

Anthropology Book Forum

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Davis-Floyd, Robbie, and Charles D. Laughlin. 2022. *Ritual What It Is, How It Works, and Why*, New York: Berghahn Books, 322pp., ISBN 978-1-80073-530-9

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Ritual What It Is, How It Works, and Why is designed for both academic and lay audiences. The book begins by clearly defining how the term ‘ritual’ will be used and an outline of its key characteristics. The authors identify and elaborate on eight core characteristics of ritual. Ritual is defined “as a patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of enactment of cultural (or individual) beliefs and values. More simply put, ritual enacts cultural (or individual) beliefs and values” (p. 256). Using multiple examples, the book details how ritual works on the human body and brain to produce its often profound effects. These include enhancing courage, effecting healing, and generating group cohesion by enacting cultural or individual beliefs and values. It also shows what happens when ritual fails. Appendix One and Two provide great support to the book and are invaluable for all readers.

The authors organize the book into twelve sections. Chapter One focuses on symbols and the authors describe a process they call “symbolic penetration.” This process they argue is where symbols enter individual conscious and generate a strong emotional reaction based on their belief systems. Chapters Two and Three expand on these core concepts introduced in chapter One. The discussions center around the “cognitive matrix,” a system of meaning and belief that rituals are designed to express, enact, and transmit. In Chapter Two the authors draw on commonly known stories such as *The Three Little Pigs* and *Adam and Eve* to demonstrate how rituals are enacted and then spread through myths, paradigms, and belief systems and the individual or group values they contain. Chapter Three investigates the nature of belief systems paying particular attention to the great degree of variation these systems have across cultures.

Chapter Four discusses the characteristics of ritual as the authors demonstrate the impacts ritual drivers have on the brain. This is achieved through a discussion on states of consciousness and altered states of conscious. The authors provide a wide range of ritual examples and their associated

intrinsic drivers. Chapter Five analyses ritual techniques and technologies investigating both how rituals are technologized in a modern world but also how ancient techniques are deeply embedded into ritual that operate in the modern high-tech world. Chapter Six explores how rituals are framed and set apart from ordinary reality. The authors also investigate the possibilities when rituals fail. This concept is important to discuss as not all rituals (both informal and formal) are successful. As the next chapters discuss the successful elements of ritual through performance, cognition, and adaptation to question of failure needed to be addressed.

Chapter Eight discusses ritual and cognition, viewing the four stages of cognition with a connection to the anthropological concepts of realism, fundamentalism, fanaticism, ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, and global humanism. Chapter Nine investigates the way rituals both conserve and transmit the cognitive matrix and belief systems. This chapter is one that I found to be most interesting as the cultural significance of ritual is addressed. While this chapter views some historical examples such as prohibition there is also an assessment of how COVID has changed greeting rituals. Chapter Ten is an interesting and practical entry as it provides examples on designing ritual. The authors explore the idea of adaptive ritual strategy explaining how traditional rituals can be combined or adapted with new rituals in successful forms.

Appendix One and Two both provide useful information. Appendix One, using key points from the book, outlines how to create and perform an effective stage four ritual. The authors note this will only make sense if the book has been read, which I found to be true. Appendix Two provides a list of documentary films about ritual with a short outline and where to access the films. The authors also state which chapters the films most accurately align. This list is an excellent resource as it provides examples beyond those discussed in the book and allow the reader connect with theory and examples. Having this checklist for ritual production and list of films are great tools for lay audiences interested in ritual, students, and academics. Having this list of films is also highly valuable for educators to show in classes to support chapter excerpts that could be assigned as class reading or core lecture topics.

The authors provide a sound canvas of relevant literature that both captures the historical significance of ritual along with more recent texts on the phenomenon. The book also engages with several pieces of classic anthropology such as Levi-Strauss, Ruth Benedict, and Bronislaw Malinowski. The authors do a good job ensuring key theoretical elements of the literature are well explained and accessible to non-scholars and academics. The authors draw on their own ethnographic fieldwork to complement the literature. The final element which in some ways was the most compelling were the use of familiar topics that would provide a good entry point for a more

lay audience. Referencing myths, well known stories, and global events such as the COVID pandemic.

This book provides the reader with an opportunity to reframe their understandings of what is meant by the term ‘ritual.’ The ethnographic examples, while primarily from other literatures, are grounded through the authors’ own experiences with ritual. The book could benefit from a more detailed methodological discussion in the introduction, particularly for lay audiences who would be unfamiliar with this process and may have questions about data collection. The writing does a good job of clearly explaining several complex issues and terms while remaining very lucid and highly engaging. The chapters all engage with interesting and well analysed topics that build on one another culminating in the design of rituals. The build throughout the book ends on a satisfying note. The authors, Robbie Davis-Floyd and Charles D. Laughlin, have provided their own original contribution to a broad body of work on the topic of ritual in anthropology.

This book is ultimately a fantastic resource for those who desire for an enriched, holistic understanding of ritual in society (both past and modern). Due to the book’s rich literature review and clear definition of ritual it would be ideal for any undergraduate classroom, non-academic interested in understanding ritual, and professional scholars.

Jesse Negro is a casual academic at Macquarie University School of Social Sciences, Sydney, Australia. His research explores urban environments and the lived experience of residents in these environments. They are author of, *Fabricating a Steel City: An Ethnography of the Illawarra’s Steel Industry* (Urbanities May 2019).



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