

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 13: Structuralist Approaches to Ritual 3

* Today we outline the approaches of Claude Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas and Edmund Leach

* Claude Levi-Strauss:

- Coined the term “structuralism,” only implicit in earlier work
- In studies of diverse kinship systems, noted common, implicit rules of reciprocal exchange of women between male lineages, then formulated models underlying known kinship systems
- Regarded all social phenomena as symbolic systems of communication, deriving from and shaped by the structures of thought rooted in the human brain
- Human beings impose these symbolic systems on social relations to structure and organize them
- Saw totemism as evidence for how cultural classification systems are rooted in a particular cognitive process:

(1) By virtue of structures of binary opposition within the brain, humans oppose the cultural world to the natural world.

(2) A natural classification system drawn from relationships among animals is applied to the world of culture to organize, elucidate, and legitimate its sociocultural relationships

- Saw the relationship between an animal and a particular social group not as one of mystical communion but logical analogy
- Analyzed conceptual systems like totemism as linguistic codes communicating like a spoken language (i.e. binary oppositions)
- Saw ritual and myth as contrasting processes, one verbal, the other non-verbal: myth as content, ritual as form
- The mythical process “turns away from the continuous to

segment and break down the world by means of distinctions, contrasts and oppositions

- Ritual attempts to take “the discrete units” created by mythical thinking and pull them back together as best in can into an experience of reality as continuous and seamless
- The experiential impossibility of ever reconstituting the seamless whole that myth had fractured and broken apart accounts for the “stubbornness and ineffectiveness” seen in the “desperate, maniacal aspects of ritual
- Ritual is a reaction to what thought and myth do to the world
- At bottom, saw ritual as the foil of myth

* Mary Douglas:

- Extended Turner’s structure and antistructure as contrasting degrees of *grid* and *group* in society.
- “Grid” refers to the strength of the rules governing the interrelationship of individual roles and formal positions in society
- “Group” refers to the strength of people’s associations as a tightly knit or closed community
- Used two intersecting axes to chart the degree of grid and group, generating four quadrants to correspond to four types of societies:

- (1) strong grid and strong group;
- (2) strong grid but weak group;
- (3) weak grid and strong group; and
- (4) weak grid and weak group

* Douglas backed up Turner’s idea that ritual provides a reinforcement of both gridlike structure and grouplike, anistructural experiences of *communitas*.

* Her system is able to correlate the degree of ritualization in a society, its general patterns of social organization and worldview, and a variety of other social attitudes toward the body, god, sin, and sorcery.

* Saw ritual as pre-eminently a form of communication, that, like speech, is generated from social relations and exercises a constraining effect on social behavior

* The symbolic communication of ritual activity reproduces real social relations among humans (e.g. her “structural” interpretations of purity and pollution, food taboos, and the organization of meals)

* Edmund Leach (d.1989):

- Went further in applying Levi-Strauss’s structural linguistics to anthropological issues
- Used a structural focus on binary oppositions to re-analyze rites of passage and ritual sacrifice, yet emphasized the role of mediating or liminal categories
- The liminal state mediates old and new positions in the social order; in a similar way, the activities of the sacrifice mediate the realms of the human world and the other world of the gods
- Rituals help sustain a neat conceptual system by enabling distinct categories - like the sacred and the profane, the natural and the cultural - to impinge on each other in carefully circumscribed ways.
- Ritual is a form of non-verbal communication, but, like linguistic communication, its signs and symbols have meaning only by virtue of their place in systems of relationships with other symbols.
- Ritual is used to transform one category into another while maintaining the integrity of categories and the system as a whole.
- In effect, Leach re-described van Gennep’s basic points in a Levi-Strauss fashion

* In Sum:

- Structuralism grew out of the difficulty of demonstrating a simple connection between social organization and cultural categories

- The meaning of symbols came to be seen as dependent on how it was grouped with other symbols
- It became clear that the realm of symbols had a much more complicated relationship with social organization and action than functionalism had surmised
- While Turner and Douglas expounded more structural understandings of functionalism, Leach's work was particularly instrumental in demonstrating structuralism's potential for analyzing ritual