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Agency as Cosmology: Rethinking Structure, Belief, and Action through Buddhist and Christian Worlds

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Abstract: This study critically examines Juliana Cassaniti's ethnographic work on Buddhist and Christian communities in Northern Thailand to explore agency cross-culturally. The research objective is to analyze how divergent religious ontologies shape contrasting understandings of human action and challenge universalist models of agency rooted in Western categories. Methodologically, the study employs comparative ethnographic analysis, drawing on Cassaniti's fieldwork alongside theoretical contributions from Archer, Sewell, Ahearn, and Ortner. Results reveal significant contrasts: Christians conceptualize agency as relational and mediated through belief in a divine Other, while Buddhists ground agency in the natural self, governed by karma and personal practice. These findings demonstrate that religious ontologies constitute rather than merely mediate action. The analysis challenges existing frameworks by showing how local epistemologies fundamentally shape agency. The paper raises questions about internal diversity within these traditions and calls for further comparative approaches integrating non-Western frameworks into theoretical discourse. Ultimately, this study contributes to the anthropology of religion by demonstrating the cosmological foundations of human action and enriches understandings of agency as culturally and ontologically situated.

Keywords: Agency, Buddhism, Christianity, Religion and Anthropology

Introduction

The concept of human agency has been one of the most enduring and contested topics in anthropology and the social sciences. At its core, the debate revolves around how individuals act within, respond to, or transform the structures that shape their lives. Early theoretical contributions have sought to balance between determinism and voluntarism. Archer (1988) emphasized the role of reflexivity in the morphogenetic cycle of structure and agency. Sewell (1992) also conceptualized structures as both constraining and enabling, thus embedding agency within cultural schemas and resources. Ahearn (2001) then reframed agency in linguistic anthropology as a "socio-culturally mediated capacity to act"; while Ortner (2006) highlighted the significance of power, resistance, and practice through her theory of "serious games." These interventions underline that agency cannot be reduced to individual freedom but must be understood as relational, historically situated, and culturally mediated.

Recent ethnographic research has broadened this discussion by engaging with non-Western traditions, thereby exposing the limits of universalist models of agency. Buddhism, for example, offers an alternative moral and cosmological framework that complicates

Western assumptions about intentionality, selfhood, and causation. Juliana Cassaniti's (2012) comparative ethnography of Buddhist and Christian communities in Northern Thailand provides a particularly valuable case. Juliana Cassaniti is a psychological anthropologist specializing in research on the co-construction of culture and mind, with an ethnographic focus on Buddhist and other mental training practices in Southeast and East Asia. In her work, she explores how ontological assumptions about mind and world are constructed through cultural and religious practices, how these assumptions are woven into the psychology of everyday social life in the region, and their implications for understanding global health and well-being. As the Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Ethos* and a lecturer at both undergraduate and graduate levels, Cassaniti integrates her interests in anthropological theory, religion, the body, and gender into academic curricula and student research supervision, positioning her as a key figure in fostering dialogue between religious studies, psychological anthropology, and contemporary issues of human well-being.

Anthropologists attempt to achieve comprehension of such religious worlds through an approach known as participant observation, which entails living with the people being studied and taking part in their daily affairs over an extended period of time. The systematic description of particular cultures through fieldwork is known as ethnography. As the noted British anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973) put it, this investigative process involves two distinct steps: "[First the anthropologist] goes and lives for some months or years among a people. He lives among them as intimately as he can, and he learns to speak their language, to think in their concepts and to feel in their values. [Second] He then lives the experience over again critically and interpretively in the conceptual categories and values of his own culture and in terms of the general body of knowledge in his discipline. In other words, he translates from one culture to the next" (Evans-Pritchard 1962: 148). Religious practices and beliefs are not studied in isolation, as distinct categories of experience and action, but in terms of how they articulate with other aspects of culture, such as economics, politics, social organization, family life, and artistic traditions. This is referred to as anthropology's holistic approach.

Based on Cassaniti's research findings, her work shows that while Christians conceptualize agency as relational and mediated by belief in a divine Other, Buddhists situate agency within the natural self, guided by karmic processes and personal practice. By demonstrating that agency in Buddhist contexts can operate independently of belief in an external divine power, Cassaniti challenges the assumption—common in Western theories—that belief is a necessary mediator of agency (Hubina 2018). This article critically engages with Cassaniti's contribution by situating her ethnographic insights within wider theoretical debates on agency. It argues that her work not only enriches anthropological understandings of Buddhist and Christian moral worlds but also compels scholars to rethink dominant theoretical models of action. Specifically, Cassaniti's study shows that agency is not simply mediated by social and cultural conditions but is also constituted by cosmological frameworks, such as karma and divine will. At the same time, this paper highlights the need for critical reflection on the internal diversity and contestation within these religious traditions—dimensions that remain underexplored in Cassaniti's account. By placing Cassaniti's findings in dialogue with key theoretical perspectives, this study seeks to advance a more dialogical anthropology of agency, one that integrates local

epistemologies into global theoretical discourse while decentering Western categories of belief, self, and resistance.

The study of agency in anthropology has often revolved around the dialectic between structure and action. Structuralist perspectives have tended to highlight the determining power of social systems, while more practice-oriented approaches have emphasized the ways in which individuals navigate, reproduce, and transform these systems. Within this spectrum, agency is best understood not as absolute freedom or mere submission but as a relational and contextually mediated capacity to act. This framework provides a foundation for examining how religious traditions shape the possibilities and constraints of human action, particularly when they embed agency in cosmological and moral orders.

Several key theoretical interventions are central to this discussion. Archer (1988) advanced the notion of morphogenetic cycles, arguing that structure and agency exist in a dynamic interplay where individuals are capable of reflexivity and transformation. Sewell (1992) highlighted the dual nature of structures as both enabling and constraining, stressing that agency emerges from actors' capacity to draw upon cultural schemas and resources to effect change. Ahearn (2001), focusing on linguistic anthropology, defined agency as the "socio-culturally mediated capacity to act," thereby foregrounding how language, culture, and context shape action. Ortner (2006) further developed the anthropological debate by proposing a "theory of serious games," in which agency is situated within fields of power, interest, and resistance. Together, these scholars provide a nuanced understanding of agency as situated, contested, and historically embedded.

Documenting particular religious traditions through field research, i.e., ethnography, is one component of the anthropological agenda of building and enhancing our knowledge. However, this is not an end in itself. In-depth particularistic studies provide the basis for broad comparative and cross-cultural analysis in which generalizations are based upon the entire spectrum of religions, taking into account the full range of cultural diversity, rather than the religious beliefs of one society or a group of societies. This enterprise is called ethnology, the systematic comparison of related and unrelated cultures around the globe looking at similarities and differences in order to answer particular questions and produce useful theoretical generalizations.

Based on these theoretical foundations, Cassaniti's ethnography (2012) offers a valuable case for testing and extending theories of agency beyond Western contexts. Her comparative analysis of Christian and Buddhist communities in Northern Thailand highlights that agency is not a universal category but one deeply inflected by religious worldviews. By showing how Buddhist notions of karma (Hubina 2018) and natural order structure agency differently from Christian ideas of divine mediation, Cassaniti complicates established theoretical models. This study, therefore, situates Cassaniti's findings within the broader scholarly conversation, exploring how they challenge and enrich prevailing anthropological understandings of agency.

Methodology

This article is grounded in a qualitative approach that centers on the critical analysis and theoretical synthesis of ethnographic and anthropological literature. The primary method employed is a rigorous textual and conceptual analysis of Juliana Cassaniti's comparative ethnography of Buddhist and Christian communities in Northern Thailand, situated within the broader theoretical discourse on agency in anthropology. By engaging deeply with Cassaniti's published work, alongside key theoretical texts by Archer (1988), Sewell (1992), Ahearn (2001), and Ortner (2006), this study constructs a dialogical framework to examine how religious cosmologies fundamentally shape conceptions of human agency. The analysis proceeds by extracting, comparing, and interpreting Cassaniti's empirical findings on the role of belief, karma, and divine will, and mapping these onto established theoretical models to identify points of convergence, tension, and expansion.

The methodological design is explicitly interpretive and theory-driven, aiming not to present new empirical data but to advance theoretical understanding through comparative critique and synthesis. This involves a two-fold process: first, a detailed exegesis of Cassaniti's ethnographic descriptions to elucidate the distinct models of agency operative in Buddhist and Christian contexts; and second, a critical interrogation of how these models challenge, refine, or complicate prevailing anthropological theories of structure, practice, and action. The study thus operates at the intersection of the anthropology of religion and social theory, using a focused case study to provoke a broader rethinking of agency as a culturally and cosmologically embedded phenomenon. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how local epistemologies, such as Buddhist teachings on karma and the natural self, necessitate a decentering of universalist assumptions in favor of a more pluralistic, dialogical anthropology.

Result and Discussion

Anthropologists maintain that religion constitutes a cultural universal, present in all societies across thousands of years in remarkably diverse manifestations. As Stephen Glazier (1997: 3) observes, religion represents a fundamental aspect of human existence documented in every society studied by anthropologists, serving simultaneously as a testament to human creativity and an illustration of humanity's remarkable resourcefulness in addressing everyday challenges. Despite this universality, religion exhibits extraordinary diversity. Roger and Felix Keesing (1971: 302) highlight this variation, noting that religious systems differ profoundly in the supernatural entities they recognize—whether multiple deities, a single god, or none at all, encompassing spirits or impersonal forces—and in how humans relate to these agencies, which may range from actively intervening in human affairs to remaining utterly detached, and from punitive to benevolent dispositions. Human responses to these powers similarly vary, encompassing awe, reverence, fear, negotiation, and even attempts at deception, while religions may either govern moral conduct or remain unconcerned with ethical matters altogether.

The effects of religion are equally varied, as Scott Atran (2002: 7) vividly illustrates: religion simultaneously serves elite interests and uplifts the oppressed, stimulates and squanders economic production, encourages cooperation and fuels competition, binds communities together and reinforces individual identity, functioning as both opiate and motor for the masses, serving as both justification for war and advocate for peace, supporting diverse political systems from monarchy to oligarchy, aligning with opposing ideologies like fascism and communism, embodying the spirit of capitalism, and ultimately addressing what material wealth cannot obtain. This extraordinary diversity in religious forms, entities, human responses, and social effects provides the essential backdrop for understanding why Juliana Cassaniti's comparative ethnographic study of Buddhist and Christian communities in Northern Thailand is so significant: it demonstrates how these varied religious ontologies fundamentally shape contrasting understandings of human agency, revealing that Christians conceptualize agency as relational and mediated through belief in a divine Other, while Buddhists ground agency in the natural self governed by karma and personal practice, thereby challenging universalist models rooted in Western categories.

This diversity presents anthropologists with the fundamental challenge of formulating a definition of religion applicable across all cultural contexts, encompassing both Western traditions and those of small-scale societies. The difficulty intensifies when encountering cultures lacking any term equivalent to the Western concept of "religion," where spiritual beliefs and practices interweave seamlessly with politics, economics, family life, and artistic expression rather than existing as a separate compartmentalized domain. The varied meanings of "religion" even within European usage further complicate matters, as David Hicks (2010: xxviii) notes. Yet the absence of equivalent terminology for analytical categories like belief, politics, economy, or art has never prevented anthropological analysis of other cultures, demonstrating that conceptual translation remains possible despite linguistic differences. The absence of universally accepted definitions of religion compounds these challenges (Horton 1960; Spiro 1966).

Among early influential formulations, Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917), considered the founder of social anthropology, proposed what he termed the minimal definition of religion in his work *Primitive Religion* (1871/1929): belief in Spiritual Beings. As Marvin Harris (1989: 399–400) elucidates, this encompasses humanity's shared world with extraordinary, extracorporeal, predominantly invisible entities ranging from souls and ghosts to saints, fairies, angels, demons, jinn, devils, and gods. Wherever such beliefs exist, religion exists. Tylor's animistic framework challenged contemporary notions that so-called "savages" lacked religion, instead positioning religious belief as a cultural universal. Tylor (1871/1929, I: 424) conceptualized animism as a "theory of souls," arguing that beliefs in spirits emerged from early humans' attempts to explain fundamental observations: the distinction between living and deceased individuals, and the apparitions encountered in dreams and visions. This definitional challenge directly informs Cassaniti's methodological approach, as her comparative ethnography demonstrates that while both Buddhist and Christian communities engage with transcendental realities, they do so through fundamentally

different ontological frameworks—Christians through relationship with a divine Other, Buddhists through naturalized karmic processes—revealing that agency is not merely mediated by social conditions but is constituted by these cosmological frameworks themselves, thereby necessitating that anthropologists move beyond Western-centric definitions and theoretical models to appreciate how local epistemologies fundamentally shape human action.

Comparative Constructions of Agency in Buddhist and Christian Contexts

Cassaniti's ethnography of Mae Jaeng (Buddhist) and Mae Min (Christian) communities in Northern Thailand illustrates how agency is deeply embedded in religious cosmologies. Her findings reveal that while Christians often locate agency in relation to an external divine Other, mediated through belief and prayer, Buddhists conceptualize agency as internal to the self, structured by karma and natural order (Cassaniti 2012). For Christians, the presence of a personal God means that individual action is always linked to divine will, with belief functioning as the mediating mechanism. Prayer, for example, is viewed as a means of accessing God's agency to intervene in personal or communal life. In contrast, Buddhists interpret prayer less as a channel to external power and more as a practice of self-regulation and moral cultivation, reinforcing the understanding that the self—through karma—remains the causal agent.

This distinction demonstrates how religious traditions offer different ontologies of action and causation. In the Christian context, agency is relational and intersubjective, emerging through trust in God's intervention. In the Buddhist context, agency is naturalized and internalized, where karma becomes both the moral and causal force guiding human life. These findings challenge universalist models of agency by showing how local epistemologies generate alternative ways of linking intention, belief, and causation. As Sewell (1992) argued, agency is always embedded in structures, and in Cassaniti's case, these structures are cosmological as much as social.

Durkheim (1961: 52) forwards a conception of religion based upon the distinction between the ordinary realm of human existence and the realm of the extraordinary: "All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by the words profane and sacred … This division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought." For Durkheim religion is a group phenomenon, comprising a set of shared behaviors and attitudes toward the sacred. These shared beliefs bring individuals together into an enduring single "moral community." Practices such as magic, which may have adherents, but do not bind together those who adhere to them, or unite them into a group, fall outside the domain of religion (Durkheim 1961: 60). Cassaniti's comparative framework demonstrates precisely how such moral communities generate distinct configurations of agency.

Agency, Belief, and Causation

Cassaniti's ethnography underscores that the role of belief differs radically between the two traditions. In Christianity, belief is not merely doctrinal but functions as an ontological bridge between human agency and divine agency. God is seen as the ultimate causal agent, with belief determining one's moral standing and fate after death. The Christian emphasis on prayer reflects this relational construction of agency, where requests for divine intervention signify both dependence on and interaction with a powerful external Other. By contrast, in Buddhist contexts, belief is not necessary for agency to operate. Agency is located in the natural self, expressed through karmic law, and actualized through personal practice and ethical intentionality.

The Buddhist responses to existential questions—such as why one dies or what happens after death—demonstrate this naturalized causal framework. Death is explained as a result of karma or time, not divine will, and the afterlife is shaped by one's own moral actions. Prayer, in this context, is less about accessing external aid than about cultivating emotional states and reinforcing ethical conduct. This divergence in the role of belief highlights how anthropology must attend to the culturally specific ways in which religious traditions structure both agency and moral responsibility.

Influenced by the work of sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) advanced a cultural and symbolic interpretation of religion that makes no mention of supernatural beings or an otherworldly sphere. According to Geertz's (1973: 4) influential formulation, religion functions as a cultural system through five interconnected elements: it comprises symbols that establish enduring moods and motivations in individuals by constructing conceptions of a universal order, while simultaneously investing these conceptions with such an undeniable sense of factuality that the resulting dispositions appear uniquely authentic and realistic. Through this framework, religious symbols inspire and mobilize people by fostering conviction in a meaningful, coherent universe (Sidky 2015), generating profound emotional states while conferring validation and ultimate significance upon human existence. Religious symbols thereby serve as the integrative mechanism through which a culture's worldview and ethos become unified and mutually reinforcing. This understanding of religion aligns seamlessly with Geertz's broader conception of culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz 1973: 89). Cassaniti's ethnographic work vividly demonstrates how such symbolic systems fundamentally structure and shape the very parameters within which human agency operates and is understood.

The supernatural has long been a central concept in anthropological approaches to religion, yet relying on the natural-supernatural distinction becomes highly problematic when studying non-Western societies that do not operate with such a dichotomy. This division is essentially a Western cultural construct, and definitions of religion grounded in this framework are therefore ill-suited for cross-cultural application. While the term supernatural refers to beliefs in gods, spirits, and an invisible, transcendental reality beyond the human world, people across all cultures acknowledge the existence of such a

transcendental dimension—even if they lack a specific word for "supernatural" or do not explicitly demarcate it from the natural realm. It would be absurd to suggest that any culture fails to distinguish between a living person and a ghost, or between ordinary reality and mystical experience. However, because "supernatural" functions as an emic category, its meaning varies considerably across cultures, and no universally accepted scientific definition exists. This absence stems from the fundamental epistemological impossibility of empirically defining what is understood to be non-empirical reality (Lett 1997: 109).

A further complication is that the term supernatural proves too narrow in scope. As James Lett (1997: 110) argues, it fails to encompass beliefs and practices that are functionally and formally equivalent to religious phenomena yet would not conventionally be labeled supernatural. This limitation has led anthropologists Arthur Lehmann and James Myers (2001: 3) to advocate for an expanded conception of religion that includes the extraordinary, mysterious, and unexplainable, thereby accommodating phenomena such as magic, sorcery, curses, and other meaningful practices found across both preliterate and literate societies. To resolve this terminological challenge, Lett (1997: 111) proposes replacing "supernatural" with "paranormal," a term that encompasses the full spectrum of transcendental beliefs—including the magical, religious, supernatural, metaphysical, occult, and parapsychological. Cassaniti's Buddhist informants, who navigate their religious world without a clear supernatural/natural dichotomy, vividly demonstrate why such expanded and flexible conceptual frameworks are essential for authentic cross-cultural understanding.

Rethinking Anthropological Theories of Agency

Placed against broader theoretical debates, Cassaniti's findings compel anthropology to expand its conceptual vocabulary. Ahearn's (2001) definition of agency as a "socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" resonates strongly here, since Cassaniti's data demonstrate how socio-religious contexts mediate the very possibility of action. Yet her work goes further by showing that agency is not only mediated socially but cosmologically, situated in frameworks of karma or divine will. Archer's (1988) insistence on reflexivity and Sewell's (1992) notion of structures as both constraining and enabling are evident in the ways Christians and Buddhists differently interpret causation and responsibility. Ortner's (2006) view of agency within "serious games" of power and practice also gains traction, since religious traditions offer structured arenas in which individuals negotiate meaning, morality, and efficacy. However, Cassaniti's contribution is not simply to apply these theories but to challenge their Western-centric assumptions. Much of anthropological theorizing presumes agency as resistance, autonomy, or transformation. Cassaniti shows that in Buddhist contexts, agency may be exercised through acceptance, mindfulness, and harmony with natural order rather than resistance against it. This reframing suggests that theories of agency must accommodate forms of action that do not fit into Western binaries of freedom versus constraint.

The anthropologist Anthony Wallace (1966: 5) expresses this view in his influential book *Religion: An Anthropological View*: "we shall ignore the extremes of fundamental piety or anticlerical iconoclasm. Thus, for us, religion will be neither a path to truth nor a thicket of superstition, but simply a kind of human behavior: specifically that kind of behavior which can be classified as belief and ritual concerned with supernatural beings, powers, and forces." Anthropologist Brian Morris (2006: 9–10) affirms that anthropologists do not concern themselves with evaluating the truth claims, moral validity, or authenticity of religious concepts, beliefs, or personal experiences attributed to devotees and prophets. As social scientists, their vocation places them in a position of neutrality—neither advocating for nor against religion, engaging in theology or apologetics, nor dismissing religion as meaningless or irrational. Jack Eller (2009: 2) similarly emphasizes that anthropology approaches religion neither to verify nor falsify it, nor to pass judgment upon it. Unlike the seminary, anthropology does not seek to indoctrinate; unlike apologetics, it does not attempt to prove or justify any religious tradition; and unlike skeptical polemics, it does not engage in debunking religion. By bracketing out questions of truth and falsity, this methodological stance aims to facilitate the study of religious beliefs and practices with minimal bias, remaining the standard approach among most anthropologists.

However, some anthropologists go beyond mere bracketing to fully embrace the worldviews of those they study. Paul Stoller (1989: 229) exemplifies this position, arguing that genuine respect for the people among whom anthropologists work demands full acceptance of beliefs and phenomena that Western knowledge systems might consider preposterous. Stoller recounts how his teachers knew he incorporated divination into his personal life, consumed protective powders, wore objects demonstrating respect for spirits, and maintained an altar where he recited incantations. While Cassaniti's approach may not embrace informants' worldviews as extensively as Stoller's, it similarly demonstrates profound respect for the cosmological frameworks of the Buddhist and Christian communities she studied.

In secularized industrial democracies, religion continues to provide moral authority through the doctrines of established salvationist religions, while churches maintain their function as providers of religious education—a role scarcely fulfilled in homes and entirely absent from public schools (Adams 2005: 282–286). Sociologist Guy Swanson's (1960) cross-cultural study of fifty societies revealed significant connections between religious beliefs and social organization, demonstrating that patterns of human interaction with gods and supernatural beings correlate with levels of political economy. His findings indicate that classless societies typically possess both high gods—who remain aloof and unconcerned with earthly affairs—and lesser gods and spirits who actively engage with human existence. These supernatural entities share comparable importance and powers, with their relationships reflecting the egalitarian character of their societies.

According to Crapo (2003: 225–227), religion in contemporary large-scale societies manifests through churches, denominations, sects, and cults. Churches constitute large religious organizations whose doctrines align with broader societal ideological values, featuring bureaucratically organized priesthoods and diverse, predominantly birth-based

membership rather than recruitment through adult conversion. Denominations emerge as new religious movements that splinter from mainstream traditions while retaining their fundamental features, differing primarily in specific doctrinal matters. Within Christianity, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Baptists exemplify denominations, while Sunni and Shi'a represent comparable divisions within Islam (Sidky 2015). Although Cassaniti's comparative analysis concentrates on local communities, it implicitly engages with these broader organizational dimensions of religious life.

Ritual, Symbol, and the Enactment of Agency

Rituals constitute a category of human behavior marked by structured, non-utilitarian, and repetitive actions and utterances that conform to established patterns. Such ceremonial practices appear in both secular and religious domains, with religious rituals exhibiting considerable variation in complexity. At the less complex end, they encompass individual acts like reciting prayers, chanting incantations, bowing, kneeling, singing, or dancing. At the more sophisticated end, they involve elaborate sequences of coordinated movements, gestures, and vocal expressions, as exemplified by ceremonies such as the Roman Catholic Mass (Alexander 1997; Nye 2008; Zuesse 1987). The terms "ritual" and "ceremony" are sometimes employed interchangeably, though distinctions occasionally apply: "ceremony" may denote ritual complexes like mortuary ceremonies, while "ritual" specifies particular components such as burial rites or mourning observances. Conversely, "ceremony" can also describe specific elements within broader ritual processes.

Ritual behavior extends beyond humans to non-human primates and other animals, manifesting in birds' courting rituals, wolves' fighting patterns, and chimpanzees' waterfall displays and mourning behaviors. Ethologists interpret these behaviors as communicative signals directed toward oneself and others that serve to alleviate fears and anxieties (D'Aquili et al. 1979; Huxley 1966). Anthony Wallace (1966: 224) suggests that religious rituals originate from this biological predisposition, becoming distinctively religious when humans rationalize them through reference to supernatural beings. Wallace (1966: 102) asserts the primacy of ritual in religion, characterizing it as "religion in action" and "the cutting edge of the tool." He argues for ritual's instrumental priority over myth, drawing analogies to how a knife's blade takes precedence over its handle or a gun's barrel over its stock—ritual accomplishes what religion sets out to achieve. Wallace (1966: 107) ultimately defines religion as "a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature."

Through rituals, humans establish relationships with the supernatural realm, performing them with the intention of realizing desired outcomes or averting undesirable ones (Malefijt 1968: 189). Bobby Alexander (1997: 139) describes ritual as "a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context within which the everyday is transformed." Rituals frequently occur in designated locations and at specified times, resembling theatrical performances or "cultural dramas" through their incorporation of various actions, gestures, speech, dancing, sacred objects, masks,

body painting, and food. However, rituals transcend mere theater, as their enactments involve genuine rather than simulated intent. Unlike plays performed for entertainment, rituals are conducted for efficacy (Schechner 1994: 6–16). Rituals unite participants, who through their performance symbolically affirm membership in a shared moral and social community.

Ritual performance follows precisely prescribed sequences of acts and utterances, with efficacy dependent upon correct execution—hence the meticulous attention devoted to ritual enactment. Ritual leadership frequently falls to specialized practitioners like shamans or priests, whose roles vary across cultural contexts (Sidky 2015). Wallace (1966: 102–166) categorizes rituals into five types: technological, therapeutic/anti-therapeutic, salvation, ideological, and revitalization. Technological rituals, which include divination and rites of intensification, aim to control natural phenomena through performances believed to operate automatically. Cassaniti's examination of prayer across Buddhist and Christian traditions reveals how these ritual practices either reinforce or transform configurations of agency.

Arnold Van Gennep (1873–1957) provided anthropology with a foundational framework for ritual analysis through his influential work *The Rites of Passage* (1960, originally 1908). He focused on rituals recurring across cultures that facilitate transitions between spatial, social, or life-stage contexts—including pilgrimages, births, puberty initiations, marriages, and funerals—designating these transformative ceremonies as rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960: 10–11). Van Gennep identified a tripartite structure common to all rites of passage: separation, transition (or liminality), and reincorporation. These rites enable individuals to navigate transitional challenges while allowing society to acknowledge their transformed identity. Separation detaches initiates from their former social identity; transition constitutes a statusless period during which ordinary social norms are suspended; and reincorporation marks initiates' acceptance into their new social identity. This final stage often receives symbolic emphasis through bodily modifications—circumcision, subincision, scarification, tooth removal, and other markers—that permanently signify the transformed social identity.

In his seminal work *The Forest of Symbols* (1967), Victor Turner developed a theoretical framework for analyzing ritual symbols, which he defined as observable, empirical objects, relationships, gestures, and spatial units within ritual contexts (Turner 1967: 19). A symbol, Turner explains, is something collectively recognized as naturally representing or recalling something else through analogous qualities or through factual or conceptual association. Drawing from his fieldwork among the Ndembu of Zambia, Turner illustrates this with the example of a tree sapling that exudes a white milky substance when its bark is scratched—this sapling symbolizes aspects of female bodily imagery, including milk, nursing breasts, and girlish slenderness, and is consequently employed in the Ndembu girls' puberty ritual. For Turner, the symbol constitutes "the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior; it is the ultimate unit of a specific structure in a ritual context" (1967: 19).

Turner emphasizes that symbols possess the quality of multivocality—the capacity to convey multiple meanings simultaneously, allowing participants to construct interpretations relevant to their particular circumstances. Ritual symbols communicate complex messages in condensed form, functioning as repositories of semantic richness. This condensation endows symbols with their emotional power to evoke awe, wonder, or dread, and to effect social transformation. Turner (1967: 44) conceives of symbols as dynamic and alive, stating that they are "alive only in so far as it is 'pregnant with meaning' for men and women, who interact by observing, transgressing, and manipulating for private ends the norms and values that the symbol expresses." Symbols serve as catalysts for social action, possessing both cognitive and orectic functions—they not only convey meaning but also generate emotion and mobilize desire. As Turner (1967: 54) asserts, ritual symbols are not merely signs representing known entities; they are experienced as possessing ritual efficacy, charged with power from mysterious sources, and capable of acting upon individuals and groups to transform them in desired directions. Cassaniti's ethnographic work similarly demonstrates how symbols—whether representing divine will in Christianity or karmic natural order in Buddhism—function to mobilize desire and shape the contours of human agency.

Symbols and Society

Émile Durkheim conceived of religious rituals as constituting a "wordless language"—a system of symbolic enactments that communicate fundamental truths about society (Barrett 1991: 135). The anthropologist's task, accordingly, is to decipher these symbolic messages. Richard Barrett (1991: 136–137) illustrates this principle through the example of ancestor worship in pre-communist China, where households maintained altars bearing spirit tablets dedicated to deceased ancestors. Family members performed important ceremonies before these altars, including funeral rites—centered on beliefs about the soul and intended to dispatch the spirit of the deceased to the afterlife—and sacrificial rites involving offerings of food and incense to ancestral spirits. These ceremonies followed precise procedural requirements: family members knelt before the altar in turn to offer prayers, beginning with the household head and proceeding according to gender and birth order. This ritual thus functioned as a rehearsal of family organization and its foundational values, serving as both a symbolic expression and affirmation of the social group. The ritual conveyed to each participant important symbolic messages about hierarchy's centrality, birth order's significance, and individual prerogatives, while simultaneously bestowing an aura of sacredness upon these inculcated values.

Symbols possess the capacity to effect profound personal transformation, as demonstrated in the phenomenon of symbolic healing (Dow 1986; Moerman 1997: 241; Romanucci-Ross 1997: 215; Sidky 2010). Medical anthropologist Cecil Helman (2001: 277) defines symbolic healing as therapeutic practice that achieves its efficacy not through physical or pharmacological interventions, but through language, ritual, and the manipulation of potent cultural symbols. In Cassaniti's comparative ethnography, both Christian prayer and Buddhist meditation operate as forms of symbolic healing, yet they

embody fundamentally distinct configurations of agency. Christian healing emerges through relationship with a divine Other, positioning the healing subject in relational dependence on transcendent power. Buddhist healing, by contrast, proceeds through self-cultivation within a naturalized karmic order, locating the therapeutic process within the practitioner's own intentional actions and ethical development.

Toward a Dialogical Anthropology of Agency

The broader implication of Cassaniti's study lies in its call for a dialogical anthropology. Her comparative framework demonstrates that religious worldviews generate distinctive models of agency, and that these models should not be subordinated to Western theories but brought into dialogue with them. Integrating Buddhist notions of karma and natural self (Hubina 2018) into global discourses of agency expands the field's analytical range while decentering its epistemological foundations.

At the same time, critical reflection is needed. While Cassaniti powerfully illustrates cultural differences, her account might underplay internal debates, tensions, and variations within Buddhist and Christian communities themselves. Future research should thus investigate how individuals negotiate, contest, or hybridize these religiously informed models of agency in everyday life. Comparative studies across traditions would also sharpen our understanding of how agency is differently constructed, enacted, and experienced in diverse cultural worlds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Cassaniti's comparative ethnography of Buddhist and Christian communities in Northern Thailand significantly advances anthropological understandings of agency by demonstrating how religious cosmologies fundamentally shape conceptions of action, causation, and belief—revealing that while Christians conceptualize agency as relationally mediated through a divine Other, Buddhists locate agency within the natural self governed by karmic processes—thereby challenging Western-centric theoretical models that presume belief as a necessary mediator of action and extending the work of Archer, Sewell, Ahearn, and Ortner by showing that religious ontologies do not merely mediate but actively constitute the grounds upon which agency operates. Future research should pursue more fine-grained ethnographic investigations into the internal diversity, contestations, and negotiations within Buddhist and Christian communities that Cassaniti's account necessarily underplays, examining how individuals hybridize, resist, or creatively reinterpret dominant cosmological models of agency in everyday practice. Additionally, comparative studies across other religious traditions—including Islam, Hinduism, and Indigenous spiritualities—would further enrich our understanding of how diverse cosmologies structure human action, while collaborative research designs that integrate Buddhist and other non-Western epistemological frameworks directly into theoretical discourse could help decentre persistent Western categories and foster a truly dialogical anthropology. Practically, Cassaniti's work offers valuable resources for teaching anthropology of religion, encouraging students to critically examine their own cultural

assumptions about agency, belief, and causation, and providing a model for how ethnographic research can illuminate the profound ways that religious worlds shape not only what people believe but how they understand themselves as actors within the cosmos.

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