



# The Anthropology of Performance

A Reader

*Edited by Frank J. Korom*

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# The Anthropology of Performance

*A Reader*

*Edited by*  
*Frank J. Korom*

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# The Anthropology of Performance: An Introduction

Frank J. Korom

When William Shakespeare's character Jacques declares that "all the world's a stage" in the play *As You Like It*, he wasn't kidding. The idea that life is a stage and that we are all actors performing our selves in a routine way on a daily basis is nothing new, but it provides a valuable way to think about how human beings expressively and aesthetically create their cultural worlds through interaction with others. This sort of artistic interaction employed in everyday communication requires us to use all of our abilities, both kinetic and verbal, in a competent fashion to convey meaningful messages to those around us. Indeed, although controversial, some evolutionary linguists have argued that our very first expressive acts that led to the emergence of language as a communicative medium were performative in nature.

Charles Darwin had already pointed out in 1872 that the strongest emotions expressed by animals were lust and hostility, which may have developed as the first verbal threats voiced by humans, especially the male of the species. Yet, while most contemporary biolinguists (e.g., Newmeyer, 2003) would agree that it is extremely difficult to derive human speech from lower primate grunts, groans, yelps, and howls, there is some evidence to suggest that the aggressive oral displays of male apes might be linked to the early development of the human male propensity to use ritual insults and other forms of expletives (see Van Lancker and Cummings, 1999). Indeed, insulting, teasing, and dueling with words (i.e., agonistic verbal behavior) are some

of the earliest verbal traits demonstrated by male children, which later in life provide them the skills to function competitively in society (see Gossen, 1976; Eckett and Newmark, 1980). Linguistic evidence suggests that these expressive forms were predominantly male centered at first, functioning to release aggression, compete for status, and increase mating opportunities in a non-violent fashion (Progovac and Locke, 2009), where words replaced weapons, such as in modern-day Yemen, where they replace bullets in the oral poetry of men (e.g., Caton, 1993). From this perspective, performative utterances (see Austin, 1962) are extremely important for the study of human behavior. While another way of thinking about primate behavior among ethologists has developed that emphasizes cooperation and altruism over aggression (e.g., de Waal, 1989, 1998), it is still not surprising that one of the perspectives for studying culture that emerged from the discipline of anthropology focused on the role of cultural performances, be they verbal or paralinguistic in nature.

Any history of performance studies could choose to begin a chronological survey of its development at different points in time and in different places in space, since the very nature of this field of study is interdisciplinary. Moreover, precisely because of its interdisciplinary nature, very few theorists would achieve a consensus on where to begin such a survey. Since a variety of other texts already exist that attempt to do precisely what I cannot do in this brief introduction (e.g., Schechner, 1985, 1988; Turner, 1986; Striff, 2003; Carlson, 2004; Madison and Hamera, 2006; Bial, 2007; Bell, 2008; Davis, 2008; McKenzie, Roms, and Wee, 2010), I have chosen to focus instead on a particular set of themes that have been important for the way that anthropology as a discipline explores the variegated roles of performance in culture.

As mentioned above, the study of performance is an interdisciplinary area of research that is essentially grounded in three distinct approaches to society and culture. I take my cue here from a valuable survey of the field of performance in folklore studies authored by Limón and Young (1986), in which they identify three major strands of thinking that coalesced into a common body of concerns over the decades leading up to the publication of their article. The first draws on Marxist notions of praxis, life as situated, ordinary practice - a stone mason building a wall, for example (Limón, 1983, 1984); the second emphasizes cultural display or enactment, when a community presents itself publicly in spectacular events such as the many forms of carnivals celebrated publicly throughout the world (Harris, 2003); while the third focuses on verbal art or oral poetics (Hymes, 1981; Tedlock, 1983), which often highlights what the folklorist Dan Ben-Amos (1972) once called “artistic communication in small groups” - an individual or group of performers, such as a lone ballad singer or the gospel choir of a Baptist church and their audiences. These three streams, developed in sociology, anthropology, and folkloristics respectively (but with a good bit of overlap), have drawn on a repertoire of theories that are further derived from a variety of disciplines ranging from theater studies and classics to political science and linguistics (Fine, 1984). The study of performance is thus a convergent field of inquiry that bridges the humanities and the social sciences, which is where I understand anthropology to be situated.

The purpose of this book is to provide readers with a selection of readings that includes examples of all three of the strands mentioned above from a variety of locations around the world, but situates such case studies within the discipline of anthropology, where key figures such as Milton Singer (1972), Clifford Geertz (1980), Victor Turner (1974,

1982), and James Peacock (1968) have utilized performance as a trope for studying culture writ large. The approach, however, is by no means new, since it builds on earlier precedents set by Bronislaw Malinowski (1992) in anthropology, Américo Paredes (1958) in folklore studies, Erving Goffman (1955, 1956, 1974, 1981) in sociology, and Albert Lord (2000) in classics. The essays included herein will therefore draw on a wide variety of sources that are not limited to anthropology but are extremely relevant to it.

Before presenting the contents of each thematic section, it may be useful to ask what exactly we mean by “performance” in the study of human culture. As one contributor to this volume describes it elsewhere, “performances are aesthetic practices – patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment – whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities” (Kapchan, 1995: 479). Yet while performance is based on repetition, mimicry, and reproduction to form ethnic, linguistic, and national traditions, it also varies to a great extent, even from performance to performance of the same play, song, or epic, which is often referred to as the emergent quality of performance (Lord, 2000). “Emergence” here refers to the dynamic quality of performance that allows each expressive event to be shaped by the interactions between performers and audiences. Due to its emergent quality, variation in performance is inevitable, thus making the comparative study of variation an important factor in understanding performances as agents of social change.

The dynamic and creative tension between continuity and innovation is precisely why the study of culture as performance is so fascinating. Because performances by competent individuals are most often enacted in front of an audience, which also has the right and responsibility to interact with performers, making them “co-performers,” the

context of performance is central to understanding and appreciating its emergent quality (Georges, 1969, 1979). For this insight, we are most indebted to the aforementioned Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), the Polish-born anthropologist who is often referred to as one of the fathers of ethnographic fieldwork, along with such other prominent figures as Franz Boas (1858-1942), Frank Cushing (1857-1900), Alice Fletcher (1838-1923), and Ivan Veniaminov (1797-1879).

In describing the genres of oral tradition prevalent among the Trobriand Islanders, among whom he conducted extensive fieldwork, Malinowski famously stated that simply recording the spoken word verbatim is not enough, for it misses the sociological and cultural milieu in which the utterance achieves communicative meaning and significance. Writing words down, he argues, without evoking the atmosphere of the performance, gives us nothing more than a “mutilated bit of reality” (Malinowski, 1992: 104). Indeed, in this oft-repeated statement, an anthropologist who insisted that the audience is as much a part of the performance context as the performers themselves signaled a movement away from the text (e.g., studying the history of a ballad and its patterns of diffusion; see Brown, 2011) and toward the context (e.g., the singer of the ballad and the people who hear it; see Buchan, 1972).

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, this approach was taking root in anthropology. Milton Singer (1961), for example, emphasized the importance of describing and analyzing context in the study of religion, and then went on to develop the idea of what he called “cultural performances,” in which members of a community put themselves on public display for others to see and hear (Singer, 1972). This sort of multi-sensorial engagement with our ethnographic subjects and their cultural productions would become one of the hallmarks of experiential and

phenomenological approaches to fieldwork (see Stoller, 1989). Yet it was not until the 1970s that a convergence of approaches that focused on the texts being performed as well as on the contexts in which they were performed coalesced into a new and distinct interdisciplinary approach strongly allied to the field of anthropology. The new approach came to be known as the ethnography of communication, and it had strong sociolinguistic components embedded in it (Gumperz and Hymes, 1972; Hymes, 1974).

It is within the ethnography of communication literature that some of the most interesting studies of performances began to appear, which influenced a number of other scholars in a variety of fields to turn their attention to the symbolic and communicative dimensions of performance (e.g., Bauman and Sherzer, 1974). By the 1980s, performance had become an integral component in the contextual study of expressive culture in North America. From then onward, a steady stream of studies has been emerging that deals with the dramaturgical dimensions of everyday life, which has given birth to a distinct field of performance studies that is situated at the crossroads of theater and anthropology, thanks to the collaborations of Victor Turner in anthropology and Richard Schechner in theater studies (e.g., Turner, 1982, 1986; Schechner, 1985).

One of the shortcomings of the performance approach that was pointed out by Limón and Young, however, was that it was too micro-ethnographic, focusing on what sociologists referred to as “ethnomethodology,” which often analyzed an unprecedented amount of indigenous detail that some would call the minutiae of everyday life. Responding partly to such critiques of hypersensitivity to context and an overemphasis on ethnographic detail, from the mid-1980s onward anthropology began to question the bounded notion of culture in a world that was caught up in complicated



processes of deterritorialization caused by the increasingly rapid flow of people, ideas, and things across national borders in the postcolonial era, which gave birth to transnational anthropology by the 1990s (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996). This theoretical and methodological move now requires anthropologists and other ethnographers to engage in what has come to be known as multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1998), resulting in the enrichment of the anthropological vocabulary with terms such as “hybridity” (e.g., Kraidy, 2005) to describe the new forms of “mixed” traditions that emerged from global flows. Moreover, it has also opened up anthropology to a greater amount of reflexivity, which gave birth to what some have called dialogical anthropology (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Tedlock, 1987), a trend that had been growing within the discipline since the 1970s (Babcock, 1980; Ruby, 1982; Fischer and Marcus, 1986), but became an issue of extreme concern in the postmodern period. It also opened up new avenues of thinking that interrogated the role of the ethnographer in the field, an idea which forces us to wonder who is performing for whom. From this perspective, the very doing of anthropology becomes an act of performance (Turner and Turner, 1982; Stoller, 1994; Herzfeld, 2001) ([Figure 0.1](#)). A bibliography of further readings is included at the end of this volume to complement the essays included and to facilitate deeper and more thorough research.

**[Figure 0.1](#)** *An anthropologist performing an interview with a bard and his audience in India. (Photo courtesy of Frank J. Korom)*



It is with these trends in mind that the essays in this volume were selected. In an ideal world, the number and scope of selections would have been greater, but difficult decisions had to be made at the production stage concerning length and other such issues that often delimit the range of possibilities. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the selections chosen will prove tantalizing for readers in coursework or on their own, as they begin to explore the fascinating cultural worlds of performance.

## **The Layout of the Book**

The first section is titled “Performance in Prehistory and Antiquity.” It consists of two articles: the first focuses on the role of verbal performance as it relates to work and material culture; the second analyzes the relationship between performance and written texts in classical Greece. As suggested above, the Harvard classicist Albert Lord made significant contributions to performance studies in his quest to understand Homeric epic poetry. His numerous studies of Yugoslavian bards addressed such seminal questions as memory, compositional techniques, and the dynamics of orality and literacy, as well as the impact that cultural encounter and nation building have had on thematic

content and technique over the centuries. To open up discussions about such topics in the context of premodern societies, I have included these two examples, which explore the relationship of singing to rug weaving, and orality to literacy.

The second section, “Verbal Genres of Performance,” draws mostly on the contribution of folkloristics to the study of performance by exploring specific genres such as African American dozens; Nova Scotian yarns; African proverbs and riddles; and the female songs of an indigenous Australian community. This section draws heavily on the “ethnography of speaking” approach advocated by linguistic anthropologists such as John Gumperz and Dell Hymes, whose combined influence on the study of genres of performance has been significant.

The third section is titled “Ritual, Drama, and Public Spectacle.” This section addresses ritual acts such as praying and healing, as well as a dramatic form from India that blends the sacred and the secular, dominant themes that were central to the early debates among the Cambridge School of myth-ritualists (Segal, 1998), and which continued in the theoretical works of Turner and Schechner mentioned above. The closing public spectacle portion of this section, which is indebted to the influential early work of Milton Singer on cultural performances, includes two essays on large-scale events that put cultures on display for others to see, interpret, and interrogate. Because such large-scale events are public, they rely heavily on audience-performer interaction for their success (or failure), and for the multiple meanings that may be conveyed by and taken away from such grandiose affairs.

The fourth section, “Performance and Politics in the Making of Communities,” consists of four chapters, all of which offer a look at how performances of various sorts enable identities to be constructed, be it through poetry recitation

in a Transylvanian village, the use of oratory in Fiji, the playing of a Commonwealth sport in the Caribbean, or an entire nation performing itself as part of a nationalization process in China.

The last section, "Tourist Performances and the Global Ecumene," explores the way that music, dance, pageantry, and ethnic enactments convey state ideologies or counter-ideologies to a larger public, but also how such ideologies can be contested through individual and small-group agency to shape identities on the local and transnational levels. This final section also looks at the inevitable phenomena of globalization and transnationalism, and how the flow of people, ideas, and practices across national borders due to mass media and quicker movement have affected such things as economic livelihood, agricultural practices, dress, ethnic identity, and even religious practices in such far-flung geographic regions as Hokkaidô, Morocco, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. Equally important, however, is to keep in mind that the local often responds resiliently to such global interventions in symbolically coded modes of resistance (Scott, 1985, 1990; Korom, 1999).

Taken together, this collection of essays should stimulate discussions about the performative dimensions of culture making on a global scale, without ignoring the local intricacies of the cultures presented, nor the specific histories that mold and shape each one.

In short, the essays selected for inclusion in this volume provide a broad range of topics all related to the performance of everyday life. The grouping of some essays may seem rather arbitrary in certain places, but this is inevitable, since culture itself is not easily divisible into vacuum-sealed compartments, such as economics, politics, aesthetics, and so forth. Instead, the divisions are heuristic in nature, intended to create a dialogue between chapters and sections. In the hands of curious, engaging readers,

they may provide springboards for lively debate and future research.

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