

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 18: Rites of Exchange and Communion

Now that we have finished our review of ritual theory, and listened to guest speakers regarding rites of passage and calendrical rites, it is time to consider, throughout the remainder of this course, various specific types of ritual activity. Today we will consider rites of exchange and communion.

Some of the best-known religious rituals involve people making offerings to a god or gods with the pragmatic expectation of getting something in return (e.g. specific as a good harvest/life or general as redemption). Referred to as “the gift theory” by Tylor, direct offerings may be given to praise, please, and placate divine power, or they may involve an explicit exchange where humans provide sustenance to divine powers in return for divine contributions to human well-being (e.g. food such as a sacrificial animal, some of which is left while the rest eaten communally).

Repeated attempts have been made to organize such rituals logically. Some researchers have tried to distinguish gifts, offerings, and sacrifices, each signifying a different kind of human-divine interaction and social organization. Others laid out a continuum of ritual sacrifices ranging from bribes to offerings expressive of pure devotion. Distinctions between dynamics of manipulative magic and disinterested devotion break down here. In ritual, it is probably safe to say that no act is purely manipulative or purely disinterested. Ritual acts of offering, exchange, and communion appear to invoke very complex relations of mutual interdependence between the human and the divine, and are significant to social and cultural processes by which the community organizes and understands itself.

Hindu devotional worship (*puja*) provides an example of simple offerings that appear to have no purpose other than to please the deity. They may be simple and private or public and elaborate. Sometimes they are visualized rather than performed. All invoke the ceremonies of hospitality traditionally shown to honored guests, particularly in ancient court life. At home or at a festival, they cast the deity as a lofty but temporary guest, while in a temple they acknowledge the deity in his or her own palace.

Technically, *puja* invokes 16 different presentations/attendances, though only a few may make up a given service. Some may have a small worship room with an altar, and the male head of household (usually) performs the ceremony once or twice daily. In larger temples this may be more elaborate and repetitive. When performing the main presentations, the devotee first summons or awakens the god to be present. The god is offered a seat, formally greeted, and asked about its journey. The devotee then symbolically washes the god’s feet and presents a small bowl of water so the god may wash its face and rinse its mouth. Another bowl is presented for sipping, then a drink of water and honey. Next comes water for a bath (or submersion of small images). The devotee adorns the image with fresh garments, ornaments, perfumes, ointments, and flowers. Then the devotee steps back to offer incense and a small burning light. Next comes food such as cooked rice, clarified butter, or betel leaf (which is later distributed once the god has tasted of it). Known as *prasada*, this return gift of food is thought to confer

blessings from the deity. Reciprocally, all present worship the image by prostrating themselves before it (*darsana*), literally seeing the god and being seen by it in turn. Finally, the god is dismissed, put to bed, or shrouded with a curtain.

While such offerings occur in many traditions, Hindu *puja* fully plays out the underlying logic of human services rendered to anthropomorphized gods. The devotee who does things for the god/image may not expect that it needs such things. Instead, these form a “grammar of devotion” (Diana Eck) in which “gestures of humility...utilize the entire range of intimate and ordinary domestic acts.” *Darshana*, the exchange of sight, is central, the most basic act of worship in Hinduism. Anywhere worship occurs, the devout Hindu is said to “take” or “receive” *darsan*, while the deity or holy person to “give” it. The moment of mutual seeing that passes between the sacred and the human is the culmination of the more tangible exchanges involved in these rites.

Such reciprocity is relatively low key in practical terms. Devotional offerings to the deity are not meant to result in direct or immediate concrete benefits, though understood to nurture a positive human-divine relationship that will be of spiritual and substantial benefit. In contrast, rites involving Chinese spirit money represent a system of offerings that often appear less devotional and much more bureaucratic and practical. Spirit money is basically coarse paper tied in bundles, on top of which is pasted yellow or silver foil identifying its currency and value. In Taiwan, “gold” spirit money is given to gods, silver to ghosts and ancestors. Usually it is burned to transfer it to the next world. Similarly, paper versions of other material gift objects are burned to release its essence in the next world. While stores now sell more realistic looking “play money” for ritual use, real money or objects will not work (as it supposedly appears fake on the other side, hence an insult). Such offerings are usually burned to solicit favors from the gods, provide the dead with the cash they need to take care of business in the courts and hells of the underworld, bribe celestial bureaucrats, and placate offending demons or interfering ghosts. In Chinese cosmology, the bureaucracy of the human world continues into the invisible world. Both spheres operate on the same principles: virtue is rewarded, but cash is very effective in working out deals and cutting through red tape.

Such an ethos of economic exchange is prominent in two Taiwanese rituals: (1) the rite to “repay the debt”; and (2) the rite to “restore one’s destiny.” In the first, life is assumed to be a type of monetary loan that must be repaid. At birth, one is given an advance from the celestial treasury; death, especially when old after producing make descendants, exhausts these funds. At the funeral, relatives burn a specially marked form of spirit money (“treasury money”) to pay off any remaining debt to the celestial treasury and ensure the continuation of the deceased’s soul in a future life. Similar rites during one’s lifetime can also replenish one’s treasury account and, it is said, stave off an early death. Next, the ritual for “restoring one’s destiny” is usually performed on New Year’s and at critical points in life, since these are said to drain life’s vitality. It may also be performed on the completion of a project or a professional success, since such good luck can sap one’s allotted vitality. If diminished due to too much success, one may fall prey to demonic maladies of all kinds. Rites to restore this vitality may be simple or grand, performed by a Daoist priest, a folk medium, or the head of the house, each in their own distinctive way. Each will make a formal request enumerating the blessings the family has received from the gods, and then specially designated “restoration of destiny” money is burned

to deposit in the celestial treasury.

The ritual grammar of human-divine interaction in these Chinese ceremonies is not the same as the humble hospitality seen in Hindu *puja*. It is the language of banking, bureaucratic hierarchy, and closed energy systems that enable humans to influence the cosmos by extending the meaning and efficacy of those activities that seem to organize the human world most effectively. The Chinese may experience the cosmos as less capricious and intimate than the Hindus, but both use distinct cultural conventions to ritualize human-divine interaction and exchange. By contrast, Mexican culture uses yet another system for representing human/divine interactions, primarily a grammar of vows and thanksgiving. This is most evident in the custom of hanging *retablos* to express thanks to Jesus or the Virgin Mother. These small, votive paintings depict the troubled scene in which divine help was extended, usually including a written explanation and thank you, to acknowledge the divine intercession in a public way.

It is not surprising that there is variety in both things offered and in the symbolic grammar with which they are made. More unexpected, however, are the similarities, such as the widespread use of incense and smoke either as offerings themselves, or as a medium to bear offerings aloft to the gods. Equally common is the offering of dances, songs, and even theater productions to entertain the gods. While some may reenact sacred events, such as the creation of the cosmos or the return of the ancestors, others are narrative tales to entertain the gods. The performance of the female dancers (*devadasis*) traditionally offered to the god Siva in south Indian Saivite temples are rituals of offering and entertainment with powerful - and controversial - overtones of virility and fertility.

The concept of “sacrifice” as a distinct form of human/divine interaction and exchange has long been a major topic in ritual studies. More than any other form of ritual, sacrifice has been considered a type of universal or nearly universal “institution” that can be explained in terms of principles applicable to all cultural examples. Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss made an important contribution by distinguishing sacrifice from other forms of ritual offerings through the principle of sanctification: in sacrifice the offerings are consecrated (i.e. made holy). As a logical corollary, the object offered in sacrifice is usually completely destroyed in the rite, either burned to transfer the offering to the gods or consumed to share it with them. Inanimate or bloodless objects like vegetables, grains, or paper items can be sacrificed (as in China), but the term usually implies blood offerings of animals, humans, or their various substitutes. Distinctions between offerings and sacrifices based on whether the object is inanimate or animate can be very hard to pursue systematically (e.g. animal offerings and spirit money in China have the same cultural roots). Also according to Hubert and Mauss, the milk offered in the Vedic sacrificial system before the *puja* were not something inanimate that is offered up, but the cow itself, in its liquid essence, its sap, its fertility.”

Theories of sacrifice have tended to focus on the “communion” it is thought to afford between humans and gods, though this terminology comes from the Judeo-Christian tradition and not much used in many other sacrificial cultures. The idea of communion with the supernatural recipients of the offerings is also used to distinguish sacrifice from ritualized killing. Communion implies that at a critical moment in the rite there is a union of the human and divine worlds: the offerer, the recipient, and the offering itself are understood to come together in some

way, however briefly. The purpose of this form of cosmic union is usually explained as a matter of renewing the universe and reordering the human/divine relations that sustain it. However, other purposes are also given for the performance of sacrificial rites, including thanksgiving, the expiation of evils, and the placation of powerful deities, which are not incompatible with the notion of communion.

When defined in very general terms, some form of sacrifice can be found in almost all societies. The sacrifice of firstfruits in agricultural societies and of domesticated animals in herding societies demonstrates certain general correlations between the form of sacrifice and the type of socioeconomic structure. Cultural cosmology will also determine the format used (e.g. smoke/incineration correlates to the belief the gods reside elsewhere; immersion conveys it to water deities; abandonment that the deity is in the environment). The form of destruction can also reflect ideas about the type of human/divine interaction afforded by the rite: total destruction can seal a contractual relationship; consumption facilitates a sharing of substance. Both forms are found in the Hebrew Bible: the burnt offering or holocaust in which the animal was completely incinerated, and the sacrifice of salvation or peace in which part of the animal was burned, the blood poured out on the altar or earth, and the rest consumed in a communal meal. While the latter is the form observed in the Passover rites, the former type of sacrifice is most familiar from the story of Abraham and Isaac (where Abraham was told to slay his son as an offering, then, at the last minute, an angel intervened and revealed a ram to use as a burnt offering in his place).

For Judaism, this burnt offering established a close bond between God and the descendants of Abraham, which was later sealed in a covenant made between God and Moses when both forms of sacrifice were performed.

As noted, most theorists stress the communion-like nature of sacrifice, which is clearest when the rites first involve the sacralization and then the killing of a living animal or person. Consecration or sacralization can make the offering participate in the divinity of the god to whom it is to be given, even to the point, in some cases, that the offering may be thought to become the god itself. This form of consecration is seen in diverse practices, such as the Christian doctrine of the real presence of Jesus Christ in the sacralized bread and wine; the offering and ingestion of the intoxicating sacred drink *balche* to feed the gods of the Lacandon Maya of Chiapas; the ritual consumption of peyote among some Native American tribes; and the Aztec sacrifice of prisoners of war to their sun god.

The peyote cult is a good example of a sacrificial ritual in which the symbolism of communion is very strong. It formally developed among Native Americans of the southern plains only about the turn of the century as an integral part of the Native American Church. Influenced by Christianity as well as pan-tribal religious beliefs and practices, the consumption of the sacred peyote button is thought to enable one to experience the closeness of the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit is said to have put his power into the sacred button so that when it is gathered by a shaman and eaten in the appropriate way the power can be absorbed by his people to help them. The hallucinatory effects of this drug are considered quite secondary to the more powerful experience of the Great Spirit, who may reveal some truth or bestow some power.

Sacralization of an offering in order to make it as divine as the god who will receive it

appears to have been an important part of Aztec sacrifice. As a principle of human/divine interaction, sacralization also sets up a type of economic exchange, “offered as food to the gods, the victim takes on the nature of the god. Consumed then by man, the offering transmits this divine power to man” (Marshall Sahlins). For the Aztecs, the offering clearly involved 2 identifications: (1) the sacrificer, the one who sponsored and expected to benefit from it, was identified with the victim being offered and in some cases would declare that the victim “is as my beloved son”; (2) a series of consecrations also identified the offering with the gods who were its ultimate recipients. Aztec mythology, in fact, describes an original self-sacrifice of the gods that enabled the sun to move across the sky. Evidence concerning the treatment of many victims after capture and prior to their death suggests that they were made to reenact this cosmogonic sacrifice of the gods: they were bathed, dressed, and painted to represent specific deities, feted, and taught special dances. When these victims were sacrificed on the altar at the top of the central pyramid of Tenochtitlan, the still-beating heart was offered to the sun, blood was splashed on the altar, and the body was rolled back down the steps to be dismembered by those waiting below. For the Aztecs, the victim going up and coming down the great steps, not unlike the rising and setting of the sun in the sky, was the medium for a necessary exchange between the human and the divine world that ensured the ordered continuation of the cosmos. According to Sahlins, the victim closed a cycle between the sacrificers and the gods, linked the sacred and the profane, and facilitated the transmission of blessings and requests. Ultimately, “Victims, gods, and communicants become one. The consumption of human flesh was thus deifying.”

Human sacrifice has been found in many societies. There are some basic similarities among the types of victims and the forms of destruction used, as well as differences in the social and cosmic purposes ascribed to the ritual. Still, human sacrifice can be seen as a simple extension of the logic underlying other forms of offerings. Whether the purpose is to avert evil, placate gods, achieve communion, reconstruct idealized kinship relations, or establish the proper reciprocity of heaven and earth, the offering of something - firstfruits, paper money, or human beings - has been a common ritual mechanism for securing the well-being of the community and the larger cosmos. Such offerings also redefine the culture’s system of cosmological boundaries - the human sphere, the sphere of the gods, the sphere of the ancestral dead, the sphere of malevolent demons, and so on - while simultaneously allowing the crossing or transgression of those very same boundaries.