

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309651375>

# Broadcast Mantras: Ritual and Infrastructure in "Village India"

Conference Paper · November 2016

---

CITATIONS

0

1 author:



[Leo Coleman](#)

City University of New York - Hunter College

11 PUBLICATIONS 10 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Leo Coleman  
*leo.coleman@hunter.cuny.edu*

**Broadcast Mantras: Ritual and Infrastructure in “Village India”**

*Edited extract of A Moral Technology: Electrification as Political Ritual in New Delhi*  
(Cornell University Press, forthcoming 2017).

*For delivery on panel “The Materiality of Solidarity,” American Anthropological Association, Minneapolis, November 19, 2016*

DRAFT Only: Please do not cite without author’s permission

Today I want to read a short extract from my forthcoming book about electrification as political ritual in India. What I’m going to highlight is the intersection of radio and Indian village rituals, as this was observed by anthropologists in the 1950s. Before I begin, however, I want to frame this material in relation to the theme of this panel: solidarity and its materiality. Much recent work in anthropology has illuminated for us the importance, and ever-presence, of material infrastructures shaping and constraining possibilities and guiding human understandings of shared fate, risks, and possibilities. In my book, I stress those moments where infrastructures come into legal and political consciousness—not merely as a reflex of material need, but as insignia and signs, expressing ritual roles, wounded statuses, and moral community (I was deeply inspired by Antina’s and Andrea’s work as I developed this approach, and I should add that electricity’s own technological materiality, its dazzling transformation of work and time, itself influenced my arguments). I am interested in how large-scale material transformations are worked out ritually, in ways that give form and “human thickness” to abstract solidarities, and also to the abstract materiality of infrastructures; a materiality which comes and goes, in breakdown and glittering display, and which requires great

intellectual and forensic labor to unearth from hidden networks of wires and devices—labor which is performed socially, in real time, as well as by critical anthropologists.<sup>1</sup>

Technology and its use to foster nationwide political-economic transformations was a matter of great concern in post-independence India, and also a subject of some theoretical importance among anthropologists of the day. Perhaps surprisingly, still, the impact of technology became a topic of debate between scholars more usually associated with a classicizing, textual, or at least “rural” view of Indian civilization: McKim Marriott and the contributors to *Village India* (1955), on the one hand, and David Pocock and Louis Dumont, founders of *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, on the other.<sup>2</sup>

McKim Marriott’s contribution to the *Village India* volume kicks off the subsequent exchange between these two groups of scholars, as well as framing the debate. His essay is conscientiously focused on the theoretical questions that guided the *Village India* conference and volume as a whole: Is a village an autonomous social and political unit, a separable or isolable field of relatively static social relations, or part of and indeed a *product* of a larger, historically-mobile whole?

Understanding ongoing historical changes in social and political relations was exactly the point of these questions. Marriott dwells, accordingly, on the shifting practice of a local ritual, *saluno*, as it is standardized to fall in line with orthodox Hindu models, and also as it changes to accommodate new technological realities. This ritual has been adapted to coordinate with the all-India festival of *rakhi* or “Charm-Tying” (Marriott’s translation). Yet in both old and new forms, Marriott tells us, it is typically an occasion when sisters and brothers exchange ritual gifts—when older, married sisters return to the

village to tie small thread charms to the wrists of their brothers, and receive small gifts of money from their natal lineage in exchange.

To understand these changes, Marriott adopts Robert Redfield's vocabulary of "primary" and "secondary" processes of change, with the first being the tradition-oriented, "orthogenetic" ongoing historicity of indigenous culture, and the second being those "heterogenetic," change-producing forces which come at Indian civilization from outside its own borders and traditional terms of thought.<sup>3</sup> It is important to stress that this is not a binary opposition between "static" traditions and "changeable" modernity—both primary and secondary, orthogenetic and heterogenetic, processes are equally innovative, in their own way, but at different metabolic rates, as it were.

After describing the "orthogenetic" changes that brought Kishan Garhi's local festival into line with Sanskritic models, Marriott tells us that "a further, secondary transformation in the festival . . . is beginning to be evident." Specifically, "the thread charms . . . are now factory made in more attractive forms and are hawked in the village by a local caste group of *Jogis*. A few sisters in Kishan Garhi have taken to tying these heterogenetic charms . . . onto their brothers' wrists. The new string charms are also more convenient for mailing in letters to distant, city-dwelling brothers whom sisters cannot visit on the auspicious day."<sup>4</sup> Marriott also cites another conference participant's report that "brothers in the electrified village of Namhalli near Bangalore tuned into All-India Radio in order to receive the time signal at the astrologically exact moment, and then tied such charms to their own wrists, with an accompaniment of broadcast Sanskrit *mantras*."

The analysis stops here, for Marriott has made his point. Industrial mass production, the radio, and electricity are parts of an alien cultural complex, which comes

in and transforms ritual exchanges—extending, standardizing, and ultimately transforming the very meaning of everyday life as it becomes part of a modern, industrial, urban, national whole. Indeed, in this example it is almost as if Marriott imagines a complex set of gearing mechanisms, by which local processes are sequentially linked up to orthogenetic, *national* religious institutions via ritual mediators such as priests and Sanskritic popular culture and then to universal capitalist processes and value-orientations, via another set of technological mediators. With the latter, finally, it is as if the whole moral (or immoral) code of capitalism were conveyed along radio waves and copper wires, and automatically adopted by village-level actors when they, at last, come into contact with manufactured ritual articles and technological means of communication!

In their long, programmatic review of *Village India* in the first issue of *Contributions*, Dumont and Pocock argue against this conception of cultural change—which treats it as if it were simply provoked by circulating objects that could be defined, once and for all, by the authenticity or alienness of their origins (in fact, the review was written by Pocock, and I will treat him as the sole author in what remains). Pocock recites in detail the examples of manufactured charms and broadcast mantras, and comments: “such changes of behaviour are not structurally significant” (although he admits that they may represent a “cultural levelling” of relations previously more markedly opposed and complementary).<sup>5</sup> To be clear, let me explain what Pocock means by “structural” significance. He notes that technological changes in “traditional” rituals—such as the coordination of astrologically-propitious ritual actions by broadcast signal—are commonly observable, as are the spread of “Western” ideas and institutions—wage-relations in rural employment, political practices associated with democracy and the state,

new technical experts and schoolteachers in villages. Yet terms such as “orthogenetic” and “heterogenetic” do not help us understand these innovations, he argues. Such facts of secular change are only important, structurally, if the system of ideas, values, and concepts with which people interpret and act with these new phenomena have themselves been affected. For example, while there may be a schoolteacher in a given village, or a priest may broadcast his mantras via loudspeaker, what matters is whether anyone treats the schoolteacher as such, or if her role is defined by her other statuses, or whether the prayer itself has been altered or not. This is a higher ethnographic bar than was set by Marriott’s analysis.

In sum, Pocock dissents from the idea that observable changes in institutions and technologies produce deep, long-lasting alterations in the value-orientation of Indians. Surface changes in how tokens of ritual expression are manufactured or circulated do not have any power to affect underlying ritual attitudes and affects of solidarity in any way. A truly comparative ethnography would require something more than observations of the use of manufactured articles, radios, and other devices in everyday life. It would require an analysis from the point of view of structure, where change of the sort that Marriott’s terminology describes is not at issue, but what is at stake instead is a rarer, more fundamental, structural *transformation* in whole sets of roles and relations.

We might summarize this debate as follows: while the *Village India* volume does not offer much nuanced consideration of the *local* meaning and value granted to new technological devices and connections—reading them usually as vectors of change, as conveying with their manufactured provenance all the values of modernity—Dumont and Pocock for their part don’t take the ritual embrace of new devices seriously enough as

itself a significant vector of transformation in patterns of solidarity. Indeed, they do not seriously attempt to subject Marriott's synthetic example to analysis on their own terms. Despite this, it is ultimately Dumont and Pocock's sense of cultural structure that allows us (imaginatively) to reconstruct the changes which might be connected with such an innovation as radio-mediated *rakhi* and how very structural they may be.

Rakhi and its local performances in Kishan Garhi were part of a festival in which connections between out-marrying sisters and village-resident brothers were affirmed. In the "traditional" form of this rite, according to Marriott, sisters exchanged with their brothers to ensure their ability to have recourse to their natal village even after leaving for their husband's home, while brothers affirmed the moral solidarity of the family even after their sister's marriage. Further, this reciprocal exchange was becoming a one-way conveyance, by post, of ritual symbols of affection from sisters to distant or absent brothers—who must tie the charms themselves and use the radio to tell them when to do this. At the very least, a ritually-significant structure of mobility and residence is rearranged here, since *rakhi* no longer features a reciprocal exchange that marks the relation of the brother's lineage to the now absent "daughters of the house." Rather, now *brothers* move and become the representatives of the village, indeed of "the rural" as a whole, in the distant city—which is the site and source of material benefits in a way the sister's marital home never was. Migrating men are, in the example of modern, technological and manufactured *rakhi*, the medium by which the village women interact, vertically, with the cosmopolitan center—the site of radio-broadcasts, and the source of technological goods and national solidarity. Meanwhile, the broadcast of Sanskrit verses and radio-mediated synchronization of the charm-tying obviates the actual presence

which was required by the earlier ritual complex, substituting a virtual solidarity for an actual one, and an affect of religious duty for what was an embodied relation of care and mutual obligation.

Read thus, these transformations are neither “purely” religious or technological, orthogenetic or heterogenetic, primary or secondary. They are, however, significant for any understanding of Indian modernity, as it was extended across infrastructures and transformed in the process, as citizens became participants in the wider “new traditions” of the national state. Broadcast mantras became the emblems of a new level of state power, and the means of the integration of villagers and city-dwellers alike into a new community of citizens. One may note that abstract, mass-mediated religious affects may be more conducive to ideologization than embodied and reciprocal obligations, and the history of politicized Hinduism in India might demonstrate this point.<sup>6</sup> Yet that wider observation aside, the point here is that a new technological complex, materially transforming time and space, intervenes tangibly upon the ritual practices of “village India,” and these in turn shape the meaning of radio and mass communications, as well as the solidarities which these new technologies help produce.

McKim Marriott was not as wrong-headed as all that, finally, to focus on the circulation of mass-produced charms and radio-broadcast mantras. It takes a more structural analysis than he provided to reveal the transformation that was really at stake in his sightings of technology; and yet by the same token we have to go further into the materiality of solidarity than Dumont and Pocock themselves could—and examine what they consider mere “changes of behaviour” provoked by new technologies, and novel relations across infrastructures, as fundamental elements in the new political and ritual

complex of the postcolonial nation-state. This involves, finally, tracking ethnographically how novel devices affected the very structure—the material structure—of ritual solidarities in village India.

\* \* \*

**Addendum:**

*I'd like to add one consideration which might provide an opportunity to more broadly frame the discussion of materiality and solidarity. India's infrastructural transformations were not of course sui generis: they partook of the wider processes of industrial capitalism, with its own transformations of values, that Marx so famously described as follows in the Communist Manifesto:*

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

*Marx treated the new values of capitalism as a profanation, a making into mute and mutable matter all that was holy and sacred in human relations. What I have tried to indicate above, however, is that these processes of abstraction and integration into techno-capitalist circuits are always met, if seldom overmatched, by ritual and even apotropaic responses, in the process of which both material and ritual relations are transformed. We know these responses in modernist and cosmopolitan settings in the*

*form of surrealism and other avant-garde movements, which offered their own “ritual” ripostes to rationalism and rationalization.*

*Kenneth Burke has described surrealism as not an irrationalist movement but as a “heresy of rationalism,” using a theological term that I imagine would have been very congenial to Dumont. This term nicely captures the tense, but not oppositional, relation between ritual and technology that I have tried to describe here. He goes on to say, with reference to Marx’s vision of capitalism as value-transformation:*

Surrealism in ‘violent’ in recognizing (in glimpses) just how deep the reordering of human values *might* go. In this, it is ‘cruel’—[and yet,] every once in a while it does obeisance to the volcano god before he reformed, first into a just god, next into a kindly one, and last in to a modern convenience much like steam heat and plumbing.<sup>7</sup>

*In even the most mundane of modern conveniences, this indicates, we must seek the residues of yet-untransformed pasts, the hidden solidarities which lurk in their materiality, and the recalcitrant, ritual power which resists sublimation into a universe of equivalencies.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Human “thickness” is my rendering of Levi-Strauss’s stricture that, as opposed to concepts, signs “allow and even require the . . . incorporation of a certain amount of human culture [*épaisseur d’humanité*] into reality,” in *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 20.

<sup>2</sup> See McKim Marriott, “Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization,” in *Village India: Studies in the Little Community*, McKim Marriott, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 171-222; and Louis Dumont and David Pocock, “Village Studies,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 1 (1957): 23-41. In a programmatic review essay published in 1963, McKim Marriott observed that no ethnographer of contemporary India could afford to leave “time and the city” out of the account. See McKim Marriott, “*Gopalpur: An Indian Village*, by Alan Beals [Book Review],” *American Anthropologist* 65 (1963): 1369.

<sup>3</sup> Marriott, “Little Communities,” 173.

<sup>4</sup> Marriott, “Little Communities,” 198-99.

<sup>5</sup> Dumont and Pocock, “Village Studies,” 39.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Burke, “Surrealism,” *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 5 (1940): 577.