

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 7: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Ritual

* Robertson Smith's work suggested that ritual participants may not be entirely aware of the purpose of rituals

* This idea was soon picked up by Sigmund Freud (d. 1939)

* In 1907, Freud drew parallels between the obsessive activities of neurotics and religious observances by the pious, positing a common source in psychological mechanisms of repression and displacement

* In *Totem and Taboo* (1913) Freud attempted to reconstruct the psychological development of the human race and religion on the basis of repressed desires:

- "primitive" religion and exogamy (the prohibition of sex/marriage between totem groups) revealed high incest dread or incest sensitivity;

- the taboo against killing the totem animal parallels this;

- both must be greatly desired;

- totems are often associated with fathers/ancestors

- thus both 'agree in content with the crimes of Oedipus' (killing one's father and sex with one's mother)

- the totemic system is rooted in the Oedipus complex

* Primal sacrificial meals: totem animal slaughtered and eaten by its own clan:

- Freud focuses on the primordial idea of violent, jealous fathers who "keep all the females" for themselves, driving away growing sons

- the sons conspire, slay and eat the father

- the totemic feast repeats and commemorates this act

- brothers, consumed by guilt, attempt to undo this crime by renouncing the totem women and prohibiting the killing of a father substitute
- this still promotes the repressed longings, ambivalence, and guilt of the original crime
- the totem cult evolves into increasingly more complex forms of religion

* Freud concluded that taboos are inseparable from ritual practices since ritual is the acting out of the obsessional neurotic's mechanism of repression. On this view, ritual is:

- (1) An obsessive mechanism;
- (2) That attempts to appease repressed and tabooed desires;
- (3) By trying to solve the internal, psychic conflicts that these desires cause.

* Theodore Reik (d. 1969) considered that much could be gleaned about ritual activities apart from people's verbal ("mythic") accounts. Yet myth:

- remains basic to the understanding of seminal psychological conflicts in early societies and the institution of religion
- methodologically, psychoanalytic ethnographers begin with ritual, working backward, moving behind myth to uncover the "real" story of desire, repression, fear, and projection that is at the root of it all
- the unconscious myth is the true one, and uncovering it will reveal the true meaning of the ritual

* Some psychoanalytic theorists have attempted to pull a more positive interpretation of ritual from Freud's writings, alluding to the therapeutic value of ritual as a means of healthy accommodation of repressed desires demanded by all culture and civilization:

- Bruno Bettelheim (d.1990): mens' initiation rituals as an effective means to integrate antisocial tendencies and adjust to prescribed social roles
- Volney Gay: religious ritual as a product of the non-pathological, often beneficial mechanism of suppression (not repression) furthering the cause of adaptation and healthy maturation

* Psychoanalysis and the myth and ritual theory had a great influence on each other

* Rene Girard:

- ritual, religion, society and culture emerge from primal violence
- desire, channeled through a ritual murder, is enshrined in social institutions
- asexual primal desire, rooted in imitation, simultaneously creates a model and a rival
- to curb this, and repress consciousness of violence and desire, a scapegoat ('an other') is seized and ritually sacrificed, one used by the community to deflect or transfer its own desire onto
- scapegoating is the root of a sociocultural process that continually repeats, renewing both violence and the repression that renders it deceptively invisible
- the group becomes conscious of itself in relationship with the sacrificed totem victim as "other," promoting solidarity through the repression of the original impulses
- "violence, in every cultural order, is always the true subject of every ritual or institutional structure"

* Joseph Campbell (d. 1987) combined the myth and ritual school with psychoanalysis (via Jung), and comparative mythology (via Eliade). He felt myth and ritual had four functions:

- (1) a metaphysical or mystical function that induces a sense of awe and reverence in human beings;

(2) a cosmological function that provides a coherent image of the cosmos;

(3) a sociological function that integrates and maintains individuals within a sociological community; and

(4) a psychological function that guides the individual's internal development.

* Campbell identified a “universal monomyth” underlying all myths and other cultural developments. It is composed of stages, including separation from the world, penetration to a source of great power, and then a life-enhancing return.

* This monomyth is most readily perceived in the myth of the hero, which echoes the theme of the dying and rising god.

* These are the major exponents of the psychoanalytic approach to myth and ritual.