

Protecting Earth? Rappaport's Vision of Rituals as Environmental Practices

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ABSTRACT In this article I discuss the characteristics of ritual practices, according to Roy Rappaport's general theory of ritual. I start by discussing technology as a kind of ritual product of science and then briefly present Rappaport's ritual theory as an aid in understanding how the Mi'kmaq Indians of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, employed rituals in their efforts to protect a sacred mountain from being turned into a superquarry. In *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Rappaport discusses the concept of the ecosystem as a product of modern Western society, emanating from scientific epistemology rather than religious dogma. Rappaport also identifies "ecological thinking" in what he calls *The Book*. Although not expressed in terms of modern ecology, he suggests, such pre-modern thought is an adequate medium for protecting environmental values. His vision is to bring these two separate cosmologies closer, in order to emphasize the moral responsibility of humans everywhere on this planet. It is impossible, Rappaport would say, to do something without simultaneously affecting social relations and the environment. Humanity has the power and the technology to destroy places and ecosystems, if morality is left without consideration. Rappaport's vision was to combine the moral efficacy of ritual with the analytical validity of ecological thinking. But how can modern, de-traditionalized humans create such a synthesis, that reckons with both practical effects and moral implications of human agency?