
PARTICIPATION IN ALTERNATIVE REALITIES: RITUAL, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND ONTOLOGICAL TURN

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ABSTRACT

The ontological turn or ontologically-oriented approach accentuates the key importance of intercultural variability in ontologies. Different ontologies produce different ways of experiencing the world, and therefore, participation in alternative realities is very desirable in anthropological and ethnological investigation. Just the participation in alternative realities itself enables researchers to experience alterity and ontoconceptual differences. The present study aims to demonstrate the power of ritual in alteration, and to show how co-experiencing rituals serves to uncover ontological categories and relations. We argue that the experience of alterity in everyday activities is of a different quality than the experience of alterity when participating in rituals. Transcendent reality is accessible during rituals. It serves as source of potentialities. These potentialities are actualized in ritual and entangled with people's everyday existence. Furthermore, we argue that participating in ritual enables the researcher to step into the alterity of alterity, and to get nearer to the origins of ontologies. Ritual participation also invokes the extension of consciousness and provides a collectively shared cognition, opening up the ontological dimension and enabling access to existential experiences and concepts. In these settings, relations between people and the world can be recognized and investigated.

Keywords: ontological turn, consciousness, ritual, alterity, quantum anthropology

INTRODUCTION

The problem of alterity in worlds is one of the most fundamental issues in recent debates on the "ontological turn" [1], [2], [3]. Generally, alterity means otherness, the difference between the quality and state of being in the sense of the other of two. From the anthropological perspective, alterity denotes intercultural otherness in people's worlds, ontologies, and meanings. However, in some situations, e.g. when participating in a ritual, alterity may even be accelerated. The present study aims to explore the power and constitutive role of ritual in alteration, and to show that the experience of

alterity in everyday activities is of a different quality than the experience of alterity when participating in rituals.

An ontologically oriented approach assumes that understanding and experiencing different "modes of existence" [4] play a key role in anthropological investigation. For this reason, the ontological approach also stresses the importance of the researcher's participation in an alternative reality that may provide him/her with new ontoconceptual insights. The participation in the alternative reality of a different culture is one way that enables researchers to experience alterity and get into close contact with ontological difference.

During field investigation, an anthropologist may participate in various realms of life of the members of a given culture, ethnic group, or subculture. Everyday activities, leisure time, production, economic activities, social communication, or artistic creation: these and many other spheres of life may help us approach multiple realities, multiple ontologies, and the different positions that people assume. However, aside from this everyday reality, there is also the so-called "transcendent reality", which, more or less, interacts with everyday reality. Based on our ethnographic experience mainly with the Dayak Benuaq (Indonesia) [5], we consider participation in rituals as one of the means of entering and experiencing transcendent reality.

Ritual practices can be found in most past as well as recent cultures. Not only in native ethnic groups, but also in modern Euro-American cultures, rituals play an important, despite a bit different, role. Anthropologists and ethnologists meet with various kinds of ritual traditions and seek insights into their ontoconceptual understanding. We suggest that just the genuine co-experiencing of collective social events may enable an anthropologist to receive in-depth insights into cultural ontologies.

The present study aims to contribute to recent discussions on the ontological turn through the exploration of the power of ritual in alteration. In the following text, we demonstrate how alterity emerges during rituals, and how this alterity may help uncover ontological categories and relations. Furthermore, we show that ritual participation also invokes the extension of consciousness and provides a collectively shared cognition, opening up the ontological dimension and enabling access to existential experiences and concepts.

RITUAL AND ENTERING ALTERNATIVE REALITIES

Ritual is suggested to play an important role in connecting the minds of people with transcendent reality. Whereas the experience of everyday reality is shaped by basic alterations constituted by the borders of categories, in the transcendent sphere, such borders may be blurred or even missing. Borders crumble, and the minds of people get into contact with the sphere that Trnka and Lorencova [6] call the realm of potentiality. This realm includes pre-existing possibilities from which some may be actualized during the course of a ritual. The realm of potentiality has unlimited potential for actualizations, and is also a source of possibilities for the participants' experience of transcendent reality.

Interestingly, there are no restrictions of time and space in the transcendent reality. It means it is not only invisible, non-measurable and nonempirical, but also nonlocal and timeless. It is full of potentialities (pre-existing possibilities) that can be actualized

during the course of a ritual. During actualization, possibilities acquire identity in time and space. These actualizations can be in opposition to common, everyday experience, because everything is possible in the transcendent sphere that is full of potentialities. Merely the repletion of potentialities makes the power of ritual in alteration very high.

In this sense, transcendent reality is a source of actualizations that are interpreted in accordance with ritual and cultural ontoconceptual traditions. When thus understood, transcendent reality is also a source of collectively shared ontologies. Actions and thoughts are affected during ritual, which has a strong impact on the perception and experience of reality, not only in the course of ritual, but even outside of it.

Furthermore, Trnka and Lorencova [6] point out that ritual is effective in the sense that it affects the information underlying forms of potentialities. We can understand information as the “alterity which makes the alterity” [7], [8], [9], [6]. Difference/alterity is the basis of our cognition and of the concepts created in our mind. The maintenance of borders between concepts is a crucial condition for our everyday actions in the world. Without these concepts and their borders, the world would be a chaotic place, where human beings would be lost. However, these borders disintegrate during the course of rituals, and a new alterity emerges through this decline. Ritual settings represent a safe method to overcome the chaos that arises with the fall of concepts’ borders.

Ritual produces alterity in several ways. Let us begin with a source of alteration that has the power to change people’s ordinary cognitions. Under normal, everyday conditions, our conscious mind works with actualizations, i.e. with entities that we can see, hear, smell, or touch. Trnka and Lorencova [6] posit that actualizations cannot be in direct contradiction, since our minds are pre-established for working with differences. We are not able to accept “A” and “non-A” at the same time. Reality should be the first or the second in a particular moment. If a person would hypothetically believe in both, a “difference” must still remain, because “A” and “non-A” cannot exist together at the same time or in the same location.

When turning our attention to cultural differences in ontologies, one may encounter the main analytical problem when applying an ontologically-oriented approach, i.e. the problem of alterity [7]. If in our culture a person is not a jaguar, our brain can not simultaneously believe that a person is a jaguar. However, the ontological approach cannot be satisfied by saying that a people believes in something different. Being ontological means that we need to go beyond establishing a difference – we need to understand how realities are produced and how identities are constituted.

During rituals, special framing is used to evoke alterity and to extend beyond the borders of everyday experience. During this extended experience or alterity, what appears to be “A” is possible to be experienced as “non-A” at the same moment. A cat can be both dead and alive at the same time. We can say that both possibilities may exist together.

However, this is not the only reason why ritual has the power of alteration. The differently structured transcendent reality enables the participants of a ritual to release from the time-space causality of everydayness. Space-less and time-less reality enables an experience of alterity that is of a different quality than the experience of alterity during everyday activities. We may say that ritual triggers the consciousness of difference, which is most pronounced in the case of ecstatic rituals. Ritual specialists (shamans, priests) and participants leave everydayness and enter into the transcendent

reality. During rituals where, for example, ritual specialists walk in sacred landscapes to speak with ancestors, spirits, or animals, the structure of the everyday material world changes so that it becomes unlimited in the time-space. In this "differently" structured world, the ritual specialist can move without everyday limitations, and can thus encounter things of past or future. We argue that this structurally changed space-less and time-less reality is entangled with the reality we are normally used to. Thus, it is possible to stay in the place of ritual in the form of a man, and at the same time, walk somewhere far from it in the form of a jaguar. Non-locality is a part of the experience of alterity during rituals, and one may even seek links to the notions comparing a reality experienced in ritual to a kind of quantum-like reality [6].

EXTENSION OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND PARTICIPATION IN RITUAL

In the course of ritual, the ritual specialist (shaman, priest) connects first with the realm of extended possibilities [6], and through his charismatic action helps the other participants of ritual to (more or less) reach this realm, too. The connection established in this way spreads gradually to the other participants of ritual, and they can thus share states of consciousness, experiences, emotions, beliefs, and collective cognition.

When turning our attention to the states of consciousness of ritual performers and participants, another kind of alterity arises. Rituals, especially ecstatic ones with their main power in alteration, are often accompanied by states of consciousness that are of different quality than normal, everyday states of consciousness. These states of consciousness can be generally summarized under the term "altered states of consciousness", used in psychology. These states extend and deepen our normal sensory experience. Through altered states of consciousness, we have the opportunity to approach the otherwise nonempirical, transcendent parts of reality. We can see, hear, smell, or touch something that is not accessible to us in normal states of consciousness. This realm is a reality behind the phenomena, inaccessible to our sensory organs when they are working in normal states of consciousness. And here, one may ask, what does this alteration mean for an anthropologist actively co-experiencing ritual?

Ontological perspectivism works with the possibility of shifting between realities [7], [8], [9]. We argue, however, that the experience of alterity of the anthropologist participating in everyday reality is of a different quality than the experience of alterity when participating in rituals. We argue that ritual participation, the alteration of consciousness, and collectively shared cognition open up the ontological dimension, and thus enable access to existential experiences and concepts. In these settings, relations between people and worlds can be recognized and analyzed. This kind of experience opens a better understanding of what kinds of identities, qualities, and processes can exist, and what relations can exist among them. We can also say that this experience is truly transformative and relational, which is in accordance with the ideas of ontological turn [7].

As demonstrated above, the anthropologist may experience, together with other participants, some types of altered states of consciousness. Therefore, we have to look more deeply at the character of alteration during the altered states of consciousness. Inspired by quantum meta-ontology [10], [6], the altered state of consciousness is understood as a kind of extension into some extra dimensions. Our experience of reality depends on three spatial dimensions during normal states of consciousness. We perceive

all matter and material entities in the three-dimensional space of normal states of consciousness. However, altered states of consciousness may include elements from other realms than those from our everyday, "empirical" reality (see in more detail [6]).

However, one important difference remains. Ontological perspectivism assumes the existence and participation in alternative realities. We must acknowledge that not only the different cultural mentalities, but also those realities accessible mostly via ritual or through other collective performance should be worthy of a researcher's participation. Here, two different participatory shifts should be distinguished. One possible shift is a shift in perspective, i.e. the shift from one cultural mentality to another cultural mentality. The researcher should "take on" the different culture that is under investigation [11], and try to appreciate the internal logic of different cultural positionalities [7]. Comparisons between the different spatial or temporal instantiations of given sociocultural forms are made possible by this shift between realities [8], and create the possibility of new ontoconceptual understandings [7]. Rather, we argue that this shift in perspective is horizontal, i.e. from one cultural mentality to another cultural mentality. However, both ritual guides (e.g. shamans, priests) and participants may experience trance states as well as other altered states of consciousness during the course of rituals. They definitely experience the alterity that is accompanied by altered states of consciousness in these moments. We argue that this kind of alterity requires an extension of consciousness into some extra dimensions [6], and is of a different quality than a shift in perspective from one cultural mentality to another. In any case, both processes may accompany one's participation in the ritual, and, as such, may be sources of alteration when participating in ritual.

EXTENDED MIND, RITUALS, AND RITUALLY USED OBJECTS

The extended mind thesis [12], [13] suggests that ritually used objects can be considered to be a part of the mind in the course of a ritual. Rituals serve as mnemonic devices, and thus enable the extensions of the mind. However, Sivado [13] suggests an interesting observation focusing on the role of other participants within ritual settings. In other words, if we accept the assumption that ritually used objects are a part of the mind of the participant, then also the bodies and minds of other participants and of the ritual specialist (shaman, priest) may be also considered to be a part of the mind of the participant. When rituals are suggested to be mnemonic devices, the people participating in them are also components of that device in the same sense as ritually used objects. Thus, Sivado [13] suggests that if we accept this logic, then everyone may be a part of everyone else's mind.

Although this implication is disputable, there is an interesting analogy with the emergence of collective consciousness during ritual. Trnka and Lorencova [6] summarized the recent scientific explanations of the phenomena of collective consciousness. There is no consensus on its nature of late; however, most theories agree that collective consciousness is a kind of field that emerges, and is based on some sort of process of the binding between individuals' minds. Under certain conditions, for example during rituals, the fields of individual consciousness transcend the borders of the organism and interfere with the consciousness of another person or persons. It is a kind of coupling between the local level of individual consciousness and the global level. Given such types of connectivity between individual minds, collective emotions

may arise in individuals who interfere with a particular field of collective consciousness. The emotional arousal of individuals interacts within the entangled field of collective consciousness, and enables the emergence of collective emotions during the course of ritual [6]. This understanding is not far from Sivado's [13] re-interpretation of the extended mind thesis [12]. Indeed, the synchronization of internal biological rhythms in participants produced by ritual performance (empirically proven by the study of Konvalinka et al. [14]) indicates that the individuals and the collective system are under an entangled influence, i.e. that they merge into one synchronized meta-system. From this perspective, the extensions of the minds and mutual entanglement of minds during ritual may seem fathomable.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrated the power of ritual in alteration. Several sources of a ritual's power for alteration were determined. First, the differently structured transcendent reality enables the participants of ritual to release from the time-space causality of everydayness. Space-less and time-less transcendent reality enables an experience of alterity that is of a different quality than the experience of alterity during everyday activities. Second, ritual has the power to change people's ordinary cognitions. Contradictions to, as well as the blurring or even the disappearance of the conventional categories of everydayness may occur in ritual. Third, the transcendent reality is full of potentialities. The repletion of potentialities is suggested to strengthen the power of ritual in alteration. Fourth, altered states of consciousness may occur in ritual performers and participants during the course of a ritual. These states extend normal sensory experience, and represent an alterity that cannot be experienced in normal, everyday states of consciousness. Fifth, if we accept the analogy between the character of ritually used objects and the bodies and minds of the participants of rituals as posited by the extended mind thesis [12], we may suggest that a kind of entanglement is present during ritual. If ritually used objects may be considered to be a part of the mind of the participant, then also the bodies and minds of other participants and of the ritual specialist (shaman, priest) may be considered to be a part of the mind of the participant. In this way, the synchronization of internal rhythms in participants and the connectivity between individual minds is considered to be an important source of alterity during rituals.

We conclude that rituals produce alterity in the world, and therefore, their research is exceptionally desirable for investigation within the field of ontological turn. Different cultures have different ontologies, which also produce different kinds of experiencing the world and "affectual multiplicity" [8]. An ontologically oriented approach recognizes multiple realities and also considers the possibility of shifting between them. The present study has shown that participating in rituals enables the researcher to step into the alterity of alterity, and to approach the origins of concepts and ontological relations.

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