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Trauma, Tedium and Tautology in the Study of Ritual

Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Form, by R.N. McCauley & E.T. Lawson, 2002. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; ISBN 0-521-81559-2 hardback, £47.50 & US\$65.00; ISBN 0-521-01629-0 paperback, £16.95 & US\$23.00, xiii + 236 pp., ills.

Chris Knight

This ambitious volume is the sequel to an earlier work (Lawson & McCauley 1990) in which the authors 'launched the cognitive science of religion' (McCauley & Lawson 2002, ix). Adopting a linguistics-inspired 'competence' approach and assimilating ritual to the Agent-Action-Patient structure of propositional speech, they make a series of scientific predictions. Where it is the Agent who is 'Special' in the sense of 'closest to God', it is predicted that the Patient will participate just once in a vivid, memorable event. By contrast, where only the Action, Instrument or Patient is special — that is, where God himself is not responsible for what happens — we may expect performances to be impermanent in their effects and correspondingly repeatable. It is predicted, further, that the consequences of a Special Agent ritual will be reversible under certain conditions (as when a non-consummated marriage must be annulled). Reversibility is not predicted in the case of Special Instrument or Special Patient rituals. In the case of Special Agent rituals, finally, it will not be permissible to allow substitutions — only the agency of God can guarantee efficacy. By contrast, it should be allowable to make personally convenient substitutions of things, actions or persons in the case of Special Instrument or Special Patient rituals.

To test these predictions, McCauley and Lawson

turn to Whitehouse's (1995) work among the Mali Baining of New Britain Island, Papua New Guinea. The local *Pomio Kivung* is a millenarian cargo cult whose followers devote themselves to placating deified ancestors. Once sufficient ritual purification has been achieved, the gods will arrive in the guise of white-skinned western scientists and industrialists. They will inaugurate 'the Period of Companies' — a period of affluence based on a western-style industrial infrastructure — before ushering in the 'Period of Government', whereupon the faithful will be freed from conflict, suffering, labour, death and reproduction.

When Whitehouse and his wife arrived to do anthropological research, it occurred to a young man named Tanotka that they must be the ancestors in question. When the couple commented innocently that the Cemetery Temple perhaps needed repairs, the alerted villagers immediately built a new temple. Breaking with the Christian-influenced mainstream cargo-cult — with its tedious focus on verbal indoctrination and ritual routine — they decided to celebrate by reviving songs, feasts and masked dances from traditional initiation rites. Confident that the world would now end, Tanotka's splinter-group ceased all labour in the gardens and killed every pig in the village. Following a feast, they constructed a roundhouse in which the sexes were collectively paired off. During the ensuing climactic nights it was expected that the ancestors would arrive within minutes. When this failed to happen, it was clearly because of everyone's half-hearted performance. To avoid upsetting the ancestors yet again, the faithful were prevented from stepping outdoors — even to relieve themselves. Following months of squalor and hunger as supplies ran low, a government health inspector finally arrived. He ordered demolition of the stinking roundhouse and commanded everyone to return to work. By now disillusioned, the cult members obeyed — and resumed participation in the mainstream religion they had earlier left.

McCauley and Lawson contrast the sermon-based, tedious *Pomio Kivung* religion with the traumatic revelatory rites of the splinter group. Why, they ask, do rituals throughout the world 'gravitate' in this way between the two 'attractor positions' of tedium and trauma? According to Whitehouse (1995), the constraints of human memory dictate that an infrequently-performed ritual must be correspondingly memorable — hence vivid and intense. McCauley and Lawson respond (p. 179): 'The ritual frequency hypothesis *cannot* account for the changes in the performances of the Kivung rites during the

splinter group period'. Contrary to Whitehouse's predictions, *both* the frequency *and* the intensity of the new rituals *increased* as time passed. In place of the flawed 'ritual frequency' hypothesis, therefore, McCauley & Lawson offer their own hypothesis of 'ritual form'. This states that sensory pageantry will be intense when rituals assume Special Agent form — that is, when 'the gods are responsible for what happens'.

The 'classic rites of passage', note the authors (p. 121), 'are paradigmatic examples of . . . special agent rituals'. 'Typically', they continue, 'the rituals that mark entry into this world at birth, into the adult world during adolescence, and into another world at death are rituals participants go through only once'. Returning to Whitehouse's account, McCauley & Lawson note that the whole period of Tanotka's splinter-group *was* such a rite of passage. Not only were dances and masks from traditional initiation rites remembered and restored. More fundamentally, the *whole idea* was to be traumatically initiated into the next world. By contrast, those leading the tedious mainstream Pomio Kivung cult *explicitly prohibited* members from participating in *any* sort of initiation (Whitehouse 1992, 794). In the light of such considerations, McCauley & Lawson (p. 187) reformulate their 'pivotal' prediction:

The ritual form hypothesis predicts that the increases in sensory pageantry in a ritual system (in response to the tedium effect) will inevitably become associated with special agent rituals, where CPS-agents [Culturally Postulated Supernatural Agents] or their representatives do something that they need only do once (such as inaugurate a new age).

As I pondered the implications of all this, I found myself nagged by a persistent question. If the authors are correct, would it not follow that 'Special Agent Rituals' would be better conceptualized in more familiar and less technical language — that is, as 'Rites of Passage'? Once this terminological restoration has been achieved, these authors' 'central puzzle' disappears. It becomes self-evident that a ritual tradition when experienced by the *out-group* ('novices', 'the unconverted') must *logically* differ from that same tradition when viewed from the perspective of the corresponding *in-group* (Knight 1998; 2002). To function effectively within any established in-group is to internalize what Bourdieu (1991) terms its 'habitus'. By contrast, becoming for the first time an 'adult', an 'ancestor' — or a member of the millenarian universal 'Government' — must entail a relatively traumatic initiation into an entirely new

game. The assumption made by the leadership of the Pomio Kivung cult, quite clearly, was that the faithful were *already* initiated — everyone was supposed to *know already* who the ancestors were. The splinter-group's traumatic features, by contrast, stemmed from the realization that an entirely new game could be tried.

Cognitivism, as I have commented elsewhere (Knight 2000), can deal neither with politics nor with collective intentionality. Its congenitally Cartesian (Chomsky 1966) assumptions construct symbolic representations exclusively as *internal* states of the *individual* 'mind/brain'. It is on this basis that McCauley & Lawson approach a messianic Melanesian cargo cult aimed at restoring parity with the affluent west. They attempt to explain this and other products of global injustice not politically — but in terms of 'micro-processes operating at the psychological level' (p. 180). Ritual is examined as if in a bubble, cut off in a disembodied realm — beyond co-operation and competition, tenderness and violence, sharing and exploitation, trust and deceit, gender, sex, kinship, economics, politics and power. To conceptualize ritual in this way would have seemed, to a former generation of social anthropological scholars, quite unthinkable. That this book has been written and published at all is therefore testimony to the continuing corporate impact of the cognitive revolution which Chomsky did so much to inspire.

McCauley & Lawson feel no need to invoke Marx, Durkheim, Turner, Rappaport, Douglas, Bourdieu — or indeed any of their own scholarly field's ancestral giants. Impervious to the existence of 'institutional facts' (Searle 1996), these authors' psychological framework renders it impossible for them even to 'see' in-group/outgroup boundaries or the corresponding dynamics. McCauley & Lawson report the discovery that 'Special Agent' rituals — that is, rites of passage — turn out to be non-repeatable. They seem not to have realized that once you are initiated, it is *logically self-evident* that you don't need to go through that particular ritual again. The authors attribute such findings to internal micro-processes within mind-reading competence. In fact, however, to appreciate such logical correlations is simply to think things through. Why is it that initiation rituals — but not performatives accomplished by authorized insiders — are experienced subjectively as direct interventions by 'the gods'? The answer becomes self-evident when we reformulate the problem in social terms. No self-organized collective can afford to allow individuals to *admit themselves* to its internal life and associated contractual privileges.

Decisions of this kind must — for *institutional* reasons — remain ‘in the lap of the gods’. As applications are duly processed and trials imposed, it is inevitable that those hoping for admission should feel at the mercy of forces beyond their control.

What of these authors’s ‘pivotal’ prediction — namely, that ‘sensory pageantry’ will be most intense where God ‘is responsible for what happens’. The circularity involved here is painful. Anthropologists have long known that the only way in which God’s agency might *conceivably* be made palpable to a whole community would be through rituals of a certain kind — namely, those making God’s agency *palpable* to that community (Durkheim 1965 [1912]). Again, McCauley & Lawson point out that rituals of the ‘Special Instrument’ or ‘Special Patient’ type — that is, repeatable moves made by insiders within an already established game — lack special procedures for revoking their own effects. Where there is no life-changing status transition to be reversed, in other words, procedures for such reversal appear not to be required. In this as in so many other ways, McCauley & Lawson predict that ‘Special Agent Rituals’ will be found packaged with an array of properties distinct from those packaged at the other pole. While the details are often indisputable, it is hard to see why any of this should qualify as predictive science. In short, the ‘predictions’ offered by McCauley & Lawson turn out to have the status only of tautologies. Only the authors’ laboriously cognitive mindset and associated esoteric terminology could possibly have concealed from them this fact.

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Of Cannibals and Kings

The Cannibal Hymn: a Cultural and Literary Study, by Christopher Eyre, 2002. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press; ISBN 0-85323-696-8 hardback, £39.95 & US\$59.95; ISBN 0-85323-706-9 paperback, £16.95 & US\$26.95

Salima Ikram

Christopher Eyre’s book is unusual in being a cultural interpretation of an ancient Egyptian text. He writes in his introduction ‘My aim is an essay on literature as an artefact of cultural history, using this specific text as a case study’ (p. 5). Generally, most analyses of ancient Egyptian texts focus on translating the text and then analyzing its grammar and word use, rather than trying to understand its cultural or social role. Granted that assessing ancient texts within their original contexts is not without its pitfalls, as Eyre acknowledges, he does an excellent job of using the text as a tool to elucidate and interpret different aspects of Egyptian society and culture. Through the vehicle of the ‘Cannibal Hymn’, he also provides a template for similar interpretations of other ancient Egyptian texts.

The ‘Cannibal Hymn’ is one ‘spell’ that is found