

The Ambiguities of Rituals: Re-thinking the ‘Problem of Rituals’

Call for papers

Workshop organized by the [*Anthropos and the Material*](#) project at Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo

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The history of the anthropology of rituals has been dominated by concerns for elucidating ways in which rituals provide some sort of security and certainty. Rituals have thus been approached as ordering devices that provide attempted solutions to problems of various kinds. However, rituals are also often fraught with ambiguities, insecurities, risks, and doubts, and are in many ways deeply problematic. While we acknowledge that rituals may operate as ordering devices, we want in this workshop to rethink ‘the problem of rituals’ by asking how rituals also pose problems in themselves. We therefore invite ethnographic explorations of the ‘problems of rituals’ and contributions that address how rituals are both potentially efficacious in various ways and at the same time thrive on insecurity, potential failures, and enduring conundrums. We ask then not solely what problems rituals aim to solve, but also what problems rituals pose to people involved in them.

It has been argued that the concept of ritual, which used to be among anthropology’s core concerns, has now been sidelined in current anthropological theorizing (Carrico, 2011; Myhre, 2015). The reasons for this are varied, but may be related to the challenges to the core assumptions in much ritual theory by contemporary theoretical approaches such as the ontological turn, assemblage theory, and Actor-Network Theory as well as approaches emphasizing global flows and large-scale processes of historical socio-economic change. These approaches in various ways question the usefulness of thinking rituals in terms of interpretation, symbols and signification, and stress rather the implication of rituals in processes of becoming, transformation, emergence, flow, flux and disorder. The current theorization of rituals in terms of events invites us to rethink the problem of rituals both as it relates to the embeddedness of rituals in processes outside rituals and the problems inherent in rituals themselves.

Another source for rethinking the problem of rituals is the increasing emphasis in contemporary anthropology on insecurities, fragilities, ambiguities and doubt (Bubandt, 2014; Pelkmans, 2011). While rituals may be seen as solutions to such insecurities, we suggest an approach to rituals that invites to dwell in the ambiguities and doubts of rituals. These ambiguities may take various forms and be grounded in incongruities of opposing ontological principles, enduring conundrums, and epistemological doubts as well as the potential for failure that often accompanies rituals. We emphasize that we see the problems and



ambiguities of rituals as always and already embedded in particular historical, political and economic conditions. While rituals may be seen as potential solutions to problems caused by such conditions, these conditions may also influence on the problems and ambiguities inherent within rituals.

We invite ethnographically grounded engagements with the problem of rituals that address questions such as:

- How are we to approach rituals as both problem solvers and problem sources?
- In what ways do doubt and ambiguities influence ritual events?
- How are the problems inherent in and attempted solved by rituals embedded in historical, political, and economic processes?
- How could ritual theory advance by rethinking the ‘problems of rituals’?

The workshop as a part of a wider collective research initiative at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, called *Anthropos and the Material: Challenges to Anthropology*. We aim for the workshop contributions to be published as an edited volume or a special issue and therefore build the workshop activities around pre-circulated drafts of chapters. Each participant will submit one unfinished chapter of about 5-7000 words. Everyone will read and comment on all contributions but each will also act as a discussant on one of the papers. The workshop is thus a collaborative event in which we work together towards a common publication.

Abstracts must be submitted to j.h.remme@sai.uio.no by 3 August and the drafts of paper by 30 September. Transport and accommodation costs are covered by the University of Oslo.

For questions, please contact Jon Henrik Ziegler Remme at j.h.remme@sai.uio.no

References

- Bubandt, N. (2014). *The Empty Seashell: Witchcraft and Doubt on an Indonesian Island*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Carrico, K. (2011). Ritual. *Current Anthropology*. http://www.culanth.org/curated_collections/4-ritual
- Myhre, K. C. (2015). What the beer shows: Exploring ritual and ontology in Kilimanjaro. *American Ethnologist*, 42(1), 97-115.
- Pelkmans, M. (Ed.). (2011). *Ethnographies of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies*. London: Tauris Academic Studies.