

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 11: Structuralist Approaches to Ritual 1

Now that we have considered the functionalist perspective, we turn to consider a series of writers that have built up on it, commonly referred to as structuralists.

Implicit in the functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown was an appreciation of social structure as a system of relationships connecting people or their social roles. His focus on structure in social relations was modeled on the study of anatomical structures in paleontology, where constant comparisons of differing species enabled scientists to reconstruct the logical of their anatomical development in adapting to physical environments. A simultaneous emphasis on invisible social structures and the fieldworker's immersion within the complexities of daily life were instrumental in generating two forms of explanation for ritual behavior. First, as in functionalism, one could analyze how ritual activities function - that is, how they facilitate the orderly cooperation of communal life. Second, one could also choose to analyze what ritual activities mean - that is, what cultural ideas and values are expressed in these symbols and patterns of activities. For Radcliffe-Brown, the structural relationships among symbols (meaning) had to be linked to the structural social relationships that comprised the society (function). Thus he expected groups organized in particular ways to have corresponding images of God, spirits, death, fertility, etc., all of which simultaneously functioned to express and maintain the social structure. Yet, despite his predictions, Radcliffe-Brown failed to demonstrate any clear and direct links between social structures and patterns of symbols and beliefs. This raised a new question, which Malinowski and others began to ask: if such symbols, beliefs, and patterns of ritual activity do not serve simply to maintain the patterns of social relationships, then what do they mean to the people who use them? Analyses of the meaning of the structured relationships of ritual and religious symbols gradually emerged as part of a more or less independent mode of analysis.

Thus, after field study of the ceremonial behavior of the Iatmul peoples of New Guinea, Gregory Bateson (d.1980) produced a detailed and influential study of the *naven* ritual, a ceremony in which everybody cross-dresses. He wanted to "relate this behavior, not only to the structure and pragmatic functioning of Iatmul culture, but also to its ethos." His ambitious attempt at a systemic explanation combined several levels of analysis: the social structures addressed by the rite; the emotional values of Iatmul life expressed in the rite, that is, the cultural structures; as well as the connection between individual feelings and activities on one hand and shared cultural values and activities on the other. Ultimately, though, Bateson was not convinced he had pulled off an explanation of anything more than his own theoretical premises. As he worked out logical explanations of the *naven* ritual on each of these levels, it became apparent to him that all of the categories of analysis he was using - structure, culture, the social, etc. - were not facts of New Guinea life, but abstractions created and used by social scientists like himself.

E.W. Evans-Pritchard (d.1973) undertook a similar project in his study of the Nuer of southern Sudan and emerged as an important figure in the modification of functionalism and the promotion of other forms of explanation, both structural (concerned with functions) and symbolic (concerned with meanings). While generally adhering to the functionalist view that

religion can be understood only by relating it to social structure, Evans-Pritchard also explored how economic, historical, and environmental factors are part of the picture since they influenced social organization, and are reflected in Nuer concepts, values and rituals. In particular, he focused on the conceptual nature of Nuer religion, which he found to be highly complex and remarkably sensitive, refined, and intelligent; it reveals, he suggested, the inadequacy of most of the theories of religion we might apply to it.

Evans-Pritchard basically agreed with Robertson-Smith, Durkheim, Mauss, and others that religions are “products of social life,” but he strongly disagreed with the idea that they are “nothing more than a symbolic representation of the social order.” In fact, he asserted, “it was Durkheim and not the savage who made society into a god.” To correct what he saw as oversimplifications, Evans-Pritchard recommended that scholars conduct systematic studies of primitive philosophies. His explorations of both the collective and the individual aspects of religion reflect a refusal to reduce religion either to Radcliffe-Brown’s social structure (i.e. the Nuer conception of God cannot be reduced to, or explained by, the social order) or to Malinowski’s appeal to individual sensibilities (i.e. that Nuer religious thought and practices are influenced by their whole social life is evident from our study of them).

Such concerns led Evans-Pritchard to a new way of conceiving ritual. Ritual is where Nuer religious concepts, which are not concepts so much as “imaginative constructions,” are externalized and could be observed. In contrast to the simple arousal of communal emotions, he called attention to the great variety of feelings displayed at a ritual: far from displaying any collective emotional ethos, some people do not pay any attention, while others are serious or happy. “What is important in sacrifice is not how people feel, or even how they behaved,” he asserted. “What is important is that the essential acts of sacrifice be carried out.” When these acts are mapped analytically, they indicate a system of ideas. For example, humans and cattle are considered equivalent with regard to the high order of god, so the sacrifice of an animal is a substitute for that of a human and acts as an offering to the god in exchange for aid. Evans-Pritchard’s analysis of Nuer sacrifice depicts the system of ordered relationships of mutual dependency that links humans, animals, ancestors, and gods. Thus, in response to Bateson’s earlier concerns, the rites of the Nuer can be understood only in terms of the Nuer’s own conceptual oppositions, primarily the opposition between the realm of spirit and the realm of humans. In enacting this complex system of relationships, the rite underscores these opposing orders while simultaneously establishing contact between them. Hence, the activities of the rite demonstrate and communicate the structural order of Nuer categories, which in turn both affects and reflects the structural order of social relations.

Evans-Pritchard went on to raise another question as well: what do these rites and conceptions actually mean to the Nuer themselves? The full answer, he concluded, is only to be found in the interior experiences of the Nuer where the anthropologist cannot go. Ultimately, Evans-Pritchard’s analysis of ritual echoed functionalist concerns while also anticipating two new developments: Claude-Levi-Strauss’s structural studies of kinship and mythological systems, on the one hand, and Clifford Geertz’s symbolic studies of cultural meaning on the other.

A rather different concern with issues of structure and function shaped the work of

Arnold van Gennep (d.1957), an excerpt of which I had you read for today. Van Gennep may have been less influenced by Radcliffe-Brown and his successors than by Frazer and his myth and ritual heirs. While not a member of the functionalist-structuralist group (in fact he was a strong critic of Durkheim, who seemed to ignore him), van Gennep came to exert considerable influence on it all the same. His insights into the internal organization of ritual activities challenged many traditional ways of categorizing ritual and opened up new perspectives on the relationship of ritual to social organization.

While sharing the categorization concerns of Frazer and others, van Gennep deplored the Frazerian tendency of collecting brief ritual descriptions from around the world and then going on to analyze them outside their real contexts. Rites can be understood, he argued, only in terms of how they are used in their original social setting; moreover, the most immediate context for any one rite is the sequence of rituals that immediately precede and follow it. For van Gennep, there can be no intrinsic meaning to a specific ritual action (e.g. circumambulation); its meaning depends on the whole sequence of rites in which it occurs and on the purposes of the sequence as a whole. This was the principle behind his “sequential method,” which studies ritual “only in relation to what precedes and what follows it.” Nevertheless, van Gennep was still very much concerned to demonstrate the universality of certain patterns, and his most famous work, *The Rites of Passage* (1909), clearly echoed Frazer’s *Golden Bough* in its appeal to universal patterns with examples from many disparate traditions.

Van Gennep specifically focused on those rituals that accompany life crises, those critical moments in social life when individuals move from one status to another. Echoing the three stages of the dying and rising god pattern, van Gennep argued that life-crisis rites display a three-stage sequence: separation, transition, and incorporation. Through this sequence of activities, rituals effect the person’s removal from one social grouping, dramatize the change by holding the person in a suspended “betwixt and between” state for a period of time, and then reincorporate him into a new identity and status within another social grouping. The first stage, separation, is often marked by rites of purification and symbolic allusions to the loss of the old identity (in effect, death to the old self): the person is bathed, hair is shaved, clothes are switched, marks are made on the body, etc. In the second, transition stage, the person is kept for a time in a place that is symbolically outside the conventional sociocultural order (akin to a gestation period): normal routines are suspended while rules distinctive to this state are carefully followed (e.g. not touching the ground, no contact with other people). In the third, incorporation stage, symbolic acts focus on welcoming the person into a new status (in effect, birth of the new self): there is the conferral of a new name and symbolic insignia, usually some form of communal meal, and so on. Initiation rituals provide the clearest examples of this three-stage pattern, although they particularly elaborate the threshold aspects of the transition stage. Birth rites, marriages, and funerals also seem to follow this three-part sequence, but the emphasis may shift to one of the other two stages. Using this three-stage pattern, van Gennep tried to demonstrate “a wide degree of general similarity among ceremonies of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies and funerals.”

As part of his study of ritualized transitions through the social order, van Gennep collected many examples of rites in which changes in spatial location are used to designate

changes in social identity. Moving people from one marked place to another, often passing through doors, arches, or gates, appears to be a common way both to signal and to effect a change in social status. A married couple passes through a festooned arbor or church door to signal their emergence into the new social state of marriage. A born-again Christian descends into a pool of water and emerges from the other side spiritually cleansed, committed, and “made new.” His analysis of the logic of ritual movements in space remains one of the most useful explanations of both the internal structure of rituals and the way they work as symbolic orchestrations of socially real changes.

In this way, van Gennep pointed to a fresh interpretation of the symbolism of rebirth and regeneration so important to the myth and ritual school. While they had analyzed this pattern as the remnant of primordial events, van Gennep suggested its ahistorical, functional, and symbolic dimensions. His extension of the three-stage pattern beyond life-crisis rituals to rites demarcating seasonal and calendrical passages also established the pattern of a particularly effective formulation of a common structure apparently underlying all or almost all rituals, and influenced Eliade’s treatment of new year rituals of cosmic regeneration. As well, van Gennep presented a fresh analysis of the notion of the sacred, a concept common to a number of different scholarly orientations, notably those of Durkheim and Eliade. Van Gennep saw the sacred as not some sort of absolute entity or quality but as a relative one that readily shifts in different situations and at different ritual stages. What he designated as the “pivoting of the sacred” alerted scholars to the ways in which ritual can actually define what is sacred, not simply react to the sacred as something already and for always fixed.

Van Gennep’s functionalism, although implicit rather than explicit, was a powerful component of his analysis of ritual. He argued that rites of passage serve to order chaotic social changes that could threaten to disturb society. Such rites distinguish status groups with clearly marked boundaries, which contributes to the stability of social identities and roles. Rituals are the means for changing and reconstituting groups in an orderly and sanctioned manner that maintains the integrity of the system. These groups include religious associations, totem clans, exogamous kinship groups, castes, professional classes, age groups, families, the political and territorial community, the world of the living, the world before it, and the world of the dead after it. “Life itself,” wrote van Gennep, “means to separate and to reunite, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn.” These changes can occur smoothly and meaningfully as part of a larger, embracing, and reassuring pattern only by means of their orchestration as rites of passage.

In a related argument with important ramifications, van Gennep pointed out that the social changes of moving from childhood to adulthood, which are effected through formal initiation rituals, have little to do with the timing of the biological changes that accompany physical maturation. The sociocultural order of which ritual is a part is not there simply to legitimate the changes of the biological order. The sociocultural world has its own order and purposes, and they can be exercised so as to try and dominate the imperatives of biology. Van Gennep also tried to suggest the importance of rites of passage to the psychological well-being of individuals, not just the structural-functional well-being of the community as a whole. “The critical problems of becoming male and female, of relations within the family, and of passing into old age,” one commentator on van Gennep writes, “are directly related to the devices which

the society offers the individual to help him achieve the new adjustment.” Indeed, van Gennep’s theory contributed directly to the questions that have been raised about the relative lack in modern society of formal social rituals and the possible correlation of this lack with modern social ills.

In the spirit of the myth-and-ritualists, van Gennep pointed to an underlying pattern within all, or nearly all, rituals, though he argued that this three-stage pattern showed that ritual was intrinsically involved with marking and maintaining cultural notions of social order. In his demonstration of how ritual reflects “the structure of social relations and changes in those relations,” van Gennep pointed both to functional dynamics and to the contextual dynamics of meaningful symbols.