

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 15: Culture, Symbolic Systems, and Action 2

* Today we review the work of Clifford Geertz and place him in context with others

* Clifford Geertz:

- made the ideas found in Levi-Strauss and Leach more explicit and concrete in his treatment of ritual
- described religion as a system of symbols that influences people's feelings and motivations
- religious symbols, beliefs and the symbolic activities of ritual = a system of values acting as both "a model of" the way things actually are and "a model for" how they should be
- culture always exists in response to the problems of meaning that arise in real human experiences
- such a symbolic system provides an embracing world-view (a coherent framework of general ideas) and induces an ethos (a set of moods and motivations)
- "in a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world."

* Nancy Munn:

- ritual = a "symbolic intercom between the level of cultural thought and complex cultural meanings, on the one hand, and that of social action and the immediate event, on the other"
- ritual draws upon a cultural code or lexicon of categories referring to various set areas of experience in a particular society
- these are organized according to patterns of opposition and associative clusters
- ritual manipulates part of this cultural code, recombining

categories and clusters in various ways in order to communicate convincing interpretations of real life situations

- ritual connects interrelated ideas expressing values basic to social life, effectively by objectifying those values in symbols that are emotionally experienced by participants

* Culturalists not only broke with functionalists by analyzing culture as a relatively independent and language-like system of symbols, they also attempted to talk about social and cultural change.

* Geertz felt ritual enables a group's attitudes and general concepts of world order (their experiences and their ideals) - to temper and nuance each other. Ritual is a mechanism for the ongoing processes of adaptation and renewal that constitute communities.

* Rituals do not simply reflect the audience's experiences of life, they effectively help to fashion them

* Geertz on the Balinese cockfight:

- while evoking concerns with status, money, virility, and pride, these do not functionally affect anyone's actual social status or significantly redistribute income.

- cockfighting "render(s) ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible"

- when represented in cockfighting, the meaning of everyday experience is "more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived." It is a (Balinese) story they tell themselves about themselves." Cockfights provide people with the imagery and cultural codes with which to conceptualize, order, and reinterpret their own experiences

- anthropological analysis parallels the interpretation of a text

- the function of the rite is not to heighten or resolve social passions, but simply to "display" them

- these ideas have had great influence on other studies (e.g.

Chinese “spirit money” offerings)

* Relation of Geertz to other theorists/linguistics:

- for Geertz, Leach and Turner, ritual is a suggestive language for communicating about structural relationships, but each developed this idea in a distinctive way
- Geertz and Turner focused more on the interaction of social experience and cultural symbols, while Leach emphasized more purely linguistic, grammatical rules in ritual
- The Geertz-Turner style has been labeled “symbolic,” “semantic,” or “semiotic” as it is concerned with interpreting the meaning of statements, activities, and events
- Leach’s direct appeal to the field of linguistics as a model has been labeled “syntactical” as its concerns are analogous to a focus on the pattern or structure of word order in a sentence. It tends to avoid interpretation in favor of explanation, prefers efficacy to meaning and favors syntax to semantics and semiology
- Leach does not so much ask what ritual expresses or means, but what the grammatical rules are that generate and structure ritual as a form of communication.