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Published online: 20 Sep 2021.

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Ritual and authority in world politics

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Abstract   *The contributions to this Forum on Ritual and Authority in World Politics examine the role that ritual performances play in the constitution of positions of authority and the maintenance of relations of authority in historical and contemporary international relations. The Forum takes as its point of departure three related observations: (i) that recent years have witnessed a remarkable upsurge of interest in ritual as a recurring feature of international practice, but (ii) that this recent interest in ritual has not extended, thus far, to the study of international authority, (iii) in spite of political anthropologists' long-standing claim that the performance of ritual is absolutely crucial to the production of authority. The performance of ritual grounds, makes tangible and enhances various forms of authority, including forms of international authority, historical and contemporary. The contributions to this Forum demonstrate the veracity of that claim in five different empirical contexts—Byzantine diplomacy, early modern cross-cultural encounters, British imperialism in India, military lawyering in America's armed forces, and the casting of ballots in Crimea and the US—and attempt also to explain precisely how it is that ritual served to undergird and stabilise authority in these various instances.*

The return of ritual in international relations

(Jorg Kustermans and Ted Svensson)

In recent years, IR has witnessed the publication of many articles that examine the performance of ritual practices and the promise of ritual theory in a variety of functional contexts: security (Mälksoo 2021; Oren and Solomon 2015), diplomacy (Pacher 2018; Wong 2020; Knotter 2021) and regional and international order (Davies 2018; Aalberts and Stolk 2020). With this forum, we contribute to this literature by exploring the role of ritual in sustaining positions of authority in global politics, both historically and in recent times. The shared assumption animating the forum is that the performance of ritual does indeed ground, make tangible and enhance authority. However, the contributors hold different views about how, and to what extent, this is achieved. In this introduction, we preface their specific arguments with a short discussion of (i) the definition of ritual, (ii) the place of ritual in contemporary international theory and (iii) the role of ritual in the study of international authority.

Ritual, ceremony, ritualisation

We follow Roy Rappaport (1999, 24) in defining ritual as

> …the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers.

This is a basic definition, which does not include any reference to the religious sphere, with which the study of ritual was originally concerned. Some scholars have proposed reserving the concept of ritual for religious rites only, preferring to refer to secular ritual with some other word, say ceremony (Gluckman and Gluckman 1977; James 2005). We understand the intuition that informs that distinction, but we do not maintain it mainly because we do not accept the view that secular ceremonies are devoid of elements of 'sacredness' or references to embedding cosmologies and myths (see Spruyt 2020, 352; Hutchinson 2009). As political and cultural anthropologists have long established, intimations of the sacred are a recurring feature of supposedly secular ceremonies too (Wydra 2015).

Another well-known distinction is that between ritual and ritualisation, which Catherine Bell (1992) has done much to clarify. The difference is not strictly empirical, but an interpretive or theoretical one. At the empirical level, both ritual and ritualisation concern the study of a sequence of acts typically characterised by 'formality, fixity, and repetition' (Bell 1992, 90; see also Myerhoff 1977, 199). However, Bell insists that rites do not lie ready-made for the researcher to observe and compare, nor for the social actor to simply learn and perform. Rites do not exist naturally as the manifestation of the category of ritual, but rather come about through a process of ritualisation, which Bell (1992, 74) defines as

> …a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.

She consistently interprets ritualisation as a strategic process: 'Acting ritually is first and foremost a matter of nuanced contrasts and the evocation of strategic, value-laden distinctions' (Bell 1992, 90). In Bell's rendering, ritualisation 'is a strategy for the construction of a limited and limiting power relationship' (Bell 1992, 8). While always comprising 'both consent and resistance, misunderstanding and appropriation' (Bell 1992, 8), it can hence not be dissociated from the exercise of power.

To the extent that the contributions to this forum examine the ways in which the performance of ritual sustains authority relations, we are certainly in agreement that ritual oftentimes involves the exhibiting, orchestration and projection of power. We are nonetheless reluctant to embrace Bell's theoretical apparatus wholeheartedly as a point of departure for the forum, as we do not wish to privilege a strategic interpretation *a priori*.

Ritual in international theory

How are we to situate the current attention to ritual in the development of international relations theory more generally? The most basic observation is that most of the authors that we cite in the introductory paragraph would probably identify their work as constructivist in inspiration. One might also note that some of the earliest constructivist scholarship in IR drew explicit attention to the role of ceremony and ritual in social life (Kratochwil 1989, 124; Onuf 1989, 105–108; Guzzini 1993, 476). It appears that once one starts to think of international relations as fundamentally social relations, one will stumble upon ritual, which Rappaport (1999, 138; italics in original) once designated '*the* basic social act'.

However, while concern for ritual reflects broadly constructivist sensibilities, the analytical foregrounding of ritual entails a more distinct theoretical choice. It imbues the constructivist project with a different spirit. It leads to a different understanding of how humans—in ways that involve the body and the mind, the graspable and the elusive—'make and remake their worlds' (see Bell 1992, 3).

Consider how the theoretical privileging of ritual sheds alternative light on some of the key concepts and premises of constructivist theorising:

- *Language*: traditional constructivism operates from an anthropology that puts a premium on human beings being endowed with the faculty of language and the ability to develop complex ideas about self and society (Onuf 1989). The world is constructed and reconstructed, it is assumed, through the articulation and dissemination of relatively systematic discourses centred on such ideas (Müller 2004). The notion of construction has an architectural ring to it here. Although a ritual approach—one that is attentive to the role of rituals—does not deny the linguistic abilities of human beings, it finds that human beings use that skill as often to repeat mantric, preordained and cryptic utterances as to verbalise and convey a reasoned discourse. Rituals are often marked by 'contradictory elements' (Chao 1999, 528) and efforts to, in vain, 'put together a series of *right* gestures' (Calasso 2015, 73; italics in original). As a result, a ritual approach

may be less hopeful about the prospects of ascertaining and steering social change than traditional constructivism oftentimes was.

- *Everyday practices*: the 'practice turn' has been an important development in IR constructivism (Adler and Pouliot 2011). It abandoned the earlier strong focus on language and downplayed the importance of 'appropriateness' and 'arguing' as logics of action, prioritising 'habitual action' instead. The social world achieves its form as a result of 'all of us doing all of our doings' (Kustermans 2016, 177), of social actors enacting manifold routinised, minute and ordinary practices. Here the notion of construction does not have the same architectural ring to it. It now has the connotation of bricolage.

- A ritual approach does not deny the mundane nature of human life, yet it finds that human beings orchestrate extraordinary events too. They indulge in what Johan Huizinga (1949, 2-3) called the 'superabundant,' affectively charged dimension of social existence, which finds expression in play, drama, and also in rites and ritualised activities (Rösch 2021). A ritual approach is, hence, not principally concerned with routines and habits of 'everyday life' (cf. Rai 2014) and gives a less demystifying, less flattening account of social order than practice-theoretical versions of constructivism generally do.

What does the above tell us about the broader intellectual inclinations that a ritual approach embodies? We venture the following: whereas traditional constructivism and practice-theoretical approaches reflect the deep-rooted secularism of most social science and international theory, the return of ritual to IR may indicate the growing prominence of 'post-secular' thought in the modern academy (Barbato and Kratochwil 2009; Wydra 2015, 5; Paipais 2020). As such, it may also be particularly well-attuned to the emergent need, if we wish for a truly global IR to develop, to broaden the empirical repository of the discipline (Seth 2013). It would, that is, bring into view that which is otherwise too easily conceived of and construed as anachronistic expressions of tradition and/or the supernatural.

Ritual and international authority

Few political anthropologists would deny that positions of authority are sustained, and often challenged (see Aalberts and Stolk 2020), by the performance of ritual and they would take this to apply in both modern and premodern contexts (Abélès 1988). However, political anthropology has not had much of an impact on the study of authority in IR (Kustermans and Horemans 2021). Rationalist explanations of international authority recognise the recurrence of expressions of 'symbolic obeisance' (Lake 2009, 12), but they conceptualise these in terms of costly policies that are only indirectly in the interest of the subordinate actor. Expressions of symbolic obeisance do not, in rationalist accounts, take ritual form.

Constructivist scholarship on international authority does not fare much better in this regard, which might be exemplified with the two strands that we identified earlier. Some of this scholarship highlights that positions of international authority are sustained by 'legitimacy claims' and thus singles out the

linguistic construction of international authority (Sending 2015). Other scholarship explains the predominance of dominant actors with reference to their historically accumulated practical sense and the 'micro-practices' that perpetuate the dominance of the dominant (Pouliot 2016). Interestingly, in developing his account, Vincent Pouliot (2006, 13) draws on Erving Goffman's work about how 'minor social rituals' keep interaction orders in place, but he identifies those 'rituals' with ordinary, everyday 'practice' and does not examine the role of more extraordinary ritual actions and events.

An overview of the contributions

The contributions to this forum seek to demonstrate that the neglect of ritual performances in the creation and maintenance of international authority represents a significant omission. Jorg Kustermans gives an account of ritual action in Byzantine diplomacy. Starting from the premise that the reality of authority is always up for question, he explains that joint ritual action serves to render authority at once palpable and palatable. Ritual makes authority real. The Byzantine case draws particular attention to the importance of the experience of jointness and intimations of equality. By engaging in joint ritual action, subordinate actors feel that they participate in the authority of the dominant actor. The Byzantine material also shows the importance of ritual action taking place in ritual space. As one enters ritual space, one becomes party to a ritual mood. This mood draws one in and makes it all but impossible not to accept the authority of the actor that is at the center of the ritual occasion. Knowing that a country such as China is investing considerable resources in organising and presiding major summits, including in the context of its Belt and Road Initiative (Ceulemans 2021), the contemporary relevance of these findings is readily apparent.

Julia Costa Lopez examines the performance of rituals in cross-cultural encounters in the 15th and 16th centuries. She gives a rich account of the interaction between Portuguese King Joao II and Wolof ruler Bemoim, which included the performance of a number of rites. More specifically, she shows how the performance of ritual provides a 'basic intelligibility in otherwise almost unintelligible contexts.' The performance of rituals enabled Bemoim to express deference without mastery of the cultural idiom of the Christian world and likewise enabled Joao II to recognise Bemoim as an authoritative (though subordinate) counterpart without them sharing a symbolic universe. To the extent that our world is a world of cultural diversity (Reus-Smit 2018), marked by a constant need for the generation of intersubjective perceptions of authority relations, ritual practices serve a crucial function also today. However, Julia Costa Lopez's account also contains a cautionary note by showing that ritual achievements are fragile. Broader social structures in the form of contemporary conceptions and impositions of racial or civilization hierarchies, that is, continue to work against the cooperative implications of joint ritual performance.

Ted Svensson attends to how British imperial rule in India at three occasions was ritualised in the form of so-called imperial durbars, and he demonstrates how these assemblies afforded imperial authority with otherwise wanting unity and stability over time. The imperial durbars displayed and enacted authority in the three-fold sense noted in Bell (1992, 212): 'the

objectification of office, the hierarchization of practices, and traditionalization'. The British presented their authority claims as derived from traditional forms of rule and as a mere, and thus 'authentic', continuation of past political orders, and they made the imperial durbars into privileged sites for staging and upholding notions of paramount and suzerain relations. Ted Svensson's contribution is not strictly of historical relevance, however. The need for addressing and glossing over empirically contestable claims to sovereignty and legitimate authority is abundant and perpetual in international relations and world politics—as are the ritualised responses to this need. While global governance institutions, through summits and high-level meetings in particular, seek to counter well-founded perceptions of fragmentation and multiplicity, states—with or without imperial aspirations—always face the challenge of having to continuously invest abstract ideas of statehood and rightful authority with concrete meaning and tangible, perceptible traits.

Tracey Blasenheim turns our attention to the role of ritual in American warfare (compare Barkawi 2017). He describes how ritual serves to reproduce the United States' self-understanding as a moral authority in world politics by pointing to the crucial, on-the-ground role of military lawyers in operational decision-making about the use of force. Uneasy about the decision to take life, military commanders constantly consult with their lawyers about how to reconcile the use of martial violence with an ethic of humanitarian care. In these rituals, military lawyers function as both priests (by actively guiding commanders) and talismans (offering comfort through sheer presence). Tracey Blasenheim explains how US military lawyers 'consecrate' acts of violence and thus help to maintain the United States' claim to the moral high ground. As such, his account also signals a warning about the politics of ritual practices. If some of the other contributions imply that we ought to value the blessings of ritual action, Tracey Blasenheim's account serves as a useful reminder that ritual performances, and the international authority they draw on and produce (in this case, the authority to kill under international law), can also sustain less desirable world political endeavours.

In the final contribution, Alvina Hoffmann discusses the significance of voting as a political ritual and how that process panned out in the Crimean referendum of 2014 and the US presidential election of 2020. She identifies three ritual functions of voting as a political practice. Electoral rituals do not only sustain existing social orders by reinvesting them with purpose, but potentially inaugurate new social orders through their capacity to reconstitute 'the people' and empower new leaders that now claim to represent it. Especially relevant in the context of a discussion of ritual and authority in world politics, however, is Alvina Hoffmann's observation that electoral rituals 'seek to uphold a sacred line of distinction between authoritarian and liberal-democratic regimes.' In the light of growing worries about the vitality of democracy in contemporary international society (Hobson 2017), this insight forces us to reflect on how the performance of democratic rituals—by liberal democrats, illiberal democrats, and authoritarians—may or may not have a role to play in restoring the strength of democracy. Across the contributions to this forum, then, it transpires clearly that ritual plays a major role in sustaining political orders and the relations of authority that constitute them, but the contributions

also indicate that there are clear limits to what ritual performances can accomplish.

How authority is made real: ritual action in Byzantine diplomacy

Jorg Kustermans

The problem of authority

The fundamental problem of authority is its intangible quality. It is terribly difficult to determine whether a certain actor or institution enjoys authority. It is not so difficult to determine whether an actor or institution holds a position of formal competence or leadership but much more difficult to ascertain whether subordinate actors experience the dominant actor as *authoritative* indeed. This manifests as an eminently practical problem. Dominant actors themselves are as uncertain about these issues as external observers are. They assert claims to authority. They propose plans and project as though they enjoy authority. But all the while, they still find themselves unsure about the ground for those claims, plans and projects. We know and they know, and they know that we know, that it could all just be pretense.

Three solutions to the problem of authority

Authority, one could summarise the problem, has people suspicious about its reality. Therefore, the practical challenge that especially dominant actors face is how to make people experience authority as real. How do dominant actors prevent subordinate actors from denying, ridiculing, resisting or seeking to usurp their authority? Any such attempt will eventually be doomed to failure, but that moment can often be postponed. One can identify at least three solutions to the problem of authority.

I. *Self-assertion* has dominant actors proposing a plan and, by that very act, assuming leadership. To the extent that the plan breaks with convention, subordinate actors are bound to experience their leader as charismatic (Kojève 2014, 19). The transgressive, self-assertive act renders authority real by rendering it *palpable*. It suggests the existence of a real difference, a qualitative difference, between dominant and subordinate actors.

II. *Discursive legitimation* has dominant actors explaining elaborately that their authority is justified, that is serves the common good, and that it is exercised in accordance with all applicable rules, customs and principles (Zürn 2018). These kinds of rhetorical endeavours render authority real by rendering it *palatable*. It communicates that the subordinate actor has reason to appreciate the dominance of the dominant actor.

III. *Joint ritual action* has subordinate actors participating in joint rituals with dominant actors. The joint performance typically embodies both the dominance of the dominant actor and the subordinate actor's stake in that dominance. Authority is made real, through joint ritual action, by

rendering it once *palpable* (there is a qualitative difference) and *palatable* (actors come to appreciate the dominance of the dominant).

In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on the third solution and give a tentative description of the role of ritual in sustaining the Byzantine Empire's international authority. I will emphasise the importance of the performance of *jointness* and intimations of equality in rituals of authority. In addition, I will draw attention to how ritual space enables and amplifies the effects of ritual performance. By entering ritual space, ritual participants are pulled into the ritual mood and become receptive to the message embodied by the ritual performance. In the Byzantine case, we will see that the orchestration of ritual space contributed mightily to the process of rendering Byzantine authority at once palpable and palatable.

Byzantine diplomatic ritual

The main literary sources for studying the use of rituals in the Byzantine Empire are Corippus's *In Laudem Justini Augusti Minoris*, a poem celebrating Justin II's accession to the throne in 556 CE, and Constantine Porphyrogennetos's *The Book of Ceremonies*, a compilation of court rituals commissioned in the tenth century. The sociopolitical context of their publication matters because in both cases the reality of Byzantine authority was, at least temporarily, in doubt. In Corippus's poem, the challenging nature of the historical situation is made explicit as it comments on the process of imperial succession. In the case of *The Book of Ceremonies*, the historical situation is concealed by the text itself, but its English translator insists that it was one of 'crisis' (Cameron 1987, 123). She maintains that 'the book itself and the rituals described in it testify to a need to restore a sense of order in society, to connect with the past after centuries of dislocation, and to reinforce the position of the ruling dynasty' (Cameron 1987, 136). Also in the Byzantine case, then, rituals did not foremost express or reflect authority but served to create and maintain it.

Byzantium's ritual repertoire was well-stocked. *The Book of Ceremonies* documents ritual performances structuring the relation between the Byzantine emperor (and empress), on the one hand, and a variety of actors and societal groups, on the other hand. These include court officials and military commanders, church officials, the two factions of Constantinople, and the ordinary people. One element in most of these rites were so-called acclamations, which had the factions and the people proclaiming the might and blessedness of the Emperor. Thus, in a section of *The Book of Ceremonies* that describes 'what is necessary to observe on the day before a reception,' it states that

> The cheerleaders recite the acclamations, 'Lord, save the rulers of the Romans!' The people three times: 'Lord, save!' The cheerleaders: 'Lord, save those crowned by you!' The people also call out three times: 'Lord save!' The cheerleaders: 'Lord, save the rulers with the *augoustai* and those born in the purple!' (Porphyrogennetos et al. 2017, 279–280)

All of these were imperial rites, that is, rites within the Empire, that articulated both the divinely ordained superiority of the Byzantine ruler and the

importance of that superiority in sustaining good order (*taxis*). Foreign envoys would not participate in them directly, as protagonists, although they would be made to witness them on various occasions during their stay in Constantinople.[1]

However, there was distinctly diplomatic ceremonial too: *audience*. This rite began at the very border of the Byzantine Empire. Here the foreign envoy would be received by a Byzantine official and then guided to Constantinople. Once in the capital, the envoy and his men would be housed and provided for during the entirety of their stay, which culminated in an audience with the Emperor. Having handed over his ruler's gifts for the Emperor to a court official, the envoy was led into the throne room, where the Emperor was seated on his throne behind a closed curtain, dressed in a magnificent outfit, underneath a mosaic depicting Christ. When the curtain opened, the foreign envoy would fall to the ground and perform obeisance thrice and 'then goes and kisses the feet of the emperor and stands in the middle and presents the letter and delivers his emperor's greetings' (Porphyrogennetos et al. 2017, 406). By participating in the rite, the foreign envoy appears to recognise Byzantine dominance. Participation in the rite made Byzantine authority palpable.

Notice, however, that at crucial moments during the unfolding of the ritual the emphasis on Byzantine dominance was relaxed and intimations of equality were incorporated. Four such elements stand out in particular.

First, when the envoy had kissed the emperor's feet, stood up again and handed over his ruler's letter and greetings, the Byzantine emperor would proceed to ask: 'How is the health of our *brother* in God,' adding that 'We rejoice at his good health' (Porphyrogennetos et al. 2017, 406). Second, the envoy would receive counter-gifts, both personally as a form of renumeration and to hand over to his ruler. These latter gifts would typically include symbolic representations of commonality, signalling that both rulers belonged to the same family of kings, or to a same aristocratic elite (Hilsdale 2014). Third, as transpires clearly from Corippus's description of the audience of Justin II with an Avar envoy, the rite included room for the foreign envoy to bring his own concerns to the fore, to speak freely, without overt consideration for the dominant position of the Byzantine ruler (Corippus and Cameron 1967, 108).[2] Fourth, and finally, there is also the fact that the stay of the foreign envoy in Constantinople would have the envoy attending many a banquet and thus sharing food with the Byzantine Corippus and Cameron 1967, 106; *De Ceremoniis*, passim). If not quite equality, this did signal inclusion in a small world of shared privilege. It rendered authority palatable, literally so.

The above description appears to confirm that the joint performance of ritual action sustained Byzantine authority by rendering it at once palpable and palatable. However, to fully understand the impact of ritual action on the experience of Byzantine authority, it is necessary to touch upon the importance of one further element: ritual space. A short reflection on the observation that ritual action typically takes place in a designated and carefully constructed environment will help to clarify further just what *joint ritual action* adds to *self-*

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[1]Averil Cameron (1987, 118) explains that impressing foreign envoys was a big part of the reason to have such elaborate ritual apparatus.

[2]As a matter of fact, Corippus's description of the event centers on Justin's reprimand of the Avar envoy's overly zealous appropriation of that possibility.

assertion and *discursive legitimation* as a distinctive solution to the problem of authority.

Ritual action and ritual environment

The historian Wolfgang Reinhard observed at one point that

> Since the times of the Egyptian pyramids, political architecture that is meant to impress, oftentimes thrives on its sheer massiveness and gigantic dimensions. (Reinhard 2017, 91; my translation)

The Byzantine case, and especially the role of ritual in sustaining Byzantine authority, leads me to qualify Reinhard's observation. Certainly, size mattered. Just imagine the foreign envoy and his retinue entering Constantinople and beholding the sacred palace, the hippodrome and the Hagia Sophia. We know that the Byzantines made sure that foreign visitors would behold these grand buildings and also the many large-sized monuments that dotted the city. One could read the construction of these buildings and messages as architectural acts of self-assertion that helped render authority palpable. However, the manipulation of the physical environment was at the same time more subtle, especially in the context of (diplomatic) ritual. At the very least, it included symbolic communication too. Monuments communicated substantive messages. The inside of buildings, including the Chalke Gate through which foreign envoys entered the ceremonial centre of the city, was decorated with meaningful mosaics. Remember, in this regard, also the mosaic depicting Christ hanging above the Emperor's throne in the sacred palace's audience hall. Size was combined with elements of visual rhetoric—typically communicating either strength, divine ordinance, or generosity—which served to render Byzantine authority palatable.

But that is not all either. What strikes me about the description of the physical context of Byzantine diplomatic ritual, in both Corippus's poem and *The Book of Ceremonies*, is the comprehensiveness of the decoration. A foreign envoy could not move about the city, certainly not on the more ritually charged days of his stay, outside of this decorated environment. He could not step out of the ritual mood. When transformed into a ritual space, the city of Constantinople, magnificently decked out though it was, was basically transformed into a circle, which one entered and which, once entered, drew one into the ritual moment (cf. Wescoat 2012). This constituted an element of jointness again: the subordinate actor became a participant. He shared in the mood (Ringmar 2018); a mood that affected many senses: sight (mosaics etc.), hearing (choirs singing), touch (prostrating on a carpeted floor), smell (delicate fragrances and soaps). Entering ritual space entailed immersion in Byzantine cosmology and let the foreign envoy *sense* the reality of Byzantine superiority. Once one entered the ritual circle, how would it have been possible not to accept Byzantine authority?

Rituals of empire: performing authority in cross-cultural encounters

(Julia Costa Lopez)

Accounts of cross-cultural encounters before and after 1492 describe numerous rituals: merchants would hand in letters of friendship from sponsoring monarchs, African and Asian rulers would sometimes be made into vassals of Christian kings, while royal emissaries would sometimes pay tribute to local rulers in elaborate ceremonies; local rulers would in turn perform customary rituals in front of and in their dealings with travellers, from honouring, to musical and gift-giving ceremonies. And yet, as the introduction to this forum suggests, most understandings of rituals are embedded in a constructivist tradition that generally understands rituals as thick cultural performances that necessitate a deep, shared social understanding. How can we then understand these cross-cultural ritual performances in contexts where mutual intelligibility can't be taken for granted?

In this short contribution I want to explore not only how to understand these rituals enacted in a cross-cultural context, but also what they may tell us about the constitution of authority in the 15th and 16th centuries. By focusing on one specific event and the (unsuccessful) performance of two rituals, I argue, first, that the ritual constitution of authority provided some basic intelligibility in otherwise almost unintelligible contexts, and second, that these rituals serve to show the fundamental fragility in the constitution of authority, in cross-cultural contexts as much as ones with thicker cultural commonality. Authority rituals thus stand not as an inevitable grounding of authority, but rather as performed authority claims susceptible to both success and failure.

Bemoim and João II

A specific episode serves to examine the role of rituals performed in cross-cultural contexts for the constitution of authority. The episode in question took place in Portugal, at the court of King João II, in 1488. Wolof ruler 'Bemoim', a transliteration of Jelen *Bumi* of Wolof, was struggling to affirm his authority vis-à-vis the rulers of other Wolof polities, and he travelled to the court of João II seeking assistance. After arriving and resting, him and his entourage were taken to an audience with João. It is at this point that royal chronicler Rui de Pina describes a specific ritual performance:

> And then the aforementioned Bemoim, and all his men, threw themselves onto his feet [the king's], to kiss them, and made as if they were taking soil from under themselves, and in a sign of subjection, and lordship [senhorio], and as great compliance, threw it above their heads. (1950, 91, all translations are mine)

This somewhat tentative description provides some hints of the strangeness of the practice for the court audience. However, as other descriptions of similar rituals confirm, this was a Wolof ritual for saluting and acknowledging a ruler (Cà da Mosto 1507, ch. xxiv). After this episode, Bemoim made a speech and petitioned João for assistance and, according to the chronicles, expressed his wish to convert to Christianity. At this point, a second ritual took place: Bemoim was taken to the queen's chambers and was baptised late at night. This was a solemn ritual, with the king, queen, and heir serving as godparents, and Bemoim adopting the Christian name of João in honour of the king (Pina

1950, 94). In this encounter we thus find two ritual performances, a Wolof one to come to a ruler's presence, and a Christian one of conversion.

Performing authority

A first understanding of cross-cultural ritual performances would emphasise their mutual unintelligibility, and thus understand them as a 'dialogue of the deaf'. Indeed, as thick social performances, their use in first or very early encounters would seem to face an insurmountable translation barrier. To a large extent, contemporary descriptions appear to confirm this view: both Rui de Pina and Cà da Mosto, for example, process the Wolof ritual through explicit feudal language of 'senhorio' or 'signor' and 'vassallo', which had specific legal-cultural meanings. Similarly, although we do not have an original Wolof account, for these were oral tradition societies, it is not hard to imagine that the significance of Christian baptism and its theology would have been lost for a ruler who, throughout the encounter, had to systematically rely on translators.

This does not, however, devoid these rituals of their performative character for the constitution of authority. Indeed, a plausible interpretation would understand the cross-cultural context as merely the stage within which they get performed, and would identify not the other side, but rather the rest of one's side as the main audience. Thus, in the case of the baptism of Bemoim, the ritual would have performative force in constituting him as a legitimate, authorised Christian ruler first and foremost for the Christian audience witnessing the process. More broadly, João's role throughout the episode would also serve to constitute him as a particular kind of authority, one legitimised as a spreader of the Christian faith. The proselytising dimensions of the early Atlantic trips have been repeatedly highlighted in historiography (Fernández-Armesto 1987). Concerning the king of Portugal specifically, it is worth remembering that the Pope had granted the crown lordship over Africa already in 1455 with the bull Romanus Pontifex. The performance of the Christianisation of an African ruler, then, could be interpreted within this context as reinforcing the authority of the king as lord of Guinea and of his authority as a Christianising one. The effectiveness of this reading of the ritual baptism, is also confirmed by other external observers. Paolo d'Olivieri, a Florentine merchant who witnessed the events, wrote to his uncle expressing that this conversion would be a 'miracle' and that 'this would be the most admirable thing ever heard, worthy of great remembrance and fame for this kingdom [rengnio]' (Zafarana 1968, 1110). From this perspective therefore, the performance of these rituals and their constitutive authority role would fundamentally be effective towards audiences with a shared structure of meaning.

And yet, the repeated use of rituals in these cross-cultural contexts would also point to a complementary interpretation, one that would see this ritualised activity as fundamental in mediating this cultural strangeness and stabilising contingency. Indeed, a long tradition in anthropology points to the role of rituals in establishing and maintaining a social context (Turner 1967). In this specific case, for example, it is evident that despite the clear misinterpretations, the ritual performed by Bemoim was at a fundamental level intelligible as a sign of submission to a specific authority, even if the cultural-specific meaning of it was lost. The fact not only that one chronicler could describe it as a sign

of 'subjection and lordship' but also that the João II himself in the moment 'with great honour and courtesy made him stand' (Pina 1950, 91–92) show that however incommensurable the broader cultural structures, the form of the ritual itself, the act of throwing oneself, created some degree of intelligibility across them and as such allowed for a social interaction to take place.

Most importantly, the constitution of authority through these rituals was also intelligible to both parties. As mentioned above, Bemoim had travelled to Portugal in search for support in local struggles with other Wolof rulers. While the year before he had already attempted to get João's support through an intermediary, it had been made clear to him that canon law banned the Portuguese king from supplying weapons to non-Christians, so his ritual conversion and baptism, even if the full meaning of it would have been lost, would have affected his positioning among the Wolof, as well as his relationship with—and thus ability to get support from—João II.

Ritual failure and the fragility of imperial authority

In an Indian Ocean context, Phillips and Sharman have theorised that durable cultural diversity was enabled by the 'existence of culturally different but structurally congruent beliefs about the legitimacy of heteronomous institutions' (2015, 7). The episode considered in this contribution seems to confirm this intuition, and points to the role of embodied rituals as capable of mediating this cultural diversity by providing a commensurable social context. And yet, to conclude I would like to consider the ways in which this episode and its rituals also point to fragility and fluidity as fundamental features of the constitution of Early Modern authority in a way that disrupts it being considered through a lens of states, empires, polity forms, or localisation practices.

After Bemoim's conversion, João II ordered the preparation of a fleet of more than 20 ships, with priests, and building materials (and presumably weapons) to sail back with Bemoim to Wolof lands. The fleet, however, never reached its destination, for the captain of the fleet Pero Vaz personally killed Bemoim, alleging that he was plotting treason. For Russell, this indicates that 'most of John's subjects were unable to accept the egalitarianism implicit in the doctrine of the *communitas fidelium* when this required them to defer to Black African kings and nobles who had accepted Christian baptism' (2013, 225 [161]). We would thus be before a failed ritual: its performative function failed with some of its audiences, for despite the formal Christianisation of a king and its establishment as an ally of the crown, this did not prevent him from being killed.

The implications for authority go beyond this, for the ritual had not only concerned the authority of Bemoim, but also that of João II. In the (legal) context of the time, the killing by a ship captain of a Christian king was an extremely serious offence punishable by death. However, Rui de Pina tells us how the king was furious but decided nevertheless not to punish the captain (1950, 96). This leads Russell (2013, 225) to wonder 'how far the spectacular events that marked the Wolof prince's visit … simply represented a piece of elaborate play-acting by the king for political and economic reasons'. And yet that is precisely the point: the episode shows how these were fragile authorities that needed to be constantly re-enacted through a variety of rituals. And even when both rituals had constituted the authority of both rulers in specific

ways, they still stood in (potential) contradiction with other social structures, such as prejudice against African people, or indeed the various political linkages of the king. Thus, the king could not order the execution of Vaz any more than he could have controlled his actions in the ship and prevented the killing. This does not change the nature of the authority rituals into a cynical performance. Instead, it points to their fundamental—if unstable and not always successful role—in the constitution of an authority that did not have much brute enforcement capacity beyond them.

The episode of Bemoim and João II thus suggests something crucial for our understanding of rituals of authority and their social embeddedness. On the one hand, it points to the fact that rituals could be helpful in mediating cross-cultural contexts, thus facilitating rather than just presupposing social interaction. As this case showed, the embodied and solemn dimensions of ritual provided a certain level of mutual intelligibility, a useful communicative bridge in an otherwise difficult situation. At the same time, however, it also shows that the (ritual) constitution of authority is ultimately a much more fragile affair than it could otherwise seem, subject to contestation and failure from within as well as outside complex social contexts.

Imperial authority and its ritualised production: British paramountcy and the overwriting of difference

(Ted Svensson)

Introduction

British imperial rule in India was grounded in two fundamental ambiguities. On the one hand, it was not given how exactly to depict and understand the manner through which Britain had come to inhabit and inherit legitimate authority. Should the British Indian Empire be conceived of as extending a right to rule originally vested in the Mughal Empire; and what did it mean for the positing of an imagery of perpetual British rule that India had originally been colonised by a company-state, the East India Company (EIC)? From the second half of the nineteenth century, the British were compelled to present a persuasive answer to whether British paramountcy was based on precolonial and regional notions of authority or if it represented an entirely novel way of governing subordinate units.

On the other hand, the British Indian Empire was centred on an essential divide—between directly governed provinces and more than five hundred 'semi-sovereign' polities, which were left to be ruled as so-called Princely States. In the wake of the Indian 'Mutiny' of 1857—after which authority was transferred from the EIC to the Crown—the British became increasingly committed to a policy of indirect rule over a broad spectrum of polities, large and small. Their status *vis-à-vis* the British was, most commonly, referred to as divided sovereignty, even though the exact meaning of this notion varied and was kept vague for the entire duration of British imperial rule. Due to the fragmented character of India as a political unit, an aporia arose in relation to the question of how authority could be exhibited in a unified sense. How, that is, were the British to both preserve the traditional make-up of 'native states' and saliently project India as coherently subjected to British sceptre?

These ambiguities became especially heightened after 1857 and the British turned to the ritualised enactment of what they designated as imperial durbars to address and overcome them.[3] The imperial durbars were meant to draw on precolonial notions of authority by representing British rule as a continuation of the Mughal Empire and as stabilising a regional order marked by the divisive binary between British India and the Princely States. The most prominent participants in the events were, accordingly, the British themselves and the 'princely rulers'. As ritualised events—bounded in time and space as well as expecting participants to act in accordance with predetermined scripts—the imperial durbars were intended to affirm the discursive figuration of the British as rightful rulers through an embodied experience of the 'truthfulness' of this very notion. Movement at the site of the durbar was regulated in a fashion that elevated the stature of the Viceroy and the British monarch, processions were undertaken that marked the grandeur as well as the inclusive character of empire, and the temporary camps that hosted visitors from across South Asia were conceived of as condensed versions of India as a whole. The imperial durbars, thus, attest to the centrality of rituals in making 'real' and palpable, what Rösch in another context has described as, 'ambivalent potentialities of world political imaginations' (2021, 9). Yet they also align with Mälksoo's view that rituals are intrinsically related to the 'mediation of [one's own] ambiguity' (2021, 58).

The imperial durbars, arranged in 1877, 1903 and 1911, hence equalled a ritual form through which paramount rule was enacted, represented and legitimised. They made tangible imperial authority as well-founded, total and unending, and they emplaced the participants in relations that replicated the hierarchies of the broader international (and regional) order. In terms of ritual substance, the imperial durbars sought to overwrite the aforementioned ambiguities by placing the British monarch—or, as a placeholder, the Viceroy—symbolically at the helm of the British Indian Empire and by portraying British rule as an instance of South Asian modalities of displaying authority. The imperial durbars, and their aim to simultaneously make manifest the unity of empire and posit the British as the righteous inheritors of tradition, thus confirm Rappaport's assertion that '[r]ituals composed entirely of new elements are […] seldom if ever attempted' (1999, 32).

Why then do we need a ritual approach to come to terms with the above? The principal reason is that we make room both for the manifestly discursive layer—such as British attempts to, through language, make sense of themselves and their 'possession'—and a recognition of the experiential side of being in and enacting the world. A ritual approach allows us to consider key symbols as well as the sensation participants have of being part of a unique event, of partaking in something grander than the individual, in which each participant still matters. An analysis of the imperial durbars as ritual, facilitates a consideration of authority both as articulated (with intent) and as imbued

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[3]The imperial durbars were modelled on the Mughal court and the courts of the Princely States. Durbar translates as '[a] house, dwelling; court, area; hall of audience, court; holding of a court, levee; royal audience; the executive government of a native state' (Haynes 1990, 461). With Wilson (2010, 1), we might note that '[t]he visibility of the prince [i.e. the ruler] and the possibility of coming into his presence were crucial to South Asian politics before British rule'.

with 'facticity' through the participants' ritualised subjection—willed or unwilled, conscious or unconscious—to it.

Three key facets of ritual

If we instead turn our attention to how the imperial durbars are great examples of three ways in which a ritual approach will add to IR broadly and historical IR specifically, it might be argued that, as ritualised events, they bring into view (1) the making present and 'bringing down to earth' of abstract notions, such as the international, imperial, sovereignty, etc.; (2) the creativity involved in overwriting and managing ambiguity; and (3) the concrete workings of acts of self-legitimation. These, in turn, denote the following:

First, there is always an estrangement at work in subjectivity and in relating individualised subjecthood to a broader social imaginary, a gap that we, as social beings, try to fill or remain ignorant of, often by engaging in ritual activities. This does not solely entail a drive on the part of ritual participants to try to mediate and master incongruity. It also points to the centrality of rituals in 'conjoining incommensurables' (Werbner 2001, 137). Rituals make that which would otherwise only exist as distant or unrelated notions and objects immanently present. In the case of the imperial durbars, this applies to 'the British Empire', 'paramountcy', 'statehood', etc. A core function of rituals—in modern as well as traditional settings, in secular and religious guises alike—is to domesticate, translate and 'make real' that which is otherwise merely available as abstract realities and ordering principles or imaginaries.

A related manifestation of how rituals help to conjoin is the manner in which they allow for disparate events and places to be connected across historical time and geographical space, and even for the distance between these to be collapsed. Such an equivalence and shared 'presence' was, through the imperial durbars, established between the British Empire as a whole and the dependent polities in South Asia and between precolonial and colonial expressions of authority. The 'time-space compression' is two-fold, however: it both refers to the lasting, generative effects of the ritual and to specific ritual settings, in which it 'is experienced when ritual participants remain focused on the ritual (experiencing "ritual time")' (Wojtkowiak 2018, 468). This, in turn, might be tied to Kustermans' point that '[t]he boundedness of ritual time and space allows participants to perform, experience, and embrace the ambiguity of authority' (2019, 404).

Second, what rituals foremost do is to conceal and cover up ambiguity, incompletion and lack of self-sameness. There is, hence, an intimate connectedness between ritual and the more creative side of politics—which refers to the imagination and ingenuity involved in blinding us to the fragile underpinnings and hollowness of power, status, belonging, order, etc. More generally this means that ritualisation, as a way of acting, responds to and mediates ambiguity (consciously or not) by (a) tacitly revolving around a basic 'contradiction' and 'dichotomy' that it never fully resolves (Bell 1990, 309), (b) drawing lines between the ritual itself and that which exists on, and as, its outside, and (c)—as described above—through bringing together, in one space for acting and thinking, the abstract and the concrete. Specifically, as confirmed by the imperial durbars, rituals often allow for mimicry and

emulation. However, none of this finally resolves or translates into a decisive mastery of ambiguity. While the imperial durbars allowed for a temporary stabilisation of meaning and affective entanglements, it was only with the end of British imperialism that the fundamental ambiguities ceased to be significant.

Third, in contrast to a view that accentuates rituals as performances—that is one which strives to take into account not only its internal traits and expressions, but also its (likely) reception among wider audiences—it seems more fruitful, if we wish to analyse political authority, to stress how rituals often revolve around acts of self-legitimisation. If we consider the imperial durbars, there is much that resonates with Barker's suggestion to regard political ritual as, above all, 'a self-referential or self-justifying activity characteristic of rulers' and as closely related to how 'rulers spend a great deal of time, effort, and resources on activities which have no immediate material function but are elements in a culture of legitimation' (Barker 2001, 13, 36). Thus, in acts of public legitimation, it seems to be the case that 'the principal actor, the most consistently engaged performer, is […] not the subject, but the ruler' (Barker 2001, 107).

Taking a ritual approach to the imperial durbars is then not foremost to enquire into their wider reception. Instead, emphasis is placed on how ritualised activities generate and sustain a 'political syntax' that makes rulers content with their own right to rule (cf. Rai 2015, 154). Of course, there are moments when the peacock feathers do not do the magic trick, when the emperor's new clothes are taken for what they truly are—but these are rare moments. The imperial durbars, conversely, evince how '[t]hose who are best prepared to perform [the] ritual […] are also those whose identities the […] ritual most fully confirms' (see Duncan 1995, 8). The true worth of a ritual approach to authority is, in other words, its attentiveness to the self-delusions that ritual enables and keeps going and to the nuances, multiplicity, abundance and pluriversality that it obscures. At least while considering a historical episode to which there is limited access as regards the emotional, affective and bodily dimensions of the reception.

Conclusion

The British endeavour to arrange three large-scale imperial durbars is a testament to the centrality of ambiguity when it comes to glossing over spurious rule, the inconsistency of celebrating civilising progress and good government while upholding the 'old regime', and the nonintegral character of empire. Authority displays that were part of the imperial durbars, on the one hand, drew on the mimicking of and postulated continuity with pre-colonial ritual forms, which entailed a rendering of the British as the guardians of tradition. We, on the other hand, find that the British construed imperial authority by drawing on European notions of suzerain and feudal relations. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was long-established that the British abstained from fully intervening in what was seen as the internal affairs of the Princely States, and that they turned to the 'princes' as the natural leaders in a region that was predominantly seen to harbour a 'stagnant civilisation of a thousand years' predisposed to 'autocratic despotism' (House of Commons 1878, 20). The

imperial durbars, as ritualised events that grounded authority *in medias res*, both epitomised and furthered these ideas.

Rituals of law and war: military lawyers and the moral authority to kill

(Tracey Blasenheim)

For the United States and other advanced industrial nations, lawyers have become essential components of war-making (Jones 2020; Craig 2013; Dickinson 2010; Goldsmith 2012; Dill 2015). The US Department of Defense employs over ten thousand attorneys, many of whom are uniformed lawyers called Judge Advocates (JAGs) who deploy on the front lines to provide advice to commanders. Given prevailing views of international law as a constraint on the exercise of sovereignty, one might assume that commanders would balk at requirements to submit their decisions to legal review. Yet, throughout my archival, interview, and ethnographic research on the 'lawyerization' of warfare (Blasenheim 2021) I found that commanders and staff officers not only accept but request the involvement of JAGs in decisions, even in instances where legal issues are straightforward, minor, or entirely non-existent. As one Navy Vice Admiral remarked: 'I wanted … my military lawyers, to be with me all the time' (United States Department of Defense 2005, 15). I posit that this appetite for JAG involvement—an 'addiction to lawyers' in the words of one interviewee—can be unpacked through the analytical lens of ritual. JAG rituals of legal advising and review, I argue, reproduce their fellow soldiers' authority to determine who lives and dies without hesitation, guilt, or ceding the moral high ground.

Legal review and advice as 'rituals'

I take cues from Carlo Severi's concept of ritual, which emphasises the magical elements of ritualistic performances. Severi focuses on how rituals enable the cohabitation and reconciliation of otherwise incongruent elements. '[T]he ritual context' he argues, 'is different from ordinary communication because it … - makes the enunciator a complex figure, made up by the condensation of contradictory identities' (2007, 37). Severi's core example draws on shamanistic healing rituals where each participant 'progressively accumulates a series of non-exclusive definitions' (Severi 2007, 38). He explains that:

> [S]hamanistic therapy is founded upon the symbolic opposition of two terms: the patient-as-an-animal spirit and the shaman-as-a-vegetal-spirit. However, the kind of ritual identity realised in this context is based on a process of progressive cumulation in which features characteristic of one pole of the opposition, that of the ill person-Jaguar, are gradually included in the other pole, that of the shaman-vegetal spirit. (Severi 2007, 35)

Severi then distinguishes this 'non-exclusionary' form of identity dualism from other expressions of a split identity, such as a theatrical performance, where the identities of the actor and her role cannot truly coexist. 'On a theatre stage, these two identities can only alternate, as mutually exclusive, because the context [of a performance] allows no confusion between them' (Severi 2007, 38). What Severi highlights about certain rituals is their capacity to

weave together two contradictory elements, here the human and non-human or the patient and shaman. One could also imagine, for example, Catholic rituals involving the simultaneous cohabitation of divine and earthly matter in the same vessel (wine transubstantiated as blood) or body (Christ as man and God). Rather than remaining separate or subsuming one or the other, these contradictory elements are brought into relation and intertwined, through ritual, to produce some new, if temporary, identity.

Severi's work offers a useful frame for unpacking JAG practices. Legal reviews and advice from US military lawyers can range in formality from oral affirmations to written legal opinions. In other cases, merely having a JAG at the commander's side for a difficult decision can be enough to perform this ritual. What these various manifestations all share is a common set of techniques and themes. JAG involvement in war, in all its forms, serves to reconcile the use of martial violence with an ethic of humanitarian care. For example, JAGs are trained to construct their advice as the union of strategic and legal or ethical guidance. These techniques are explicitly intended to reframe morality and sound tactics as congruent rather than oppositional in the minds of their fellow soldiers. In this imbrication of humanitarianism and military necessity, JAGs seek to provide international legal justifications for violence and to enable attacks while also reducing harm civilians. Through these techniques, the involvement of the JAG 'consecrates' (Kustermans and Horemans 2021) decisions over life and death and provides participants with a feeling that tensions between military expediency and humanitarian ethics have been diminished if not resolved.

This act of consecration through the reconciliation of ethics, law, and violence extends down to the linguistic structure employed by JAGs. During an Army JAG training course that I completed, I saw how trainees learned to word their guidance in a lexicon that communicated both humanitarian concern as well as willingness to help kill and destroy. This mixing is also evident in the professional identity of the JAGs and what their presence represents. As commissioned officers and international lawyers, JAGs visibly stake claims to expertise in both the exercise of violence and its subjugation to global rules. For example, the motto of the Army JAG Corps is 'soldier first, lawyer always,' with an insignia of a crossed arrow and pen. Furthermore, as the military's top specialists in the Laws of Armed Conflict—a body of international law envisioned as a balance between the principles of 'humanity' and 'military necessity' in war—the figure of the JAG not only communicates but symbolises the integration of these conflicting value systems. Therefore, the mere presence of a military lawyer during critical decisions may be enough to enact this ritual. As such, the 'lawyer in the room' may act as either priest—actively guiding the participants—or talisman, whose presence alone helps consecrate a decision.

The ritualised re-production of authority

While the form and practice of these iterated rituals vary, they enact a similar consecration of military decisions. The presence of a lawyer, as either priest or talisman, extends the duality embodied in the JAG—as both war fighter and humanitarian—to the other participants in the ritual. This collaborative act,

repeated before and often during battle, re/affirms the authority of the partici-
pants to wield violence ethically. In this, JAG claims to expertise in *inter-
national* law and humanitarian ethics form critical components of legitimation.
As both symbol and interpreter of the military's commitment to International
Humanitarian Law, the authority extended by JAG participation invokes justi-
fications for violence grounded in long-standing custom and universal sover-
eign recognition within the international system. Therefore, the international
component of this authority stakes a claim to the (potential) approval of audi-
ences far beyond US borders for decisions over life and death.

The military lawyers and the officers I spoke with depicted this re-produc-
tion of authority in three ways. First, participants described lawyers as having
a 'warm blanket effect' on decision-making, in which the involvement of a
lawyer would instil confidence and help soldiers make decisions on the use of
force without hesitation. As one JAG put it:

> [The law] is a combat multiplier, because if that individual private believes what he's
> doing is right, he's a better soldier. He's a better fighter. He's more effective. Because he
> doesn't hesitate and think, is this right or wrong? He knows it's right because he's been
> educated to understand that. (Interview 01.02.12)

This impact was unpacked by a targeting officer, who explained that 'we
always try to minimize harm, but we're soldiers. In our line of work, some-
times somebody's gotta die. And when that happens everyone feels better
about it knowing the JAG's right there by the [commander]. Even if you never
talk to him, it makes it easier to do what you have to do.' (Interview 01.03.02)

Second, some soldiers depict legal review as a practice that relieves guilt.
'[S]ometimes I feel more like a chaplain than a JAG because the questions that
commanders are asking us aren't necessarily legal questions: they're looking
more for absolution than for legal advice a lot of times' (Jones 2020, 309).
Similar themes emerged from my fieldwork research. One JAG recalled his
legal review duties during the first and second Gulf Wars in the follow-
ing way:

> It's almost like being a preacher, it's almost like being a pastor. You're the holder of the
> sacred rules. And they're looking for validation of the rules. They're about to go and
> maybe kill people and they want to hear you say it's valid, it's sanctioned, it's not
> murder. It's authorized and legal killing. Because human beings don't like to kill people.
> We don't, we don't want to do it. But soldiers have to. And so, they want that validated.
> It helps them do their duty. (Interview 01.02.12)

Another retired JAG similarly explained that legal operations are necessary
'because the soldier needs to retain his humanity, amidst the inhumanity of
war' (Interview 01.02.07). Others remarked that such practices help soldiers
'come home with honor, knowing that even if they didn't like everything they
did, they upheld the law' (Interview 01.02.12).

Third, these rituals are depicted as critical for the US to maintain the moral
high ground against its enemies, especially in the War on Terror. For example,
in a speech to a graduating class of JAGs, General H.R. McMaster remarked:
'Make no mistake: evil does exist in the world, but it is your advice as a judge
advocate … that helps our forces remain true to our values as we fight these

brutal and murderous enemies.' Other interviewees linked this affirmation of the moral high ground to legal advice and review, especially for the purpose of communicating moral commitments to key allies and coalition partners. 'Everyone wants to be the good guy,' one JAG remarked when explaining why such rituals were particularly important for NATO operations. He recalled how in World War I European combatants used to write 'God is on our side' on their uniforms. 'Except everyone claimed that God was on their side at that time. Which means he's kind of on no one's side. But the law is only on one side [in the War on Terror].'

Conclusion

I have argued that rituals of legal advising 'consecrate' acts of violence through the JAG, whose involvement or symbolic presence helps reconcile military necessity with humanitarian restraint. These rituals help re-produce the moral authority of the US military in the War on Terror by enabling participants to alleviate doubt over the use of force, absolve themselves of guilt, and maintain the moral high ground. Yet, that does not mean this moral authority is complete or stable, as indicated by rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and disillusionment among servicemembers. Nor are JAGs the only ones concerned with moral conduct. Commanders at all ranks grapple extensively with ethical conduct on the battlefield, and chaplains continue to hold specialised roles that absolve, comfort, and provide guidance on morality in warfare. However, the role of JAGs in these efforts remains unique, given their dual claims to expertise in warfare and international law and humanitarianism. The institutionalised 'addiction' of the US military to its lawyers—through even the mere presence of a JAG in the room—reveals the importance of these figures in the reproduction of the US military's martial identity. Reading these practices as rituals enables us to unpack how JAGs contribute to this critical process of authority-making.

Voting as a political ritual: the logic of aggregation in electoral practice

(Alvina Hoffmann)

'Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of democracy', as countless research institutes, NGOs and liberal democracies regularly proclaim. What would it mean to conceive of voting, a taken-for-granted feature of liberal democracies, as a *political ritual* rather than institutional requirement? How does electoral practice enshrine democratic authority? In this contribution, I map out three ways to examine the social, political and symbolic effects of electoral practice on society. First, it fulfils an ideological function in defining as authoritative certain ways of seeing society in its production of collective representations. Second and relatedly, it seeks to uphold sacred, if fragile, lines of distinction between authoritarian and liberal-democratic regimes. Finally, it inaugurates a new socio-political order through the voice of 'the people', and thus points to ritual's transformative power. I will consider two examples of electoral practice to show how these practices play out: The 2014 Crimean referendum which was staged in just a few weeks, and the 2020 US presidential

elections which former president Donald Trump described as fraudulent in unsubstantiated claims. Both acts single out and essentialise the ritual of voting and its social magic—or failure thereof—in sanctifying a new democratic order. This allows us to visualise the importance of the broader social universe for rituals in legitimating the logic of aggregation of individual votes. Rather than analysing these as distinct cases of domestic politics, my contribution offers an entry-point into what has been described by some scholars as populist movements transforming democracies around the globe (see Urbinati 2019). The study of political ritual as employed across boundaries to capture a mystical people helps illuminate the transnational dynamics of this phenomenon.

Collective representations of the social world: symbolic and ideological functions of ritual

Weeks before Crimea was integrated into Russia during a spectacular political ceremony in Moscow when the Accession Treaty was signed, its residents were presented with a new pro-Russian Prime Minister. Sergey Aksyonov, whose Russian Unity party had scored 4% of the vote in the 2010 regional elections, saw himself as a natural 'crisis manager' for the peninsula that saw an influx of paramilitary forces, known as 'little green men'. In fact, Aksyonov claimed to be the head of these paramilitary forces which occupied central infrastructure in the lead-up to his seizure of the highest political post on the peninsula. The vote had taken place behind closed doors and in the presence of unidentified gunmen who had stormed the building prior to the vote. Aksyonov alleged to have won 55 out of 64 votes, but it was unclear whether he actually managed to get a quorum of 50. The vote did not only result in his appointment, but also authorised a referendum on Crimea's secession from Ukraine. Before the referendum, Aksyonov was optimistic about the results: 'Independence is what we want. It is what Crimeans want' (Shuster 2014). Why go through the familiar motions of these political rituals of parliamentary elections and a popular vote to supposedly reconstruct the will of the people?

   In his discussion of political ritual, Steven Lukes offers his 'working' definition of ritual as *'rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance'* (1975, 291). By no means an all-encompassing definition, it nonetheless highlights the importance of the symbolic and cognitive dimensions of ritual, which create a certain representation of the social world. To Lukes, elections are 'the most important form of political ritual in liberal democratic societies', fulfilling an official ideological role and mobilising mass participation which affirms 'voters' acceptance of the political system and of their role within it' (Lukes 1975, 304). Participation in elections is a minimal but essential condition for democracy. To David Kertzer, political ritual helps both to understand the world and simplify it, providing a symbolic backbone to the workings of politics (1988, 2–3). It can serve both as a conservative force and 'a potent force in political change' (Kertzer 1988, 12). In the run-up to the annexation of Crimea, ongoing transformative political events were legitimated through the referendum, the result of which supposedly mirrored a vote by

the people, and thus essentialising the ritual of voting as automatically capturing the general will.

In *Rites of Institution*, Bourdieu circumscribes ritual as a form of social magic which transforms social practices, groups or orders into something purposive, more than the sum of its parts or an aggregation of individual acts (1991, 126). The authority of democratic institutions, which is legitimated by the vote of 'the people' itself is an excellent example of this, as it is a practice that is reproduced in various political systems. Bourdieu proposes an understanding of institutions linked to social magic. He discusses a broad range of acts of social magic, such as marriage, (noble) titles or academic degrees and, most relevant to this piece, institutional offices 'which can only succeed if the institution … is guaranteed by the whole group or by a recognized institution' (Bourdieu 1991, 125). This guarantee is not the result of a conscious act but is rooted in the habitus of a group, or 'the socially fashioned dispositions to know and recognize the institutional conditions of a valid ritual' (Bourdieu 1991, 125). The mental structures which produce a representation of the social world through ritual and the social position of the group align.

Ritual also entails a transformation of its own boundary from arbitrary to becoming recognised, or rather misrecognised, as the legitimate social order (Bourdieu 1991, 118). This ideological function, which produces as legitimate collective representations of liberal democratic society, is perhaps best mirrored in the judgments issued by US courts. The rulings followed a campaign by Trump's legal teams which instigated numerous lawsuits, seeking to invalidate ballots, disrupt the aggregation process of ballots and overturn the results in some states. While not a single lawsuit was successful, it is worth noting how this fight was more than just about legal technicalities around voting. The judges saw themselves as holding up the pillars of democracy. By re-mystifying the act of voting, circuit judge Bibas of the Third Circuit District Court of Pennsylvania affirmed in his opinion: 'Free, fair elections are the lifeblood of our democracy. Charges of unfairness are serious. But calling an election unfair does not make it so. Charges require specific allegations and then proof. We have neither here' (2020, 2).

Political rituals, in a sense, seek to uphold a sacred line of distinction between authoritarian and liberal-democratic regimes if they are practiced properly, as in regularly and with appropriate preparations. In liberal democracies, post-election rituals such as confirming the votes in a presidential election at first might seem superfluous and merely ceremonial with no political import. This was the case on 6 January 2021, when former vice president Pence confirmed the electoral college votes for now President Biden. Yet the inherent fragility of such rituals, and democracy, became very apparent when a violent and armed mob of Trump supporters invaded Capitol Hill during this ceremony (Serwer 2021).

The authority of 'the people' in inaugurating new political orders

Finally, political rituals do not only have a world-making power and enshrine ideological lines of division between supposedly opposing political orders. By fulfilling a social transformational function, ritual enacts temporal boundaries 'which […] allows one to pass over or transgress in a lawful way' (Bourdieu

1991, 117). It initiates a profound temporal transition, rather than simply delineating boundaries of differentiation between different groups. Political rituals, such as voting, draw a line between an old and a new political order, passing over into a new legislative period, while renewing the authority of democracy itself. But it also transforms individual aggregates into 'the people'. Returning to our example of Crimea, shortly after Aksyonov's election as Prime Minister, he proclaimed that 'Crimean order would only be restored by Crimeans themselves' and that those public servants, who refused to follow this order, were invited to write their resignation letter (allcrimea.net 2014). In invoking the Crimean people, Aksyonov equates himself and his speech with the speech of all, and thus enacts 'a people' that surfaced during the referendum. How is 'the people' made through voting?

Bourdieu addresses this question by denaturalising an almost taken-for-granted conflation of the act of voting with giving one's political opinion by reintroducing the social conditions which allow someone to produce a political opinion and speak 'politically' (2005, 55–6). This underlying philosophy of electoral practice in liberal thought is centred on solitary or socially isolated individuals casting a secret vote. The material reality of this secrecy practiced in public is exemplified by the polling booth, its protective curtain and the ballot box which absorb the act of voting as an 'invisible, uncontrollable, and *unverifiable* expression […] of an opinion' (Bourdieu 2005, 57). By voting, each individual is reduced to an atomised political subject that is only relevant in the act of statistical aggregation. In the place of a logic of genuine collective action to produce the general will, collective opinion is the result of what Bourdieu terms the logic of aggregation, fracturing groups into 'sets of juxtaposed, accumulated, agglomerated elements' through the counting of ballot papers (Bourdieu 2005, 58).

The logic of aggregation, practiced through the democratic ritual of voting, is by no means an expression of individual votes with equal rights. First, in order to produce a political opinion, individuals need to be in a certain social position and equipped with cultural capital that grants them access to the means of production of a personal opinion. Second, following from this privileged position, dominant individuals have an interest in reproducing this liberal vision of democratic politics which works in their favour through individual strategies rather than collective action. Dominated groups have no choice but 'to escape the logic of individual choice, for them profoundly alienating' through for example abstention by participating in the political process, or submitting to this order (Bourdieu 2005, 59). This discussion reveals hidden forms of disenfranchisement and barriers of access to participating in electoral politics as an individual voter.

Finally, how are individual aggregates transformed into something more meaningful than its sum? Bourdieu dissects the social technology of delegation, which produces a delegate that becomes authorised to speak on behalf of their constituency and in turn constitutes the group through their speech. Through the delegate, the group 'escapes from the powerlessness attached to serial atomization, and it can mobilize all the force, material and especially symbolic, that it contains *in potentia*' (Bourdieu 2005, 59). The delegate's voice becomes the voice of the group, not of its individual parts. In Crimea, Aksyonov poses as such a delegate, claiming to speak with authority on behalf

of its entire social space. The courts in the US upheld not only the result of the election, but also the legitimacy and authority of the president, instituting a new democratic order by legitimising the voice of 'the people'.

To conclude, this contribution pointed to three ways to consider voting as a political ritual, outlining its world-making effects, ideological function in liberal-democratic societies claiming a clear line of separation from authoritarian regimes and ritual's transformative power in inaugurating a new socio-political order through the voice of 'the people'.

Disclosure statement

Funding

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