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RITUAL PERFORMATIVIZATION: HOW RAJASUYA CHANGES ITS REGIME OF WORK ACROSS CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Rituals are widely considered a consistent type of power, especially in relation to analysis of kingship and consecration. The author of this article begs to differ. Instead of asking questions about what a particular ritual is, this author asks how a particular ritual functions amidst varying institutional circumstances. Using a transregional framework of Rajasuya, this author asserts that ritual does not become irrelevant when it crosses different contexts, but rather it changes the way it operates. The author introduces the phrase ritual performativization to describe this process. Specifically, ritual performativization describes the process whereby a ritual that is no longer a creator of political power, but rather a symbol of cosmic order, and ultimately a practice that generates ethical power and a performative one that is critical of power. Through a comparative interpretative methodology, the author analyzes Rajasuya through three different frameworks: India as a locus of institutional ritual power, mainland Southeast Asia as a symbolic order, and Indonesia as a performative order. Instead of framing Rajasuya as a declining tradition based on changes of a ritual's form, focusing on changes of a ritual's function is what this article attempts to achieve. Theoretically, the article attempts to utilize the regimes of ritual work as a way of framing the function of rituals that, even after the loss of their institutional legitimacy still manage to operate in a meaningful way. This adds to the rich, albeit contentious, body of anthropological work on the intersection of ritual, power, and performativity.

KEYWORDS: Rajasuya, ritual performativity, ritual function, ritual and power, transregionalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rituals have consistently been treated as acts possessing meanings which are more or less constant and stable, and especially, when it comes to issues concerning power and political legitimacy. Most of the early works in anthropology treated rituals as social technologies which legitimized the orders prevailing at the moment, their success being measured in terms of the preservation of meaning and authority. This dominated the field to the extent that rituals began to be seen as symbolic institutions which functioned as long as the underlying power structures of the institution were in place (Bell, 1992).

Rajasuya is a ritual that particularly stands out in this regard. In India, the Rajasuya ritual is considered a royal consecration ritual and serves to reinforce the institutionalization of authority. In the eyes of earlier scholars, this ritual is understood to provide a legitimization of only the outer aspects and still serve as an operative unifying attribute of the king, the macrocosm, and the microcosm of the social order, in a triad of a closed, pyramidal hierarchical system (Heesterman, 1957). Defaulting to this perspective, the dominant social structures of kingship and of ritual authority provide the stability of the system for the function of the ritual.

There is a problem with the assumption that the function of the ritual is stable when Rajasuya become acknowledged outside the original institutional setting. The success of ritual in legitimating power is tied to certain social and political conditions, such as monopolization, interpretive control, and the presence of a meaning-enforcing institution (Dirks, 1987). When one or more of those conditions is absent in a given setting, the rituals do not necessarily become void of meaning, but instead, they become unable to serve the function that they once did.

This problem is more pronounced in mainland Southeast Asia. For example, in Thailand and Cambodia, royal legitimacy is not founded in active ceremonial consecration rites, but in a world view that places the king in the center of the universe. In such a situation, the primary role of the ritual is to communicate power in a symbolic manner, rather than serve as a vehicle of direct legitimation (Tambiah, 1976). Consequently, the purpose of the ritual shifts from the generation of power to the representation of a cosmology.

The change signifies the erosion of normative institutional supports and the representation of ritual as something that enables the endurance of the ritual itself. Southeast Asia's history and cultural analyses illustrate that even in the absence of fully functioning operational rituals, the dominant royal symbols still

persist. In this instance, what is not present is the operational ritual, but the representation that continues to keep the idea of power in the system (Wolters, 1982).

The Indonesian case shows this change of ritual function most clearly. Rajasuya elements in this case do not function as institutional processes of royal consecration, but rather, as part of an epic that has become one with the Javanese literary and cultural corpus. Legitimacy of rule is no longer performed through rituals, but rather, through the stories that evoke and reinterpret the Javanese culture (Zoetmulder, 1974). It is this change that signifies the rupture of the linkage between ritual and institutional legitimacy.

In the context of the wayang performance, the audiences utilize the ritual narrative as a tool for contemplation of ethics and social issues. The narrative itself does not justify the power relations of the performers. Instead, the audience gets to encounter and evaluate the performers' leadership, the morality and the relations of power through their performance. The audience-and-performer interaction re-negotiates the meaning of the ritual as opposed to meaning being closed by a monolithic center of meaning (Keeler, 1987). In this case, the ritual is more performative than institutional.

Additionally, the study of performance and cultural change in Indonesia indicates that even in the absence of official state authority, performative activities can still function. At present, rituals are used to reflect, and critique values in a social context, and not merely to replicate power (Hatley, 2008). This indicates that the absence of institutions does not signal the end of the ritual, but the beginning of different types of uses.

Continuing from this cross-contextual reading, this article begins with the premise that purposes of ritual are not fixed, but depend on the specific social configurations within which they operate. To account for this change, this article draws on the concept of ritual performativity, whereby a ritual loses its status as an institutional mechanism of legitimizing a certain power and becomes a performative practice that fosters ethical reflection and an distancing critique from that power. By concentrating on changes in the operations of rituals, this article refrains from focusing on changes in form or symbolic continuity. Thus, this article creates a framework for interpreting ritual changes as a threshold of a new work regime rather than a loss of tradition.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this study, the Rajasuya ritual's changing centrality and transregional context will be analyzed using a comparative-interpretive framework. As the framework is employed for comparative analysis, it is neither aimed at producing a thick ethnographic description, nor at carrying out a detailed historical reconstruction. Instead, it aims at understanding the different ways a ritual function, as it traverses different sets of social relations, institutions, and forms of power.

The ritual work regime, which is concerned with the operations of the socio-political and ritual systems, is the basic unit of analysis. This emphasis on the work regime as the analytical unit of comparison enables ritual social function assessments in different work regimes, irrespective of context, rest area, time, or direct influence. This

approach demonstrates the possibility of cross regional assessments without presuming a certain meaning and, or cultural hierarchy.

The selection of India, mainland Southeast Asia, and Indonesia is contextual and not representational. These three contexts are considered analytical configurations rather than distinct geographical studies. India is understood as a context where Rajasuya functions within a more encompassing institutional setting that also acts as an electricity generator. Mainland Southeast Asia is understood as an intermediate context where the ritual, though apprehended as a system of cosmological representation, lacks operational capacity. Indonesia is characterized as a context where ritual is divorced from institutional authority and is enacted as a performing activity that invites reflection and the negotiation of meaning.

Table 1. Changes in the Rajasuya Ritual Work Regime in a Transregional Context.

Analytical Dimension	India (Rajasuya Classical Context)	Mainland Southeast Asia	Indonesia
Institutional Foundation	Embedded within royal-sacral institutions	Associated with court traditions but partially detached from governance	Largely detached from formal political institutions
Primary Function	Political legitimation	Symbolic representation of authority	Cultural reflection and interpretation
Relationship to Power	Constitutive of power	Display of power	Critical engagement with power
Source of Ritual Authority	Sacred kingship and state structure	Royal heritage and ceremonial tradition	Cultural memory and community participation
Audience Position	Subjects of authority	Spectators of authority	Interpreters and participants
Dominant Work Regime	Institutional	Representational	Performative
Expected Social Outcome	Stabilization of political order	Reinforcement of symbolic hierarchy	Reflection, dialogue, and reinterpretation

The regional contexts compared in this study should be understood as analytical categories rather than culturally homogeneous entities. India refers to a classical socio-political setting where Rajasuya rituals were formally embedded in sacred kingship and state institutions. Mainland Southeast Asia encompasses historical court traditions influenced by Indian political culture, particularly in regions such as Cambodia and Thailand, where ritual authority remains tied to royal heritage but only partially integrated into governance. Indonesia is examined as a contemporary cultural context where Rajasuya-related narratives and ritual performances are primarily preserved through cultural memory, local reinterpretation, and community participation rather than formal state structures. Therefore, this comparison focuses on differences in the institutional location, ritual function, and power relations of Rajasuya-derived practices, rather than attempting to generalize across the diverse historical experiences of each region.

The data for this article is based on the textual

data, historical research, and the works of recognized anthropology and performance scholars. Sources were selected based on three criteria: (1) their direct engagement with Rajasuya or related royal ritual traditions, (2) their influence within ritual, anthropology, and performance studies, and (3) their ability to explain the relationship between ritual, institutions, and power within each context. These sources are not perceived as self-standing empirical documents, but rather as signposts of the changing functions of ritual. Consequently, the analysis is concerned with the absence of ritual practice or local distinctions, focusing instead on the three dimensions of the functions of ritual, the institution, and power that are permissive or constrictive of ritual.

The analysis employs an interpretive approach by functional shift mapping, i.e., the moments when a ritual stops functioning as a legitimizing mechanism. This analysis aligns with the understanding of ritual as a socially oriented and socially constructed activity without an intrinsic function, and one that is

dependent on the social context that gives it support (Bell, 1992). Hence, the changes in ritual practices as a functional transformation and not a loss, departure, or degradation of a social practice.

This approach deliberately bypasses the consideration of particular local attributes in order to maintain the analytical emphasis on the changes in ritual work routines. The absence of local or regional specifics is not a result of a lack of data, but rather a deliberate methodological choice to foreground the analytical purpose of the paper as an intervention as opposed to a descriptive, comparative study. This approach also allows for the innovation of the concept ritual performativization as an analytic tool for understanding ritual changes in different contexts.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1. *Rajasuya as the Production of Institutional Power in India*

Rajasuya in India is the operational and institutional consecration of the ritual that produces and politically legitimizes power through a series of actions that entangle the king, the cosmos, and the social order in a closed, structured, and hierarchical order. The classical studies of Rajasuya demonstrate that the success of the ritual depends upon the royal institutions and the authority of the ceremony, which is able to regulate control, participation, and interpretative dominance. Therefore, the ritual act in and of itself, is the legitimizing factor, and there is no need to negotiate (Heesterman, 1957; Witzel, 2011).

The most recent studies of power and ritual in South Asia affirm that the operational dimension of royal rituals is also integrated with the supporting institutional order. When consecration rituals are interlaced with the social order that institutions are capable of politically and cosmologically supporting the king, they become political technologies. From this standpoint, rituals are the means through which conditions to exercise power are created (Pollock, 2006; Inden, 2018).

Rituals in this context appear to operate by eliminating the distinction between the ritual and the authority it produces. The authority in question is not something that is up for debate, but rather an existential social and cosmic order that is actualized through the ritual. The formulation of this order through ritual is what contemporary scholarship on political theology and kingship identifies as the absence of the three domains of ritual, the political, and the knowledge system in the social structure (Dirks, 2001; Singh, 2017).

The institutional arrangement of the time

explains why the Rajasuya could serve as the legitimizing function of the ritual. Where such systems of institutions are in place, the authority is capable of being ritualized. Recent scholarship on shifts in the role of the ritual has shown that this is not a role that is permanent (Bell, 2009; Humphrey & Laidlaw, 2012).

3.2. *When Institutions Weaken, Symbols Survive: Representational Regimes in Mainland Southeast Asia*

In the cases of mainland Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand and the Khmer region, Rajasuya as an operative institutional consecration ceremony has ceased to function. No consecration, Indian-style, religious processes, and validate the king's power. Royal legitimation stems from a particular cosmology of power with the king as the central figure and an orchestrator of universal order and the cosmic equilibrium (Tambiah, 1976).

Per the rationale, the ritual at this point does not completely disappear, but rather goes through an institutional regression. The ritual operational mechanisms disintegrate, but the powerful imagination symbols remain. Rajasuya does not exist as an act of legitimizing the monarch, but as a semiotic expression of the monarch's divine position in the universe and relation to the moral order. The ritual's function shifts from forming power to merely signifying the meaning of power (Wolters, 1982).

Southeast Asian studies reveal that the process of royal legitimation no longer required the strict observance of royal consecration rituals and instead offered their kingdom as a potential or symbolic cosmological center. In this configuration, Jackson (2010) suggests that the 'function' of rituals was not to create power, but to make power socially visible and legitimize it within the social imagination.

The evidence suggests that the functions of the Rajasuya and the institutional practices of the Rajasuya did not transform in the same way. Even as an institution began to decline, the Rajasuya's functions continued to change, and it remained the case that symbolic efficacy was retained in the dysfunction of the ritual. Thus, during the critical juncture of Southeast Asia, the ritual's operation had not become reflective so as to constitute a performative act.

Even in this dictatorship, rituals kept the power structures obvious not the creation of new power. Power was not in closed, exclusive rituals, but in the cosmic symbols embedded in the kingdom's people, the buildings, and the walls, the stories. The

change from institutional to representational meant that the boundaries could be pulled further. Thus, rituals could be enacted in domains that had completely lost their institutional character.

3.3. When Ritual Loses Institution: Rajasuya as a Performative Practice in Indonesia

The Rajasuya in Indonesia does not exist as an institutional consecration ritual or an active cosmological emblem of kingship. There are no rituals that directly sanctify political power through consecration. Instead, parts of Rajasuya remain primarily as epic narratives integrated into the Javanese literary and cultural tradition, even when there are royal institutions that have the ability to impose ritual legitimacy (Zoetmulder, 1974).

The lack of installations is a significant factor that sets apart the Indonesian context from the other two regimes. In the absence of a politically binding structure and ceremonial power, Rajasuya cannot function as an instrument of production or a representation of power. Nevertheless, the study shows that the ritual continues to function. It transforms and operates under a different regime. In this case, the ritual acts as a performative practice that traverses the domains of narrative and performance.

In traditions featuring Rajasuya, narrations are not performed in wayang to justify a certain position of power or reaffirm an order of the universe. Rather, performances suggest a setting in which audiences can critique, discuss, and deliberate problems of leadership, morality, and the power relations. The meaning of a ritual is not determined by an individual, but is a product of an interplay of performance, story, and the audience (Keeler, 1987).

In this context, the ritual narratives are not only performed verbally and through acting, but also through the embodied experience of performers. The use of gesture, patterns of movement, and the rhythm of the body in Indonesian performance traditions is done to convey certain values in relation to power. The absence of an institution in the use of the body for ritual functions has a similar effect to that of a dance in which meanings are fluidly created in the experience of looking and being looked at, rather than through authoritative symbols. The empowered body is a site for the gradual construction of critical distance from the power of the body without the need for any sort of institutional discourse.

This study indicates the performative aspect of the ritual in Indonesia by keeping its distance from

the center of power. Power is no longer presented as a given cosmological fact, some must obsequiously accept, but is a topic that can be engaged in discourse. In this regime, the success of a ritual is not defined by its power to produce legitimacy but by its ability to foster a process of introspection in the community.

The most recent studies on the performances and the change of culture in Indonesia confirm the ritualistic behaviors resulting in the retention of meaning and the absence of formal political legitimacy. The role of the ritual is not an instrument to acquire power, but to articulate a belief and critique the society (Hatley, 2008). Therefore, a dissolution of an institution should not be viewed as the end of ritualistic work, but as the beginning of a new order.

As an analytical climax, the Indonesian context indicates that Rajasuya's metamorphosis is more than local variation, or the final stage of degeneration. The clearest statement of the changing role of ritual is in the case of Indonesia. In this context, ritual is completely severed from the production and presentation of power and becomes an activity that promotes internalized contemplation, critical distanciation and meaning making in the social sphere. This study shows that the presence of ritual in Rajasuya is not what changes, but the regime of function of that ritual does.

3.4. Ritual Performativeness as a Shift in the Regime of Work

The results of the three case studies indicate that the transformation of Rajasuya cannot be explained by a change of form, local adaptation, or a reduction of tradition. What fundamentally changes is the work regime of the ritual, particularly its social function concerning the systems of agency and power. Rajasuya keeps its meaning when relocated to different contexts, although it no longer works the same way.

In India's case of institutional inertia, the ritual serves to assert power by closing the distance between ritual practice and the forms of legitimation it produces. In Mainland Southeast Asian representational regimes, the ritual loses its operational potency, yet it survives as a symbolic structure that articulates the cosmic order of power. In the case of Indonesia's performative regimes, the ritual is entirely disengaged from the systems of institutional legitimation, and works by constructive disengagement that enables contemplation, reflection, and meaning-making.

The transition signified by the performative nature of rituals is from the legitimation of power, to

the construction of power as something to be spoken about. In this order, the use of ritual to either hide the legitimization of the order or to represent the order of the cosmos is no longer the case. Instead, ritual is understood as a socially productive practice in the Most confined sense. The success of a ritual is not measured by the extent to which it contests or creates new forms of authority, but by a social discourse surrounding it.

As such, performativization of rituals as the loss of rituals is an indication of the loss of the legitimization of the order of the cosmos. The loss of the supportive institutional structures is no longer the case. The loss of structures is functional (from the perspective of social practice) and not gradual in form. Rajasuya does not shift from "sacred ritual" to "cultural performance." Rather, Rajasuya shifts from one effort to another.

This synthesis emphasizes that there are no ritual functions that are fixed and transhistorical.

Rituals will always have different functions depending on social and institutional structures. From this perspective, ritual performativization is not a deviation, nor a final stage of degeneration, but rather a positive and constructive way of approaching ritual practice. This article offers an understanding of how ritual can be displaced across different contexts without being viewed negatively as a dislocation of meaning, or an abandonment of tradition.

The cross-contextual analysis of Rajasuya in this article is not aimed at uncovering changes in the form of the ritual, but rather the differing orders of ritual practice. Table 1 demonstrates this by characterizing India, mainland Southeast Asia, and Indonesia as successive stages in the transformation of ritual practice. Thus, in this sense, the table is a conceptual synthesis of the analysis rather than a descriptive summary.

Table 2. Changes in the Rajasuya Ritual Work Regime in a Transregional Context.

Transregional Context	Ritual Work Regime	How Ritual Works	The Relation of Ritual-Power
India	Institutional Production	Operational and closed ritual action	The ritual generating and legitimizing power
Southeast Asia Mainland	Symbolic Representation	The ritual functions as cosmological language	The ritual representing and framing the power
Indonesia	Performative Practice	The ritual works through the narration and performance	The ritual creates critical distance towards power

This table shows that Rajasuya's transformations are not about decline or peripheral change, but about reconfiguration in the social modus operandi of the ritual. In India, ritual is used in an institutionally constructive manner to produce power. In mainland Southeast Asia, ritual ceases to have operational capacity but continues to exist as means of representing and communicating with the cosmos. In Indonesia, the ritual is completely devoid of any institutional legitimization and exists as a performative practice to stimulate reflection and negotiation about underlying values. Hence, the performativization of ritual is a quite significant transformation in the nexus of ritual and power.

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that it is the notions of ritual stability or the degradation of tradition that fail to explain the Rajasuya's changing function across various contexts. This analysis undermines the dominant assumption in the study of rituals that the legitimization is an inherent quality of a ritual. This study has demonstrated that the functions of a ritual are historical and contextually specific, not ahistorical as suggested by the characterization of ritual as a strategic practice tied to a specific social

order (Bell, 1992).

In India, Rajasuya acts as a mechanism of power by synthesizing ritual and authority. When this configuration erodes, as in mainland Southeast Asia, the ritual loses its operational capacity but remains a system of cosmological representation. This shift indicates that a ritual may lose its functional capability while retaining its symbolic effectiveness an observation which remains unaccounted for in approaches emphasizing the continuity of meaning.

This change is most explicitly expressed in Indonesia. Here, ritual is completely dissociated from institutional legitimacy and serves as a performative mechanism that fosters self-reflection and critical withdrawal from power. These insights speak to ritual performativity and indicate that the basis of performativity lies in changes to the ritual work regime and not in symbolic representation or performance aesthetics (Humphrey & Laidlaw, 2012).

The performativization of ritual is particularly visible in contemporary Indonesia, where many ritual forms continue to operate after losing their original ties to state authority or royal institutions. Wayang performances, palace ceremonies featured in heritage tourism programs, cultural festivals, and

community commemorative events increasingly serve as sites of interpretation rather than mechanisms of political legitimacy. Their social effectiveness arises not from their capacity to generate authority, as in the classical *Rajasuya* context, but from their capacity to generate reflection, public dialogue, and cultural negotiation. Participants engage with ritual symbols as cultural resources through which historical memory, identity, and ethical values are continually reinterpreted. This transformation illustrates a shift from ritual as a technology of institutional power to ritual as a performative practice of meaning-making. Therefore, rituals persist not because they retain their original political function, but because they acquire new forms of social work in changing historical conditions.

In this case, the performative regime ritual work is not only mediated through a narrative/story and symbolic representation, but also through the body as the main medium of meaning making. Traditional performances in Indonesia exhibit characteristics of dance in that, they use gesture, rhythm, and repetition to articulate specific values and moral judgments. In this instance, the meaning of the ritual is not conferred through some source of institutional authority, but proprioceptively bodily, through the act of performing and being performed. Therefore, the performative body as a site for the gradual production of critical distance from power in the absence of formal legitimacy claims.

The essay introduces the concept of ritual performativity in an attempt to part ways with the approaches to performativity that treat ritual merely as a sign or an expression. Performing rituals put into play a different function that shifts from producing power to portraying order and fostering social contemplation. Within this frame of analysis, Indonesia cannot simply be treated as an epilogue or a remnant of tradition, but as a site of theoretical elaboration for the most pronounced transformation of the function of ritual.

Theoretically, the discussion attempts to illuminate the viewing of rituals as social practices that function (or operate) under a variety of regimes, depending upon the relation of the rituals to the structures of power and the institutions. Such a perspective offers an appreciation of the non-linear evolution of rituals in various contexts without recasting them as a sign of the failure of tradition, while simultaneously contributing to the discourse on ritual, power, and performativity in contemporary anthropology (Dirks, 2001). More explicitly, the concept of ritual performativity

contributes to ongoing debates in ritual theory by challenging paradigms/assumptions regarding ritual legitimacy and inherent social efficacy. Classical approaches often rigidly define ritual as being used to produce authority, social order, or symbolic continuity. This study emphasizes that ritual can remain socially effective even after losing its institutional foundation. In this sense, ritual effectiveness is not simply a fixed property of ritual action, but rather a historically contingent relationship between ritual, institution, and power. This framework also contributes to performance theory by expanding performativity beyond questions of representation and embodiment. Ritual performativity emphasizes how performance can embody critical distance, ethical reflection, and new forms of social engagement. By connecting ritual studies and performance studies through the concept of changing ritual work regimes, this article offers a comparative perspective for understanding how ritual continues to operate in various historical and cultural contexts in an updated manner.

5. CONCLUSION

In examining *Rajasuya* as a ritual event, we cannot treat it as a ritual with a self-contained, fixed socio-cultural and political function. The study, based on a transregional approach, indicates that the function of a ritual is thoroughly determined by the socio-political order that underpins it. When such orders change, the ritual doesn't fail or collapse, but it ceases to serve the same functions.

Rajasuya's mutations from India, through mainland Southeast Asia to Indonesia, indicate a qualitative change in the order of the operation of the ritual. In India, *Rajasuya* is an institutional process of production of power. In mainland Southeast Asia, the ritual is institutionally much less, but still operates as a cosmological representation. In Indonesia, *Rajasuya* is an activity of performance that produces introspection, critical distance, and the negotiation of value, rather than institutional legitimacy. This change cannot be understood as a case of symbolic degradation or adaptation, but a change in the operational regime of the ritual.

Ritual performativization describes this shift as a functional difference as opposed to form difference. The performativization of rituals signifies an active departure from rituals that span over no gaps or intervals between an act and an exercise of control to rituals that offer a critical distance from control. Within a performative regime, rituals no longer legitimize a position of control. Rather, they make it questionable, discussable, or criticizable.

This article by articulating concepts with Indonesia, contests the diffusionist and hierarchical perspectives that view peripheries as passive or as the final stage of tradition. In Indonesia, Rajasuya, for instance, illustrates an ontologically separate style of ritual functioning, rather than a decline. Here, the ability of ritual to operate and perform novel functions is exemplified by the fact that it is relevant when it is institutionally powerless.

Theoretically, this paper argues that ritual should

be conceptualized as a social practice and that its function is historical, contextual, and flexible. This approach provides analytical possibilities for other rituals that move across contexts as changing practices, rather than as traditions that are stagnant or growing increasingly obsolete. Thus, the performativity of ritual applies in this case, beyond the study of Rajasuya to ritual and performativity in a broader transregional context.

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