

## S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

### Lecture 15: Culture, Symbolic Systems, and Action 2

Now that we have introduced the culturalist approach to symbolic systems and ritual, we will conclude this section by briefly reviewing the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his place among other anthropologists of this school.

Geertz made many of the ideas found in the works of Levi-Strauss and Leach more explicit and concrete in his extensive treatment of ritual. He described religion as a cultural system, that is, a system of symbols that influences people's feelings and motivations by formulating coherent conceptions of the general order of existence. The symbols of religious beliefs and the symbolic activities of religious ritual constitute a system of values that acts as both "a model of" the way things actually are and "a model for" how they should be. With this famous formulation, Geertz attempted to describe how the symbols and activities of ritual can project idealized images that reflect the actual social situation, on the one hand, yet also act as a template for reshaping or redirecting the social situation, on the other. Hence, for Geertz, the symbolic system that constitutes culture is neither a mere reflection of the social structure nor totally independent of it. It always exists in response to the problems of meaning that arise in real human experiences, such as the problems of evil and suffering. When lived out in ritual, such a symbolic system provides an embracing world-view (a coherent framework of general ideas) and induces an ethos (a set of moods and motivations). It is in ritual, he suggests, that images and attitudes about the nature of existence are fused with one's actual experiences of the realities of existence: "in a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world."

A similar formulation of the workings of ritual as a symbolic system is offered by anthropologist Nancy Munn, who describes ritual as a "symbolic intercom between the level of cultural thought and complex cultural meanings, on the one hand, and that of social action and the immediate event, on the other." How does such an intercom work? Munn contends that ritual symbolism and activities draw upon a cultural code or lexicon of categories that refer to various set areas of experience in a particular society, such as categories for types of persons, deities, and bodily experiences. As part of the cultural code, these categories are organized according to patterns of opposition (e.g. human vs. divine, male vs. female, hot vs. cold, etc.) and associative clusters (e.g. water, fertility, female, nourishment, in one cluster). Ritual manipulates part of this cultural code, recombining categories and clusters in various ways in order to communicate convincing interpretations of real life situations (e.g. death as a passage, god as dangerous, or women as weak). In this way, ritual connects interrelated ideas that express values basic to social life, but does so by objectifying those values in symbols that are emotionally experienced by participants in the ritual.

Culturalists not only broke with functionalists by analyzing culture as a relatively independent and language-like system of symbols, they also attempted to talk about social and cultural change. Functionalists had treated the system as more or less static in order to try to grasp its structural patterns of organization. They were only secondarily concerned with how those structural patterns changed over time. Yet the idea that ritual mediates the interaction of

two levels, cultural ideas and social experience, gave theorists a means of depicting change as a constant process. Victor Turner had been very concerned to explain how ritual facilitates both the continuity and the redressive transformation of social structures. Geertz gave ritual a similarly important place as a mechanism for sociocultural change, but a somewhat different description of how it works. In Geertz's description, ritual enables a group's ethos and world-view - that is, their attitudes and their general concepts of world order (their experiences and their ideals) - to temper and nuance each other. It is a mechanism for the ongoing processes of adaptation and renewal that constitute communities, and plays a crucial role in the way in which the socio-cultural holism of a living community works. Geertz implicitly contrasted his approach with functionalist analyses when he argued that religion is sociologically interesting not because it describes the social order but because it shapes it. He demonstrates this point in a description of the Balinese rite of combat between the witch Rangda, who is the embodiment of fear and horror, and the foolish but lovable monster Barong, who expresses narcissistic playfulness. Geertz points out that these two characters are not representations but powerful presences that draw the crowd into dramatic experiences of participation in the struggle. In other words, Rangda and Barong do not simply reflect the audience's experiences of life, they effectively help to fashion them.

In another ethnographic example, which I had you read for today's class, Geertz described the ritual intricacies and significance of cockfighting in Bali, where, despite its illegality, it is as central to Balinese culture as baseball is to American culture. While cockfighting evokes concerns with status, money, virility, and pride, these rituals do not functionally affect anyone's actual social status or significantly redistribute income (as functionalists might suggest). What the emotion-laden contest does is "render ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible" by depicting it in terms of activities for which the practical consequences have been removed or minimized to patterns of appearances. When represented in the ritual of cockfighting, the meaning of everyday experience is "more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived." It is, Geertz concludes, a Balinese interpretation of Balinese social experience, "a story they tell themselves about themselves." Cockfights provide people with the imagery and cultural codes with which to conceptualize, order, and reinterpret their own experiences. With this approach, Geertz effectively argues not just for the importance of ritual to what cultural life is all about, but also for the importance of a focus on ritual when interpreting culture. He concluded his analysis of the cockfight with two observations that went beyond his earlier formulations and suggested new directions in analyzing ritual. First, he observed that anthropological analysis parallels the interpretation of a text: "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts" that the anthropologist is trying to read over their shoulders. Second, he argued that the function, so to speak, of the rite is not to heighten or resolve social passions, as Gluckman or Turner might have claimed, but simply to "display" them. These two images, that of textual analysis and that of display, have been developed further by other ritual theorists.

The idea of a language-like system of symbols fueled various other forms of symbolic analysis. Studies of the "language" of the food offerings made to south Indian gods or the "message" of the spirit money offerings made to Chinese deities, ancestors, and ghosts are but two examples. In the latter case, Chinese gods are offered gold spirit money, of which there are various kinds which correspond to the three main classes of the celestial bureaucracy according to Chinese folk religion. The ancestors are offered silver money, and ghosts are given copper

cash. The value of the offerings to any one group is a function of that group's place in the whole system of offerings. Likewise, the system of offerings communicates messages about the relative status of the invisible recipient, effectively distinguishing among groups of spirits that have different relationships with the living. Within this ritualized semantic system of money offerings, alterations in what is offered to any particular type of spirit can affect that spirit's place in the hierarchy of gods, ancestors, and ghosts. An ancestor offered only copper cash is likely to become as problematic as any ghost, while a demonic spirit to whom gold "god" money is sacrificed is likely to grow in stature and power until she or he can confer godlike blessings upon those who make the offerings.

### **Relation to Linguistics:**

For Geertz, as well as for Leach and Turner, ritual is a suggestive language for communicating statements about structural relationships, but each theorist developed this idea in a distinctive way. Geertz and Turner focused more on the interaction of social experience and cultural symbols, while Leach emphasized more purely linguistic features in an attempt to formulate the rules that govern the orchestration of a ritual sequence in the same way that rules of grammar govern a verbal sequence (Levi-Strauss virtually took social structural relationships out of this altogether with his emphasis on the structure of symbolic systems rooted in the brain). The Geertz-Turner style of anthropological interpretation has been labeled "symbolic," "semantic," or "semiotic" because it is concerned with interpreting the meaning of statements, activities, and events. Geertz himself wrote that "the concept of culture I espouse...is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be, therefore, not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." In contrast, Leach's direct appeal to the field of linguistics as a model, a direction developed more fully by others, has been labeled "syntactical" since its concerns are analogous to a focus on the pattern or structure of word order in a sentence. This type of linguistic approach has aimed at a more scientific and less "interpretive" methodology. That is, it has tended to avoid interpretation in favor of explanation, prefer efficacy to meaning, favor syntax to semantics and semiology. Such theorists do not so much ask what ritual expresses or means; instead, they ask what the grammatical rules are that generate and structure ritual as a form of communication.