

## Ritual Theory and Attitudes to Agency in Brazilian Spirit Possession<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article works with theory of ritual in order to begin addressing a series of questions raised by Brazilian spirit possession rituals (in Kardecism and Umbanda). Four contributions to theory of ritual highlight relevant conceptual issues: Humphrey and Laidlaw on non-intentionality; Bloch on deference; Houseman and Severi on social relations; and Kapferer on virtuality. Strawson's philosophical distinction between objective and reactive attitudes toward intentionality is used to make a case (i) that certain formal aspects of ritual (indexicals) serve to (ii) mark culturally-variable attitudes to agency within rituals, which are related to, but fundamentally distinct from, non-ritual attitudes to agency.

### Keywords

Ritual, theory of ritual, agency, indexicality, Umbanda, Kardecism, social relations, Brazil

Recent theory of ritual has been moving past linguistic communication models that emphasize the symbolism of rituals and that attempt to read their syntax and semantics. This article makes a specific theoretical contribution that draws together themes from recent work on theorizing rituals. The first section of the article offers a brief overview of two Brazilian religions, Umbanda and Kardecism. Highlighting the interrelations between spirit possession and social relations raises a series of questions. The theoretical perspective set out in the following sections suggests a means of answering these questions. The second section sketches four contributions to theory of ritual: Humphrey and Laidlaw on non-intentionality; Bloch on deference; Houseman and Severi on social relations; and Kapferer on virtuality. The third section draws on the work of philosopher Peter Strawson to distinguish two distinct attitudes toward agency, reactive and objective. This article's most significant contribution is to argue that rituals help to reframe the relation between these attitudes in a manner distinct from their relation in non-ritual contexts. By focusing on this relational tension we turn our attention from reading the meaning of ritual to the structure and dynamics of ritual practice and how these reframe agency. I illustrate the ramifications of this distinct by examining its relations with the four contributions to theory of ritual discussed in the previous section. The fourth section draws critically on the work of Alfred Gell to argue that the Peircean concept of indexicality is invaluable in analyzing which elements and aspects of ritualized action achieve these attitudinal effects. The resulting theoretical frame emphasizes agency, virtuality and indexicality in ritual within specific social contexts. This will be illustrated, in the fifth and final section, by an analysis of spirit possession in Kardecism and Umbanda.

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I make three general claims. First, the balance between reactive and objective attitudes to agency is transformed in the case of ritualized actions. Second, this constitutes an important aspect of ritual virtuality, of i.e., of ritual's ability to create an altered set of social relations, "a space in which participants can reimagine (and redirect or reorient themselves) into the everyday circumstances of life" (Kapferer 2004: 47). Third, the fact that certain elements of ritual function as indexes (in the Peircean sense) is crucial to this process. That is, some aspects of ritualized actions can only be understood within, and insofar as they point to, their specific context. The words 'this' and 'now' are indexical because their meaning, and the truth-value of sentences in which they are found, can only be fully determined with sufficient knowledge of the context in which they are uttered. My thesis is as follows: certain sorts of 'thisness' found in spirit possession rituals in Brazil alter the tension between reactive and objective attitudes; this naturalizes the agency of supernatural agents; and the virtuality of these rituals both rehearses and inserts this transformed agency into broader social relations of reciprocity.

### **Spirit Possession and Social Relations in Kardecism and Umbanda**

Spirit possession is important in several areas of the Brazilian religious landscape: folk religion; Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism; the Catholic charismatic revival; Afro-Brazilian religions; Kardecism or Spiritism, a French-import with roots in nineteenth-century American Spiritualism; and Umbanda, a twentieth-century mixture of Afro-Brazilian religions and Kardecism. I focus on the latter two, though related claims could be argued regarding the others. Kardecism and Umbanda manifest a range of possession phenomena, including spirit mediumship of different types, voluntary cultic possessions that involve long-term relationships between a given medium and a given spirit, involuntary possession by these same or similar spirits of ritual participants and observers, and malevolent possession, which is treated as an important cause of physical and mental illness. I focus on spirit mediumship and voluntary cultic possessions, which manifest a clearer relation to the broader field of Brazilian social relations. A brief overview of these two religions will raise questions that highlight the potential value of certain conceptual and theoretical resources.

Kardecism is a descendent of nineteenth-century French Spiritualism (Bastide 1967; Aubrée and Laplantine 1990; Hess 1991; Sharp 2006; Monroe 2008) Umbanda is a mixture of Kardecism with Afro-Brazilian traditions (Brumana and Martinez 1989; Brown 1994). Kardecism is an urban, middle-class religion, with a highly educated membership among Brazilian religions (Pierucci and Prandi 2000: 633). Umbanda is a distinctively Brazilian religion, formed in the 1920s and 1930s as a mixture of Afro-Brazilian traditions and Kardecism. Although census results are especially problematic in Brazil, given the high degree of multiple adherence and syncretism, the basic numbers give us a useful sense of the scope of these two religions (Jacob et al. 2003: 101-105). In the 2000 census, 2.2 million Brazilians self-identified as Kardecists and 397,000 as Umbandists. (Candomblé, the largest of the Afro-Brazilian traditions, is much smaller, with only 118,000 Brazilians claiming this as their primary religious affiliation.)

Kardecism's beliefs include reincarnation, karma, the universal spiritual evolution of humankind, the practicability and value of communication with more evolved spirits (including Jesus Christ), a plurality and hierarchy of worlds, a transcendent God, and as an exceptionally evolved spirit. Key rituals include textual study sessions, consultation with or reception of messages from spirits received by

mediums (through oral communication, automatic writing or other means), the “passe” (a form of blessing similar to New Age cleansing of the aura), and rituals of “disobsession” conducted to free people from the pernicious influences of confused or un-evolved spirits.

Three distinctly Brazilian characteristics of Kardecism stand out. First, since its inception, Kardecism in Brazil has been more religious than in France, where its “empirical” and scientific nature was emphasized (Warren 1968: 397; Machado 1983: 114; Stoll 1999: 41). Second, it has reflected Brazilian racial beliefs, above all rejecting black and native spirits as non-evolved, a key element in the tensions that led to the emergence of Umbanda as a separate religion in the early twentieth-century (Brown 1985: 11). Third, it posits a specifically Brazilian conception of the superior, more highly evolved nature of the spirit guides and the worlds or “colonies” in which they live (Xavier 2006a; 2006b; see F.L. Silva 2005). In its new home, Kardecism received a distinctly Brazilian emphasis, reflecting specific concepts of religion, race, and social hierarchy.

The origin of Umbanda is closely tied to issues of race and class. This fact is basic to understanding how it came to be that Umbanda occupies a spectrum of doctrinal and ritual positions between Kardecism and the Afro-Brazilian traditions like Candomblé, with individual groups varying widely in their balance between the characteristics of these two extremes (Engler forthcoming). Three tendencies, reflecting the Brazilian myth of three races (DaMatta 1987: 58-85), were present in the formation of Umbanda and continue to influence its development (Brown 1977; Brown and Bick 1987).

First, Spiritists looked to Afro-Brazilian traditions for a more intensely emotional and corporeally satisfying symbolism and ritual, leading to the *empretecimento* of Kardecism (Ortiz 1999, 40-45). This view is reflected in historical accounts that focus on the role of white middle-class kardecists as leaders of the merging religion, portraying Umbanda as originating in a middle-class *empretecimento* of Kardecism.

Second, analyses that focus on social and demographic factors place greater emphasis on the movement in the other direction, from Afro-Brazilian traditions towards Kardecism (Brown 1977). Candomblé was the most important Afro-Brazilian tradition in this context. Its key rituals include initiation, divination, and the *roda-de-santo* (saint wheel) in which initiated members dance counter-clockwise, to intensely syncopated drumming, until they enter into a trance state, becoming *cavalos* (horses) for the *orixás*. This model of possession remains prominent in some Umbanda *terreiros* but is not found in Kardecism. Two factors led, in the late nineteenth century, to the *embranquecimento* of Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian traditions, primarily in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo: (i) the influence and Spiritism and elements of Catholicism on the lower classes, which led to the formation of a “low Spiritism”; and (ii) the presence of increasing numbers of white members, often new immigrants, in the Afro-Brazilian traditions (Camargo 1961, 34-35; Ortiz 1999, 34-40). Edison Carneiro’s study of Afro-Brazilian religions in Bahia, primarily in the 1930s, for example, found spiritist ideas being absorbed into Candomblé de Caboclo, a tradition already incorporating both African and indigenous elements (Carneiro 1977: 73-74; Ortiz 1999, 36).

Third, indigenous figures played an important role in the emergence of Umbanda. Kardecist mediums began to receive the spirits of Brazilian Indians in the 1920s. These *caboclos* was rejected by some as less evolved. Their presence continues to be an important marker distinguishing Kardecism from Umbanda (Concone 2001;

Motta de Oliveira 2007). *Caboclos* are also present in some Afro-Brazilian traditions (Boyer 1992; Santos 1992, 1995; Harding 2005: 122; Prandi 2005: 121-138).

There are a number of significant differences between Kardecism and Umbanda (Camargo 1961; Aubrée and Laplantine 1990: 179-184; Brown 1994: 15-25; V.G. Silva 2005: 99-127; Lewgoy 2006). In general, Kardecism is predominantly a middle-class religion. It is much more centralized institutionally and formally coherent in doctrine and practice. It has a strong emphasis on textuality, with highly literate members, a larger range of publications, and a central role for spirit writing as a ritual form. Afro-Brazilian religions tend to be lower class, widely diffuse in belief and practice, and orally based. Umbanda occupies a spectrum between Kardecism and the Afro-Brazilian traditions in all these senses. With few institutionally imposed or maintained norms, individual Umbanda *terreiros* manifests a spectrum of doctrinal and ritual characteristics, from Umbanda branca (“white” Umbanda), that resembles Kardecism, to a more Africanized Umbanda that resembles Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions. The former has a higher proportion of white and middle-class members and the latter includes a greater proportion of black and lower-class members. (It is important to keep in mind that race in Brazil is a complex issue, with tensions less sharply defined than in other areas of Latin America [Lovell and Wood 1998; Hoffman and Centeno 2003; Fischer 2004])

On the other hand, there are important ritual similarities between the two religions, including the predominance of women as participants (though of men in leadership roles), the *passe* or laying on of hands (more common in Kardecism), and the blessing of items such as T-shirts and medallions, given to infants and the sick for the purposes of protection and cure (more common in Umbanda).

There are several important differences, in general, between rituals in Kardecism and Umbanda. In most of these cases, Umbanda *terreiros* at the “white” or Kardecist end of the spectrum manifest these differences to a lesser extent and those at the African end of the spectrum to a greater extent.

First, during possession rituals, Kardecist mediums remain fully or partially conscious of themselves as distinct from the spirits that they receive, whereas, in Umbanda, the medium, or *cavalo*, normally enters a classic trance state, sometimes so deep as to require additional rituals to end the possession.

Second, Kardecist mediums receive “evolved” spirits, often middle-class professionals like doctors, lawyers and intellectuals; they reject black and native spirits as non-evolved. In Umbanda, the two most common types of spirits are marginal figures: *caboclos* and *preto-velhos* (indigenous and black spirits respectively, central in this religion but ‘marginal’ in terms of dominant social evaluations and access to socio-economic opportunities). Participants are also often possessed by *orixás* (the divinities of Candomblé) and by *exus*, a type of trickster or demonic figure present in Candomblé but which seldom possesses members of that religion.

Third, Kardecist rituals are often text-centered, unlike Umbanda. Doctrinal knowledge is central. Most Centers have a bookstall that sells Kardecist literature, including the books currently being used in the weekly study sessions.

Fourth, where Kardecists will often return home from the Center with a reading assignment, Umbandists are often told by the spirits they consult to perform additional rituals at home, often involving lighting candles in a carefully prepared environment with symbolic substances, colors and the presence of running water.

Fifth, Kardecists have a more fluid and democratic hierarchy. Meetings are generally led by a senior male, echoing Protestant congregations. Newcomers begin by attending study sessions and only slowly graduate to attending rituals where spirits are

received or patients disobsessed. Umbandists have a more rigid hierarchy of mediumship and a sharp line, doctrinally and as inscribed in the ritual space, between clients and mediums.

Sixth, Kardecists dress like they were going to a Christian church. Umbandist clients prefer white and avoid black. Mediums are distinguished by more elaborate forms of dress, with variations that mark different types and levels of mediums. These markers are more obvious at the African end of the spectrum where mediums place greater emphasis on donning the clothing and taking up the artifacts associated with the particular type of spirit that possesses them.

Seventh, Umbanda more explicitly reflects Brazilian social relations. Peter Fry argues that Umbanda reflects the social and political structures of Brazilian society:

Umbanda is plausible insofar as the personal relations established with the spirits, in hopes of obtaining favours, are homologous with the real relations established for people's benefit in the broader social system. ... Umbanda ... is a ritual dramatization of the principles that govern life in the large cities of Brazil... Umbanda is a ritualized and dramatized metaphor that refers to Brazil's social and political reality (1978: 45, 47).

Concone notes that the religion's various spirits "are obviously drawn from the national reality" (2001: 282). Brumana and Martinez characterize Umbanda as a "subaltern cult" that "elaborates symbolically the social condition of the client" (1989: 45). Ortiz argues that "umbandist ideology preserves and transforms Afro-Brazilian cultural elements within a modern society, [while, at the same time] manifesting rupture, forgetting, and reinterpretation of older, traditional values" (1999[1978]: 212). Patricia Birman underlines Umbanda's symbolic and ritual engagement with Brazilian social reality: "umbandist possession ... is worthy of credit to the extent that it contextually invokes its relation with the world as experienced by its audience" (1995: 44-45). This complex refraction of Brazilian social relations in Umbanda is not found to the same extent in Kardecism, where issues of hierarchy work themselves out more in the traditional rhetoric of institutional politics. That is, in Kardecism's hierarchical and meritocratic view of spiritual progress is reflected in the relative absence of tensions between personal and impersonal modes of authority.

Eighth, and finally, this tendency of Umbanda to more closely reflect tensions within the hierarchical relations of Brazilian society, while at the same time standing apart from the economic sphere, is correlated with its greater openness to a range of conceptions of gender and sexuality (Landes 1947; Fry 1982; Birman 1982; 1985; 1995; Natividade and Oliveira 2007).

Several issues emerge as targets for potential explanation and interpretation. The historical importance of issues of race and class in relations between Kardecism and Umbanda, and the parallels between aspects of these religions and specific characteristics of Brazilian social relations underline the need to foreground these contextual dimensions. Differences between the two religions, in terms of class position, leadership and institutional structures, literacy, textuality, types of possession states, etc. might make sense in terms of some relation to this context; on the other hand, differences in ritual form must be kept clearly in mind.

## Marshalling Theoretical Resources

The view that ritual is communication has important precedents, e.g., Durkheim, Leach, van Gennep, Geertz, and Turner. This broad set of approaches holds that ritual conveys meaning like language does: by referring—albeit less literally, more symbolically—to something other than itself. This approach has trouble dealing with the efficacy and dynamics of rituals as well as with discrepancies among insider interpretations of rituals and between those of insiders and scholars. As a result, key recent works emphasize formal aspects of ritual (e.g., Laidlaw and Humphrey 2006; Kreinath 2006; Severi 2006). Fritz Staal marked an extreme: “A widespread but erroneous assumption about ritual is that it consists in symbolic activities which refer to something else. It is characteristic of a ritual performance, however, that it is self-contained and self-absorbed. ... Ritual is pure activity, without meaning or goal” (Staal 1979: 3, 9).

As I tried to make sense of Brazilian spirit-possession rituals, I found many traditional approaches to theorizing rituals to be problematic. Issues like who is agent and who patient, who sender and who receiver, who performer and who audience opened up fascinating dimensions of ambivalence. My attempts to make sense of what I saw were challenged by the dynamism of the rituals and the variety of interpretive positions that reflect and shape them. After much reading and thought, I found a number of recent theoretical approaches to be especially valuable: certain features of the case, seemed best characterized in terms of certain key concepts, and these in turn seemed more amenable to certain theoretical approaches. My approach to working with theory of ritual converged on what Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg call “Theorizing Rituals,” a theoretically pluralistic approach, drawing on multiple perspectives in a methodologically open and reflexive manner, and that foregrounds a dynamic interplay between paradigmatic concepts and theoretical affiliations (2006; cf. Engler 2008: 25-27). Four approaches emerged as particularly useful.

First, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw make the relation between ritual and intentionality central to “contrasting ritualized action with action which is not ritualized” (1994: 2). Less radical than Staal, they hold that rituals are learned purely as sequences of actions and that meanings are applied to them after the fact. They argue that ritual transforms the relation between action and intentionality: the “ritualization of action” ... consists in it becoming non-intentional, stipulated, and elemental or archetypal” (Laidlaw and Humphrey 2006: 278) That is, rituals effectively disengage the form of intentionality associated with action in non-ritual contexts: ritual actions are not intended in the same way that non-ritual actions are. This reflects the fact that rituals stipulate a sequence of actions that stands prior to the individual ritual actor. This results in its perceived elemental or archetypal quality. The ‘non-intentionality’ of ritual is the first concept I draw on below.

Second, Maurice Bloch helped to clarify this link between non-intentionality and the archetypal quality of ritualized action. He agrees that intentionality is displaced when action is ritualized: “any act ... that appears to originate fully from the actor cannot properly be called ritual” (Bloch 2006: 496). He clarifies this by noting that rituals involve extensive quotation or deference, that is, “reliance on the authority of others to guarantee the value of what is said or done” (Bloch 2006: 497). In this light, tradition serves as a “phantasmogoric quasi-person” that guides ritual regardless of individual intentions (Bloch 2006: 504). Bloch echoes Humphrey and Laidlaw

regarding the non-intentional, stipulated, and archetypal quality of ritualized action, but he is more specific regarding the cognitive mechanism involved. He also offers a more explicit bridge to discussions of one of the psychological functions of ritual: “when one is in trouble and does not know what to do, one allows oneself to be taken over by the knowledge and the authority of others” (Bloch 2006: 506). This provides a second insight that I will draw on: displacement of intentionality is not simply characteristic of ritual in a descriptive sense; it has functional and even strategic dimensions.

Third, like Humphrey and Laidlaw, Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi (1998) focus on the organizational features of ritual action, not on issues of meaning. More specifically, they focus on the social context that ritual creates: “[I]t is the form of the *relational* field in which the protagonists are engaged which underlies the establishment of a context specific to ritual behaviour” (Houseman and Severi 1998: 167). They argue that ritual acts out special relationships, and that this is what sets it apart from non-ritualized action: “To the degree that ritual performances incorporate ... exceptional situations, they become readily recognizable as distinct from everyday interaction: they cannot be fully accounted for in terms of ordinary internalities and patterns of relationship” (Houseman 2006: 418-419). This third insight places the first two other in a social context, raising the possibility that shifts in intentionality both reflect and reconstitute social relations.

Fourth, Bruce Kapferer goes further in specifying the relationship between ritual and non-ritual fields of social relations. He similarly focuses on “ritual as a technical practice rather than a representational formation” (2006: 672). He argues that ritual, due to its ‘virtuality,’ allows participants to exercise their agency in

a self-contained imaginal space—... a construction that enables participants to break free from the constraints or determinations of everyday life.... The phantasmagoric space of ritual virtuality may be conceived as a space ... whose dynamic not only interrupts prior determining processes but also ... [within] which participants can reimagine (and redirect or reorient themselves) in the everyday circumstances of life (Kapferer 2006: 673-674; cf. 2004: 47).

Ritual is not subordinate to non-ritual nor does it simply represent it. Ritual’s difference allows participants to act differently; its similarity allows them to bring that distinct agency into play in the non-ritual sphere. This fourth insight draws together the others in suggesting that the distinct social field constituted in and through ritual can be characterized by its virtuality, not entirely unlike yet not reducible to the sphere of non-ritual relations, and providing a space within which participants reimagine, redirect or reorient themselves. In analyzing Brazilian spirit-possession rituals, I will characterize this re-orientation in terms of alternative conceptions of agency and intentionality.

In sum, these four recent theoretical approaches to ritual jointly emphasize several valuable themes: ritualization (that which makes ritual distinct from non-ritual action); a correlated emphasis on the form and dynamics of ritual (as opposed to its meaning); a distinct relationship between intentionality and action (as compared to non-ritual actions); a quality of authority that ritualized action gains in part due to this transformation of intentionality; a distinct field of social relations constituted within and by rituals; and the virtuality of the ritual sphere, autonomous and providing a space where participants reimagine themselves, especially their agency and intentionality.

### **Reactive and Objective Attitudes to Agency**

Theorizing possession rituals in terms of the four theoretical insights above gives us a general starting point: ritual creates a social space, like and unlike that of non-ritual action, in which distinct forms of agency, characterized by the displacement of agency, play themselves out. The next step is to clarify how ritual agency is distinct. Houseman and Severi (1998: 231-232) critique Humphrey and Laidlaw's idea that ritual action is non-intentional as being negative and residual. What does 'non-intentional' mean? It is not enough to simply assert that ritualized action is characterized by prior stipulation: that might make some sense of highly formalized and scripted rituals, like many in South India, but a more general approach to ritual needs to say something more concrete about the intentional/non-intentional distinction. There are types and degrees in the tempering or displacement of intentionality. Describing cases of how intentionality is transformed can clarify the relation between agency and ritual dynamics, presenting a spectrum of stances toward intentionality that ritual participants occupy and draw upon.

My main contribution in this article is to offer a conceptual distinction that shows promise in clarifying the senses of agency involved. It is an initial step, drawing on a specific set of cases, but with potential value more broadly. Brazilian spirit-possession rituals offer a case where something quite specific seems to be going on, in terms of the types of agency of the various ritual participants. In this section, then, I propose a distinction between two attitudes toward the actions of oneself and others: the first recognizes a normal relation between intentionality and action; and the second responds to an abnormal quality of this relation.

Philosopher Peter Strawson, in a classic essay, "Freedom and Resentment" (1976), argued for a middle ground on the thorny issue of free will vs. determinism by distinguishing two distinct attitudes toward agency. Strawson notes that our attitudes towards the actions of others, when these actions affect us directly, vary along a spectrum between two extremes. We adopt a 'reactive' attitude when we judge the actions of the person who has benefited or harmed us to have been intentional, willed, self-directed, etc. We adopt an 'objective' attitude to the extent that we judge that person to have acted unknowingly, unintentionally, or in some other manner outside their conscious control. In the former case, we experience the full range of appropriate emotional reactions (Strawson mentions gratitude but focuses on resentment). In the latter case, we acknowledge the person's causal role, but we temper our reactions based on our judgment that the usual relation between intentionality and action has been somehow transformed.

On this view, our attitudes toward the agency of others (and toward our own agency in hindsight) depend upon our evaluation of relations between action and intentionality, between agency and causality. In some cases, we recognize that people are not fully the agents of their actions. Strawson focuses on cases of the 'not guilty by reason of insanity' sort:

the participant attitude, and the personal reactive attitudes in general, tend to give place, and it is judged by the civilized should give place, to objective attitudes, just in so far as the agent is seen as excluded from ordinary adult human relationships by deep-rooted, psychological abnormality (Strawson 1976; cf. Yearly 1985).

Interestingly, he notes, in passing, examples comparable to possession rituals:

we may think of such statements as 'He wasn't himself', 'He has been under very great strain recently', 'He was acting under post-hypnotic suggestion'....



Such pleas as these do ... invite us to suspend our ordinary reactive attitudes towards the agent, either at the time of his action or all the time. ... They invite us to view the agent himself in a different light from the light in which we should normally view one who has acted as he has acted. I shall not linger over ... [such] cases (Strawson 1976).

I propose to do what Strawson did not, to linger over such cases, exploring the theoretical leverage that his distinction offers in the case of spirit possession.

In general terms, religion is often closely associated with tensions between free and constrained action. More specifically, we can note that religion offers both cases where it is appropriate to adopt an objective attitude due to the non-intentionality of an agent, e.g., due to altered states of consciousness, and also cases where it is appropriate to adopt an objective attitude due to normative constraints, e.g., where an agent is required to act according to moral or ritual codes.

The distinction between reactive and objective attitudes is relevant to a broader range of cases than those that Strawson discusses. Because his focus is on issues of free will, responsibility, punishment, and moral condemnation, he examines only cases where the disconnect between intentionality and action, between agency and causality, is internal and non-stipulated. That is, he focuses on cases where the agent is free from morally relevant constraint except insofar as their intentionality becomes unhooked from their actions due to ignorance, immaturity, psychological problems, or altered states of consciousness. In this type of case, voluntary and willed actions are the norm, and involuntary and unwilled actions are abnormal. Hence, a reactive attitude is the norm and an objective attitude the exception.

As a result, regarding this class of actions, Strawson's distinction functions in two ways. First, it frames certain cases of human actions as abnormal, tempering or sustaining our normal responses and attitudes. This has clear implications in spheres like law, psychiatry and childrearing. In the case of religion, there are obvious cases where normal agentic link between intention and action is transformed in comparable ways. For example, in spirit possession it is appropriate to adopt an objective attitude toward the agency of the person who is possessed (though perhaps a reactive attitude to the spirit or other agent that is possessing the patient). However, the specific attitude—from reactive to objective—that is seen as appropriate in such rituals will vary depending on a number of factors, including the type and degree of possession and a wide variety religious and social beliefs and practices. For example, the predominance of women as participants in ritual possession invokes complex and widely varying questions of agency and power that bear on judgments of praiseworthiness, blame, and the associated issues of status (see, e.g., Boddy 1994: 415-422; Rasmussen 1994; Caciola 2000; Chesnut 2003; Hayes, 2006).

The second function of the distinction between reactive and objective attitudes is that the latter normalizes the former. That is, the existence of cases that invoke an objective attitude, of cases where we judge that people are not responsible for their actions, helps to delimit, define, normalize and naturalize cases of "normal" agency, i.e., where we adopt a reactive attitude. As Steven Yearley notes, in exploring the implications of Strawson's distinction for legal and scientific reasoning, "in the law all explanations are concerned with making sense of departures from willing compliance with legal rules.... [C]orrect ... [action] is treated as self-explanatory and thus in no need of special investigation" (Yearley 1985, 117-118).

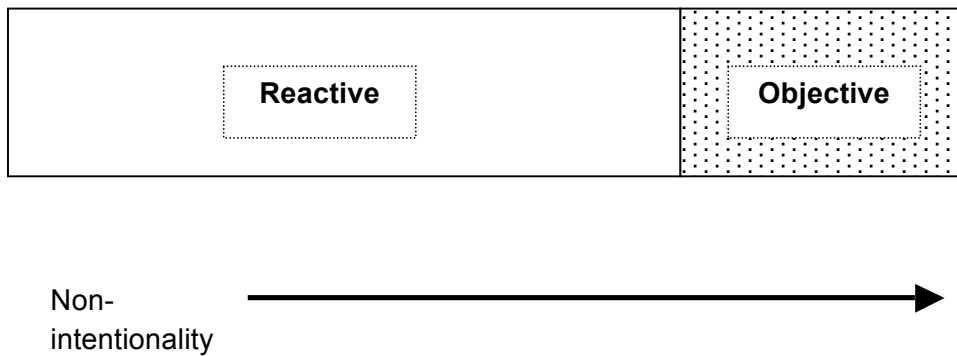
Strawson's analysis meets his purposes. However, it can be enlarged in two ways for theory of ritual. First, we can take into account that agents form reactive and

objective attitudes toward their own actions in retrospect. For example, it is appropriate to adopt an objective attitude toward our own action, as well as those of others, in cases of altered states of consciousness, in cases of moral or ritual obligation, or where individual agency is seen as radically subsumed under divine agency. Phrases like “In ša’ Allāh” or “God willing, for example,” mark beliefs that subtly displace reactive attitudes, sacralizing mundane contexts through this transformation: by delimiting our own agency, we emphasize God’s.

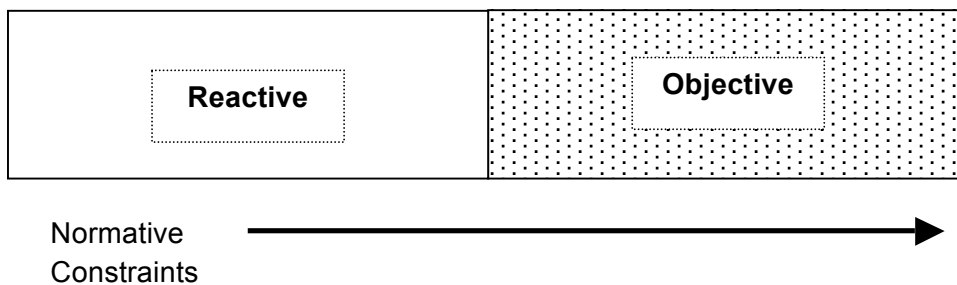
Second, we can take account of another important and related category of cases, on that Strawson does not address given his interest. We adopt objective rather reactive attitudes in the face of others’ actions where those actions are previously stipulated or normatively constrained, for example, in cases of obeying the law, respecting moral rules or customs, keeping promises, carrying out bureaucratic processes, and, of course, performing rituals. (Recalling Humphrey and Laidlaw’s emphasis on prior stipulation and the resulting non-intentionality of ritual action, the relevance of Strawson’s distinction is obvious.) Our reactive attitudes are tempered when people are perceived as doing what they must or ought to do, as opposed to acting purely on the basis of their own unfettered intentionality. That is, we adopt objective attitudes to a greater or lesser extent when people act under various forms of normative constraint. That is, we find it harder to resent or praise someone who is simply following orders or just doing their job.

Such cases are contrary to those that Strawson considers in an important sense. In the cases of non-intentionality that he considered, reactive attitudes were normal and objective attitudes exceptional. However, where actions are previously stipulated or normatively constrained, the opposite is true: acting according to these constraints, even against one’s will, is the norm, and acting freely and without constraint is less usual. A more objective attitude is the norm in the sort of cultural and institutional contexts that frame the bulk of our actions in society, and a more reactive attitude is the exception. To paraphrase Yearley, acting as normatively stipulated is self-explanatory and thus in no need of special investigation. Both the types of case discussed by Strawson and this second type associate the objective attitude with limitations on agency. In the case of non-intentional actions, emphasized by Strawson, reactive attitudes are suspended due to the involuntarily faulty agency of the actor. In the case of normatively constrained actions, as is often typical of religion, reactive attitudes are tempered due to the voluntary subordination of the actor’s independent agency to those norms. Strawson considers only the former case, but both are relevant to theory of ritual.

In effect, Strawson proposes a linear model (see Figure 1a), in which the spectrum from reactive to objective attitudes is correlated with a distinction between freely chosen and fully intended actions, on the one hand, and actions characterized by non-intentionality on the other, i.e., a break between intention and action due to ignorance, psychological abnormality, etc. Taking into account previously stipulated or normatively constrained actions adds a second independent variable (see Figure 1b). As either the non-intentionality of an action or the normative constraints on it increases, so will our tendency to adopt an objective attitude toward it.



**Figure 1a. Objective attitudes to agency as a function of non-intentionality.**



**Figure 1b. Objective attitudes to agency as a function of normative constraints.**

This distinction between attitudes toward agency has implications for our assessment of Humphrey and Laidlaw’s claim that ritualized action is characterized by non-intentionality. They are right to draw attention to the non-intentional character of ritual action, but this concept is too broad. By itself, non-intentionality fails to distinguish ritual action from the kinds of cases that Strawson draws our attention to (non-intentionality by virtue of faulty agency). Their additional claim that ritual action is stipulated and archetypal effectively sets it apart from those cases. However, as just noted, ritualized action is only one of various sorts of action characterized by normative constraints.

Bloch’s concept of deference adds an important dimension. According to Bloch, ritual has three distinguishing characteristics. The first two are deference (i.e., “reliance on the authority of others to guarantee the value of what is said or done” [2006: 497]) and consciousness of deference. In the case of spirit possession, for example, “the act of deferral takes center stage, and everybody joins with ... the medium in abandoning their intentionality and in making themselves transparent to whomever’s words they are quoting, which strangely fade out of focus” (Bloch 2006: 501). This far, Bloch covers much the same ground as Humphrey and Laidlaw’s criteria that ritual action is non-intentional, stipulated and archetypal. His third criterion takes us further: “lack of clarity on the person to whom one is deferring” or “indetermination of the originating mind” (2006: 500, 502):

The secret to the problem of wanting to locate meaning without having normal originators of that meaning is to merge all the shadowy transparent figures into

one phantasmagoric quasi-person who may be called something like ‘tradition’, ‘the ancestors as a group’, ‘our way of doing things’, ‘our ‘spirit’, our ‘religion’, perhaps even ‘God’ (Bloch 2006: 502, 504).

On Bloch’s account, “deference is a common aspect of human life,” but ritual is distinctive because it “involves high degrees of deference”: “Rituals are orgies of conscious deference” (Bloch 2006: 505-506). The emphasis on the consciousness of deference and the link between non-intentionality and the legitimation of authority are valuable additions. However, the concept of deference also fails to adequately distinguish ritual from non-ritual. Ethical and customary norms share these same qualities of conscious indeterminate deference, in a manner that often displaced onto tradition and supernatural beings. These examples are arguably within the fold of religion, but they are less arguably cases of ritual.

The distinction between reactive and objective attitudes toward agency allows us to take a further step forward. My suggestion is that Strawson’s concept of the objective attitude offers a more effective way to characterize those aspects of ritualized action that Humphrey and Laidlaw analyze in terms of non-intentionality and Bloch in terms of deference.

One of the advantages of bringing the distinction between reactive and objective attitudes into dialogue with recent theory of ritual is that it offers richer resources for making sense of participant attitudes toward the agency that they and others exercise. It is important to distinguish between cases where participants see intentions linked ‘normally’ to ritualized action and those where they do not. This is so even where scholars of religion might argue that both cases are non-intentional.

It is significant that Staal and Humphrey and Laidlaw drew on highly formalized south Asian rituals as examples in order to conclude that issues of meaning and intentionality are independent from ritual form. (Laidlaw and Humphrey acknowledge that “performance-centred” rituals require the extension of their analysis of non-intentionality [2006: 282].) On the one hand, these examples offer the advantage of rigid ritual form, facilitating the comparative analysis of this form’s relation to other aspects of ritualized action. On the other hand, these examples occlude the importance of ritual dynamics, of improvisation and individual variation, of choices between alternative possible forms, of spontaneous invention, and of negotiation between ritual participants. It is relatively easy to see what their claim that ritual is non-intentional means with the highly formalized examples that they draw upon. It is less easy to make sense of this claim in the case of less formalized rituals or where comparable ritual elements are present in cases that vary in their degree of formalization. To respond that non-intentionality is a characteristic only of formalized and pre-scripted ritual would miss much of importance. The distinction between reactive and objective attitudes can characterize a fuller range of types of non-intentionality.

The distinction between reactive and objective attitudes not only allows us to further specify Humphrey and Laidlaw concept of non-intentionality and Bloch’s concept of deference, it intersects with Houseman and Severi’s claim that ritual performance is “an enactment of exceptional relationships,” i.e., that “the symbolic ‘work’ of the rite ... consists in the establishment, on the basis of existing relations, of a new relationship” (Houseman 2006: 420; Houseman and Severi 1998: xiv). The distinction between reactive and objective attitudes allows us to specify one important manner in which normal social relations are evoked or echoed but, at the same time, transformed or displaced within ritual. It also clarifies an important dimension of ritual virtuality according to Kapferer’s analysis. By transforming what would be a reactive

attitude in a non-ritual context to an objective reaction in ritual, or vice versa, ritualized action opens up a complex field for modeling alternative and variations on a key aspect of social relations, our ascriptions of intentional agency to others and ourselves.

### **Indexicality, Distributed Agency, and Ritual Dynamics**

This section of the article argues that the indexicality of certain ritual elements contributes to the transformation of reactive to objective attitudes. Attempts to theorize ritual based on models of linguistic communication have emphasized the symbolic function of ritual elements, but this approach is limited and distracting. In asking what a ritual “means,” we interpret its elements against the broader religious and cultural background that gives meaning to these signs or symbols. This always leads us beyond ritualized action itself to its alleged backdrop of signification. In semiotic terms, given that symbols mean what they mean because of linguistic and cultural conventions, we are led to analyze ritual as a token whose type lies beyond the ritual context itself. Indexes are signs whose meaning is inseparable from their specific context. The word “this,” for example, is an indexical expression, because it serves as a pointer, and, as such, its specific meaning is inseparable from the context within which it points at something. As a result, the concept of indexicality turns our attention toward, rather than beyond, the ritualized actions themselves. One of the main weaknesses of the model of ritual as linguistic communication is that it loses sight of the specificity of ritual. The main advantage of analyzing certain ritual elements as indices is that this focus on ‘thisness’ allows us to make better sense of ritual efficacy and dynamics.

A useful theoretical foil for clarifying the place of indexicality in ritual is Alfred Gell’s theory of art, in his *Art and Agency* (1998; see Layton 2003; Bowden 2004). His theory is based on the agency of art not on its aesthetic or communicative aspects: art is “a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it” (Gell 1998: 6). For Gell, artworks are effective mediators of social agency because they motivate viewers to make abductions of agency: “Any object that one encounters in the world invites the question ‘how did this thing get to be here?’” (Gell 1998: 67). As a result, art works embody a form of “distributed agency” that both acts on its own and points toward its originating agency. Gell’s points about agency can be extended to other objects besides art objects: “Agency can be ascribed to ‘things’ without this giving rise to anything particularly recalling the production and circulation of ‘art’” (Gell 1998: 23).

In Gell’s theory, the concept of agency is closely linked to the indexicality of art objects. Here he draws on Charles Sanders Peirce’s distinction between icon, symbol and index. An icon refers by exemplifying, exhibiting or sharing a similar structure as its object. Architectural drawings or onomatopoeic words are icons in this sense. A symbol refers to its object by virtue of cultural and linguistic conventions. An interpretant (i.e., the person who interprets) understands that the word “red” refers to a certain colour by applying a conventional rule that associates the two. The concept of the index is more complex. It is generally spelled out in terms of a causal relation between object and sign. Smoke is an index of fire and boot prints in the snow are an index of the recent presence of a human being. A classic statement defines the three as follows:

an *icon* is an object which takes on its sign character by reason of its resemblance to its object; the *symbol* is a sign whose connection with its object is merely associational and conventional; and the *index* is a sign which is really,

dynamically, and even causally connected with what it serves to indicate (Moore et al. 1942: 367).

The three categories of index, icon and symbol are not mutually exclusive: a given sign can be more than one (Burks 1949; García-Carpintero 1998: 532).

The use of indexical expressions has been richly developed in two main areas of study, analytic philosophy and ethnomethodology, with philosophers emphasizing that the truth-value of indexicals depends on their context and ethnomethodologists arguing that their meaning does (Barnes and Law 1976: 224). They hold the basic point in common: it is impossible to say what indexical expressions like “this is new,” “it is raining now,” or “I am hungry” refer to unless we know the specific pragmatic context in which the sentence was uttered (Bar-Hillel 1954). At issue here is the degree to which it is possible to arrive at any understanding of language extracted from its context.<sup>2</sup> The main implication for ritual theory is this emphasis on context. Gell’s perspective is limited, in part, because he drew to a very limited extent on these two rich sets of literature.

Gell emphasizes the causal and non-linguistic aspects of the index, highlighting the relevance of the concept to his proposed link between agency and art objects. He writes that an index is a “‘natural sign’ ... from which the observer can make a *causal inference* of some kind, or an inference about the intentions or capabilities of another person” (1998: 13). Jens Kreinath further specifies aspects of the index in arguing that the concept of the index (and Gell’s work specifically) is relevant for ritual theory, in part because it allows to make inferences about the intentionality of ritual participants: “It is characteristic of indexes that they not only function as vectors in causal relations but that they are also self-referential and therefore capable of causal inference that allows to build hypotheses about the intentions or capacities of other persons” (2006: 468-469). On this view, four aspects of the index emerge as especially relevant in extending Gell’s theory of art to theory of ritual: a causal relation between object and sign; the material nature of this causal relation; the non-linguistic character of the sign; and the particularity of this direct form of reference.

Of these four characteristics that appear to bridge Gell’s theory of art and theory of ritual, the first three can be interpreted more broadly. This allows us to gain insights from Gell’s work, avoiding some of the points for which he has been criticized, and to integrate these insights with recent theory of ritual in a productive manner. That is, I argue that it is productive to view the relation between index and object as not necessarily causal, material or non-linguistic.

This is not to suggest that it is wrong to interpret Peirce in this triply narrow manner. This view is one of many consistent with Peirce’s complex writings on the matter. These and other aspects of the index are found in his fragmented and sometimes contradictory writings on semiotics:<sup>3</sup>

- *A causal connection between object and sign*: “An Index is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object.”

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<sup>2</sup> It is arguable that indexical representations have played a central role in the evolutionary emergence of domain-specific cognitive mechanisms oriented to solving recurrent adaptive problems (Clarke 1996). There is an implicit link here between the view I argue for and cognitive theories of ritual.

<sup>3</sup> All citations are from the *Commens Dictionary of Peirce’s Terms* <[www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/dictionary.html](http://www.helsinki.fi/science/commens/dictionary.html)>. Complete references are available there.

- *Materiality of that relation*: “The index is physically connected with its object....”
- *More broadly than just a causal relation, “real connections” or “a genuine Relation” between sign and object*: “really and in its individual existence connected with the individual object”; “a sign of its object by virtue of being connected with it as a matter of fact.”
- *A corollary of this sort of relation, contiguity*: “the index, ... like a pronoun demonstrative or relative, forces the attention to the particular object intended without describing it”; “An object, in so far as it is denoted by an index, having thisness, and distinguishing itself from other things by its continuous identity and forcefulness, but not by any distinguishing characters, may be called a hecceity.”
- *A quality of grabbing the attention*: “A sign which denotes a thing by forcing it upon the attention is called an index”; “an index ... is a sign of its object by virtue of ... forcibly intruding upon the mind, quite regardless of its being interpreted as a sign.”; indices “direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion.”

Gell’s appeal to the concept of indexicality reflects his specific concerns with the agency of art objects. He wants to free the anthropology of art from an excessively relativistic concern with culture, and he wants to link the specific form of causality implicit in the case of artifacts to the issue of agency. This leads him to interpret Peirce narrowly, interpreting the index in causal, material and non-linguistic terms.

A focus on theory of ritual leads us to broaden the concept of indexicality in each of these manners, emphasizing four themes from Peirce’s account of the index. First, the relation between index and object can be one of contiguity (real and existential) in addition to one of causality. A pointing finger is an index by virtue of contiguity not cause. Second, it follows that this relation does not necessarily require a “material imprint” (Kreinath 2006: 468). Third, the category of index includes linguistic signs, as implied by Peirce’s reference to pronouns and developed extensively in the subsequent philosophical literature. Fourth, it is important to take account of the attention-grabbing quality of indices.

The following analysis draws on three specific senses of this enlarged concept of indexicality. First, a variety of interjections and alterations in tone of voice are characteristic of spirit possession. This type of index includes linguistic signs and is informed by relations of contiguity more broad than those of causality.

Ethnomethodologists have noted the complex nature of this indexical function:

Interjections are primarily *indexical* ... in that they stand for their objects by a relationship of contiguity rather than by a relationship of convention (as in the case of symbols) or similarity (as in the case of icons). ... interjections may index more than one object at once. In particular, they may index objects, signs, internal states, and social relations (Kockelman 2003, 471).

For example, “wow” or “yikes” can index emotions; “hi” or “good riddance” can index the nature of the social relationship between interlocutors; and “knock on wood” and “God willing” can index attitudes toward agency. In spirit possession, the meaning of certain elements of the ritual is not fleshed out in relation to some external backdrop of cultural meaning. They mark the presence of an altered agency: here, now, in this person, at this moment.

Second, the messages received by mediums, and passed on in oral or written form, and the objects that are blessed by the spirits also function as indices of supernatural agency. Here we are close to Gell's analysis, with the exception that these indices are not exclusively material artifacts but also linguistic and conceptual.

To make sense of this second category of ritual indexicals, it is useful to engage another aspect of Gell's theory, his concept of distributed agency. In his view, art objects are secondary agents, acting as indices of their creators agency. An agent, according to Gell, is any "thing" (e.g. a person or object) "who is seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention" (1998: 16; cf. 17, 19). This focus on agent as intentional cause allows Gell to extend the concept to include the agency of objects:

Agency is attributable to those persons (and things)... who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences... events caused by acts of mind or will or intention.... An agent is the source, the origin, of causal events, independently of the state of the physical universe (Gell 1998: 16).

This contrasts with other influential views of agency. Anthony Giddens, for example, includes a contrafactual element that is missing in Gell's account: "agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently" (Giddens 1984: 9). Giddens focuses on the process on agency, with its various phases of decision-making, intentionality, will and action in the face of potential external limitations and constraints. Gell focuses on the endpoints of agency, on the initial cause and the result. In his paradigmatic case, the former is inferred (or abducted) from the latter, i.e., from the presence of material artifacts. Giddens looks at agency from the inside; Gell looks at agency from the outsider's perspective, analyzing cases after the fact from the agentic signs that they present to us. For this reason, Gell's conception is less appropriate for the philosopher and the sociologist, but perhaps more appropriate for the anthropologist and the student of ritual.

This sort of external approach to the concept of agency is helpful for making sense of religious agents. That is, by focuses on what *acts like* an agent rather than what *thinks like* an agent, we bring the concept of agency to bear on the sorts of agency that play important roles in religious contexts. Ronald Inden argues that gods are agents "whose very existence may be contested ... [but who] may in a sense be real. ... We may take such agents to be real to the extent that complexes of discursive and nondiscursive practices constitute and perpetuate them" (1990, 27).

William S. Sax connects this sort of distributed agency explicitly to the functions of ritual: "Ritual is the point at which the agency distributed among other persons, relationships, and social institutions is articulated and made manifest. ... [P]ublic ritual is precisely the point at which complex agency is articulated and confirmed" (Sax 2006: 481, 478). This point that Sax makes is central to my argument. Agency is extended, transformed, displaced and naturalized through the ritualization of action. Specifically, I argue that altering the relations between reactive and objective attitudes to agency are one way in which supernatural agency is recognized or constituted. Supernatural agency emerges through the cracks that ritual creates in our 'normal' perceptions of human agency.

In this light, Gell's concept of distributed agency draws our attention to two points that are relevant to the indexicality of ritual. First, objects are seen as having effects that are independent of the direct actions of their originator. It is in this sense



that artworks have distributed agency: the agency of the artist acts secondarily, in a mediated fashion, through these artifacts. Second, because this distributed agency stands at a distance from its originator, we are forced to postulate the identity of that originating agency using a process of abduction. Gell notes, “Any object that one encounters in the world invites the question ‘how did this thing get to be here?’” (Gell 1998: 67). It is precisely at this point that altered perceptions of agency can displace the postulate of an original human agent onto that of divine agency.

To sum up this second extension of indexicality beyond Gell, the concept of distributed agency offers a valuable means for explaining the power of artifacts and other material elements of ritual, as well as many of the discursive and conceptual products of ritualized action. On the one hand, this point to the perceived affects that ritual agents, human or supernatural, can have, effects that can extend outward into the world more broadly through the secondary agency embodied in ritual products. On the other hand, this very extension, from original human agent to sites of distributed agency, creates a gap into within which divine agency can be perceived or constituted.

The third sense of an enlarged concept of indexicality that is relevant to the case of ritual is the fact that, as Peirce noted, indices grab our attention. Gell makes a similar point when he argues that art objects are captivating: “they are difficult to make, difficult to ‘think’, difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator” (Gell 1998: 23). However, Gell does not link this fascination clearly to the concept of indexicality itself.

It is not a coincidence that the same is said of spirit possession: “possession continues to hold the anthropological gaze despite heroic attempts to tame it, render it harmless or understood” (Boddy 1994: 407). Vincent Crapanzano underlines this compelling quality of spirit possession: “‘Fascination’ captures the magic, the demonic power, of possession itself...” (Crapananzo 2006: 200-201). The parallel between the fascination of the art object and the fascination of possession is that both force us to ask questions about the agency that lies behind what we see before us. I argue that possession is fascinating in large part due to its superposition and transformation of reactive and objective attitudes. We see someone, perhaps a neighbor or relative, in action, but we are forced, by the ritualized nature of that action, to alter or our attitude toward this manifestation of human agency.

This transformation of the balance between these two attitudes to agency plays a role in the constitution of the sacred. Reactive attitudes are displaced in ritual: we react naturally, but this reaction cannot be attached to the ritual actor, toward whom we adopt an objective attitude. The postulated supernatural agents often serve as the objects of these displaced reactive attitudes. Where Houseman and Severi draw attention to exceptional relations, I argue that it is our exception reactions, in part constituted by these incommensurable social relations, which are more significant. Ritual invokes a disjunction, as our attitudes to agency are evoked but displaced.

To sum up, Gell proposes two useful concepts: indexicality and distributed agency. Making sense of ritual requires interpreting indexicality in a broader sense than Gell does: including linguistic phenomena, such as interjections; recognizing that divine agency can emerge from the gap between original human agents and sites of distributed agency; and the fascination that is evoked, in part, by the perceived disjunction that is produced in our perceptions of agency when it is transformed, displaced, or distributed.

One of Gell’s goals in invoking the concept of the index was to distance the anthropology of art from its emphasis on cultural context. According to Peirce, the symbol can only be read by paying attention to the broad cultural conventions that constitute its meaning, but the index has a real, existential link to a specific context.

However, extending the concept of the index beyond a narrow view focused on causal and material relations brings culture back into the equation. For example, interjections are indexicals, but part of their meaning is governed by conventions: a “wow!” by any other name is not necessarily a “wow!” Gell’s view of indices is simply untenable in its radical departure from culture and convention. Ethnomethodologists classify indices as “deictic tokens,” and analyzing the cultural context of these context-driven signs is one of their stocks in trade: “The anchoring of deictic tokens to a specific time and place relies on cultural expectations that organize their salience” (Duranti 1997: 352).

The final two sections of this article explore a specific set of indexicals, signs of altered agency in Brazilian spirit possession rituals, and it argues that the work of these ritual elements reflects a very specific set of cultural expectations. This is intended to accomplish the two overarching goals of this contribution to ritual theory: to set out concepts that offer a broad applicability in other contexts, while making it possible to take account of specific social and cultural contexts.

### **Virtuality, indexicality and attitudes to agency in Kardecism and Umbanda**

This final section illustrates the value of the theoretical approach outlined above by analyzing spirit possession in Kardecism and Umbanda. From the perspective of ritual theory, the key task set out by this brief overview of two Brazilian religions is to explain the ritual differences. A further challenge is to propose a theoretical frame that draws on the strengths of recent important work in ritual theory.

The distinction between reactive and objective attitudes offers important insights into spirit possession, in part because it highlights the need to analyze the details of possession in specific religious and social contexts. As Houseman and Severi suggest, ritualized action constitutes special relationships. Here I offer a specific account of what this means in this particular ritual context: the pervasive patron-client relationships of Brazilian society are echoed and transformed in these rituals. Specifically, I argue that the relation between reactive and objective attitudes is altered in these contexts. The sacralizing function of a shift between reactive and objective attitudes constitutes a key dimension of the rituals’ virtuality, of their capacity to allow participants to re-imagine, redirect, and reorient their capacity for agency with respect to the everyday circumstances of life.

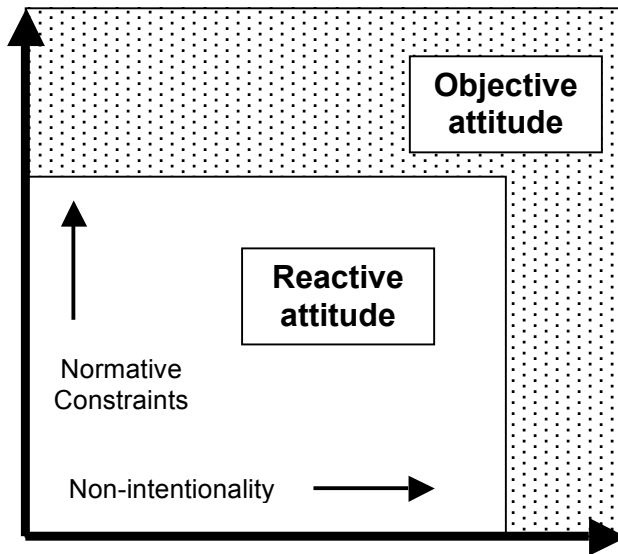
Possession rituals transform attitudes toward agency in three ways. (Recall that a reactive attitude reflects a judgment that others’ agency is normal, above all, intentional; an objective attitude reflects a judgment that their actions are not entirely their own.) First, an objective attitude toward the medium who is possessed replaces the reactive attitude that holds toward this member of one’s community outside the ritual context. This shift from reactive to objective attitudes is based on the non-intentionality of the medium’s agency and it is marked by certain indexicals. Second, as a corollary, reactive attitudes are displaced onto a supernatural patron, the possessing spirit, who acts more generously and less self-interestedly than is the case with the normal patron-client relationship. The messages that are conveyed by mediums, both oral and written, and the objects blessed by the spirits and later circulated function as indices of that altered agency. At this point, Gell’s analysis is particularly appropriate. The particular tension between reactive and objective attitudes here depends on the specific character of Brazilian society, a reminder of the need for ritual theory to take social and cultural contexts into account. Third, the clients’ attitude toward their own actions, during and as a direct result of the ritual, shifts toward the objective. This shift from reactive to objective attitudes is based on the normative constraints that inhere in the ritual process.

In all three cases, the indexicality of certain ritual elements is essential to unhooking reactive responses like gratitude from the reciprocity that governs non-ritual social relations. In general, the virtuality of spirit possession in Kardecism and Umbanda models a more functional set of patronage relations that are leveraged free from constraining links of reciprocity.

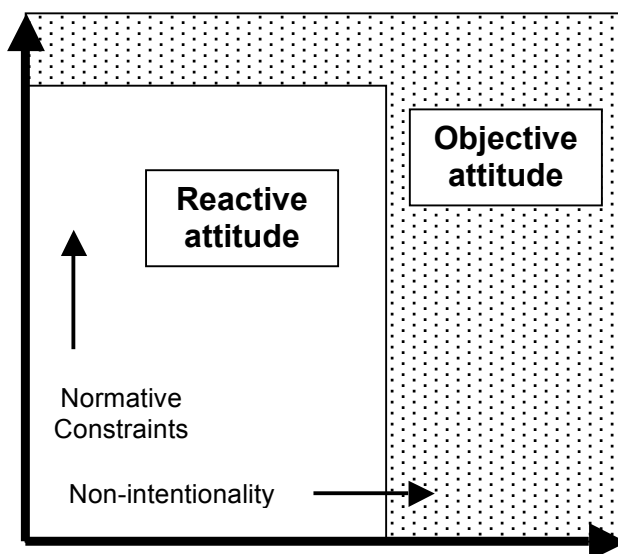
Various aspects of possession rituals in Umbanda and Kardecism illustrate the role of indexicals in prompting a shift toward objective attitudes regarding the medium: dramatic gestures, sudden movements, eye rolling, and sharp cries mark the moment of possession, more so toward the Afro end of Umbanda; the spirits' 'horses' often have a distinctive rolling gait in rituals at the Afro-Brazilian end of Umbanda's spectrum of ritual forms; changes in tone and pacing of voice mark possession; more specifically, guttural interjections are characteristic of the manner in which possessed mediums speak in Umbanda; distinctions between these guttural interjections gives evidence of different types of spirits, e.g., *caboclos* and *pretos velhos*; the hushed and attentive response of non-participants/clients also marks specific points in the ritual that are characterized by the presence/agency of spirits.

These signs are all indexical in that they are caused by or contiguous with the possession process. As such they point to an alteration in the agency of the medium. That is, these indexicals are the basis on which the non-participants/clients make judgments about the nature of agency manifested by the medium, informing a shift of attitude from reactive to objective. The judgment results in the medium having the status of an artwork, in terms of Gell's analysis, i.e., an object, a site of distributed agency, that forces us to search for an originary agency behind it. The postulate of a supernatural agent follows: clients face what appears to be an agent yet have strong reasons to believe that the person before them is not acting normally; the obvious conclusion is that an occluded agent is acting through them. What this article adds is a clarification of the relation between two attitudes to agency that inform this reaction.

As noted above, Gell's attempt to sidestep the cultural contingency that shapes the interpretation of indexicals fails. I suggest that the prominence of spirit possession in Brazil is a function of the fact that the general function of ritual that I point to, altering relations between attitudes to agency, resonates more strongly with attitudes to agency that are common within Brazilian society as a whole.



**Figure 2a. Objective attitudes to agency as a function of non-intentionality and normative constraints**



**Figure 2b. Objective attitudes to agency as a function of non-intentionality and normative constraints (Brazil).**

The threshold at which reactive attitudes shift to objective attitudes differs between cultures (Figures 2a and 2b). In Brazil, the scope of one's agency in the non-domestic sphere is more limited than is generally the case, for example, in North America or Western Europe. As a result, objective attitudes are more often appropriate. Along the "non-intentionality" axis in Figures 2a and 2b, the popular sense grants a great scope of non-intentionality; the point at which one is no longer responsible for what has happened. This reflects the fact that bureaucratic and other public systems are inefficient, irrational and, on occasion, corrupt, leading to a correlated reliance on personal relations (Buarque de Holanda, 1999: 139-151; Queiroz 1976: 33-159;

DaMatta 1983).<sup>4</sup> It also reflects a correlated belief that a variety of spirits obstruct one's efforts. Belief in spirit possession is widely held, especially among the lower classes. *Encostos* are believed to be very common. These are mildly harmful spirits that obstruct, distract, hinder, cause illnesses, etc. (interpreted in Kardecism as mild cases of obsession). Self-help programs on Brazilian television discuss *encostos* where Oprah and Dr. Phil would be discussing dysfunctional self-image. Along the "normative constraints" axis in Figures 2a and 2b, the reverse is true. Because confidence in impersonal system is justifiably low, those who would be perceived, in Canada and the USA, as normatively constrained are, in Brazil, more often seen as having the latitude, if they so desire, to *dar um jeito* ("find a way") (Barbosa 2006). As a result, the ritual shift in attitudes toward agency comes easier. It reflects the relational tensions between reactive and objective attitudes in Brazilian society more closely. In Brazil, it is easier and more 'natural' to adopt an objective attitude toward a medium, displacing one's reactive attitude onto a postulated supernatural being.

This perspective allows us to take one step toward making sense of a key ritual difference between Kardecism and Umbanda. The two religions exhibit important differences in the social make-up of practitioners: Kardecists are more likely white, middle-class, and well educated; Umbandists more likely to be *pardo* or black, poor, and poorly educated. That is, Kardecists have, on average, significantly more social and economic capital within Brazilian society. Within Umbanda, with its spectrum of ritual forms, a homologous tensions exists between "white" and Afro forms (Engler forthcoming). The fact that the rituals in Umbanda at the "white" end of the spectrum more closely resemble Kardecism is correlated with higher middle-class and white participation. In terms of the theoretical frame proposed here, practitioners of the two religions are rehearsing and reorienting different tensions between reactive and objective attitudes toward agency, correlated with their ability to wield social capital. That is, the virtuality of rituals rehearse and model different social landscapes in the two cases.

A key ritual difference is correlated with this social difference: Kardecist mediums remain conscious of and largely in control of the presence of the spirits they receive; Umbandist mediums enter an unconscious trance state and are more likely to require subsidiary rituals to free them from the spirit that has possessed them. Because of their class and status locations within Brazilian society, Kardecists are more like North Americans in terms of the culturally predicated attitudes toward agency that they bring to the ritual table. The less radical displacement of reactive attitudes reflect the fact that Kardecists are less likely to be accustomed to adopting an objective attitude toward their own agency.

## Conclusion

Agency is constrained or facilitated by our attitudes toward it, and these vary across cultures, classes, and other social boundaries. As Gell notes, agency is "a culturally prescribed framework for thinking about causation, when what happens is (in some vague sense) supposed to be intended in advance by some person-agent or thing-agent" (Gell 1998: 17). In this light, a focus on the virtuality of ritual—its creation of spaces

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, Brazil's impersonal systems are inefficient and its personal systems efficient only by comparison, generally to Western Europe and English-speaking North America. It is important not to jump to the conclusion that these factors are necessarily correlated with, much less the cause of, a 'backward' or 'deficient' modernity in Brazil (Souza 1999).

for rehearsing alternative attitudes toward agency—offers a theoretical framework for analyzing ritualized action in a manner responsive to cultural specificity.

The elements of a theoretical approach sketched here are not meant to be complete or exclusive. The indexicality of ritual (or formal aspects of ritual more generally) are not determinative or solely responsible for shaping people conceptions of and attitudes to agency. Nor are reactive and objective attitudes to agency exclusive of or more important than a variety of other factors. For example, the notion of person in Kardecism is distinct from that of Umbanda in its emphasis on rational agency and the modification of individual behaviour (Cavalcanti 1983). This religious anthropology might well play a greater role in shaping attitudes to agency than the elements of ritual form that I have focused upon.

It might seem overly functionalist or reductionist to suggest that these rituals can frame functional and even strategic displacements of intentionality. This would appear to fly in the face of Kapferer's denial that ritual is "a coded symbolic formation whose interpretation or meaning is ultimately reducible to the sociopolitical and psychological world outside the ritual context" (Kapferer 2004: 46; cf. 2002: 118). Kapferer's insistence on the autonomy of ritual takes a healthy step back from overly reductionist approaches. At the same time, he is often too stark in arguing for the independence of ritual from the social field of non-ritual: "the virtual of ritual is a thoroughgoing reality of its own, neither a simulacrum of realities external to ritual nor an alternative reality" (Kapferer 2004: 37). His core insight, that rituals allow participants to "reimagine (and redirect or reorient themselves) in the everyday circumstances of life" would make no sense if the space created by the ritual bore no relation to the non-ritual sphere (Kapferer 2006: 673-674). It is the dynamic tension between like and unlike that allows the virtuality of ritual "to realize human constructive agency" (Kapferer 2004: 47).

The approach I sketch could be used as part of narrowly (and indefensibly) functionalist or reductionist arguments. I point rather to correlations between attitudes to agency in the ritual sphere and non-ritual spheres, suggest that elements of ritual form contribute to this relation of like and un-like, and argue that these correlations vary to some extent by culture and class. Brazilian spirit-possession rituals do not simply echo or reflect broader cultural factors; they also allow ritual participants to reimagine and rehearse dynamic conceptions of and attitudes to the agency of themselves and others; and this has implications outside of the ritual context. The indexicality of rituals, in part, both influences and reflects changes in attitudes to agency; and this constitutes an important element of the virtuality of the rituals. Given their virtual framing of attitudes to agency and intentionality, rituals could potentially do several sorts of work for individuals and groups: adapting or dislocating participants from their broader social context; preparing them for more effective non-ritual agency or compensating for its lack; reflecting, distorting, critiquing, romanticizing social reality. The extent to which any given set of rituals performs these or other functions is a largely empirical issue, one not addressed here. It would be one-sided and limiting to analyze rituals solely in terms of their offering psychological compensation to those whose social position leaves them with hampered agency in 'real' life: in terms of the present analysis, by shifting participants' views of structural constraints from dysfunctionally reactive to functionally objective, reorienting attitudes to agency in relation to structural norms. This may well be an important part of the story, but other possibilities should also be considered: e.g., that religious rituals can constitute a social space within which altered attitudes to agency are correlated with distinct status markers.

In substantive terms, I argue that Brazilian spirit-possession rituals create a virtual space where participants work out alternative senses of agency and

intentionality, and these latter bear certain relations to the broader field of Brazilian social relations. The distinct attitudes to agency that are prevalent in Brazilian society make spirit possession more effective in two senses of that word. First, the rituals succeed in evoking or constituting the sacred more effectively because their displacement of reactive attitudes comes more easily to those who are more used to making this mental move. Second, the rituals offer a space for the rehearsal of a type of attitude adjustment that is functional in Brazilian society in a way that it is not in Canadian or American society: it is useful to recognize when others are not able to act fully as agents and to displace one's reactive attitudes toward figures that hold positions that allow them to function as patrons.

My theoretical claim is a limited one: that certain formal aspects of ritual offer cues that help constitute a virtual space for participants, within which culturally-specific relations between reactive and objective attitudes can be modified. Cultural and socio-economic factors, as well as religious conceptions of the self as agent, inform the relevant aspects of ritual dynamics. This basic approach could be extended to analyze other dimensions of relations between ritual form and conceptions of agency and intentionality.

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