

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 1: Defining Ritual 1

Up until the last couple of decades, if you had mentioned the word “ritual” to a sociologist, you probably would have got a strange look. Such things were left to anthropologists, practitioners of other disciplines such as religious studies, and were of relatively little concern in the study of modern, industrial societies - except perhaps in some rather specialized branches of the sociology of religion.

Pressed further, our late 20th century sociologist would have likely given three responses. The most likely, which relates to the work of American sociologist Robert Merton, views ritual as one form of deviant adaptation to *anomie* - the gap between socially inculcated goals (e.g. material and social success) and the people’s varying ability to reach them using legitimate means. For those unable to do so, Merton postulated a series of deviant adaptation: innovation (using illegitimate means, such as theft or drug dealing); retreatism (rejecting both goals and means and retreating into oneself, such as alcoholics and drug addicts); and, most germane for our purposes, *ritualism* - a form of deviant adaptation where one accepted the means but adjusted (some would say gave up on) the socially inculcated goals of success. Examples would include things like “going through the motions” by working a dead end job and rationalizing that “what I have is enough,” or “settling” for a comfortable or “appropriate” relationship rather than the passion one secretly yearns for. Clearly, Merton saw ritualism as a form of deviance. Startlingly, some sociologists still think of ritual in this fashion today (e.g. I recall a faculty meeting where the group was accused of engaging in “ritualism.” While bureaucracy does sometimes, in a rather twisted way, seem to make engaging in anal-retentive behavior into a virtue, I still think this comment was, at least partially indicative of ongoing lack of knowledge about ritual in my field).

A second possible response, from a more politically and theoretically savvy sociologist, would be to mention rituals of power and domination. Emerging from the anarchist literature, this tends to view the regular patterns and actions we engage in - in contexts of unequal power and wealth - as the means by which subordinates repeatedly produce and reaffirm their subordination and those in power are shown the deference that maintains their domination. Thus, going to work every day for an exploitative capitalist who works one half to death for a pittance would be seen as a ritual of subordination and domination that repeats, even maintains the existing power structure. I’m sure we’ve all had jobs that felt like that. In a similar vein, feminist sociologists have taken up this type of reasoning in relation to gender relations. Thus, the patriarchal man who comes home after work and demands his supper on the table, if his wife complies, has just engaged in a gendered ritual of domination and subordination of his wife. In sum, whether in the workplace, the family environment, or a host of other social contexts, there are sociologists who look at ritual primarily in political terms, essentially as an interactional means of enacting and reproducing broader social patterns of domination and subordination.

The third response we might get from our hypothetical sociologist shares something with the second, but adds a new twist - emotion. Randall Collins views some of the central processes of macro-sociology such as order, conflict, and stratification as resting on the long unappreciated micro-level foundation of emotion. For Collins, social order is solidarity and moral commitment.

These emerge in the course of "interaction rituals" at the micro-level, when two or more actors focus on a common activity. In the proper circumstances, a common mood is experienced, and this leads to a sense of unity among the actors. Conflict, too, rests on a foundation of emotion, as much as it involves a mobilization of sentiments of anger towards carriers of opposing interests. Both perspectives, moreover, are joined in Collins analysis of stratification.

Collins views stratification in terms of two dimensions, namely, power and status. Power rituals are interactions structured by the division of roles into order givers and order takers, mainly in large scale organizations. Although these actors participate with different goals and interests, crucially a *common mood of shared emotions* arises nonetheless. Because of their dominance, order givers derive "emotional energy" from the interaction. On the other hand, order takers frequently experience loss of emotional energy. Similarly, Collins talks of status rituals which involve, for example, membership inclusion or exclusion which respectively increase or diminish emotional energy. Broadly speaking, these interaction patterns provide a foundation of emotional resources for the participation in further interactions - which Collins expresses in his idea of "*interaction ritual chains*," which cumulate across time and space to constitute the macro-structure of stratification.

These then, are the major schools of thought that one might expect a late 20th century sociologist to discuss upon mention of the word ritual. However, aside from characterizing - or framing - ritual in certain limited ways, none really get down to the key question: what is ritual? Thus, we must consider a definitional strategy.

As your reading indicates, a life is made up, in many respects, of a series of organized events (birth, marriage, death); institutional life requires entering, passing through and leaving; years are broken down into phases with holidays, and special events are sometimes organized as well (e.g. reunions). All involve rites, ceremonies, conventions and celebrations - serving to mark the progress and cycle of time. Some are big, some involve but few participants - but all are rituals, a key feature of the social life of all societies.

Rituals and ceremonies have clearly marked beginnings and endings, but some ritualistic elements appear within most social actions. Ritual can be a way of doing things as well as a type of thing done (e.g. different types of talk one engages in with bosses, lovers, friends and strangers). Gestures, friendly nods, place, dress, all are performative elements that mark identity and role in a broader social organization.

This distinction between rituals as events and the ritual aspects of ongoing social activities is important. Under the first reading, rituals, rites and ceremonies are distinct events, types of activities, or social objects. Here, the term ritual is used as a noun. On the second are the ritual or ceremonial aspects of otherwise ordinary or ongoing activities, social processes and events: ritual is used as an adjective. This distinction enables more than a shift in referent, it shifts analytic point of view (e.g. it allows us to study, for example, communication as ritual as well as communication rituals). This distinction is important as it opens up to us that rituals go far beyond the kind of specialized things we ordinarily think of when we hear the term (e.g. weddings, funerals, religious services), enabling us to consider that the ritual aspects of ordinary social activities are just as worthy of analysis.

But again we return to the problem of definitions. Ritual studies encompasses both of the above uses of the term, but there are definitional challenges. While a recognizable category, ritual crosses and reorders many categories of commonsense and social theory. Examples come from such varied realms as “the religious and secular, archaic and modern, indigenous and colonial, political and personal, trivial and important, large and small, work and leisure, public and private, and from any cultural group available through the literatures of communication studies, anthropology, sociology, and historical, literary and religious studies. Ritual, like other forms of communication, is everywhere.”

A concept cover so much ground risks being outrageously abstract. However, it is the formal properties of ritual that help distinguish it from other types of human social action - providing continuity across the diversity. It is to its form rather than to its meanings, purposes, or circumstances that efforts at definition will be addressed.

Definitions:

In the literature, there are almost as many definitions as there are authors - with little consensus and sometimes even contradictions. The place to start is with a review of the terms . Much of what follows discusses 15 characteristics common to the many definitions of ritual available in the literature, concluding with a review of the communication principle that enables integration of most of these key ideas into a single, formal definition of ritual.

1. Action: Ritual is action, not just thought. While probably obvious, this neglects the fact that in 19th century anthropology the relation of myth and thought with ritual and action were an important subject of debate that has structured much thinking since. Do myth and belief follow ritual action as an explanation or do they precede it as a motivation? Debates over such hard dichotomies are still with us, but in studies of ritual they are often transcended in observations that belief and action fuse, or become one (e.g. in religious ritual where practitioners act out their faith, producing a world in which it is real).

Another reason to emphasize the thinking/action dichotomy is that ethological materials often provide evidence of conservatism in ritual practice, but more fluidity in belief among the same community over time (e.g. Catholic ritual and belief). The action of ritual and the thinking and feeling that go along with it can work in different ways with different results.

So ritual is a form of action, not only a process of thinking. It is something people do bodily as well as thoughtfully, it has external form. Second, ritual may transcend changes in thought processes accompanying the ritual.

2. Performance: Ritual is performed as “an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience.”

It is never invented in the moment of action: it is always action according to pre-existing conceptions. These may be formally embodied, as in the Masonic ritual or actors’ scripts, or at the other extreme, may be present in latent competencies, such as those performed by a skillful

host or effective meeting chair. Either way, pre-existing conceptions serve as guide for the performance and criteria for its evaluation.

Next, ritual is always performed for someone (i.e. an audience). Acceptance of responsibility for the performance to the audience also exists on a continuum ranging from full-blown, formal productions to moments of showing off in otherwise ordinary settings (such as a class clown).

Important to all moments of performance, but easiest to see at the formal end, are the “keyings” of a frame (i.e. the ways in which a ceremony is set apart in time and space from conventional modes of action, such as word choice, dress, tone of voice, and rules of etiquette that serve both to mark a boundary in social action and offer information about the other action to be performed within that boundary.

When displaying competence is seen as primary, ritual and artistic performance can merge (e.g. one may sing well regardless of the text, setting and audience). Still, ritual must be distinguished from art and entertainment. Competence is thus not primary to ritual performance, but ritual and art have nevertheless often been interdependent through history. Though ritual may be a special type of performance, not identifiable with all displays of competence, to the extent the effectiveness of ritual depends on the form of its performance, competence of that performance is crucial.

3. Conscious, Voluntary: There is usually something conscious and voluntary about ritual. People are usually aware they are participating and that the ritual is a human accomplishment. Perhaps in smaller, less especially distinct rituals (e.g. common greetings), people may not be fully conscious of their regular behavior, but people are often aware of choices embedded in ritual interaction forms - they may choose to participate or not, the mode of their participation, the orthodoxy, style and enthusiasm of their participation, etc.

Choice implies that the performance of a ritual - and its results - are dependent on the degree of voluntary involvement by its actors. Often, rituals are accompanied by a certain social compulsion. What are the costs of not participating? Refusing to swear allegiance to the King at one time could get you jailed or deported (as the Acadians found out). Often times, the consequences are not so dire. All the same, we need to be aware of the formal voluntarism of ritual as the ritual participant formally accepts, rather than resists, the social compulsion by performing acceptance (regardless of what s/he thinks privately).

4. Noninstrumental or Irrational: Many authors consider instrumentality, rationality, or the nature of means-ends relations in their definitions of ritual.

Ritual is called arational or nonrational to the extent that it is not useful for specifically technical purposes: technical rationality does not apply because the means-ends relations are not intrinsic from the stance of the scientific observer (e.g. they may purport to alter the world by metaphysical means). Such rituals used for technical purposes or in some other way treated as if they were instrumental then, would be labeled magic - and irrational - because they do not seek to alter the world by physical means.

While noninstrumentality has been a dominant theme in the literature, obviously even if such rituals cannot be shown to causally bring about their desired ends, they can be shown to perform other social functions that are just as practical (e.g. reducing indecision, producing consensus, inspiring action). The same could be said for tension reducing rituals in modern society, historical rituals that functioned as aids to memory, reinforcing social roles and relations.

Finally, the point of identifying the so-called arational element of ritual is that ritual works by a logic of signs that is different from the logic of technical rationality (it may not be rational, but if a handshake seals a deal morally in a system of meaning, it may be a practical form of performed instrumentality).

5. Not Recreational: Rituals are not just recreational: they are not only for fun. Even in celebrations, there is something serious going on in the background. While writers like Durkheim somewhat arbitrarily distinguished the serious (necessary) and non-serious aspects of ritual, it is better in this respect to follow Pickering who uses the serious life as an ideal type rather than as defining a strict dichotomy. Shils is also helpful in that he uses seriousness as an attitude of the people under study rather than an observer's evaluation (more on this later on). For now, let us just say that ritual, in contrast to play, is in earnest even when it is playful, entertaining, blasphemous, humorous or ludicrous.

6. Collective, Social: Ritual is usually not seen as something individuals do only for individual purposes in purely individualistic ways. They may be done in private, but there is always something socially structured about them: language and other sign systems, tradition, systems of morality. Thus, individual "beauty rituals" are repetitive and collectively structured actions that embody cultural codes though done in private. Even Freud's conception of individual ritualistic behavior as a symptom of pathology is seen as having origins in social relations. Usually rituals are oriented toward a group and most often performed in social situations

7. Expressive of Social Relations: Ritual involves the use of modes of behavior which are expressive of social relationships. Forms of ritual action constitute symbols that often have among their referents the social relations, orders, and institutions of the society in which the ritual is performed (e.g. forms of greeting, clothing marking power, marking sexual differences and relations).

Rooted in the structural functionalist idea that ritual expresses social relations, many used this methodologically: by reading the ritual of a society, one could map its social structure (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown, Leach, Goffman, Burke).

Meanwhile, to speak is to perform language: language is not meaning, but its performance both expresses and produces meaning. Meaning both produces and is created by language just as language both produces and is created by meaning. To speak is to embody language and meaning, which is to place both in a position in a social order; to embody language and meaning in a position in a social order is to perform a position in a social order, which is to constitute it. So the social order both gives rise to language and meaning and is a result of

language and meaning. In this system of relations, one form is always becoming the other, and that mode of becoming is a kind of ritual transformation.

8. Subjunctive, Not Indicative: Rituals are often not about what is, but what could be, might be, or ought to be (e.g. initiations, political and religious ceremonies, civic commemorations of cultural heroes, etc.) Some have explored this relation between ritual and ordinary social life, noting a relation of reflection, commentary, evaluation and hope (Turner). Others suggest rituals may serve as models of a version of social order beyond the status quo (Handleman).

Many critics of ritual make the mistake of expecting rites and ceremonies to be indicative. Judged this way, they are obviously false as they do not represent the world they occur in. But viewed as time-outs, they are occasions for imagining how things could or ought to be. This is an important social function that must not be trivialized.

Another aspect here is that many rituals contain a liminal place, a threshold or in-between place that offers a time-out from normal social roles, responsibilities, rules, orders, ways of thinking. These can produce great license in social activity and potential for freedom and creativity in social thought, as has been seen historically (e.g. the 1960's).

9. Effective Symbols: The symbols of a ritual are seriously effective. Beyond the ordinary ways language gets things done, the symbols of ritual are powerful (e.g. rites of passage where adolescents become men and women, single people become married, etc.). Equivalently powerful symbols are at play in many rituals, even when social transformations are not the explicit purpose (e.g. dance, prayer, etc can alter social and psychic experience).

10. Condensed Symbols: Socially important symbols have layers of meaning and multiple, simultaneous referents. Social analysis must unpack the meanings, examine the laminations, and follow the ramifications, for the full meaning of socially important symbols is not clear from their surface. One of the reasons is that most socially important symbols are characterized by condensation.

Sapir distinguished referential from condensation symbolism, the latter characterized by multiple referents, richness of meaning with deeper roots in the unconscious diffusing emotional quality to types of behaviors or situations far removed from the original meaning of the symbol. Freud saw condensation as an aspect of dream work - a transformative process whereby unconscious thoughts became highly condensed dream content. More recent anthropological work refers to condensation as the characteristic of ritual symbols that multiple meanings, actions, and things may be represented at once. Ordinary objects like flags, uniforms, crosses etc expand to fill their situations with meanings. Yet in ritual, these various meanings can become emotionally fused in the ceremony and its aftermath.

Condensed symbols are richly ambiguous - not only difficult for the observer, but extraordinarily flexible, adaptable to multiple social uses. They can work in different ways for different people simultaneously, depending on their sensitivity to different valences, and their effectiveness can carry over from one situation to another. They can also fall apart easily due to

their multiple possible meanings (e.g. a handshake). This is particularly problematic when social change removes previous referents. Thus the need for a certain unthinkingness for the effectiveness of ritual symbols - usually through condensation of multiple references and valances - is seen as its insidiousness by some and its transcendence by others. Evaluation of ritual must depend on the nature of the compromises and the quality of the resulting order involved: results can be seen as healthy by some, pathological to others.

11. Expressive or Aesthetic Behavior, Aesthetic Excess: Many definitions of ritual emphasize the expressive or aesthetic element, even seeing aesthetic “excess” as a marker of ritual. If something is stylized beyond reason, the aesthetic is emphasized in an otherwise practical realm, or symbolism is emphasized as a stylistic device, then that is taken to indicate the presence of ritual attitudes. This logic depends on distinguishing practical from expressive acts, identifying the former with utility and materiality and the latter with aesthetics, symbols and ideas. Yet this commonsense distinction is itself a symbolic construction, expressive of ideas, and eminently aesthetic. There are problems with using style and aesthetics as terms of definition of ritual when used alone - implying styles of judgement rooted/hidden in technical rationality. Yet, it is important to consider the expressive as one of the key modes of ritual: many rituals do have an aesthetic component that we cannot ignore.

12. Customary Behavior: Rituals are forms of customary behavior. This is vital. No definition of ritual is adequate without it. There is always something about ritual that is stereotyped, standardized, stylized, relatively invariant, and formal. This implies ritual is repetitive in the sense that others have done it this way before, it is not authored by the actor but, to some extent, the performance of a script.

Yet behavior is not customary just because it is regular, uniform or constant. What is necessary is adherence to a custom, rule or standard. This is a region governed by oughts - there are right and wrong ways to do things: choices in this realm have implications that are serious.

13. Regularly Recurring Behavior: Ritual is also regularly recurring (e.g. those that are based on the calendar). Even those that mark the passage of time from the individual’s perspective, such as rites of transition from one age to another, still are regularly recurring in the social group. Ritual performance has its own social rhythm. These cycles are dictated by the norms of the social group.

14. Communication Without Information: Some claim that ritual is communication without information, or at least that ritual is communication that works in strange ways from the perspective of information theory. Information theory is based around the statistical problem of predicting the next word or letter. This falls apart in dealing with rituals that are repetitive, stereotyped, scripted, with an emphasis on form over substance. It is argued they do not carry much information in the statistical sense, even that they are only loosely tied to the situations in which they occur.

Yet the claim that ritual is communication without information is overstated. The choice to participate contains a bit of information, as does timing. Nevertheless, ritual has more to do with performing than with information; more to do with transcendent patterns of order than with

particularities, more to do with acceptance than change.

15. Regarding the Sacred, an Element of the Serious Life: Many authors, especially Durkheim, emphasize that ritual is action regarding the Sacred. Others oppose this. The concept of the sacred has intuitive appeal for students of religious ritual. The problem is that the substance of the sacred varies widely from community to community, culture to culture, historical setting to setting, etc. This creates difficult classification problems.

Nevertheless, many scholars recognize structural similarities across cultures and situations in action toward the Sacred. A formal definition of the Sacred identifies those commonalities and avoids the particulars. In any given community, the Sacred is whatever is treated as unquestionable, as something of the utmost seriousness by members of that community. Still, there may still be issues of degree of consensus and the veracity of observers' judgements.

The criterion of Sacredness must be seen in the patterns of activity of the members of the community, how they treat a sacred object rather than the object of nature independent of their treatment. Such patterns of activity, reflecting a tendency to treat some things as of a different category of importance or seriousness, appear to be a constant in human life. The dimension of seriousness, whether applied to a deity or social category (e.g. nationalist symbols) appears in the ritual aspects of life, even everyday life (e.g. broken promises). Ritual, then, is an element of the serious life.

A Communicative Principle & Final Definition:

At bottom, one fundamental might be called the seed of ritual - even its generative logic. Wherever ritual appears, *appropriately patterned behavior constitutes symbols that are effective beyond the behavior itself*. Without this generative logic, nothing could be a ritual: all rituals presuppose it.

Many of the key ideas reviewed above are either present in or implied in this statement. The stipulation that the behavior be patterned addresses the stereotyping and formality of rituals. That behavior be appropriately patterned implies the existence of rules and the performance of a script not authored by the actor. This also implies external support for the behavior - in the case of ritual, an institution, moral system, sacred presence, or cosmic structure. The symbolic element is explicit, as is its material basis in human behavior; the ideal reference implied by the term symbol. The effectivity of the symbols is explicit. The fact that this is "beyond the behavior itself" identifies the non-intrinsic means-ends relation.

This is also the generative logic of communication: no act of communication could be unless that logic held: all acts of communication presuppose it. Ritual and communication are kin: they are logically related and share family characteristics. Everyone who performs a ritual accepts the idea, at least implicitly, that his or her patterned behavior is symbolically meaningful and effective. Participants in ritual are doing something symbolically: they are using symbols to achieve social purposes.

By adding the two final terms from the list above - voluntarism and reference to the serious life, we may ultimately come to a formal definition of ritual: "The voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life."

This is a general, formally rigorous, yet flexible definition that, if carefully used, should capture the entire range of rituals we will discuss in this course.