

Rituals as generators of common knowledge

Ilkka Pyysiäinen

Rituals – Why Indeed?

Think of all the time, energy, and economical resources people all over the world have invested in ritual activities, during the course of human history. Whatever the ultimate explanation of ritual behavior is, it obviously remains true that rituals are an extremely important concern of humans. One may quit smoking, stop drinking, and even adopt a celibate life, but hardly ever have we heard of a person totally refusing to participate in rituals. It would seem that an activity worthy of such investment of time and energy must be of utmost importance for human survival; yet it has not been shown that rituals serve any such function. What, then, is it that makes rituals so ubiquitous that they seem like our second nature?

We certainly are not short of answers, which I somewhat paradoxically take to be a sure sign of our ignorance about the causes of ritual behavior. What we know for sure, we can express in a single answer; what we do not know, we can go on explaining for hours. In this short essay, I only wish to offer a small emendation to Pascal Boyer's (2001- 229-263) recent explanation of ritual behavior, and also to formulate a hypothesis that can be empirically tested.

Boyer presents the following argument:

- 1) There are panhuman evolved mechanisms of the mind that are specialized in handling information about social relationships.
- 2) These mechanisms are tacit and intuitive; we are not normally conscious of them and cannot perceive how they function.
- 3) Therefore, the ways in which changes in social position are brought about have an aura of magic around them.

Then add to this:

- 4) beginning from infancy, we repeatedly see our cultural elders to associate a given ritual with given social effects.

Two conclusions immediately follow:

- 6) we are conditioned to think that rituals are essential for certain social effects: they causally produce the desired result;
- 7) we are motivated to stick to these ritual behaviors and to transmit them to future generations, because they seem necessary for the desired effects.

This may be – partly at least – a valid explanation of how and why ritual actions are so widespread in human cultures. But it does not say anything of why rituals are performed in the first place. The belief in causal efficacy cannot be the proximal cause of ritual behavior because it is the result of observing ritual performance. Although Boyer admits that baptisms, weddings, etc. are essentially social matters and deal with changes in social positions, he denies that in ritual people grasp or express any important messages about themselves and their relationships with each other. Moreover, although rituals deal with changes in social position that are important not only for the specific individuals acting as patients in the rituals, but for the whole community, the necessity to organize social relationships cannot explain why there has to be a ritual performance in connection with such social events. Rituals are not necessary to social processes, but only to people's thoughts about these processes. They do not create social effects, only the illusion that they do. (Boyer 2001: 232, 247-248, 252-256.)

In what follows, I shall argue that rituals are necessary to social processes and that they do convey information about social relationships. The need to convey information about changes in social positions may well be the proximal reason why rituals are performed, although it is very likely that people often also develop all kinds of beliefs about the 'magical' efficacy of rituals in causally producing the desired change in social position. As McCauley & Lawson (2002: Ch. 2) argue, the performance of rituals is "integral both to situating individuals within the larger religious community and to sustaining that community." I do not claim to explain why individual rituals are arranged in precisely those specific ways they are. There are different reasons for different rituals being the way they are. There may also be a general, ultimate, explanation for such general features of ritual behavior as repetitiveness, formal behavior, etc., but I am here not concerned about that aspect of explaining rituals either (Boyer 2001: 236-246). I only try to explain why members of a group gather together and jointly direct their attention to such facts as that someone has been born, some get married, someone has died, etc.

My account thus suggests that there is something in common in all rituals: the generation of common knowledge about the specific changes the ritual ap-

pears to be meant to bring about (Chwe 2001). However, this is – at best – only a necessary, not a sufficient, characteristic feature of rituals (there are other ways of establishing common knowledge as well). I argue that this is the most important reason for ritual behavior, although it does not rule out the possibility that people yet may believe that rituals actually cause the relevant changes. In the following, I try to explain the difference between rituals as generating common knowledge about social transformations and rituals as causally producing those transformations.

The Problem of Social Causation

Societies are not bounded units of nature, but rather consist of mental concepts that have specified relations which other such concepts. This view is a version of the idea that societies are not made up of individuals but of communicative acts (Beyer 1984: ix-x). The specified relationships between individuals and groups of individuals do not exist in observed physical reality but in the minds of people. It is only by virtue of this that they can exercise influence on human behavior. Although there are certain biological facts that for example make a certain individual my brother and another one my mother, it is the human understandings of motherhood and brotherhood that contributes to the organization of social relationships. Not that these understandings are independent of inborn intuitions and their physical realization in the brain. That is not what I mean. I only mean that social structures are abstract entities based on our intuitions and conscious beliefs about the relationships between individuals as members of a whole. There are many types of classifications contributing to social structure: family, social class, ethnic group, caste, race, lineage, gender, etc. (Boyer 2001: 250-251).

Although these classifications are for the most part creations of human minds, we often are prone to think that they are somehow ‘natural.’ We think that there must be some unitary inner essence that makes someone a Finn or a Hungarian, or a shaman, thief, cousin, professor, etc. Such classifications are not understood as mere abstractions made on the basis of several, partly independent, facts. Membership in a class is rather considered as caused by a single unobservable essence the existence of which is inferred from certain perceptual cues. In principle, that essence cannot be changed: “once a thief, always a thief.” (Gelman & Hirschfeld 1999; Boyer 2001: 251-252; Ahn et al. 2001.) It has been suggested that this way of thinking originally emerged in the context of folk biology and has been subsequently adopted for use in the social context: priests, shamans, etc. are sup-

posed to have an essence just as natural kinds do (Boyer 1994: 155-184). It seems, however, that in fact essentialist thinking might have independently emerged in several domains (Gelman & Hirschfeld 1999).

So, how is it possible to acquire an essence or to lose it? Clearly, people graduate, are ordained as priests, marry, etc., and also cease to be children, laypersons, bachelors, etc. What causes the change? According to Boyer, as we cannot directly observe how someone turns from a bachelor to a married man, or from a non-professor into a professor, we are prone to provide all kinds of outlandish explanations for this change. Such changes also are accompanied by a ritual; having had many occasions to witness such rituals, we then gradually develop a belief that the ritual is in fact necessary for the change in question. In other words, we develop a belief that it is the ritual that causes the change. People thus are convinced that rituals produce effects, even if they have no idea of how the rituals produce the effects. Boyer calls this the “illusion that the ritual is actually indispensable to its effects.” (Boyer 2001: 250-256.)

Counter-Intuitive Agents

Ignorance about the mechanisms through which rituals are efficacious makes it possible to put forward various kinds of conjectures. As we know from experience that the social world functions on the basis of intentional acts of rational agents, it is a default value that also the mysterious causes that rituals induce in social positions are someone’s intentional acts. They are not produced by any purely mechanical forces. If the cause lies in the intentions of an actor, and the actor cannot be seen, touched, or identified by any other concrete means, then the ritual effect obviously is brought about by a counter-intuitive agent that lacks ordinary physical and biological properties but yet has a mind with beliefs and desires. Such an agent can be a god, an ancestor, Christ, or any other variant of counter-intuitive agency. (Boyer 2001: 256-258.)

According to Lawson & McCauley, religious rituals can be differentiated from other kinds of rituals by the fact that in them the causal powers of the ritual are ascribed to some counter-intuitive agent (Lawson & McCauley 1990; McCauley & Lawson 2002: Ch. 1; cf. Boyer 2001: 236, 256). Counter-intuitive agents are agents with properties that contradict panhuman intuitive expectations about agents and agency already in place in young infants (see Boyer 1994: 91-124; 2001: 51-91; Lawson 2001; Pyysiäinen 2001: 14-22). Lawson & McCauley (1990), McCauley & Lawson (2002), and Barrett & Lawson (2001), have argued at length

that people have intuitive knowledge about ritual structures because rituals follow the general pattern of action (vs. something just happening): someone does something for someone by means of something. Religious rituals only include a “culturally postulated superhuman agent” (a CPS agent) either as the actor, patient, or instrument of the ritual action. Barrett & Lawson (2001) have experimentally shown that, in judging whether a hypothetical ritual is effective, people regard having an appropriate intentional agent as relatively more important than the particular action.

Lawson & McCauley (2002; McCauley & Lawson 2002; McCauley 2001) argue that when a CPS agent is the actor, the effects produced are ‘superpermanent’ because what gods do is done once and for all. Therefore, such rituals need not be repeated for any one individual. Only such rituals can be repeated where the actor is a group of humans and the patient is a CPS agent. But, as both I myself (Pyysiäinen 2001: 93) and Boyer (2001: 260-262), independently from each other, have argued, this seems like a mistaken interpretation. It is, for example, not the fact that it is God who actively gives his blessing to the deceased that makes a funeral a non-repeated ritual with a superpermanent effect; funerals are performed only once for any one patient simply because people die only once. We also are born only once, usually receive only one name, and do not get married every second week. All rituals in which the agent is a CPS agent are such that they relate to instances of social change that have a once-in-a-lifetime character (they are rites of passage). Rituals where the CPS agent is the patient do not deal with such social changes; a typical example of them are offerings. It is difficult to imagine that such rituals were done only once (see Whitehouse 2000). Rituals can be divided into rites of passage, calendrical rites, and crisis rites (Honko 1979); of these, it is only rites of passage that deal with changes in the social (or even ontological) status of persons, involve counter-intuitive agents as active agents, and have a once-in-a-lifetime nature. Calendrical and crisis rites are repeated rituals with humans agents as actors; they are clearly of a different nature (see below). (See Pyysiäinen 2001: 92.)

Conclusion: Ritual and common knowledge

For Boyer, rituals are performed in order to achieve particular effects, although the connection between the actions prescribed and the results expected often is rather mysterious to the performers. Rituals are behaviors in which a group of people do something which they believe will have effects on their social

life, yet remaining completely ignorant of the mechanisms through which their deeds bring about what they are believed to bring about. As the ritual mechanisms of causation thus escape common sense, they often are explained with reference to gods, spirits, ancestors, and other such counter-intuitive agents which fill in the empty place-holder of 'caused by someone.' (Boyer 2001: 232.)

I have already expressed some dissatisfaction with this scenario. First, it does not explain why ritual behavior has emerged in the first place. Although I agree that many beliefs and behaviors can be accounted for by selectionist arguments explaining why these beliefs and behaviors have survived in cultural transmission, I think that we can and should say more about ritual behavior. To the extent that rituals are collective actions, we cannot explain them as idiosyncrasies that have become widespread because of their memorability and attention-grabbing potential. And, to say that they are group activities that subsequently have become widespread, leaves unexplained how they ever got to be group activities. Rituals do not start as idiosyncratic behaviors that then gradually become widespread. Belief in the magical causation thus cannot be the cause of ritual behavior because it is its consequence.

Second, I don't think that the driving force behind ritual beliefs is an intellectual curiosity that urges us to seek for metaphysical explanations for social causation. It is rather that we have the very practical need to know in what kinds of relationships we stand to other members of society. I need to know who is my mother and that my relationship with her is different from my relationship with my boss, etc. This is the kind of information that actually is expressed and transmitted in rituals. Even if we cannot explain why it is expressed precisely in the way it is, it remains true that such information is conveyed in rituals and that this information is important for humans (as also Boyer acknowledges). But this is not enough; also others need to have the same knowledge we do. In addition, we have to know that they know, they have to know that we know that they know, etc. (here I am inspired by Chwe 2001). What other means could there be to establish such common knowledge than public rituals? It is not that mere random performance of rituals gradually creates the illusion that it is these rituals that cause the relevant changes in social positions, thus making the rituals worthy of repeated performance and cultural transmission. Rituals are, from the outset, arranged because of the need to generate common knowledge (Chwe 2001). The society simply cannot function (or even exist) without common knowledge concerning social relationships.

In this perspective, rituals can be efficacious only to the extent that everybody agrees to their efficaciousness. As the whole issue concerns bringing about changes in social positions (which are ideas in human minds), it is not possible to have ritual effects in the absence of a common consensus. A person who has not undergone a wedding ceremony, for example, cannot argue that he or she actually is married but only through a secret ceremony which nobody has had the opportunity to witness. Although it is possible to live with another person in a self-defined marriage like this, such co-habitation will not amount to the social status of a marriage, if others refuse to treat the two as a married couple. Rituals are in this sense self-serving; it is the social agreement made manifest in the ritual that establishes the marriage.

Thus, although rituals do not cause changes in social positions, they are essential for distributing knowledge of the fact such changes have taken place (because some people have decided so). If I introduce myself to you, saying: "Hello, my name is Ilkka Pyysiäinen," I do not cause Ilkka Pyysiäinen to be name. I only let you know that fact. Similarly, in a wedding, the society is only informed that the couple now is a married couple. The effect is that after the ceremony everybody knows that the two are a couple, not that the ceremony would have turned the man and woman into a couple. The Finnish Lutheran wedding ceremony, for example, has gradually emerged from a mere churchly blessing of the engagement, made according to secular law and folk custom, into a ritual that actually establishes the marriage. In 1734, the churchly wedding was made compulsory by law; only as late as in 1963 the words "I declare you as man and wife" (uttered by the minister) were introduced into the wedding formula. Thus the church has gradually adopted a function that traditionally had belonged to families acting (ritually) on the basis of secular law and folk tradition. By the same token, the wedding ritual has been invested with such belief in the causal efficacy that probably was not part of the engagement ritual. (Heikinmäki 1981: 133-135; Lempiäinen 1986: 151-192.)

In my example of a 'secret marriage,' the failure to establish a marriage is due to the fact that others refuse to treat the 'secretly married' as a couple because the couple has refused to accept that others have the right to know. The ceremony is only a sign of a will to accept the authority of the society. It also is quite possible to explain a bachelor's behavior with reference to one kind of an essence and a married man's to another kind, without any theory of how the essence changes. People are not necessarily curious about the mechanism of this change, as it does

not have any direct consequences for everyday life. We simply use different kinds of essences to explain different cases.

Yet it is possible that people think that rituals can really cause shifts in social positions, whether the agent of causation is thought to be gods or the society. In this sense, Boyer's account may well be correct, although it only explains the belief in ritual causation, not why rituals are arranged in the first place. They are not arranged because people believe them to have magical-like effects; people rather believe them to have these effects because they are arranged. And they are arranged because the need to organize common knowledge. Whether people actually believe that rituals have magical-like causal effects can only be found out by experimental research. Barrett & Lawson (2001) already have shown that people intuitively think that a hypothetical ritual is most likely to be efficacious when either the agent or instrument is special in the sense of having been given special properties or authority by the gods. However, in this experiment, the subjects were directly asked to rate the probable efficaciousness of the described hypothetical rituals in producing special kinds of effects. Therefore, the results from this experiment do not rule out the possibility that people do not always think of rituals as means of producing changes in the physical or social reality. Rituals could just as well be understood as means of generating common knowledge. Also this hypothesis should be empirically tested, however.

Introducing counter-intuitive agents into ritual structure does not necessarily change the fact that rituals are arranged because common knowledge has to be generated. Counter-intuitive agents are 'interested parties' (Boyer 2001: 189) of our social life and thus need to have the same information as humans. In this sense, they are not needed to cause changes in social positions; they only need to have the opportunity to participate in the ritual as an interested party. Yet counter-intuitive agents can be considered to bring about causal changes in reality. Here they also differ from other types of agents in that it is possible to ascribe to them such powers that ordinary agents do not have. It is thus easier to consider them agents of change in such instances in which the mechanism of change is unknown.

Calendrical rites could be understood as a means of generating common knowledge about the passage of time, although I cannot develop an argument to support this claim within the present confines. Crisis rites are of a different type in the sense that they clearly aim at producing a change in the physical reality: to bring rain, heal a sickness, etc. Possibly also they could be understood as a means of 'publishing' the information that a draught is threatening the community, a

member of the group is ill, etc. But clearly they also involve the aspect of causality: people hope that counter-intuitive agents not only participate in the ritual but also do something about the danger that threatens the group. As counter-intuitive agents they should, after all, be capable of doing things humans cannot do.

Yet there is a small piece of evidence to support the hypothesis that people are not as likely to pray for a dramatically counter-intuitive effect as they are to pray for a more natural change. I am referring to Justin Barrett's (2001; 2002) study of the prayers of Protestant university students. In having to choose between praying for a counter-intuitive change that is either physical, biological, or psychological, they were more likely to choose the psychological change which was not as evidently counter-intuitive as the other two (it was easier to find a rationalist explanation for it). Yet this study only yields information about one especially intellectual religious tradition, Protestantism, and also may be open for a number of different interpretations. I here only want to emphasize that the need to generate common knowledge offers a basis for a very economical explanation of ritual behavior, although people may at times also believe in the causal efficacy of rituals. The explanation that proceeds from the need to have common knowledge also is well in line with what we know about the way the human mind actually works in regulating behavior; the capacity for cooperation is a built-in property of humans and forms perhaps the most important strategy by which we have been evolutionarily so successful as a species (Ridley 1996). Without empirical experimentation it is impossible to evaluate the plausibility of my suggestion, though. I shall, however, have to leave such work for the future.

Lastly, I want to mention that Durkheim's (1937) theory of religion was partly based on the same intuition as Boyer's theory and my emendation to it. There are, however, several important differences: 1) in my account it is not necessary to take recourse to the problematic notions of 'collective consciousness' and 'social facts;' 2) it is not necessary to consider 'gods' as only an expression of the society (an idea for which it is difficult to find empirical or theoretical justification); 3) religion is not seen as simply a symbolic expression and a shaper of collective consciousness (which would make religion redundant as a category); and 4) we need not satisfy ourselves with the rather mysterious explanation that social pressure affects us 'through mental pathways' (*par des voies mentales*) by which the group is 'incarnated' in the individual (see Pyysiäinen 2001: 55-74). Society does not cause things, although we may intuitively think that it causes.

Whether rituals are understood as causes of change, or as a means of generating common knowledge about changes produced by other means, now waits for experimental research to provide the answer. I hypothesize the second alternative to be the more fundamental explanation of ritual behavior. It does not, however, rule out the possibility that people have both explicit and intuitive beliefs about the causal powers of rituals. If it turns out that people have at once both kinds of beliefs, it should be explored how they relate them to each other. In any event, these are sufficiently simple and exact hypotheses to hold a promise for exact answers to the question of why rituals are so important for us.

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