

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 17: Ritual and Practice

* Practice theories of ritual emerged in the 1970's:

- share with performance theories a critique of purely structural or semiotic approaches to historical change, action as action, and acting individuals as bodies, not just minds.
- take seriously the idea of human activities as creative strategies to reproduce and reshape social and cultural environments
- unlike performance theories are less interested in specific types of acts than how cultural activity in general works
- are often concerned with analyzing large processes of historical and cultural change
- are particularly interested in the political dimensions of social relationships, especially how patterns of domination and subordination are variously constituted, manipulated, or resisted

* Marshall Sahlins:

- argued that practice brings together structure and history, system and event, continuity and change
- ritual enables enduring patterns of social organization while cultural symbolic systems can be brought to bear on real events
- simultaneously, real situations are assessed and negotiated in ways that can transform these traditional patterns or structures
- the traditional formality and self-consciousness of ritual = a type of human practice in which basic cultural processes are particularly accessible to observation and analysis
- ritual creates a meaningful event out of a new and potentially incomprehensible situation by bringing traditional structures to bear on it.
- if done effectively, ritual action enables structures to embrace, subdue and make meaningful new situations, enabling structures to

- continue as legitimate, appropriate, and relatively unaltered.
- If a situation resists the ritual formulas used to interpret it, structures must be reinterpreted and perhaps altered
 - history is how cultural traditions appropriate new situations

* Pierre Bourdieu:

- goes beyond Sahlins by redefining both history and structure in terms of the dynamics of cultural action
- ritual does not bring history and structure together since neither exist except insofar as embodied and reproduced in human activity as cultural values.
- these values are embodied and reproduced by means of strategies that are rarely conscious or explicit. Thus, the theorist must focus on the acts themselves, not on abstractions like “structure” or “historical process.”
- uses the term *habitus* to designate human activity in its real and immediate context
- ritual is generally not a matter of following rules, but strategic practices for transgressing and reshuffling cultural categories in order to meet the needs of real situations
- ritual licenses violations even as it reinforces the underlying sense of order that violations transgress
- ritualized exchanges = tools for social and cultural jockeying; a performance medium for the negotiation of power in relationships.

* Maurice Bloch:

- ritual produces distinctly ideological forms of knowledge in tension with more purely cognitive forms in day to day behavior
- ritual is a type of ideological mystification, “the exercise of a particular form of power” that makes “a power situation appear a fact in the nature of the world.”

* Sherry Ortner & Jean Comaroff:

- ritual is the means for mediating enduring cultural structures and the current situation. In ritual practice culture molds consciousness in terms of underlying structures and patterns, while current realities simultaneously instigate transformations of them
- the ritual life of a people is the sphere where such accommodations take place.
- human activities reproduce cultural structures in strategically reshaped ways
- ritual incorporation of foreign elements, in a context of subordination, can be a “a struggle for the possession of the sign.”

* Talal Asad:

- stresses moving from “reading symbols” to analyzing practices
- highlights the historicity of the concept of ritual and the involvement of this concept in practices that structure very wide-ranging power relationships
- finds different “technologies of power” behind culturally distinctive constructions of the self, society, and the cosmos (including ritual theory itself)

* Catherine Bell: critiqued earlier theories of ritual under two headings:

- (1) the over-determined circularity of theoretical discourse on ritual; and
- (2) the problems of defining ritual as either a distinct and autonomous set of activities or an aspect of all activity.

* Bell proposed a systematic framework for analyzing ritual as practice:

- (1) human practice has some common features: it is situational, strategic, apt to mis-recognize the relationship between ends and means in ways that promote its efficacy, and motivated by an ordered construal of reality allowing advantageous ways of acting;

- (2) ritual is not the same everywhere; it can vary in every feature;
- (3) ritual distinguishes itself from other ways of acting in the very way it does what it does; moreover, it makes this distinction for specific purposes;
- (4) stresses how a particular community or culture ritualizes (what characteristics of acting make strategic distinctions between these acts and others) and then asks when and why ritualization is deemed to be the effective thing to do;
- (5) focuses on oppositional schemes mobilized as the body moves through space and time which qualitatively structure the physical environment.
- (6) some schemes come to dominate others in a seemingly natural chain of association
- (7) the structured environment provides those in it with an experience of the objective reality of the schemes
- (8) agents of ritualization do not see how they project this schematically qualified environment or how they re-embody those same schemes through physical experience

* Bell sees the following points as central:

- (1) ritual should be analyzed and understood in its real context, which is the full spectrum of ways of acting in any given culture;
- (2) the primacy of the body moving about within a specially constructed space, simultaneously defining (imposing) and experiencing (receiving) the values ordering the environment; and
- (3) ritualization is a way of acting that promotes the authority of forces deemed to derive from beyond the immediate situation

* Advantages:

- affords the opportunity of analyzing more or less effective rituals, the various schemes of ritualization that are invoked, and the great diversity of cultural schemes and styles of ritualization.
- less concerned with the issues of social control, more with

mapping the orchestration of complex relationships of power

- focuses more directly on what people do and how they do it.
- involves less commitment to an overarching notion of ritual
- offers greater opportunity to formulate the subtle ways power is recognized and diffused, interpretations are negotiated, and people struggle to make more embracing meanings personally effective.

* In sum:

- the study of ritual as practice involves a basic shift from looking at activity as the expression of cultural patterns to looking at it as that which constitutes them
- practice theorists attempt to see ritual as part of a historical process in which past patterns are reproduced but also reinterpreted or transformed
- practice theories are explicitly concerned with what rituals do, not just what they mean, particularly the way they construct and inscribe power relationships
- emphasizes human agency, how persons acquiesce yet protest, reproduce yet seek to transform their predicament
- focus on the physical mind-body holism as the primary medium for the deployment and embodiment of everyday schemes of physical action and cultural values
- Bell suggests jettisoning the category of ritual as a first step in opening up the particular logic and strategy of cultural practices