

Anthropology Book Forum

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DIMITRIS XYGALATAS, 2022, *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living*, London: Profile Books, 312 pp., ISBN 978-1-78816-102-2

Dimitris Xygalatas' book *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living* delves into the profound significance of rituals across diverse cultures, exploring their role in shaping human behaviour, fostering group cohesion, and influencing social dynamics. Xygalatas uncovers various functions of rituals, their evolutionary origins, and how they can affect our well-being in various contexts, from extreme rituals in village settings to elite sports and workplace practices. The themes of collective effervescence, the bonding effects of rituals, and their potential positive impact on mental health and group dynamics are central to Xygalatas' research and the ideas presented in the book. He draws connections between seemingly diverse rituals, ranging from extreme events like fire-walking to more common experiences like workplace activities and communal feasts. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that melds anthropology, psychology, neuroscience, and sociology, Xygalatas offers insights into the complex nature of rituals and their intricate effects on individuals and societies.

Having observed mesmerising Candomble rituals in northeast Brazil, documented intense Shia ceremonies in India, learnt the exciting music and movement of combat-dancing rituals in Indonesia, walked 380kms on pilgrimage in the North of Spain, and participated in a firewalking ceremony in the Philippines, I was keen to read this book to learn more about ritual in human societies. As I plunged into Xygalatas' book, I was excited to learn that much of what anthropologists observe in their fieldwork and much of what people participating in ritual report is being consolidated with experimental studies. Learning how ritual can improve psychological health is both reassuring and affirming. This book not only affirms the value of ritual as an area of academic study and research but also explores how it can profoundly impact our psychological well-being. In *Ritual*, Xygalatas offers an accessible and engaging exploration of this essential aspect of human cultural life, inviting his reader to contemplate rituals more deeply and rigorously.

Xygalatas' expertise, and consequently the book's primary focus, revolves around extreme rituals, those perched at the zenith of the spectrum of emotional stress, physical pain, or energy expenditure (p. 12). The front cover, featuring what appears to be a photo of a tea ritual, depicts ritual practices at the other end of the spectrum. In another edition of the book, sky lanterns grace the cover, evoking feelings of calmness and serenity. Although the book does not extensively discuss every day or less extreme rituals, it effectively stirs curiosity about more familiar, common, and widespread rituals that often blur the fine line between ritual and habit. Will most readers view ritual as something exotic, something done by others but not by 'us'? After all, how do the body modification rituals of the Global South differ fundamentally from extreme practices like plastic surgery, labiaplasty, or even gruelling gym routines? While the differences might seem apparent, the underlying similarities are, perhaps, even more intriguing to consider. Xygalatas boldly posits that rituals are "truly universal human behaviours," a premise that invites readers to explore the profound connections that bind us across cultural boundaries.

To fully appreciate the spirit of the book, a glimpse into the author's background is helpful. Dimitris Xygalatas, a cognitive anthropologist, stands as a prominent figure in the study of ritual, religious practices, and the underlying cognitive and social mechanisms. His expansive journey has taken him through esteemed institutions including Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Queen's University Belfast, Aarhus University, Princeton University, Masaryk University, and University of Connecticut, where he has collaborated with leading researchers in the field of religion. Xygalatas' approach to ritual behaviour aligns with cognitive and evolutionary perspectives, seeking to decipher the rationale behind seemingly irrational and resource-intensive behaviours such as rituals. He explores the adaptive functions that these behaviours might have evolved to serve, including group cohesion, identity formation, and social bonding.

Xygalatas' methodology encompasses a blend of ethnography, experimental methods, and cross-cultural analysis to explore various aspects of ritual behaviour and its significance. Through innovative means such as psychophysiological measurements and behavioural observations, he has probed into the intricate psychological and physiological processes that underlie ritual practices. He has applied this methodological approach to his fieldwork in various cultural settings, including the Caribbean, India, Mauritius, and Greece. His cross-cultural lens allows him to investigate how ritual practices and their effects differ across

different societies and contexts. Ultimately, Xygalatas' research illuminates the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of ritual. Beyond the realms of anthropology, his work reverberates through neighbouring disciplines including psychology, sociology, and religious studies, offering valuable insights into the profound and enigmatic human practice of ritual.

Comprising nine easy to read chapters with catchy titles, *Ritual* seamlessly combines engaging narrative with the latest scientific findings to introduce readers to the wonders, significance and paradox of ritual behaviour. The key points illuminated in the book are that (1) ritual, as demonstrated by the ancient site of Göbekli Tepe, predates the hallmarks of civilization, including agriculture and permanent settlement, suggesting that it was a significant impetus for people to form large groups; (2) rituals extend beyond their social aspect to serve as psychological tools, providing structure and predictability that alleviate stress and anxiety amidst uncertainty; (3) rituals possess a profound social dimension, acting not merely as social glue but as superglue, fostering togetherness, emotional alignment, and a transformative sense of unity and cohesion; (4) rituals mark pivotal life events, define social relationships, and craft meaningful experiences that mould an individual's autobiographical self and shape their identity; and (5) while the manifestations of rituals may evolve, they endure across secular societies, persisting because they fulfill a fundamental human need for connection, meaning, and self-discovery.

Xygalatas' work primarily aligns with the functionalist perspective on rituals. Other anthropological lenses, such as structuralist and interpretive approaches, can bring additional layers of complexity to the study of ritual. In various cultural contexts, rituals can serve varied purposes that extend beyond group formation. They may reinforce power structures or accentuate social hierarchies rather than fostering unity. In certain scenarios, rituals might even exclude specific groups or individuals, challenging the notion of universal togetherness by creating divisions or perpetuating inequalities. Extreme rituals, such as initiation rituals marked by elements of pain or humiliation, can even serve contradictory functions, often entailing significant stress and anxiety. To add to this complexity, the meanings attributed to rituals can be malleable over time. Various segments of a society may interpret the same ritual through diverse lenses, resulting in nuanced and multifaceted understandings. Additionally, rituals can undergo transformation or fade into obscurity due to shifting social, political, or economic landscapes. Unpacking the adaptability and responsiveness of rituals to

changing contexts, as well as their profound and multifarious functions within diverse cultural settings, presents a complex challenge. Xygalatas' book leaves room to flesh out these dimensions of ritual with the possibility of turning to alternative and complementary ethnographic perspectives to add rich analytical layers.

Xygalatas' functionalist perspective on ritual is coupled with an adaptationist understanding of its evolutionary origins. Nonadaptationist theories, which Xygalatas dismisses, extend beyond the evolutionary glitch description he briefly describes. Nonadaptationist concepts such as exaptations, spandrels and relaxed selection could offer a complementary and nuanced view of ritual's multifaceted nature. While I recognise Xygalatas' book is intended for a general audience, the urge to delve deeper is hard to resist. For example, could his characterisation of ritual as exhibiting a high degree of redundancy—a term, which strictly speaking, refers to structural repetition—be more intricately described by thinking about ritual in terms of degeneracy—a term which refers to the structural variation underlying functional plasticity? The concept allows for more flexibility in documenting varied ritual practices and potentially offers greater explanatory power concerning evolutionary dynamics. Xygalatas lays a strong foundation for comprehending the significance and functions of ritual. Yet, his work also sparks curiosity about uncharted territories within ritual theory. Might there be fruitful intersections between adaptationist and nonadaptationist viewpoints, fostering a richer and more comprehensive understanding of this profoundly human phenomenon?

Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living by Dimitris Xygalatas is tailored for a popular audience. As an educator, I can appreciate how useful this book would be for students studying introductory anthropology and for students of research psychology learning how to apply experimental methods outside the laboratory. This book, as a didactic tool, possesses the capacity to not only introduce more students to the discipline of anthropology but also kindle a deeper appreciation for anthropological theory and methodologies among those beyond our immediate academic sphere. While seasoned anthropologists may find themselves desiring more thick description and probably more ethnographic analysis, educators adept at pedagogical innovation can seize the opportunity to use this book to scaffold their student's learning. Though one may occasionally find themselves wishing for further elaboration, such desires are precisely what spark meaningful and captivating classroom discussions. It compels us to ask, What more remains to be

uncovered? What questions remain unanswered? Xygalatas' book transcends the mere provision of answers; it awakens a sense of awe, fascination, and wonder in those newly introduced to the world of anthropology. In celebrating this book, I recognise the tremendous effort it has made to bridge the gap, rendering complex concepts accessible, anthropological discourse readable, and the subject matter genuinely engaging. It is, in essence, a testament to the boundless potential for anthropology to captivate and enlighten a wider audience. *Ritual* is an accessible launching pad to learn more about anthropology, to prompt students to ponder anthropological questions, and to inspire new research on human rituals. The true measure of its impact will be the extent to which this book reaches its intended audience, enticing more students to embark on the fascinating journey of anthropology.

On the heels of several other academic books on ritual by Harvey Whitehouse, Robert Bock, Mary Farag, Martha Rampton, Robbie Davis-Floyd and Charles Laughlin and those edited by Al-Suadi, Soham, Richard S. Ascough, and Richard E. DeMaris as well as Risto Uro, Juliette Day, Rikard Roitto, Richard DeMaris to name a few, Xygalatas is pitching his work to a broader readership. His effort to make the subject accessible to a wider audience is indeed laudable, particularly in an era where the ability to bridge the gap between academia and the general public holds immense value. While some phrases and ideas may raise the occasional eyebrow among anthropologists, it's crucial for colleagues within the discipline to extend generosity to a fellow anthropologist who has ventured beyond the confines of academic jargon to engage with a diverse readership. Initiatives like this, aimed at bringing anthropology to a wider audience, enable us to ignite enthusiasm for the discipline and, subsequently, invite readers to delve deeper into the intricacies of anthropological inquiry. Obscurity and abstraction have not been the most effective ambassadors for anthropology. Embracing the occasional touch of exoticism might just be the catalyst we need to initiate conversations that should have been part of the public discourse long ago. Getting books like this into the hands of a wide readership allows us to enthuse people about the import of anthropology and then say, "But wait, there's more!" Xygalatas' book, despite the critiques that may arise within the field, serves as an essential vehicle for anthropology to engage, inspire, and educate beyond its traditional borders.

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