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- 1 Michael Rudolph, *Ritual Performances as Authenticating Practices: Cultural representations of Taiwan's aborigines in times of political changes*, Berlin, LIT Verlag, "Performanzen," vol. 14, 2008, bibliogr., index.
- 2 This volume constitutes an original contribution to Taiwan studies: it situates an examination of contemporary aboriginal rituals within the transformation of the Taiwanese political, cultural, and social context. Such an approach proceeds from the conviction that rituals are not limited to "representing" the cultural or religious beliefs of the communities performing them; they also contribute to transforming the political, social, and identity framework in which their performance takes place and find meaning.
- 3 Rituals are thus viewed here in terms of "transformative practices" that, contrary to current opinion, set out not to confirm a group's identity but rather to reorganise it in the very act of ritual performance. "Rituals not only mean something, but also do something, particularly the way they construct and inscribe power relationships. (...) Rather than seeing rituals as the vehicle for the expression of authority, practice theorists tend to explore how ritual is a vehicle for the construction of relationships of authority and submission."¹
- 4 The kind of rites Michael Rudolph focuses on, and which he calls "retraditionalising rituals" (p. 15), therefore point more often to situations foreign to the historical elements they borrow: the observer's attention is drawn at the outset to the "emerging meaning" that the ritual staging helps express through a subversion of cosmological or other symbols used.² Changes in ritual forms are not necessarily imposed by material conditions: they correspond to the quest for meaning through which the community

redefines its borders, its bases, and its destiny. At the same time, the potential politics of any religious ritual can only be fully grasped by looking at its actuation in terms of the issues and strategies that lie beyond its narrow limits and anchor it in a greater community. Thus we move from the ritual's apparent symbolism to the impression of meaning and power produced by its staging. In other words, the question of determining whether or not the semantic of contemporary rituals is that of past rituals is directly linked to the nature and evolution of the political community of which they are a part, and which they justify and/or challenge and transform.³

- 5 Following an excellent theoretical introduction, the book examines the new role of aboriginal rituals in the context of the cultural, political, and social changes in Taiwan since the early 1990s. Rudolph highlights the transformation in the representations of ancestor spirits. Originally "demons" to be exorcised and driven out, these spirits gradually become the very forces protecting and coming to the aid of the resurgent aboriginal communities. At the same time, the staging of rituals quickly becomes a political issue, with political forces squabbling over them: different aboriginal groups lay claim to their glorious past as "head hunters" in order to dramatise their protests against the Kuomintang (KMT) and then the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Attention to this political dimension also reveals a certain manipulation of aboriginal representations and movements by Han intellectuals who use them for their own ends. Such manipulation is, however, partly eroded by the gradual emergence of an aboriginal intellectual class, itself seeking power and legitimacy. Finally, the renewal of ritual practices opens up a "negotiating" arena between Christian faith, which has been adopted by a large majority of Taiwan's aborigines, and a past they reappropriate and reinvent.
- 6 The next section begins by examining the relationship between the progressive recognition of the Taroko as an official ethnic group and the rituals adopted by the Tarokocommunities. The reorganisation of values and attitudes that led to the reaffirmation of Taroko identity followed a reinterpretation of their traditional cosmology in terms of social practice: cosmological symbols became those of concrete existence, ancient rituals being thoroughly reworked and imbued with new significations. The chapter shows that aboriginal intellectuals' initial attempts to reorganise these rituals in line with ancient beliefs met with resistance from local communities, which imposed their own interpretation system on ancestral beliefs and the way in which they were adapted in the Taiwanese Presbyterian church. The aboriginal intellectuals' relative failure might have been due to the fact that the public they had in mind had really been groomed less by their own people than by Han intellectuals when it came to persuading them of the excellence and efficacy of aboriginal beliefs and practices.⁴ The next chapter looks at the harvest festival (Ilisin) held annually by the Taibalang Ami tribe⁵ in Hualien district. Rudolph views such festivals as an annual forum for re-diffusing values, symbols, and strategies so as to facilitate the affirmation of Ami ethnicity and its bargaining power in Taiwanese society. Relations with political parties, the Catholic and Protestant churches, and other authorities are represented and negotiated in such a way as to ensure the unity and prosperity of a village that remains mainly Catholic while at the same time aspiring to benefit from the new cultural legitimacy of shamanistic practices. As in the Taroko context, this strategy is both encouraged and complicated by the symbiotic relations between local intellectuals and the Han intellectual community as a whole. Again, for the organisers of aboriginal cultural renewal, the challenge is knowing how to address

different publics simultaneously while making trade-offs that will prevent falling afoul of any of them.

- 7 The book's concluding section develops the following observation: Taiwanese national construction is based on the conscious assertion of multiculturalism, which has created a system of shared interests among Han and aboriginal elites. A cultural revitalisation partially directed from above has sometimes posed dilemmas for the populations concerned, or at least has induced a process of negotiation between the aborigines and their cultural elites, and traces of this process can be found in cultural transformations. Meanwhile, aboriginal elites (cultural figures, religious elites, politicians) often pursue divergent interests that both complicate and enrich strategies for ethnic and cultural renewal. The second point developed in this section concerns the importance of aboriginal cultural and ritual renewal in the overall policy of constructing Taiwanese identity. The strategic role of rituals is linked to their performance as spectacle and the insistence on their religious nature, often affirmed through bloody sacrifice (pp. 198-201). Implicitly, Rudolph seems harsh in his judgment that the interests created by the assertion of Taiwanese culture place the aboriginal elite in greater symbiosis with its Han counterpart than with its own community. Aboriginal cultural redefinition risks losing touch with the expectations of aborigines themselves (p. 210). Besides, up to now, aboriginal cultural affirmation has not brought the aborigines and the Han closer but has rather redefined the borders separating them.
- 8 We should be grateful to Rudolph for these reflections on the dialectic relationship between ritual reconstruction and identity redefinition, nurtured by studies of perceptively and carefully documented cases. His study offers a valuable opening to contemporary Taiwanese culture and helps view it in new comparative perspectives, notably with the rest of the Austronesian world from whom the Taiwanese aborigines cannot be separated.
- 9 Translated by N. Jayaram

NOTES

1. Catherine Bell, *Rituals: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1997, pp.82-83. (Cited by Rudolf on p.14).
2. Stanley J. Tambiah, "A Performative Approach to Rituals," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1979, 65, pp. 113-169.
3. Rudolph is critical of the works of the ethnographer and documentarist Hu Tai-li, who while displaying some awareness of intervening shifts, continues to "show" the symbolism and semantics of ritual sequences as if they had an intangible essence (pp. 182-187).
4. Rudolph relies on the dissertation of Qiu Yufang, *Zuling, shangdi yu chuantong: Jidu zhanglao jiaohui yu Tailuge ren de zongjiao bianqian* (Ancestor-spirits, God and Tradition: The Presbyterian Church of Taiwan and religious change among the Truku), National Taiwan University PhD dissertation, 2004.
5. Unfortunately, in this case, as in others, Rudolph adopts the Chinese transcriptions of place names and not the local ones. In this specific instance, it would be Tafalong.