

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 17:Ritual and Practice

Beyond performance theory, the 1970's saw the emergence of several formulations of human action as *praxis* or “practice,” a term that has usurped structure as the dominant image for cultural analysis. Practice theories share a number of concerns with performance theory, particularly the critique of purely structural or semiotic approaches to account for historical change, action as action, and acting individuals as bodies and not just minds. Contrasting with the static view of structuralism (which tends to see human activity as enacting cultural rules), practice theory claims to take seriously the way that human activities, whether formal religious ritual or casual recreational activities, are creative strategies by which humans continually reproduce and reshape their social and cultural environments.

Practice theory also deals with issues that differentiate it from performance theory. Thus, it is less interested in specific types of acts, such as ritual or dance, and more in how cultural activity in general works. Still, some do address ritual and cast it as “paradigmatic” activity, activity that particularly showcases cultural patterns. Many are concerned with analyzing large processes of historical and cultural change, often developing models of the interaction of human action, needs and experiences, on one hand, with traditional cultural structures, organizational patterns, and symbolic systems, on the other. Secondly, practice theorists are particularly interested in the political dimensions of social relationships, especially with how patterns of domination and subordination are variously constituted, manipulated, or resisted. Indeed, practice theory emerged together with greater attention to the lingering effects of colonialism, the political ramifications of cross-cultural encounters, and the various effects of economic and cultural domination.

In several highly theoretical ethnographic studies, Marshall Sahlins developed a provocative model of the cultural practices involved in ritual activity. He argued that practice brings together structure and history, system and event, continuity and change. Thus ritual enables enduring patterns of social organization while cultural symbolic systems can be brought to bear on real events. In the meantime, real situations are assessed and negotiated in ways that can transform these traditional patterns or structures in turn. For Sahlins, human action is critical in the shaping of culture and history, and he has sought the theoretical tools that can display this. One of his ethnographies discusses the death of explorer Captain James Cook at the hands of Hawaiians who, he claims, mistook Cook as one of their more important gods. Sahlins argues that Cook’s death resulted from his transgressions of the ritual status the Hawaiians had accorded him. Killing him was an active response to a cosmological crisis and not the mere reproduction of prescriptive rules or structures. As such, it was an act of performative tradition, or practice, and thus the very creation of history.

For Sahlins, the traditional formality and self-consciousness of ritual make it a type of human practice in which basic cultural processes are particularly accessible to observation and analysis. Also, in some societies dominated by traditional forms of kingship, ritual activities appear central to cultural life in general. Hence, ritual can serve as a convenient example of the forces shaping all forms of social action. Sahlins tries to show how ritual creates a meaningful

event out of a new and potentially incomprehensible situation, namely by bringing traditional structures to bear on it. If done effectively, ritual action enables those structures to embrace and subdue the new situation, rendering it meaningful and enabling the structures themselves to continue to thrive as legitimate, appropriate, and relatively unaltered. If a situation resists the ritual formulas brought in to interpret it - if someone is hailed as a king but does not act like one - then those structures must be reinterpreted and perhaps altered. For Sahlins, the application of cultural structures to new situations, most readily observed in ritual action, is the very process of history itself. Thus, he rejects those notions of history that view it as a descriptive account or consciousness of events unfolding through a neutral duration of time. Rather, he argues that history is the way in which cultural traditions appropriate new situations. Like other practice theorists, he sees people as making their own history in their own cultural fashion - and ritual as a frequently central instance of this activity.

A different approach is taken by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who has proposed a formal “theory of practice.” While Sahlins looks to history to provide the dynamic missing in more static structural analyses and ends up redefining history in terms of activities, Bourdieu goes further by redefining both history and structure in terms of the dynamics of cultural action. In other words, ritual does not actually bring history and structure together since neither exist except insofar as they are embodied and reproduced in human activity as cultural values. For Bourdieu, these values are embodied and reproduced by means of strategies of human practice that are rarely conscious or explicit. Thus, the theorist must focus on the acts themselves, not on abstractions like “structure” or “historical process.” Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to designate human activity in its real and immediate context (i.e. as the set of dispositions by which people give shape to social traditions; the structured and determined attitudes that produce structuring and determining practices). In a key passage, Bourdieu argues that one should not approach a myth as some object complete in itself and lying open to analysis, nor as some sort of poetic form of subjectivity. “To confront the act itself,” in this case the act of myth-making, one must address the principle underlying all practices, which is “the socially informed body.”

While Bourdieu only briefly analyzes specific ritual practices, he argues that ritual is generally not a matter of following rules. He characterizes rituals as strategic practices for transgressing and reshuffling cultural categories in order to meet the needs of real situations. Thus, among the Kabyle of Algeria, the rites of plowing or marriage “have the function of disguising and thereby sanctioning the inevitable collision of two contrary principles that the peasant brings about in forcing nature.” When that which nature has divided or united, according to the cultures classifications of the natural, must be changed or reversed, it is ritual that neutralizes the dangers associated with such sacrilege. By means of its collective, public, and carefully delegated forms of authority, plus complex and judiciously euphemized symbolism, ritual can sanction - or even deny - the sacrilege in the very act of committing it. Among the Kabyle, deflowering a bride, plowing the first furrow, cutting the last thread in weaving, or harvesting the last sheaf all presuppose an ordered set of cultural categories that both *should not* be violated yet *must* be violated. Bourdieu says ritual licenses these violations even as it reinforces the underlying sense of order that the violation transgresses. It affirms the differences and boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human. Yet it is in ritual that these differences and boundaries are permitted, for a few minutes, to break down.

In another example, Bourdieu exposes rituals of gift-giving to challenge explicitly structuralist models of ritual where gift-giving establishes an ordered system of reciprocity and communication. Bourdieu shows that giving and receiving gifts involves complex strategies of challenge, domination and honor: “To reduce to the function of communication...phenomena such as the dialectic of challenge and riposte and, more generally, the exchange of gifts, words, or women, is to ignore the structural ambivalence which predisposes them to fulfil a political function of domination in and through performance of the communication function.” Hence, the ritual exchange of gifts is not primarily the communication of messages about the social order. In practice, such ritualized exchanges are ways of establishing political dominance through what appear to be overtly fair exchange. Ritual is a tool for social and cultural jockeying; it is a performance medium for the negotiation of power in relationships.

Maurice Bloch is another theorist who explored how ritual goes about actually constructing authority, ideology and power. He analyzed the restricted linguistic codes used in ritual to generate hierarchical structures of authority that appear to be sanctified by tradition. He emphasized the contrast between ritual and other activities by arguing that ritual produces distinctly ideological forms of knowledge in tension with the more purely cognitive forms rooted in day to day behavior. Bloch concludes that ritual is not a necessary dimension of everyday life, rather, as a type of ideological mystification, it is “the exercise of a particular form of power,” a form that makes “a power situation appear a fact in the nature of the world.”

Two other influential analyses of ritual as practice have developed this connection with power. Both understand ritual to be the means for mediating enduring cultural structures and the current situation. It is through ritual practice that both see culture molding consciousness in terms of underlying structures and patterns, while current realities simultaneously instigate transformations of those very structures and patterns. The ritual life of a people is the sphere where such accommodations take place. Thus Sherry Ortner studied Sherpa culture in Nepal, both in relation to the rites of daily life and the political activities involved in the founding of Buddhist temples. She attempts to describe a dynamic cultural process by which human activities reproduce cultural structures in strategically reshaped ways. While she examines activities outside of most formal definitions of ritual, she vividly illustrates the ways in which human practices produce and negotiate relationships of power. Secondly, Jean Comaroff studied changes and political tensions in the post-colonial ritual life among Zionist churches of the Tshidi of South Africa. She attempted to uncover some of the complex negotiations of power involved in ritual activity. She argues that the Zionist synthesis of Tshidi tradition and Christian rites of healing is not a passive accommodation of colonialism but a set of highly coded efforts to control key symbols and defy the hegemonic order of colonialism. Ritual, she suggests, is “a struggle for the possession of the sign.”

Anthropologist Talal Asad explicitly addresses the need to move from “reading symbols” to analyzing practices. The former suggests that culture exists as some separate dimension, while the latter recognizes the fact that cultural values and meanings exist only insofar as they are embodied in what people do. Yet he distinguishes his approach from those above by virtue of a comprehensive perspective addressing two fresh themes: the historicity of the concept of ritual and the involvement of this concept in practices that structure very wide-ranging power relationships. Thus, he contrasts the medieval Christian concept of rites for developing virtue (an

understanding of ritual in terms of discipline and morality) with the modern concept of rites as symbolic action (in societies where formal matters, not discipline, are deemed necessary to social morality). In various historical and ethnographic studies, Asad finds different “technologies of power” behind culturally distinctive constructions of the self, society, and the cosmos. Indeed, he argues that the whole modern perspective on ritual as symbolic activity is itself another historically shaped organization of power, one that is intimately linked to very modern Western assumptions about self and the state. The “fundamental disparities” among various historical forms of so-called ritual activity lead him to conclude that the inadequacies of a single category like “ritual” to describe them all is further evidence of the politically and culturally hegemonic functions of the term. Hence he warns against the normative application of concepts rooted in Christian history and organizations of power.

Catherine Bell, in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, proposed a more systematic treatment of ritual as a form of cultural practice. She critiqued earlier theories of ritual under two headings: (1) the over-determined circularity of theoretical discourse on ritual; and (2) the problems of defining ritual as either a distinct and autonomous set of activities or an aspect of all activity.

Under the first heading, Bell argues the logic underlying most theoretical discussions of ritual depends on a dichotomization of thought and action. While this facilitates a focus on action per se and on ritual as a type of action, it structures the whole discussion of ritual around a series of oppositions, including an opposition between the theorist and the ritual actors. Ritual comes to be understood as something that mediates or integrates all of these oppositions, as the socio-cultural mechanism by which cultural ideas (thought) and social dispositions (action) are integrated, on the one hand, and as the phenomenon that affords theorists (thought) special access to the dynamics of culture (action) on the other. In effect, “the theoretical construction of ritual becomes a reflection of the theorist’s method and the motor of a discourse in which the concerns of the theorist take center stage.”

Secondly, there are the dilemmas that attend two major ways of defining ritual, either as a distinctive and essentially different set of paradigmatic activities, or as a set of qualities found to some degree in all activity. Either can get bogged down in elaborate sets of categories and problematic distinctions between utilitarian and non-utilitarian action that end up with ritual action as expressive, non-instrumental, or irrational. These features are likely to have little to do with the categories relevant to ritual actors themselves, and tend to invoke, moreover, methods of analysis that analyze action as the execution of a conceptual program. Hence, the very nature of activity and practice is lost.

Bell proposed a more systematic framework for analyzing ritual as practice. First, she notes human practice in general has some common features: it is situational, strategic, apt to misrecognize the relationship between its ends and means in ways that promote its efficacy, and it is motivated by what can be called “redemptive hegemony,” a construal of reality as ordered in such a way as to allow some advantageous ways of acting. Given these features, what sort of practice is ritual? Clearly it is not the same thing everywhere; it can vary in every feature. As practice, the most we can say is that it involves ritualization, a way of acting that distinguishes itself from other ways of acting in the very way it does what it does; moreover, it makes this distinction for specific purposes. A practice approach to ritual will first address how a particular

community or culture ritualizes (what characteristics of acting make strategic distinctions between these acts and others) and then address when and why ritualization is deemed to be the effective thing to do. Exploring some limited generalizations about how people ritualize, Bell focused on the oppositional schemes that are mobilized as the body moves through space and time. These schemes are generated by the gestures and sounds of the body and act to qualitatively structure the physical environment. In this process, some schemes come to dominate others in a seemingly natural chain of association. The structured environment provides those in it with an experience of the objective reality of the schemes. The agents of ritualization do not see how they project this schematically qualified environment or how they re-embody those same schemes through the physical experience of moving about within its spatial and temporal dimensions. The goal of ritualization as such is completely circular: the creation of a ritualized agent, an actor with a form of ritual mastery, who embodies flexible sets of cultural schemes and can deploy them effectively in multiple situations so as to restructure those situations in practical ways. Among the most important strategies of ritualization is the inherent flexibility of the degree of ritualization invoked.

In her practice approach to ritualization, Bell sees the following points as most central. First, ritual should be analyzed and understood in its real context, which is the full spectrum of ways of acting in any given culture - not as some a priori category of action totally independent of other forms of action. Only in this context can the theorist-observer attempt to understand how and why people choose to differentiate some activities from others. In this way, the focus is less a matter of clear and autonomous rites than the methods, traditions, and strategies of "ritualization." Secondly, the most subtle and central quality of those actions we tend to call ritual is the primacy of the body moving about within a specially constructed space, simultaneously defining (imposing) and experiencing (receiving) the values ordering the environment. Hence, the body movements of ritually knowledgeable agents actually define the special qualities of the environment, yet the agents understand themselves as reacting or responding to this environment. They do not see how they have created the environment that is impressing itself on them but assume, simply in how things are done, that forces from beyond the immediate situation are shaping the environment and its activities in fundamental ways. Thus, thirdly, ritualization is a way of acting that tends to promote the authority of forces deemed to derive from beyond the immediate situation. For example, participants may embody and deploy various schemes for molding an environment, and experiences within it, according to values that differentiate the sacred as autonomous and eternal and transcendent. The result is a ritualized agent who has acquired an instinctive knowledge of schemes that can be used to order his or her experience so as to render it more or less coherent with these ritual values concerning the sacred. Effectively, the real principles of ritual practice are nothing other than the flexible sets of schemes and strategies acquired and deployed by an agent who has embodied them. This type of analysis of ritual practice affords us the opportunity of analyzing more or less effective rituals, the various schemes of ritualization that are invoked, and the great diversity of cultural schemes and styles of ritualization. It is less concerned with the issues of social control that most other theories of ritual address, and more concerned with mapping the orchestration of complex relationships of power - especially how the power at stake is deemed to be nonhuman or non-immediate (god, tradition, virtue, etc) and is made amenable to some degree of individual and communal appropriation.

Practice theory makes it possible to focus more directly on what people do and how they do it. It involves less preliminary commitment to some overarching notion of ritual in general. It assumes that what is meant by ritual may not be a way of acting that is the same for all times and places. Ritual, or ritualization, may be best defined in culturally specific ways since cultures, and even subcultures, differentiate among their actions in distinctive ways. Thus, a universal definition of ritual can obscure how and why people produce ritualized actions; it certainly obscures one of the most decisive aspects of ritual as a strategic way of acting, the sheer degree of ritualization that is invoked. For these reasons, Bell argues practice theory today seems to offer greater opportunity to formulate the more subtle ways in which power is recognized and diffused, interpretations are negotiated, and people struggle to make more embracing meanings personally effective.

In sum, the study of ritual as practice has meant a basic shift from looking at activity as the expression of cultural patterns to looking at it as that which makes and harbors such patterns. In this view, ritual is more complex than the mere communication of meanings and values in specific ways. Hence, rather than ritual as the vehicle for the *expression* of authority, practice theorists tend to explore how ritual is a vehicle for the *construction* of relationships of authority and submission. Most practice theories also share a number of assumptions that follow from this basic orientation. First, they attempt to see ritual as part of a historical process in which past patterns are reproduced but also reinterpreted or transformed. In this sense, ritual is often depicted as a central arena for cultural mediation, the means by which various combinations of structure and history, past and present, meanings and needs, are brought together in terms of each other. Ritual provides an appropriate medium through which the values and structures of a contradictory world may be addressed and manipulated. The ability to address and manipulate them is the power to define what is real and to shape how people behave. Secondly, practice theories are explicitly concerned with what rituals do, not just what they mean, particularly the way they construct and inscribe power relationships. Third, there is human agency, how persons in their everyday production of goods and meanings, acquiesce yet protest, reproduce yet seek to transform their predicament. Basic to this concern is a focus on the physical mind-body holism as the primary medium for the deployment and embodiment of everyday schemes of physical action and cultural values - as in the arrangement of a home or the orchestration of a game - that are the means by which culture is reproduced and individual categories of experience are forged. Finally, implicitly or explicitly, many practice theories suggest the value of jettisoning the category of ritual as a necessary first step in opening up the particular logic and strategy of cultural practices.