RITUAL DYNAMICS AND RITUAL FAILURE

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The contributions to this volume clearly show that in many cases participants and spectators alike learn more about the ‘correct’ performance of a ritual by deviating from, rather than by adhering to the rules. One might even say that solely the definitions and examples of ‘ritual failure’ and ‘error’—and how they are coped with—prove the existence of decisive norms for ritual actions, even when the former are imagined deviations from imagined norms. It therefore turns out that this slightly unusual view opens up new perspectives on ritual rules, expectations, procedures, and on the interactions which constitute these procedures and their context. ‘Failed ritual’ directs our attention to ‘what really matters’ to the performers and participants and others in one way or another involved in a ritual.

However, when talking about ritual failure and mistakes in ritual there is a need to be explicit about one’s notion of ‘ritual’. In scholarly literature, there is no lack of definitions of ‘ritual’, and not two definitions are alike.2 Recently, there is an increasing tendency among ritual studies scholars to avoid the term ‘ritual’ altogether and to use other terms (such as ritualisation or public events) instead. Moreover, some of the traditions dealt with here do not even have an “indigenous” term equating ‘ritual’.3 Neither does this group of scholars from the diverse academic disciplines contributing to this volume agree on one uniform definition of ‘ritual.’ Nevertheless, the diverse notions and usages of ‘ritual’ in this volume are conceptually connected: our working definition of ritual is that of a polythetic class, that is: “(A) each member of the class has a large but unspecified number of a set of characteristics occurring in the class as a whole, (B) each of those characteristics is possessed by a large number of those members” (Snoek 2006).4 The

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1 The final version of this essay was decisively influenced by Edward L. Schieffelin’s introduction to this volume.
2 See e.g. Snoek 2006.
4 To meet the requirements of a ‘fully’ polythetic class, no one of those characteristics would be possessed by every member of the class (Snoek 2006). The ‘rituals'
plurality of potential characteristics of the members of this polythetic class allows us to look at a very wide range of events, rather than at actions that are ‘traditionally’ recognised as rituals alone. We use this ‘open’ definition of ritual as a heuristic tool, not as an end in itself.

One very good example of the usefulness of such a loose analytical category even for studying actions which are not generally perceived as ritual is given by Hoffmeister in this volume. Rituals that go awry or deviations in ritual can be used as a tool to understanding what ritual can be or do.

1. Deviation and evaluation

Contrary to the widespread assumption that rituals are rather static and unchanging, most rituals do in fact undergo slight or even significant changes—be it in the course of time, as a result of their transfer to another cultural context, or simply because they are ‘updated’ to meet the requirements of changed circumstances. The notions of change, adaptation, invention and reinvention imply deviation from an original or earlier version of a ritual. Only if such deviation from explicit or implicit rules, values, expectations, norms or models is judged negatively do we find ourselves in the field of ‘distortion’, ‘mistake’, ‘flaw’, ‘error’, ‘slip’, ‘failure’ etc. That means that not each and every deviation is necessarily marked as a mistake. Even an obvious difference between ritual prescription and performance can continue to exist for quite a long time without being judged negatively (see Hüsken 2006: 269f.).

dealt with in the present volume possess the characteristics of a ‘polythetic class’, but nor those of a ‘fully polythetic class’ because the characteristic of ‘repetition’ can be found in any of the rituals dealt with in this volume.

Some of these characteristics are: religious, action, repetition, (cognitive) framing, formally stylized, based on scripts or models, perceived as different from everyday behaviour, invested with meaning, transcendence, symbolic communication, consisting of building-blocks, culturally constructed, traditionally sanctioned, taking place at specific places and/or times, multi-medial, rehearsed, structured, patterned, ordered, sequenced, and rule-governed (cf. Snoek 2006).

A polythetic definition of ‘ritual’ comes close to a ‘field of possible forms of ‘ritual’’, as proposed by Handelman (2006) in order to avoid the banality of universal definitions. At the same time this is also a step towards the “de-Westernisation” of one of the concepts of the study of religion (Religionswissenschaft), as called for by Platvoet (2004: 243f).

See also Stausberg 2004: 234. Moos (2001b: 5, note 27) gives a list of 40 English synonyms for ‘mistake’. He argues that the vocabulary of a language betrays the interest (or lack of interest) in the concept of ‘mistake’ (Moos 2001b: 2).