

## **Performing Peace-building – Conferences, Rituals and the Role of Ethnographic Research**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores performance and ritual theory in the context of anthropological research on peace-building institutions and knowledge discourses, as well as the process of writing up an ethnographic PhD thesis. Based on fieldwork in Germany and Nepal, the article's aim is to expand the theoretical scope of 'aidnography' and apply it to knowledge management, workshops, global conferences and the author's performance in these spaces. The article analyses how a potentially critical and contested concept such as liberal peace-building has been absorbed by an emerging ritual economy of indoor events, policy papers and transnational actors. These strategies of organisational and professional self-promotion create depoliticised action and products in the context of global aid chain management.

### **1 The rise of 'aidnography'**

The politics and relationships of aid have become another thriving area of qualitative, ethnographic research with 'veterans' of the aid industry using anthropological writing to reflect on their own institutions and practices. Mosse and Eyben are two of the prominent voices and their writings have sparked ethical and methodological debates around conducting 'aidnographies' and the politics of critically engaging with development projects and knowledge management as anthropologists (Mosse 2005, 2011; Eyben 2010). In short, as Stubbs summarises, 'aidnography' 'seek[s] to situate aid and development "projects" and "programmes" in the context of social, political and economic relations and power imbalances between "donors", "implementing agencies", "recipients" and all manner of intermediary actors and agencies' (2005: 1). Ethnographic studies have also been expanded to other sub-fields of development, for example, humanitarian aid (Marriage 2006) or electoral assistance and democratisation processes (Coles 2007); although they have been largely absent from

the recent stocktaking and expansion in both the anthropology of development and organisations. Micro-level studies are available and they often focus on local communities. Hilhorst and Van Leeuwen offer ethnographic insights into the dynamics of local peace-building through a women's organisation in southern Sudan (2005), Pouligny's reflections on the role of civil society in donor organisation's peace-building efforts (2005) or Richmond's observations on the longer term impacts of peace-building on Cambodia (2007) are three examples that critical research on institutional and organisational processes is becoming part of peace research. However, ethnography still seems to be largely confined to peace-building in Southern contexts (*cf.* Goetschel and Hagmann 2009). My research was able to include Northern, Southern and transnational contexts of peace-building activities, following the aid knowledge chain through multiple sites which enhanced the research significantly.

This article focuses on several stages of which many development interactions are performed nowadays, for example, indoor performances of meetings, workshops, trainings and conferences. Focusing on research and policy performances highlights the potential of performance theory and ritual approaches to enrich the organisational anthropology of aid. The article will be introducing short vignettes from my research on conferences, meetings and workshops in Germany and Nepal to establish a context in which some of my key methodological, practical and performative challenges are highlighted. The article concludes by outlining initial findings of an emerging 'ritual economy of peace-building' that is potentially relevant for other areas of the aid industry where self-, organisational- and knowledge-marketing go hand in hand with on the ground development work.

## **2 The role of performance and rituals in ethnographic research**

The following section introduces the two core theoretical elements for my analytical framework, performance and rituals.

According to Hymes, performance is a special subject of conduct in which one or more persons 'assume a responsibility to an audience and to tradition as they understand it' (Hymes quoted by Carlson 1996: 12). Presenting my doctoral research in a thesis (tradition) to the reader (audience) can be regarded as a performance,

because as Carlson notes ‘there has been general agreement that within every culture there can be discovered a certain kind of activity, set apart from other activities by space, time, attitude, or all three, that can be spoken of and analyzed as performance’ (*ibid.*: 13).

Methodological reflections and personal learning with a qualitative concept such as ‘performance’ may evoke associations around ‘play’ or actions that were happening on a ‘stage’ and involved an ‘audience’; such an approach may also expose my research to criticism as it may appear that I did not take the challenge seriously putting the quest for a perfect research performance before paying attention to the flow of events. I wish that I had already come across Goffman’s wise words that he shared at a seminar in 1974 *before* I embarked on my fieldwork:

But you have to open yourself up [during fieldwork] in ways you’re not in ordinary life. You have to open yourself up to being snubbed. You have to stop making points to show how ‘smart assed’ you are. And that’s extremely difficult for graduate students. (1989: 128)

I was confronted with my attitudes, behaviour and beliefs throughout my research. But the performance metaphor also hints at the core challenge of conducting ethnographic research as an activity and reflective process at the same time, because it is not an innocent or transparent process, but another way of how knowledge is created and legitimised, as Carlson points out (1996: 207–8). In other words, critical reflections on ethnography not only should have an auto-ethnographic component, but need to bridge the notion of a ‘perfect performance’ with the complicated nature of performativity that ‘points to the impossibility of separating our life stories from the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they are created and the ways in which performance as a site of dialogue and negotiation is itself a contested space’ (Holman Jones 2005: 774).

Performance is also an important and useful concept when it comes to the production of the final ‘perfect’ product, the thesis. Performance may evoke ideas of a physical environment, a stage, audience and activities, but the creative process of writing (up) ethnography becomes its own stage of the performance because time, temporality and events are (re-)structured in order to create a coherent narrative. My article is one attempt to highlight the paradox of narrative closure that a successful PhD writing

process and bound thesis requires whereas many debates and reflections on the ‘backstage’ of the experience will only become public afterwards.

My research focus on workshops and conferences *emerged* during fieldwork, but it only became a central theme of my thesis during the writing-up process. In some ways I have been trying to address the challenge of linking history and action by not subsuming ‘the eventness of being by narrative closure’ (*ibid.*: 14), but the task of writing a thesis in an academic setting makes narrative closure necessary to prove the successful completion of the academic requirements. Therefore, I cannot make the claim that the fieldwork performance necessarily lead to performative writing in a way Holman Jones understands it: ‘when we invite an audience into dialogue as we write, speak, and perform the words on the page, in our mouths, on our bodies, and in the world’ (2005: 774).

However, by outlining some of my challenges, shortcomings and learning of the research process in this article I am able to lift the ‘curtain’ of the backstage and can acknowledge the performative nature of ethnography and shine light on the non-linear evolution of fieldwork, writing and learning.

Closely linked to research on performance is the research on ritual theory, for example, Bell (1992), Rothenbuhler (1998) and Knottnerus (1997). They not only provide a historical overview over the evolution of the concept, but also provide a comprehensive review of relevant theoretical elements.

Rothenbuhler defines ritual as ‘the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behaviour to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life’ (1998: 27). Bell’s insights into the relationship between ritual and power highlight important theoretical elements for the analysis: ‘[R]itualization *is* very much concerned with power.

Closely involved with the objectification and legitimation of an ordering of power as an assumption of the way things really are, ritualization is a strategic arena for the embodiment of power relations’ (1992: 170; emphasis in original). When meetings, presentations and conferences are organised and take place it is necessary to explore the strategic arena around them, and the different spaces that make up the arena – from presentations to coffee breaks – as well as the preparation or dissemination of findings.

A key aspect that Knottnerus’ theory stresses is what he calls ‘strategic ritualisation’

‘in which actors utilize or manipulate a system of ritualized practices in order to realize certain outcomes [that] can have profound consequences for members of society’ (Knottnerus 1997: 275).

After initial reflection on doing fieldwork in Germany and Nepal, the remainder of my article will unpack the research performance along two core themes: first, data collection through interviews and, second multi-sited ethnographic research on and in different conference settings. Additional reflections on my personal learning and how I would have performed differently if I had to start all over again will form the final part of this article.

### **3 Familiar spaces as research sites: re-entering Germany and Kathmandu**

My fieldwork took place in three main phases and at three different sites. First, I unsuccessfully tried to negotiate a longer research internship at the headquarters of a German Aid Agency (GAA) during a training workshop I observed. Second, I conducted field research in Kathmandu as a visiting anthropologist at the offices of the University of Heidelberg’s South Asia Institute. Third, during the writing-up phase in the United Kingdom, I attended two international conferences in Belgium and the Netherlands. In addition, I conducted interviews with a group of informants in Germany, Nepal and globally via Skype.

During the completion of my first year of the PhD that led to a University-approved research outline, I decided to contact the GAA and discuss the possibility of a research internship. I learned from a consultant that she was organising a three-day workshop at the GAA headquarters. She offered to introduce me as her research assistant and that I could spend one or two days more after the workshop to introduce myself and my research project as well as present my research outline officially in a staff meeting. GAA staff listened politely, mainly because of my affiliation with the consultant, but declined my request for a research internship mainly on grounds that my research was missing a clear hypothesis and that it focused too much on ‘us and our ways of working rather than the peace-building projects’. ‘We don’t need an outsider to snoop around and criticise our work’, one middle-level manager said, ‘because we don’t have the time for such games’.

In this early episode it appeared as a conflict between GAA staff and an outside

academic researcher, but during the course of my research I realised that spaces are opened or closed based on interactions that often involve a particular performance by the researcher to keep them open. Demanding clarity, hypotheses and research questions, GAA staff made their understanding of a ‘perfect’ research performance very clear. In the end, granting an anthropological researcher ‘all area access’ may have threatened the power that the division between performer and audience carries. However, the main question that bothered me after this episode was whether I could have performed better, disguising my curiosity in the ‘back stage’ better and entering the stage under the pretence of accepting the traditional model of performance. I chose to be fully open and transparent about my intentions adding to the performative aspects of my research project by creating boundaries between ‘insiders who would not allow access to a critical outsider’.

GAA staff made a clear distinction between their organisational cultures and my approach towards ethnographic research. Castañeda’s observation on the ‘invisible theatre of fieldwork’ and the complex roles members of the ‘subject community’ play resonate well with my own challenges conducting ethnography and how my (failed) engagement was to some extent determined by the (un)willingness of the ‘subject community’ to let me ‘in’:

Members of the subject community exercise their agency and control over the extent to which they engage the fieldworker and participate as subjects, distant/disengaged observers, active or occasional participants, collaborators, interpreters, critics, publicly or privately vocal nay-sayers, assistants in or enemies to the research process. [...] However, the assumption governing successful grant writing [...], and defense of dissertations is that the researcher determines, controls and imposes not only the definition of the research project but designates who is involved as subjects of research. (Castañeda 2006: 84)

After my experiences in Germany, my fieldwork experience in Kathmandu felt more ‘at home’ than the experience in Germany – even if it took place in a situation of political instability and transition.

When I arrived in Kathmandu in mid-April 2006 the political situation was fragile, even tense and my first week in Kathmandu was marked by a curfew that usually lasted for most of the day. The People’s Movement (Jana Andolan-II) was in full

effect, demanding the return to a democratic process after the King had dissolved the parliament and peace talks with the Maoists. Only when the King resigned did it become clear that Nepal was on its way to a democratic transition from conflict to peace and that this groundbreaking step could be the beginning of the end of the ten-year long conflict that had so far cost the lives of approximately 13,000 people. After the breakdown of previous peace initiatives, this was an important step forward and it seemed that the pressure from the people's movement on the streets had contributed to a similar landslide political change as in 1991 when civil-society pressure led to Nepal becoming a multi-party democracy. Amidst the Nepali enthusiasm about the peaceful future of their country, the international donor community was caught by surprise about the quick, peaceful transition; shifting from a situation nearing a humanitarian emergency to a post-war situation where development assistance could resume and normal development work would be possible again.

Within the first two weeks my initial research proposal became obsolete as donors no longer wanted to talk about peace-building strategies to end the conflict or their organisational approaches during the conflict. They quickly embraced the new situation and started to plan the post-war peace-building and reconstruction work. To go with the flow of people, events and discussions I had to adapt my field research and it quickly became clear that an international machinery had started to get into gear – sending headquarter people, consultants and experts to prepare Nepal for this transition phase.

As my thesis analyses in detail, the social, cultural and political spaces in Kathmandu were met with traditional approaches of the donor community. Potentially open-ended discussions about post-war development, a new constitution or economic priorities were curbed by well-known global performances of outside experts who arrived in town in large numbers and in quick succession to inform, but also to entertain the aid industry inside the vacuum of political transition. Rather than staging an 'invisible theatre' and engaging the donor audience in critical debates the visiting consultants reassured donors that the transition could be managed based on 'best practices' from other post-conflict scenarios. Due to the focus of the article on fieldwork reflections, a comprehensive review of critical debates on liberal peace-building in general and the case of Nepal is not possible. However, earlier articles critically explore the peace-

building change-of-behaviour phenomenon in more detail (Denskus 2007, 2009). On a practical level, the situation in Kathmandu almost always felt more accessible and open than my research in Germany. My previous work experience in Nepal may have helped me to ‘play the native card’ in the international development and peace community a different way than I was ever able to do in Germany. Jacobs-Huey stresses the limiting factors of ‘playing the native card’ approach as potentially ‘non-critical privileging of [the anthropologist’s] insider status’ (2002: 791), but I found it to be a more positive approach that helped me to be regarded as authentic and able to blend with the transnational community that was used to visitors, researchers and consultants as part of their professional experience as expatriate aid workers in Nepal. In transnational aid spaces many of the neat categorisations of home and away or native and foreign are constantly in flux and create new identities for global researchers and practitioners with different, new and accumulating understandings of identity and positionality that also affect narrative structures or the use of culturally embedded concepts such as irony.

My approach evolved along the lines of Gusterson’s notion of ‘polymorphous engagement’, emphasising ‘interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites [...] collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways [such as]... formal interviews... extensive reading of newspapers and official documents...careful attention to popular culture’ (Gusterson 1997: 116).

My ambitious assumptions about critical anthropological work in large aid organisations and the staff’s willingness and curiosity about ‘reflective practice’ were abandoned very quickly in the context of German aid organisations. A major challenge that persisted throughout my research was that I had chosen an inductive rather than deductive framework for my research that consisted less of hypotheses that would be proved or disproved which often put me at odds with the predominant paradigm in German peace research and policymaking. My field research was not simply a negotiation for access, but elements of my performance played important roles in how certain spaces opened up or remained closed to me. Neither organisational ethnography on the peace community in Germany, nor the concept of self-reflective research and writing are well known and academically accepted in Germany and often the research at home in my native country felt alien and distant

compared to the research experience abroad in Nepal. I had envisioned more openness, but the reality was that some people did not want to be part of my project.

#### **4 Multi-sited research on and in events**

While limitations did exist, the following paragraphs analyse key aspects of the research I *was* able to conduct: by focusing on some of the outputs of academic research, aid organisations and thinktanks, I followed the flow of information and knowledge to some of the key sites where I thought knowledge and policy would be brought together, discussed and negotiated – at events where different groups regularly gathered. In addition to the GAA workshop I attended five more workshops and conferences during my field research in Germany. Many of the workshops brought together a core set of usual suspects as participants, and my primary interest in them was about the contents, *what* was presented and discussed and only later on about *how* such events were organised. It took me a while to treat these events as fieldwork sites, but the large number of them, the efforts in organising them and the firm belief that they contributed to results and influenced policymaking subsequently interested me as vehicles to maintain an epistemic community and facilitate knowledge in certain, surprisingly unchallenging, ways. The workshop space as a particular social space of a community became important because of the value and importance organisers and participants attributed to it and to the ways in which it naturalised debates and interactions as Hastrup points out:

A social space – be it a nation-state, a university-conference or a construction site – has no ontological status *as a whole* apart from what is collectively attributed to it and made manifest in action. Conversely, social spaces are naturalised and allowed to exert physical force over individual action. (Hastrup 2005: 11)

I attended five workshops, two academic conferences and one weekly donor meeting during my field work in Nepal. Additionally, I organised my own workshop at the end of my stay to discuss some preliminary findings with interested colleagues that had contributed their time and opinions during the research. In addition to attending workshops officially, I also spoke to junior staff or interns from various organisations that had spent considerable time on organising different events – mostly in one of the half a dozen four or five star hotels in the city. This was so the norm that sometimes I

would just stop by one of the hotels in the morning when I could see a variety of cars with diplomatic licence plates in the car park and ask which organisation was coordinating what workshop today. In the beginning attending workshops only seemed to be a convenient way to meet potential informants in a less formal and more direct way than contacting them by email, but I soon realised that they were a time-consuming business for people and occupied a larger space than simply the meeting room and lobby in a hotel. Going to and from workshops was part of the package and often consumed a lot of time because of increasing traffic in Kathmandu and frequent road blocks of protesters on some of the main intersections. Equally, writing a note about a workshop to colleagues in the office, following up one or two issues with a colleague who also attended and wanted to share a document for example, coordinating the organisation of a workshop of the own organisation and numerous lunch breaks, farewell drinks and coffee breaks occupied a space that was an essential part of the day-to-day routines of some staff. Given that very little was decided on these occasions, very few critical or challenging discussions took place and many people acknowledged that most workshops were not worth the amount of time and effort, my interest steadily grew in these performances. But it took me some time after my fieldwork to figure out the centrality of workshops and other day-to-day business in the ritual communication of the peace-building community in Kathmandu. The participation in workshops did not only reveal rituals inside the workshop space, but the supposedly liminal space of arrival, departure, registration or (coffee) breaks was equally structured, eliminating many surprising encounters beforehand.

About a week after the International Peace Research Association's (IPRA) conference in Leuven, Belgium a friend tagged me into a photo he had just uploaded to a folder called 'conference hopping' on his Facebook profile. The photo shows me in a seminar room of the Catholic University of Leuven, standing in front of a group of academic colleagues and presenting my ethnographic research on the international aid community in Kathmandu. The PowerPoint slide in the background is entitled 'about ethnography' to help me explain better what it was that I was researching in Nepal. The circumstances (an international academic conference), the location (a seminar room without any hint of the location and even without daylight (the window blinds are shut) and the performance of me standing in front of the audience wearing a

corduroy jacket to appear more professional and academic provided me with an interesting opportunity for reflection, in the literal way that it felt like looking into a mirror or watching the effect on television when someone is looking in the camera and the picture is duplicated on a screen in the background, getting smaller and smaller in the eternity of multiplication. Even if the contents of the slide may provide some critical input into the debates that we were having on the panel about the role of external actors in building peace and states in fragile environments, my performance as a *paper giver* at this conference is essentially replicating the expectations of presenting research and engaging with colleagues from around the world.

The space for critical engagement had to be constantly re-negotiated and I often chose a less offensive approach for the sake of contributing to a successful conference (their ‘perfect performance’) in the eyes of the organisers – the very medium of interaction that I was often criticising in my thesis. Even though the IPRA conference took place after the initial end of my fieldwork it is an important example both in terms of understanding the writing-up process of my thesis as well as the complexities of the performative nature of ethnographic research inside the transnational community in which the role of actor and spectator and insider or outsider changes over time – or just for the brief moment of being part of a conference panel. After Germany and Nepal I was now on the front stage performing my research findings in front of an audience of ‘spectators’ – spectators of my presentation who were at the same time actively contributing to the research process as I mentioned at the beginning of every presentation.

These performances underline the complexity of agency of a critical researcher who deliberately took part in an expected performance, but at the same time may have been able to influence the audience’s attitudes or mindsets through the critical contents of a traditional, ritualistic PowerPoint presentation.

When I opened my laptop at Amsterdam airport, inside the terminal building, next to the queue of McDonald’s customers (where the only available power plug was situated), waiting for my Easyjet flight back to London-Gatwick, I was almost beaming with excitement: here I am again, I thought to myself, at an airport, waiting to return from yet another big academic conference, this time from the World Conference of Humanitarian Studies (WCHS) that took place in Groningen, The

Netherlands in early February 2009. The WCHS conference was well organised, but I knew from the moment when I saw the program with 68 panels there were simply too many. The amount of panels plus the fact that weather conditions were generally bad in larger parts of Europe and a visa seemed difficult to obtain for international participants meant most of the panels lost either presenters and/or their audience. But it turned out to be a fascinating experience. A colleague and I had organised a panel on Nepal and we were surprised by the fact that participants seemed to take our call for papers seriously and submitted personal stories of how they and their organisations tried to engage in development work during the height of the Maoist insurgency. Moreover, we managed to bring together a range of development practitioners and researchers from and on Nepal and in the midst of this conventional conference panel, a reflective space opened up.

During my introductory presentation, which was based on my previous IPRA presentation, I told the story of an overworked international organisation staff member who had to organise all the meetings for the official delegations from headquarters that descended on Kathmandu after the signing of the peace agreement. Frank, as I will call him, an international aid consultant I had first met in Nepal before my doctoral studies, joked about the fact that he had dressed up for the occasion as an aid agency representative with suit and tie although he was a freelance consultant at that time who would not normally dress up for a regular event. Analysed with the understanding of rituals and performances I have now, it is an interesting example of what Castañeda describes as ‘emergent audience’ in fieldwork, because it ‘has meaning and value for those who have allowed it to happen in their midst’ (2006: 86). Frank showed a remarkable amount of irony, because he was the only participant wearing a suit. He did not say whether this was his attire that he generally found appropriate for the framework of an international conference, but he referred to his outfit as ‘wanting to represent a donor representative’. He had prepared a presentation about a project around fragile statehood, but quickly abandoned his PowerPoint slides and started to tell anecdotes and stories from inside the donor and conflict advisor community of Kathmandu. He had realised during the previous presentations that this was a ‘safe space’ with ‘insiders’ who were not only interested in such stories, but also knew the details of his stories, the context and the actors involved. Frank’s

performance is a small, but powerful example of how roles can change from ‘actor’ to ‘presenter’ to ‘reflective aid practitioner’ – all within the course of a 90-minute panel. Conferences as research sites display a range of performative features on and off the physical stage with presenters and panel participants. Fieldwork in these situations ‘happens’ when the community allows it to take place in their midst, indicating how powerful such a community can be to legitimise or de-legitimise the endeavours of a researcher, how much agency individuals have and how unpredictable performances can be. My engagement with conferences and workshops supplemented personal meetings and additional observations; finding a suitable framework to write these performances up proved to be another challenge.

I will outline the broader significance of events for development research and policymaking in the following paragraph. Because what also became apparent during my research was that performative and ritualistic dynamics are not limited to the discourse of peace-building.

Whenever I spoke to academics or development practitioners about my research the reactions were similar as they confirmed that these dynamics were also visible in their area of specialisation, whether this was ‘gender’, ‘participation’ or ‘nutrition’.

Therefore, it is important to understand workshops and conferences in a broader context of a ritual economy. In the ritual economic marketplace a growing number of actors (from academics advising organisations to large bilateral and multilateral aid organisations, NGOs, local organisations and multinational consultancy firms) perform traditional outputs such as research reports and simulate action and debate often to justify projects that are removed from local realities and are likely to have very little policy impact.

## **5 Towards a ritual economy of peace-building performances**

I have argued above that workshops and conferences are central locations for performances that are rehearsed in the expanding capillary system of transnational development work and lifestyles.

As I concluded for the workshop spaces in Germany and Nepal, a potentially transformational and active space is replaced with an indoor theatre in which participants often seem to be spectators, rather than actors that are learning and

engaging with critical knowledge or have the power to shape development policy or practice.

Ritual theory provides approaches to better understand the agents of ritualisation and their symbolic practices. The ritual legitimators, entrepreneurs and sponsors that Knottnerus' research (1997) identifies work inside the system and use symbolic practices to increase their social capital inside the peace community, but also their economic capital through the organisation of events and its interlinkages of networking and follow-up projects, workshops and additional conferences.

Ritual entrepreneurs take advantage of the needs of transnational professionals and offer a marketplace for material and immaterial goods, (e.g. new policy papers or checklists) exchanges or services (promoting consultancy services or the availability for commissioned research) that take advantage of the ritualised spaces that indoor events provide. Peace-building workshops and conferences often display intangible products, for example, ideas, knowledge and ultimately the vision of a better, peaceful society that will be embedded in the liberal market model of Western societies.

Professionals may offer their services, knowledge, gossip and information in hotels and workshops and engage in an ongoing ritual negotiation of expert status, acceptable knowledge or unthreatening policy recommendations.

The ritual economy is elusive and difficult to grasp because it allows for pockets of agency within a broader framework of liberal peace-building training and knowledge management. But these dynamics go far beyond the peace research and peace-building community. Wells and Davis-Salazar's foundation for a ritual economy, based on anthropological and archaeological research on ancient Meso-American Maya culture, highlights some of the broader dynamics that can link ancient tribal culture to contemporary development discourses: The contributors to this volume recognize three aspects of materialization whose analysis is critical for building a theory of ritual economy: *acquisition* (how ritual structures provisioning and the motivations behind procurement), *consumption* (how ritual demands labor and social valuables), and *power* (how materialization of beliefs and values can be manipulated to manage meanings and shape interpretations) (Wells and Davis-Salazar 2007: 5; emphasis in original)

It is important to point out that there is no overarching ritual authority that manages

the processes of acquisition, consumption and power. Ethnographic fieldwork needs to engage carefully with agency and resistance, but as my case studies from the peace-building sector have highlighted, the ritual economy follows contemporary economic principles of self-management and self-promotion. Thrift, with reference to Foucault, makes an important point about the connection between discourses, identity and bodily conduct:

This stance means that I am not interested in management identity as such [...], but rather in the means by which spaces can produce identity effects, the ways in which spaces figure as, to use that well-worn Foucauldian phrase, ‘technologies of the self.’ I am interested, in other words, in how spaces can be used to produce collective bodies and identifications “through the inscription of particular ethical formations, vocabularies of self-description and self-mastery, forms of conduct and body techniques. (Rose 1999: 47; Thrift 2000: 677)

The rituals of travel, physical attendance of events, expectations of results (e.g. a conference report) or conduct (experts staying in certain hotels for only a couple of days) often create economic activities, status and legitimacy as well as a new form of pilgrimage. Wells and Davis-Salazar’s analysis of pilgrimages and their role in the ritual economy of pre-Hispanic Northwest Mexico sound familiar to the journeys of conference participants or consultants:

Pilgrimages to sacred locales were – and still are – important ritual institutions that structure social, economic, and political relations, often leading individuals outside local communities to ritually significant places on the landscape where pilgrims from different regions gather periodically. The circulation of material goods changing hands at pilgrimage centers, and possibly at stops along the way, often happens through the exchange of objects that materialize social values and beliefs. (Wells and Davis-Salazar 2007: 9)

Although ceramic goods rarely change hands these days, the ritual economy encourages people to move to centres of activities as the examples from Nepal show when international experts and organisations arrive in post-conflict Kathmandu to start peace-building activities. Today, virtual goods such as knowledge, frameworks or presentations are important and new performative aspects emerge as laptops are carried around for presentations and stories from other post-conflict spaces are shared.

Being at the right place at the right time when the ‘ritual caravan’ of post-conflict experts, funding and opportunities passes by is important as is the willingness to present oneself at workshops or at conferences after field visits.

## **6 The PhD process as research performance**

One aim of this *IDS Bulletin* is to provide a space to reflect upon the *process* of completing a PhD in addition to presenting some of the key *findings*. In this paragraph I will therefore take advantage of ritual and performance theory as an entry point for self-critical reflections on my own positionality and the expectations of the rite of passage of obtaining a PhD.

‘Performance theory provides for reflexivities of three kinds: self-reflection, self-discovery, and self-commentary’ (Palmer and Jankowiak 1996: 230). Cultural anthropology, ever aware of the nuances and complexities of the social theatres around us, seemed to offer a gateway into my doctoral research performance along the neat categories outlined by Palmer and Jankowiak above. A bound thesis, a viva without corrections and accepted articles would be elements of a successful and ‘perfect’ PhD performance. However, as this article demonstrates, the flows of research and the ebbs of writing up mark a journey of changes, learning and reflections that is often difficult to capture with the static nature of a traditional output such as a thesis.

Even with the growing body of anthropological research on reflective writing and development, hardly anything is written about the institutional context in which such ethnographies are written up. In his thesis Wiltshire (2011) engages among other topics with the publication processes inside universities and how virtual research is changing some of the writing paradigms, but in my case the issues were more about perfectionism and the real or imagined pressure to be or become a reflective writer. Dunleavy mentions perfectionism only once in his well-known book on how to master a PhD (2003: 227) and in my case the quest to find the ‘perfect’ reflective voice added time and energy to the writing-up performance. In an academic environment where critical, (self-) reflective writing on development has a long tradition (e.g. Grillo and Stirrat 1997; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Eyben 2006) this added to the pressure I felt to ‘produce’ something special in this genre in order to

‘compete’ with the academic discourse around me. This was emotionally very stressful as I equated my less-than-perfect attempts at writing with personally and professionally failing the challenge the institution seemed to have laid out for me. Maybe opening up the thesis output to alternatives to the ‘one book’ thesis or thinking completely outside the box of written material (e.g. submitting a filmed documentary, blog posts or audio files with the written thesis) could enhance the performative quality for anthropologists and their audiences.

Researching rituals of international development communities, analysing performances and linking it to the subject of peace research and peace-building can only be interpreted within a self-reflective framework of my own performances and the rituals of academic research and thesis writing. My research encountered divisions between ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ in Germany and more complex and overlapping stages within the international development and expatriate community in Kathmandu. Finally, my perspectives shifted again by becoming a performer myself at international conferences. The article tries to make some of these key challenges visible that are often hidden from view in a neatly bound seven-chapter doctoral thesis.

My previous experiences as an undergraduate student and peace researcher in Germany encouraged me sometimes to project my own criticism and ironic distance onto those who worked in peace research and policy; the danger is that my own performance took over in a similar way as Carlson describes it for modern politically-oriented performance: ‘[it] is flexible [...], slipping back and forth between claiming an identity position and ironically questioning the cultural assumptions that legitimate it’ (1996: 194). Another point is that I could have worked closer along core anthropological concepts such as ‘multi-sitedness’. ‘Going with the flow’ inside the policy communities was a legitimate choice, but it also meant that I had to sideline other flows, for example, questions around the (re-)presentation of Nepal in Germany and vice versa. With the exception of global conferences, the transnational element turned out to be research at the starting and end points of policymaking and implementation, rather than looking at the ‘flows’ in between.

## **7 Conclusion**

My analysis contributes to ‘aidnography’ by employing performance and ritual theory to identify an emerging ritual economy of peace-building with potentially larger implications of how contemporary development discourses are created and maintained in a ritual economy. My doctoral research on peace-building events in Germany, Nepal and the transnational professional arena of conferences and workshops analysed emerging rituals around knowledge production and management as well as the global professionalism that facilitates exchanges inside the development industry. The article is also a first inroad into broader issues on the emerging ritual economy of peace-building: in addition to working on ‘real’ social change, many critical concepts such as peace-building seem to have been absorbed by indoor rituals and events, replacing contested, public spaces ‘out there’ with the power of arranging, or in a Foucauldian sense disciplining, a group of professionals around a PowerPoint presentation, scheduled coffee breaks and a twenty-five page report.

A broader question emerges as to what extent do well-managed, but depoliticised events have a real impact on how development is conceptualised, debated and ultimately implemented. My research in post-conflict Kathmandu suggests that Western and capitalist concepts of liberal peace-building quickly filled the void that the old royal regime left and that there was very little time for more localised discussions on the future of Nepal.

The article is also a reminder that anthropological research is always a self-reflective endeavour and that reflection on performance or rituals also applies to the researcher. Meeting the expectations of the academy with regard to performing a PhD thesis is difficult in a complex and fluid context of research that responds to the flow of events, people and globalised ideas.

Last, but not least, becoming immersed in professional communities is still a challenge for researchers, despite increasing popularity of ethnography in qualitative development research especially as informants have the power and agency not to get as excited as the researcher about critical deconstructions of their professional life-worlds.

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