Postmodern Rituals: Contemporary Australia Responds to Bali

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After Bali, October 12, 2002, a range of public rituals took place in Australia to remember those who had been killed in the bombing. In Melbourne, the most visible and collective ritual was the laying of flowers by members of the public on the steps of the State Parliament building, at the highly visible apex of Bourke St. This was a much-publicized event that took place over a period of two weeks. It was a riveting and moving sight/site for many people, who left notes expressing grief and regret, promises of remembrance, and of revenge. The choice of the site, and what would happen there, was prompted by talk-back listeners to Radio 3AW’s Neil Mitchell, who called in with many different suggestions as to where and why the laying of flowers should take place. This essay seeks to understand the processes and purposes of the popular, public rituals after Bali, asking who made them, what was made, and how popular—that is, open to formation by those not primarily and directly connected with the mass media and party politics—were the constructions? Further, in calling such an event a “postmodern ritual,” the essay will inaugurate an analysis, through cultural studies methodologies, of the attributes of public rituals in contemporary Western cultures.

The history of anthropological studies of ritual is the study of earlier religious explanations that became increasingly complicated by concepts of ideology. It is also the history of structuralist thought moving towards post-structuralism. Anthropology’s early claims to be the disciplinary site of ritual studies were most often articulated through studies of religion.1 The long evolution in anthropological approaches to ritual develops from the work of Emile Durkheim, Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, in which the sacred/profane dichotomy stood as the overarching concept, through to mid-century anthropological questioning of this dichotomy and more recent expansions and responses to Durkheim’s work, to the important genealogical work of Victor Turner who placed increasing stress on the openness of participants’ expectations in the performance of rituals, to the stress on ideology in social ritual enabled by the 1970s work of Geertz and Foucault.

Moving beyond purely religious explanations of ritual, the influential anthropology of Clifford Geertz offered broader definitions of ideology in relation to ritual. In the essay “Ideology as a Cultural System” Geertz saw ideology as a “response to strain” in society (219), a “confluence of socio-psychological strain and an absence of cultural resources by means of which to make sense of the strain, each exacerbating the other” (220). In his description of the workings of ideologies he comes close to setting the stage for contemporary public rituals and their necessity when he writes: “Whatever ideologies may be—projections of unacknowledged fears, disguises for ulterior motives, phatic expressions of group solidarity—they are, most distinctively, maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience” (220).

Anthropologist Michael Taussig, informed by post-structural approaches in the 1980s and 1990s, expands understandings of ritual into the postmodern, connecting religious and ideological with individual, experiential, embodied accounts of ritual. While still working within the study of religion in society, Taussig has necessarily and fruitfully complicated the study of ritual in the light of secularization and globalization, as well as at the micro level of lived experiences.

Writing within a more immediately and viscerally politicized postmodern context, American sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer, in his 2002 volume Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence, describes the responses to the September 11, 2001 terrorism of New Yorkers, who set up, around lampposts, or along vacant block fences, little temporary neighborhood shrines, leaving flowers, messages and candles, as well as photocopied messages—“Have you seen this man/woman . . . please contact” posters. Juergensmeyer was moved by what he describes as these temporary shrines, experiencing them as fitting, popular, spontaneous expressions of sentiment. That is, of grief and the desire to remember. When questioned at the 2002 Religion and the Arts conference if
such moving temporary shrines could also be read as sen-
timental and as places around which signs of hatred, patrio-
tism, rallying cries for American vengeance also circled, Jurgensmeyer demurred, replying that grieving citizens also had a need to express anger. The strands of religious/ritual and ideological response entwined here need some investigation.

As noted above, by the 1970s Geertz’s work had begun to move away from the purely religious explanations of ritual, drawing out the interconnectedness between public ritual/ceremony and the workings and pressures of ideology within a society. In his description of the ways in which rituals work, both in traditional and to a certain extent modern societies, he compounds the ideological aspects of ritual: “In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turns out to be the same world” (Geertz 112). This is still a basically purist and religious description of ritual, but it is already beginning to embrace elements beyond the “religious”, paving the way for the uneasy—postmodern, mongrel—fusions, or impossible desires for such fusion, evident in contemporary postmodern rituals. How helpful is a concept of “postmodern, mongrel ritual” in considering such different public demonstrations of grief, anger, revenge, forgiveness and bewilderment as the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, the roadside memorials along the edges of freeways, and the Bali memorial services? How fleeting, temporal and quickly passed can such a demonstration be and still be considered a ritual in any significant way?

In reading the “temporary shrine” at Parliament House in Melbourne, I came across a number of highly personalized messages amongst the sea of flowers, but two cards stand out: one read “Christ will win in the end” and the other, with a slightly more poetic touch, said “The Rosary will strangle al Qaeda.” Neil Mitchell commented that such a memorial expressed the powerlessness and futility of people in the face of terror. With such a range of responses, how do we read the purposes of this “ritual”? How do we begin to think about the connections between ritual and ideology in postmodern societies? In what ways was this a ritual, if at all?

In order to address these questions—to give them historical framework—I found it helpful to consider the work on Aboriginal ritual of contemporary cultural studies academic Stephen Muecke. Informed by the work of Michael Taussig, José Gil, and Michel de Certeau, Muecke has recently written about the importance of what he calls Aboriginal practices or rituals—what he sees as the meeting of philosophy and magic. He values in these rituals the “immediate” and “performativity,” the “transformative” and “relational,” drawing together as these rituals do the individual body, the communal body and the country. In this context, Muecke critiques Western academic procedures, which, he argues, only falteringly grasp the experiential and processual (my descrip-
tion) nature of the forces alive in Aboriginal rituals. Muecke argues that the workings of Aboriginal culture are obfuscated by the Western drive towards “representationalism”—the incessant reading of texts (rituals, philosophies, symbols, myths, narratives). He claims of Aboriginal ritual that “it is movement going on here, not meaning: rapidity, not logos” (9). (I will return to this concept of movement and the refusal of fixed meaning, which, if I think, valuable in considering contemporary popular rituals).

For example, of the work of early anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner, which he both honours and critiques, Muecke writes:

He is floundering around with a circular representa-
tionalist model where “things” have to be objectified and made metaphysical, converted to images, and fed back into the ritual complex from which they originally emerged. The process he is describing is not an Aboriginal process of understanding, but the process of his own science’s rationalizations of “Aboriginal religion.” (9)

With his comparative emphasis on the processual and performative nature of Aboriginal cultural production, Muecke is seeking to provide non-indigenous readers with a critique of their own academic, scientific, representa-
tionalist approaches, which he claims are missing the “immediate relations between objects, things, feelings, words, and music” (10). Muecke is aligned here with the anthropology of Michael Taussig, which he reads as critiquing “anthropology’s reduction to the symbolic, the function being to create understandable and exploitable ‘traditions’ out of the force and magic of the primitive” (10). For Muecke, performance and ontology come together in what is arguably an idealist discourse. Muecke is not explicitly critiquing Western rituals, but rather the academic modes of recording such rituals. However, my argument hinges around the implicit comparison between such (idealizing) representations of Aboriginal ritual and what might be called hybrid, mongrel, postmodern rituals. I am in the complicated position here of both disclaiming the idealizing implications of Muecke’s work, but of wanting to incorporate the notion of movement, immediacy and performativity into the discussion of a range of postmodern rituals. The phenomena to which I am here attempting to apply such qualities or affects are, of course, very different to the Aboriginal contexts as described by Muecke, and are themselves temporal, moving, and self-reflexively performative.

Contemporary rituals demonstrably share many worrying, persistent ideological features (colonialist, xenopho-
bic and reductionist: recall “The Rosary will strangle al Qaeda”). But other more processual, tentative, ad hoc, often gauche, and valuable features are at the same time traceable in these popular ceremonies. Further, I would want to argue, contra Muecke, that reading the features of
Corrie Perkins, writing in The Sunday Age, used a range of sources regarding the events in Bali and the rituals being performed in their aftermath. She quotes Anglican Archbishop Peter Watson describing such gatherings: "It is really important for us all to admit something really terrible has happened, to let our feelings come out. These moments, and these kinds of gatherings allow (such expressions)." Rabbi Ralph Genende is quoted: "We need ceremony, we need an outlet for the enormous amount of feeling that has been unleashed by this event. . . . When you share grief you diminish something of the acuteness of it." The Rabbi is also quoted, perhaps contradictorily, saying: "One of the things we can do as a country is to stand together and confront this kind of evil." Tim Costello, a Baptist spokesperson, said there needed to be rallying points: "a park or a hall or municipal gardens" for those unconnected to churches. "There has to be a place where people can come and light a candle, hear a piece of music, or hear the names of the victims read. . . . It has been a national tragedy and we are all in this together." Never lost for evangelical words, Costello goes on to reflect on the nature of Christian culture: "The one thing about churches in a more Christian culture—you actually have a strong sense of where to go. The symbols remain alive in your memory—the cross, the candles, the hymns. But for many, that sense of being together is not all that clear. Where do people go? Their confusion is very apparent now, and I suspect many people on Sunday will take the initiatives themselves" (Perkins 2).

Perhaps such a tragic time should provoke even the most garrulous or "representationalist" academic observers to suspend analysis and simply to participate? After all, don't these public acts overtly call for a forgetting—or at least suspending—of individual, critical self, the other who stands aside and observes, and for an invoking of the participatory self who seeks through ritual to join emotionally in the experiences of the other's grief/anger. In other words, what use cultural semiotics?

In an early 1990s debate about the nature of popular culture as practice, John Frow critiques what he sees as Michel de Certeau’s ethnography of actions, his stress on the "singularity and particularity of practices," arguing that both "uses and doings are codified (i.e. They are texts) . . . (and that) the appeal to a pristine (and invisible) experience of the text is both unwarranted and in principle dangerous" (Frow 59). In an essay in response to Frow, Tony Schirato argues that

Frow . . . would either have practice deliver up itself, unmediated, or, and this amounts to much the same thing, he would have it delivered up through a pure and objective scientific gaze and discourse. Frow is aware that the notion of practice exposes the claims of science, but the desire to know and explain makes him forget what he already knows. (Schirato 289)
experience and analysis, is succinctly expressed here. It is this same split that concerned Muecke. But a middle ground opens up in Schirato's discussion, a third space where the necessary discriminating and reflection, even of a rudimentary kind, occurs in order to decide how one will or will not participate. This tension typifies contemporary public Western ritual, I am arguing, and can in fact be thought of as its highly valuable characteristic. It is the self-reflexive, ambivalent and one might even add reticent, suspicious way in which many participants enter into such postmodern rituals that places them in a different category to traditional rituals.

In the case of the Bali rituals, this ambivalence is made up of great individual and communal pain, and the need for support, amongst many participants, together with an “Australian” wariness about institutionality—religion, media, politics—and other orchestrated elements. Most Western participants in such postmodern, public rituals are not practiced in what are experienced by many as institutionally constructed, “fixed” religious symbol and ritual. This essay is arguing that it is the reticence and ambivalence of the Bali ritual events—the demonstrated compulsion to express almost inexpressible sorrow and sympathy felt by so many, together with bewilderment, anger, and even national outrage, that is the defining and valuable trait of these transient, mongrel, postmodern rituals. In this reticence there can be seen both the need to read, understand, analyze, and the desire and willingness to participate before any reading or understanding can take place, if at all. Doubt and participation are not, of course, mutually exclusive.

Michel de Certeau describes the space of a postmodern tension, the ghostlike terrain of popular practice, where what he calls consumers (those “unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality” (xviii) enact both participation and discrimination:

In the technocratically constructed, written, and functionalized space in which the consumers move about, their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences, partly unseeable paths across a space. Although they are composed with the vocabularies of established languages (those of television, newspapers, supermarkets, or museum sequences) . . . the trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop. (xviii)

If we accept de Certeau’s hopeful notion of consumers and their agency—“the ruses of other interests and desires,”—there is the potential to see cultural usefulness in these mongrel cultural events. I would like to be able to agree with his optimistic notion of cultural production, as subversive, contextualized, heterogeneous bricolage, and even with his optimism that the effects of such production are “without capitalizing . . . without taking control over time” (de Certeau xx). However, there are grounds for reservation about such optimism in the light of the much more ideologically mongrel nature of such practices observed after Bali, in some of those microscopic but “less cohesive” effects produced in the interstices of the popular outpourings of emotion: “Christ will win in the end. The rosary will strangle al Qaeda.” Fundamentalism breeding fundamentalism? Apocalyptic time invoked to produce a “taking control over time”—not, I think, what de Certeau was imagining and not, of course, a product of “popular culture” alone, but shared with many state, media and religious institutions.

For me there remains, however, a usable and helpful metaphor for such ambivalence in de Certeau’s celebrating the refusal to take control over time, of experiencing the weight and the loss of time, its more than human architecture. This response is markedly different to, and subversive of, the political response of taking up arms, issuing edicts, talk of preemptive strikes, taking control, all with their own fundamentalist metaphors of good and evil.

What is the role and the potential of mongrel, contemporary ritual? Although little neighborhood shrines might also be rallying points of aggression, it has been the argument of this essay that it is the simultaneous willingness of many citizens to participate, together with the ambivalence, questioning and skepticism of the effects of such participation, and even the necessary acknowledgment of violent responses within that mix, that defines contemporary rituals per se. Such a multiple response—participation with ambivalence—seems far from Muecke’s idealizing of Aboriginal ritual. However, it shares with Muecke’s understanding of indigenous ritual a desire to embrace ritual as a moving out beyond logos, or fixed, creedal meaning. The rituals of contemporary Australia are of course structured by this current historical moment, and more broadly by the vertiginous conditions of contemporary Western subjects in the context of terrorism. The argument of this essay is that such postmodern rituals simultaneously evidence a suspicious, ambivalence and desire for participation. This is far from a simple demand for “The Logos,” but it is still an understandable acknowledgment of desire for meaning.

Notes


5 The term “postmodern ritual" seems appropriate here in the light of developments in Anthropology, and in Western societies across the twentieth century. Anthropology, which has dwelled so much on non-Western and religious/sacred communities for its objects of study, has been coming to grips, along with Sociology, with the accelerating effects of secularisation in the West, and with what has been argued, in postmodern debates, to be the return of the repressed sacred in the West. See Mary Douglas' work for a systematic description of the effects of modernity on religion, and Peter Berger who discusses the crisis of religion in the West and the crisis in secularity's "myth of progress." See for example Peter Berger, Facing Up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics and Religion. Basic Books, New York, 1977; Mary Douglas and Steven Tipton, eds., Religion and America: Spiritual Life in a Secular Age. Beacon Press, Boston, 1983. For more contemporary readings on this conjunction between postmodernity and the sacred, see for example the U of Chicago P series, Religion and Postmodernism, edited by Mark C. Taylor, John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon; God, the Gift, and Postmodernism. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1999; Catherine Clement and Julia Kristeva, The Feminine and the Sacred, Columbia UP, New York, 2001.

6 Australian Bali Memorial Day ceremony, ABC television broadcast, Sunday, October 20, 2002.

7 See Roger Martin, “Some find closure and some only confusion," Weekend Australian, November 16-17, 2002, 11, for an account of the Hindu purification ceremony attended by a large group of Australian survivors and their families. Many of those quoted express a mixture of bewilderment and estrangement, while others seemed to be saying they knew they were supposed to feel some sort of closure. This of course was a Balinese Hindu ritual, attended by Australians who were not acquainted with most of the symbols and the language of the ritual.

Works Cited


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Country Pub

In my time this was a six-pub town.
Long gone now but The Shamrock still lives.
I breathe the incense of hops and fags,
move through the gregorian race-call chant
and bow my head over the glass lit golden
by the late sun.

Despite the years I recognize the figure
hunched over the Herald. My old self.
We move to make the rusty connection.
I speak about the collapsed marriage.
He asks about the kids. Tells me his
golf handicap is now in single figures.
And I wouldn't know the old house
now the trees are grown.

A silence falls. I push across the car keys.
He rises as the sun drains from the room.
I open his paper and nod to the barman,
relishing the beer tap's double bump
as he creeps the head.

Kevin Murray is the recipient of several awards, including, the Max Harris Literary Award, for Time Out, and the FAW Shaw Neilson Poetry Award, for On Living Alone: A Guide. He lives in Melbourne.