

## S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

### Lecture 19: Rites of Affliction

\* Rites of affliction = ceremonies that attempt to deal with various types of misfortune. They seek to rectify a state of affairs that has been disturbed or disordered; they heal, exorcise, protect, and purify

\* The type of ritual and expert employed depend on the way in which a culture interprets the problematic state of affairs

\* Within this category, ritual tries to redress the development of anomalies or imbalances, often by purging the body and mind of all impurities or harmful influences (e.g. illness), or the community of problems (e.g. drought)

\* Healing rituals express understandings of the nature of physical and mental infirmity usually differ considerably from modern medicine. Yet, these rites address factors simply not dealt with by scientific medicine and often exist alongside it even today (dimensions of individual and community, mind and the body, material and spiritual).

\* Traditional Korean shamans (*mansin*):

- become ill (their calling); recover when accepting their role;
- healing powers use 2 main rituals: a divinatory session (*chom*) where the problem is diagnosed, and an exorcistic ritual (*kut*), where the problem is rectified;
- 3 stages of divination: slowly dancing into a trance, vigorous possession by the god who defines the problem; and the god departs;
- the *kut* follows, a broad based form of group or family therapy;

\* Ritual responses to illness have proven quite capable of effecting psychotherapeutic cures.

\* In cultures where possession and exorcism are common events and metaphors, the self is defined vis-a-vis the social-spiritual world in ways that differ from modern European and American cultural tendencies:

- possession cultures identify powerful forces and influences outside the individual, while modern Euro-American culture often identifies them within the individual;

- historical studies of possession, both as an acceptable phenomenon involving formally recognized expertise and as a highly undesirable phenomenon among the socially alienated, show links between forms of religious expression and the socio-political milieu;

- rituals of trance and possession often occur in historical or structural opposition to other forms of ritual expertise;

- they may even institutionalize methods of inverting, reversing, or undermining other dimensions of the religious and social order, though not usually successfully (e.g. the Ghost Dance);

\* Purification is a major theme in rites of affliction, though it can be understood in a number of ways. It can involve:

- freeing a person from demonic possession, disease, sin, or the karmic consequences of past lives;

- focus on personal problems and faults;

- attempts to remove interpersonal forms of contagion that generally afflict the human condition

\* Rites of affliction show people's persistent efforts to redress wrongs, alleviate sufferings, and ensure well-being. Yet they reveal complex

cultural interpretations of the human condition and its relation to a cosmos of benign and malevolent forces

\* While early theorists saw these rituals as particularly “magical” due to presumed manipulative intent, more recent scholarship has emphasized the ways these rituals actually affect people and the larger community

\* Though they may be particularly effective in maintaining the traditional social order, they show that the human realm is not completely subordinate to spiritual power. These rites open up opportunities for redefining the cosmological order in response to new challenges and new formulations of human needs.