Absent Ritual:
Exploring the Ambivalence and Dynamics of Ritual

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

When Is Absence Indicative of Presence? Reflections on Ritual Intricacies

*Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart**

In this intriguing volume of studies, the contributors look at ranges of complexity that surround the theme of the absence of ritual. These themes may involve the disappearance of ritual practices without replacement by others, or with replacement, or the concealment of practices; changes in styles of ritualization involving the increased expression or suppression of emotions such as grief; the application of rules concerning where and how a particular kind of ritual such as a wedding can be conducted; or how a life-cycle event such as a divorce should be, or is not, marked by rituals. Each one of these kinds of examples is treated by the contributors with scholarly attention and careful contextualization. The chapters in the book all focus around the concomitants of time and space, memory constructions, seen and unseen phenomena, and the power inherent in secrecy and taboos. Cultural values and changes in values over time are revealed in the course of these ethnographic cases. The absence of ritual in one context reveals or suggests its former presence or a memory of its presence or a marker of it, as happens with monuments of deaths suffered in warfare.

It is interesting to note that the studies in this volume mostly deal with recent historical or contemporary circumstances in Europe, including the Netherlands. Major parallels can be found, however, in places around the world, conspicuously in the arenas of religious and ritual change in the Pacific Islands, where indigenous religious practices were largely replaced by versions of Christianity from colonial times onward. At least in early stages of contact, missionaries advocated that indigenous rituals were incompatible with Christianity and must be abandoned by converts to the new religion. People were told that the old religions came from Satan and

were sinful. Continued adherence to indigenous rituals would therefore bar the possibility of people being saved and thus going to the Christian Heaven at their death. Often, people were enjoined to destroy the objects of indigenous worship or to hand these over to the missionaries themselves so as to "free themselves" from the power thought to inhere in these objects (such as cult figures). Quickly enough, traces of the old religions were eliminated, but they inhered still in the landscape and in folktales and knowledge of specific sites where pre-Christian rites had been held. The rituals were, then, physically absent and supposedly removed from popular consciousness, but they were still borne in mind. Furthermore, the introduced Christian practices became partly blended with certain aspects of the indigenous religions, so that these aspects became present again, but were given negative value or were not recognized as such. An equation of Jesus or God with ancestral deities was one way in which older notions were carried forward into the new religion. In charismatic versions of the Christian religion the pastors continually urged people to guard against the influences of the past. Pagan spirits were often still experienced by people in dreams, and these dreams were taken as omens of trouble or impending changes. In a way, old ideas and experiences were incorporated back into the new world of ideas, and the absent became partially present again. Such a kind of mixing of times and places introduces a complexity into the paradigm of absent versus present ritual.

Another possibility is found. Adherents of a new religion may conceal aspects of their old ritual activities or alter them subtly as a kind of disguise or camouflage, in the knowledge of disapproval by the missionaries and their assistants. Such was the case among the Duna people of Hela Province in Papua New Guinea (see Stewart and Strathern 2002 and Strathern and Stewart 2004 and 2010). The Duna followed practices of exposing the bodies of their dead in wooden platforms until the flesh had disappeared. After some time, they would take the bones up to a rock shelter and perform a secondary burial of these remains within clan territory, along with sacrifices of pigs to the spirits of the ancestors. After the adoption of Christianity from the 1960s onward, the Duna began making grave sites with a version of platform burial concealed inside a structure of indigenous materials. Then, when they removed the bones to high altitude rock shelters, they would do so in a clandestine manner, telling others that they were going to hold "a little party" in the bush. Thus, the pretext was that the old practices were now absent, whereas in fact they were simply concealed, along with a

degree of subterfuge and rationalizing by giving an appearance of conformity with the introduced practice and a linguistic downplaying in relation to secondary burial.

In addition to such historical adaptations to change, the indigenous practices themselves concealed strong elements of secrecy. In Hagen, the Female Spirit ritual performance entailed the seclusion of ritual practice behind two layers or more of fencing (see Stewart and Strathern 1999, 2002 and Strathern and Stewart 1999, 2000). The first fence, ou röprö, "big fence," shut off the cult site proper from the larger public ceremonial ground or moka pena on which the formal dance display would be held. Next, the smaller fence, kel röprö, small fence, hid from view the main cult house, known as the "house of men and women" ('manga rapa amb -nga'). Inside this structure or nearby to it in another hut, the collections of decorated stones that were the signs of the Spirit were housed and pork sacrifices made to honor the Spirit herself. There could, finally, be yet another division of the site where only the approved ritual experts brought in from afar would perform incantations celebrating the power of the Spirit to renew the fertility of the land and its people, both male and female. At the end of the whole event, dancers burst out of the big fence area and performed the dance of celebration, circling the ground as ceremonial pairs and stamping the ground rhythmically. The most powerful ritual acts were kept most secret. The final dance was the most public and was meant to explain to all the spectators that the ritual "had worked."

The Hagen spirit stones were then buried in the clan ground within the secret site and their placement was shown to a youth or youths who might be expected to perform a follow-up many years after the initial occasion was held. Secrecy followed by display followed by secrecy again is the basic model, with expectation that the display will be renewed by the next generation of mature men in the clan.

After a round of performances by various groups, the cult has gone out of favor, with the progressive strength of conversion to Christianity. The fences of the cult site rot away and the burial place of the spirit stones is kept in memory by the planting of sacred cordyline plants over it. The Spirit herself is then supposed to remain latently in the site, awaiting the renewal of ritual that could awaken her power. A passerby would not understand the symbolism of the burial, since it is almost as though the secret is lost, but knowledge belongs to the leaders of the group that has performed it. Memory is now in control.

With time, knowledge of the site can get lost. We would then be at the point documented in the volume here of Christian churches that have lost their congregations in parts of Europe, only in reverse. In our Papua New Guinea example, Christian churches have taken over and their rituals are practiced publicly and constantly. In parts of Europe, by contrast, Christian church buildings are decommissioned when they cannot be supported effectively by the official Church, and secularization sets in. In both cases, rituals become absent, but for opposite reasons, conversion to Christianity in Papua New Guinea, away from it in Europe. The decommissioned church buildings get converted themselves into other uses, coffee shops or libraries or community halls. When a new church is consecrated this is marked by a ritual celebration. De-sacralization may require an authorized ritual, but it marks an end rather than a beginning.

The chapter on divorce offers a parallel here. Weddings, as beginnings of new and putatively positive relationships, are strongly marked in ritual. Divorce is the opposite; it marks an end of the relationship, and is not celebrated, even though in practice it may lead to freeing of the parties from a relationship that has not worked. As always, ritual practices are inflected in accordance with the overall values of the society. Marriage rituals are intended both to celebrate the values that constitute it and to create a sense of rejoicing through the ritual action. Divorce indicates the opposite of rejoicing and with this goes the lack of ritual. Anglican church rules in England are expressly designed to make divorced people who wish to remarry with a church service proclaim remorse for the ending of their former marriage, thus likening divorce to a sin that must be atoned for. This is perhaps a legacy of the original Catholic Church, which does not allow its members to formally divorce, although it does permit annulments. The Anglican rule corresponds to what we may call "curtailed ritual," not absent but truncated.

In fact, this characterization can be applied to other contexts, as contributions to this volume attest. Another term that is applicable here is William Arfman's "ritual selectivity," which he deploys very effectively in relation to rituals marking disasters. Media coverage of disasters varies in accordance, he demonstrates, with politics, at different levels. Martin Hoondert's chapter on "ritual indifference," in cremation rituals in the Netherlands in the 1960s–1980s also falls in place here. Cremation became legal in the Netherlands only in 1955 and from that time through the 1960s it was conducted in plain buildings and with a minimum of ritualization,

as though it should not (like divorce!) be accorded any ostentatious attention. Martin Hoondert perceptively notes that in the 1990s this austere cultural pattern was replaced by more expensive and emotive patterns of ritual organization. We can make a comparison here with a shift in funerary practices in Mount Hagen in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, where there has recently, within the last ten years or so, been a shift toward the building of expensive, permanent-material, mausoleum-like tombs for local male leaders or educated youths, situated near their former dwellings, often beside a government-built road (Stewart and Strathern 2018). We are working on the meaning and history of this ritual shift as a marker of conspicuous consumption and presentation of self. In Hoondert's case study conspicuous consumption would certainly appear to be a factor, along with dialectical swings of fashion and possibly changes in income and class structure. A correlation of this kind might prove fruitful to pursue in both the Netherlands and Papua New Guinea. "Ritual styles" rather than "ritual indifference" could be used as a label for such a comparison.

"Ritual style" is also at the heart of Professor Paul Post's study of the artist Pieter Saenredam's church interiors. Catholic interiors and rituals were banished and replaced by "de-ritualized" interiors in the painter's representational work that belongs to the seventeenth century. One might describe these interiors also as "austere." Yet the architectural design recapitulates spaces in Catholic architecture, minus the paintings and statues. A famous church in Augsburg, Germany, that we visited many times during 2017–2019, displays the same kind of austerity, in counterpoint to an elaborate statue of a mature Jesus, his arm outstretched to the congregation. Professor Post's essay here illuminates both art history and the history of religious change in historical Europe. The difference between the Saenredam paintings and the church, St. Moritz Kirche, in the center of Augsburg is that the Augsburg church is actually a Catholic church, whose interior design has been redone by a minimalist architect, John Pawson, in contemporary times, making a twist on deritualization from within the Catholic tradition itself, in the twenty-first century. "Ritual selectivity" has here been exercised to transcend earlier religious conflicts.

Selectivity of ritual can be connected to further contexts. Professor Van Beek's remarkable study of Mormon rituals of marriage records how the very intense sacredness of Mormon temples goes with the exclusion of relatives from the central marriage ritual. Laurie Faro's moving account of a ritual change of practices in relation to stillborn children, as a result of

public sentiment, led to the installation of monuments for the stillborn in many cities in the Netherlands. Martin Hoondert broaches a vital set of issues in his chapter about rituals of remembrance that present divided views, and thus have the potential to provoke violence rather than healing. Healing for whom, then? Selectivity points to historical shifts in sentiment, shaping and reshaping rituals.

The absence of a particular ritual may be a result of a banning, but this may reflect the phenomenon of "ritual transfer," away from institutionalized church rituals and into personalized practices belonging to civil society. Martin Hoondert explores this important process in his chapter on vicarious rituals and Requiem concerts that have taken the place of earlier Catholic practices on All Souls' Day occasions that were originally designed as events for prayers on behalf of the souls of deceased Catholics in Purgatory. With the decline of the idea of Purgatory this aspect has tended to be replaced by musical Requiem performances that provide an uplifting aesthetic experience. This has happened since 2004, in association with turning away from old theological themes and cosmologies. The Requiem concerts replace sermons with music, and ritual expressions of honoring the dead replace prayers for their souls. This example also evokes a rich context of the importance of music and song in rituals generally. In a broader sense again, the example raises the issue of the effectiveness of ritual transfers such as the transfer of rituals to cyber-space, as well as the interplay between the virtual and the physical realms. The final chapter in this rich panoply of ritual studies found in the volume is by Paul Post and reviews the contested question of whether cyber-rituals can function as sacramental performances of embodied power and salvation. This arena can be seen as recapitulating earlier arguments about the meaning of the Eucharist ritual. So the volume ends with yet another look into what the subtitle of the book signals, "the ambivalence and dynamics of ritual."

The interweaving of absence and presence is strongly displayed throughout this volume of scholarly studies. Instead of being simple opposites, absence and presence are displayed in dialectical form.

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* Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern) and Andrew J. Strathern are a wife-and-husband research team who are based in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh and co-direct the Cromie Burn Research Unit. They are frequently invited international lecturers and have worked with a number of museums to assist them with their collections. Stewart and Strathern have published over 50 books, over 80 Prefaces to influencial books, over 200 articles, book chapters, and essays on their research in the Pacific, mainly Papua New Guinea (Mount Hagen, Duna, and Wiru areas primarily) and the South-West Pacific region (e.g., Samoa, Cook Islands, and Fiji); Asia (mainly Taiwan, and also including Mainland China and Japan); Europe (primarily Scotland, Ireland, Germany and the European Union countries in general); and New Zealand and Australia. One of their strengths is that, unlike some others working in the Mount Hagen area among the Hagen people, they learned the language, Melpa, and used it to understand the lives of the local people. Their most recent co-authored books include *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Cambridge University Press,

2004); *Kinship in Action: Self and Group* (Prentice Hall, 2011); *Peace-Making and the Imagination: Papua New Guinea Perspectives* (University of Queensland Press with Penguin Australia, 2011); *Ritual: Key Concepts in Religion* (Bloomsbury Academic Publications, 2014); *Working in the Field: Anthropological Experiences Across the World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); *Breaking the Frames: Anthropological Conundrums* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); and *Sacred Revenge in Oceania* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). Their recent co-edited books include *Research Companion to Anthropology* (Routledge Publishing, 2016, originally published in 2015); *Exchange and Sacrifice* (Carolina Academic Press, 2008) and *Religious and Ritual Change: Cosmologies and Histories* (Carolina Academic Press, 2009), including the Updated and Revised Chinese version (Taipei, Taiwan: Linking Publishing, 2010). Stewart and Strathern's current research includes the topics of Cosmological Landscapes; Ritual Studies; Political Peace-making; Comparative Anthropological Studies of Disasters and Climatic Change; Language, Culture and Cognitive Science; and Scottish and Irish Studies. For many years they served as Associate Editor and General Editor (respectively) for the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania book series and they are Co-Series Editors for the Anthropology and Cultural History in Asia and the Indo-Pacific book series. They also currently serve as Co-Editors of four book series: Ritual Studies, Medical Anthropology, European Anthropology, and Disaster Anthropology, and they are the long-standing Co-Editors of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* (on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ritualstudies). Their webpages, listing publications and other scholarly activities, are: http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/ and http://www.StewartStrathern.pitt.edu/ .

Birch, Cromie Burn Research Unit,
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