INTRODUCING RITUAL, PLAY AND BELIEF, IN EVOLUTION AND EARLY HUMAN SOCIETIES

IAIN MORLEY

This volume has its genesis in a multidisciplinary symposium held in the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in Cambridge entitled From Play to Faith: Play, Ritual and Belief, in Animals and Early Human Societies. All of the authors represented here contributed papers to the symposium and participated in extended discussion over four days, in light of which the papers were developed for this book. The symposium formed part of the project Becoming Human: The Emergence of Meaning, generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation. This project, which has also produced the volume Death Rituals, Social Order and the Archaeology of Immortality in the Ancient World: “Death Shall Have No Dominion” (Renfrew et al. 2015), had as its focus the early evidence for human behaviours that relate to central concepts in ritual and religion, and followed directly from the similarly motivated project The Roots of Spirituality, also funded by the John Templeton Foundation at the McDonald Institute.

The theme of the present volume derives directly from long-standing interests on the part of the editors regarding ritual and religion in prehistoric human societies and, in particular, the development of approaches to understanding these behaviours derived from exploration of the cognitive foundations of human behaviour and experience (often termed ‘Cognitive Archaeology’).

Pursuit of the specific theme of relationships between ritual and play behaviours in animals and humans was catalysed by the attendance of the present writer at a talk given by Gordon Burghardt in Cambridge following the publication of his own book The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits (Burghardt 2005). Several of the key characteristics of play in animals that he outlined there seemed to bear striking similarities with key aspects of ritual practice and, furthermore, could be closely interwoven with our existing interests in relationships between ritual, performance, embodied action, music, dance and cognitive evolution (e.g. Renfrew and Morley 2007, 2009; Renfrew et al. 2009; Morley, 2009, 2013; Malafouris and Renfrew, 2010; Morley and Renfrew, 2010). In light of this we invited the colleagues represented here to contribute to elucidating the extent to which these apparent parallels and relationships between ritual and play are genuine and what, if anything, they can tell us about the origins of ritual and the importance of play, in our species, Homo sapiens, and in human societies in the past.

This book begins from the observation that ritual activities and play behaviours, including structured games, have a number of significant traits in common. Furthermore, play and ritualised behaviours are widespread in the animal kingdom, and a sequence of increasingly complex play behaviours constitutes an important, perhaps essential, part of normal human cognitive development.

These traits suggest deep-rooted biological foundations to play behaviours and, potentially, to some of the fundamental aspects of ritual behaviours as well. This volume constitutes an exploration of these apparent continuities between play and ritual, plus their discontinuities, and their relationships...
with processes such as performance, transformation, mimesis and social learning in animals and humans. In a second strand of investigation, it specifically explores the relationships between rule-structured games, play and ritual in a cross-section of early human societies. It thus constitutes a contribution not just to the literature on the archaeology and prehistory of ritual, but to that concerned with the biological and cognitive foundations of ritual and religion.

We are not the first to propose such fundamental connections; Huizinga (1944/1955) coined the term *Homo ludens* in his seminal work (of the same name) to describe our species, seeing play, ritual and performance as fundamentally interrelated throughout our human activities. Others have since explored in detail the development and biological foundations of play behaviours in either animals or humans (several of whom contribute to this volume). Further researchers are especially concerned with the relationships between organised games and rituals (again, several feature within this volume). But, we believe, this volume represents the first attempt to explicitly explore the connections between play and ritual in prehistory by bringing together pre-eminent researchers in these fields.

The volume is organised around three major themes in the exploration of relationships between play and ritual.

The first section (Part I) examines play behaviours in animals and humans, their nature, roles, relationships with other abilities, including those that are important in ritual activities, and their possible roles and relationships in an evolutionary context.

The second section (Part II) looks at relationships between ritual behaviours, play and performance in a number of ancient societies from a selection of locations and periods, and the extent to which we can understand these relationships and their importance on the basis of archaeological and, where available, documentary evidence.

The third section (Part III) takes this theme a stage further by exploring the relationships between formal games, play and ritual, and their social and religious roles, in a further selection of ancient societies.

The volume concludes (Part IV) with chapters that take an overarching view of the topic, with discussion and analysis of the issues and conclusions that are – and are not – raised by the preceding chapters.

The first chapter, by Colin Renfrew, outlines and explores the core concepts and issues underlying exploration of relationships between ritual, play, games, performance and religion, and previous major contributions to investigating these critical human behaviours. This chapter elaborates and considerably expands our original manifesto and motivation for undertaking the present study, and contributes significantly to developing an understanding of the major themes upon which the following chapters focus.

**PART I PLAY AND RITUAL: FORMS, FOUNDATIONS AND EVOLUTION IN ANIMALS AND HUMANS**

**Burghardt**

Gordon Burghardt has carried out extensive research on play behaviours in a very wide range of animals, their forms, roles and relationships with other abilities. Here he reviews this evidence, along with his own explanatory framework, situating play behaviours in their ethological contexts and exploring parallels and differences between these and ritualised and ritual behaviours. He highlights that there has been a long history of the scholars studying play behaviours in animals and humans proposing that play behaviours may contribute importantly to cognitive development, behavioural innovation and creativity, and that they can form essential scaffolding for the development of social norms such as moral behaviour and concepts of fairness. All of these are important prerequisites for and components of religious thought and ritual behaviours. Meanwhile, amongst evolutionary psychologists considering evolutionary foundations for ritual and religion in human evolution, the roles of play in humans and in other animals that have implications for our longer evolutionary heritage have largely been neglected. By considering core definitional components of play and ritual behaviours in both animals and humans he goes on to examine how these behaviours may indeed share important commonalities of form and function.
Bateson

Patrick Bateson has worked extensively on play behaviours in non-human primates and other mammals. Here he elaborates upon the universality of play behaviours in mammals, and upon the principal criteria for identifying play behaviours, including the extent to which ‘playfulness’ need be evident. Bateson explores the circumstances in which play activities are carried out and the characteristics that they exhibit in a wide variety of animals, before discussing the question of what play is ‘for’ – what beneficial roles it may be said to fulfil in the ontogenetic development of the animals, and in their evolutionary context. In particular, he then goes on to explore relationships between play behaviours and the development of creativity and problem-solving in different species, including in important examples of human innovations. Finally, he relates this creative aspect to the systematic alteration of states of consciousness by humans, which is so often a feature of ritual activities.

Smith

Peter Smith turns to detailed discussion of play behaviours in human children, to their parallels in the play behaviours of our nearest relatives, the higher primates, and to their differences, in the elaboration of forms of play that seem to be particular to humans. Smith has produced a large body of work studying the importance of play behaviours in human children and, recently, their place in evolution. In particular he focuses on pretend play, or imaginative play, as a form that is uniquely developed in humans, with potentially wide-ranging significance for cognitive development. This includes social pretend play, and socio-dramatic play, and has the potential to be viewed as part of a package of behaviours that rely on the development of symbolic capabilities, made possible by cognitive abilities such as self-awareness, theory of mind and language that, whilst having precursors in our closest relatives, are uniquely developed in humans. He looks at similarities and differences between play and games with rules, which have often been observed to have similarities with ritual and, indeed, overlap in use (a theme explored further by contributors to the third section of this book). He then goes on to look in detail at the evolution of pretend play, evolutionary rationales for its function, and relationships between pretend play, imagination and creativity, traits that have important implications for religious and ritual thought, including testimony, pretence and belief in invisible agents.

Morley

The chapter by Morley situates these differences in the development of human play behaviours in the context of hominin evolution. The first part of the chapter explores the natures of different types of play behaviours in apes and humans and their relationship with the emergence of certain critical cognitive skills, including some of those required for ritual behaviours and supernatural beliefs. It examines the relationship between these play behaviours, especially pretend play, and life-history stages in ape and human development, in particular infancy and early childhood. Humans feature a uniquely extended early childhood stage of development, and it is during this stage that much of the development of pretend play occurs, including many of the elements of cognitive sophistication that have relevance for religion, performance and ritual behaviours. The second part of the chapter examines the palaeoanthropological evidence for the appearance in human ancestors of a modern human-like pattern of these life-history stages, and the implications that this may have for the emergence of pretend play and the abilities that underlie it in our immediate and more distant ancestors.

Dissanayake

Concluding this section, Ellen Dissanayake explicitly proposes that what is commonly recognised as ritual in humans has its origins in constituent elements of play and ritualised behaviours, as observed in many non-human mammals. She discusses how these elements also constitute antecedents and components of wider ‘arts’, which are also key ingredients of
rituals, and factors in the efficacy of arts-based rituals in instilling belief and doctrine in participants. Dissanayake explores the ritualisation of behaviours in a variety of ethological and human contexts, especially parent–infant interactions, and the evolutionary development and role of meta-representation in play and ritual. This is followed by discussion of the participatory aspects of ritual in particular, and then the components that ritualised and play behaviours contribute to human ritual practices. In particular, Dissanayake elaborates the hypothesis that the specialised components of play and ritualised behaviours in animals provided the evolutionary foundations for religious ritual behaviours in human ancestors, in which context they serve to, amongst other things, coordinate and unify the group and alleviate anxiety.

PART II PLAYING WITH BELIEF AND PERFORMANCE IN ANCIENT SOCIETIES

Freidel and Rich

In David Freidel and Michelle Rich’s exploration of sacred play among the Maya, they engage directly with overlaps that existed, and still exist, between toys, sacred items, performance and ritual. Their discussion of the “enduringly complex” relationship between play and ritual in the Maya world begins with the example of the ‘bring Chahk’ rain ceremonies in which boys perform roles with clear overlaps with pretend/imaginative play as outlined in the preceding section. This clearly also features elements that are far from playful, as did the Maya ballgames they discuss, which are also covered in detail by Taube in Part III. They examine a series of cases in which play behaviours and formal games carry great significance in Maya mythology and ritual practices. They go on to explore in particular the case of the Maya city of El Perú–Waka’. The material culture at the site shows clear overlaps between items used in chance games and musical performance with important ritual roles, linking play and ritual in the elite and common realms of experience. In addition, the monumental architecture and iconography reinforces connections between organised play and games, performance, play with identity, and ritual practice, including the notions of solidarity and alliances and playing with risk in creating tension and cathartic resolution.

Halley

Moving to the North American Southwest, Claire Halley discusses the role of communal performance, especially dance, in the contemporary and prehistoric Puebloan populations of the region. Whilst these may be full of fun and laughter, the actions, paraphernalia and content are intimately tied to religious beliefs, worldview, values and identity. Play, including clowning and playing with (transformations of) normal conventions and accepted behaviours, is an integral part of religious practice and ritual performance. Meanings and roles are reversed, at once entertaining and playful, and serious in reinforcing conventions that exist under ‘normal’, non-ritual circumstances. Halley goes on to explore how ritual and symbolic meanings, identity and solidarity are created and reinforced in the context of these communal performances, especially dance, and the extent to which we can gain insight into the long history of these activities in the archaeological evidence of communal architecture and iconography generated by the occupants of this region.

Watkins

The chapter by Trevor Watkins further explores the preceding themes of the relationships between monumental architecture, performance space and activities, and the creation of ritual symbolism and communal identity, this time in the context of the emergence of Neolithic populations in South-West Asia. With particular reference to Göbekli Tepe in south-east Turkey, Watkins examines the archaeological evidence for a succession of large-scale, non-domestic constructions of late Epi-Palaeolithic and Neolithic date in South-West Asia, and their relationships with communal ritual practice and the creation of complex symbolic systems. He does so in the context of discussion of proposed limitations in cognitive evolution, which are argued to shape the necessity for the creation of communal activities for
the maintenance of social bonds, and in the context of niche construction theory. Amongst the critical elements of human cultural niches created, it is argued, is the developmental environment within which children learn the complex body of cultural knowledge and beliefs that they then begin to practice. Relating communal performance to recent theories of the cognitive science of religion, Watkins argues that the built environment, in which ritual performance took place, physically manifested cultural information as part of the niche in which the development of ideas and beliefs occurred, including the otherwise ‘make-believe’ of super-human agents.

Garfinkel

Retaining the focus on the Near East (South-West Asia), and on performance, Yosef Garfinkel focuses in particular on the evidence for performative rituals that play with identity, in particular, the evidence for masked ritual in the Neolithic of the region. Beginning with discussion of the universal nature in humans of religion, and the role of ritual in publicly consolidating the abstract concepts within religion and cosmology, he goes on to look at the universal performance of dance and its effects and roles in ritual and religious contexts. The chapter then examines in particular masks as used in ritual and dance performance. Garfinkel assembles (for the first time) a rich record of archaeological evidence for the use of masks in the proto-historic Near East, including masks themselves and depictions of their use. He goes on to discuss the use of these in ritual and dance, interpreting them in the context of evidence for the use of masks in performance amongst traditional societies. Masks have the potential to transform identity and roles, through hiding identity, homogenising identity, imposing identity or exaggerating characteristics, and through marking a distinction between the performance context and ‘normal’ contexts, all common features of play behaviours.

Sterckx

Roel Sterckx discusses the relationships between ritual, play and perception of animal behaviour in pre-imperial and early imperial China. The behaviours of animals and humans were not only seen as parallel and contingent, but the behavioural (and anatomical) qualities of animals were described in terms of ritual requirements and human virtues, and “the origins of music, movement and dance were closely linked to animals”. Formal, ‘ritualised’ performative behaviour was seen to apply to both humans and animals, but adherence to ritual etiquette or ‘propriety’, as opposed to instinctive interactions, was seen to distinguish human from animal nature. The chapter goes on to discuss examples where appropriate human behaviours were seen as derived from, or to have parallels in, the ritualised behaviour of various animals, as well as the case of ritual games derived as performative enactments of animal contests. Melody, rhythm and dance were in particular seen as derived from the discovery and observation of sound and movement in nature, in which they were embedded. But meanwhile a clear distinction was maintained between the moral propriety required to behave ritually (to whatever extent possessing parallels with animal behaviours), versus, in contrast, play and sports, seen as lacking such moral propriety, in spite of their other parallels.

Malone

Returning to the theme of performative play-acting in the ritual context, Caroline Malone examines the evidence for competitive feasting and ritual at the Neolithic prehistoric temples of Tarxien, Malta. Reconstructing the evidence from the original excavation diaries, this chapter explores the relationships between feasting, animal conceptualisations and cosmology, looking at the roles of animals and identity in the symbolic expression of ritual belief. Artefacts from the temple complexes include monstrous hybrid and semi-human forms, imagery modelled in clay, incised on pottery or carved on limestone, some of which cause Malone to question whether their use was serious or humorous, as well as the extent to which transformations of identity between animal and human in ritual contexts may have been significant.
PART III THE RITUAL IN THE GAME, THE GAME IN THE RITUAL

Morgan

Lyvia Morgan explores relationships between ritual, games, play, performance and transformation, focusing in particular on the representations of these activities in ancient Egyptian and Aegean imagery. She observes initially that play can be ritualised in its form and function, effecting transformations, such as from youth to maturity or maturity to regeneration. Furthermore, it has been argued that underlying all performance is the ritualisation of play (in its broad sense); performance includes public play, games, dance, music, ceremony and ritual, and boundaries between these categories are permeable, with each potentially encompassing aspects of the others, especially in the ancient world. Her chapter goes on to focus in particular on the imagery of games, sports and hunting in Egyptian and Aegean Bronze Age art, proposing that underlying these are concepts of ritualised transition through social performance. These include scenes of the play and games of children and young men in which the performative play implies bodily preparation for adulthood. Morgan goes on to discuss the performance of the – often agonistic – games and their ritual significances, proposing that many of the representations of play, games and performance reflect transformational ritual content. She also proposes that direct parallels may have been made between the agonistic play (play-fighting) of animals and those represented in the ritualised human games, including the adoption of animal-like properties as a consequence.

Marinatos

Focusing specifically on the Bull Games in Minoan Crete, Nanno Marinatos discusses the ritual and ideological dimensions of the games, and their relationships with particular Minoan deities. The games consist of both bull-leaping and bull-grappling, as two different activities carried out in different ways by different participants, and Marinatos interprets the evidence for each of these in the context of their representations as well as their comparative and cultural context in the wider geographical area. She suggests that the games were publicly performed for large audiences, fulfilling roles testing and reaffirming elite bravery and credibility, including their association with divine patronage and sanction.

Spivey

Drawing upon a range of evidence, from figured ceramics to military equipment, Nigel Spivey discusses the ideology behind the formal sporting contests of archaic and ancient Greece and the motivations for ‘play’ in the period. He explores the connections – and their limitations – of the organised games of sport and athletics with warfare. For example, certain sports are (relatively) ‘safe’ versions of behaviours that in their usual context (of conflict) would be dangerous or fatal. This shows a clear parallel with the ‘play-fighting’ of animals and children, and the wider common element of play and ritual of featuring behaviours that are transposed from their ‘normal’ context into a new one, where they have different rules and effects. Actual combat could also be performative, theatrical and rule-bound. He suggests that one reasonable conception of a game is “a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles”, and that when physical exertion (often to exhaustion) is added, it becomes not just a ‘game’, but a ‘sport’. Further, he posits, situating such activities in sanctuaries adds ingredients that make the activities ritual too. In the case of conceptions of ‘game’ and ‘sport’, it is notable that these definitions could be said to encompass various types of animal and child play, including rough-and-tumble and object play. Spivey goes on to look at what the games were for – what their perceived origin was, what were the motivations behind carrying them out, and how they related to the concept of worshipful, immortal heroism.

Taube

Continuing the theme of ritual games, but returning to Mesoamerica, Karl Taube analyses the evidence
for ritual blood sports, including the Olmec and Maya ballgame and previously underexplored ritual boxing. Both were not only formalised sources of entertainment, but had intensely religious significance too. He discusses how the ballgame and its associated human sacrifice were related directly to ritual practices concerning rainfall, fertility and abundance and, similarly, how the ritual boxing (with stone gloves) was related to fertile rainfall and the god of rain. He discusses the iconographic and architectural evidence for both competitive ‘sporting’ elements to these activities and their important ritual components, highlighting how “public sport and sacred ritual overlap in profound ways”. He discusses the representations and role of ritual boxing, as well as architectural features of the ballcourts designed to allow their ritual flooding, mixing the symbolically highly fertile blood that was the aftermath of the games with the water that was the blood of the Earth. In contemporary (and probably ancient) examples of ritual boxing, masked costumes provide transformations of identity, marking the activity as distinct from prosaic life, and incorporating “otherworldly fun” alongside excitement and fear.

Kyriakidis

Evangelos Kyriakidis begins his theoretical discussion of similarities and differences between games and rituals with the observation that the two can be very difficult to distinguish archaeologically. But whilst they have much in common with each other, he argues that they are distinct in a significant respect – that whilst participants in games are engaged actively throughout, those in rituals have a passive ‘intention-in-action’. According to Kyriakidis, both rituals and games can be defined as institutionalised “set activities with a special (not-normal) intention-in-action, and which are specific to a group of people” (and this “special (not-normal) intention-in-action” is also a defining characteristic of play behaviours). Furthermore, he highlights some significant structural similarities between rituals and games: both feature rules that separate them from the ‘normal’, or quotidian world; the means by which their ends are achieved are often through following non-contiguous processes within the framework of the specific rules that apply in their non-quotidian circumstances. However, he initially argues that they also differ in that the outcomes of rituals are fixed, while those of games are not, and that participants in rituals are followers of prescribed practice whilst those in games are agentive players. It becomes clear over the course of the discussion that this distinction applies to some rituals and not others. He goes on to discuss how in both rituals and games, their departure from the rules of the quotidian world leads to participants entering a ‘new’ world, undergoing new experiences and impacting learning as a consequence.

PART IV  FROM PLAY TO FAITH? DISCUSSION

Malafouris

Bringing together themes developed in the preceding chapters, Lambros Malafouris discusses these relationships between ritual, play and games from the perspective of material culture. Each has to be enacted – performed – through the use of material things and/or bodies before they can be thought about or conceptualised. He discusses how play might be defined, in light of the preceding discussions, and the questions this raises about its recognition in past contexts, and goes on to posit that a powerful linking theme between play and ritual (and the realisation of belief through ritual) is performance. He discusses also how this manifests in the various archaeological evidence mentioned in the latter chapters, before turning to the cognitive and evolutionary implications of the approaches to the evidence taken in the earlier chapters. He concludes with discussion of the role of material culture in scaffolding the development of play and ritual.

Osborne

In reviewing the foregoing chapters, Robin Osborne asks to what extent the initial ideas that ritual and play are related have been confirmed or refuted.
Is ritual indeed involved in play and games? Can performative (‘ritual’) behaviours amongst animals serve a purpose without being meaningful? Is make-believe play related to the ability to create beliefs? He first of all highlights some distinctions between ritual and play that he sees as emergent from the preceding evidence. These include the extent to which they have fixed, or anticipated outcomes, the extent to which chance factors (including errors) are encouraged or minimised in the proceedings. But at the same time, both play and ritual define themselves in opposition to the ‘normal’, are purposive and social. In both ritual and play, performance of roles distinct from the ‘normal’ is important, and these take place in their own world where specific rules and consequences apply. Osborne goes on to propose that in the context of this ‘difference from normality’ shared by both play and ritual there is nevertheless a significant distinction: play signals that in its contrast to ‘normal’ events, less is happening than you might think, whereas ritual signals that in its contrast to ‘normal’ events, more is happening than you might think. They are similar, parallel, but pulling in different directions. He concludes that the experience of play was indeed crucial for preparing humans for not only ritual, but for engagement with the supernatural world of belief, effected through ritual.

Morley

The concluding chapter of this volume seeks to draw out core intellectual themes developed by the contributors, and in light of these proposes a framework for understanding the origins and effective structures of ritual – and other forms of performance – in the cognitive structures which make possible and are developed in the context of play behaviours.

References