

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left. The text "Anthropology Book Forum" is written in a white, sans-serif font on a dark blue background.

# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

**ROBBIE DAVIS-FLOYD AND CHARLES D. LAUGHLIN**, 2022, *Ritual: What It Is, How It Works, and Why*, New York: Berghahn Books, 322 pp., ISBN 978-1-80073-528-6

The book "Ritual: What It Is, How It Works, and Why" offers valuable insights for both professionals in the field of religion and newcomers to the topic. The authors' clear writing style makes complex ideas accessible, making this book a useful resource for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of rituals. It effectively addresses both the basic and the more nuanced questions, presenting deep reflections in an understandable and even relatable manner.

Davis-Floyd illustrates many of the chapters from the deep honesty and vulnerability of having lost her daughter in a tragic accident, which far from being an unnecessary self-references, they are genuine illustrations of the power of ritual to go through grief. This emotional depth may surprise readers who think it impossible to feel moved while reading an anthropological manual.

Another noteworthy aspect is the consistent interplay between the diverse examples that illustrate each chapter, which enhances the text's didactic and engaging quality. These examples range from various ethnographic studies, including those drawn from the author's own fieldwork, to more familiar scenarios and personal anecdotes. This dynamic movement between the unfamiliar and the everyday feels reminiscent of an already classic book such as Paul Bohannan's "We, the Alien" (1991).

The book is divided into ten chapters and two appendices. The first chapter introduces how ritual symbols enter and interact with different areas of the brain, synchronizing physical sensations, emotion, meaning, and intellect. Authors' definition of ritual is "a patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of cultural (or individual) beliefs and values" (p. 256). Far from being reductionist or mechanistic, this definition sets the stage throughout the book to think about ritual not only from a religious framework -as it may happen due to the popular use of the term-, but from a more secular perspective. The second chapter explores the relationship between values, rituals, and symbols, and their insertion in the cognitive matrix of those who perform them. It also incorporates elements of neuroscience, useful for those interested in questions related to cognition, and perception. Additionally, this chapter discusses how rituals function as an 'enactment' of worldviews, and myths, but also of paradigms (for example, rituals in the field of biomedicine), ideas that are explored in depth in the third chapter.

In chapter number three, the authors discuss the process of "truing," which refers to the cognitive mechanism through which we take certain assumptions for granted, and how the nature of these explanations varies across different cultures. Chapter four presents a particularly intriguing topic—states of consciousness. I personally would have appreciated a more extensive exploration of this subject, especially regarding the concept of "warp of consciousness," defined as "points of experiential and neurophysiological transition between states of consciousness" (p. 81). But besides that, the chapter is well constructed and includes an interesting discussion regarding the role of ritual as a catalyst and facilitator for these

transitions between different consciousness states, which leads to a broader examination of cultural perspectives on consciousness. Specifically, the authors propose in this section a division between more "monophasic" cultures, which prioritize sensory experiences and material values over spiritual development and other forms of knowledge, and "holistic" or "polyphasic" cultures. These categories, not intended to be rigid or exclusive, are presented as ideal types existing along a spectrum, which resulted in my opinion reminiscent of classical anthropological essays.

Towards the middle of the book, the following chapters discuss the technologies and techniques that constitute ritual (chapter five), how ritual is framed both symbolically and physically, and what that framing implies. For this, the authors will return several times to the concept of the perceived inevitability and inviolability of ritual, and examine the consequences when these boundaries are broken. Additionally, chapter six addresses the role of laughter and joy in the ritual process—elements that are often overlooked in the study of rituals. Throughout the book, and especially in this chapter, the authors emphasize the importance of emotions in shaping the ritualistic experience, including their role in the symbolic efficacy of rituals.

The seventh chapter explores the performative elements of ritual across different cultures and expands once again into the psychological and neuroscientific aspects of the question. This exploration will culminate in the eighth chapter, titled “The Four Stages of Cognition, where they present a scale of “open-mindedness” that ranges from fundamentalism and fanaticism to global humanism, proposing ethnocentrism and cultural relativism as intermediate stages.

Towards the end, and connecting with its' predecessor, chapter nine reflects the paradoxical role of ritual, which can serve as both an agent of social change and a preserver of the status quo. It also explores how ritual can act as a reversible mechanism for navigating crises, as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, among other instances. Chapter ten concludes with examples of the origins of various rituals, examining both collective and individual practices, such as family rituals like weddings and memorials, as well as the feedback loop between belief and its effectiveness.

The book covers many useful notions for both the curious general public and academics. However, given its vast scope and rich conceptual content, the authors recommend delving into the suggested bibliography if one wishes to explore a particular term in depth. The authors strike a balance, exploring these phenomena and concepts with sufficient depth to provide the reader with a general understanding without being overwhelming. The book feels more like a comprehensive atlas of the vast world of ritual, rather than a specialized manual. It is illustrated with clear and useful examples, and comparative tables are included when necessary.

At the end of each chapter, there is a thorough summary to review the content covered, which, combined with the well-defined structure of each unit, gives the reader a sense of having attended a university lecture. Finally, beyond the theoretical elements, the two appendices that conclude the volume are noteworthy for their practical value. The first appendix consists of a checklist on creating one's own rituals, while the second provides recommendations of documentary films for those eager to explore the subject further.

In conclusion, in this book the authors successfully bridge the gap between academic rigor and general interest, making it a valuable resource for both scholars and casual readers alike. Whether the reader is seeking to expand their knowledge of rituals, or simply curious about their impact on society, this book offers a meaningful journey into that world. The inclusion of practical appendices further enhances its utility, encouraging readers to apply the insights

gained to their own lives. Overall, this work is a significant contribution to the field of anthropology and a must-read for anyone interested in the power of ritual.

**Keywords:** Ritual; Ethnography; Cognitive Anthropology; Anthropology of Emotion; Symbolism

## References

Bohannan, Paul. *We the Alien*. New York: Random House, 1991.

## Author Bio

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