



The Ritual-Clown: Attributes and Affinities

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Abstract. — Most studies of the ritual-clown have tried to demonstrate how clown behavior may be related to world view and to themes in everyday life external to the ritual context. This essay argues that, if clown figures are fixtures of certain rites, then a parsimonious (although partial) explanation of their presence should look first for their contributions to the working of such rites, in organizational and in symbolic terms. The interpretation offered here is of the ritual-clown as a symbolic-type: one which is clumsily-integrated, but with strong connotations of movement, of motion, and of fertility. Internally, this symbolic-type is composed of sets of contradictory attributes, among which it oscillates without stabilizing itself or making its composition homogeneous. In a sense, the type straddles a boundary within itself, which it is dissolving continuously. So long as this figure is true to type, it evokes inconsistencies and ambiguities of meaning. The type is a mechanism of reflexivity, which exists in an ongoing state of self-transformation. Hence it is a powerful solvent and a representation of "process." These attributes, and the affinity of the type to boundaries, enable it to help shift ritual occasions through their sequential phases. Through discussions of a phase of a Pakistani wedding rite, segments of the Easter rites of the Mayo, performances of the Hopi niman, Duck kachina, and shoyohim kachina, and the performance of the Tewa Dance of Man, ritual-clowns are shown to have crucial functions of boundary-dissolution, of processuality, and of reflexivity, for the organization itself of such rites.

This essay examines the place of sacred-clowns in ritual contexts, to draw out a suggestive series of affinities between this type and other aspects of the organization of ritual. To this end, four ethnographic examples will be adduced: a phase in a series of Pakistani wedding rites, analyzed by Pnina Werbner; Mayo Easter rites, discussed by Crumrine, which feature *capakobam* impersonators; Hopi rites of the summer solstice, and the Tewa Dance of Man, reconstructed by Laski.

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