

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 12: Structuralist Approaches to Ritual 2

Following upon the work of van Gennep, today we consider the work of “structuralist” anthropologists Max Gluckman and Victor Turner.

British anthropologist Max Gluckman (d.1975) brought 2 major insights to the study of ritual; the first modified Durkheimian theory, the second modified van Gennep’s approach. Gluckman argued that Durkheim’s model of ritual as the projected expression of social cohesion and the unity of the group does not do justice to the presence, degree, and role of conflict that is always built into society. “Every social system is a field of tension, full of ambivalence, of cooperation and contrasting struggle.” Stressing the difficulty of actually achieving social unity, he suggested that rituals are really the expression of complex social tensions rather than the affirmation of social unity; the exaggerate very real social tensions that exist in the organization of social relations and then affirm unity despite these structural conflicts. He especially pointed to what he called “rituals of rebellion,” rites in which the normal rules of authority are temporarily overturned (e.g. Zulu women boldly parading around in men’s clothes at a festival, doing things usually forbidden to them in a normally patriarchal culture). Gluckman suggested such ceremonies are ritualized rebellions that channel the structural conflicts caused by men’s social subordination of women. Hence, they have the cathartic effect of releasing social tensions, thereby limiting discontent and diffusing the real threat contained in such discontent. Simultaneously, these rites function to reinforce the social status quo, since temporary inversions or suspensions of the usual order of social relations dramatically acknowledge that order as normative. Hence, for Gluckman, instead of the simple expression of social cohesion suggested by Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, ritual is the occasion to exaggerate the tensions that exist in society in order to provide a social catharsis that can simultaneously affirm unity and effect some semblance of it. The goal of ritual as such is to channel the expression of conflict in therapeutic ways so as to restore a functioning social equilibrium.

As for building upon van Gennep’s concerns, Gluckman tried to explain why some but not all social relationships required rituals of passage. He raised this issue by contrasting the greater ritualization of social transitions and relationships in tribal societies with their relative absence in modern industrial ones. In a tribal society with a subsistence economy, each social relation tends to serve many overlapping purposes and roles. In order to avoid conflicts of allegiance and competition, stylized and ceremonial techniques are used to differentiate roles and reduce tensions. Social relations in such societies are more tightly ritualized than they need to be in groups where social roles are already differentiated more mechanically. For example, some of the most ritualized roles in tribal societies are positions of authority. In these cases, “the legitimation of authority takes on a mystical character because those in authority are involved in many other relationships with their followers.” Ultimately, for Gluckman, ritual is “the symbolical enactment of social relations themselves,” in all their ambiguity, tension, and strife. In this way, he tried to link explanations of ritual to the specific context of dynamic social relations in a group.

Significantly, Gluckman’s work shifted the definition of ritual away from Durkheim’s

notion that rite was primarily concerned with religion or “the sacred.” Gluckman defined ritual as a more embracing category of social action, with religious activities at one extreme and social etiquette at the other. Thus, “ritual” could loosely refer to a wide spectrum of formalized but not necessarily religious activities. Henceforth, the study of ritual had to do with society and social relationships, not just religion or religious institutions. Moreover, ritualization came to be seen as a particular way of organizing social relationships: not simply a reflection of the structure of social relationships, ritual and structure began to be recognized as a major means of working and reworking those social relationships.

Van Gennep’s work on the structure of ritual and Gluckman’s on the ritualization of social conflict were soon developed into a powerful analytical model by Victor Turner (d.1983), an excerpt of whose work I had you read for today’s class. Turner combined a functionalist’s interest in mechanisms for maintaining social equilibrium with a more structural perspective on the organization of symbols. Like many of his colleagues, particularly Mary Douglas (who we deal with next class), Turner’s work incorporated a variety of emphases - many of which helped to generate new questions about symbolic action that pushed his inquiry well beyond the explanatory frameworks of functional and structural concerns. A former student of Radcliffe-Brown and Gluckman, Turner’s first book *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (1957) extended Gluckman’s analysis of structural conflict in social life. He argued that many forms of ritual serve as “social dramas” through which the stresses and tensions built into the social structure could be expressed and worked out. He echoed Durkheim in reiterating the role that ritual, as opposed to other forms of social action, plays in maintaining the unity of the group as a whole, but he also echoed Gluckman in stressing how ritual is a mechanism for constantly re-creating, not just reaffirming, this unity. In later studies, however, Turner went well beyond the functional model of society as a closed and atemporal structured system that, when disturbed by conflict, could be returned to harmonious stasis through ritual catharsis. His notion of social dramas led him to view social structure not as a static organization but as a dynamic process. Rituals did not simply restore social equilibrium, they were part of the ongoing process by which the community was continually redefining and renewing itself.

During his fieldwork among the Ndembu of northwestern Zambia, Turner saw periodic episodes of great tension and communal strife. Perceiving these as far from random or chaotic, he approached them as social dramas with a temporal or processual structure that could be analyzed in terms of four main stages: a breach in normal relationships, followed by an escalating sense of crisis, which calls for redressive action, and eventually culminates in activities of reintegration of the alienated or social recognition of their separate status. This appeal to an underlying temporal structure within social processes was developed in his later use of van Gennep’s three-stage sequence of separation, transition, and reincorporation. Turner recast this sequence into a more fundamental dialectic between the social order (structure) and a period of social disorder and liminality (antistructure) that he termed *communitas*. Rituals, he argued, affirm the social order while facilitating disordered inversions of that order: through such inversions, the original order is simultaneously legitimated and modified - either in its basic structure or by moving people from one status to another.

In a number of studies, Turner focused on the transition stage, a period of liminality and *communitas* that is “betwixt and between” the structure of society at the beginning of the ritual

and the structure of society that is affirmed at the end. In analyzing the elaborated transition stages found in initiation rites, Turner interpreted the symbolism as expressing ambiguity and paradox: the initiates are simultaneously treated as if they are neither dead nor alive, yet also as if they are both dead and alive. Thus, young boys undergoing tribal initiation might be treated as polluted corpses or helpless fetuses in positions of burial not unlike those of gestation. Their names are taken from them and countless other details express “a confusion of all the customary categories” of the culture. For the duration of this stage of the ritual process, the initiates “have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows.” They are effectively outside the structure or organization of society, in a state of liminality or antistructure, which nonetheless fosters an intense experience of community among them. In fact, Turner compares the lifelong ties forged by this initiation experience to those established by fraternities and sororities on American college campuses or the graduates of the same class from naval or military academies in Europe. At the conclusion of this stage, initiates are reborn into a new position in the social hierarchy, given names or titles, and expected to assume the appropriate responsibilities and uphold the social structure of which they are now integral parts. From this, Turner inferred that “for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality...the opposites, as it were, constitute each other and are mutually indispensable.” Hence, not only does ritual involve orchestrated sequences of structural order and antistructural *communitas*, so does social life itself. The experience of order and structure in society must be balanced, he suggested, by the experiences of an underlying ethos of sacrality, egalitarian unity, inversion, danger, and creative forces for renewal.

Turner saw ritual as the means for acting out social conflicts in a series of activities through which people experience the authority and flexibility of the social order, the liminality and bonds of egalitarian *communitas*, and the passage from an old place in the social order to a new status in a reconstituted order. He went beyond some of the limits of Gluckman’s model by arguing that as social dramas rituals do not simply release emotional tensions in a cathartic easing of social tensions. Instead, rites depict, act out, or otherwise give form to conflicts and the dominant values holding the group together. Ritual dramatizes the real situation, and it is through this dramatization that ritual does what it alone does.

Aside from this focus on social dramas, Turner also attempted to articulate what ritual does as precisely as possible through a close analysis of ritual symbols. In a series of studies of the complex symbols and symbol systems invoked in Ndembu rites, he drew attention to the dynamic qualities of symbols, rejecting the more static approach represented, say, by the structural studies of Claude Levi-Strauss. Symbols are not timeless entities projected by society and reflecting the forms of social organization, he argued. Originating in and sustaining the dynamics of social relationships, they do not have a fixed meaning; they can condense many meanings together. Inherently “multivocal,” symbols must be interpreted in terms of the variety of positions they can occupy in relation to each other in systems of symbols. When temporarily isolated, however, Turner found symbols to be structurally bipolar, referring to sensory experiences on the one hand and ideological or normative values on the other. A good example is the “milk tree” used in a Ndembu girl’s initiation ceremony. When scratched, the tree exudes a milky white latex that explains why the Ndembu associate the tree with breast-feeding, with the

mother who feeds, and with the swelling of a young girl's breasts. Yet these sensory aspects of the tree symbol are only part of its significance, Turner argues. By virtue of these properties, the tree also stands for the normative values of matriliney, which is the basic principle of Ndembu society structure, for tribal traditions, and ultimately "for the unity and continuity of Ndembu society." However, in other contexts or even in the same extended ritual, the milk tree can play other roles, such as signifying the tension between the initiate's mother (familial claims) and all the other women of the tribe (social claims).

The mobilization of such symbols in ritual involves a dynamic exchange between their two poles: the orchestration of the sensory experiences associated with such symbols can effectively embed their allied ideological values into people's consciousnesses, endowing the ideological with sensory power and the sensory with moral power. Wrapped in a blanket at the base of the tree, the Ndembu girl is said to "swallow instruction" as a baby swallows milk. What she swallows, of course, is instruction in tribal matters, values and images. In this way, Turner argued, the ritual provides tangible and compelling personal experiences of the rightness and naturalness of the group's moral values. It makes these values the stuff of one's own experience of the world. Ritual, for Turner, is a "mechanism that periodically converts the obligatory into the desirable." The symbol is the heart and soul of this ritual mechanism; it is the irreducible unit of ritual activity.

In Turner's analysis, symbols like the milk tree do not simply reflect Ndembu social values or express emotions of Ndembu communal solidarity. While the effects of ritual explored by the functionalists are not wrong, he argued, they do not give due weight to how symbols generate a system of meanings within which people act, think, and feel. Turner eventually came to a very different position on the origins of symbols than did Durkheim and most functionalists. For example, Durkheim and Mauss had argued that the organization of the social group is the source of symbols and schemes of symbolic classifications, which are applied even to one's understanding of the body. Turner argued the opposite: that the human body is the source of symbols and systems of symbols, which are extended outward to organize and understand the social world. Among the most basic human symbols is the set of three colors composed of white, red and black, representing the products of the human body: milk or semen, blood, and feces or decayed matter. Those situations in which these products are spilled from the body are ones of heightened emotion. Rooted in the body and associated with strong emotional experiences (in a way that spittle is not, for example), these colors (with their associated body products and experiences) are extended to organize other realms, such as physical drives (hunger, lust, aggression, excretion, etc.) or social relationships (children, spouses, enemies, ancestral dead, etc.). Through such networks of connections, the body becomes the basis for a cultural system for classifying the full gamut of social experience. "In contrast to Durkheim's notion that the social relations of mankind are not based on the logical relations of things but have served as the prototypes of the latter...I would postulate that the human organism and its crucial experiences are the (source and origin) of all classifications." Rituals like the Ndembu girl's initiation ceremony exploit the depth, complexity and flexibility of these symbolic systems.

Turner's work is full of insights that were developed in a variety of interdependent directions. His rich ethnographic accounts of tribal personalities and political maneuvering prompted more attention to forms of network analysis, social strategies, and game theory. His

emphasis on how ritual does what it does by means of a process of dramatization led him and other scholars to explore ritual as performance. In addition, his interpretive approach to symbols as an ambiguous and suggestive language for communicating complex ideas and attitudes about social structure led many to abandon some of the more rigid suppositions of functionalist-structuralist theory.