

Among Patriarchs and Baboons: Ritual, Morality and Indexicality

According to the ritual theory of Roy A. Rappaport (1926-1997), ritual actions help to enforce the social contract because the particularity of the ritual form works as an antidote against what Rappaport termed as “Lies and Babel”, that is lying and deception. When a person participates in a ritual, she succumbs to the inherent ideology of the ritual system (“the canonical message”), and as such her mere participation and implied acceptance, helps to enforce the system. In this paper, I am going to focus on Rappaport’s work on “comissive speech acts” and ritual’s ability to establish and maintain moral conventions. Using oath-making rituals in the Hebrew Bible as a case-study, and with a brief detour to the greeting behavior among male olive baboons (Watanabe and Smuts 2008), I bring Rappaport’s ritual theory into dialogue with more recent work on evolutionary psychology, religion and morality (Teehan, Sober and Wilson, Norenzayan). I particularly wish to explore the importance of indexicality in ritual actions for the interplay between morality and ritual.