

**Stepping Across Boundaries:
Ritual Praxis Inside (and Outside)
the Religious Studies Classroom**

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During the past two decades, in an effort to create a context in which my students might have the opportunity to touch, and to be touched by, the richness, texture, and power of a wide variety of religious worlds, I have utilized a variety of experiential/participatory pedagogical techniques in my undergraduate Religious Studies classes. For example, the students and I (at times with the assistance of an invited expert practitioner) have drummed, gone on shamanic journeys, made masks, done tai chi and hatha yoga, interpreted dreams, engaged in mythic psychodramas, practiced different styles of meditation, and so on. I offer all of these non-orthodox activities as a way to underscore and enliven the copious (and crucial) intellectual content that students must grapple with when taking one of my classes, content that is delivered in the old-fashioned way: i.e., via lectures, classroom discussion, and lengthy book assignments. In this article, I would like to focus in some detail on one of the more complex and non-orthodox activities that I have integrated into one of my classes over the years: myth performances.

Students of mine do not often have the opportunity to take part in myth performances. Basically, I only offer this assignment once every two years when I teach “Magic, Myth, and Religion,” an undergraduate anthropology of religion course. This assignment is crucial to the course, but before the students begin to work on it, I try to prepare them intellectually. During the first few weeks of “Magic, Myth, and Religion,” we discuss numerous theoretical understandings of the origins and functions of myth as well as the complex interweaving between myth, dreaming, and visionary states; we analyze a range of myths and investigate various ways of understanding several typical symbolic patterns; we look into the roles played by art, music, dance, and community

interaction in relation to myth and ritual; we discuss the potential power and significance of ritual activity and the complex interrelationship between ritual and myth; and we carefully examine the symbolism inherent in a wide assortment of ritual actions (e.g., various bodily postures, eating food, washing, shedding blood, etc.). All of this intellectual data is crucial, both in its own right *and* as a way to prepare the students for their myth performance; that is, not only do my students get a real sense of the significance and value of mythic and symbolic ways of thinking, expression, and enactment from exposure to these ideas, but they are also given a nice juicy chunk of raw material that they can draw upon in the creation and performance of their own myths.

However, in order to really help them to get the most out of their myth performance, I need to do more than simply to prepare them intellectually. Over the years, I have discovered that it is also crucial that I present this assignment to the students in a particular way so that I can maximize its potential to be a successful and meaningful experience. My classes typically have between 30 and 35 students, so fairly early on in the semester I have the class count off — 1, 2, 3, 4 — somewhat arbitrarily, splitting the class into four groups of about eight or nine students. I then give them time in class to get together in their groups to exchange phone numbers and email addresses, and I encourage them to meet early and often with each other outside of class.

I next give the students a pep talk. I begin by describing how important their attitude is to the success of this assignment. I tell them that if they see it as some sort of onerous duty, or some sort of flakey joke, and just do the bare minimum in order to get by, they will most likely end up hating the assignment. However, I point out, they can also see the assignment as one of the very few opportunities that they will have in college to be genuinely creative and they can decide to really give themselves to the process. I tell them that if they see the assignment in this way that they might just discover, as many if not most students have discovered in past courses, that creating and performing this myth together is the highlight of the semester. I also inform the students that it is crucial that everyone pitch in fully, not only because it is more fun and fair that way, but also because they have a shared grade.

The grade for the myth creation and performance, as the students already know from their syllabus, counts for 15% of the course grade. Fortunately — and I never tell my students this ahead of time — I have never given any of the *groups* anything less than an “A” for their work, not out of compassion or laziness on my part, but because they have all demonstrated enough creativity, hard work, and “mythic know-how” to deserve this grade (criteria that are outlined in the syllabus as well). I also let the students know that I reserve the right to lower the myth performance grades of those less-than-exemplary individuals who occasionally surface in various groups, or to reward those individuals who go beyond the call of duty in their contributions to their group’s myth performance.

Another criterion of the students’ grade is the response paper. As I inform my students, each person is required to write a two-page response paper due on the day of the class after the performance. In this response paper, they should discuss their own contribution to the process of creat-

ing the myth performance as well as what they learned from the assignment. I also let them know that they can, if they so choose, either highlight those individuals in the group who really gave themselves the most to the process, or they can gripe about the students who they thought did not contribute as much as they should have — and that (as I mentioned above) I will modify the grades of these participants accordingly. I have discovered that giving the students this opportunity to either praise or to berate their classmates is very helpful: it not only speaks to their innate sense of fairness, but it also lets those students who might be inclined to blow off the assignment know that they will be held accountable for their lack of participation.

During this same class, or perhaps a bit closer to when I think they are actually getting ready to start meeting together, I give them a type of “Show and Tell.” One aspect of the myth performance is that each group is required to write up their myth in an artistic and, ideally, symbolic way. In order that they can get a sense of the level of the creative work that I am expecting, I show them several examples of the myth “books” written up from previous classes so that over the years that I have taught this course, I have kept several of the best examples of these myth books. I am almost inevitably impressed with the level of time and imagination that has gone into creating them. Some of them are simply made out of paper, often artistically designed (e.g., the edges of the paper might be scorched, or the pages might be sewn together with leather straps, or assembled like a scroll; the myth itself is often written out by hand in some form of calligraphy; and the pages are often filled with vivid “paintings” — of varying levels of artistic ability — of scenes drawn from the myth itself). Some of the groups, however, go further in their attempt to create a meaningful and artistic myth book. I remember one myth book, for instance, that focused thematically on the origin of the hunt for deer, whose cover was made from a real deer skin and antlers. Another myth book focused on the death and rebirth of the moon and was constructed from a series of small wooden circles (about ½ inch thick and three inches in diameter, cut straight from the branch of a tree) that had been burned to represent the different phases of the moon. All of these small circles had a tiny hole bored in the top of them that enabled the students to tie all of the moon phases together, so that they could then be unfurled like a hand of cards.

Of all of the myth books, however, two examples were perhaps my favorite. One group told a story about a cosmogonic spider who weaved the universe from her own body, a universe that was made from the very words that form the spider myth itself. These (very clever!) students made the spider from a series of large Styrofoam balls painted black – and in the middle of the spider’s “back” they hollowed out a space that contained a roll of paper with the myth written on it, constructed so that the mythic words (i.e., the myth itself) could be unrolled from the body of the spider. Another group had an old shaman walk onto the “stage” holding a staff. On the end of the staff, which was a family heirloom from one student’s family, there was a globe made of paper-maché, which was painted to look like the world that had just been created in the myth itself by the shaman. On the globe were printed the words of the myth, glued on in such a way that in order to read them, you had to spin the globe — just as the globe, or planet, itself had been made

to spin in the myth by the words of the shaman.

After I have either inspired my students (or put the fear of God in them) by showing them these previous myth books, I also let them know that, in order to be the most powerful experience possible, their performance should, ideally, include within itself not only a script (i.e., the myth itself), but also music, lighting, symbolic props and artwork, dance or choreographed movements, and some sort of costumes. In order to nip their groans in the bud, I typically emphasize that this is a group creation, and that one or two people *should* not, and cannot, do it all. Instead, I stress that each person needs to find their own way to make their unique contribution, drawing upon their particular gifts and skills. I inform them that it is important for the group *as a whole* to brainstorm and decide upon the basic framework of the myth. However, once that is done, one or two people who actually enjoy creative writing can write out the myth itself, while others can take on the job of designing and putting together the myth book, while still others can make the props, figure out the costumes, help with the choreography, coordinate the music, and so on.

Once I have described the assignment to my students, given them their pep talk, and helped them to believe that it is not only do-able, but at least potentially worth doing, I will then, at various points throughout the semester, ask if they have started meeting together as a group, if they are running into any obstacles or problems, and so on. During this lead-in to the performance itself, I am also, unknown to them, spending a fair amount of time trying to find an appropriate venue in which they can give their myth performances. These myth performances simply cannot occur within the physical confines of a typical desk-filled classroom. Therefore, it is critical that I find a space on campus that can accommodate the non-ordinary logistical demands of this quasi-ritual praxis. So, in the past, these performances have taken place in gym basements, unused auditoriums, and student union meeting rooms.

However, during the first myth performance that my students gave, which took place during my first year at Southern Methodist University, I learned very quickly that there are very real limitations as to what types of ritual activities the students can do in certain spaces. On this day, we met together in one of the ballrooms in the Student Union. During the performance of one of the myths, the students burned some sage in order to purify the participants and the space. Unfortunately, only minutes later, two campus policemen and the activities director of the student union barged into the room. Apparently someone outside the room had smelled the sage burning and thought that we were smoking marijuana. I had previously gotten permission to burn candles in the room, and I had brought a fire extinguisher just in case, but I had anticipated neither the fact that the students might burn sage nor any police intervention. After the initial period of intensity and confusion, the policemen were actually rather understanding, although I never dared to use that space in the student union again.

As for what typically happens in preparation for the myth performances, I have found that it is crucial to let the various groups meet together during the entire class period on the day before the myth performance as a type of dress rehearsal. After reminding them where the performance will

be and emphasizing that they need to be sure to come at least fifteen minutes early, if possible, to deal with the props, costumes, music set up, and so forth, I send them off to rehearsal spaces that they have chosen. Then, on the day of the performance, I usually get to the space at least half an hour early so that I can greet the students and put up a sign on the door so that no one outside the class comes in unannounced, and so that each of the students can sign in on a sheet as a way of taking roll. After they have all arrived, and I have made sure that everything and everyone is ready, I welcome them all formally, have them decide which group wants to perform when, and then, once the first group is set up, I signal the start of the performances with a blast on a small Tibetan horn (which not only gets their attention, but tends to break the tension since they inevitably all laugh when I, so to speak, toot my own horn).

The myth performances are typically about ten minutes long, with about five to ten minutes for the students to set up and break down their props and scenery. It is difficult to describe the atmosphere in the room during these myth performances. The students' excitement and nervous anticipation is tangible and infectious. And, thank God, I have almost never been disappointed by what the students put together. What I have noticed, in fact, is that after watching these performances, my jaw hurts because I have been smiling so much. While some performances are less substantial and moving than others, I have never been embarrassed by any of them. Much more commonly, I am amazed by, and deeply appreciative of, the quality of their creative performances. Sometimes my hair has literally stood on end in response to how deeply moved I am by what I am seeing and hearing, times in which it is so clear just how seriously the students are taking their performance, how much of themselves they are pouring into it, times in which the lighting, and the makeup, and the music, and the decorations, and the masks, and the drumming, and the chanting, and the choreographed bodily movements, and the ritualized recitation of the myth all come together to create something more, something magical: a sense of presence, an awareness of a palpable energy filling the room, bringing with it a deep sense of stillness, awe, or even reverence. During these moments, it is as if we are no longer in a gymnasium or a theatre rehearsal room, but instead, are witnesses to something genuinely profound, something that transcends the ordinary, something that, dare I say it, brings with it a sense of the sacred.

One of these special myth performances took place just last semester. This particular group had been meeting together for a while, generating the story of the myth and starting to plan who was going to do what. Unfortunately, one of the young women in the group was not able to participate during this process because she had gone through an intensely traumatic event. She has freely, and in fact enthusiastically, given me permission to tell you her story. A former boyfriend of hers had kept calling her, showing up unannounced, begging her to talk with him. Finally, against her better judgment, she got into a car with him. She told me that she almost immediately knew that she had made a mistake because her ex-boyfriend drove away very fast and began to act very erratically. It did not take long before she asked him to stop the car and let her out, but he refused. To make a long story short, this young woman was abducted by her ex-boyfriend, endured hours

of pleading and threats from him, and then, after he finally stopped the car in a remote area, she attempted to fight him off as he brutally strangled her, telling her that if he could not have her, no one would. Amazingly, even though this young man tried to kill my student, and thought that he had done so, and was getting ready to dump her body, she returned to consciousness (after, by the way, having had a powerful and classic near-death experience). She somehow managed to convince this young man that she still loved him and that she wanted to go to Mexico with him. She also managed, astonishingly, to get him to stop down the road from her parents' house in Houston, telling him that she needed to get some clothes from a friend who lived in the area. Instead she jumped out of the car, ran into her parents' house, locked the door, and called the police. Her ex-boyfriend, after a few minutes, drove off.

I did not, of course, have any idea that all of this had happened to this young woman. All that I knew was that she had not been in class for a while. I only began to get some hint that something awful had happened when her mother and the Dean of Students emailed me, telling me that she had undergone a very difficult experience and would not be able to attend school for several weeks. (I learned later that she could not come back to school not only because she needed to recover, physically and mentally, from the trauma, but also because she had to stay in hiding until the young man was finally caught and arrested.) The bottom line was that when she returned to class, her group had already written the myth and had begun to rehearse. Fortunately, this young woman was, and is, amazingly buoyant, and really wanted to be part of the myth performance, so she threw herself into the time that the group had left, coming to every rehearsal, and contributing what she could.

On the day of the myth performances, when it was time for her group to perform, I had as usual no idea what I was about to see. All that I knew was that her group consisted of eight young women, and one young man. Here is a rough outline of the myth that they performed: the eight young women were members of a tribe of Amazons, women who were strong and self-reliant, and yet who hated men, because in the past men had enslaved and brutalized them. Every year, this group of women, led by the young woman I mentioned, would capture a man from a nearby tribe, tie him up, get him intoxicated with sacred drinks and smoke, and then, after capturing his essence via a ritualized sex act, one of their group (in this case, the young woman) would repeatedly stab him with a sacred knife until he died, catching his blood in special cups that they would then offer to their goddess as a way to bring vitality to their community for the coming year.

I sat there watching this performance with my jaw dropped. By this time, I knew what had happened to this young woman, and so I assumed that she had helped to shape the myth so that it clearly reflected her own experience. But I later learned that not only did she have nothing to do with the story of the myth, but also that no one in her group, or in the audience, knew anything about what she had gone through. Even though this was the case, she had been chosen, by the group, not only to be the one to capture the young man, but also to be the one to ritually sacrifice his life. Without any conscious choice on her part, she had, amazingly, been given a context in which to publicly go through a very profound, and deeply cathartic, form of mythic psychodrama.

She was given the opportunity to take part in a mythic enactment in which she could address and ritually overcome almost point for point what had happened to her.

You can imagine: I was simply stunned when I watched this performance – a performance that also deeply affected many of the students, even though they knew nothing about this young woman’s story. A couple of days later, she came to my office and spoke to me privately about how healing and life affirming the myth performance had been for her, how safe it felt, how deeply touched she had been that God, or the universe, or someone or something “out there” or “up there,” had seemingly, on the face of it, offered her this opportunity, within the safety of what looked like “make believe,” to confront and overcome some of her deepest fears, to experience a level of power within her that she did not know existed. She also shared with me how, during the performance, she often was so caught up in the drama that she would forget that it was simply a class assignment taking place in a wrestling room with a bunch of fellow students, and would feel instead as if she were part of something real, something powerful, something greater than herself, something (and I am using her words here) sacred.

Of course, not all of the myth performances reach this level of depth; nonetheless, as I mentioned, I am almost never disappointed. Therefore, thankfully, it is usually a very pleasant task to take a few minutes immediately after each performance to express my appreciation and to reflect on what we have all just witnessed. Typically I will ask each group to share with the class what the myth symbolized, what their intentions were in the performance, and what they got from the process. I will then ask the “audience” what struck them about the myth performance, and based on their responses, I try to help them to see dimensions of the myth performances that they might have overlooked in the rush of the performance itself.

During the next formal classroom session following the myth performances, after I have collected their reflection papers, I typically spend quite a bit of time unpacking the myth performances, helping them to see more clearly how the performances related to previous lecture material and to the assigned readings in the class. I will often, right off the bat, emphasize how their own performances were, in many ways, very different from the myths and rituals that are embedded in a more traditional cultural setting. I want to make sure that students do not forget that although these myth performances might well create avenues of visceral connection to the aboriginal traditions we are studying, nonetheless, we will never succeed in our attempts to enter into the dense, complex “otherness” of these traditions. I want them not to tame over-quickly the strangeness of other cultures, make the Other too familiar, too comfortable. In these discussions, I repeatedly emphasize to my students that their myth performances were just a “taste” or a “glimpse” of the real thing and do not even come close, for the most part, to the power and complexity of rituals and practices that are situated within the matrix of a living culture.

In order to underscore this observation, I might note, for instance, that while they might have felt that they put a lot of time into creating their masks — and relatively speaking, they really had — masks in traditional cultures might take years to create, not just a half hour, and for various

indigenous peoples, that mask might often be assumed to be a living being, an incarnation of, for example, an ancestor or a totem spirit. I might also point out that most myths and rituals are not consciously created and are certainly not the result of a classroom assignment, but instead they are either understood as emerging out of a powerful visionary contact with divine beings, or they are understood as a faithful communal enactment of what these divine beings require of those within the tradition, in order for them to be in a correct relationship with the sacred.

In this post-performance discussion, I do not, however, just emphasize the differences between their mythic performances and more traditional ritualized expressions of myths. I do want my students to develop a respect for diversity; I want them to come to cherish the unique qualities found in the cultures that they are studying. But I also want my students to emerge from my classroom amazed at the underlying similarities that members of each culture share, simply by virtue of being human. I want them to have contemplated the numerous and subtle ways in which many of their own deepest concerns are addressed by these religious traditions. I want my students to leave my class having built fragile, but important, bridges into that world of otherness. Therefore, in this discussion, I also underscore and help them to articulate why this assignment was so powerful, so moving, so enlivening to them. I point out that doing these sorts of exercises does, in fact, give them an empathetic “taste” or “glimpse” of the practices of other cultures; it allows them to enter, if only for a moment, and only partially, the lifeworld of those people who before were, at best, simply objects of study. I point out while they are, of course, not “the same” as, for example, the Conibo people in the Amazon region of Ecuador, nonetheless, they too, even within the limitations of this exercise, were able to tap into a ritualized, mythic mode of consciousness (albeit in a much briefer, much less intense, and much more self-conscious fashion than most indigenous peoples).

I have kept many of the response papers that students have written after their myth performances. While preparing this essay, I re-read many of these, and I was once again struck by how much students genuinely do appear to get from this process. Time and time again, these papers describe how after some initial struggles, both internally and with other group members, the students were able to discover what a joy it was to get an opportunity to be creative. They also frequently articulate how they gained a deeper understanding of the power of symbolism, music, bodily movements, and art to create a sense of community as well as to transform their perception of themselves and the world around them. Students also frequently mention how the class material suddenly became alive to them after this assignment. They often comment on how they had to overcome personal barriers in the process of creating and performing the myth, how they went through a certain period of suffering, similar to an initiation, only to discover experientially, within themselves, a new access to deeper levels of self understanding and closeness to others, all within a relatively short, but intense period of time. One student wrote that “by watching the other myths and performing in ours, I really felt as though I was part of something greater.” Another student said, “I am very happy that this myth project was assigned; it gave me a chance to transform myself into something completely different and unexpected, and it gave me a real, if only partial,

glimpse into what life is like for people in other parts of the world.” Finally, one of our majors, a very articulate young woman, expressed her response to the myth performance in this way: “At the outset of the process, I must admit I was skeptical about creating and performing a myth; however, now that it is complete, I could not be more proud of our myth presentation. Working with the group to create the myth was enlightening because it taught me how a myth is not actually created, but instead, it flows into creation on its own. To a large degree, we did not plan the symbolism, but the symbolism was ever-present in our story, waiting to be discovered. I first imagined that the performance of it would be similar to a play or a theatrical show, but after performing ours and then watching the other groups, I found the myth performances to be much more powerful than I had ever imagined.”

While it is fair to say that my students are almost invariably extremely enthusiastic about this type of experiential/participatory activity, certain of my *colleagues* have been at times, shall I say, somewhat less enthusiastic. On occasion, a few of them have claimed that these sorts of classroom activities are either inappropriate classroom filler or are occasions for an idealized, romanticized depiction of religious Others. Even more seriously, these colleagues have sometimes raised pointed questions about the ethical implications of such activities. Fortunately, my colleagues shared these concerns in the context of a departmental colloquy and a symposium on pedagogy in Religious Studies in which I could publicly share my rationale for this type of unorthodox pedagogical technique. What I would like to do is to reiterate the arguments that I made in those two contexts. First, I realize that this mode of teaching is not for everyone. I am convinced that teaching comes alive when the professor teaches what he or she loves, and it is obvious that not everyone loves these types of activities in the way that I do. Second, I fully acknowledge that brilliant, transformative teaching is quite possible without doing a single one of these exercises in class. It is not as if there is, on the one side, dry, boring, intellectual teaching about religions, and on the other side, lively, interesting, experiential/participatory activities such as these myth performances. I do not think that giving students detailed, vivid, and complex understandings of the history, beliefs, and practices of other religious traditions through lectures, class discussion, and textual analysis is unimportant. Far from it; that more traditional type of teaching is in actuality the bulk of what I do, explicitly because I think that it is transformative: it helps my students to become better human beings — more thoughtful, more informed, more tolerant, more open-minded, more critically aware.

I admit that I am somewhat puzzled by people who insist that experiential/participatory pedagogical strategies are somehow incompatible with more orthodox techniques (such as lecture and discussion formats). In my experience, they compliment and reinforce one another. While the information transmitted in lectures and in assigned readings can dramatically expand and transform the students’ previous assumptive worlds, this “logocentric” mode of presentation can also subtly reinforce the tacit understanding that religious life is primarily about words and beliefs. Too often, I fear, students leave Religious Studies courses convinced that the peoples whom we study are exclusively philosophers and that these traditions are primarily a matter of abstract ideas and

beliefs. Because the facts about these traditions are typically conveyed to the students in an exclusively *verbal* form, the students are frequently given a very “thin” understanding of the critical significance of non-verbal activities for the religious life of people within these traditions. I would suggest that the (perhaps inevitable) logocentric focus of the university classroom can be at least partially tempered with the bodily-based, existentially-gripping modes of learning that are present in assignments such as these myth performances. These types of experiential/participatory activities accentuate the multi-sensual, concrete features of the religious traditions that the students are studying, and permit the students to feel, in their bones and muscles and minds, a temporary and partial, yet tangible, analogy to the lived experience of those immersed in the traditions that they are studying. These activities, in essence, create a metaphorical bridge between two previously separate worlds.

These exercises are also powerful avenues for the students to discover within their own experience the power of the imagination. It is an opportunity for them to “see” how the themes and symbols that come together to form the myth rarely emerge when they are consciously willed into being. Instead, these symbols much more frequently (and easily) emerge either from fragments of dreams, or just spontaneously arise out of the playful, free-flowing, brainstorming of the group sharing ideas together, ideas that (I am frequently told) often seem to bubble up out of nowhere.

Finally, I think that it is important to emphasize that these activities are fun. Amazingly, at least to me, when I have mentioned this fact before in other contexts, some people have acted as if the very fact that the students were having fun is actually a strike against these sorts of activities. It is almost as if their bottom line assumption is that if the students are enjoying themselves, if they are smiling and laughing, if an easy, lighthearted feeling fills the room, then we cannot possibly be doing something that is substantive and worthwhile. But for me, it is clear that the fact that students enjoy drumming and making masks and creating and performing myths is not some sort of inconsequential side effect. When my students are lit up with excited anticipation before their myth performances, when they are riveted by the performances of others, and when they feel viscerally a “collective effervescence” fill the room as they move their bodies in symbolic, ritually-charged ways during their own performances, they are creating within themselves a powerful affirmation, that modes of religious praxis that previously might have seemed very remote from their lived experience can and should be taken seriously. They are beginning to realize that mythic praxis can and should be recognized and respected as at least potentially transformative, even within the very different context of their own lives. That shift in attitude, at the very least, seems to me to be worth cultivating.