

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 10: Functionalist Approaches to Ritual 3

- * Today we wrap up our look at neofunctional systems analyses, including the work Erik Erikson

- * Neofunctionalist systems analyses:
 - explore how ritual activities regulate the community or enhance individual well-being
 - focus on the interaction of multiple systems: whether ecological, ethnological, biogenetic, or psychological

- * Roy Rappaport's study of New Guinea tribes:
 - ritual activities worked to regulate the relationship between people and natural resources
 - ritual regulated the interaction of one human community with another
 - ritual regulated the interaction of humans with local materials, foodstuffs and animals
 - pigs were slaughtered only under special circumstances and within a ritual framework. (e.g. when pigs become a drain on resources, by warriors during wartime, or *Kaiko* festival)
 - this maintains the environment, limits fighting, adjusts man-land ratios, facilitates trade, distributes local surpluses of pig throughout the regional population, and assures high-quality protein when people most need it.
 - ritual maintains this system because people believe that much more than physical resources are at stake.

- * Marvin Harris: studied Hindu cow worship and Aztec human sacrifice:

- the cow was an indispensable economic resource for Hindu farming families: killing it for food would be catastrophic. The ritual attitude had social and economic benefit

- In the absence of sufficient protein, Aztec ritual slaughter was a “state sponsored system geared to the production and distribution of substantial amounts of animal protein in the form of human flesh”

* Ethology (Julian Huxley and Konrad Lorenz):

- explores ritualized behavior patterns among animals and raises questions about the origins and social ramifications of human rituals (e.g. courtship, grooming, signaling territory, fighting)

- these promote clearer communication of useful information and stimulate more efficient actions in others, reducing damage or killing within the species and facilitating sexual or social bonding

- suggests that much of human culture is probably rooted in these inherited patterns of early animal ritualization

- speculates that human ritual behavior is shaped by genetic propensities that accompanied human evolution, along with the highly symbolic activities humans acquire in cultural socialization

- Huxley: modern people are failing to ritualize effectively, leading to flawed communication, escalation of conflict, needless killing, and weak personal and social bonding

* Biogenetic structuralism:

- combines ethology and sociobiology, an emphasis on comparing ritual across species with genetics and evolution

- ritual is seen as a technology or mechanism deemed integral to how the brain works; biogeneticists surmise that it enables the individual, or the animal, to solve problems of adaptation that would otherwise be unyielding

* Erik Erikson:

- focuses on physical and social maturation within the human life cycle

- ritualization= a type of consensual interplay between two or more persons repeated in recurring contexts that has adaptive value for those involved

- emphasizes “greeting ceremony” between mother and baby: the root of more complex ritualization

- various dimensions of ritual are elaborated and learned in 8 successive stages of the life cycle necessary to a fully socialized and individuated human being

- Erikson’s theory makes ritualization an essential link between the development of the human individual and the evolution of the species

* Other neofunctional approaches to ritual:

- catharsis

- “safety valve” of human thought and disruptive emotions

- still psychological, biological and focus on adaptation

* Ultimately, neofunctional theories of ritual develop two ideas:

(1) Human behavior is determined by more than just social conditioning: ecological, economic, genetic, or physiological conditions impose parameters, chains, or a “leash” on what behaviors can be learned; and

(2) These theories are concerned with a particular location for what they see as universal qualities of ritual action: human physiology or maintaining a balanced ecology

* Critics view these approaches as reducing religion and ritual to purely material matters. Supporters feel such theories contribute greatly to an understanding of ritual