



Metaphors taken for granted

MATT J. ROSSANO:

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Matt J. Rossano is a Professor of Psychology at Southeastern Louisiana University, recognised as a scholar in the evolutionary study of religion. In his new book, Rossano offers a recapitulation of evolutionary anthropological arguments and claims that human ritual had emerged to support psychological resources centred around social capital. Moreover, he takes the reader from the oldest archaeological sites from South Africa to Greece, to rituals in Russia, including Soviet ones, concluding with the cults of Native Americans. In this contribution, I will consider his red thread and its jargon.

Defining ritual by managerial jargon

Rossano refers to the numerous connections between synchrony, trust, and cooperation. Certainly, those groups that moved or vocalised in unison had expressions of generosity, a sense of unity, a sharing of sacred values, as well as an in-group trust that went to a significantly higher degree than those that were not synchronised, even though they had all shared a common goal. In the margins, he mentions how the ritual effect can also be exploited, for example, for terrorist purposes.

In light of current research on corporeal/sensory integration, it is surprising how Rossano argues that (1) fitness became contingent on psychological states, (2) psychological states are resources, and (3) ritual manages psychological resources. He not only over-mentalises his narrative but also economises it, using managerial vocabulary, such as, “The Ritual participant ritually generates a resource (joy) which is directed to the Community yielding the products: social cohesion and future confidence” (p. 37).

Rossano assumes the presence “of the supernatural, hope, and survival through accommodation or endurance” (p. 140), all thanks to repetitive activity. He sees ritual as management of a resource (of empathy, loyalty, commitment, and goodwill) necessary for survival. The way ritual is explained also points to implicit categories. However, ritual cannot be reduced to “the means by which humans ‘process’ and ‘manage’ psychological resources” (p. 143). It is not clear how this could be enough to explain the metaphorical thinking inherent in ritual.

Surprisingly, in the book on evolution, Rossano jumps to the rituals of the Olympic Games, their supposed connection to the honourable virtues of Roland, Arthur, and others, and

validates violence in the name of land protection. The warrior virtues, according to Rossano, form an axis linking Greece, Medieval Europe and even the Maya in 'bravery and loyalty' necessary to secure the city (p. 89). In this androcentric narrative, there is no place for carnival or other folk rituals that balance heroism.

Sacralising the right

The concept that Rossano operates with, as if it were natural, is sacredness. He offers the following sequence of events: the ritual activity – the building of in-group unity – the sharing of sacred values – cooperative actions. This is insufficient, however, since there are certain preconditions for the distribution of 'the sacred' (Boyer, 1990; Tužinská, 2006). The author draws attention to claims that increasing self-control through ritual leads to people being more forgiving, faithful, sober, and grateful. He often relates the signs of pro-sociality to the Judeo-Christian narrative, including regular church attendance and its ritual effect.

If ritual is supposed to establish the social order, why does it do so with the use of contradictions? Rossano pays no attention to paradoxes, while the presence of both classifications and contradictions are for ritual constitutive (Rapport, 1997). Rather, he generalises from Christian ritual: "Ritual is all about doing the act itself and doing it right. 'Right' meaning following the traditional script. It is in doing so that the message about values is transmitted. By ritually washing, the priest tells onlookers 'the objects I'm handling are sacred'" (p. 14). This premise is hardly to be reconciled with Sperber's definition of symbolism (1975: 3): "That's symbolic? Why? Because it is false." What is described as traditional, right, and sacred is often not self-evident.

Rossano also neglects to note how the ritual uses humour and the principle of determining what is laughable. This refers to the principle of reversal. Metaphors generally defy literal interpretation and invoke a multitude of meanings. If the point is found in the sense of nonsense, then honest fakes in the form of institutional facts are vital: "Deceptive signals originally aimed by a coalition against an external target are subsequently redeployed for honest communicative purposes within the group" (Knight, Lewis, 2017: 435).

Prioritising property over senses

When Rossano refers to a settled way of life, it is in reference to the mnemonic power of place. However, for groups that are more on the move, the processualism of ritual may make more sense than the commemoration of a place-bound event. Archaeological findings (Watts, 2014) indicate the use of both red clay and beads, which are thought to have been part of the people's first symbolic communication. Rossano, however, attributes greater value to beads over pigment: "Pigment fades, washes off, and cannot be passed from one person to another or inherited by descendants. Beads last and can be given as gifts to others or handed down to offspring as part of their heritage. Furthermore, beads can quantify social information – more beads can indicate higher social standing, more friends and allies, or greater wealth. In this way, beads are a richer source of social information" (p. 62).

As if *having* beads was more than *being* red. By both permanence and transferability, Rossano not only legitimises greater significance of the property itself, but moves seamlessly to the possibility that beads may refer to one's marital status. It is not insignificant that touch is required in the application of the red substances. In terms of the amount of time spent, knowledge acquisition, execution, and tactile application of pigment indicate a costly signal of group loyalty and gender egalitarianism (Watts, Chazan, Wilkins, 2016; Power, 2019; Finnegan, 2017; Lewis, 2015).

Searching for paternalistic stability

“The anthropologists Knight, Power, and Watts (1995) argued that the first rituals would have been about stabilising pair-bonds in hominin groups” (p. 70). Their Female Cosmetic Coalitions (FCC) model emphasises collective ritual action by women as the source of reverse gender dominance and symbolic potency (Power, 2019). This should not be reduced to a matter of privatisation of female sexuality (Finnegan, 2013). From a comprehensive understanding of these authors, it is clear that pair stability was not the key, but rather alloparenting and the contribution of males. To relate this model to monogamy is to misunderstand it or imagine a primacy of patriarchy.

Rossano boldly claims: “For at least 50,000 years, marriage has been part of human life (...) In most other monogamous species, the mated pair physically isolates themselves from the conspecifics and actively repels rivals from threatening the pair-bond” (p. 69). Primatologist S. B. Hrdy (2009) (and other genetic data) have shown exactly the opposite – young mothers prefer to stay close to the grandmother and help her offspring. For the vast majority of that time, marriage would have taken the form of bride-service, where men have no certainty of ‘conjugal rights’, but are required to keep earning them by working for their in-laws (Volland, Chasiots, Schifenhovel, 2005; Uhrin, 2020).

Rossano claims that “Males, however, won’t reliably resource an offspring unless they can be sure of genetic parentage (paternity certainty). (...) How to create stable pair-bonds in social groups where the temptation to cheat is only the next hut away?” (p. 69). Neither paternal certainty nor lifelong pair-bond stability is a necessity for either cooperation or offspring rearing, although they have often been presented as dominant in history. The partible paternity model has long since rearranged the Eurocentric doctrine (see Beckerman, Valentine, *Eds.*, 2002).

Rossano even goes so far as to suggest marking exclusive sexual relationships. He paternalistically implies exclusive male ownership and continues: “It was within this symbolically-constructed world that appropriate behaviour (female chastity, male resourcing) and inappropriate behaviour (infidelity, irresponsibility) were recognised and morally evaluated” (p. 70). This type of gender division appears to be in sync with previous statements.

Rossano attributes the first ritual practices to shamanism. It seems logical to him that afterlife beliefs precede shamanism. He does not take into account the findings that afterlife beliefs, for example, might be absent (Woodburn, 1982). It cannot be ruled out that consciousness-altering ritual represents a very early form of ritual activity, even though it does not follow that they were ancestral (the species and gender of the ancestor is not defined), nor that they had a form of shamanism.

Rossano also discusses in more detail the lifecycle rituals in Russia, in the 19th and 20th centuries, which seem to confirm the ‘natural’ matrix. He also shows replacement of traditional rituals in the former Soviet Union by those associated with joining communist societies, maturation, labour, education, and military service. Rossano claims that they failed because



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“socialist rituals re-formed traditional ones in ‘unnatural’ ways” (p. 115). Here the question remains, what is natural in ritual terms? I would like to turn to the point that propaganda forces people to take the messages literally. The crucial difference might be that in non-totalitarian regimes, the metaphor remains open to *ludus*, whereas in totalitarian regimes, it eventually dies because of the rigidity of interpretation. In traditional ritual, the community pulsates in and out of the ritual domain, but totalitarianism focuses on fixing the community in one mode only.

Forgetting the pretend play

Rossano concludes with the barren paradigm that “humanity defined itself by intellectual superiority” (p. 143). He eventually returns to a postulate that has a much longer history than the last few years: “In the past decade or so, however, sociality has overshadowed rationality as humanity’s defining trait” (p. 143). The fundamental question of why humans have become ultra-social has not yet been answered. It is not a coincidence that Tomasello’s designation of humans as ultra-social animals has changed Rossano towards ultra-social souls. It is no longer enough to state that through rituals, humans generate the trust necessary for relationships, nor that “if we abandon ritual, we give up being human” (p. 144). Rossano argues that humans have always used ritual to rob Nature of the last word. Many ethnographies have shown that humans may not synchronise with Rossano’s formula: that nature determines birth, maturation, lusts, desires, and death, yet only ritual legitimises them.

“Humans are the only species that take offense at Nature’s indifference to our plight. Ritual is a defiant gesture expressing that offence” (p. 144). No other terms seem to me more remote from the philosophy of ritual than offense, defiance, and insult. Concepts of Nature change historically and mirror alternating paradigms. Thus, in a time of countless studies of reflexivity and decolonisation in anthropological research, imprisoning the deepest cultural assumptions comes as a surprise.

If anything is typical of ritual, it is the presence of non-literalism and often blatant ‘nonsense’. What is clear to initiated insiders is confusing to outsiders. Matt Rossano seems to have chosen to overhear the incomprehensibility of cultural ‘obscurity’ by offering readers familiar arguments with comforting demonstrations. Upon closer examination, this raises more questions than it answers, not towards research, but to the background of the author’s choices.

HELENA TUŽINSKÁ,
Department of Ethnology, Faculty of Arts,
Comenius University in Bratislava

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DIMITRIS XYGALATAS:

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Imagine the following scenario. In the midsummer of fierce, parching heat on the Greek island of Tinos, people dressed in black are crawling right all the way from the quayside to the top of a steep hill where an Orthodox church stands. Their limbs are bleeding and their bodies are exhausted. The crucial question is: why do people participate in rituals that are costly and can even be very painful?