

Catherine BELL. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. x + 270 pp. Hardcover US\$35.00, ISBN 0-19-506923-4. Paperback US\$15.95, ISBN 0-19-507613-3.

While it is a common observation that ritual plays a crucial, even defining, role in Japanese culture and religion, scholarship on Japan has contributed little to larger discussions on the role of ritual in culture and religion. The study of ritual in Japan may finally be reaching some sort of critical mass, however. In recent years the notion of ritual has received important, sophisticated attention in the work of scholars such as Herman Ooms, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, Gary Ebersole, and Alan Grapard. It is now difficult to speak of ritual without an acquaintance with the wealth of theoretical, interpretive research on the subject, nor can scholars rely on some shared scholarly "common sense" about what ritual is and does.

Catherine Bell's *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* can be taken as a useful guide to ritual, although it is as difficult as any current work on the subject. In addition to critically examining theories of ritual and offering a range of constructive insights, it also uses the problems posed by ritual to provide valuable commentary on recent theoretical discussions of such notions as power, ideology, practice, and meaning.

Part I is an examination of ritual theory from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The argument is a subtle one and can only be presented in skeletal form here. Bell proposes that ritual theories, as part of a larger effort

to construct religion, culture, and society as objects of study, have been built on an often hidden assumption of an opposition between thought and action. This leads to a division and mapping of religion, society, or culture in terms of a series of dichotomies—ritual/belief, individual/group, action/ideas, ethos/worldview, etc.—derived from and roughly analogous to the thought/action dichotomy. Having thus constructed an object of study, theory is then faced with the dilemma of determining how the various dichotomies are integrated, harmonized, or mediated. More often than not, it is ritual that is presented as mediating the various oppositions generated by the more fundamental opposition of thought and action.

Thus Bell sees the argument of most ritual theories as both circular and contradictory. Theory attempts to bring together the thought-action dichotomies it itself has introduced into the object of study; ritual is presented as the mediating element, but ritual is initially identified with action and is thus, by definition, unable to resolve the basic opposition. As the title *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* suggests, Bell views ritual theory itself as a type of practice, a theoretical practice shaped by the same sort of implicit, loose homologies between oppositions that we easily see as characterizing other people's religious practices but not our own theoretical reflections.

Parts II and III develop an alternative approach (although something less than a total theory) by introducing the notion of ritualization, in order to focus on the process by which "social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other action."

Ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities apart from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between sacred and profane, and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors. (p. 74)

While many theories have identified ritual with a particular strategy such as repetition, this formulation emphasizes the variety of strategies.

Only a few of the ramifications of this idea can be touched on here. Ritualization emerges in this analysis as a situational, strategic mode of action involving the interplay of ritualized bodies with the ritual environment they structure and are in turn structured by. Through this interplay, ritualization manipulates and reorchestrates cultural schemes as a way of redefining a problematic situation. Since ritual reorchestrates (and does not reflect, reproduce, etc.) existing cultural schemes, it cannot be taken as a simple window on a larger, unified worldview, culture, or ideology. A given ritual may thus stand in a variety of complex relations to the surrounding range of practices and conceptions.

In similar fashion, ritual also lacks the internal cohesion and uniformity often attributed it. The reorchestration of cultural schemes through ritual involves a loose and not consciously articulated deployment and hierarchization of binary schemes to generate a sense of totality and systematicity that

afford the participants a sense of empowerment and redemption. Any act of ritualization, however, is a joint, negotiated undertaking of ritual experts and ritual participants that permits a range of interpretations and attitudes to all involved. Ritualization is thus a means of negotiating understandings of authority, self, and society.

The sort of “practical” insights generated by this work might be illustrated through an example drawn from the flurry of ritual activity that accompanied the passing of Emperor Shōwa. Widely reported and shown in the mass media were the moments of *mokutō* (silent prayer or homage with heads bowed) that occurred throughout Japan at schools and places of work. This simple ritual act was interpreted in the media (and in some scholarly commentary) as a symbolic expression of the thoughts and feelings of the Japanese or, more critically, as yet another example of the power of imperial ideology in Japan. These interpretations were, moreover, perfectly consonant with more “sophisticated” scholarly notions often used to interpret ritual in Japan.

The argument presented in *Ritual Theory/Ritual Practice* suggests that the above interpretations are inadequate. Informal fieldwork (as well as simple gossip) at the time of these ritual activities suggests that there was more drama behind—and within—the ritual acts than the above readings suggest. At many schools and workplaces, the seemingly harmonious, transparent, and unified moment of *mokutō* was a compromise resulting from serious, if not bitter, contention and dispute. Some people thought there should be no marking of the event; some thought there should be a fuller and more explicit homage paid to the emperor. Participation in the ritual act marked a consent to participate but not necessarily to believe. Hence the stereotyped reading of the emotional valence of the act did not necessarily correspond to the feeling within people’s hearts, and the presence and absence of certain ritual gestures may have said as much about resistance to as acceptance of a vague imperial ideology.

As in many areas of study, scholarship on Japan is split between those who are enamored of theory and those who view it with suspicion. While its theoretical concerns are obvious, *Ritual Theory/Ritual Practice* is a work that also raises questions about the limits of theoretical discourse and thus, at least potentially, speaks to both sides of the split. Bell views efforts to construct a total theory of ritual as succumbing to seemingly intractable, and perhaps inevitable, contradictions. She also shows, however, that theory is inescapable; the assumptions informing and generated by theory are at play even in those works that eschew theory in the grand sense. One of the virtues of this work is the way it serves to question accepted understandings of ritual: ritual as social control, ritual as communication, ritual as a reflection of emotions, ritual as a reflection of ideology, ritual as legitimation, ritual as performance, etc. Being partially “an exploration of ways of *not* thinking about ritual” (p. 219), *Ritual Theory/Ritual Practice* helps one with the most difficult of endeavors: bringing to light implicit assumptions and defamiliarizing accrued levels of what seem like solid, established insights.

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