

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 5: Early Theories of Ritual

- * Today we begin our review of theoretical approaches to ritual
- * Over the next few weeks, we will:
 - (1) Provide a fairly complete overview of major approaches and figures;
 - (2) Provide background on larger issues of religion, society and culture; and
 - (3) Show both how creative and inconclusive these approaches can be.
- * Theoretical perspectives we will consider are concerned with things like:
 - (1) The origins and essential nature of ritual and religion;
 - (2) The role of ritual in the social organization and dynamics of societies; and
 - (3) A focus on ritual as a form of cultural communication that transmits the cognitive categories and dispositions of people's sense of reality.

Myth or Ritual: Questions of Origin and Essence:

- * Academic study of ritual began in the 19th century with lengthy debate over the origins of religion: which came first - myth or ritual?
- * Four main lines of thought emerged historically:
 - (1) Early theorists who first raised the issues;
 - (2) The “myth and ritual schools”;
 - (3) Phenomenologists of religion emphasizing myth; and

(4) The psychoanalytic approach

* Today we will deal with the first two

(1) Early Theories and Theorists:

* Muller (d. 1900) argued that myths were originally Indo-European poetic statements about nature that were later misunderstood

* Tylor (d. 1917) felt myths were

- not misunderstandings
- “primitive” attempts to understand the world
- that we have now evolved beyond
- rooted in “primitives” seeing the dead in dreams
- perceived by “childlike savages” as reflecting spiritual or animistic forces (“animism”)

* William Robertson Smith (d. 1894) argued for the primacy of ritual, and religion in activities that cemented the bonds of community (e.g. early Semitic ritual sacrifice of a “totem” animal as a festive communion). Myth was only a secondary explanation

* Robertson Smith’s work influenced the “myth and ritual school” of Frazer, the sociological approach of Durkheim, and the psychoanalytical approach of Freud.

* Frazer (d. 1941) saw ritual as the real source of most expressive forms of cultural life. Developed the idea that there is a universally diffused pattern underlying all ritual of a the dying and rising of a sacrificial god-king who symbolizes and secured the fertility of the land and the well-being of the people

The Myth and Ritual Schools:

* Rooted in Robertson Smith and Frazer, this approach claiming the historical and cultural primacy of ritual is represented by;

- (1) A group of Biblical and Near-Eastern specialists; and
- (2) A group of Cambridge classicists

* Both emphasize the dying and rising god-king as a central motif to ancient kingship, religion, drama, sports, philosophy, and heroes - among other things

* Scholars in other fields picked up this theme in literature, poetry, and studies of the role of the hero in folklore

* Gaster (d. 1992) converted the dying and reviving god into the broader motif of a “seasonal pattern” of “emptying” and “filling” (i.e. rites of invigoration and jubilation). However, he sees ritual as the “expression of a parallel aspect”

* Into the 1950's -and beyond- scholars continued to search for universal ritual patterns in things ranging from popular music to classic and contemporary literature

* Critics became more vehement in the 1950's and 1960's:

- Hyman (1955): a modest theory for the origin of a few myths eventually came to make rather large claims for the essential form of culture;

- Kluckhohn (1960's): it is silly to claim that *all* myths are clearly related to ritual. A wider variety of relationships exist, including complete independence. Critical research using real data needed

- Fotenrose (1990's): no historical or ethnographic evidence exists of the universal pattern of Near-Eastern kingship

* Nevertheless, ritual has remained important in the study of religion

and society. Some of the important questions raised by the myth and ritual school remain with us today