

**Ecuadorian Indigenous Festivals:  
The Generative Tension of Ritual  
in the Production of Cultural and Social Meaning**

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**Summary:**

In this essay I bring together ritual, myth, history and everyday practices in an exploration of the generative power of shared frameworks of cultural and social consciousness. I aim to understand the common processes and forces behind cultural production, reproduction, transformation and destruction. The analysis juxtaposes the supposedly conservative forms of ritual and myth with manifestations of dramatic change and innovation to show that these apparent paradoxes are powerful complementarities (Dillon and Abercrombie 1988).

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**Introduction: From Opposition to Transformation**

In this essay I bring together ritual, myth, history, everyday practices and people in an exploration of the generative power of shared frameworks of cultural and social consciousness. I aim to understand the common processes and forces behind cultural production, reproduction, transformation and destruction. The analysis juxtaposes the supposedly conservative forms of ritual and myth to manifestations of dramatic change and innovation to show that these apparent paradoxes are powerful complementarities (Dillon and Abercrombie 1988).

In the Northern Ecuadorian highlands, Ecuadorian indigenous peoples have been intensely involved in advocating constitutional changes that would legalize Ecuador as a multi-cultural, multi-national nation-state. Recognition and valorization of indigenous cultures have been foremost on a national indigenous agenda that seeks to establish some degree of cultural and political autonomy. It is in this context that I study indigenous festivals as ritual activities that signify practices through which people not only affirm existing traditions, but engage in new cultural production that informs local, regional, and national identities. Festivals constitute important arenas for social and political expression, for reflection upon and negotiation of changing views of the world, and for the development of social consciousness and the structuring of social change.

My studies of the political *applications* of these forms of expression have raised questions about what, more specifically, makes myth and ritual *in themselves* particularly rich loci not only for the reproduction of social values and enduring cultural beliefs, but

simultaneously for the development of inventive symbolic tropes and the articulation of new consciousnesses. So, although I am, of course, interested in festival expression as a powerful tool for social critique and as a vehicle for alternative social protest that recognizes the voices of “diverse social others” (Hill 1988:2), this paper assesses the production potential and the creative power of the genres themselves.

I must reiterate that the separation of politics from a genre analysis of myth and ritual is, of course, only theoretical and only momentary. I do not mean to imply that these categories should remain separated. Even theoretically, a detachment for the sake of clarity can only be brief before we have to remind ourselves of the inextricable link between myth, ritual, history, politics and power. Indeed, efforts by authors like John and Jean Comaroff, David Kertzer, James Scott, not to mention Mikhail Bakhtin among many others, have been vital in legitimating ritual performance as a consequential form of social expression and cultural critique. Academic and political acknowledgment of alternative forms of social protest has been a tremendously important step in recognizing marginalized voices and in reconceptualizing our understanding of how and where power operates. By no means is this part of the job done as both festival participants and Ecuadorianists continue to resist the labeling of Indigenous festivals by the media and the general public as simple drunken parties or obsolete practices.

Norman Whitten reminds us of the non-unidirectional character of meaning-making and points out that the effectiveness of ritual and myth derives from an *ambiguous* generative power that serves as a source for opposition as much as for domination, for unity as much as for fragmentation (Whitten 1996:191). Failure to see beyond the immediate political application of ritual as opposition underestimates the potential of ritual as generative of transformation.

An assumption that I make throughout the essay is that a correspondence between myth, ritual and “reality” exists, as Victor Turner states, in a matricial mirror pattern of constant exchange (Turner 1985:301). An emphasis on shared frameworks of belief that inform action transgresses any strict categorization that may be drawn along those lines to show that people draw meaning and sense from different realms of experience, memory and tradition, and from the dynamic between them. That some of these realms of production have been ignored in mainstream literature, history and politics is the underlying subject in several articles that attempt to underline the participation of alternative histories, literatures and politics—myth, folklore and ritual—in the formation of identities and belief systems. This undertaking for writers like Jonathan Hill, Thomas Abercrombie and Mary Dillon is threefold since their task is first to demonstrate how narratives of history are linked to notions of power and identity; second, to open a space for acknowledging alternative narratives as an important aspect of identity and power formation; and third, to reveal that official and “nonofficial” narratives operate, not at odds with each other, but, as interrelated, complementary modes of consciousness (Hill 1988:2). I have, for this reason, used definitions loosely, in accordance with the general associations between realms that work so productively for Hill. For the purpose of this essay it seems unnecessary to concentrate on the differences between ritual and myth. Indeed, my argument here, in agreement with Hill, is that the mechanisms at work and the theoretical questions they raise about the production of symbols are very similar even if the final expression is specific to each.

### **Breaking with Notions of a Static Traditional Order**

An assessment of the generative power of ritual and myth begins with a necessary challenge to an enduring notion often found among the general public and some scholars that traditional culture is something static or self-contained, locked into a perpetual cycle of repetition. Whitten strongly rejects the erroneous portrayal of traditional cultures “as the surviving remnants of ancient marginals who existed in pockets of cultural enclosures...” (Whitten 1981:17) as unfounded contradictions to efforts to show that highly structured, traditional symbolic forms like myth and ritual are anything but conservative cultural forces. And, Catherine Bell writes that “tradition, of course, is not created once and then left to its own momentum. Tradition exists because it is constantly produced and reproduced, pruned for a clear profile, and softened to absorb revitalizing elements” (Bell 1992:7). Traditions are dynamic, heterogeneous and ambiguous processes, constantly borrowing, lending, and changing in a non-unidirectional fashion. Cultural and social re-valorization, transformation and re-production are the norm and not the exception in the process of meaning construction. A reassessment of ritual and myth thus challenges us to think about both continuity and change, both conservation of form and new cultural meaning, not in contrast to each other, but in interdependence.

### **From Continuity to Meaning**

As Dillon and Abercrombie observe, this break with notions of tradition as static and immutable has led to an important shift from overemphasizing continuities in myth and ritual to examining the production of meaning, both past and present, in these modes of interpretation (Dillon and Abercrombie 1988:51). Continuity is not altogether done away with, but instead

reformulated as part of an inclusive dialogue with processes of transformation and the production of new meaning. The main question they raise is how to understand the relations of power manifest in myths and rituals in terms that are both meaningful for present-day experience and compatible with a historical reality (Dillon and Abercrombie 51).

So far I have been addressing these expressive genres as if they were self-propelling, only alluding to the contexts in which they spring to life as arenas of “heightened consciousness.” The key to setting the whole mechanism in motion is an element that surprisingly often gets lost in the frenzy of anthropological theorizing—people.

Dillon and Abercrombie point out that in searching for the historical source of meaning, many authors overlook the importance of placing myth in the context of its telling, and by implication, ritual in the context of its performance (Dillon and Abercrombie 55). Meaning occurs at the juncture between form and agency. Frank Salomon’s essay on North Quito ritual drama is particularly adept at showing how it is *people* who actively negotiate their identities through ongoing dialogue and commentary across generations, the conservation of traditional ritual forms, the transformation of performance structures in changing social contexts, and the admission of individual expression and spontaneity in traditional performances (Salomon 1981). The resulting performances and narratives come about not through some sort of spontaneous generation, but through a process of decision-making and participation by individuals. Turner’s words continue to resonate throughout this discussion: “Society has always had to make efforts...to actually *produce* cosmos” (Turner 1985:301). It is really only in conjunction with a serious discussion of agency that the previously mentioned ideas about reflexivity and the constant revising and re-valorizing of meaning make sense.

### **Ritual and Everyday practice**

This emphasis on agency brings culture and tradition into a much closer exchange with everyday social practice. Clifford Geertz points out that meaning resides not in the head, but in the public sphere where “people talk together, name things, make assertions, and to a degree understand each other” (Geertz 1973:213). Many authors including Turner, the Comaroffs, Whitten, and Salomon assert that it is from the intersection of ritual or myth and daily practice that new meaning emerges. The Comaroffs affirm, “the creative power of ritual...arises from the fact that it exists in continuing *tension* with more mundane modes of action...” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993:xxi). The combination of a structured genre with the innumerable expressions of local culture brings about a creative explosion of social practices that vary within given historical moments, local political conditions and changing social climates.

It is the variety of expressions and uses of ritual and myth in dramatically different social realities across the world that more than anything else testifies to the flexibility and generative capacities of these cultural forms. As Hill argues, the ability of myth and ritual to generate a variety of symbolic tropes hinges on their use of “multivocal, linking metaphors to imbue historical consciousness with meanings from a number of different domains of social experience” (Hill 1988:10). By the same token, the flexible structure of these genres allows for the absorption of a multiplicity of voices and circumstances into myth and ritual as revitalizing elements. The challenge is to explain how this productive multivocality ultimately finds expression in unified social action.



### **In Pursuit of the “Generative Heart” of Ritual and Myth**

How do these structures work as a departure point for understanding how indigenous formulations of the past serve not only as what anthropologists refer to as Lévi-Straussian “ways of thinking,” but also as Geertzian “models for” social action in the present?

Contradiction, according to Roger Rasnake, is the driving force behind mythic and ritual structures. For him, contradiction is an unavoidable prerequisite for ongoing social action since within contradiction there is a push toward a dialectical resolution (Rasnake 1988:136, 139). Frank Salomon also underscores the importance of conflict in suggesting that ritual oppositions “afford an opportunity to explore, in a setting of heightened and yet disguised consciousness, the question of how people in a state of potential discord can live together” (Salomon 1981:172). However, the aim of working through these contradictions, as Rasnake points out, is *not* resolution. The advantage of living in this perpetual, generative tension, adds Salomon, “lies in understanding the dilemma, not in removing it” (Salomon 202). Finally, Whitten warns against a move “beyond opposition” which he condemns as a “false resolution of opposites” in a doctrine of *mestizaje*, or hybridity, that amounts to “accommodative or assimilationist tendencies” (Whitten 1981:16, 23).

Whitten’s 1996 essay on the Ecuadorian *Levantamiento Indígena* of 1990 explores how multivocality, condensation, associational unification, and polarization in the cultural sphere bring people in and out of relations of both unity and opposition in the socio-political sphere (Whitten 1996:193-194). This article also introduces another very important issue: shared frameworks of belief not only undergo revision through constant dialogue with everyday life, but also encounter contestation and challenge with other ideological frameworks and their manifestations in the public sphere. A focus on the construction of common tropes in this essay

omitted an explicit discussion of the simultaneous formation of competing tropes. And, a narrative leap to talking about multivocality might have led to a false implication that power is somehow equally distributed across society. Oppositional social movements remind us of the subtext (or supertext) of power inequality and competing narrative tropes that inspired books like *History, Power, and Identity* and *Rethinking History and Myth* in the first place.

Whitten shifts the discussion from a focus on the process of how shared beliefs find articulation in social practice to a debate regarding the struggle to gain *access* to symbolic, meaning-making processes. Metaphors and tropes are arenas not only for struggle over meaning, but more importantly for struggle over the modes of production of meaning; not only for power, but “for the power above power—the right to specify the terms,” as Geertz insists (Geertz 322). The “unending struggle for the possession of the sign” (Comaroff cited in Whitten 1996:213) brings myth and ritual directly into the political arena as dynamic and powerful means of transforming the present through reclaiming and reimagining the past, as “both time binder and release mechanism” (Whitten 1988).

### **Ritual and Social Action**

Denying people their history or their traditions does not amount to the mere removal of a few cultural artifacts or folk stories or dances. The removal of peoples from their histories, or “historicide,” as Hill refers to it, “is radically disempowering because it obscures the historical processes that have produced the racial hierarchies that prevail in the Americas today” (Hill 1996:16). Failure to acknowledge alternative histories, explanations and referential frameworks is a direct attack on people’s means for reflection, mechanisms for self-valorization, access to political and social awareness, modes of production of meaning and ultimately frameworks for

social action. It is an attack on the basic necessity of a people to construct, as Hill argues, “a shared understanding of the historical past that enables them to understand their present conditions as the result of their own ways of making history” (Hill 1996:17). In a different publication, Hill adds, “Indigenous societies cannot survive as even partially autonomous orderings if they are not given an opportunity to bring historical consciousness into a controlled relation with a reflexive mythic consciousness of social reproduction” (Hill 1988:14). Claims to history and tradition, although often voiced in the context of political struggle, are more than sly tactics to gain the political upper hand. As Hill warns, the consequences of violating the processes by which societies symbolically reformulate themselves over time, can be tragic not just in a political sense, but historically and culturally as well (Hill 1988:14).

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