

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 20: Feasting, Fasting, and Festivals

* Today we consider communal feasts and fasts. These emphasize:

- religio-cultural sentiments
- public expression and display of commitment to basic values
- cultural performance of social dramas
- sometimes “licensed reversal” or “ritual inversion” of social order

* The Kwakiutl *Potlach*:

- competitive feasting that displays and transfers status and prestige, as well as fostering divine-human interaction and cosmic connectedness in a hunting-fishing society
- ranges from small to large
- enormous amounts of food, material wealth, accompanied by dances and speeches regarding sponsors’ wealth, pedigree and status
- tradition has continued on Vancouver island
- much preliminary work required (a year or more)
- dancers impersonate important mythical beings and events in Kwakiutl cosmology / legendary history of sponsoring family
- once viewed as a primitive economic system, “fighting with property,” or crude materialism and status seeking
- has more recently been interpreted in terms of ritual re-enactment and regeneration of a “consubstantial cosmos” in terms of mutual, mythological obligations

* Indonesian *slametan*:

- a Javanese communal meal that stresses the social and spiritual unity and equality of participants

- in a different way, reaffirms Javanese sense of a consubstantial cosmos of human-human and human-divine interdependence

* In either of the above, sharing food ritually marks out a community:

- includes many in group
- food taboos mark off group from others

* Fasting:

- serves to extol social distinctions
- highlights the spiritual realm
- subordinates the physical realm as sinful
- fasting common in Christian history (e.g. Lent)
- in Islam, daytime fasting during Ramadan is one of the 5 pillars of the faith, central to Muslim identity
- some take it further than others
- ends with celebration of *Eid al Fitr*
- such fasting is said to teach discipline, spirituality, and community
- socializing physical practices reproduce doctrinal traditions and identities
- Islamic festivals, compared to Christianity & Judaism, more greatly stress prayer and charity, less so shared meals
- Shia's also stress martyrdom of Husayn / identify with, mourn, and vigorously re-enact his physical and emotional suffering
- processions of penitents publicly display elite spiritualism

* Festivals:

- occasions for excess and celebration
- often deny position and hierarchy

* Brazilian Carnival:

- characterized by social chaos and licentious play
- while seemingly the opposite of ritual, this aspect is seen in its bounded nature, traditions, and drawing together of social groups
- reverses usual social hierarchy
- allows masses to let off steam
- remind those in power what people think of them
- controversy over whether it changes status quo, or reinforces it
- biggest participation by the poor, more vicarious by those of high status

* Mardi Gras:

- the opposite of Carnival: biggest participation by the upper echelons of society / attempts to keep others out of exclusive clubs organizing activities (*krewe*s)
- attempts have been made to overturn this, with considerable opposition. In the meantime, alternative *krewe*s have been formed
- the ritual format puts great emphasis on maintaining basic social distinctions, even when the ritual is apt to play with these

* *Holi* festival (India):

- involves a thorough disruption and inversion of the usual social order, as well as celebration of symbols of sexual fecundity
- the lowest castes going about the day disrupting the normal social order
- "The bully is bullied and the high are brought low."
- has been known to inspire promiscuity

* Japanese *Matsuri*:

- propitiate the deities that influence human well-being and the fruitfulness of the harvest
- mark the temporary return of the spirits of the dead
- symbolically, the dead and the living are reconstituted as

community, which is said to heighten fertility and facilitate the transformation of the recent dead into more remote ancestors.

* Practices of feasting, fasting and social inversion have also been associated with the phenomenon of pilgrimage

* Whether they contain explicit reversals of the social order or not, communal feasts and fasts all involve, at the same time, the display of both the hierarchical prestige social system and the interdependence or unity of human and divine worlds.