Rhythm as Form of Social Process (Part 2)

Tuesday 12 March 2019, by Pascal Michon

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The Law of Rhythmic Social Life (Mauss – 1906)

These descriptions show how unfair Evans-Pritchard's criticism was. Mauss did not simply want to confirm the Durkheimian theory of religion by a case study. He certainly treated the question of ritual life with care but he did not limit his analysis to it. His perspective was much larger and he actually dedicated three times more pages to the Eskimo's jural life than to their religious beliefs.

Mauss' first noticeable achievement was to clarify, by elaborating further an idea borrowed from Durkheim's *Suicide* (1897), the theoretical status of social rhythms. He showed that the phenomenon of morphological but also technological, religious and legal alternation, was no mere adaptation to climatic and biotopic alternation induced by the poorness of available technology, but a *sui generis* phenomenon which received its ultimate explanation from the sociohistorical level only. Social rhythms were not entirely determined nor explicable by geographical and technical conditions. As far as archaic societies were concerned, Mauss of course conceded that the environment and the level of technological development had an impact on morphological variations, but, in his eyes, they played only a secondary role.

On the one hand, at the outset of his essay, he warned against the falsity of absolute geographical determinism, because it was always mediated by the state of society.

> [The geographical situation, far from being the essential factor which we have almost exclusively to consider, constitutes only one of the conditions for the material form of human groups.] In most cases it produces its effects only by means of numerous social conditions which it initially affects, and which alone account for the result. [...] So, when we study its effects, we must trace their repercussions on all the categories of collective life. All these questions are not, therefore, geographical questions but proper sociological ones; and in this study we will approach them in a sociological spirit. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 22, trans. James J. Fox, my mod.)

On the other hand, he emphasized that the technical relation to nature was not the only one nor the most important. The poverty of the Eskimo technology made them very dependent on the animals they hunted of fished, but this explanation was insufficient to account for what was happening, because in reality human beings insert themselves into nature through all aspects of their societies

and not only through technology.

> [It is because of this technology, which is a social phenomenon, that Eskimo social life becomes a veritable phenomenon of symbiosis that forces the group to live like the animals they hunt or fish]. These animals concentrate and disperse, according to the seasons. [...] In summary, summer opens up an almost unlimited area for hunting and fishing, while winter narrowly restricts this areas. This alternation provides the rhythm of concentration and dispersion for the morphological organization of Eskimo society. The population congregates or scatters like the game. The movement that animates Eskimo society is synchronized with that of the surrounding life. (*Seasonal Variations...*, 1906, p. 55-56, trans. James J. Fox, my mod.)

Rhythmic phenomena were therefore of a specific nature, separated from the cosmos. Although they could be observed in human societies all around the world, they were historical phenomena which were brought about by a causality of their own, linked somehow to natural phenomena but not determined by them.

> Nevertheless, although biological and technological factors may have an important influence, they are insufficient to account for the total phenomenon. They provide an understanding of how it happens that the Eskimo assemble in winter and disperse in summer. But they do not explain why this concentration attains that degree of intimacy which we have already noted [...]. They explain neither the reason for the *kashim* nor the close connection that, in some cases, seems to unite it to other houses. Eskimo dwellings could supposedly be grouped together without concentrating [so narrowly] and without giving birth to this intense collective life [...]. [Neither need they be long-houses.] But the state of Eskimo technology can only account for the time of the year when these movements of concentration and dispersion occur, their duration and succession, and their marked opposition to one another. (*Seasonal Variations...*, 1906, p. 56, trans. James J. Fox, my mod.)

In fact, bio-climatic rhythms did not explain the universal spread of social rhythms; they represented only “opportunities” that allowed them to spring up.

> Instead of being the necessary and determining cause of an entire system, truly seasonal factors may merely mark the most opportune occasions in the year for these two phases to occur. (*Seasonal Variations...*, 1906, p. 79, trans. James J. Fox)

Thirty years later, Marcel Granet, commenting on the morphological variations in ancient China, perfectly summarized this viewpoint.

> This rhythm [the seasonal morphological variation] is not *directly* modeled on seasonal rhythm. If it seems to depend on all natural conditions which control the activity of a society living especially on agriculture, it is because the season during which the Earth does not need human labor offers a time where men can most conveniently deal with interests that are not secular. Nature provides

> the signal and the opportunity. But the need to seize the opportunity and to perceive the signal has its source in social life itself. (M. Granet, *La Pensée chinoise – Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 110, my trans.).

Mauss indicated, in support of his thesis, many other facts of morphological variations which were not linked to climatic variations or even to a deficient state of technology. He began with a large number of Amerindian populations in the American West. I quote at length because, besides giving us some noticeable information, these lines largely anticipate the subsequent work on the *Potlatch* that eventually led to the essay on *The gift* and the great theoretical texts of the 1930s.

> Yet though this curious alternation appears most clearly among the Eskimo, it is by no means confined to this culture. The pattern that we have just noted is more widespread than one would at first suspect. First, among the American Indians, there is an important group of societies, quite considerable in themselves, that live in the same way. These are mainly the tribes of the northwest coast: Tlingit, Haida, Kwakiutl, Aht, Nootka and even a great number of Californian tribes such as the Hupa, and the Wintu. Among all these peoples there is an extreme concentration in winter and an equally extreme dispersion in summer, though there exist no absolutely necessary biological or technological reasons for this twofold organization. In keeping with this twofold morphology there are very often two systems of social life. This is notably the case among the Kwakiutl. In winter, the clan disappears, giving way to groups of an entirely different kind: secret societies or, more exactly, religious confraternities in which nobles and commoners form a hierarchy. Religious life is localized in winter; profane life is exactly like that among the Eskimo in summer. […] Many Athapascan societies, ranging from those in the far north such as the Ingalik and Chilcotin, to the Navaho of the New Mexican plateau, also have the same character. (Seasonal Variations…, 1906, p. 78, trans. James J. Fox)

But these examples, which are taken in more or less “archaic” populations, might still seem too close to the Eskimo, so Mauss added to them a series of other examples taken in more complex European and Asian societies.

> These American Indian societies are not, however, the only ones that conform to this type. In temperate or extreme climates where the influence of the seasons is clearly evident, there occur innumerable phenomena similar to those we have studied. We can cite two particularly striking cases. First, there are the summer migrations of the pastoral mountain peoples of Europe which almost completely empty whole villages of their male population. Second, there is the seemingly reverse phenomenon that once regulated the life of the Buddhist monk in India and still regulates the lives of itinerant ascetics, now that Buddhist sangha no longer has followers in India: during the rainy season, the mendicant ceases his wandering and re-enters the monastery. (*Seasonal Variations…*, 1906, p. 78, trans. James J. Fox)

Finally, he cited examples taken from European societies of his time. Social rhythms were not limited to archaic societies; they were also pervasive in modern ones.

> What is more, we have only to observe what goes on around us in our Western societies to discover these same oscillations *[les mêmes oscillations]*. About the end of July, there occurs a summer dispersion. Urban life enters that period of sustained languor known as *vacances*, the vacation period, which continues to the end of autumn. [From this time on, it tends to increase steadily until it drops off again in July]. Rural life follows the opposite pattern. In winter, the countryside is plunged into a kind of torpor; the population at this time scatters to specific points of seasonal migration; each small, local, or territorial group, turns in upon itself; there are neither means nor opportunities for gathering together; this is the time of dispersion. By contrast, in summer, everything becomes reanimated; workers return to the fields; people live out of doors in constant contact with on another. This is the time of festivities, of major projects and great revelry. Statistics reflect these regular variations in social life. Suicides, an urban phenomenon, increase from the end of autumn until June, whereas homicides, a rural phenomenon, increase from the beginning of spring until the end of summer, when they become fewer. (*Seasonal Variations*..., 1906, p. 78-79, trans. James J. Fox, my mod.)

In this instance, Mauss was clearly indebted to Durkheim, who wrote in 1897 the following statement.

> For the countryside, Winter is a time of rest approaching stagnation. All life seems to stop; human relations are fewer both because of atmospheric conditions and because they lose their incentive with the general slackening of activity. People seem really asleep. In Spring, however, everything begins to awake; activity is resumed, relations spring up, interchanges increase, whole popular migrations take place to meet the needs of agricultural labor. (É. Durkheim, *Suicide* (1897), p. 119, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson).

Many years later, Mauss emphasized again the general presence of social rhythms in modern societies.

> I think I have given a good example of this principle of "double morphology" with the Eskimos. But it is almost the same everywhere. We live alternately in a collective life, and a family and individual life. (M. Mauss, "La cohésion sociale dans les sociétés polysegmentaires" (1931), *Œuvres*, to. III, 1969, p. 14, my trans.)

In the last pages of his essay, Mauss sketched a conception of society, which somehow resembled that of the neoclassical economists. The evidence gathered strongly suggested that society was not a set of fixed groups, nor even of classes, it was *a bundle of oscillating entities*. The fundamentally rhythmic nature of social life was probably a sociological "law of considerable generality."

> All this suggests that we have come upon a law that is probably of considerable generality. Social life does not continue at the same level throughout the year; it goes through regular, successive phases of increased and decreased intensity, of activity and repose, of exertion and recuperation. We might almost say that social life does violence to [the bodies and minds] of individuals which they can sustain only for a time; and there comes a point when they must slow down and partially

> withdraw from it. We have seen examples of this rhythm of dispersion and concentration, of individual life and collective life. (*Seasonal Variations*…, 1906, p. 79, trans. James J. Fox, my mod.)

Moreover, since "each social function," had "a rhythm of its own, " these oscillations had different spatial extensions, complexity levels, and frequencies. They were not entirely regular or cyclical and could sometimes overlap, as in the examples cited above of modern rural and urban populations.

> Among these people [the Eskimos], the phenomenon is so easily observed that it almost springs to view, [so to speak]; but very likely it can be found elsewhere. Furthermore, though this major seasonal rhythm is the most apparent, it may not be the only one; there are probably other lesser rhythms *[qui ont une moins grande amplitude]*, within each season, each month, each week, each day. Each social function probably has a rhythm of its own. (*Seasonal Variations*…, 1906, p. 79, trans. James J. Fox, my mod.)

Apart from the fact that, generally speaking, society was not for Mauss reducible to production, exchange, and consumption, his conception of the sociological rhythms was however quite different from that of the economic rhythms by the economists. Whereas the latter often compared society to a living organism plunged in a natural context called trade, the rhythm of which were consequently not to be disturbed by state intervention, Mauss strongly objected to the reduction of society to a living organism and more generally of economy to nature. Although they remained most of the time unconscious, the social rhythms were entirely historical and therefore could be politically transformed if necessary.

Incantation and Prayer Rhythms (Mauss – 1904-1909)

Mauss' second significant achievement during the 1900s was more surprising. Parallel to his rather traditional use of the notion of rhythm in his anthropological study on the Eskimo, Mauss began to give it a significantly different sense which, despite its immense theoretical interest, has not yet, to my knowledge, attracted academic attention. This new meaning appeared in the researches, which are nowadays wrongly considered as obsolete, that Mauss initiated in the first years of the 20th century concerning archaic poetry, ritual literature, and prayer.

In 1904, he published with his friend Henri Hubert an important article entitled "Outlines of a General Theory of Magic" [1] and, in 1909, the first part of his PhD thesis on *Prayer*, which unfortunately he never completed. These texts are rarely mentioned in the contemporary discussions concerning Mauss, which usually limit themselves to the *Essay on the gift*, but they are of the greatest interest to us because of the rhythmological innovations they introduced. [2]

Most remarkably, Mauss and Hubert immediately realized the importance of the *pragmatic* aspect of the discourses they were studying. This discovery lay at the heart of the texts written during the 1900s. In the essay on magic, Mauss' and Hubert's attention went to the fact that it was impossible to separate incantation and rite, language and act.

> They are not separable from each other. They are so intimately associated that they should be studied concurrently in order to give an exact idea of the magical ceremonies. [...] Words and acts are absolutely equivalent. (*Outlines of a General Theory of Magic*, 1904, p. 47 and p. 50, my trans.)

The prayer, Mauss noted in the same spirit in 1909, was an integral part of ritual gesture.

> In Australia, it would be quite hazardous [...] to treat of prayer in isolation; it is, so to speak, to no degree an autonomous rite. It is not self-sufficient [...]. Most of the time, it is only the accompaniment of another rite [...]. It is therefore impossible here to separate oral acts from manual gestures, which sometimes are performed independently but always contribute to giving the latter their full and true meaning. (*The Prayer*, 1909, *Œuvres*, to. I, p. 452, my trans.)

The importance of this idea was so great in Mauss's eyes that he repeated it practically word for word many years later.

> As far as we can imagine the so-called primitive mentalities, the difference between the word and the act is not as great as in our Western minds. This is true in both senses. The word is an act [...], but, conversely, the rite is a word. ("Collective Categories of Thought and Freedom," 1921, *Œuvres*, to. II, p. 121, my trans.)

In certain Australian tribes, he recalled,

> the emission of voice, the breath itself, are rigorously conceived as a gesture [...] But conversely, the gesture in these religions is conceived as a language; the rite is usually a mimed dance or a mime; in any case, at least it is a symbol. *(Ibid.)*

The anthropological approach thus allowed Mauss to break with the age-old reduction of language to its referential function—and also, by anticipation, with its Levi-Straussian definition as sheer symbolic power. If a speech was equivalent to a gesture, or even an act, then its function was not only to represent ideas or things, but also to produce effects. Prayer was "full of meaning as a myth," it was "often as rich in ideas and images as a religious narrative," but it was also "full of strength and efficiency as a rite" and often "as powerfully creative as a sympathetic ceremony." (1909, p. 359) The representation and the ritual gesture coincided perfectly and constituted a single *act*.

> Here the ritual and mythical sides are, strictly speaking, only two sides of one and the same act. They appear at the same time, they are inseparable. (*The Prayer*, 1909, *Œuvres*, to. I, p. 360, my trans.)

Mauss made very clear the anti-representative perspective implied by these statements. He pointed out that ethnographic evidence about the embedment of prayer in the social context forced us to consider it, contrarily to traditional religious history, as a ritual action that had a meaning by itself and not as a discourse of an individual expressing through a conventional language his intimate religious representations.

> Whereas, for philosophers and theologians, the ritual is a conventional language by which the interplay of images and intimate feelings imperfectly expresses itself, it becomes for us reality itself. For it contains all that is active and alive in prayer. (*The Prayer*, 1909, *Œuvres*, to. I, p. 385, my trans.)

Mauss, instead, sketched a *pragmatic* theory of language without forgetting yet its *semantic* side.

> This convergence is, moreover, quite natural. Prayer is speech *[La prière est une parole]*. And language is a movement that has purpose and effect; basically, it is always an instrument of action. But it acts by expressing ideas, feelings that the words translate outside and make concrete. To speak is to act and think at the same time: that's why prayer belongs to faith and worship at the same time. (*The Prayer*, 1909, *Œuvres*, to. I, p. 358, my trans.)

Thus, from his earliest texts, language no longer appeared to Mauss as a mere instrument of *representation* of ideas or things, but primarily as an *activity* in which meaning and efficiency would go hand in hand. This first result, already remarkable in itself, was completed by another discovery which oriented, with even more strength, Mauss' theory of language in a new direction laying the ground for a entirely novel conception of rhythm.

In their essay on magic, Mauss and Hubert made, with respect to *the opposition of sound and meaning* which was foundational for the whole dualistic theory of the sign, a series of remarks that have not enough attracted academic attention. Influenced both by the emphasis put at the time by the authors themselves on the much criticized notion of *mana*, and by the no less debatable phonological reading made posteriorly by Levi-Strauss, we no longer see the novelty of the work on the magical discourse which was then accomplished.

In addition to their multiple attempts at defining the notion of *mana*, Mauss and Hubert insisted, in an innovative way, on the central role played in the magic system by the *incantation*, a term "which usually denotes the oral magic rituals" (1904, p. 47). They criticized their predecessors for having missed its significance: "It does not seem that it has ever been given the exact share it deserves." (p. 47) They emphasized that the *mana* itself—the magic force—could be conceived from the incantation: "[For the Iroquois] the incantation is the *orenda* (the magic force) [the *mana*] par excellence." (p. 107) Mauss and Hubert noted the frequency of meters and chants (p. 51), the importance of tone (p. 51), but also of onomatopoeia (p. 48), puns (p. 48). They noted that incantations were generally made in "a special language" which everywhere "seeks archaism, foreign or incomprehensible terms" (p. 50). More generally, they noted the importance, in the ritual and magical worldview, of sounds, and in particular, of human phonic production.

> Among the Hurons, the *orenda* is the sound emitted by the things; the animals that cry, the singing birds, the trees that rustle, the wind that blows, all express their *orenda*. In the same way the voice of the enchanter is made out of *orenda*. The *orenda* of things is a kind of incantation. (*Outlines of a General Theory of Magic*, 1904, p. 106, my trans.)

Thus in magic ritual, the division of sound and meaning was not relevant, because the sounds did not represent ideas that would precede them, but formed *a system signifying by itself*. In this case, the speech system of sounds prevailed over the "words" (i.e. over the ideas which they represented): "The intonation can have more importance than the word." (p. 51)

In short, Mauss' early anthropological studies revealed his deep questioning of two of the most important pillars of the dualistic theory of the sign: the primacy of representation over activity and efficiency, and the opposition of sound and meaning. [3] This must be strongly underlined because the theoretical reorientation that resulted from this critique of the *semiotic* paradigm brought him closer to the *rhuthmic* intuitions developed from the 18th century by the string of artists and theoreticians reflecting on the language activity we have studied in volume 2.

Associating the two faces of his critique of the sign, Mauss repeatedly emphasized that the *meaning* of the magical incantations or prayers, that is to say essentially their *effectiveness*, resulted from their *sounds*, especially when the latter took the systematic form of a *rhythm*. This rhythmic aspect of the incantation pragmatism was particularly evident in magic, of which it constituted the main nucleus. Mauss and Hubert noted, for example, that for the Iroquois, "the cause par excellence is the voice" (1904, p. 107). In the same way, in Vedic India, "the *bráhman* [the active principle] is what the men and the gods act through, and it is, especially, the voice" (p. 110).

In 1913-1914, Mauss devoted an entire course to "the theory of the origin of the belief in the virtue of formulas," in which he concluded that all ritual formulas had to be conceived "as deriving from a type of formulary ritual, where the pronunciation of rhythmic words was endowed with a value that is at once practical, suggestive, aesthetic, and moral" ("Cours de 1913-14" in *Œuvres*, to. II, p. 260).

In 1921, he explicitly attributed the pragmatic and signifying aspects of the magic formularies to their rhythm.

> The emission of voice, the breath itself are rigorously conceived as a gesture: the magician enchants by his inspiration and expiration; *his breath*, *the sound of his words*, *their rhythm*, *are his strength and his soul*, and they are also something material. ("Collective Categories of Thought and Freedom," 1921, *Œuvres*, to. II, p. 121, my trans., my emphasis)

In the summary of the course he devoted, the same scholastic year, to "the belief in the effectiveness of [magic and religious] formulas," Mauss recapitulated his findings.

> After a summary of last year's course, we have studied: 1° the magic oral rituals; 2° the funerary

> oral rituals; 3° the dramatic and cathectic [emotional] oral rituals. The following conclusions have been reached: all these formularies and the other religious oral rituals, in the strict sense, have the same characteristics: [they are] 1° practical; rhythmic words are supposed to have an immediate, practical, magic action; breath and voice are equivalent to notes; 2° moral and obligatory, and not spontaneous; 3° [they] have a cathectic, sentimental nature and effect. ("Résumé du Cours de 1920-1921," *Œuvres*, to. II, p. 261, my trans.)

One may realize the importance attributed by Mauss to the pragmatic and signifying aspects of magic and religious formulary rhythm from the mere fact that he devoted to this subject his courses at the École des Hautes Études in 1910-11, 1911-12, 1912-13, and again in 1920-21, and 1922-23. And this long-sustained interest may, in turn, also help us to better assess his subsequent extensive research on archaic ritual and poetic literature, especially the dramatic poetry of the Australian corroboree studied in 1910-11, then again in 1922-23, 1923-24, 1924-25 and probably still in 1929-30 ("Leçons sur l'art et la littérature rituelle archaïques, 1910-1932" *Œuvres*, to. II, p. 259-263). Unfortunately, only the summaries of these lessons are extant but the list itself shows how much involved Mauss was in studies closely associating anthropology, with poetics, and linguistics.

This long and numerous series of border-crossing studies initiated by Mauss in the pre-war years, and which was continued until late in the 1930s, resulted in giving the language a completely new theoretical status. Mauss' conception of language headed, under the aegis of the concept of rhythm, in the same anti-dualistic direction indicated by philosophers such as Diderot and Nietzsche, poets such as Hölderlin, Goethe, Baudelaire, Hopkins, and Mallarmé, linguists such as Humboldt and Saussure (for Saussure see, Michon, 2010a, chap. 5; for the other authors, see vol. 2). Based on ethnographical data, Mauss operated an empirical critique of the semiotic dualism concerning the opposition of sound and meaning within the sign, as much as, outside the sign, between the latter and the spirit, or the world. Language was no longer taken merely as a means of representing ideas or things, but above all as series of *acts* that produced effects. Moreover, it was no longer considered as a catalog of words representing elementary meanings that could be combined to form a speech, but as an *activity* during which *multiple levels of signifier* were mobilized: *lexical*, *syntactical*, but also—and for magic it was essential—*sonic*, *tonal*, *rhythmic*.

This empirical critique of the semiotic dualism tended to remotivate—in the linguistic sense of the word—the notion of rhythm. The latter was no longer, as in the Eskimo studies, thought of as a *linear and binary alternation of strong and weak periods of time*, or as in the first studies on primitive poetry as mere *succession of beats*, but—in a manner close to that already envisaged by the poets and thinkers aforementioned and also to that that Meschonnic later developed from similar pragmatic bases—as *the system of linguistic or extra-linguistic signifiers*, *responsible for the pragmatic and semantic effects of magic or religious rituals*—as well as, one may say, of literatue (see vol. 2, chap. 8).

From this perspective, magic or ritual incantation as well as prayer should not be reduced to the words, nor even to the inarticulate sounds, they contained. There was, beyond and above the linguistic level proper, a continuous gradation of other signifying levels. To the words, one must also add, on the one hand, the breaths, inspirations and expirations, and on the other, the collective gestures and interactions that accompany them. And it was this rhythmic system, both dynamic and organized—this *rhuthmos* in the pre-Platonic sense of the term—that was responsible for all the

effects of incantation, prayer, or poetry.

Next chapter

Footnotes

[1] The text was published in *L'Année sociologique* under the heading "Année 7 (1902-1903)" but actually printed by Felix Alcan in 1904. I will therefore use this second date.

[2] In these last two sections, the page references will be to Hubert, Henri & Mauss, Marcel. 1904. "Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie" in Mauss, Marcel. 1950. *Anthropologie et sociologie*, Paris, PUF and Mauss, Marcel. 1909. "La prière" in Mauss, Marcel. 1968. *Œuvres*, to. I, Paris, Minuit. Other references in footnotes. All translations mine.

[3] Meschonnic has once pointed out the importance of Mauss' contribution without yet going into details (see Meschonnic, 1982, p. 294-295 et p. 648-651).