

Ritual, ideation and performance: A Case Study of Multimedia in Anthropological Research - the Mambila Nggwun Ritual

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Abstract

The Mambila Nggwun ritual is partly a war dance in which the domination of the outlying hamlets by the village centre is dramatically enacted. Principally, it is a celebration of the institution of chief, and it includes many rites to strengthen the chief. Prior to 1997 Zeitlyn had documented the ritual on many occasions, based on his participation and discussions with a range of Mambila consultants. In 1997 Zeitlyn and Fischer returned to Somi to further investigate the ritual by working with local consultants to author visual documents based on the ritual. What we found was puzzling. Although everyone could produce a schematic specimen verbal account of Nggwun with a simple chronological description of its structure, no one we worked with could produce either a description or reliable judgements about order or structure based on audio-visual materials depicting an occurrence of the ritual six months earlier, despite being able to recognize each individual depiction.

Our research results strongly suggest that whatever collective or individual representations of Nggwun may be present, these representations are not easily described using existing anthropological theory regarding cultural representations. Briefly, our evidence suggests that concrete representations of past or future Nggwun rites corresponding to these theories are incomplete, lack structural stability or consistency, and are insufficient to account for enacting Nggwun. These representations are not consistent with interpretive, textual, schema, or existing structural theories of cultural knowledge and practice, all of which require more detailed knowledge than that for which we found evidence. We stress this is a problem for anthropological theory not for Mambila actors!

It appears that Mambila actors do not think of the details of an Nggwun performance as a chronologically structured sequence in which b follows a and is in turn followed by c, and that as a group, Mambila do not make judgements relating to the chronological sequence of Nggwun despite being able to produce a summary verbal schema when asked. While performing the ritual they make comments that indicate deontic judgements (the logic of permissions in which a **permits** b) but stronger, more deterministic models of sequence are refuted by our empirical findings. This has consequences for an anthropological account of meaning and presents a strong challenge to any text based model of society

Cultural Systems and the Study of Ritual

Rituals have been a central pre-occupation of anthropology since its beginnings in the nineteenth century. Ethnographic accounts present synoptic accounts or descriptions that summarize the actions and what some actors say about the meaning and or purpose of the event. Theoretical overviews generalise on the strength of such accounts, and in the past have tended to

make strong statements about their meaning and conceptual organisation, without being clear about who these statements have been derived from the ethnographic reports that are cited. Nor has there been clarity about how grand theory may be evaluated in the light of further ethnographic research. Since the earliest days of field anthropology the potential of film (and sound) recording has been recognised. Famously, during the Torres Straits expedition of 1898 Alfred Haddon filmed some traditional dancing. The development of portable lightweight sound and video recorders has transformed the way in which complex events can be documented, rendering some textual description redundant. However, it has had very little impact on high theory, and the way in which non-textual records can and should change the type and style of ethnographic reporting remains relatively little discussed even within the relevant sub-field of Visual Anthropology.

What we are doing...

We have used video of a complex recurrent ritual to elicit comment from some of the actors in that ritual some time after the event. By using digital video in a portable computer we were able to be responsive to problems that our consultants experienced with the ways in which we began the research. Having considered those problems we were able to collect systematic data which challenges some of our base assumptions about how collective action is conceptualised by its actors. This poses a profound challenge to High Theory. Implicit in the non-formalised models which we were using to think about the ritual were assumptions about sequence and the arrangement of sequential actions that are inconsistent with our data.

The Mambila Nggwun ritual

The Mambila Nggwun ritual is partly a war dance in which the domination of the outlying hamlets by the village centre is dramatically enacted. Principally, it is a celebration of the institution of chief, and it includes many rites to strengthen the chief. It is performed at the enstoolment of the chief, and thereafter biannually at the new moon in the middle of the dry season (December or early January). During these rites the chief repeats his oath of office. During the war dance performed around the Chief's palace the outlying hamlets, who owe allegiance to the chief, enact their subservience to his authority. In ritual hidden from most of the participants, the Chief is treated with special medicines which protect him from evil actions (conceptualised as witchcraft) - those of others and from performing any himself. Most of this is performed privately in the innermost house of the palace by the mgbe leh (lit. the chiefs of medicine), who control the overall performance. Before leaving the palace, the chief repeats his oath of office. He is within the innermost enclosure, but selected seniors are allowed to remain just outside to witness his words. Once the main ritual treatment has been performed in private, the chief, the mgbe leh and his senior sisters and wives process from the palace to the square. They circle the dance while the crowd crouches or bows. The chief and his senior sisters sit on royal stools and drink three gourds of beer to the accompaniment of cheering. A final aspect

to note is that during the ritual period some senior participants - a *mgbe leh* and a sisters' son of the chief, go round the village blessing every house to protect them from evil.

Mambila actors know how to do Nggwun and demonstrate this by performing it every two years. When stated in this way it seems trivial and incontrovertible. Debate arises when we ask how knowledge is constructed, structured and embedded in process, or how variable an experience can be and still be Nggwun.

The Mambila Nggwun ritual has not been studied as extensively as other Mambila rites such as *suaga* (see Zeitlyn 1994). Zeitlyn was present during most of the ritual in 1994 (the ritual occurs on a two year cycle) and he was invited by the Chief to return with a video camera. In addition, in 1994 he was given express permission by the *mgbe leh* (ritual chiefs lit. the chiefs of medicine), the non-royal men who run the ritual, to witness the most private parts of the rite. These he had never even had a description of in the (then) nine years of his field experience with Mambila in Somi village. Being granted a c-cess, particularly with this combination of video recording plus innermost organisation, raised the possibility of investigating the different meanings of the rite for the widely varying populations who all participate in the ritual.

In sum, this is a complex ritual which has different components with many participants. There is no single 'final' or 'correct' account of Nggwun for even a single Mambila village.¹ Rather, different participants have very different understandings of the event. Our research project explored some of the ways in which different understandings are constructed and transmitted. Two aspects of this were studied. Different categories of participants in the village of Somi were interviewed about what the ritual means to them, and how they conceptualise their participation in the ritual. A smaller set of questions were also asked of Kwanja people from a neighbouring village many of whom attend the Nggwun rites in Somi as visitors (although seeing only the public events in the square outside the palace).

In part, Nggwun is a civic as well as a royal rite (see articles in Cannadine & Price (eds.) 1987), and as such is an important focus of local (village) as well as of ethnic (Mambila) identity. The study of Nggwun thus raises the question of how ritual is used as an element in the construction and maintenance of a variety identities, both local and ethnic. Mambila identity has not been a major regional issue by comparison with that of the Tikar (see Chilver and Kaberry 1971, Price 1979 and Fowler & Zeitlyn 1998). This makes a comparison between Mambila and Tikar understandings of the rite potentially revealing of the ways in which identity is constructed and maintained (this will be further discussed elsewhere). A full ethnographic account of the Nggwun ritual is being prepared as part of a monograph-length discussion of this project. A shorter ethnographic summary has been prepared as part of the online documentation (<<http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/VIMS/Nggwun/desc.html>>).

Studying Nggwun

Zeitlyn made video and sound recordings during the Nggwun of December 1996. Based on this, during the summer of 1997 and spring of 1998 we did research designed to improve the description and documentation of the Nggwun ritual, to explore individual variability in relation to a collective experience, and to evaluate the efficacy of multi-media assisted ethnographic research. We thought this was an ideal circumstance,

¹Not all Mambila villages perform Nggwun; it is related to the form of chiefship in each village.

since the 1996 performance was the sixth Nggwun in which Zeitlyn had participated, and on this occasion at the invitation of the Chief of Somi, he was permitted to video the most private parts of the ritual. Zeitlyn's experience could help us evaluate both the richness of individual experience and the value of multi-media assisted research.

We used video clips as prompts for interviews, and worked through about 7 hours of raw footage on CD ROM with local ritual consultants, selecting twenty minutes of video which in turn was reduced to a set of clips totalling a little more than three minutes. The rough edits were done on a Macintosh Powerbook which also provided a controlled environment for the interviews. We know exactly which frame or sequence a particular utterance refers to since we recorded the interviews, in effect as an extra sound track to the video. This was based on Fischer's previous fieldwork in the Cook Islands on five occasions between 1992 and 1997.²

In this research we were particularly concerned with the process by which a 'traditional ritual performance' is understood, identified and/or invoked to serve in different social and cultural contexts by different participants of the rites. Originally, it seemed that this approached as developed in Fischer's Cook Islands research would be applicable in the African context of the Mambila Nggwun ritual. We believed that we could produce multimedia documents with the assistance of indigenous experts describing some of the ritual processes. By showing these documents to other participants, we hoped to develop detailed models of how a specific ritual domain is understood by different types of participant and by witnesses from different ethnic groups.

One conventional problem with studying a ritual event is from whose perspective to study it, especially if one wants to capture the many different perspectives that contribute to the event. This is a particular problem if the ritual events are being recorded in the form of notes by the ethnographer, and only later discussed with participants. As Morphy (1994) suggests, there are circumstances where reliance on notes (for anthropologists) and memory (for participants) are problematic, and research can be enhanced by the use of non-verbal recording.

We addressed this problem in two ways. First, this particular ritual continues for a period of more than 72 hours. However, much of this is highly repetitive from any one perspective. DZ videoed segments of the event from as many points of view as possible, and attempted to elicit a range of comment from participants and observers during the event itself. Second, we selected segments of the video, (some selected prior to, and some during fieldwork) under the advisement of indigenous consultants. We then prepared computer-based multimedia documents in the field as an elicitation device for a range of participants and bystanders, as well as a number of 'others'. We intended to focus on the range of comment and opinion these differently situated individuals have on the different situations (in particular, comparing their reaction to other, differently situated, observers' constructions of the ritual). We hoped that this would help us to identify, for each of the different consultants, their situated specification of what defines the ritual, what is optional (and why), and to elicit their help in producing a 'definitive' account of the ritual based on the clips we had available (the materials for construction).

²He describes some of this in his 1994 book 'Applications in Computing for Social Anthropologists', and in a book currently in preparation, as well as on our WWW site, the CSAC Ethnographics Gallery (<http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/Tradition/>).

The research did not progress as we had expected. Although our consultants had few difficulties in recognizing the events on the video clip and talking about them at great length, they were apparently not able to make selections to represent a chronological sequence. They had no difficulty in making classificatory and structural choices among the clips. They could, and did, comment at great length on the significance of clips and the level of visual access different categories of people should be permitted to them. But no overall sequence could be elicited, even one to match their earlier verbal sequences. We proceeded by matching the classificatory choices to the chronological sequence that Zeitlyn had produced based on past participation and interviews. However, at this stage, the chronology was only known to us, and was not presented as a sequence. We ended this stage with 50 scenes. This was approximately about three times the maximum Zeitlyn had elicited in past using verbal interviews during the occasion itself. It included two scenes that we, as anthropologists, saw as part of the process, but which were never mentioned by informants.

In the second phase we presented the 50 classificatory choices in random order (relative to Zeitlyn's derived sequence, the order determined by a pseudo-random number generator). Based on the earlier experience of interface design, we created a simple tool for selecting and playing video clips and placing choices into a 'scenes box' which played the scenes placed within in as a sequence. A partial WWW representation of this is at the URL

<http://sapid.ukc.ac.uk/Research/Mambila_Video/Phase2/>. There were provisions for vocal notes to be associated with each selected scene, and an overall vocal note for the selection, as well as a vocal note preceding the session in which the consultant described Nggwun. We had some 15 sessions with this protocol. The consultants we interviewed found that this interface worked well and they had no particular problems with operation or interpretation of the individual scenes. However, once again, we found that consultants had a difficult selecting and placing the event segments into a chronological order. They recognized most of the scenes (there were some which individual consultants did not recognize), but they were reluctant to select from among them any which might exemplify Nggwun, or order them in sequence. At this point we became suspicious that it was the act of selecting or ordering that was problematic rather than other considerations interfering with this.

In response to these problems a new computer interface for selecting and sequencing these clips was developed which made it relatively easy for a wider group of informants (12) to view the clips, to make selections, sequence them, and to record their verbal annotation with each selection. This resulted in a simple video sequencer, including attached verbal annotations. From the results of these interviews (and the resulting sequences selected), we constructed a number of simple video questionnaires of which we selected two for further interviewing [hc 3/4 etc]. These effectively used true/false and multiple-choice motifs to investigate the role of temporal sequence in conceptions of the ritual. Since we had become suspicious about the importance of temporal order to our informants' representations, we used the new format to investigate this. After some pilot adjustment, at this point we were able to record the test patterns onto videotape which facilitated a larger number of interviews, including some undertaken by DZ after MF and his computer had left the field.

To investigate the importance of temporal order we modified the protocol as follows. First, having shown a single clip, we simply asked people what came before and what came next. Second, we made multiple choice screens, with three events to the left (before) and three events to the right (after),

and an event between these. Third, we had an event with another event either to the left or right, and asked whether the left event was earlier or later than the right event. All of these were done in context, and modified after a brief set of pilot tests for usability. The pilots were not used as data. We are certain that the task was understood, that the left and right orientation was not a source of confusion, and that people intended to be cooperative. However, the results of all three tests indicated that visual stimuli did not elicit an ordering of event segments in their order of occurrence. In the end we concentrated on simply showing a clip and asking what came next and what came before. This was shown to the widest pool of informants possible, taking care to cover a range of different social variables. All tests indicated a distribution that was virtually identical to one generated by chance ($p > .997$ on 27 trials). Results broken down by age, gender and social status were similar in all categories (though the sample sizes were smaller). In the end, the evidence suggests that the visual prompts elicit neither intuitions nor judgements relating to the chronological order of the event segments, despite knowing what was represented in every case.

It is one thing to develop some methods and tools, but we believe that we have demonstrated that these methods and tools were useful - they revealed data that could not have been easily elicited using verbal means alone within the time frame of the research. Indeed, the tools worked well, it was relatively easy to store verbal comments, and the logs and audio recording made it possible to review a session including its visual context. They provide a useful means to synchronic documentation of a performance or event.

A Radical Conclusion: Living in the possible world

Anthropologists synthesize collective representations at a symbolic level. Using a range of literary and expository techniques and conventions, they communicate a sense of the content of these representations, how they vary, and how these change over time. They also produce detailed descriptions of human behaviour, though of necessity these are also often synthetic, drawn from a lot of partial experiences or individual's accounts of experience.

Anthropologists have found difficulty in the critical area of relating the symbolic to the descriptive. As D'Andrade (1995) relates in his account of the development of cognitive anthropology, it is only since the 1950s that explicit systemic distinctions between concepts and behaviours have been available to anthropology, though one can find less explicit use of this idea in earlier work, especially that of Whorf as early as the 1930s. However, the norm is to either consider the idea and the action as one (e.g. if X says she does Y, QED she does Y), to produce analyses of the world as if it were contained in language, or to produce detailed descriptions of behaviours with some handwaving interconnection with 'beliefs'. Such descriptions make no distinction between the two, e.g. between what is known or believed need be enacted, and the actions themselves. The excuses for this have not been very convincing. On the one hand empirically oriented anthropologists have tried to blur the differences using a poorly formulated competence/performance distinction.³ Many empirical anthropologists

³ Unlike Chomsky (1965) who is very explicit and formal in this distinction, and declares that linguistics should concern itself with competence over performance.

are still embedded in the paradigms of the past (pre-1930s in intellectual terms), attempting to relate idea and action directly, although almost all the evidence suggests this is not the case. They survive by picking and choosing their examples, synthesizing these into norms of belief and norms of behaviour which can be related to each other to some extent.

On the other hand neo-modernists attempt to find 'new' insights by privileging the world of ideas, and not concerning themselves very much with what is enacted as a result of them, writing this off to some rather vague notions of power and negotiation. The general excuse for this lack of concern is that the resulting behaviour is such a pastiche and so conditional on fine aspects of context that it is fruitless to relate the two directly. The relationship is contingent - not random - but not generalisable to any significant degree because of the distinctions between the contexts of expression. It is also relevant that behaviour is self-conscious and intended, with results that may not match because there are other individuals with different intentions; the outcomes are 'negotiated' between these positions. The intentions themselves are incidental and situational, so the same basic kind of encounter between two or more individuals may not have the same results in a future encounter.

At a basic level this is a classical conundrum: no two situations are ever exactly the same, so we will never see exactly the same result. However, the real misunderstanding here is that while we may not be able to generalise (explain) the whole, we can generalise about the parts. That is, parts of the situation can be taken and applied to other situations. Generalisation about the parts is, in itself, not inconsistent with the overall position that the whole is not generalisable. But there is as yet no systematic approach that can relate how all these 'transferable' pieces themselves interact to produce a holistic result. This is almost certainly true. However, this does not warrant the suggestion that it is thus useless to investigate how the transferable pieces themselves operate, at least as a central goal for anthropologists.

Almost all of this confusion arises from variance in what constitutes 'meaning'. Meaning is a concept with an astonishing variety of definitions. Within formal semantics it is the interpretation assigned to a string of symbols. But symbols in the formal sense are very different from the symbols deployed in ritual, from the symbolic meaning of ritual and the parts of a ritual. In formal semantics there are strings of symbols which can be transformed into other strings. The same transformation can also be applied to the interpretation of the original string creating a new interpretation which indicates some degree of control or interaction between the two levels. The field of pragmatics is concerned with how such transformations interact with contexts of use. Moreover, since in both formal semantics and pragmatics 'meaning' is defined in terms of a set of interactions all meanings cannot range freely. Some people attempt to contest this notion by pointing out that meaning can be assigned arbitrarily to any symbol or action. Our main point is that the meaning of symbols is NOT fully language-like, especially where Saussurian arbitrariness is concerned. One can make arbitrary associations, but these are parasitic-upon rather than constituent-of meaning and language. In any case, to be a socially useful meaning, the association must be shared, which suggests that the meaning is reproducible by a set of individuals within some useful range. Held by actual groups of people, this also suggests that the range of such arbitrarily associated interpretations will be rather limited - otherwise we would quickly exhaust the ability of human memory.

Meaning arises within a context of use. But the context of use carries a great deal of the weight of this emergence...

The meaning is not necessarily reproducible without that context. In effect, the situation does a great deal of the processing required to use a set of symbols. This implies that the range of meanings will be constrained at least by the set of possible interactions, at least in the sense that people cannot control the possible meanings/interpretations without changing the situation. Again, this is indefinite, especially if we regard each interaction as being in some ways unique. But this refers to the set of interpretations, not the meaning making itself. Meaning making is dependent on interpretations, and interpretations modify a discourse. If interpretations are dependent on contexts of use, then either meaning making must include components for classifying and generalising these elements or there must be 'natural' - intrinsic - rules for working within contexts (or, of course, both could occur together). We cannot support a position which includes neither. Since the latter position is inconsistent with even the least relativist of anthropologists, we must assume that these rules of classification and generalisation are a part of the cultural inventory of the people involved, and thus largely bound to that. This constrains the set of possible socially shareable meanings.

One attempt to counter this line of argument is to appeal to complexity and variability of the aspects of a situation that are selected in the specific interaction (or 'negotiation') taking place. Against this we are suggesting that there are a limited set of constructs to translate individual experience into. That is, to the extent that individuals vary, the set of cultural constructs must become more limited in their variation for intersubjective meaning to exist, as patently it does.

Using an algorithmic approach to culture, we can conceptualise culture as an inventory of instructions or actions that can take place, which modify the meaning state of a limited range of constructs. There may be a classificatory layer that matches elements of a situation with a range of variation. In this way, an indefinite number of situations can be understood and accommodated, to the extent that the situation and its sub-elements can be matched to the available resources. This provides much of the flexibility of language, without including some of the more advanced features of language itself. An algorithmic approach is close to that of formal language but does not limit us to formally defined results. The algorithm itself is formally defined. However, the results of its application may or may not be what was predicted formally, and indeed because of the indeterminacy of the situation, the results may be very far from what was intended.

The idea is always bigger than the action. One of the objections to the schema or script-based approach to culture stems from a dislike of the notion of rule and the focus on behaviour. But we cannot fully induce rules from behaviour, because many such actions could be the result of one concept, and different concepts can adduce the same action. However, there are constraints on ideas (see e.g. Boyer 2000, Rosch 1977). Ideas are used to explain events, they are used as retrospective justifications to describe the 'essential' nature of the world so that other ideas can be associated with the world. Thus the ideational corpus is critical to how we interact with it. In very real terms, ideas shape the world as anthropologists have proposed since the 1920s. But ideas only have free reign with respect to other ideas. To the extent that those ideas are independent of actions, true relativism can exist so long as there is some consistency in the ideas. If ideas are responsible for actions, limitations are imposed. This also opens territory for distributed algorithms, where the individual components are not solely aimed at achieving the collective algorithm. This does not mean they are 'aimless', rather, the specific performative goals cannot be accounted for in terms of the specific 'meaning'

of the performance. That is the understanding we now have of Nggwun.

It is quite clear that people often act in terms that can be described as algorithms, not by deductive cognition or by drawing on mystical powers. We can use logic and mysticism to account for or describe the algorithms that people use in their day to day life - their meaning, so to speak - but these are not directly equivalent to the underlying algorithms. Algorithms are about doing - without meaning. Declarative logic is about explaining. Knowledge for or 'how' is algorithmic knowledge. Knowledge about is declarative. How these two connect is the essence of our question in addressing the links between ideational (logical) and applied domains. In a related study Dougherty and Keller discussing practical goal-oriented tasks identify a 'taskonomic' approach in which 'the productive organization of information [is] on the basis of a particular context [of use]. (1982: 766). They conclude that 'there is no one basic structure to which we can turn as the key to the practice of blacksmithing. Blacksmithing, like other behaviour, is characterised by productivity' (1982: 771). Another way of seeing it may be think of a shared armature upon which the individual participants collaborative build the ritual. However, that shared armature is both slighter and less structured than we were wont to think.

The importance of these issues is not a matter of interpretation; they stem from the nature of performance itself. There need be no immediate link between the actions that are undertaken in performance, and the underlying interpretation of these actions, whether local to the actions of specific performances themselves, or in terms of the overall impact of the performance. This being the case, there is no need for a given individual to have any particular knowledge of the interpretations nor of all the actions required to produce a Nggwun performance token. Actors may have their own personal view (understanding or interpretation) of the performance, but this has no necessary relation to how their role fits into the overall performance. This implies that a group of individuals can possess a wide range of beliefs and explanations relating to their own behaviour yet still contribute to a global performance that resembles past performances. In other words, the reproduction (or re-creation) of a ritual occasion depends on the creation of active social contexts within which individual beliefs and knowledge can be activated and aligned to produce public experiences.

Such a position can explain why it is common to 'lose' culture, despite having representatives from generations that took part in the cultural acts which were 'lost' - the survivors never possessed the overall algorithm because they have lost the social infrastructure/context within which a particular body of knowledge exists and functions. Likewise, culture can be found again, not simply through pure invention but by recreating a context within which inventions can be reproduced.

We began our research on Nggwun aiming to investigate the issues of variation of definition, action and experience - to document the ritual in detail using video recordings as a part of the research process. Instead, we found ourselves driven to addressing a more basic issue, how knowledge is structured and combined to construct a new instance of Nggwun every two years. The general problems we encountered re-occurred at a finer grain when we attempted to understand just who knows what and how the performance is achieved.

Granted the certainty that the actors collectively have a completely adequate knowledge of what they are doing, the problems we encountered raised questions about our questions and therefore about our understanding of what we were studying. This has led to a concern about the best way to conceptual-

ise the sequence of actions that comprise a performance of Nggwun, and generalising, all ritual performances.

We are left with several large challenges, each of which contains enough work for several lifetimes. First, to construct a theory of meaning and of ritual action that can explain our data. Second, to ensure that this theory is able to deal with the types of complexity found in the ethnographic literature. Third, to explain why our results are so perplexing to informants and professional colleagues alike. Our argument is not that the Mambila are weird in thinking about ritual in a non-linear fashion but that we are weird, and that the claim to linear thought about events is a misleading reconstruction, probably distorted by the effects of literacy.

Acknowledgments

This research has been undertaken with the support of the British Academy (DZ), the Nuffield Foundation (MF) and the ESRC (DZ & MF grant R000222465) 'MambilaNggwun - the construction and deployment of multiple meanings in ritual'. It could not have been undertaken without the institutional support of the Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing (CSAC) and the Department of Anthropology, at University of Kent at Canterbury, particularly Alan Bicker, Jan Horn and Roy Ellen. We are very grateful to all those who have enabled the research to take place. In Cameroon we have benefited from the help and support of the Ministry of Information, National Archives Service, the staff of the APFT Project and the continuing tolerance of the people of Somi .

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