

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 11: Structuralist Approaches to Ritual 1

* Today we begin looking at a close relation to functionalism: structuralism

* Radcliffe-Brown's work generated two forms of explanation for ritual behavior:

(1) How ritual activities function to facilitate the orderly cooperation of communal life; and

(2) What ritual activities mean (i.e. what cultural ideas and values are expressed in symbols and patterned activities)

* Radcliffe-Brown thought these were necessarily linked, but failed to demonstrate this conclusively

* Analyses of the meaning of structured relationships between ritual and religious symbols gradually emerged as a more or less independent approach

* Gregory Bateson (d.1980): studied the *naven* ritual in New Guinea, examining its cross-dressing on several levels:

(1) the social structures addressed by the rite;

(2) the emotional/cultural values expressed in the rite; and

(3) the connection between individual feelings and activities on one hand and shared cultural values and activities on the other.

* Yet Bateson was unconvinced he had pulled off an explanation of anything more than his own theoretical premises

* E.W. Evans-Pritchard (d.1973) similarly studied the Nuer of southern

Sudan

- explored how economic, historical, and environmental factors are reflected in Nuer concepts, values and rituals
- focused on the conceptual nature of Nuer religion and how existing theories are inadequate
- while agreeing religions are “products of social life,” he strongly disagreed with the idea they are nothing more than a symbolic representation of the social order.
- recommended that scholars conduct systematic studies of “primitive” philosophies
- refused to reduce religion to either Radcliffe-Brown’s social structure or to Malinowski’s appeal to individual sensibilities
- saw ritual as the place where religious concepts or “imaginative constructions,” are externalized and could be observed
- drew attention to the great variety of feelings displayed at a given ritual
- “What is important in sacrifice is not how people feel, or even how they behave. What is important is that the essential acts be carried out. When mapped analytically, they indicate a system of ideas”
- rites can be understood only in terms of the group’s own conceptual oppositions
- activities of the rite demonstrate and communicate the structural order of conceptual categories, which in turn both affects and reflects the structural order of social relations.
- what do these rites and conceptions actually mean to people themselves? The full answer, is only to be found in their interior experiences where the anthropologist cannot go.

* Arnold van Gennep (d. 1957): his insights into the internal organization of ritual activities:

- (1) Challenged more traditional ways of categorizing ritual; and
- (2) Opened up new ways of seeing relations between ritual and social organization

* Van Gennep:

- felt rituals can only be understood in their original social context
- emphasized sequence: what precedes and follows a given ritual
- focused on rituals accompanying “life crises” where individuals move from one status to another
- he posited three stages:

(1) *Separation* (marked by rites of purification and symbolic allusions to the loss of the old identity);

(2) *Transition* (the person is kept for a time in a place symbolically outside the conventional sociocultural order); and

(3) *Incorporation* (symbolic acts focus on welcoming the person into a new status (in effect, birth of the new self)).

- this sequence can serve to illustrate similarities in a wide variety of seemingly different rituals
- his analysis of the logic of ritual movements in space remains a useful explanation of both the internal structure of rituals and the way they work as symbolic orchestrations of socially real changes
- van Gennep pointed to a fresh interpretation of the symbolism of rebirth and regeneration by focusing on its ahistorical, functional, and symbolic dimensions
- van Gennep extended the three-stage pattern beyond life-crisis rituals to rites demarcating seasonal and calendrical passages
- van Gennep saw the sacred as not some sort of absolute entity or quality but as a relative one that readily shifts in different situations and at different ritual stages
- rites of passage serve to order chaotic social changes that could threaten to disturb society. They distinguish status groups with clearly marked boundaries, contributing to the stability of social identities and roles.
- rituals are the means for changing and reconstituting groups in an orderly and sanctioned manner that maintains the integrity of

the system.

- the social changes of moving from childhood to adulthood effected through formal initiations have little to do with the timing of biological changes. The sociocultural world has its own order and purposes, and can be exercised to try and dominate the imperatives of biology.

- van Gennep contributed directly to questions raised about the relative lack in modern society of formal social rituals and the possible correlation of this lack with modern social ills

- van Gennep suggested the importance of rites of passage to the psychological well-being of individuals, not just the structural-functional well-being of the community as a whole.

* In demonstrating how ritual reflects “the structure of social relations and changes in those relations,” van Gennep pointed both to functional dynamics and to the contextual dynamics of meaningful symbols.