

By her own admission, the chapter *Constructing Ritual* she attempts to analyse the consistency in the theoretical depiction of ritual (Bell, 1992, p. 16-17). She claims to have observed that in ritual there is a highly structured differentiation and then subsequent reintegration of two particular categories of human experience: thought and action – but in her own words, the internal logic of it a specific ‘cultural methodology’, a theoretical approach that defines and addresses ‘cultural’ data is at root at many anthropological (Bell, 1992, p.). Thus, she argues that there is a problematic manner in how anthropologists theoretically constitutes ritual as the object of a cultural method of interpretation (Bell, 1992, p. 16-17).

She says this this structure of ritual theory has imposed a powerful limit on ‘theoretical flexibility’, the anthropologist’s ‘divisions of experience’ and the ability to perceive the logical relations inscribed within these divisions (Bell, 1992, p. 17) .

How does she argue this? She says that there is a surprising degree of consistency in the depictions of rituals – rituals are a form of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing social and cultural forces come together (Bell, 1992, p. 16).

I had wondered if she would explain more what was problematic with extrapolating information about culture from ritual. Initially in the introduction, she argues that the discussion about rituals are part of larger discussions about culture and nature – it has been seen as both a universal phenomenon or applied theoretical constructs and whatever you assume you then just go about and insist it backs up points made from a broader discussion (Bell, 1992, p. 13). Even scholars who tried to be clear about how they were defining it so as to not mislead people critiquing work end up blurring and not differentiating between what was precise data and abstract theory (Bell, 1992, p. 13). Furthermore, in the following chapter she described how much of the anthropological approach to ritual has fallen for a dichotomic view of belief (thought) and ritual (action), without being able to coherently put them together (Bell, 1992, p. 19-23) – without being able to explain how ritual can function as a synthesis of some form of the original opposition (Bell, 1992, p. 23) and be able to reintegrate thought and action.

Bell backs up fellow Anthropologist Clifford Geertz analysis of ritual - she argues that Geertz had the best ‘illustration’ on how a coherent discourse on ritual is generated (Bell, 1992, p. 25). Geertz argued that in symbolic systems (i.e. religion) involve (by nature?) ‘models for’ and ‘models of’ reality (Bell, 1992, p. 26). (By nature?) They give meaning... (or) objective form, to social and psychological reality by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves (Bell, 1992, p. 26). Geertz also invokes a third pattern, and this has further implications for his model of ritual ((Bell, 1992, p. 27). Cultural Performances (i.e. religious rituals) are “not only the point at which the dispositional and conceptual aspects of religious life converge for the believer, but also the point at which the interaction between them can be most readily examined by the detached observer (Bell, 1992, p. 27). For participants, rites are “enactments, materialization’s, realizations” of a particular religious perspective, “not only models of what they believe, but also models for believing it” (Bell, 1992, p. 28). Participants can experience the integration of their own conceptual framework and dispositional imperatives (Bell, 1992, p.28). Ritual activity becomes more meaningful to the theorist only when he recognises the ritual mechanism of meaningfulness for the participant (Bell, 1992, p. 28). Geertz would say that that the way we can find our differences and similarities (or access) to ‘the others’ comes respectively from the congruity or likeness of doing ritual and generating theoretical interpretations (Bell, 1992, p. 29).

John Skorupski had a similar view when he suggested that within rituals (or 'interaction ceremonies' as he described them) the different parties communicate between each other in a conventional language which Skorupski describes as the interaction code (Eller, 2007, p. 112). The point of interaction code behaviour, according to Skorupski, was he argued though to maintain an equilibrium or mutual agreement among the people involved in an interaction as to their relative standing or roles and their reciprocal commitments and obligations (Eller, 2007, p 112) – though this doesn't directly contradict Geertz's theories of reintegrating thought with action. It simply is saying that this relies on a large deal of hierarchy (which directly contradicts what Victor Turner theorised in his theories of *Communitas*). Skorupski also points out that humans do not necessarily also have to understand the interaction code in rituals – or really believe in it at all (Eller, 2007, p. 112). Rituals can be tacitly understood within individuals about what they mean – but there may be none of the of the reintegration of thought as supported by Geertz and Bell. Does this then disqualify it from proper classification of ritual?

I would conclude that to understand ritual you can do more than simply learning from other people what they find meaningful in a conscious sense. One may want to also just objectively observe what they spend their time doing in contrast to what they say is meaningful to them – and what they wish to celebrate.

Reference List:

1. Bell, C. (1992). *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Inc. 198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016-4314, Oxford University Press.
2. Eller, J. D. (2007). *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*. 270 Madison avenue, New York, NY 10016, Routledge.
3. *Oxford Dictionaries*. (2018) Oxford, Oxford University Press