

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 10: Functionalist Approaches to Ritual 3

Today we will wrap up our look at functionalist approaches to ritual by considering an overview of neofunctionalist systems analyses, including that found in your reading today by Erik Erikson.

Various studies of ritual can be loosely grouped as “neofunctional” forms of systems analysis. They explore various ways that ritual activities serve to regulate the community or enhance the well-being of the individual. Yet, rather than limiting themselves to the parameters of the functionalist approach linked to Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, neofunctionalists try to describe the interaction of multiple cultural systems. While they might not call themselves functionalists (due to the criticism associated with this word), this may also have to do with the real ways these theorists are working with complex models of social dynamics. Neofunctional theories - whether ecological, ethnological, biogenetic, or psychological - testify to the value of a more nuanced functionalist concern with how ritual relates to social life.

First there was Rappaport. Back in 1968 he introduced a radically new perspective on ritual through several studies of New Guinea tribes. These showed how ritual activities worked to regulate the relationship between people and natural resources, thereby maintaining a delicate but essential environmental balance. Rappaport argued then that ritual not only regulates the interaction of one human community with another, but can also regulate the interaction of humans with local materials, foodstuffs and animals. Sketching tribal life as an exchanges including everything from genetic matter to stone axes, Rappaport cast social processes like ritual as an intrinsic part of a much larger and embracing cultural ecosystem.

Rappaport outlined how the Maring-speaking peoples of New Guinea slaughtered domestic pigs only under special circumstances and within a ritual framework. It only occurs if the number of pigs grows to the point that too much labor and food are needed to maintain them. Then the pig becomes a parasite, dependent on limited resources, rather than a resource for the community. During wartime, pigs may also be killed and eaten in a ritual meal, but only by those warriors preparing to fight - though it is understood that such nutrition to the warriors benefits all whom they defend. The ritual framework formalizes the killing of pigs and, as such, helps restrict such killings to particular circumstances. Beyond this, the major pig-festival, the *kaiko*, is part of a complex series of interlocking ritual activities that link the land, plants, and interaction with enemy tribes. Rappaport concluded that this type of ritual helps “to maintain an ungraded environment, limits fighting to frequencies which do not endanger the existence of the regional population, adjusts man-land ratios, facilitates trade, distributes local surpluses of pig throughout the regional population in the form of pork, and assures people of high-quality protein when they are most in need of it.” Rappaport is, thus, in many respects, a form of systems analysis in which ritual is shown to play a key role in maintaining the system since it claims an authority rooted in the divine/ancestors, as well as tradition. In comparison, economic managers or ecological managers would not be as effective in securing compliance with traditional methods of maintaining the ecological balance - indeed, quite the opposite: ritual is so important to maintaining this system because people believe that much more than physical resources are at

stake.

Rappaport's suggestions about the role of ritual in mystification for the good of the community have been echoed in the work of Marvin Harris - an anthropologist often termed a "cultural materialist." Harris created a stir when he took an extreme approach to other examples of the ritual regulation of resources, such as cow worship among Hindus in India and human sacrifice among the ancient Aztecs. In the former, he argued that the cow was an indispensable resource for Hindu farming families with small plots of land, not only enabling them to plow and plant but supplying them with milk for food and dung for fuel. If, in times of severe crisis, people were to butcher and eat their cows, they would lose the one resource they most needed to get back on their feet later. Hindu cow worship, the religious obligation to show the greatest respect to cows, ensures that people do not eat their cows in times of crisis - at least not short of total desperation. Hence the ritual attitude toward the cow guarantees the maintenance of a basic level of economic resources and does so more effectively than any economic argument would.

Harris similarly explains Aztec human sacrifices as a ritual means of regulating the limited dietary resources needed to maintain the community. Arguing the Meso-American ecosystem lacked adequate resources of animal protein to support estimated population growth, he concluded that Aztec ritual slaughter was a "state sponsored system geared to the production and distribution of substantial amounts of animal protein in the form of human flesh." While critics have successfully challenged both the correctness of his raw data and the plausibility of his interpretations, Harris' approach to these ritual traditions has suggested new questions and possibilities about the variety of ways that ritual might function.

Ethology has another approach to ritual activities. Associated with Julian Huxley (d. 1975) and Konrad Lorenz (d. 1989), ethology explores so-called ritualized patterns of behavior among animals that raise many questions about the origins and social ramifications of human rituals. Studies of the ritual-like behavior found in animal displays (e.g. courtship and mating routines, elaborate signaling of territorial rights, the reciprocal etiquette of grooming, or rules for fighting in male tournaments) have led scholars to try to define such behavior in terms congruent with analogous patterns in human social life. Huxley defined such examples of "ritualization" as "the adaptive formalization or canalization of emotionally motivated behavior, under the teleonomic pressure of natural selection." Such formalized patterns, he suggested, appear to promote clearer communication and stimulate more efficient actions in other animals which reduces damage or killing within the species and facilitates sexual or social bonding." Hence, in exploring questions of function, ethologists developed an important early argument about the inherently communicative nature of ritual action and concluded that the ritual gestures of animals serve as codes or signals that transmit information useful to the well-being of the group. Some studies went on to suggest much of human culture is probably rooted in these inherited patterns of early animal ritualization - not only mating and war, but also play, dance, art and education.

Generally ethologists have held that animal ritualization is a combination of genetically determined and socially acquired behavior. Similarly they speculate human ritual behavior may be shaped by genetic propensities that accompanied human evolution, along with the highly symbolic activities humans acquire through cultural socialization. In this way, animal and human rituals can be considered similar, even though human ritual differs greater in complexity, self-

consciousness and aesthetic. On the basis of this presumed kinship, however, Huxley, among others, tried to evaluate the state of ritual in modern society, specifically in light of the ills of 20th century civilization. In 1966 he argued that modern people are failing to ritualize effectively, leading to a heightened propensity toward flawed communication, the escalation of conflict, needless killing, and weak personal and social bonding among our own kind. While rituals of breeding regulate procreation among animals, he asked how, in the wake of readily available contraceptives, human beings would regulate their sexual contact so as to avoid promiscuity, overpopulation and disease. He feared that older religious systems have fallen into irrelevance and human communities have lost their ritual traditions of bonding just when new and larger social groups, such as the world community represented by the UN, need to be reinforced by the bonding that only ritual affords.

More recently, ethological animal studies have been loosely synthesized with sociobiology's focus on genetics and evolution. This combined field of inquiry, dubbed "neuroanthropology," in the field of ritual studies is termed "biogenetic structuralism." Like ethology, this focuses on the evolution of the capacity for ritual and on comparison of ritual activities between species, including humans. Yet there have also been attempts to investigate the biopsychological roots of human ritual behavior and its effect on both cognitive and more general neurophysiological processes in the body. While widely assumed that ritual behavior is deeply involved in the interaction of the brain's cognitive functions with the social-physical environment, some biogeneticists have also tried to locate the specific brain sites responsible for ritual action.

Ethology and biogenetics reflect strong concerns for the origins of ritual as well as the role of such formalized behavior patterns in human adaptation to physical and social environments. From this perspective, ritual is seen as a technology or mechanism deemed integral to how the brain works; biogeneticists surmise that it enables the individual, or the animal, to solve problems of adaptation that would otherwise be unyielding. While this form of functional explanation primarily views ritual in terms of how it aids physiological and social development, ethologists and biogeneticists have not been unsympathetic to its moral and religious dimensions, since these remain indisputable aspects of how ritual has been and continues to be an important component of our evolutionary success.

Ethological and biogenetic approaches to ritual often invoke the psychological theories of Erik Erikson - an excerpt of which I had you read for today's class. Erikson (d.1990) looked at issues of physical and social maturation. Erikson addressed what he called the "ontogeny" or development of ritualization in stages of maturation within the human life cycle. He defined ritualization as a type of consensual interplay between two or more persons that is repeated in recurring contexts and has adaptive value for those involved. His central example of such behavior is the peculiar greeting ceremony that unfolds between a mother and her baby in the morning. Their interaction is both highly individual and stereotypical, he argued; each does things that arouse predictable responses in the other that are important for both physical and emotional reasons. He concludes that human ritualization is grounded in such pre-verbal infantile experiences, although it culminates in the elaborate ceremonies of public life. As such, he saw ritualization as having a primarily adaptive function, the first concern of which is to help the infant overcome the sense of separation or abandonment it experiences when its mother is not

there. While the experience of separation may be intrinsic to the formation of an individual ego, it must also be mediated or balanced by the ritual reassurances that pull one from an inhuman isolation into social relationships with them.

Erikson argued that various dimensions of ritual are elaborated and learned in 8 successive stages of the life cycle necessary to a fully socialized and individuated human being. The pre-verbal rites between mother and child establish a numinous experience of the mutual recognition of separate selves, while the rites of early childhood establish the judicial ability to discriminate right from wrong. The child masters further aspects of dramatic elaboration and formal rules of performance at the age of play and thereafter in school. The conjunction of these dimensions of ritual in adolescence leads to the formation of a sense of ideological conviction that links one to a group. With the rituals of adulthood come the social sanctions that enable one to act responsibly and creatively in community. Ultimately, Erikson's theory makes ritualization an essential link between the development of the human individual (ontogeny) and the evolution of the human species (phylogeny).

Other psychological approaches to ritual have also suggested neofunctional purposes for ritual. While many theorists attest to somewhat simplistic "cathartic" functions, others argue that ritual is a type of mechanism that channels the expansive and harmful tendencies of symbolic thought that could result in excessive individual anxiety or the disruption of social harmony. Similarly, some propose that ritual ceremonies, like the dreams studied by psychoanalysts, protect society from dangerous conflict by communicating, and therein releasing, harmful thoughts and emotions. Most of these theorists, moreover, would not dispute the possibility that ritual activity is linked to particular dynamics in the brain and may well have had adaptive value in the development of social life. Some are "at least half convinced that there can be genuine dialogue between neurology and culturology."

The above neofunctional theories of ritual develop two underlying ideas. First, they hold that human behavior is determined by more than just social conditioning. At the very least, ecological, economic, genetic, or physiological conditions impose a set of parameters on the variation of social behavior. In other words, not all behavior is learned, and not all behaviors can be learned. This has been described as a matter of genetic chains that hold cultural patterns "on leash," though no one is sure how long the leash might extend. Second, these theories are concerned with a particular location for what they see as universal qualities of ritual action. Instead of universal social structures or universal rules for how societies act and develop, some of these theories would suggest that what all ritual has in common has to do with human physiology; others would suggest that what all ritual has in common is its ability to induce compliance with practices that maintain a balanced human ecology. Cultural variations in ritual is then ascribed to the interaction of human physiology with different physical environments. For this reason, Rappaport and Harris have been called cultural materialists. To their critics, these approaches seem to reduce religion and ritual to purely material matters. To their supporters, such theories contribute greatly to an understanding of some of the ways in which human activity is both conditioned and creatively responsive.