Chapter Six

SORCERY AND THE BEAUTIFUL
A Discourse on the Aesthetics of Ritual

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[The beautiful is the criterion that determines the true. But the true must be rooted in man.]

– Mikel Dufrenne, The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience

The efficacy of much ritual is founded in its aesthetics. This is especially so in Sinhala demon exorcisms or healing rites (tovil), in which the aesthetics of rite, the media of performance—the poetics of language, music, song, dance, mime, masked drama, the various plastic arts—are crucial to the ritual project. I address the aesthetic of these rites both from the cultural perspective of the ritual specialists who perform exorcisms and with regard to the significance of the aesthetic practice of Sinhala healing rites for wider discussions of aesthetics that may reach beyond the specific ethnographic instance.

My argument concentrates on the thoroughgoing pragmatic force of aesthetic processes in ritual. While I discuss some of the performance aspects of ritual, my stress is upon what can be broadly described as the dynamic logic of aesthetic processes that are variously realized through performance. Furthermore, I address the power of aesthetic processes as symbolically constitutive rather than expressive. While both aspects are intimately connected, what may be described as performance perspectives in anthropology have tended to focus on the expressive features of symbolic processes. This is especially so in approaches to ritual that stress the way ritual practice reflects the social, political, and psychological dimensions of processes that are present externally and independently of

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the internal dynamics of rite. Ritual, therefore, is submitted to a logic or reasoning that, while relevant to the understanding of ritual efficacy, for example, is often at a distance from that of specific ritual practices. In such perspectives the cosmologies, logics, and internal intentionalities and orientations of ritual practice are given a reduced analytical significance, are frequently represented as mere “belief,” and are subordinated to the more generalized analytic categories of the analyst.

The foregoing observations are why, in this discussion, I engage the concept of virtuality (see Deleuze and Guattari 1994). This is a concept, as I will explain, that focuses attention on the dynamics of the practice articulated by ritual itself. The virtual, in my usage here, is a concept that both argues for the specific reality of ritual practice and makes intensely problematic the question as to how ritual practice may relate to quotidian realities (the diverse, often chaotic actualities of the paramount world of everyday life). My chief interest in the concept here (see Kapferer 1997, 2001, 2003b, 2004) is in the critical direction it yields to the importance of aesthetic processes. The aesthetics of everyday life is gaining increased attention (see Burckhardt [1860] 1997 for an early and still unsurpassed perspective), but the idea of virtuality that I develop here accents, I suggest, a significance of the aesthetic that may not otherwise be so obvious. The aesthetic in virtuality manifests the thoroughly constitutive, rather than expressive, dimension of the aesthetic as quintessentially the potency of humanly produced symbolically sensuous processes.

One of the great contributions of Victor Turner’s orientation to the liminality of ritual dynamics addresses this key aspect, but, as I will discuss towards the end of this analysis, the idea of the virtual enables a further development. Broadly, the attention to the virtuality of ritual extends an understanding of the construction of human realities (virtual and actual) as through and through the creation and invention of the world-making symbolic capacity of human beings.

A central issue of the analysis is a consideration of the grounded and pragmatic force of aesthetic processes. This is especially relevant to the specific context of Sinhala healing rites, where both aesthetic contemplation and immersion in the dynamics of aesthetic formation are joined to matters of life and death. No less vital in this process are ultimate questions of an aesthetic kind, such as the very nature of the beautiful and its relation to issues of Suffering, Truth, and Justice. These, as I will show, are as practical as they are apparently abstract, although one of my aims is to show that such a dualistic perspective (practical versus abstract) holds no significance in the pragmatic ritual contexts that I explore. Of course, the unity of the abstract and the concrete is integral to the Sinhala Buddhist cosmology within which the ritual practices I discuss develop and is fundamental in the ontological projection and organization of the whole ritual process.

The pragmatic orientation of the Sinhala Buddhist healing aesthetic opens up similar, if not identical, questions regarding the aesthetic in
European traditions stemming from the ancients (Plato, in particular) but finding new life in the post-Enlightenment idealist traditions, most notably of Kant and Hegel. Kant’s connection of the issue of aesthetic judgement with matters of ethics and the problem of justice has resonance with matters at the heart of the Sinhala Buddhist healing practice that I discuss. I am particularly interested in Kant’s discussion of the sublime as this relates to the formation and reformation of the conceptual categories involved in experience—a problem, incidentally, that seems to have guided Turner’s interest in the liminal. Kant and no less Hegel are also concerned with the way aesthetic processes can, in my terms, be existentially transformational through their direction to ultimate value. Kant and especially Hegel ([1835] 1975) hierarchialize aesthetic forms and process accordingly, which is certainly relevant to the Sinhala case. Although I concentrate on Kant, I do not underrate the later importance of Hegel, whose argument is clearly relevant to the ethnography I present. This is especially so, for the dynamic aesthetic of Sinhala ritual articulates a progressive dialectic oriented towards the achievement of an ultimate aesthetic harmony, an absolute. Moreover, in the context of the processes I discuss, the emergence of such an absolute—even in art—is ultimately an impossibility. It, as life itself, is subject to fundamental contradictions that can never achieve a unity and against which even aesthetic artifice must collapse.

**Sinhala Rites of Healing: A Sinhala Buddhist Aesthetics**

Sinhalese ritual practice is directed within aesthetic conceptions firmly located within the historical development of religio-cosmic themes emergent in the Indian subcontinent. Thus, the concepts of *rasa* (taste, sense) integral to the musical and dance-drama of Bharata Natyam (see Kersentoom 1987, 1995) and refined in the work of the Indian medieval scholar, Abhinavagupta, are thoroughly vital in the artistic traditions of Sinhala exorcism. However, they are often quite distinct in their formation within exorcism practice (see Kapferer 1983) and bear only rough relation to the notions contained in classic texts, many of which are being revitalized in nationalist cultural revivals in India and Sri Lanka.²

Sinhala exorcism is founded in the idea that human realities are first and foremost human constructions. They are cognitive formations both generated and accessible through the human senses. Reality is no more nor less than that which is materialized through the senses. In accordance with this ontology, reality is *maya* or illusion; that is, reality cannot appear other than through the veil of the senses. There is no human reality that is not illusory—that is, constituted and sensible through the operation of the human perceptual faculties and rooted in the process of human symbolic construction. The aesthetic and artistic practices (consciously created symbolic forms that achieve their materiality in relation to the particular sense or
combination of senses that govern their appearance) are par excellence those whose construction are composed specifically in relation to particular senses and their combination (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste).

A hierarchy of aesthetic value is involved in the structuring of Sinhala exorcism performance. This value is conditioned in the degree to which artistic forms, content, and style veil or cloud the order or “truth” of existence in their reality-creating dynamic: in their making of reality through their manipulation of the senses. The Buddha and his Teaching (Dharma) conditions the aesthetic hierarchy and in certain ways stands beyond or is located outside all aesthetic and symbolic formation. That is, aesthetic or artistic symbolic processes are valued in accordance with their capacity to achieve balance and harmony in their formation or dynamic by means of their orientation to the Buddha Teaching. The beautiful (laksana) in such a context is an index of balance and harmony. It is the object or materialization—as I will describe—that embodies the abstract and to which the aesthetic dynamic of rite is directed. Furthermore, through the developing and unfolding aesthetic processes of the rite, the participants at the center of the ritual action are led towards a realization of the truth of existence that yet is hidden by aesthetic formation (e.g., that suffering, duka, is its condition, one of the key teachings or Noble Truths of the Buddha integral to Buddha’s reason).

In the rite I will examine, key participants are also brought to a point whereby they are enabled to constitute their realities, even the cognitive categories through which such realities are recognized and experienced.

Overall the value of aesthetic processes, the balance and harmony to which I have referred, depends on their capacity to manifest and produce a calmness or serenity of mind, of consciousness, and to open up mind and body so that reason, shaped after the Buddha’s example, can flower. Aesthetic processes that impede or prevent or excite the passions, encourage Desire, Anger, Greed, or otherwise confuse, disturb, or excite mental action inhibiting the establishment of the clear sight of a reasoning consciousness, are regarded as being low in the hierarchy of aesthetic value.

The great artistic challenge in the figurative representations of the Buddha is to manifest a being who effectively does not act upon or activate the passionate senses of those who may gaze upon them, other than appeal to the highest mental consciousness (conceived as a sense, see Kapferer 2001). It is through such a consciousness that the Truth of the Buddha Teaching is directly revealed.

Particular Buddha representations are intended to produce a soothing consciousness for those who contemplate them and a mental orientation that is ultimately self-negating. The Buddha statue, for example, representations of the dying Buddha, unlike representations of Christ, should not activate the passion of pity. There is in this Buddhist aesthetics a logic in which the aesthetic dynamic itself tends to the destruction of its own
force. In other words, it is an aesthetics of aesthetic negation, a motioning towards Nothingness or existential negation.

Dimensions of the hierarchy of aesthetic value I have outlined are evident in differentiations in ritual and religious practice and in the value placed upon particular kinds of aesthetic content. Practices centering on the key objects of Buddhist worship as well as the objects themselves (e.g., the Buddha statue or the central Buddhist edifice, the magnificent aesthetic, perhaps perfect, architectural form of the Buddha dagaba [stupa, caitiya]) express a simplicity and suppression of aesthetic excitement. The dominant color is white, a totally unsaturated or noncolor that does not excite the senses. The central Buddhist structures are intended to concentrate the mind, permitting its transcendence, and to encourage quiescence of the senses the other forms of aesthetic construction might activate. The shrines to the main Sinhala gods (who are regarded as guardians of Buddhism) are usually set aside from those focusing on the Buddha. They are full of color and intense activity. Their aesthetic, while it sets them apart, is always oriented in relation to the Buddha, from whom they receive their potency and towards whose idea and reason they typically tend. But returning to Sinhala exorcism, the hierarchy of aesthetic value to which I have been referring is integral to the logic and pragmatic effect of performances. Demons in both popular understanding and in that of ritual specialists are creatures who are so governed by their physical needs that they are not only incapable of mental concentration but also rendered thoroughly oblivious to the Buddha’s Teaching. They are absolute victims of delusion, completely determined in their motivating passions. Their aesthetic formation, their appearance to the senses within and outside ritual contexts, express this. Their color is always that at the dark and saturated end of the spectrum; they are formed in foul fumes; their offerings and foods are the very essence of imbalance and disharmony; the demonic dance is furious and manifests a determining and polymorphic sexuality that, as frequently depicted, disregards gender distinctions; the drumming of their music drowns out thought. The constitution of the body in unity with the movement of music and dance often manifests as demonic trance (avessa), which is expressed as the discordant movement of the body in disunity with the mind (see Kapferer 1983). Demons are called by the shrillest and sharpest of atonal sounds (the sound of the demon pipe or vasadanda); they are addressed in the crudest of poetic forms and through rough, obscene speech that knows no rule or convention. The aesthetics of demonic formation and realization manifests demons (yakku) as being at the very base of a hierarchy of aesthetic value. Their appearance, usually disgusting and ugly, defines the balance and harmony at the apex of the hierarchy (which Buddha encompasses) that the demonic threatens to subvert and topple.

Indeed, popular devaluations of the artistic worth of exorcism, especially among the urban middle class and elites, is closely connected to the
hierarchical logic of value that informs much Sinhala Buddhist practice. This is so even though such class attitudes are also a product of the modernist rationalism born of colonialism and postcoloniality. Although dramatic events connected with Sinhala exorcism may be performed in the precincts of Buddhist temples (vihare), exorcism is conceived of as largely antagonistic to Buddha’s teaching. Some ritual specialists of exorcism (adura), who are themselves devalued in a Sinhala hierarchy of caste (kula), will describe their ritual practice as an inverted ritual form associated with Hindu temple practice (puja) and, despite its conditioning within the authority of the Buddha’s Teaching, inappropriate to Buddhist temple worship.4

What should be stressed is that exorcism works thoroughly in the realms of the senses, of maya. The victims of demonic attack who occasion an exorcism performance are in the grips of demonic delusion (moha). They are utterly given to the terrors of the senses through which their existential reality, a demonic reality, is constituted. One of the vital aims of the aesthetic process of exorcism is to work on victims by manipulating their sense experience, in effect reorienting their body and mind to reality. This exorcism does by aesthetically restructuring and reconstituting within the context of ritual the way reality is made to appear. The hierarchical formation of this reality—the plethora of beings, gods, godlings, demons, and other spirits (preta, both ancestor spirits and ghosts of former house occupants) that are in motion within it—is conjured through the aesthetic devices of the rite. The aesthetic dynamic engages the senses and organizes perception into ever changing and developing relations of balance and harmony. In this process the mental and physical orientation of patients is formed and reformed to the ritually defined terms of the appropriate Sinhala Buddhist cosmological scheme of things. The overall aim of an exorcism is to reveal, by means of its aesthetic, the delusionary aspect of demonic forces and their ultimate stupidity and distance from a world commanded by the Buddha’s reason.

Sinhala exorcism can be conceived of as an aesthetic process that works in virtuality. The concept of the virtual I develop from the usage by Deleuze (see Deleuze 1989; Deleuze and Guattari 1995; Kapferer 1997, 2001). I employ the concept to depart from common approaches to rite, which often describe them as suspensions of everyday life (or its paramount reality; see Schutz 1967; Berger and Luckmann 1971) or else as their abstracted symbolic representation.5 In this last perspective the symbolic is treated as an expression of nonritual social and political realities, a view that is common in sociology and is not the approach I take by regarding rite as a virtuality.

There is a connection between what I call the virtuality of rite and that which Victor Turner discussed as the liminality of ritual. Ritual conceived of as a virtuality, as in liminality, opens up a space within quotidian paramount reality so that new or renewed formations of reality (or orientations to lived
experience) can be constructed. The liminal or the liminoid in Turner’s analyses is outside the cognitive orders and relations of ordinary life or is dramatically deconstructive or subversive of the cognitive and other structures of life in which ritual participants have hitherto been embedded. Artistic forms or the poetics of rite in Turner’s (1967, 1969) work achieve their force within liminal space as instruments of deconstruction and of reconstruction. The concept of the virtual has much similarity with this perspective. However, rather than conceive of it as a “betwixt and between” space, a space momentarily out of the space and time orderings and categories and constructs of cognized paramount reality, the concept of virtuality addresses ritual processes (such as the antisorcery healing rite that I will describe) as a descent into the very dynamic crux of reality formation. As I have explored elsewhere (Kapferer 1997), rather than a process out of time and space, the virtuality of ritual with which I am concerned involves an intervention in the dynamic formation of reality, repositioning, in this case, the victim in its flux. Thus in virtuality, ritual moves into the depths of reality formation, erecting and developing a simulacrum of it, by means of which focal participants are reoriented, repositioned, and reset within the ongoing processes of everyday life. Within the dynamics of reality formation that is virtuality, the aesthetic (the formations of the senses), as the quintessential dimensions of reality construction, is brought to the fore.

The art of exorcism developed in the virtuality of rite is nothing less than a direct engagement with the sensual forces that are thoroughly integral to the way human beings form and constitute their realities as an incarnated, embodied process. Thus, the power of exorcism is absolutely in its aesthetics or in the organizations of the senses through which reality in its multiple dimensions continually forms before and within embodied existence.

**Sorcery, the Suniyama, and the Aesthetic**

What I have discussed by way of introduction can be expanded through a consideration of the major Sinhala antisorcery exorcism, the Suniyama. There are five major demon exorcisms, and with the exception of one (the Iramudun Samayama or exorcism for the midday demon), the rites last through the night. Each engages distinctive episodes of poetry, song, music, dance, and drama relevant to the particular demon under whose primacy they are performed and whose name the exorcism bears (see Kapferer 1983; Kapferer and Papigny 2002). The principal demon addressed in the separate major exorcisms is generally a composite formation of numerous destructive demonic materializations or possibilities of one of the five principal elements from which all existence is constituted (mahabhuta) and central to the humoral theory of illness that informs exorcism. The main
demons and their exorcisms address specific illnesses or forms of embodied distress as signs of humoral imbalance. The one exception, however, is Huniyam or Suniyam, a demon/god with a dual destructive and protective aspect (see Kapferer 1997, 2003a, 2003b). Although he affects the humors, he is not a manifestation of their imbalance as are the other major beings of distress. Rather, he is the objectification of action, human action (vina), and principally in its malevolent possibility.

Huniyam or Suniyam is the being of sorcery (huniya, kodivina, vina) who, in the conceptions of exorcists, is an agency in all illness or personal anxiety and distress. All exorcism rites will address his malevolence and invoke his protective potential.

I stress Huniyam/Suniyam’s critical feature, in effect, as a formation of thoroughgoing human potency: the manifestation of that human causative energy that is involved in the particular suffering of human beings, in the suffering of self and other. Huniyam is generally regarded as the objectification of consciously motivated human destructive, disruptive force that is directed at other human beings, their projects and objects of interest and value. Suniyam, the higher form, articulates destruction with beneficence and protection. Conceived as having godlike but intensely uncertain and volatile potency, he has the capacity to intervene in the chain of human causation (karma), overcoming its malevolence and turning back the force of humanly motivated destruction and disruption to its source. In the hierarchy of exorcism it is the rite to this demon/god, the ritual generally known as the Suniyama, that is accorded pride of place in the ritual art of exorcism.

The ubiquity of sorcery in illness experience (the recognition that all illness is rooted in the human condition and in one way or another is the result, if not entirely, of the action of other human beings) is a major reason for this. This is so, I hasten to add, not merely because of the pervasive character of sorcery as such but what is implicated in the factuality of sorcery as a foundational aspect of the human condition. The ubiquity of sorcery implicitly recognizes not that human beings are inherently destructive or evil but rather—given the karmic universe of Sinhala Buddhist conception—that all human experience is grounded in human constructed realities that must implicate the action of other human beings. Sorcery in the Sinhala Buddhist context, as I have argued elsewhere at length (Kapferer 1997), implicitly extends towards central ontological problematics. While these must be at the heart of the other exorcisms, it is to be expected that a rite that deals thoroughly with sorcery—as does the Suniyama—will manifest, above all the other rites in the repertoire of exorcists, such issues to the greatest extent.

Exorcists state that the Suniyama is their most highly regarded rite because above all it is the original rite of exorcism; the rite that was invented by the ritualist or grand sacrificer, Oddisa, who not only created the Suniyama but also the other major exorcisms. The exorcists claim that the knowledge that underpins any performance of the Suniyama is in
large measure the key to understanding their practice as a whole. Those who perform the Suniyama, in the past members of the highest lineages among the berava (drummer) community, are considered to be the most skilled exponents of the exorcism arts. Exorcists look upon the Suniyama as being their highest aesthetic achievement. But this recognition of the aesthetic of the Suniyama is directly connected to the Buddhism of the rite, a fact that is stressed by the ritualists and that also underpins their reverence for the rite.

The other exorcisms are concerned with controlling specific demons, ending their hold over human beings and ultimately banishing them to the margins of human realities. The overarching objective of these exorcisms is to make demons conform to the proper Buddhist and human order of things. The authority of the Buddha is invoked to control and to remove them, but they are outside the capacities and reach of human reason. This is not so in the situation of sorcery. While the Suniyama addresses demons, its central concern is with the demonic possibility of humanity itself and with overcoming the forces integral to the human situation as a moral order. Here the arguments of Buddhism may be expected to receive the greatest elaboration and import because it is in the contexts of action between human beings that they experience their greatest challenge and potency. The other exorcism rites are referred to by exorcists as having little to do with Buddhism and even as being anti-Buddhist, for the arguments of the Buddha are beyond demon comprehension. This is not so in the human-centered practice of the Suniyama.

It may appear somewhat paradoxical to outsiders, especially those brought up in a relatively recent Western rationalist discourse on sorcery and witchcraft (see Kapferer 2003), that a rite dealing with sorcery should be considered to manifest the highest aesthetic achievement and knowledge by its practitioners and by many of those who demand its performance. However, it is precisely in the character of sorcery, as the Suniyama elaborates, that an understanding of the aesthetic achievement of the rite and the significance of its great Buddhist themes are to be discovered.

The Suniyama is a rite of reorigination of immense cosmological and ontological proportion. This is evident in the myth-narrative of the rite that underscores the Suniyama and that the ritual practice expands and reveals. The myth also indicates the key importance of aesthetic processes that the rite develops.

The Mahasammata/Manikpala Myth: The Ontogeny of Human Creation and the World Order

The myth, sung at the start and at intervals throughout the performance of a Suniyama, tells of the emergence of the world in the current age (kalpa), of how the great Being, Maha Brahma, came to earth climbing
down the stalk of a lotus, and how humankind developed from his body. The myth concentrates on the parlous condition of human beings.

Among all the forms of life, only human beings are without order. They have no hierarchy, no ordering kings as do the other creatures of the sea, sky, and land. Human beings are continually fighting among themselves and consumed by greed. Their suffering is great. However, through this suffering they become conscious of the fact that other creatures, because of their order—because of the order that is natural to them—are living in relative peace and without suffering. Now conscious of themselves as human beings and thus aware of themselves as different from other creatures, human beings decide to choose a king from their number. He is called Mahasammata, the Great Elect, the most handsome of men from the lineage of the Sun. Mahasammata institutes the world order. He creates his cosmic city-state; a hierarchization of human beings into four castes or estates, encircled by defensive barriers that protect Mahasammata’s cosmic city from the outside world from which it is now separated. Mahasammata then chooses his queen, Manikpala, the most beautiful of women, sister of Lord Vishnu. Mahasammata and Manikpala make love in their room at the heart of their palace at the cosmic center of Mahasammata’s city. It is Mahasammata and Manikapala’s erotic harmony that maintains the protective unity of the hierarchical order of the cosmic state. It is a just state within which there is no suffering. But this erotic unity is broken when Mahasammata decides to expand his authority and order beyond the borders of his cosmic city. He leaves his queen and engages in a war against the Asuras in a totalizing effort to bring all within his sway.

While Mahasammata (a cakravartin) is so involved, Vasavarti Maraya, the Great World Poisoner, sees Manikpala unprotected. He is filled with desire and lusts to possess her. He approaches the bedchamber of Mahasammata’s Palace, and in so doing he takes the form of Mahasammata himself. Manikpala is confused, but a servant girl sees through the ruse and warns Manikpala, for she notices Vasavarti’s foul stench, which is not Mahasammata’s perfume of sweet-smelling sandalwood. Manikpala bars her door.

Furious at his discovery, Vasavarti revealed reaches into the hell of Ignorance (avicciya) and draws out a fire viper (ginijala polanga—firewater viper, generative essence, perhaps sperm?) that he flings at Manikpala. It breaks through the door and enters the queen’s womb. Manikpala falls unconscious, and her body is covered in sores. Manikpala is the first victim of sorcery, and she is an innocent victim, although it is her beauty that engenders Vasavarti’s destructive Desire. Her attack brings down what may also be regarded as Mahasammata’s beautiful and protective hierarchical order, an attack made possible by Mahasammata’s overambitious totalizing act to expand his order to encompass all of existence.

The overcoming of Manikapala’s sorcery illness and her restitution to consciousness is also a world re-creative and ordering act, although not, of
course, identical to the first act of world creation. I will explore later the implications of this fact for the ritual process of the Suniyama. For the present, I underline some key dimensions of the myth and therefore the rite as a discourse on the aesthetic.

The myth recognizes that the act of self-recreation by human beings is in itself a creative act, a constructive process in which the human order is imagined into existence. It is a mimetic act, ordered after the natural world of animals but reconceptualized, reimagined, as a distinct human creation (human by the fact of the conceptualizing imagination) in which human existence is reconstituted. This existence is no longer determined by processes outside human control and manufacture. The human world is created through a conscious, conceptualizing imagination.

The implication in this Sinhala Buddhist myth is paralleled in the Kantian a priori that is integral to certain Kantian notions of the aesthetic. I refer specifically to Kant’s highly disputed contention that certain aspects of the force of the aesthetic occur outside of or independently of a conceptualizing reason. One aspect of the Kantian position—expanded in the work of Cassirer (1996) and especially Susanne Langer (1942) in her discussion of presentational symbolism—is that some features of the aesthetic, or the beautiful, are directly intuited and have their force independently of the mediation of conceptual or cognitive categories. The argument as I understand it does not rule out the importance of particular cultural conceptions, which so many anthropologists insist upon, but sees in different particularities an underlying universality.

The myth powerfully articulates the potency of order as an aesthetic synthetic and sensuous unity. The breaking of such a unity establishes a process of the loss of consciousness, and the reversal of the ordering process. Manikpala, the sensible body, is beautifully perfect in her erotic unity with Mahasammata, the being of Knowledge and Reason. Vulnerable in her separation, Manikpala loses her beauty, and Mahasammata, separated from her body, loses his knowledge and potency. Furthermore, power broken loose from its harmonic unity attacks its own perfection and manifests as the anti-just. Thus, Vasavarti Maraya assumes the appearance of Mahasammata.

The rupture in the order of human existence demands that Mahasammata seek the assistance of Oddisa, the arch ritualist, who has the necessary ritual skill but lives outside the human created order. He is a terrible figure, an arch-sacrificer, who embodies within himself the rupture that his artifice can heal.

The myth is concerned with existential extremes and has implicit within it an argument that the force of rite inheres in its aesthetic practice. In the myth, Mahasammata summons other healers, sages, persons filled with knowledge, to Manikapala’s side. But they fail. Only Oddisa in possession of the artifice of rite succeeds. The implication in his success is that he comes from a position that is outside or marginal to the orders of existence. He is a liminal figure par excellence. In my interpretation, he is
external to all structures of knowledge and power, indeed, threatening of them (for the gods tremble in fear at his presence, even the Buddha). Nonetheless, he possesses the technology that can bring forth the circumstances for the restoration of the orders of knowledge and power.

There is a further understanding that might attach to the myth, but realized in the performance of the rite and not in the myth. This is that the harmonies achieved through the aesthetics of ritual are momentary, that the circumstances producing anxiety and suffering must eventually return in the nonritualized actualities of ordinary existence. Moreover, intimated in the myth to be elaborated in the ritual practice are notions of the fundamental limitations of existence and also of power, order, and reason.

The Suniyama Performance

The performance of the rite is intended to close off the effects of sorcery, the potentiality of its recurrence, and to prevent the possibility of revenge or any other effort directed to cause a victim and his or her household harm.

The Suniyama is a composite and total ritual form, as are the other major exorcisms. Basically, it is an inventory of a set of ritual events both oriented to cause sorcery and to overcome it that can be performed independently, as rites in themselves, of this master rite. The Suniyama is a total rite in this sense, manifesting the poisons and antidotes of sorcery in all its manifestations. But more than this, and as I have indicated, it is a major cosmological intervention whereby the relations of space and time in whose junctures victims and their relatives may be caught (and so determined in their misfortune) are effectively readjusted. Indeed, it involves a descent into the Void, the living space of all realities, and an entrance into the forces of their generation.

The rite’s overall structural thematic is that of sacrifice. It is conceived by exorcists as being organized around sixteen events of sacrifice that in themselves are finishing acts of judgement (tindui), which cut the constraining bonds of sorcery, the ties of destruction, and free the victim to take once more an active role in reality constitution. I note that these acts of judgement are explicitly grasped as involving acts of moral assertion. The aesthetic dynamics that lead to such acts or in which such acts are embedded—songs, poetry, events of dance and drama—declare the virtues (buduguna) of the Buddha’s Life and Teaching. These virtues, I add, are themselves powerful instruments of force, judgement, and completion.

The performance of the Suniyama is a total act, a total sacrifice in the sense of Hubert and Mauss (1964). The conclusion of the rite is effected by the sacrificial destruction of the key ritual edifice, the Mahasammata Palace. This action in one of its vital aspects is understood as being a destruction of the total object of Desire (and of the very materiality of existence) that lies at the root of sorcery—indeed, of all suffering. The
palace, moreover, is conceived as a lavish gift—a glittering edifice of wealth—and its destruction, much in the sense of the classic instance of the potlatch, can be seen as the action that paradoxically sustains the giftiness of the gift (see Derrida 1994) and the restoration of the social and moral order that is the power of sacrifice.

The ritual performance, of course, constitutes an unfolding aesthetic, a hierarchy of aesthetic forms. This hierarchy, which is a structure of ascending value, is determined in accordance with ultimate Buddhist morality or the extent to which the realities formed by aesthetic events are conditioned in the virtues (guna) of the Buddha’s Teaching. The progression of ritual events (usually discrete named ritual acts) is one that proceeds from lower to higher forms of aesthetic value: for example, from mantra and verses in demonic tongue (sometimes obscene and inchoate, manifesting a combination of different linguistic forms) to those expressed in Sanskrit or “pure” Sinhala of the medieval Elu form; from demonic dance to the dance of divinities, etc. A similar hierarchization operates within each particular ritual event and in the content and organization of gifts in the form of flowers, foods, smells.

The aesthetic focus of the whole rite is a building known as the palace of Mahasammata (Mahasammata maligava or vidiya), a supreme site of the Buddha’s virtues and particularly of the ordering categories of the cosmos. It is a resplendent structure expressly made to appear beautiful and attractive to the gaze. Architecturally it represents the perfect cosmic city-state, the state as it was constituted by Mahasammata. As an aesthetic formation, to be gazed upon, Mahasammata’s building is a representation before the senses of the dynamics constitutive of the realities of existence that human beings construct. It is the construction of constructive processes, an architectonic form, a representation of the potencies into which the sorcery victim will be progressively introduced. Perhaps it might be described as the “categorical imperative” in the aesthetic form of the cosmic state.

The façade of the palace embeds in its design the five elements (mahabhuta) of matter ingrained in all existence and the divine hierarchy (Brahma, Visnu, Siva). The right and left sides indicate the male (Sun) and female (Moon) principles of generative and harmonic union, and at the central apex of the façade, in mediate and commanding position, is a representation of Suniyam/Oddisa, bearing aloft his sword of sacrifice and judgement. In the contemporary popular imagination he is the mediating figure of justice and punishment.10

The victim, who is the center of most of the ritual action, is initially seated in a position confronting the palace and is enjoined to look upon it.11 The victim is in the place of Manikpala and, regardless of the victim’s gender, must wear Manikpala’s shawl. At the start of the rite the victim is conceived to be located at the perimeter of Mahasammata’s cosmic city and where the force of destructive sorcery is at its most intense. The victim must wear Manikpala’s shawl both as protection and to cool sorcery’s
Figure 6.1  The victim in Manikpala’s shawl confronts the Mahasammata Palace

Photograph by Bruce Kapferer.

Figure 6.2  The Mahasammata Palace (the World of Desire)

Photograph by Georges and Marie-Claude Papigny.
Figure 6.3 The dance of the exorcist (Oddisa, the sacrificer)

Photograph by Georges and Marie-Claude Papigny.
destructive heat. Other cooling objects are placed close at hand, and the victim is told to keep his or her mind focused on the Buddha.

The object of the entire rite is to move the victim from where he or she is initially seated into the palace. This is achieved in the major event of the rite known as the hatadiya (seven steps). The victim moves in slow stages progressively towards a small doorway set into the base of the palace into a space known as the atamagala (the place of eight auspicious objects) behind the palace façade. Here the victim is seated on a mat and turned around, reoriented, to face back into the world and back down the path already taken. The victim in this position is located at the axial center of world creation, simultaneously on the seat of Maha Brahma, Maha Purusa, and Lord Buddha. The victim is also conceived as being in the bedchamber of Mahasammata and Manikpala, in the erotic center of world (re)generative harmony. In some interpretations by ritualists, the victim changes into the balanced creative condition of Mahasammata and is no more in the condition of the afflicted Manikpala. Indeed, the victim is now poised to reenter everyday realities restored as a full participant in their ongoing creation.

The ritual journey of the victim describes a process that indeed spans the Void (sunya), the emptiness from which existence is perpetually emergent. The victim’s progress effectively moves from that pole of existence where the potencies of life and death are in explosive originary emergence towards the point, within the palace, that lies at the edge of nonexistence (beyond life, death, and the perpetual cycle of existential emergence).

The rite’s dynamic and the victim’s movement towards the palace are effected, in the conception of exorcists, both by the victim’s perceptual action and by the aesthetic construction of reality before the victim. This movement is intensified as the victim’s body is cleansed of the destructive agents of reality formation (ghosts and demons), and a consciousness imbued with the Buddha’s reason develops. In the understanding of exorcists, the victim’s action of gazing upon the beauty, the glittering perfection of Mahasammata’s cosmic city (the Mahasammata Palace), combined with the effects of the cleansing acts of the rite, operate to draw the patient into the palace. Simultaneously, the palace, as an aesthetic formation of cosmic order, draws the sorcery victim to it. The palace, therefore, is more than an aesthetic representation. It is an aesthetic form that has constitutive and motional force. In the course of the victim’s movement towards the palace, the truth that yet lies hidden within the palace is progressively revealed to consciousness, a consciousness that is progressively embodied as it is recomposed (reborn) and freed from its bonds of anxiety and fear.

I interpret the victim’s passing through the portal of the palace into the bedchamber as a breaking through the final illusion of reality’s appearance, a movement beyond that façade to which Desire still clings and from which the suffering in the world emerges, of sorcery’s anguish. The space within the palace reached by the victim is almost beyond the illusory field of maya and of the aesthetic formation of reality. In the view of exorcists it
Figure 6.4 The line of sorcery’s viper and the seven lotus steps (*hatadiya*)

Photograph by Georges and Marie-Claude Papigny.
Figure 6.5 A victim (wearing Manikpala’s shawl) seated within Mahasmmata’s Palace

Photograph by Georges and Marie-Claude Papigny.
is the space of mind at the limit of illusion, a position from within which the victim can potentially constitute, like Mahasammata, the world anew.

The Suniyama and Kantian Aesthetics

There is much in this ritual discourse that can be brought into dialogue with other discourses on aesthetics. I refer specifically to the aesthetics that has its roots in the work of Kant and that continues to dominate, either in extension or rejection, discussions on aesthetics in Europe and North America. Perhaps the Suniyama extends an understanding of aspects of Kantian aesthetics as well as underlining the significance of the larger issues to which a Kantian aesthetics is oriented, specifically as argued in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1987).

I have described the victim in the Suniyama as moving between two absolute limits, which might have been recognized by Kant to be what he discussed as the Sublime. The Sublime for Kant is at the edge, at the very limit of human cognitive and conceptualizing capacity. It is the point where reason itself encounters its limit. The Sublime is where all cognitive categories break down (see Kant 1987; Deleuze 1995). But as Kant suggested (and I intimate that this is the powerful implication of the Suniyama), it is at the limits, at the points at the very edge of the orders of life, that the potencies wherefrom the conceptualizing categories integral to lived existence spring and take form.

There are two dimensions of the Sublime for Kant, or what he refers to as the mathematical sublime and the dynamic sublime. The former is the feeling of an immensity that lies beyond the measurements or symmetry of Reason, the point where Reason transcends itself, the Infinite. The power of Reason, it might be said, reaches its limit where the cognitive categories through which existence is known and is made sensible can no longer operate. Existence ceases to be. The latter notion of the sublime, the dynamic sublime, is the power of absolute origination, power in its volcanic, erupting, and motional force, of being in its becoming. In this sense, it is explosively generative, the energy of creative force as Desire, yet before the cognitive powers of reason through which its energies may be controlled and constrained. The dynamic sublime may be grasped as the energy of life that yet subverts and defies its further fruition and development.

Mahasammata and Vasavarti Maraya of the Suniyama might be conceived in this Kantian vein (as, too, Oddisa and the Buddha). Vasavarti is that immense explosive generative force that exists before the formations of existence, and the realities constituted through the differentiated categories of reason. He is the force that breaks down all categories, the limit that knows no limit and yet is mastered, if only momentarily, through the potencies of reason. Mahasammata is the power of reason at its ordering height. Yet he is at the limit of reason. The atamagala behind the palace is a
transcendental space where reason through the passage of reason is itself transcended. It is the beginning and end point of reason, the place where reason itself is absolutely manifest or present, yet moving beyond the realities it constitutes and moving towards the brink of its own negation. A clear feature of the space of the atamagala is that it is a transcendental space. It is a space where reason, or the consciousness or mind that produces reason and the lived categories of a reasoning consciousness, becomes not just secluded but enclosed and cut off from existential realities. The victim in this space might be described as a transcendental ego, removed from the world even though the victim is at its most potent constituting point. Within the atamagala, described as a womb space (gaba), the victim is intended to be removed from all sensory experience of the world, except that formed through the operation of the mind (see Kapferer 2001).

The atamagala is an awe-inspiring place. This seems to be the experience of many victims who enter within it. When they cross the threshold into the palace (or more accurately go behind the façade), they often shake and tremble.

It is critical that Vasavarti and Mahasammata are not understood as opposites. They are inextricably associated, and this, as I described, is explicit in the myth narrative. Vasavarti appears to Manikpala in the guise of Mahasammata. Thus he deludes Manikpala. But I think there is an implication in the myth that they do in fact form a unity in the sense that, while separate beings (never constituting a union of opposites, they are mutually repelling), they are inescapably the potential of the other. In the illusory realms of existence, consciousness and reason are tied to the constant reemergent energy and evanescence of life. Thus, Mahasammata as the reasoning, ordering power of existence is attached to Vasavarti, to Desire and eruptive, destructive potency. Each needs and must bring forth the other.

This is a basic message of the rite, vital in the tragic direction of its drama. The idea is embedded in the victim at the progressive center of the rite. It is a grounded abstraction, as it were, critical in the transformation of the victim out of the condition of sorcery that involves a commitment of the victim, an embodied commitment, to the force of Buddha’s reason in subordinating and controlling the force of Desire, the energy of life. It is through such reason that life can be sustained and prevented from prematurely destroying itself.

Much of what I say here is condensed and elaborated in two closing events of the Suniyama that essentially form its dramatic denouement: a comic drama (the vadiga patuna) and the destruction of the palace (chedana vidiya). These are performed after the victim has attained the space of the atamagala and is liberated from the immobilizing bonds of sorcery that are literally cut from the victim’s body by the presiding exorcist. Brought to the highest space of consciousness, the world constituting space of
Figure 6.6 A comic drama (the vadiga patuna)

Photograph by Georges and Marie-Claude Papigny.
Figure 6.7 Destruction of the palace (*chedana vidiya*)

Photograph by Georges and Marie-Claude Papigny.
Mahasammata, a situation of balance and harmony effected through the arts of the rite, the erstwhile victim is once more a creature of language and, in effect, a world creator and a constructor of order.\textsuperscript{13}

In the comic drama of the \textit{vadiga patuna}, life in all its fluidity bursts forth. The comedy ostensibly portrays the buffoonery of the sages who failed to cure Manikpala preparatory to Oddisa’s successful invention of the Suniyama. The comedy has manifold import, among them the demonstration of consciousness as an object to itself. The pleasure of the comedy for the players and the audience alike derives from their submersion in the constitutive and deconstitutive dynamic of consciousness for itself (see Kapferer 1997, 2001). Comic speech reveals consciousness as itself an object of contemplation in the obscenities, spoonerisms, malapropisms that crowd the language and action of the drama. The Rabelaisian breaking of rule and convention of the comedy accentuates the very categories and boundaries that are integral within the realities of everyday life.

While the comedy affirms life it also demonstrates its interweaving with death.\textsuperscript{14} Much of the comedy concentrates on sexual themes, making a mockery of the life-generating force of Desire, as well as the fact that such force underlies the potency of reason, is its nemesis as its necessity. Desire and Reason are unified in the comedy, but this unity through the comedy demonstrates its impossibility. The violence of so much comedy—and this is a powerful feature of the \textit{vadiga patuna—}reveals the irre- solute contradiction that comedy exposes, a contradiction, paradoxically perhaps, that is at the fount of life: its ultimate sadness or joke.

The comedy announces that the victim is about to return to the everyday world, and reconstitutively so. Within the \textit{atamagala,} the victim is in the position of a \textit{bhodisattva,} about to make a conscious choice to return to quotidian realities, alive to the excitement of life (facilitated by the comedy), freed from the pall of sorcery but made aware of suffering’s inevitable connection with life. The comedy also indicates the impending destruction of the rite and the conclusion of the aesthetic processes that have hitherto formed its ritual realities and sustained them. The comedy ends with the final appearance of Vasavarti Maraya (the final joke of the comedy?), the supreme manifestation of Desire and of the world-destroying potency of sorcery’s poison.

This is the \textit{chedana vidiya.} An exorcist in the guise of Vasavarti bearing a sword and in a drunken stupor, a figure of absolute Ignorance and blind confusion, attacks the palace. Unreason and Reason, Annihilation and Nothingness, Vasavarti and Mahasammata, sorcery and the victim restored in the place of Buddha’s Truth, the extremes of the Void of existence, all are brought into direct and defining confrontation.

Vasavarti in a rage hacks down Mahasammata’s Palace. Effectively, he breaks down the edifice of illusion, reality as a construction before the senses that, while an object of order, is also the central object of Desire. Desire destroys its own object and, in my interpretation, could be understood as
freeing the erstwhile victim, now incarnating reason, from Desire’s embrace. More strongly, the victim as the embodiment of consciousness and reason at its height defeats Vasavarti, makes him rather than Manikpala, the creature of delusion and the victim of its artifice. Vasavarti’s impotent destruction of the palace (which parallels the popular Buddhist story of Buddha’s famous defeat of Mara, Death, and impassive concentration before the furies and temptations of Mara’s demonic hordes at the time of His Enlightenment) signs the end of the rite. Most specifically it indicates the conclusion or limit of the aesthetic potency of the rite. While the force of the aesthetic processes of the ritual have brought the victim to reason’s center, the blossoming of reason, the restoration of consciousness, has itself exposed the impotence of artifice before the potency of reason. In other words aesthetic forces have reached their ultimate limit. The victim is liberated by Vasavarti’s destruction from what may be regarded as the false supports of rite, however functional they may have been.15

Now the victim is enjoined to constitute through the force of consciousness. This manifests as a series of sacrificial acts that bring the victim back once more into quotidian realities and outside the protective enclaves of ritual buildings and performance. Effectively, the erstwhile victim acts from outside the realm of the aesthetic. In essence, the victim restored to consciousness is situated independently of the realm of *maya* or of those constructions of human consciousness that have become vulnerable to the forces of delusion that are antagonistic to consciousness and the orders of reason.

In the rite’s final events most of the ritual artifacts are cleared away. Indeed, a clearing is made, a space swept clean and purified of the decaying detritus of sorcery, within which the victim is now free to act and form anew his relation to ordinary realities. The exorcist-performers pack up, and the usually large gathering of spectators that have come to witness the events disperse. They leave the victim almost alone, apart from the guiding help of the presiding exorcist, whose skills in concluding sacrificial acts are effectively passed to the erstwhile victim. The victim becomes his own sacrificer and a being of order and justice. Using Vasavarti’s sword—now transmuted into reason’s sword—the victim engages it as an instrument of reconstitution and not destruction. In his own sacrificial action, the victim remakes his world.16

The transformational force of the aesthetic progression of the rite is achieved in virtuality, enabling an entry into the powers of the sensory realms at the heart of existential formation. To put it another way, the victim is drawn from the dreadful zone of death and destruction, from the edge of personal extinction—the living death of the ensorcelled—and drawn towards beauty and perfection. Here he finds a haven of peace and serenity where he is restored to consciousness and brought to the position where he can reconstitute an ordered and just world from which the disruptive forces of sorcery have been removed.
Interpreting the Homeric Odyssey, Elaine Scarry (1999) restores the importance of a Kantian perspective and his recognition of the aesthetic and the beautiful in underscoring the sensual as being at the heart of a universal human orientation towards justice and truth. This is a universality (grounded in human subjectivity within which cognition and reason are immanent) that perhaps widespread beliefs and practice of sorcery indicate despite their numerous particular cultural differences. In her wonderful essay, Scarry almost evokes the deep existential force of what I understand in the Suniyama.

She refers to the encounter of Odysseus with the beautiful Nausicaa. Nearing the end of his journey, the abject Odysseus, shipwrecked, alone, and naked, is confronted by the beautiful Nausicaa, who alone of all her friends is not frightened by Odysseus’s wild appearance. Odysseus discovers a perfection and sanctity in Nausicaa. It is Nausicaa, beauty unafraid, who takes Odysseus to her father, King of the Phaeacians. He assists Odysseus finally to his home of Ithaca where, of course, Odysseus exacts his own life-reclaiming judgement. Scarry’s interpretation of beauty as the mediator of justice and truth—Nausicaa’s beauty is a kind of Kantian in-itself, a universal—compares with the import of the journey of victims in the Suniyama.

The very appreciation or awareness of something as aesthetic as something to look upon already depends on the emergence, in the very activity of such a look, of a synthesizing and unifying human mind. The pleasure in the sensible simultaneously gives rise to a cognitive and constituting capacity, which is not to reduce the cognitive to the sensual or subjective. But all thought of Kant aside, Scarry’s commentary on the shipwrecked Odysseus is also suggestive of the sorcery victim in the Suniyama. The victim can be conceived of as “shipwrecked” on the verge of personal extinction as a consequence of the travail that sorcery implicates, but through the mediation of the aesthetic and beauty is lead back to the potencies of Truth, Reason, and Justice. The victim, as with Odysseus, is returned to a capacity to engage, once again, in the determination of his or her life chances.

Conclusion

The relation of ritual to art and aesthetics has long been recognized in anthropology. Recent and contemporary movements in the arts and much discussion of aesthetics in general recognize an identity with the diverse kinds of human problematics that are opened up in ritual. This essay has continued in such a concern but with a renewed emphasis on the particular force that artistic forms can achieve within the aesthetics of ritual practice.

There has been a tendency in some anthropological quarters concerned with art and the aesthetic to be removed from the great existential concerns
that are at the root of so much ritual action and with which its aesthetic (and the pragmatics of such aesthetics) are enlivened. This in my opinion marks off the significance of the work of such major figures in anthropology for whom aesthetic forms and processes are crucial to the understanding of the diversity that is human being, as the work of Lévi-Strauss, Victor Turner, and most recently Roy Rappaport (1999) have all exemplified. In the studies of these thinkers—and specifically with reference to ritual—artistic practices and aesthetic forms engage thoroughly with the crisis that is human being. This is made intensely evident in the practical work of ritual, which, furthermore, reveals or manifests the vital potential within aesthetic processes and structures that may be obscured when “art is broken free from its ritual integument.” When Turner made this observation he implied strongly that a distinction exists in the formations of the arts and aesthetic in rite from their realization as art independent from rite, even allowing for the many affinities between the several arts and ritual.

Turner’s aesthetic focus with regard to rite (and more generally) is arguably the strongest among anthropologists. It was he more than most who insisted that anthropologists in their analyses of ritual had much to learn from the literary and performance arts. His aesthetic turn was not of the more reductionist kind epitomized in the focus on the “art” or “anthropology of art” orientations of some contemporary anthropology. Such perspectives these days tend to decline in the direction of a well-plodded “art and society” concern (often Durkheimian, less frequently Marxist) and despite some recent attempts at phenomenological or post-structuralist orientations (with of course exceptions, e.g., Munn 1973). Too frequently anthropologists wish to address their own aesthetic sensitivities rather than those of the peoples with whom they might more immediately be concerned.

This was not so with Turner, who along with an emphasis on the particular dynamics of aesthetic processes in rite showed how their practical concerns were connected with larger human existential questions of moral and ethical import. This is especially evident in Turner’s early ethnography on rite, where he refused a too narrow philosophical and theoretical confinement that characterized the particular sociological Durkheimian directions of much British social anthropology of his time. One of the most poignant examples is his essay *Chihamba: the White Spirit*, in which he lays out many of the themes that he would later develop in his broad approach to ritual. In *Chihamba*, Turner shows that the practical concerns of Ndembu rites are wrapped up with the kind of great human questions that lie at the heart of other religious traditions and the literature that develops from within them. Thus he sees parallels in the discourses of Ndembu rites and those in Christianity. Turner, seizing on the multiladen values that the Ndembu place on “whiteness,” engages with Melville’s classic saga *Moby Dick*, finding in it the kinds of magnificent symbolic potency that Turner encountered in Ndembu ritual. Turner was
not pursuing either a Christian-centric or Eurocentric perspective. Instead he was demanding a recognition from anthropologists that human beings everywhere manifest in their distinct and particular ways critical matters perhaps universally at the center of human being. His point, developing as much from Freud and Jung as from the neo-Kantians such as Susanne Langer, is that there exists a preconceptual, prelogical force emergent from human embodied existence in the world that develops differentially along particular cultural lines. These may not be reducible to each other but, nonetheless, they manifest a certain ontological universality underlying all human experience.

What is immediately apparent in Turner’s discussions of the aesthetics of rite and of the art/rite relation is the vital conjunction and exploration of the existential forces at the ground of the formation of human beings and the cognitive construction of their realities. There is a clear Kantian direction in Turner’s own early work. But he departed from the objectivist orientation in anthropology, possibly most strongly developed in various structuralist perspectives, that refused a consideration of the subjective and the sensual. Turner was influenced by another Kant, that which is at the heart of the philosophical and ethnographically sensitive work of Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer, figures of considerable importance for the development of symbolic anthropology. There are shades of Kant in Turner’s approach to meaning (his discussion of its orectic and exegetical poles) and even in his, on the surface, most anti-Kantian developments of the concepts of liminality, antistructure, and communitas.

Kant’s notions of the sublime as I have discussed in relation to the Suniyama have a definite bearing on these ideas. For Turner and Kant, it is at the limits, at the edge of reason and existence—when human beings are brought outside the forms of ordinary life and placed in situations of subjective intensity—that they can be brought to reimagine their circumstance and its orders and to reform and perhaps redirect their lives in original ways. At the limit, at the threshold, in liminal space, human beings can be brought to new realizations and break away from an endless repetition of the same.17

Regardless of whether Kant and Turner can in fact be reconciled, there is one aspect about which they agree. This is that aesthetic processes draw human beings towards major moral issues that are at the center of their existence. Here, too, the wonderful performance of the Sinhala Buddhist antisorcery rite, the Suniyama, should leave no doubt.

The Suniyama establishes the cosmological process within which a hierarchy of aesthetic value is both determined and has its effect. Within the course of the rite, artistic forms discover an aesthetic force, realize their value in effecting a progressive change in the victim. I stress the thorough pragmatism of the aesthetic dynamics directed as they are to the overcoming of the dreadful personal and potentially world-annihilating experience that sorcery holds for its victims. No less integral to the dynamic aesthetic
processes of the rite are what many readers might regard as highly abstract questions, matters of deep concern in Buddhist doctrine and philosophy. If not universal, many of these are yet apparent in diverse form in widespread human practices separated in space and in time. Although sorcery practices as they are often presented in anthropology would obviously seem to be very distant from such abstractions as those connected with Reason, Truth and Justice, this is certainly not the case in the context of the great Sinhala Buddhist antisorcery rite that I have discussed. Indeed, I contend that such issues—especially those of personal and social justice—are implicit and immanent in sorcery practices in many parts of the globalizing contemporary world, as the apparent increase in appeals to sorcery ideas and practices might otherwise indicate (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Geschiere 1997; and a critique, Kapferer 2002). But my critical point in this analysis is that the aesthetic of this Sinhala Buddhist rite engages abstract matters to pragmatics, grounding them and their emergence in the sensual world of human existence.

The ritual as an aesthetic process works in what Kant argued was the fundamental subjective (embodied) basis of human cognitive formation (an argument developed in various phenomenologies, including the religious). Through the manipulation of the sensual ground of human realizations (constructions) of human existence oriented to the consummate values of Buddha’s Teaching, the aesthetic process simultaneously removes sorcery victims from their particular suffering despair and feelings of injustice and recenters them in the existential and experiential ground and position of a Universal Subject in whom Reason and Justice, reached via the ever-ennobling dynamic of the ritual aesthetic, are refounded.

The ritual discourse of the Suniyama resonates with an import that reaches beyond the particular cultural and historical context of its production. Its celebration of aesthetic potency shares much with the splendor of human artistic creations everywhere and in its difference manifests, nonetheless, often a similar import. There is much in the Suniyama to my mind that parallels, for example, Dante’s progress in The Divine Comedy as represented in Botticelli’s splendid drawings. Despite the distinct Christian cosmology of their context, there is yet, in the depiction of Dante’s ascent in the company of the beautiful Beatrice leading to the breaking of the Devil’s bonds, a similarity with the motioning of the victim in the Suniyama.

I have given some attention to Kant because I consider that the Suniyama enables a reflection from a different cosmological and cultural perspective on matters that have general import and that a discussion of the aesthetic must enliven. The abstraction of the former as the pragmatism of the latter reminds us of the crucial human issues and questions at the center of aesthetics and, further, of that anthropology that attends to matters of aesthetic and symbolic process, whether in rite or other forms of human practice.
Notes

I have discussed the arguments presented here with Angela Hobart, Tom Ernst, Jadran Mimica, and Roland Kapferer. I am most grateful to them and also to members of the workshop on aesthetics, performance, and ritual who met at Ascona in May 2000.

1. The translation of *tovil* as "exorcism" is problematic because of the ease with which it may be confused with exorcism in Christian traditions. Demons in *tovil* are not cast out in the way that they usually are in Christian exorcisms. Rather they are removed and placed at the margins of human social worlds. They are also transformed from malevolent to relatively benign and harmless creatures. In Sinhala conception, of course, the potential of the demonic is an ever-present dimension of human existence. These and other differences distinguish between *tovil* and Christian exorcism. However, there are broad similarities despite the differences.

   The word *tovil* specifically refers to Sinhala rites directed to demons (*yakku*). It is etymologically related to the Tamil for work or worker. In fact ritual practitioners (or exorcists) liken their rites to the noise and commotion of modern factory work where something new is hammered out of base material.

2. Exorcism in Sri Lanka is now increasingly being realized as a national heritage. Schools of dance and drama are being established catering especially for the middle class. The information presented is often being refashioned and made more and more consistent with classical Indian knowledge.

3. During the dance, which is oriented in terms of the dynamic of male and female principles, the dancers will play with convention, making a mockery of both homo- and heterosexuality.

4. Indeed, there is much in the structural organization of exorcism rites that explicitly relates to Hindu temple practice.

5. In my early work on exorcism (Kapferer 1983), I conceived of exorcism as involving a ritual suspension of everyday paramount reality. I note that this approach, common in ritual studies, allows for the equation of rite with modern theatre drama. While this may be appropriate in numerous instances, as far as exorcism is concerned, any such similarity would obscure significant differences. The use of the term "virtuality" conveys this. It is a thoroughgoing reality of its own that is neither a representation of realities external to it (symbolic in this sense) nor another reality altogether. Rather it constitutes a descent into the dynamics from which reality in all its multiple possibilities might be said to be constituted. I might add that, while there are clear theatrical dimensions of exorcisms that contribute so much to their delight, what could be called their "backstage" directions are also very much to the front. Exorcisms, like much ritual, constitute a complex of rules and directions into which participants are systematically introduced. If I were to continue with theatrical metaphors (which I have already indicated are not necessarily the best way to describe rite), I would say it is as if exorcism, as performance, is in a constant state of rehearsal.

6. Huniyam is the destructive demonic aspect. In Sinhala, "s" and "h" are interchangeable, although "s" is normally used for superior forms. Therefore, Suniyam is the encompassing form who transforms or articulates destruction with beneficence or protection, usually converting the one into the other.

7. Oddisa is presented in his origin myths as a demonic being who absorbs all the poisons of existence and then uses them to harm and to cure. He is presented as the great sacrificer whose knowledge outreaches that of Brahmanic astrologers and physicians. Oddisa lives outside human society, and it is from such a position that he has the ritual potency to reconstitute, for example, the orders of society.

8. The Suniyama shares much in its composition with the great ritual festivals and sacrifices of the annual renewal of kingship in medieval Sri Lanka, vestiges of which are still
performed today (see Seneviratne 1978). The Suniyama as a sacrifice is understood by exorcists to be composed of sixteen sacrificial actions (tindui) or completions in which the connection between the victim and sorcery is cut and the victim is reconstituted.

9. Events of drama and dance in the Suniyama are conceived by exorcists as sacrificial and finishing acts and are named by exorcists as part of the sixteen events of sacrifice that comprise the rite as a whole.

10. Shrines to the god Suniyam have been erected mainly in urban centers from the end of the nineteenth century. In these shrines he is a god who is represented as meting out justice or judgement, reward, and punishment to those who bring their problems before him. A popular cult would appear to be increasing around his worship. Problems with authority, state officials, or matters involving the law are frequently brought before him.

11. The gaze (darsana) is of central importance in the rite. To look upon the edifice of Buddhist order, the Mahasammata Palace, is to become part of its virtuous force.

12. This is a tantric rite. The victim is made to travel along the body of the snake of sorcery, which is simultaneously the snake of space and time, the spinal column, the world axis, etc. Marked along the line of the victim’s journey in the rite are seven lotuses, or body plexuses, through which the energies of life renewal come. The hatadiya is the central rite of the entire Suniyama (see Kapferer 1997).

13. It must be stressed here that, throughout the rite, the victim remains silent. This silence is largely a silence wrought by the end of speech, which is one of the chief effects of sorcery. Sorcery kills the capacity of human beings to act in the world and to pursue their life projects. Language is, of course, the chief vehicle of such action. I note further that within the atamagala the victim is transformed from speechlessness into the silence of meditative quietude in which absolute consciousness and a moment approaching the transcendence of reason is achieved—reason in transcendence of itself being a condition at the very threshold of nonexistence. It is also, in the context of the Suniyama, a moment of the height of reason’s potency.

14. The comedy elaborates on themes of life and death, and this is also its explosive quality, as Mary Douglas (1982) noted insightfully concerning the joke form.

15. Many Sinhalese Buddhists, laypersons, and monks will say that although ritual is necessary ultimately it cannot be used in place of the recognition and commitment to the power of the Buddha’s reason. Such opinions undoubtedly are inspired in the great rationalism of a supremely modernist kind that has influenced present day appeals to Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1989) discuss this in their accounts of what they term Protestant Buddhism and what is generally described as the rationalism of recent Buddhist revivals spawned under the conditions of colonialism and after.

16. At this moment, or earlier in the rite, an effigy (panibaya) of the cause of sorcery is burnt, usually in a dark place and hidden from public view.

17. Turner’s contribution through his development of the concept of the liminal must be emphasized in the overall context of the argument of this essay. Liminal moments are moments that stand outside conceptual orders, structures of interpretation (the categorical imperative) and, as Turner demonstrated in his Ndembu materials, are moments in which such categories or interpretative frames are actively demolished to give rise to new forms of meaning and position (status) in the orders of ongoing life. Here Turner broke away radically from that anthropology that saw in rite only conservatism and traditionalism. The liminal dynamics of rite are the vital clue to understanding how rituals can transform life situations. He effectively reassigned the significance of ritual in the anthropological imagination. He indicated why ritual action should persist through historical changes: integral in creating social and political ruptures, otherwise opening up social space, and facilitating the development of new or original orientations to the realities of experience. Within this move, Turner saw the potential identity between the liminal and the aesthetic and suggested why
artistic practice and aesthetic processes should be so vital in much ritual performance. The liminal in ritual gave rise to the creative, generative, and imaginative potentialities of the artistic and of the emergence of new orientations or an aesthetic reflective grasp on experience.

References


