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Innovation, adaptation and maintaining the balance : Roy Rappaport's ritual theory as a framework for interpreting religious environmental rituals

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Innovation, adaptation and maintaining the balance

Roy Rappaport's ritual theory as a framework for interpreting religious environmental rituals

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The environmental crisis has challenged faith traditions to take a stand and act both globally and locally. Statements and action build on reinterpretations of tradition, which also produce a variety of ritual applications. Environmental rituals, for example, deal with the grief and anxiety caused by environmental crisis or seek to have a concrete impact on local environmental problems.

The anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1926–97) examined religious environmental rituals, firstly as a way of regulating ecological balance. Secondly, he saw religiously motivated environmental rituals as a way of changing human thinking and behaviour in an era of environmental crisis. These perspectives can be applied in at least three ways: firstly, by looking at how rituals are used in religious communities that are directly dependent on the natural environment; secondly, by examining how religious communities use rituals in various situations related to environmental issues; and thirdly, by focusing on how Rappaport's ideas could be used to engage in environmental action. In this article, I focus on religiously motivated environmental rituals and the perspectives that Rappaportian ritual approach provides for examining them. As examples, I use the struggle of the Canadian Mi'kmaq indigenous community over the fate of their sacred mountain and the ordination ritual of Thai monks, who ordain trees under threat of felling in a Buddhist monastic community.

Introduction

Religious communities respond to changing circumstances by interpreting their traditions and thereby seek answers to problems that affect them.[1] The environmental crisis has challenged faith traditions and religious communities to take a stand and act both globally and locally. Interpretations of tradition from an environmental perspective have also produced a variety of ritual applications, for example on how to work together to overcome the grief and anxiety caused by environmental crisis (see Pihkala 2021), or have a concrete impact on local practices that are destroying the environment.

The anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1926–97) examined religion and religious environmental rituals both as a way of regulating ecological balance and as a way of changing human thinking and behaviour in an era of environmental crisis. He positioned his research as part of an engaged anthropology, and advocated research that has a social impact (Hart and Kottak 1999: 159–60; Low and Merry 2010). His posthumously published major work *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999) represents such a research perspective. In this work, Rappaport sought to combine

1 An earlier version of this article was published in Finnish in *Uskonnontutkija* 10(1) 2021 (Pesonen 2021).

religion, science and technology, focusing on the idea of the fundamental importance of ritual as a cohesive and regulating element of community. For him, what is essential about rituals is the undeniable relevance and effectiveness of the content they convey to the community, which potentially allows them to be used for religiously motivated environmental protection efforts (Rappaport 1999).

How does Rappaport's approach position itself in the fields of religion and environmental research? Roughly speaking, one can see two types of starting point in religion and environmental research: on the one hand, one can speak of a descriptive approach, which examines how religious traditions and religious communities and actors have reacted to environmental problems, what ecological practices they have developed and how they have reinterpreted tradition from an ecological perspective. On the other hand, one can speak of normative research, where religious, environmental and research objectives are combined in different ways. In normative research, scholars are often also activists, aiming to turn religions green (Pesonen and Kurenlahti 2020: 145–6; Taylor 2005b: 1373–7).

In his anthropology, Rappaport clearly moves in both fields. Rappaport's overall thinking is characterised by holism, the aim of forming a holistic theoretical framework of society, culture, nature and humanity, which would also have practical relevance. He sees anthropology's task as understanding and framing the place of humans and humanity in the world. This task is linked to his idea that it is the moral responsibility of science and scientists to engage in solving social problems. Rappaport himself also acted as a societal speaker and writer and was involved in a wide range of social activities related to such issues as environmental protection and human rights (Messer 2001: 15–16, 21).

With these research approaches in mind, Rappaport's ritual theory can be applied in at least three ways. First, the role of rituals in a religious community whose life is directly dependent on the natural environment can be examined. This is the approach used by Rappaport in his classic study *Pigs for the Ancestors* (1980 [1968]) and applied by early ecology of religion researchers, such as Marvin Harris (1978) and Åke Hultkrantz (1966), in their studies (see Burhenn 1997; Mononen 2020). The first wave of ecology of religion often involved science-oriented studies, with a strong focus on the concept of 'ecology'. Research focused specifically on the adaptation of human populations to different natural conditions and on how ecological adaptation relates to different cultural and religious practices (Burhenn 1997; Pesonen 2004: 15–16). Such research often focused on analysing indigenous cultures and their religion from an ecological perspective.[2]

Second, Rappaport's ritual approach can be applied by examining how religious communities use rituals in various (disputed) situations related to environmental issues. The third approach focuses on the ways in which Rappaport's ideas could be used more broadly to engage in environmental action. This is the central aim and theme of Rappaport's major work mentioned above, and one that he especially highlighted in his reflections at the end of the study. I will return to this point briefly at the end of the article when I present

2 This kind of ecological approach has also been applied to so-called world religions. Gustavo Benavides (2005), for example, has examined Christianity from an ecological perspective (Pesonen and Wickström 2018: 320).

Rappaport's broader 'theological' or 'religious' vision. The main focus of the present article, however, is on religiously motivated environmental rituals and the perspectives that Rappaport's ritual theory provides for examining them. As examples, I use the struggle of the Canadian Mi'kmaq indigenous community over the fate of their sacred mountain and the ordination ritual of Thai monks, who ordain trees under threat of felling in a Buddhist monastic community.

Rappaport's research and activities include many features representative of the directions in which the humanities have developed over the past few decades. The public visibility and importance of anthropology has increased as researchers have chosen to focus more on adopting an engaged perspective (Low and Merry 2010: 203). Normative research on religion and the environment examines what different faith traditions could contribute to solving environmental problems. Many researchers in this school of thought are also committed religious practitioners and active environmentalists (Taylor 2005b: 1373–8). Various approaches to critical human sciences – such as feminist or gender studies – expose and deconstruct social problems and power relations (Taira 2015: 27). Rappaport's holistic vision has parallels with all these research approaches, but what makes it clearly special is the strong emphasis on the importance of ritual.

Defining the ritual

Ritual is at the heart of Rappaport's thinking. He sees ritual as the foundation from which religion springs. While Rappaport draws a distinction between the two, he nonetheless argues that all the main elements of religion – such as the sacred or the divine – are both created and affirmed through ritual. Without ritual, therefore, religion loses its foundation (Rappaport 1999: 125; Segal 2009: 67). To clarify the meaning of ritual, Rappaport uses the term 'metaperformativeness' to describe the constructive and reinforcing dimension of ritual. He associates the concept with J. L. Austin's (2011 [1975]: 7) 'performative utterances' (performatives for short), but in such a way that the performativity of ritual is seen as specific: metaperformatives do not merely create action, as performatives do. For example, the phrase 'I declare war on Sweden' is a performative in which the utterance is an act in itself, while the initiation ritual also affirms and constructs various states of affairs, such as the meaning of divinity, the social hierarchy or the status of the initiate in this hierarchy (Rappaport 1999: 47, 125; Cassell 2014: 422; Hovi 2006: 2, 7).

Ritual is often also a practice through which communities regulate the relationship between the human population and the (natural) environment. Rappaport sees ritual as part of a self-regulating system that acts like a thermostat, keeping the ecosystem in balance.[3] Anne-Christine Hornborg clarifies this idea with the example of a fever. If you have a fever, your body will try to bring it down and thus regulate your temperature towards a normal state (Hornborg 2008b: 278). According to Rappaport, rituals work in a similar way. He noticed that when the community and the natural environment came under pressure, this pressure was relieved and regulated through ritual (Rappaport 1980; Rappaport 1999: 197).

3 This view is influenced by cybernetics and systems theory, and particularly by Gregory Bateson (Hart and Kottak 1999: 161; Glazier 2005: 1342–3).

Rappaport defines ritual as an event in which 'more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers' are performed (Rappaport 1999: 24). The relevant point is, first, that the form of rituals remains more or less unchanged: ritual performers may come and go, but the form of the ritual remains the same. Second, rituals refer to the ultimate sacred postulates of the community, which are at the heart of rituals. Because of their immutability, rituals do not allow for individual interpretations and variations, as is the case with language, which Rappaport refers to as a potentially problematic form of communication. An individual can use language as he or she wishes – subjectively – and thereby produce distorted and false information. Ritual, on the other hand, is a form of communication in which the individual is an instrument that transmits deeper beliefs, values and (moral) concepts through a formal ritual that is repeated in the same way (Rappaport 1999: 24–58). What is essential in Rappaport's ritual thinking is that there is no other justification behind the ultimate sacred postulates, and they cannot be negotiated or contested. By participating in a ritual, members of the community accept and commit themselves to the immutable principles shared by the community as well as to the associated codes and guidelines (Rappaport 1999: 281, 429–31).

According to Rappaport, rituals and religion have characteristics and benefits that contribute to the construction of a sustainable society, which is already reflected in the analysis of the ritual cycle in *Pigs for the Ancestors*. Rappaport notes that traditional communities have been more successful than modern communities and societies in maintaining balance in their ecosystems. In these communities, rituals can be used to regulate the way people behave towards each other and their natural environment (Rappaport 1999: 460–1). Rappaport is not interested in worldviews and the content of religions *per se*, but in practices and especially ritual practices. For him, religion and ritual are a means to reach a specific end: the balance of the ecosystem. The actual contents of religions and rituals seemingly do not matter much to him; what is more important is their form and effectiveness (Hornborg 2008b: 277).

The Mi'kmaq community's fight for their sacred mountain

Setting: threat and reactions

In the following sections, I discuss two contemporary environmental activities with a religious basis and the rituals at their core. I consider how Rappaport's view of rituals can be applied to the study of environmental rituals. I find support for this perspective from the scholar of religion Anne-Christine Hornborg, who has studied the Canadian Mi'kmaq people, their religious traditions and their environmental practices (Hornborg 2008a, 2008b, 2017). In particular, she has examined modern Mi'kmaq environmental thought and practice, and she has also applied Rappaport's ritual theory to its interpretation (Hornborg 2008b). In the second example, I present and analyse a Thai tree ordination ritual that combines a multi-dimensional religious ritual with ecological, pedagogical and national goals.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a huge quarry was planned for Kelly's Mountain on the east coast of Canada, which would operate for 20 to 40 years, transporting 150,000 tons of rock every week by ship to the United States. The mining company assured the general public that the technique of opening the mine from the top of the mountain would minimise the visibility of the operation from the outside. However, the mine

would require new buildings, facilities, and equipment on the mountain. Many locals viewed the mining project as a solution to unemployment in the region. Others feared that the project would threaten tourism, local fishing, and – above all – the beautiful mountain. Various secular activist groups began to form to oppose the project and started to organise protests against the mine (Hornborg 2008a: 145).

When members of the Mi'kmaq indigenous community learned of the mining plans, they began to organise religious rituals involving drumming and singing in a village near the mountain. They also performed other rituals to protect the mountain, such as a sweat-lodge ritual and a *powwow* dance ritual. The community also collaborated with secular environmental activist groups (Hornborg 2008b: 281). Community representatives made public how the quarry would be an insult to Mother Earth. Similarly, they argued that the cave on the mountain was the home of a cultural hero or prophet (Kluskap) of popular myth, who would one day presumably return (Hornborg 2008a: 145–6).

The ritual trump cards of rebalancing

It is possible to analyse these events by structuring the speech and actions associated with them as facts and rituals. Both mining-company representatives and secular nature-conservation organisations drew on a variety of facts in their arguments. The mining company's representatives argued that the mine provides jobs, including for indigenous people living in the area, and also contributes to the economy of the area. They also argued that the mine would be set up using new environmentally friendly technology. Secular environmentalists, on the other hand, argued that the mine would eradicate valuable natural sites and destroy biodiversity. Furthermore, they pointed out how the methods and materials used in the mine pollute groundwater and how the trucks moving to and from the mine disturb the peace of the local inhabitants and increase the carbon footprint (Hornborg 2008b: 279–81).

In various nature-conservation disputes, this kind of fact-based debate can easily become stalled and often those with the most power and money, and the best lawyers, win. The mountain and its fate were negotiated by means of various calculations, numbers and facts, using the language of science and technology; the arguments framed through such a language are negotiable and can be questioned in various ways, however. If, on the other hand, it can be shown that the mine is a sacred site of religious tradition, where religious activities have been carried out for a long time, this cannot easily be counter-argued with scientific facts. The fundamental values expressed through rituals are those that can no longer be transcended or overcome except by questioning the meaningfulness of the worldview of the community as a whole. The message of the Mi'kmaq, 'Do not desecrate the holy place', is, according to Hornborg, immune to bureaucratic calculations. The Mi'kmaq people reinforced the message by equating the mountain with holy sites of other religions, such as the Wailing Wall or Mecca, and they likewise equated the prophet's predicted return to the cave with the belief in the second coming of Jesus (Hornborg 2008b: 280).

The indigenous community's reference to the sacred mountain made it more difficult to oppose their views, as the authorities were not used to discussing religious values in relation to plans for industrial projects. Similarly, the concept of Mother Earth, often associated with indigenous thinking and central to Mi'kmaq beliefs (Valkama 2016: 9), and the stereotypical image of the

'ecological Indian' in general, were, according to Hornborg, important weapons in the fight for the mountain. The indigenous people were well aware of the strength of these images and skilfully exploited them (Hornborg 2008a: 151).

To protect the mountain from mining, the Mi'kmaq invoked the unchanging, non-negotiable sacred principles of their religious tradition in their rituals and messages. However, they did not reject ecological arguments for the protection of the area, as evidenced by their cooperation with environmentalist organisations. Hornborg writes that in a way, this strategy followed Rappaport's vision of how technology, science and religion can be combined to build a synthesis that appeals to both scientific facts and fundamental sacred principles (Hornborg 2008b: 282).[4]

In Rappaport's view, the survival of a ritually organised community depends on its ability to protect its identity, while at the same time adapting to different material and cultural conditions (Cassell 2014: 423; Rappaport 1999). Such a process can be articulated by applying the sociologist and systems theorist Niklas Luhmann's concepts of function, performance and self-reflection to the religious community. Function describes the specific function of a community that distinguishes it from other communities. Through its function, a community also directs and justifies its actions. Performance, on the other hand, is the way in which a community applies its own function in relation to other communities. Through self-reflection, a community maintains its identity in relation to a changing ecological and social reality. Self-reflection is often seen in the way in which, by reinterpreting a certain tradition, a community seeks to resolve problems related to its existence and continuity (Luhmann 1982: 238–40; Pesonen 2004: 100–1). In this case, for example, the *powwow* (performance) undertaken by the Mi'kmaq people to protect their sacred mountain is based on an ecological reinterpretation (self-reflection) of their own tradition in order to maintain and safeguard the community's underlying sacred principles and, more broadly, its religious identity and existence (function).

From a Rappaportian perspective, this is an adaptive process that seeks to restore balance in the face of external perturbations (Rappaport 1999: 408). In his research on the Tsembaga community, Rappaport especially studied a ritual cycle related to pig herding. When the pig population of the community became too large, it began to threaten human gardens and thus concrete living conditions. As a result, a ritual had to be performed to restore the balance (Rappaport 1980). This ritual served a regulatory function designed to return the community to a state of ecological equilibrium. In the same way, the Mi'kmaq, by performing environmental rituals to protect the sacred mountain, seek a solution to a perceived threat to the community's fundamental sacred principles. It is thus a quest for balance, though not explicitly for ecological balance in relation to the natural environment and its resources (see also Hornborg 2008b: 281). Essential to the process of adaptation, according to Rappaport,

4 No quarry was established on the mountain at the time, and one of the main reasons for this purportedly had to do with Mi'kmaq rituals and arguments about the sanctity of the mountain (Hornborg 2008b: 281–2). However, controversies over the use of the mountain have continued to this day, and both religious and secular protests against the mine have taken place over the decades. The most recent news on the subject dates from 2017 (see e.g. SaltWire Network 2017).

is also the maintenance of systemic resilience, which in this case means responding to a perceived threat and pursuing a state of equilibrium through various reinterpretations of tradition and derived activities, such as rituals, protests and media coverage (see Rappaport 1999: 409–10).

Thai tree ordination as an environmental ritual

Setting: threat and reactions

One of the best-known illustrations of environmental activism motivated by Buddhism is the environmental action of Thai monks. This is an example of what is known as 'engaged Buddhism'. Socially engaged Buddhists strive to use traditional Buddhist teachings and practices to address social problems with the aim of alleviating suffering in this world. This is done by engaging in a wide range of social activities, one of the most important of which is Buddhist environmental activism (Kraft 2005: 239–40; Darlington 2012: 7). Ecologically oriented Buddhist monks see a direct link between the root causes of suffering (greed, ignorance and hatred) and the destruction of the environment, and they therefore interpret environmental activism as part of the responsibility of Buddhist monks (Darlington 1998).

Starting in the 1970s but extending into the 1980s and 1990s, Thai monks have set out especially to protect Thailand's dwindling forest resources. According to some estimates, 70 per cent of Thailand's land area was covered by forest in 1936, compared to 38 per cent in 1973. Current estimates of forest cover range from 15 to 25 per cent. The Thai government imposed a logging ban in 1989, but deforestation has continued, both legally and illegally (Delcore 2004: 3–4; Darlington 1998).

In response to this situation, a number of Thai monks ('eco-monks'[5]) have adopted the so-called tree-ordination ritual as a special means of combatting deforestation. This involves tying an orange garment or monk's robe around a tree or trees, a process which symbolically incorporates the tree into the Buddhist monastic community (*sangha*). This kind of ritual has a long tradition in Thai Buddhism and is done to honour trees that are particularly sacred. These include the bodhi tree, under which the Buddha is believed to have experienced enlightenment, or particularly large trees where local guardian spirits are believed to reside. However, the practice of wrapping a tree in cloth to consecrate it without it already being sacred is a recent invention (Darlington 1998; Darlington 2012: 74–5).

The ritual was first performed by a monk named Phrakhru Manas in 1988. Manas said that he developed the ritual as part of a local movement in northern Thailand to stop the – apparently extensive – illegal logging of forests close to one village community. The ritual was also developed as a result of various petitions and appeals, both to the forest company and to higher authorities, and after, for example, blockades of forest roads had proved ineffective. As a last resort, Manas decided to use the religious symbolism associated with the ordination of trees to stop their felling. Manas was inspired by a story told by an old villager about a road being built near the village. The builders of the highway had been faced with a situation where they had been ordered to cut down a bodhi tree growing next to the temple. Once the

5 Thai monks with an environmental orientation are variously referred to as environmental monks, environmentalist monks or ecological monks (see e.g. Delcore 2004; Darlington 2012: 29, 54; Darlington 2011: 145).

builders had cut down the tree, however, they experienced a series of misfortunes thought to be caused by spirits. In the same way, Manas thought that by wrapping the tree in a monk's robe for protection, he would transform the tree from an ordinary tree into a sacred tree and incorporate it into the world of sacred things (Isager and Ivarsson 2002: 404–5; Morrow 2011: 55–6).

What started out as a very simple ritual gradually evolved into a more extensive ceremony, including rituals to summon the spirits of the forest to protect the forest and punish those who cut down the trees. Modern ceremonies include making offerings (such as curry, tobacco and incense) to guardian spirits at the altar erected for them and conducting rites to protect the entire forest. The ceremony may also include dancing, singing and various short plays in which villagers present their ideas for forest protection (Darlington 2012: 71). Similarly, village lay people may take an oath not to cut down trees in the forest. The basic element is the ordination of the trees, where monks and lay people tie orange robes around the trees after having placed a Buddha statue nearby (Morrow 2011: 56–7).[6]

6 The ceremony has spread over recent decades and is now practised throughout Thailand. The ordination of trees and the invocation of spirits to protect the trees and punish those who cut them down has become a way of building a symbolic fence between the forest and those cutting down the trees. It is also a sign to others that villagers have the will to protect the forests in their neighbourhood. The eco-monks who developed the practice of tree ordination have also taken other steps to protect Thailand's environment. For example, they have developed tree-planting ceremonies, been involved in the setting up of protected areas and taken initiatives in community-based sustainable development projects and organic farming. They have also been involved in opposing such activities as shrimp farming and the construction of dams (Darlington 1998; Isager and Ivarsson 2002; Delcore 2004; Morrow 2011; Darlington 2012).

Strategic functions of the invented environmental ritual

The tree-ordination ritual is based on a local belief in spirit trees, which can be found, for example, in Buddhist temple grounds or sacred groves. Spirit trees are not traditionally the subject of special ceremonies or celebrations in Thailand. In rural areas, they are seen as living beings in the sense that they are populated by the guardian spirits of families and villages. The spirit living in the trees is often understood as the spirit of a deceased person. Usually, such trees are honoured by protecting them. Anyone who harms a sacred tree may experience misfortune, illness or even death when the spirit of the tree exacts revenge. However, the protection of sacred trees is not explicitly done from an environmental perspective. The idea of such trees also includes the dualistic conception that certain trees are defined as sacred, while most 'ordinary' trees can be freely used for other purposes. According to Avery Morrow, the use of spirit trees for purposes of environmental protection was a conscious act by Thai monks, combining Western ecological education with their own culture and their observations of deforestation in Thailand (Morrow 2011: 54–5).

When first initiating the trees, the monks did not believe that the tree was thus incorporated into the *sangha*. Nor did the monks believe in the spirits from whom they were asking protection in the ritual. For example, Phrakhru Manas said that he chose the word 'ordination' to give more weight to the ceremony. Another well-known eco-monk, Phrakhru Pitak, argued that

> it is not true Buddhism to conduct such rituals. But in the villagers' beliefs they respect the Buddha and fear some of his power … In general, villagers also believe in spirits. Therefore, we set up a shrine for the guardian spirit together with the Buddha image. This led to the saying that 'the good Buddha and the fierce spirits work together to take care of the forest'. (Morrow 2011: 56)

Both the monks and representatives of environmental organisations (NGOs) who often participated in the rituals argued that the references to spirits and Buddhist symbolism and the practice of tying a monk's robe around certain trees were a 'device', 'mechanism' or 'trick' used for a psychological purpose and not based on any Buddhist principle. The real purpose of the event, according to them, was to introduce the villagers to the basics of ecology. Likewise, the reinforcing of Thai national identity, 'Thainess', played an important role. One ritual, for example, highlighted how large-scale forest conservation efforts by villagers can be a greater gift to the Thai king than millions of dollars donated by rich city dwellers. The ritual also ended with the playing of the king's hymn (Morrow 2011: 57; Delcore 2004: 16–20).

Both examples discussed in this article demonstrate a mechanism of action, which I call the strategic function of the environmental ritual. On the one hand, the Mi'kmaq community uses the romantic notions of a primordial ecology associated with both them and indigenous peoples in general as well as the concepts of Mother Earth and sacred ecology[7] adopted from modern indigenous environmental thinking. On the other hand, those who represent the community in the public sphere have received environmental training and draw on the ecological and conservation arguments of environmental activists (Hornborg 2008a: 151). Similarly, Thai eco-monks and NGOs combine Buddhism, local beliefs, nationalism and pedagogical means in the tree-ordination ritual. Phrakhru Pitak said he adopted the practice of tree ordination because it was more effective in spreading environmental awareness than the conservation efforts he had previously undertaken and the speeches and sermons he had given to villagers (Morrow 2011: 57; Darlington 2011: 146). Pitak describes how villagers used to come to him for religious merit and to listen to his sermons, after which they would return to their homes to cut down trees (Darlington 1998). The tree-ordination ritual is a strategic environmental ritual constructed by the eco-monks, in which two traditions (Buddhism and local folk religion) are harnessed as a tool for environmental protection activities and

7 The concept of sacred ecology has been used in a variety of ways to describe the relationship between nature and traditional ecological knowledge in traditional societies (see Berkes 2012: 11; Hornborg 2008a: 151). Modern indigenous peoples who are knowledgeable about ecology and environmental issues have formulated the concept of sacred ecology by combining their current traditional knowledge with science, ethics and spirituality. More recently, such sacred ecological thinking has led to a 'pan-Indian ecology' in which spirituality and ethics are just as important to the study of ecology and the environment as scientific competence (Hornborg 2008a: 152–4). Thus, the concept of sacred ecology can be understood as a construct that combines science and religion to achieve specific goals. In this way, for example, the environmental struggles of the Mi'kmaq can be defined as their contribution to the sacred ecology of indigenous peoples in North America (Hornborg 2008a: 156).

also for certain pedagogical and national objectives.[8]

This is where Rappaport's notion of the effectiveness of ritual activity in comparison to many other activities comes into play. Religious rituals are basic social functions that refer to immutable, fundamental sacred principles that cannot be influenced or challenged (Rappaport 1979: 174). What was essential to the effectiveness of the Mi'kmaq community's environmental activities was the difficulty faced by outsiders in successfully objecting to the ritual and religious claims through established secular discourse. The effectiveness of Thai rituals is linked to the deterrence built through them: spirits may cause harm if trees are cut down. Effectiveness is also reflected in the way monks report having exchanged teaching or other demonstrations for rituals they consider more efficient. Participating in the ritual involves communicating with the supernatural, for example by means of offerings, dancing, singing, drumming or tying a monk's robe around a tree. The metaperformativity of the ritual is essential here, and its effectiveness is reinforced by the fact that the ritual is an embodied experience. Susan Darlington stresses that the real power of rituals lies in the affective experiences they evoke in participants and that people carry in their everyday lives (Darlington 2012: 54–5). Ritual involves participation in an activity that represents and constructs both a supernatural reality and a relationship to it through embodied performance.

Another way of looking at tree-ordination rituals is to consider them in relation to Rappaport's idea of a hierarchical structure of rituals. Rituals consist of different layers or levels that are hierarchically related to each other. At the unchanging heart of rituals are 'the ultimate sacred postulates', which refer to the supernatural, such as deities and spirits. An example of this is the Christian creed (Rappaport 1999: 263). Surrounding the ultimate sacred principles are 'protective belts' (see Cassell 2014: 423), layers of principles and concepts that are more subject to change. By modifying these belts, a community can respond to changing circumstances and disruptions while maintaining the truth value of certain fundamental principles. The next protective belt consists of the 'cosmological axioms', by which Rappaport refers to conceptions about the structure of the universe and the various relationships through which the universe is constructed. These relationships may include, for example, the hierarchy and internal relations of the spirit world, or the relations of human beings to the spirit world (Rappaport 1999: 264).

The next belt consists of various rules, guidelines or taboos that govern, for example, relationships between people or between people and states of affairs and the activities related to them. These relationships may include rules relating to gender relations, for example, and the roles and tasks assigned to the sexes. These kinds of rules are represented in rituals, but they also guide people's everyday activities (Rappaport 1999: 264–6). Then come various rules of social life, such as political agreements or rules of economic exchange, as well as promises and oaths. The closer one moves to the centre, the more general and significant the principles and rules become, while the further one moves from the core, the more specific and concrete the rules become. The ultimate sacred postulates at the centre are also the vaguest,

8 Similar eco-pedagogical and national strategies can be seen in the Hindu *Ganga aarti* ritual, in which ghee lamps are offered to worship the Ganges (see e.g. Luthy 2019).

referring to nothing in this world, because their point of reference is outside natural reality (Rappaport 1999: 275, 450; Cassell 2014: 423; Hoey and Fricke 2007: 591).

The idea of the hierarchical nature of rituals can be applied in different ways when considering environmental rituals. The tree ordination ritual constructs and confirms the underlying sacred principles of the two religious traditions, which in the case of Buddhism are related to the alleviation of suffering and in the case of the villagers to the belief in tree-dwelling spirits who are also able to influence people's lives. At the same time, however, the principles, guidelines or rules related to the outer layers of rituals can be modified. The ordination of trees involves a wide range of modifications and additions to the traditional initiation ritual. These include, for example, village plays that emphasise the immediate need to protect the forest (Darlington 2012: 71) or the drinking of consecrated water instead of the traditional sprinkling of water. Sanctified water is usually understood to have a powerful ritual function, and people want to ensure that they receive drops sprinkled by the monk during the ritual. In the tree-ordination ritual, village leaders occasionally drink the consecrated water in front of an image of Buddha to seal their promise to protect the forest. According to Susan Darlington, this symbolic act made protecting or destroying the forest a karmic activity, with good rewards for protecting the forest and bad rewards for destroying it. These rewards in turn have implications with respect to reincarnation or else already affect one's standing in this life (Darlington 1998).

The innovative nature of environmental rituals can also be explored through the concept of 'inter-rituality'. Inter-rituality refers to the process of borrowing activities or elements from other rituals. Through this process, it is possible both to invent new rituals and to refer to them as an old tradition at the same time. Inventing rituals is about selecting elements from other rituals that already exist and are understood as 'traditional'. These elements are then adapted to fit a new framework. By reusing older elements as building blocks for a new ritual, it is also easier to introduce completely new elements without disturbing the idea of the traditional nature of the ritual. According to Hornborg, it is important that the participants in the ritual are aware of the traditional elements of the ritual and, through them, interpret the new ritual as part of the existing tradition. When inventing a ritual, it is essential to find a balance between old and new elements (Hornborg 2017: 17; Uro 2016: 75; Rappaport 1999: 32–3). From this perspective, the environmental rituals of both the Mi'kmaq and Thai monks can be seen as invented rituals that build on familiar and traditional elements but also acquire new content, form and meaning. In this way, the external layers of the ritual structure are creatively modified to better respond to a particular challenge posed by social conditions, while still preserving the sacred principle at the heart of the religious tradition.

The fact that ritual is a response to disruption and an attempt to adapt to changing circumstances inevitably leads to inter-rituality and the (re)invention of ritual. Even 'traditional' rituals must be adapted to a new context, which requires not only a process of adaptation but also creative action. The content of the outer layers of rituals may change, but the forms are then better preserved. Indeed, according to Avery Morrow invented rituals are usually popularised by appealing to familiar forms, such as dressing, singing or various power relations (Morrow 2011: 53). The act of tying an orange monk's robe around

a tree is essential to the ritual of ordaining the trees. However, the content and meaning of the ritual has changed compared to the traditional ritual of initiating a novice monk into the *sangha*.[9]

Rappaport argues that the ritual form communicates something that cannot be communicated in any other way. The form communicates certainty, meaning, specificity and public acceptability regardless of the individual's beliefs (Cassell 2014: 422; Rappaport 1979: 174, 190; see also Bell 1997). The ritual form thus confirms the importance and relevance of the content. What is particularly relevant in environmental rituals is how they are implemented and what tradition they reinforce. To be effective, environmental rituals must be linked to tradition through form. The tree ordination ritual is given meaning by the Buddhist tradition, on the one hand, and by local vernacular religious thought on the other. Both are used to achieve persuasiveness and impact. The importance of the form is also illustrated by the way in which the tree-ordination ritual is constructed in different contexts with different content while still retaining a certain form and structure. In addition to the ordination of trees, the ritual includes, for example, offerings and the erection of a statue of Buddha and a shrine for the spirits. The importance of the form in ritual is also illustrated by Susan Darlington's (2012: 63) observation that in initiation rituals, it is not important what songs are sung but the fact that they are sung at all.

9 This is also a point that generated a great deal of criticism at the beginning. According to Susan Darlington, members of the *sangha* and urban middle class in particular were shocked and outraged that trees were being ordained in a place reserved for humans. However, attitudes gradually changed, and tree ordinations have now become an accepted and popular activity in Thailand (Darlington 2012: 11).

The role of religion and rituals in sanctifying the ecosystem

Rappaport writes in *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999) about the way in which rituals can be used in ecological thinking and environmental action. Rituals can introduce both moral principles and efficacy and thereby build a deeper commitment to environmental action. Rappaport also suggests that religions in the West, such as Christianity, could also play a role in sanctifying understandings of the ecosystem and its functioning. This could help both to preserve the 'integrity of the world' and also revitalise the religions in secularised societies (Rappaport 1999: 456–61).

As this article has shown, a religiously motivated conservation perspective can in many ways be seen as more persuasive and influential than a secular or political perspective. According to Catherine Albanese, religious explanatory models and the rituals that reinforce and construct them provide a guide to action that links theology and ethics, theory and practice. The fact that religious models and rituals derive their legitimacy and strength from a supernatural reality also forms the basis from which other models – such as political ones – cannot spring (Albanese 1997: 41–2).

It should be noted, however, that the temporal, social and cultural context plays an important role when considering the effectiveness of rituals or their unquestioned nature. The ultimate sacred postulates at the heart of religious ritual are not the same from one culture and religious tradition to another, making rituals inevitably context-bound and exclusive. They are based on shared cultural knowledge. Fundamental sacred postulates can

also change over time within a tradition. Furthermore, the meaning of rituals can always be questioned from outside the tradition. Similarly, if new ritual innovations, such as environmental rituals, are too far removed from tradition, they can also be challenged from within traditions. Indeed, Rappaport's global vision of the sanctification of the ecosystem seems in many ways utopian in religiously and culturally pluralistic and secularised societies. Similarly, the idea of uncontested or even widely shared environmental rituals is challenging, to say the least.

On the other hand, the importance of the (strategic) sanctification of nature has been increasingly highlighted when studying the role of religion in an era of environmental crisis. One starting point for this kind of thinking can be seen in Lynn White's (1967) call to either create a new religion or reinterpret the old one to help solve the environmental crisis. In the post-White debate, others have suggested that religious thinking contains elements that can be used to shape people's relationship with nature and the actions that flow from it in the desired direction. In this case, religion is precisely the means by which thinking and action are guided (see Pesonen 1999: 26). A religiously motivated sanctification of nature makes – depending on the tradition – the destruction of nature a sin or a taboo violation, for example (Heiskala 1990: 311).

In the theocentric thinking of monotheistic religions, nature can be defined as sacred because it is the creation of God, and humans are responsible to God for the care of creation. Humans are understood in this context as stewards appointed by God to guard his properties (Bakken 2005: 1598–9). In the viewpoints that emphasise the intrinsic value of nature, on the other hand, nature is given a value independent of humans and humans are understood as an organic part of nature. This may also be reflected in the sanctification and deification of nature and in various animistic, pantheistic or panentheistic conceptions. Such thinking can be found, for example, in eco-paganism or in the eco-spiritualist trends of Christianity, where the universe is understood as the 'body of God'. Spiritual ecology and various secular forms of radical environmental activism may also seek to re-sanctify nature, drawing inspiration from Asian and indigenous religions (Beyer 1997: 217; Kearns 1996: 63; Taylor 2005a: 1326; Sponsel 2017: 221, 225).

In this sense, Rappaport's vision and desire is reflected in various ways in traditional religions and new forms of religiosity, as well as in secular environmental activism. The overall starting point is an emphasis on the fundamental connection and equality between humans and the rest of nature. The environmental rituals examined in this article also operate along the lines of Rappaport's central idea: by creatively combining various elements of tradition, nature-sanctifying rituals are constructed that both pursue and implement environmental protection measures. At the same time, these invented rituals revive and enliven tradition and strengthen community identity. ■



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