

## S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

### Lecture 21: Political and Legal Rites

- \* Today we look at political and legal rites, emphasizing the former
- \* Political rites= ceremonial practices that specifically construct, display, and promote the power of political institutions or the political interests of distinct constituencies and subgroups
- \* They do not simply give form to power, they actually construct it.
- \* Political rites are elaborate arguments about the very nature of power that make it tangible and effective
- \* Generally, political rites define power in a 2 dimensional way:
  - (1) they use symbols and symbolic action to depict a group as a coherent and ordered community based on shared values and goals;
  - (2) they demonstrate the legitimacy of those values and goals by establishing their iconic nature in relation to the perceived values and natural order of the cosmos.
- \* It is through ritual those claiming power show how their interests are in the natural, real, or fruitful order of things. When effective, political ritual can transform the arbitrary and conventional into what appears to be necessary and natural.
- \* Important strategies:
  - public displays of wealth and power
  - parallels with the cosmic or divine order
  - appeals to higher forces or designs

- restricted access to the ruler's presence
- cults of the ruler as a god

\* The Japanese Emperor:

- once seen as a god (until after WWII)
- would his son be crowned as in the past?
- central ceremony still done, but privately
- ritual removed references conflicting with constitution
- the same general ritual could be used to uphold differing power relations (dictatorship and constitutional monarchy)

\* Criminal justice:

- Foucault notes tortuous execution of an assassin in 1757 France
- more going on than execution: demonstration of king's power
- these could backfire

\* Role of etiquette in political ritual:

- British diplomatic mission to China: deadlock and negotiation
- U.S./Mexico standoff over ritualistically saving face: led to war

\* Symbolic action is taken very seriously by those contending for power. Far from "empty ritual," etiquette and ceremony can go to the heart of constructing relationships of political submission and dominance:

- rites create political reality.
- it is by participating in rituals that people identify with larger political forces that can only be seen in symbolic form.
- through political ritual, we are given a way to understand what is going on in the world

\* Rites of rebellion attempt to create and display power, but by virtue of their challenge to a deeply entrenched power structure, they must

negotiate the symbolic interaction quite differently.

\* The Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya: 2 main themes:

- (1) destroying the old way of life by demolishing what they owned and transgressing the traditional taboos that defined the old social and cosmic order; and
- (2) bringing on the new by performing ritual activities thought capable of bringing on the apocalyptic age they envisioned

\* When such groups resort to violence to effect this new age, it was not uncommon for them to use ritual procedures to make themselves invincible. Here, however, ritual reaches the limit of what it can do.

\* Japanese Ittoen:

- founded by a mystic who emphasized humble service
- later elected to parliament and engaged in moral reform
- the original teachings turned into institutionalized regimens that implicitly supported the social status quo instead of challenging it (e.g. company retreats)

\* Political rituals display symbols and organize action in ways that try to demonstrate that the values and forms of social organization to which the ritual testifies are neither arbitrary or temporary but follow naturally from the way the world is organized.

\* Hence, ritual has long been considered more effective than coercive force in securing people's assent to a particular order