

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 12: Structuralist Approaches to Ritual 2

* Today we continue our review of structuralism with the work of Max Gluckman and Victor Turner

* Max Gluckman (d.1975):

- Durkheim's model of ritual does not do justice to social conflict. Rituals express complex social tensions and reaffirm social unity despite them (e.g. cathartic "rituals of rebellion")

- Built on van Gennep by trying to explain why some (but not all) social relationships require rites of passage: more necessary in tribal societies due to multiple overlapping purposes and roles. Rituals help avoid conflict by symbolically enacting the social relations themselves (e.g. authority)

- Shifted the definition of ritual away from primary concern with the sacred toward a continuum of social action (i.e. from religious activity to social etiquette)

- Ritual came to be seen as a way of organizing social relationships, not simply their reflection

* Victor Turner (d.1983):

- Combined a functionalist's interest in mechanisms for maintaining social equilibrium with a more structural perspective on the organization of symbols

- Argued that many forms of ritual serve as "social dramas" through which the stresses and tensions built into the social structure could be expressed and worked out.

- Emphasized how ritual is a mechanism for constantly re-creating, not just reaffirming, group unity

- Viewed social structure not as a static organization but as a dynamic process. Rituals did not simply restore social equilibrium, they were part of the ongoing process by which the community was continually redefining and renewing itself

- Saw periodic episodes of great tension and communal strife among the Ndembu of northwestern Zambia. He approached these as social dramas with a temporal or processual structure in terms of four main stages:

- (1) a breach in normal relationships; followed by

- (2) an escalating sense of crisis; which calls for

- (3) redressive action; and eventually culminates in

- (4) activities of reintegration of the alienated or social recognition of their separate status

- Recast van Gennep's three-stage sequence into a more fundamental dialectic between social order (structure) and a period of social disorder and liminality (anti-structure) he termed *communitas*

- Rituals affirm the social order while facilitating its disordered inversions: through these, the original order is simultaneously legitimated and modified - either in its basic structure or by moving people from one status to another

- Turner's research focused on the transition stage, the period of

liminality and communitas “betwixt and between” the structure of society at the beginning of the ritual and the structure of society that is affirmed at the end.

- In this stage, Turner interpreted the symbolism as expressing ambiguity and paradox
- For the duration of this stage initiates are effectively outside the structure or organization of society, in a state of liminality or antistructure, which nonetheless fosters an intense experience of community among them
- At the conclusion, initiates are reborn into a new position in the social hierarchy, given names or titles, and expected to assume the appropriate responsibilities and uphold the social structure of which they are now integral parts
- The experience of order and structure in society must be balanced by the experiences of an underlying ethos of sacrality, egalitarian unity, inversion, danger, and creative forces for renewal.
- Turner also attempted to articulate what ritual does through a close analysis of symbols, drawing attention to their dynamic qualities
- Symbols do not have a fixed meaning; they can condense many meanings together. Symbols must be interpreted in terms of the variety of positions they can occupy in relation to each other in systems of symbols
- Symbols are structurally bipolar, referring to sensory experiences on the one hand and ideological or normative values on the other (e.g. the “milk tree” used in a Ndembu girl’s initiation ceremony).
- The mobilization of such symbols in ritual orchestrates sensory experiences associated with such symbols and effectively endow

the ideological with sensory power and the sensory with moral power.

- Ritual is a “mechanism that periodically converts the obligatory into the desirable.” The symbol is the heart and soul of this ritual mechanism, the irreducible unit of ritual activity.

- Contra Durkheim, Turner argued that the human body is the source of symbols and systems of symbols, which are extended outward to organize and understand the social world.

- Turner’s legacy:

(1) More attention to forms of network analysis, social strategies, and game theory;

(2) a subsequent scholarly focus on ritual as performance; and

(3) His interpretive approach to symbols led many to abandon the more rigid suppositions of functionalist- structuralist theory.