

## From ritual to theater and back

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At Kurumugl the transformation of debtors into creditors was not simply the occasion for a celebratory performance (as a birthday party celebrates but does not effect a change in age). The performance at Kurumugl makes happen what it celebrates. It opens up enough time in the right place for the exchange to take, be made: it is liminal, a fluid mid-point between two fixed structures. This mid-point occurs when for a brief time the two groups merge into one dancing circle. During this liminal time/place *communitas* is possible - that leveling of all differences in an ecstasy that so often characterizes performing (see Victor Turner 1969, 1974, 1982, and 1985). Then and only then can the exchange take place (figure 4.3). The transformations above the line convert dangerous encounters into less dangerous aesthetic and social enactments.

Figure 4.3

war parties transformed into ...	dancing groups
human victims	pig meat
battledress	costumes
combat	dancing
two groups one group	
debtors creditors	
creditors debtors	

Those below the line effect changes from one actuality into another. It is only because the transformations above the line happen that those below the line can take place in peace. All the transformations - aesthetic and social as well as actual - are temporary. The meat will be eaten, the costumes doffed, the dance ended. The single group will divide again according to known divisions; today's debtors are next year's creditors, etc. The pigkill and dance at Kurumugl managed a complicated and potentially dangerous exchange of goods and status with a minimum of danger and a maximum of pleasure. Performing was the mode of achieving "real results" - paying debts, incurring new obligations. The dancing does not celebrate or mark the results, it does not precede or follow the exchange - it is the means of making the transformations below the line, it is part of the exchange: more than meat is being traded. The performance at Kurumugl was effective.

The Tsembaga, Arunta, and Kurumugl performances are ecological rituals. Whatever enjoyment participants take in the dancing, and however carefully they prepare themselves for dancing, the dances are danced to achieve results. If the dance fails - if instead of two groups merging into one, fights break out - then the exchange of meat will not take place; the transformation of debtors into creditors and vice versa will not happen. In religious rituals results are achieved by appealing to a transcendent Other (who puts in an appearance either in person or by surrogate). In ecological rituals the other group, or the status to be achieved, or some clearly defined human arrangement is the object of the performance. An ecological ritual with no results to show "below the line" soon ceases to be performed. At Kurumugl, the "above the line" transformations changed aggressive behavior into harmless, pleasure-giving performances. I am struck by the analogy to certain biological adaptations among animals.

#### THE EFFICACY-ENTERTAINMENT BRAID

In the Papua New Guinea Highlands, first under the pressure of the colonial police, later under its own momentum, warfare has been transformed into dancing. As above-line activities grow in importance, entertainment as such takes over from efficacy as the reason for the performances. It might be that at first people assembled at Kurumugl to dance so that they might exchange pigs/social-obligations. But later it became that they would exchange pigs etc., so that they might dance. It is not only that creditors and debtors need to exchange roles, but also that people want to show off, want to dance, want to have a good time. It is not only to get results that the dances are staged, but also because people like sing-sing for its own sake. Efficacy and entertainment are not so much opposed to each other; rather they form the poles of a continuum (figure 4.4). The basic polarity is between efficacy and entertainment, not between ritual and theater.

Figure 4.4

#### EFFICACY

Ritual

#### ENTERTAINMENT

Theater

results fun

link to an absent Other Only for those here  
symbolic time emphasis now  
performer possessed, in trance performer knows what s/he's doing  
audience participates audience watches  
audience believes audience appreciates  
criticism discouraged  
collective creativity  
criticism flourishes  
individual creativity

Whether one calls a specific performance "ritual" or "theater" depends mostly on context and function. A performance is called theater or ritual because of where it is performed, by whom, and under what circumstances. If the performance's purpose is to effect transformations - to be efficacious - then the other qualities listed under the heading "efficacy" will most probably also be present, and the performance is a ritual. And vice versa regarding the qualities listed under "entertainment." No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment. The matter is complicated because one can look at specific performances from several vantages; changing perspectives changes classification. For example, a Broadway musical is entertainment if one concentrates on what happens onstage and in the house. But if one expands the point of view to include rehearsals, backstage life before, during, and after the show, the function of the roles in the lives of each performer, the money invested by the backers, the arrival of the audience, the reason spectators are attending, how they paid for their tickets (as individuals, on expense accounts, as members of a theater party, etc.), and how all this information indicates the use they're making of the performance (as entertainment, as a means to advance careers, as charity, etc.) - then even the Broadway musical is more than entertainment, it's also ritual, economics, and a microcosm of social structure.

In the 1960s and 1970s artists emphasized and displayed rehearsal and backstage procedures. At first this was as simple as showing the lighting instruments and using a half-curtain, as Brecht did - or using no curtain at all. (Brecht got the idea from Asian theater where the half-curtain is an important and dynamic device.) But since around 1965 what has been shown to the spectators is the very process of developing and staging the performance - the workshops that lead up to the performance, the various means of theatrical production, the ways the audience is brought into and led from the space, and many other previously conventional and/or hidden procedures. These all became problematic, that is, manipulable, subjects of theatrical inquiry. These procedures have to do with the theater-in-itself and they are, as regards the theater, efficacious: that is, they

are what makes theater into theater regardless of themes, plot, or the usual "elements of drama." Theater directors and choreographers discovered reflexivity even as they were discarding (temporarily) narrativity. The story of "how this performance is being made" replaced the story the performance more ordinarily would tell. This self-referencing, reflexive mode of performing is an example of what Gregory Bateson called "metacommunication" - signals whose "subject of discourse is the relationship between the speakers" (Bateson 1972: 178). As such theater's reflexive phase signaled loudly that the spectators were now to be included as "speakers" in the theatrical event. Thus it was natural, that reflexivity in theater went hand in hand with audience participation.