GOING BEYOND THE WORDS: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY IN CIRILO F. BAUTISTA'S "RITUAL"

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Abstract

Despite the ever-growing body of scholarship on the short stories of Cirilo F. Bautista, particularly "Ritual," arguably his most popular and widely anthologized piece of short fiction, his treatment of reality as a product of consensus through communication, has not been sufficiently explored. His use of the phrases "The Words" and "Going Beyond," deliberately title-cased, and his description of community rituals, customs, and traditions invite an investigation into the nature and definition of the concepts embodied in these terms and rituals, how they are communicated, and how the characters understand and integrate these into their self-identities and interactions with others. Of note is how the interiority and experiences of certain characters drive the process of meaning-making through communication to construct a symbolic reality, that represents and maintains the social order described in the work, as the actions of the central character seek to enact social transformation through anti-structural action.

A new reading of this short story through a Carey-ian lens makes possible a renewed understanding of Bautista's story as an exploration of communication along two paths: as culture, and as a tool and impetus for driving social change within the community-as-setting.

Keywords: social construction, ritual view of communication, communication as culture, communication theory, Cirilo F. Bautista, ritual, fiction

Introduction

Cirilo F. Bautista's "Ritual" won First Prize in the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature in the English Short Story Category (1970-1971). It has been widely anthologized and shared over the internet; it is a favorite assignment of English and literature teachers to young students to analyze and dissect for themes.

To summarize it: The story has a first-person perspective, and the events in it are seen through the point-of-view of a young man, a teacher of language and literature, who has left his wife and taken a job in a mountain town where he meets Dayleg, a member of a community in that place. Dayleg, a teacher like himself, educated in Western ways, wants the community to change, give over their worship of ancient gods, and adopt modern thoughts and lifestyles. Unable to win over the elders with arguments, Dayleg takes the Narrator with him to "forbidden grounds," a place in the forest the community believes is sacred to the gods. It is where "the gods hunt." There Dayleg slays their sacred white boar. This shocks the Villagers, who are in terror over the sacrilege. Dayleg leaves. After two years, he returns, looking haggard and beaten. The community is holding a sacrifice to placate the gods angered by Dayleg's transgression. The narrator observes the ceremony, and sees Dayleg dancing for the gods during the feast. The next day, the Narrator returns to the city.

The postcoloniality of the story is evident from the plot, particularly in the obviousness of the device wherein a champion of new, "Western" ways and thoughts attempts to overthrow the indigenous highland traditions, culture, and religious beliefs that have reified over time, but fails.

"Ritual" begins with an epigraph that encapsulates the entire narrative in these words: "The Desecration of the Grove / The Killing of the Boar, and / What the Gods Did." The words are arranged as in a poem; the nouns and verbs are deliberately capitalized. The first paragraph is one huge chunk of text, similarly with certain words capitalized, signaling their significance in the narrative, written in a lyrical style expounding on a philosophy of a certain community, and it is with this knowledge that the reader begins his journey into the world of the people living in the Mountains.

The rest of the story is largely made up of various conversations. After the exposition contained in the first paragraph, the sentence immediately after that is a line of dialogue: "The trouble with you," Roy said, "is that you are a coward." (Bautista 445). Through the characters' dialogues may be seen the communication taking place within Bautista's fictional community, and how its rituals and customs play a large part in shaping and determining the characters' actions, even their fates.

One theme that emerges from a cursory reading is the importance of words—words in and as of themselves, and woven into conversations. In the first paragraph Bautista refers to "The Words," meaning the phrase "Going Beyond," again both capitalized. But are there other Words and are they revealed in the story? What is their purpose? I submit that they refer to a philosophy shared by the community, one that is important to them and that encompasses a definition of both belonging and otherness.

Through this I introduce the approach I will take to provide an alternate reading of the story, one grounded in communication theory, specifically that propounded by communication theorist James W. Carey—the "ritual view" of communication, as opposed to the regular and dominant "transmission view," which holds that communication is linear, and that messages are "sent" or "conveyed" as things back and forth between sender

and receiver; as he described it, a "process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in spaces for the control of distance and people" (Carey 15).

This Lasswellian sort of linearity and causality, in which communication is about "who says what to whom through what channels and with what effect" (Lasswell 117), while useful when explaining here-to-there communication technology such, as text messaging or emails, or even the posting of a letter through the mail, fails at capturing the dynamism, layeredness, and complexity of human communication, and removes it from the encompassing matrices of culture and society.

Rather, Carey suggested thinking about communication as something with a deeper and more profound use and purpose in human endeavor. He said communication in a "ritual" view is linked to terms such as

> …'sharing,' 'participation,' 'association,' 'fellowship,' and 'the possession of a common faith.' This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms 'commonness,' 'communion,' 'community,' and 'communication.' A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs (15).

Given the term that he chose to describe this view of communication "ritual," he also remarked on its "indebtedness" to religion (15); in what way this may manifest in texts we shall see, as we read Bautista's "Ritual" through this lens.

Conversation

> In the mountains they call it Going Beyond. The way they pronounce The Words endows the sound with a hushed finality as though the meaning had nothing to do with the syllables, the lips just bit parted, afraid to release the Words altogether.

The story begins with these sentences that go on to swell into a page-long paragraph that describes how a certain community in the Mountains (perhaps Baguio City, or one of the highland towns of the Cordilleras?) thinks of someone who has stepped out of the communal embrace. There is fear of Going Beyond, even in their utterance: "…lips just bit parted, afraid to release The Words altogether."

It is a fate worse than death, and at the same time beyond death; the words are used to speak of someone who lives yet is somehow dead:

> "He's gone beyond," the father would say. "No, he's not dead, but he's gone beyond." Beyond is more than the physical boundaries of the Village…It is not Death. It is not Life. It is not Life and Death put together. You may give it any name you want, you may declare these people mad, but in the Mountains, they call it Going Beyond.

These, then, are some of The Words—"Going Beyond." Bautista describes the people of that community going to and from their business, with cabbages and green bananas, at the Market or by the Highway waiting for Tourists to buy their vegetables "at a pauper's price." At this point in the story it is unclear what Going Beyond means; a reader might glean that it is a form of transgression, a breaking of cultural norms held significant

by members of the community, communicated to one another through unspoken means. But this is made clear by what transpires later on in the story.

What follows the initial, expository paragraph is a conversation between the Narrator, who remains unnamed throughout the story, and his older brother Roy, who has come to visit him after two years of their not seeing each other. Roy speaks as we would imagine an older brother speaks. In turn he scolds—"The trouble with you is that you are a coward;" explains—"[Luisa] is going to have a baby. You cannot expect a woman like her to remain alone forever;" and shows affection—"I don't know why I came…I wanted to see you." It is through exposition in this first conversation that the background is unraveled for the reader.

The next conversation unrolls the pivotal event in the story: the slaying of the sacred white boar. This is a flashback, and the reader is taken farther back to the time the Narrator first arrives in the community to teach. He meets the school principal Father Van Noort and his fellow teacher Carlos Dayleg, who, after class that day, takes the Narrator back to his hut to drink. Another conversation ensues, but Bautista does not convey this in dialogue, rather as an exposition by the Narrator.

In this particular conversation, they "talked about many things." Dayleg studied pedagogy and philosophy in a Manila university, setting up the reader to understand that this is an educated man, and that his past and present attempts to push his community into modern times are not without basis. Dayleg explains to the Narrator that "he has come back to his Village to do his part in the 'education of my people.'" Since the age of sixteen, he had been "challenging traditions," shouting at the High Priest, yet at the same time taking part in these customs and traditions himself, dancing to honor the god Lumawig, "He Who Sends Fruition to the Earth."

In these and other conversations throughout the book, we see how the people of the Village communicate the culture and traditions of their tribe, and how Dayleg explains these to the Narrator. The Elders and the Villagers mutter to each other about "Going Beyond" and what it entails, and describe Dayleg's action of killing the boar as sacrilegious—"It is sacred," they intone three times, almost as a litany, as Dayleg shrieks, "It is dead, dead!"

Carey says through communication, knowledge can be transmitted among individuals and groups, the messages "distributed in space for the control of distance and people" (Carey 13). We see this in the way The Words are communicated among the Villagers, in the way the Elders speak of Lumawig and the gods and the community's duty, in terms of worship and respect, to these supernatural entities.

But Carey also says communication has a higher manifestation than to merely inform, educate, or control. Under his "ritual view," communication borrows metaphorically from religion in that the "role of the prayer, the chant, and the ceremony" are highlighted, in order to bring about the "construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action" (Carey 15).

Through conversing with one another, the characters in "Ritual" build, maintain, and destroy relationships and communities, as well as negotiate their understanding of concepts related to family, friends, community, and society as a whole. We see this in the way Dayleg explains to the Narrator all his Village's traditions that he is attempting to break, because he believes they should be challenged. Through this conversation, he also negotiates and renegotiates with himself what he means to do; he tells the Narrator in another conversation, "It's not because my people are uneducated that they cling to ancient traditions," he says. "…it's a reason civilized men like you don't and can't fully understand." Here he is negotiating his own identity—the man from the City is civilized, in contrast to the Villagers and himself.

Dayleg is trying to break free from the traditions that keep him bound to the community, trying to remake himself into someone "civilized" as well.

Through the Careyian lens we see how the Villagers communicate their traditions that they believe maintain the type of society that they are used to. They are content with the status quo, in a way that Dayleg is not. And it is Dayleg, among them, who seeks to destroy the social reality his fellow villagers have created to remake one more to his liking.

Parallel in thought to the concept of conversation is that of dialogue. Berger, explaining Bakhtin, wrote, "Dialogue is basic to understanding communication, not monologue—in which we are talking to ourselves, so to speak" (Berger 62). Dialogism allows two or more voices to discuss and build ways of thinking and belief systems, as well as gives space for other voices to be heard. As we see in "Ritual," all the Villagers, the defiant and deviant Dayleg included, are allowed to have their say, even if The Words they utter may not be to the liking of the others.

Ritual

How are we to think of The Words?

The Words are part of the "ritual" of the Village, if we think of "ritual" as shorthand for the community's traditions, norms, and values. The Words the Villagers refer to are not only "Going Beyond." Any discourse is labeled by them as such, for instance, in the part of the story where Dayleg gathers 30 Villagers at the schoolhouse where he "lecture[s] them on the advantages of forsaking Lumawig and adopting the ways of the Christians."

His listeners sit "neither nodding nor shaking their heads, for they could not follow the ramifications of this strange, exotic dialectics, taking in "The Words" more out of respect for this young man who had been to the university than out of interest for what he was saying…"

Lumawig is the bedrock of the Villagers' faith. For Dayleg to persist in trying to persuade the others to turn away from their god is nothing less than a shattering of the social reality they have carefully built up over many years, in countless conversations about their belief system from one generation to the next. "All ritual begins, then, to use John Pauly's apt phrase, in the gridless ambience of conversation" (Carey, CIQ p. 315).

The Council of village elders "condemned Dayleg's action" and ordered him "upon pain of expulsion from the tribe" to "refrain from expounding foreign philosophy to the natives." Here is clearly an attempt on the part of the elders to maintain their social reality in the face of challenges from other, alien concepts. This is how they hold their constructed society together. And this casting out from the group is the penalty that Dayleg will later face after showing no remorse for killing the white boar.

It is easy, when reading "Ritual," to adopt a cursory, surface-level perspective. A group of Grade 12 students, for instance, will readily identify common themes such as "traditions and change" ('Purple Menageries') and "culture and traditions of people," "how they react to the changes of the times today," and "reconciliation with the past in order to move on forward" (Serrano), a "yearning for change" (Matti), and "activism...a practice that exerts efforts in order to achieve social reform" (Pingol).

Deeper readings can yield interesting insights. One interpretation uses Wolfgang Iser's reception theory to determine that in "Ritual," "Going Beyond" is deviance. "By breaking the laws and traditions of his tribe, Dayleg has become a deviant, he has Gone Beyond. With the ritual, he embraces his roots once more" (Baytan). Deviance is departing from the norm or commonly accepted standards, and Dayleg certainly has done so. In Carey-ian terms, he is unraveling the "ordered, meaningful, cultural world" that the community has created and maintained over time.

At the beginning of this essay I mentioned how "Going Beyond" is spoken by the members of the community with dread: "…lips just bit parted, afraid to release The Words altogether." "Going Beyond" is the fear of isolation, which is the opposite of belongingness. Belongingness is a universal fundamental human motivation found across all cultures and in different types of people, who feel severe consequences for not belonging (Baumeister 499). To act in a deviant manner and so be cast out of the group, as Dayleg has done, can cause severe emotional and psychological distress, as we see in Dayleg's countenance upon his return. He was clad in "dirty maong trousers," his hair was long, "almost touching his shoulders;" he "had lost weight," his eyes were "bloodshot," his voice "old, tired, excruciated by a force too strong for me to unlock." This is in stark contrast to his appearance when he first met the Narrator: "His white trousers and white shirt were spotless; the electric bulb was reflected on his shoes." Dayleg has clearly suffered in the two years since his slaying of the sacred boar.

Dayleg's suffering is both punishment and penance, but the actual act of atonement lies in his participation in the ritual sacrifice and dance. Through his decision, his actions, the movements of his body, he conveys capitulation to the greater will of the community and begs to be allowed to return and be accepted back. His return ticket is his unspoken promise to behave in accordance with the group's culture. Dayleg has realized that his actions were "social practices with social consequences—which is what communication is" (Rothenbuhler 18).

We can also discern in Dayleg's behavior throughout the story an individual's search for his identity. How is Dayleg to think of and about himself, others, and the world around him when he is looking through at least two frames of reference—the tribal belief system he grew up in, and the Western mindset his education has taught him? As Rothenbuhler remarked, "In the ritual aspects of everyday communication, too, people's selves are

constructed and conveyed, their identities are at stake, their hopes are invested" (14). It is the conflict of these two often contradictory philosophies within himself that led to the unraveling of Dayleg's sense of self and gives the story its plot.

In the Village, the social order is communicated through ritual—through the "reality-constructing consequences of communication in both formal rites and ceremonies and in the ritual aspects of everyday activities" (Rothenbuhler 14). And it is also through ritual that Dayleg has sought to destroy this constructed social order. When talking to the Villagers brings him nowhere, he strikes at the heart of the ritual by killing the sacred boar in the sacred grove. And when he seeks to return to the tribe, it is also through ritual that he achieves this, because the "ritual communication aspect of everyday life constructs the realities in which we live" (ibid.).

Finally, as self-conflicted as Dayleg has been, he is also a "moral agent" for change, attempting to change the values by which the tribe conducted itself, through his Words and actions within the Village's belief system; and here "ritual reminds us…of the importance of communication in moral life, of our roles in life as moral agents" (Rothenbuhler 14-15).

Conciliation

In the last part of the story, Dayleg surprises the community by returning during the sacrifice to dance, in an attempt to atone for his earlier transgression. He has suffered in the two years since he had left the group. At first he is reluctant to rejoin the community; when the Narrator tells him that his people are holding a sacrifice tonight, he replies: "But I'm not staying."

But later that night, at the sacrifice, "the noise of a commotion" disturbs the ritual. There is a sound of gongs, and the Narrator thinks at first that he is dreaming, but then he sees "a lone man dancing."

"He's back," the Villagers exclaim, "Dayleg, Dayleg." His feet "stamped the ground in syllables of penance" and he kept dancing, "his feet and arms and soul declaring his inviolable kinship with all that made him what he was and what he would be…"

But Dayleg's gesture is not merely penance, nor to establish "reconciliation," which is the restoration of friendly relations; it is also "conciliation," the placation or appeasement of someone who is angry, and it is through participating in the ritual of the dance at the sacrifice to the gods that Dayleg believes he can avert the misfortune that has befallen upon the community because of his past actions. His initial hesitation to participate in the sacrifice is his last bastion, his holdout against acting contrary to his own avowed convictions.

But ultimately, his separation and isolation from his family and group prove to be grievous; he only wishes to become a part of the community once more and regain his lost sense of belongingness.

It is this placation, this knuckling under to the community's traditions that he had once flouted, that sours the Narrator. Immediately after the description of Dayleg's dance, Bautista abruptly ends the story with the Narrator getting on a bus for the City the very next day. It is a lame ending to an otherwise vibrant story; it would have been satisfying if the writer had returned to the initial device he used in the first paragraph, that of using indigenous wisdom to explain how social order is maintained in that community in the Mountains.

The sudden *volte face*, the return to the City, paints the Narrator as petulant. And a sign of his having failed to understand Dayleg's need for belongingness, for order, for his need to expiate his shame—because even without Words, by his actions alone the Narrator has communicated to Dayleg and the people of the Mountain community that he cares not for their traditions, and that he considers Dayleg as someone who has turned his

back on modern thought to return to the benightedness of superstition.

Can we consider the Narrator to be a deviant as Dayleg has been, because he has helped slay the white boar? But the former is not a member of the community. He is not under the onus to subscribe to their beliefs, and there is no divine retribution for his transgression against the gods by being Dayleg's accomplice, by stepping into the forbidden grounds, by helping Dayleg carry back the carcass. In this story the Narrator has no obligation to help construct and maintain the community's social order—and this he communicates by leaving the Mountain, where he does not belong. And in his leaving, no one says that he has "Gone Beyond," nor does it seem that anyone has even noticed his departure.

Neither is there a need for the Narrator to conciliate anyone, only perhaps his former wife. But he can no longer play a role in her life as she is with someone else. The Narrator has not found where he belongs; he is both inside the social order and outside it. And it is in this sense that he is the Other who shows the two different conditions that an individual may find himself or herself, in relation to a community. In leaving the Mountain, the Narrator has "Gone Beyond," beyond the tribe. But then he never really belonged.

Reading the Communication in Fiction

As Carey said, understanding a culture is a complex matter. He quotes Geertz as having said, particularly in relation to ritual, that "the guiding principle is the same, societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One only has to learn to gain access to them" (453).

Carey also notes Durkheim's comment that "society substitutes for the world revealed to our senses a different world that is a projection of the ideals created by the community" (95). Culture, in other words, is constructed

by society, and the construction is conducted through communication, including rituals and indigenous practices, as Bautista's "Ritual" shows.

This symbolic order that orders the community's ideals is manifested in materials forms, such as "dance, plays, architecture, news stories, strings of speech" (Carey 15). It is this symbolic order that

> Operates to provide, not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds, but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process (ibid.).

It is this underlying social process that Dayleg has sought to overturn and replace with the new, but the old order proves to be less fragile than he had assumed. In the end, it is he who capitulates and seeks to conciliate the gods he had claimed not to believe in. And it is the elders who have proven stronger in their will and in their faith in Lumawig.

What "Ritual" also points out is something Carey has noted—that the commonalities in human thought do not mean that we are both primitive and modern at the same time, "creatures of both reason and superstition." Rather, he views human thought "more as interpretations people apply to experience, constructions of widely varying systems of meaning" that science cannot entirely verify (Carey 48).

"What persons create is not merely one reality, but multiple realities. Reality cannot be exhausted by one symbolic form, be it scientific, religious, or aesthetic," (Carey 49) and I suggest that in order to understand a culture—even a fictional one, such as Bautista has created in "Ritual"—we need to create that "access" spoken of by Geertz, by fastening upon the interpretations made about human existence and systematizing them to "make them more readily available to us," as Carey says (49).

This is the "process of making large claims from small matters," studying forms such as "rituals, poems, plays, conversations, songs, dances, theories, myths" (49), and yes, even short stories, which are an important tool for understanding the self and the world, and constructing knowledge about them. As Careyian scholar Eve Munson put it, "As children and as adults, Carey notes, we tell stories about ourselves. It is a way of explaining ourselves to ourselves" (xi).

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