On the Orientalism of Dana Logan's
Awkward Rituals

Marko Geslani | orcid: 0000-0002-8638-6463
Associate Professor, Department of Religious Studies,
University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA
Geslani@mailbox.sc.edu

Abstract

This article assesses the merits of Dana Logan's Awkward Rituals as a notable anthropological intervention in the study of American religions, one that opens significant converse with Asian ritual traditions, as mediated by colonial history. It suggests that the book presents a genealogically measured theoretical advance to the tradition of ritual studies.

Keywords

ritual – Orientalism – hierarchy – genealogy – ritual studies

A scholar of Hindu ritual encounters Dana Logan's Awkward Rituals with the delight of a lost space traveler witnessing the opening of a wormhole. While less common today than in an earlier era of Orientalism, the study of ritual in premodern Hinduism remains a highly conventional affair, in the sense of having a long pedigree. It was for instance the French Sanskritist Abel Bergaigne whose description of Vedic sacrifice inspired Durkheim's a-theistic concept of ritual in Elementary Forms (1995[1912]: 33). Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert's influential study of sacrifice (1964[1898]) drew primarily on Vedic precedent, and was based primarily on the work of European Sanskritists like Alfred Hillebrandt, Herman Oldenberg, and Sylvain Levi. So enduring is Vedic-Hindu ritualism, so venerable the Orientalist tradition of its study, and so intimate its relation to ritual studies, from Durkheim to Mary Douglas, that the subject of “Hindu ritual” often sounds tautological. By the same token, so decisive is the
myth of America’s revolutionary break with British monarchy; so enduring the historiographic tradition on American self-governance; and so absent is ritual from the study of American religions, that to study “American ritualism” would appear oxymoronic.

Herein lies the tremendous power of Logan’s work, which deploys the conceptual richness of this most Orientalist (i.e. generally non-Christian, specifically Asiatic) of anthropological categories in order to elaborate how the spirit of British monarchy encompassed early American civil society. As Logan shows, precisely when Alexis de Tocqueville was regarding America as the very type of democracy, various voluntary associations in the American northeast were creatively redeploying ritual formalism to mediate the instabilities of the republic. Logan examines the endurance of such formalism in a variety of contexts, including Masonic esotericism, evangelical corporate governance, social reform associations, and domestic training manuals. In each case, she argues for a self-conscious, performative understanding of “ritual.” Rather than a condition of embodied comfort, ritual in the republic was a deliberate act of mimetic play that leveraged an “awkward,” Cartesian head-body distinction to generate social and political difference. In this sense, Logan might be seen (to borrow from South Asian anthropology) to offer a hierarchical, Dumontian reading of American civil society (Dumont 1970). Certainly, we owe thanks to Logan for the possibility of teaching Catherine Beecher’s “A Treatise on Domestic Economy” (1843) alongside the in/famous Brahmanical legal code, the Laws of Manu (ca. 2nd century CE). For Beecher’s is an essentially Brahmanical view of American society, one in which social distinction is grounded in domestic control.1

The interpretive power of Logan’s conception of ritual awkwardness is finely displayed in chapter two, “Conventional Behavior in the American Bible Society,” which delivers a lively series of formalist readings of the institutional routines of a mid-nineteenth century Evangelical association. We are invited to fathom how the conventional sequences of corporate behavior produced the felicitous sensation of consensus. That is, while the private board meetings and public conventions of the ABS have been understood as incubators of American self-governance, they relied on scripted and formal structures of action: “convening-reading-resolving,” in the first case; “listening-debating-reconciling,” in the second. This anthropological reading of the American Evangelical corporation is compelling and multifaceted. For instance, the minutes of the ABS board meetings may be read as a genre of

1 Not unlike Logan, Dumont also wrote his study of caste hierarchy as a commentary on Tocqueville’s notion of equality.
ritual media, used to maintain the sense of the tradition’s regularity, so that, as she puts it, “the fact that a meeting occurred [was] more important than whatever happened there” (Logan 2022: 73). Meanwhile, the behavioral codes of decorum in the ABS convention, which, for a ritual gathering based on public speech, were crucial to generating communal felicity, also set a framework for demonstrating the racial aberrancy of parallel abolition conventions. Thus not only did such collective events consolidate the (priestly?) authority of the ABS, they effectively drew the racial and gendered boundaries of the community. Logan’s unlikely reading suggests that the American democratic process was less the result of a Protestant antiritualism (or antimonarchy) than a ritual formalism that effectively curated the commons.

In the same chapter Logan cites Clifford Geertz’ study of the nineteenth-century Balinese theater-state (1980), for a provocative comparison. Whereas the Balinese royalty “demanded obedience through public awe” (Logan 2022: 57) the private board meeting, no less ritualized, was also no less aesthetic. As she puts it, “to account for the power of American rituals of governance, we need to understand the minimalism of bureaucratic ritual as a mannered aesthetic of its own that can dazzle even if it does not display thespian artistry” (Ibid.). Such a comparison works on multiple fronts. Parlaying the anthropological purchase of “ritual,” it pulls North American civility into the range of Oriental statehood. Awkward Rituals might be read alongside any number of ethnohistorical works on the princely state in colonial India, or the monarchy in contemporary Nepal, for example (e.g. Waghorne 1994; Mocko 2016). How then did the minimalist aesthetic of the ABS demand obedience differently from the maximalist aesthetic of the theatre state? If not through public awe, then was it through public disinterest? A forceful line of questions emerges.

What then snaps into focus is how this anthropological bridge between North American civility and Oriental statehood rests on the infirm bubble of British Colonialism. Logan thus stimulates our appetite for ritual analysis of early-modern corporations such as the British East India Company. This would not only enrich the cultural history of Imperial Britain; it would give us wider purchase on the discourse concerning ritual in England around the time when it became, in view of Talal Asad (1993), a universal anthropological category. Consider Bernard Cohn’s comment in his study on the representation of authority during the British Raj: “The contradictions and difficulties in defining a symbolic-cultural constitution are traceable in the efforts made during the first half of the nineteenth century to construct a ritual idiom through and by which British authority was to be represented to Indians” (Cohn 1983: 177). That is, the consolidation of authority in colonial India increasingly took the form of cultural assimilation – at first the assimilation of the British
administration to Mughal forms of ritual-political allegiance, and later the imposition of British feudal traditions of fealty onto the ruling elite in India. In the same essay Cohn discusses no-less awkward British “experiments” with public ritual, including the 1824 dedication of Hindu and Muslim colleges in Calcutta with “imposing” Masonic ceremonies, similar to those described in the introduction and first chapter of Awkward Rituals. Cohn quotes the following description from the Calcutta Gazette:

The Cups, Square, and other implements of the Craft were then placed on the Pedestal ... The Reverent Brother Bryce ... offered up a solemn prayer to the great Architect of the Universe ... As far as the eye could reach, it met Tiers upon Tiers of human faces, the house tops in every direction being crowded to cramming by the natives anxious to have a view of the imposing scene (quoted in Cohn 1983: 177).

Here a European ritual idiom means to signal the inauguration of public buildings for secular education in India. But we should add that the native audience had been well prepared by a long tradition of public monumental dedications in medieval South Asia. The imperial ritual project was thus a search to find a distinctly British idiom that could nonetheless generate a felicitous sense of consent on the part of the native public and aristocracy. Logan’s work investigates one instance of a broader set of British experiments in ritual governance. She also begs the relation between these experiments in colonial rule and our theoretical conception of ritual.

As a work of ritual studies, Awkward Rituals’ major virtue is its rectification of archival sources with both the genealogy and theory of ritual. In dwelling on the British heritage of American voluntary associations, this work carves out an appropriately provincial (cultural and historical) scope for the analytic use of a term whose anthropological tradition, as Asad and Philippe Buc (2001) have shown us, is continuous with French and British political thought. It is because Logan’s archives participate in and comment on the British tradition that her anthropological observations about American governance translate so deftly into theoretical interventions in the tradition of ritual studies. Thus the cultural-historical insight that the spirit of British monarchy informs American governance of democratic bodies also cuts against the prevailing tendency in ritual studies to lionize non-official ritual agents through notions of embodiment, ritualization, and disciplinary virtue. If for some time ritual has seemed like a moribund category, to be used sparingly, and only in equal measure with
more palatable terms (such as practice or discipline), Logan reinvests the category with analytic clarity and historical responsibility.

I wonder as a medieval Indologist about the nature of my potential conversation with the historical anthropologist of the early American republic. How should we talk to each other with “ritual”? That is, are we comfortable once again with a structural-comparativist framework wherein the term functions as a quasi-universal? If so, does this mean we have returned to ritual as a privileged performance of cultural values for the transcendent anthropologist? Alternatively, is further genealogical work required to inform discrete cross-cultural projects that would connect, say, medieval India to antebellum America, such that our acts of anthropological comparison become acts of historical relation? I tend to favor the latter alternative, partly for what I have learned from Logan’s work: the sublimated desire for ritual at the heart of American democracy goes a long way in explaining the spirit of American Orientalism. In September 2022, for instance, I witnessed a shocking outpouring of piety at the death of Queen Elizabeth II in South Carolina, a state where the word “colonial” more easily denotes America’s Revolutionary War than India’s Mutiny against Britain.

But the question is honest: Should we read Logan’s intervention as historical or theoretical? What history of “ritual,” and what ritual theory might we take from this work? For Religious Studies, what looms behind the question of ritual’s relative universalism/provincialism is the depth of Logan’s critique of Catherine Bell (1992). As her conclusion suggests, the “awkwardness” of ritual rejoins the fantasy of embodiment in ritual studies with a still-disembodied head. If awkwardness thus returns cognition to the conversation, I wonder what other anthropological lineages it might reactivate. And if we do find ourselves again in a continuous Durkheimian tradition, does Logan’s work help us to understand the recent generational critique of ritual as part of a longer history of American ritualism? Note that what alarmed both Bell and Asad was the reappropriation of ritual in twentieth century Christian circles, which called – and call still – for a ritual revival in the interests both of theological renewal and secular governance. To what extent can we say that the anti-ritual tendencies in Bell and Asad were also informed by the “American ideology of willful self-creation”?

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2 Logan cites Victor Turner, Geertz, J.Z. Smith. I had Mary Douglas in mind throughout this work.
References


