

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

on

Göran Aijmer's

**THE NATURE OF RITUAL AND THE PLACE OF RITUAL  
IN HUMAN EVOLUTION**

by

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Comments: The Nature of Ritual and The Place  
of Ritual in Human Evolution

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In this paper The Nature of Ritual and The Place of Ritual in Human Evolution, professor Göran Aijmer gives a brief panoramic view of the general approach to culture in anthropology.

As Aijmer demonstrates the approach of the culture relativists have at the present stage of development of the discipline completely conquered the ground. In order to approach the phenomenon of ritual in a transcultural context Aijmer chooses to deviate from the dominant paradigm of academic anthropology and defines himself as a rationalist and indeed argues for a revival of the ideas of Adolf Bastian.

Bastian's ideas on culture were based on his conviction of the psychological unity of mankind, a unity which was based on a number of basic ideas - Elementärgedanken - which formed the deep structure of the mind. These elementary structures more or less like fenotypes became manifest or surfaced as Völkergedanken as a function of ecological variables. These ideas do have a familiar ring and Aijmer demonstrates that they articulate with the generative ideas of Noam Chomsky.

Having thus prepared for himself a theoretically launching pad for his transcultural approach, Aijmer proceeds to develop his ideas on the evolution of ritual in human culture. As is to be expected, primate studies serves as a point of departure.

Aijmer demonstrates that ritual is an important form of communication in group processes both among primates and humans. Somewhat timidly Aijmer ventures the hypothesis that 'ritual is a communicative system which is phylogenetically older than and separated from language.'

Aijmer struggles to make primate behaviour prove his case. He does succeed in demonstrating beyond doubt the existence of ritual behaviour among chimpanzees. Possibly too impressed by the primate case, however, Aijmer proceeds to argue that 'Human ritual is neither intended, nor ideationally understood. The messages of ritual are neither formulated consciously by the actor, nor understood in reflexive thought by himself, by an audience, any receiver person.' Because Aijmer has failed to give a proper definition of ritual, it is difficult to know what he exactly is talking about here. If he by ritual understands something akin to reflexive behaviour, his statement may be true. But if his theme is what is normally understood by ritual in anthropology, he clearly overstates his case.

Rituals are in most cases loaded with meaning, which, as Turner has shown in the case of the Ndembu, is clearly understood and can be expressed in local exegesis. We should indeed know from our own preparations of rituals, how much thinking and conscious

behaviour we normally invest. Levi-Strauss reminds us of the conscious and indeed philosophical energy some tribes invest in their rituals. In the case of the Australians 'we understand that a certain sociological and philosophical common style has been developed. A style which does not preclude consciously elaborated variations in which even the most insignificant element is noted and commented upon as favourable and unfavourable. No doubt each group has been motivated by a wish, less contradictory than it appears, to do like the others or even better: not at all like others, there is a constant speculation over themes, the very outline of which has been established by tradition and usage (Levi-Strauss 1968:96. Translation by the commentator.)

I have during my field-work among the Sidamo of S.W.-Ethiopia observed how the council of elders is participating in the performance of their majestic circumcision-ritual through advise and comments.

Aimer's hypothesis clearly is based on a completely different definition of ritual from that which is current in the everyday life of social anthropology. Although he does not refer to the psychoanalytic school of thought, his ideas of rituals as more or less unconscious acts certainly articulates with the Freudian understanding of ritual acts. If this is the case, we are in a somewhat different frame of reference. It is probably true that a number of more or less idiosyncratic acts more or less compulsively performed by neurotics and hysterics are unconsciously motivated. It is usually the case that the performers have no conscious ideas of why they carry out their

private rituals. It is also beyond doubt that the acts have a deep symbolic significance which the psychoanalyst in fortunate cases will be able to translate into normal prose. I am prepared to believe that the genesis of idiosyncratic, private rituals has something in common with the genesis of rituals in the context of shared social life. A discussion of the psychodynamics of symbolism, however, is beyond the present scope apart from the observation that the very acts of symbolic articulation is a cognitive achievement of the highest order, whether conscious or sub-conscious.

These considerations favours the conclusion that Aijmer's hypothesis remains unconfirmed, but nevertheless stimulating. It is probable that ritual communication is phylogenetically older than speech, but this does not imply that its significance have become less in the present day world of homo sapiens. It is true that Aijmer does not explicitly deny this, but he gives the reader the impression that this archaic form of communication has become in a certain way subordinated to speech. With all due respect for verbal communication, it must be admitted that it has serious limitations. It is digital in nature and can only create a vague resemblance of the emotional impact of communicative acts in which both sight and sound participate. It would indeed have been odd if man, the animal of vision par excellence symbolically should have become completely subordinated to communication through the ear.

Of course it is more to this than the question of sense-modalities: The truly engaging moments in life are usually kept

far apart by the irrelevancies and often humdrum routines. But in every community there are recurrent complexes of events which mobilize a person emotionally and intellectually to a high pitch. It is generally true that distinctive features from repetitive scenarios of this nature tend to become common metaphors of experience with high symbolic power. As such they are eminently suited for inclusion in the symbolic lexicon of rituals. If we want to really understand the meaning of ritual events, we are well advised to look for significant experiences which serve as models for symbols and symbolic action. An obvious example of this is the Christian communion in which the symbolic distribution of bread and wine serves as the most sacred and engaging event.

The crux of the matter is that rituals do what words cannot do: engage a human group in a collective enterprise of meaning through which acts and symbols in a manner of speaking become fused. It is therefore an essential feature of social life everywhere. It may be phylogenetically older than speech, but it is still a most vital and indeed indispensable part of human communication.

The most important question to be raised with regard to the role of ritual in the context of evolution is its survival value in the competition for scarce resources and indeed for the maximisation of inclusive fitness.

The role of ritual in the human struggle can be observed even in a short term perspective. The moral standard and

consensus of a human group, whether tribe or nation<sup>x</sup> is no stronger than its communal rituals. These are essential in the pedagogic process of making the necessary desirable in the personal lives of human beings. Only ritual can adequately perform this miracle. A word of caution is therefore called for in our age of reason: rituals are not irrational and therefore inferior communicative events, but communication reaching levels of the mind which are beyond the domain of words. Rituals in the lives of nations are as important as ever. The destruction of rituals in the name of reason is a destruction of the symbolic capital of a society and may reduce its chances of survival in the Darwinian sense.

#### References

Levi-Strauss, Claude 1962: *La pensee sauvage*.