

## S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

### Lecture 13: Structuralist Approaches to Ritual 3

Today we move on from the work of van Gennep and Turner to introduce further structuralist developments in the study of ritual. In particular, we briefly introduce the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, turn to outline Mary Douglas' grid-group approach, and close by considering the related work of Edmund Leach.

Functionalism generated a number of concerns in the late 1950's and early 1960's about aspects of the structural organization of societies, ritual activities, and cultural symbols that functionalism itself was unable to answer. These created a receptive climate for a rather different form of analysis known as "structuralism," propounded by French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. He produced a series of studies that began by analyzing the structure of kinship systems, paused to reinterpret totemism, and ultimately yielded a massive four-volume study of mythology entitled *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*. In an earlier work, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, he argued that behind the great multitude of kinship practices there were a few principles or rules based on the reciprocal exchange of women between male lineages that were forbidden to marry their own women. From these principles, he formulated a small number of models that underlie, he argued, the diversity of the kinship systems known to us. Ultimately, he regarded all social phenomena like kinship, myth, or ritual as symbolic systems of communication, deriving from and shaped by the structures of thought rooted in the human brain. Hence, in a clearly anti-Durkheimian position, Levi-Strauss argued that the relationships of symbols orchestrated in these systems are not reflective of social structure. Rather, human beings impose these symbolic systems on social relations in order to structure and organize them. For Levi-Strauss, social structure does not exist out there in the observable world of human interaction so much as it exists in the unconscious processes of human thought.

From this perspective, Levi-Strauss offered a very different interpretation of the old problem of totemism, which had been central to the ritual theories of Robertson Smith, Durkheim, Freud, and many of their disciples. Instead of a mystical communion and confusion of humans and animals, Levi-Strauss saw totemism as evidence for how cultural classification systems are rooted in a particular cognitive process. First, by virtue of structures of binary opposition within the brain, human beings oppose the cultural world to the natural world. Then, a natural classification system drawn from the world around them - specifically, the relationships among animals - is applied to the world of culture in order to organize, elucidate, and legitimate its sociocultural relationships. Levi-Strauss argued that totemism is a matter of representing each human social grouping or clan by a distinct animal species, with the "natural" relationships among the animal species providing a way of thinking about the relationships among human social clans. In other words, the relationship between an animal and a particular social group is not one of mystical communion but one of logical analogy: "the term totemism covers relations, posed ideologically, between two series, one *natural*, the other *cultural*." The contrast between nature and culture, he avowed, is the most fundamental of the binary oppositions that organize human thought. In this way, Levi-Strauss analyzed conceptual systems like totemism as linguistic codes that communicated in the same way that a spoken language communicated, that is, by virtue of binary oppositions - a revolutionary view of language developed in the work of

linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (d.1913).

In analyzing ritual, Levi-Strauss tended to oppose it to myth, casting the two as contrasting processes, one verbal, the other non-verbal: myth as a matter of content, ritual as a matter of form. He saw the mythical process as one that “turns away from the continuous to segment and break down the world by means of distinctions, contrasts and oppositions.” The ritual process, however, attempts to take “the discrete units” created by mythical thinking and pull them back together as best in can into an experience of reality as continuous and seamless. For Levi-Strauss, the experiential impossibility of ever reconstituting the seamless whole that myth had fractured and broken apart accounts for the “stubbornness and ineffectiveness” seen in the “desperate, maniacal aspects of ritual.” Hence, he concluded, ritual is not a reaction to the world, emotional or otherwise, nor an enactment of the conceptual categories of the cultural group found in myth. Instead, it is a reaction to what thought and myth have done to the world, a rather doomed attempt to restore a mindless continuity to experience. Such a description hardly amounts to a real theory of ritual, and Levi-Strauss was not especially concerned to develop one; he was content to see ritual primarily as a foil to myth. Nonetheless, his structural method for analyzing myth greatly influenced scholars who were very concerned with ritual, particularly Mary Douglas and Edmund Leach.

Like Turner, British anthropologist Mary Douglas - who I had you read an excerpt from for today's class - also developed a special functional-structuralist approach that has had a major impact on ritual theory. Her 1970 study *Natural Symbols* presented a useful extension of Turner's notions of structure and antistructure in contrasting degrees of *grid* and *group* in society. “Grid” refers to the strength of the rules governing the interrelationship of individual roles and formal positions in society, while “group” refers to the strength of people's associations as a tightly knit or closed community. “Grid is order, classification, the symbolic system. Group is pressure, the experience of having no option but to consent to the overwhelming demands of other people.” Douglas used two intersecting axes to chart the degree of grid and group, generating four quadrants to correspond to four hypothetical types of societies: (1) strong grid and strong group; (2) strong grid but weak group; (3) weak grid and strong group; and (4) weak grid and weak group (see diagram). She argued that societies with strong grid or strong group exert a great deal of control over individuals and are marked by a fair amount of ritual activity; societies with weak grid or weak group exert less control, have less ritual, and allow for more individualism.

Douglas' analysis tended to support Turner's idea that ritual provides a reinforcement of both gridlike structure and grouplike, anistructural experiences of *communitas*. Indeed, her system is able to correlate, to an unprecedented extent, the degree of ritualization in a society, its general patterns of social organization and worldview, and a variety of other social attitudes toward such things as the body, god, sin, and sorcery.

Although she never departed from a fundamentally Durkheimian position on the origin of symbolic systems in the forms of social organization, Douglas also effectively replicated many aspects of Levi-Strauss's work. “Ritual,” she argued, “is pre-eminently a form of communication,” and, like speech, it is generated from social relations and exercises in turn a “constraining effect on social behavior.” For Douglas, the symbolic communication of ritual

activity always reproduces the real social relations among human beings, as seen in her most “structural” interpretations of purity and pollution, food taboos in the biblical book of Leviticus, and the organization of a normal meal. However, Douglas’ British colleague Edmund Leach (d.1989) went further in applying Levi-Strauss’s structural linguistics to anthropological issues, especially in a small book entitled *Culture and Communication: The Logic by Which Symbols are Connected*. Leach used a structural focus on binary oppositions to re-analyze rites of passage, such as those discussed by van Gennep and Turner, and ritual sacrifice, such as the animal offerings of the Nuer explored by Evans-Pritchard. Yet, in contrast to the binary oppositions isolated by Levi-Strauss, Leach emphasized the role of mediating or liminal categories in keeping with the notion of the liminal (threshold) stage in ritual described by van Gennep and Turner. This liminal state mediates old and new positions in the social order; in a similar way, the activities of the sacrifice mediate the realms of the human world and the other world of the gods. For Leach, rituals help sustain a neat, synchronic conceptual system by making it possible for distinct categories - like the sacred and the profane, the natural and the cultural - to impinge on each other in carefully circumscribed ways. Ritual is a form of non-verbal communication, but, like linguistic communication, its signs and symbols have meaning only by virtue of their place in systems of relationships with other symbols. Although ritual conveys information about the most basic conceptual categories and ordering systems of the social group, it is used primarily to transform one category into another while maintaining the integrity of the categories and the system as a whole. In other words, only ritual can transform a boy or a girl into an adult, an animal into a gift for the gods, and the realm of the gods into a presence responsive to human needs while still maintaining all the boundaries that enable these categories to organize reality. In effect, Leach re-described van Gennep’s basic points in a Levi-Strauss fashion.

In sum, structuralism grew out of a functional concern with the organization of social groups which tended to see ideas, values, theologies, and symbols as direct or indirect projections of this social organization. However, this direct or indirect connection between social organization and cultural ideas became hard to demonstrate in a convincing fashion. Structuralism emerged as the attempt to pursue what increasingly appeared to be the autonomous order of cultural values, symbols, beliefs, and practices. This would not do. Thus, no longer did theorists assume that a symbol was a projection of some social relationship. Rather, a symbol was seen to have no fixed meaning in itself or in relation to a fixed social reality; its meaning depended on how it was grouped with other symbols. The syntactical grouping of symbols in structured relationships, interconnecting systems, and elaborate classification systems made it clear that this realm of symbols had a much more complicated relationship with social organization and action than functionalism had surmised. While Turner and Douglas began to expound more structural understandings of functionalism, Leach’s work was particularly instrumental in demonstrating structuralism’s potential for analyzing ritual.