



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Ritual as theory, theory as ritual

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Comment on Mueggler, Erik. 2017. *Songs for dead parents: Corpse, text, and world in Southwest China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Erik Mueggler's *Songs for dead parents: Corpse, text, and world in Southwest China* is an extraordinary study of Lòlop'ò funerary rituals, and it will certainly go down as one of the most moving and nuanced analyses of funerary rituals in the anthropological literature. The writing is beautiful.

But it is much more than this.

Mueggler contends that for much anthropological theory mortuary rituals are read as a means to restore a social order that has been disrupted by death. An implicit social functionalism underlies many such approaches, as well as an implicit relationship between anthropological theory and its object: anthropologists use theory to uncover the mechanisms, symbols, and structures underlying social ritual.

Mueggler turns this analysis around. Instead of using anthropological theory and applying it to analyze the rituals of Lòlop'ò, Mueggler argues that ritual for Lòlop'ò is their theory. It is the basis through which Lòlop'ò work through their social worlds and work through the possibilities for change. When we use anthropological theory to analyze this work, with the consequent ways that we tend to think about rituals, we are in part missing the point. The rituals are the theory—or, to be more precise, the work that Lòlop'ò do when dealing with the dead is the work that anthropologists do with theory.

Such a perspective forces us to rethink rituals, and it also forces us to rethink theory.

To explore these points, let us discuss Mueggler's argument in more detail. The book is divided into two parts. The first explores the funerary rituals of Lòlop'ò, and in particular the work of making bodies for the deceased. The second focuses on a series of songs to the deceased.

In Lòlop'ò ritual, the deceased have to be removed from the relations which defined the person while alive. To accomplish this, the rituals give the deceased a new, complete body. Such work produces a “formal image of an entire social world” (p. 29). In doing so, Lòlop'ò reconstruct the social order: “The relations of generativity at the heart of kinship emerge from this procedure, creating the conditions for making new living bodies” (p. 29).

For Lòlop'ò, therefore, the work of making bodies “is the most engaged, rigorous, and conscientious form of thought about what we have come to call ‘persons’” (p. 6). Such work “reveals and formalizes relations that are otherwise implicit, potential, or obscured” (p. 6). It is in such work, in other words, that social relations come to be actualized and formalized. This is why it is the equivalent of what we would call social theory. But it is not just one body of theory: it is in this work that Lòlop'ò most fully carry out this form of thought.

This form of thought is not performed in the modes that we have come to think of as theory. It is rather the same sort of practical, technical work as that undertaken in activities like agriculture (p. 14). Only here,





it is the technical work not of domesticating and cultivating plants but rather of constructing social relations.

In other words, we need to realize that theory can also be found in work like funerary ritual, and we need to realize as well that ritual needs to be taken more seriously than any social functional approach, however carefully undertaken, allows us to do. A social functional approach always requires the analyst to explicate the social world in terms of which the ritual is then interpreted. But what if Lòlop'ò are themselves interpreting and working with the social world precisely through the work of funerary ritual? Seeing this forces us to see their ritual as their theory. We will soon see that it goes the other way as well.

In the second part of the book, Mueggler undertakes a beautiful series of analyses of the songs of lament (*nèpi*). These *nèpi* are an art of singing to the deceased. Here again, Mueggler opposes an anthropological approach that would try to unmask the ritual chants in terms of their function in the social sphere. Mueggler therefore commits himself to a disciplined hermeneutic of exploring “the process by which the *nèpi* constructs a world, assembles an architecture for souls, and theorizes the construction of bodies, without making many statements about how this material illuminates a world that Júzò residents might be assumed to share with the interlocutors in this event” (p. 190). In other words, Mueggler will again read the songs as theory, instead of reducing them to being in some way indicative of a pregiven social world as understood by the anthropologist.

But this is not just a theory about the nature of the deceased. Since the living come from the dead, the songs are also theories about the living: “. . . they must also be heard as profound expressions of thought about the genesis of living human persons, of which dead bodies are an essential determinant” (p. 227).

And, in both cases, the theorization opens up new possibilities. Although constructing a world for the dead, such a theorization of social relations also opens possibilities for creativity and escape: “If we see the *nèpi* as coming into being through a dialog between living and dead subjects, we can also imagine that the intensive bodies of the dead might have served as resources for the subjectivity of the living, demonstrating to the living that between the building blocks of even the most instrumental regimes of power are possibilities for creativity, flight, and escape . . .” (p. 260).

The *nèpi* are theory, but this is not simply a theorization that seeks to describe. It is a constructive theory—

constructing a world for the dead but also opening up possibilities, both for the dead and for the living: “And because the subjectivity of the living depends on relations with the dead, we can see this complex, shifting, multivalent, variously affected dead subject as a sketch of possibilities that living subjects may also share” (p. 230). The implications of this are significant. A key aspect of theory—be it Marxian, Foucauldian, etc.—is that, through the description and reconceptualization of social relations, possibilities for change are introduced. Much of the work of social theory in general is designed to open up such possibilities, and the work of the *nèpi* is comparable.

But if we need to understand Lòlop'ò rituals as doing the work that theory does, Mueggler argues that it goes the other way as well. Just as Lòlop'ò are doing the equivalent of theory, so is Mueggler's own anthropological work the equivalent of Lòlop'ò ritual: “For my part, I see this anthropological work as analogous to the work of the ritual—materializing virtual bodies, unfolding ideal images of relations, hoping to put an end to ghostly repetition” (p. 264). Underlying the book is a sense that Mueggler himself, in his earlier studies, had failed to understand what Lòlop'ò meant when they kept telling him to focus on the funerary rituals and the *nèpi*. In doing so now, and in the way that he has, Mueggler is also undertaking the work of collaborating with Lòlop'ò to actualize their theory of social relations. It is work analogous to that of Lòlop'ò ritual. We not only need to think about ritual differently, we need to think about theory differently as well.

In short, this is a work that forces us to rethink our understanding not only of ritual but also of theory. It accordingly raises a number of key questions for our work as anthropologists. To use myself as an example, I have long been interested in exploring indigenous ritual theory in China. Calling this body of material “theory” forces us to expand our definition of the term and challenges our assumptions about how theory works. But the effort it takes to do so is relatively easy compared to what Mueggler is attempting. After all, the theory I am looking at in China does consist of written texts making arguments about the social world and the workings of ritual. Mueggler is arguing something far beyond this: we need to realize that funerary rituals and ritual chants can themselves be theory. Not only have we been looking for theory in all the wrong places (or at least in some of the wrong places), we have accordingly been in danger of giving reductive readings





of the work of the peoples we are most concerned with understanding. And we equally need to reread our own theoretical work as well: just as ritual can be theory, so can theory be ritual.

This is an extraordinary work that challenges some of our most precious assumptions about the nature of theory, about the nature of ritual, and, perhaps most importantly, about the relationship between the two.

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