hyper-reality (Geertz 1966).

This focus on images brings into play questions of sentiment, aesthetics, emotion, and art. In our own studies of violence and peace-making, we have been interested in the power of images, particularly images that represent peace as opposed to war and conflict, and their place in an overall spectrum of symbols (see Stewart and Strathern 2002; Strathern and Stewart 2011; Strathern, Stewart, and Whitehead 2006). In Mount Hagen, for example, the decorations which the male dance performers wear for the climax of the Female Spirit ritual occasion include the white and yellow feathers of the Lesser Bird of Paradise and a special whitened head-net to which the bird feathers are attached. These decorations are emblems of the Spirit herself. Men also dance in pairs, one being the men's house side and the other the women's house side: both separation and peaceful alliance are expressed. The 'white' decorations are markers of peace, whereas the Red Bird of Paradise (Raggiana) plumes worn in other contexts are the color of war. The whole dance performance therefore stands for, and is, a tableau of peace and alliance created through marriage and exchange (see, e.g., Strathern and Stewart 1999b, 2000; Stewart and Strathern 1999). The rite is one of renewal and intensification. Its results are ex-

pected to be fertility and prosperity. And though men are the immediate performers, the values expressed are cosmic, and women are deeply involved in the whole process. We plan to explore the cross-cultural symbolism of peace in future work, studying peace and how it interacts with other matters (Stewart and Strathern n.d).

One recent context in which we were involved reminded us strongly of the power of images. It had to do with death, and indeed violent death. Following the blowing up of government offices in Central Oslo and the subsequent mass shootings at a youth camp on the island of Utøya on July 22, 2011, extensive acts of ritual mourning ensued in different parts of Norway, as well as in Oslo itself. We were on a research and lecture tour in Norway from August 10th onward, and were in the city of Bergen from the 20th–26th, during which time we observed the creation of a ritual tableau of mourning in a part of the city center, where on a long platform people placed flowers, hand-written letters of sorrow and even objects such as teddy bears (marking the relatively young age of many of the victims of the shooting). These embodied images stood out in the open, intimate yet public. They were spontaneously produced and ephemeral, but constantly renewed. We have seen many similar examples of personal mourning sites, although on a smaller scale, in other places. On the campus of the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, we saw a commemorative site set up for a young student who had been killed, with messages of 'we miss you' from friends and family. We have seen also roadside commemoration places where persons who died in car accidents are memorialized, especially with flowers and plaques. Here again, the combination of an intense intimacy of expression with the 'nakedness to view' of a public setting proves particularly poignant. The cognitive technology is strongly emplaced, and the underlying message is a complex blend of appeal to universal compassion and specific warning. All of these images are equally means of striving for peace.

Ritual studies are in a particularly vibrant phase at present, and Camille Wingo's book contributes to this phase in a highly arresting, original, and attention-grasping way. Other books in the Series in which this book appears can be productively compared with hers: for example, Christian Højbjerg's book on ritual resistance to state authority among the Loma people of Guinea in Africa (Højbjerg 2007); Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw's stimulating edited volume on Religion, Anthropology, and Cognitive Science (Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2007); and Andrew Lattas's work on dreaming, myths ('fairy-tales') and turbulent social change in New Britain (Papua New Guinea) (Lattas 2010). Højbjerg's book meticulously presents the complex transformation of ritual symbols centering on ideas of secrecy over time and deployed

in resistance against state disapproval. Whitehouse and Laidlaw, in mutual dialectic, explore the potentialities and limits of a universalizing cognitive science in ritual studies. Lattas's study of dreaming and narrativization of change impinges on the importance of the imagination and picture-building in ritual creativity. In addition to these specialist works, we ourselves have sponsored two special issues of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* brought together by William Sax and others on the whole topic of ritual efficacy (see the *Journal of Ritual Studies* 24 pts. 1 and 2, 2010). We have also selected, edited, and provided an in-depth Introduction for, a set of studies on ritual generally, from earlier theorists through to the present (Stewart and Strathern 2010). (A further co-authored volume is in preparation for publication by Continuum.)

As further testimony to the vibrancy of ritual studies in general, we may cite the five weighty volumes emerging from the conference held in Heidelberg at the collaborative research center on 'Ritual Dynamics' in 2008, and published by Harrassowitz Verlag in 2010 and 2011 under the general editorship of Axel Michaels, and the overall title of 'Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual'.

Wingo's study enters this well-trodden field with a light yet persistent dance step of its own and is bound to become a focus of debate in its own right because of the approach to efficacy through cognitive technology and the maverick appeal of the image of the widget.

Stewart and Strathern's webpages are <http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/>
<http://www.StewartStrathern.pitt.edu/>

October 2011

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