

## S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

### Lecture 1: Defining Ritual 2

In our last class, we introduced ritual and attempted an initial definition by attending to the most common features associated with it in the ritual studies literature. In this class, we continue with our definitional strategy by (1) reviewing five inadequate conceptions; (2) four only partly adequate conceptions; and (3) finish with a consideration of some special problems involved in the study of ritual.

#### **Five Inadequate Conceptions:**

**(1) Habit and Routine:** One common use of the word ritual is to denote a habit or routine (e.g. a glass of water before bed). Yet, if a conception of ritual is so based, there are serious problems: this is totally inadequate to the social importance, meaningfulness and efficacy of things like weddings, funerals, initiations, etc. Habits lack what energizes rituals: the purpose of symbolically effecting the serious life.

Habits are also prevalent features of social life and communication, but, a contrast might be drawn here, for example, with habitual TV viewing (which is less selective, more diversionary and routine) as opposed to active, purposeful and selective viewing. Instrumental (i.e. goal-directed) media use pushes the former into a residual category which, while not devoid of relaxation and arousal, entertainment and habit, companionship and economy, is not actively involved in seeking out and satisfying serious informational needs. While we cannot draw researchers away from the importance of habitual behavior in social life, habits are not rituals, nor are they ritual-like.

**(2) Insincere Public Performance:** It is also inadequate to conceive of ritual as insincere public performance (e.g. by politicians, bureaucrats, or spin doctors). When you hear “your call is important to us,” it may be insincere, but it is not a ritual). If something is claimed not to be related to a speaker’s real motivations (i.e. not to solve a problem, but to gain attention and research money), calling it a ritual: (1) undermines our ability to distinguish ritual from insincere public performances because it assumes that the two are the same; and (2) this presumption becomes a habit of thought that relegates ritual to something not worthy of respect or attention (i.e. “Mere ritual”). Ritual, under this reading, would become something not fundamentally real, a second class reality on life support, if that. Obviously this presumption is untrue of both academic pursuits and everyday realities - where statements spoken with passion cannot always be taken as mere performance signifying nothing (e.g. expressions of love or vulgar insults). Moreover, such a worldview would seriously undermine our social order.

**(3) Empty Convention:** Another inadequate conception views ritual as mere empty convention, just going through the motions of something that is supposed to be meaningful but is not (i.e. all form and no substance, like some mandatory office Christmas parties). People involved in such things have commented that they are “just a ritual.” Such activities are not strongly motivated by their apparent meaning, but, unlike insincere public performances they are just empty - we usually don’t suspect participants of bad intent.

Empty conventions are real enough phenomena, but building a theory of ritual on them is problematic: the pathological is treated as the normal and the ability to understand rituals that work is lost. Politeness illustrates the complexities here. Being polite to someone we dislike is a common example of empty convention, in some ways a pathological ritual. In other ways, however, this is one of the most important and powerful rituals of social order - performative of civil society rather than barbarism. That may be the whole point of the ritual.

**(4) Stylistic, Symbolic or Aesthetic Excess:** Another inadequate view is of ritual as a form of stylistic, symbolic or aesthetic excess. This comes into play when a social activity or artifact is viewed as a means to an end, and, when features necessary to do so are classified, everything else is seen as superfluous - ritualistic. Anything redundant or unnecessary to a message or social relations are seen as ritualistic elements of style (e.g. greeting someone with anything more than 'hello').

Yet, to identify all rituals according to excess has two serious problems: (1) it fails to identify the ritual element of social actions that are not aesthetically excessive; and (2) it isolates ritual and labels it excessive, hence unnecessary.

Drawing attention to symbolic excess does draw attention to some important features: how and what is said and done; rituals working through symbols without obvious means-ends relations; many rituals having a great redundancy of symbols, etc.) Yet not all have a thickness of symbols, yet are nevertheless expressive of social relations on a variety of levels (e.g. subtle variations in simple greetings can have important social implications). Moreover, any definition of ritual based in excess sets up a series of unfortunate dichotomies that remove ritual from the world of the practical, the real, rational or simple and then implicitly denigrates it as impractical, unreal, irrational and overwrought. This makes it hard to understand how ritual can ever be used practically to get things done. Moreover, this again prefers a plain, brutal world with no aesthetic appreciation.

At bottom, ritual cannot be understood without attention to style, symbol and aesthetics. They are essential to its work. Thus, it cannot be understood through a conception of these elements as excessive.

**(5) Ritual=Myth=Ideology=Lying or Confusion:** There is a view, rooted in Marxist analysis, that views ruling ideas as those of the ruling class, and popular ideas as serving their interests. The cultural critic's job, on this view, is to unmask the class interests behind popular culture. When this view is applied to ritual, its performance is seen much like the promulgation of a myth, a propaganda form. While this may be true in certain cases, it is not necessarily always the case. Indeed, to make this presumption would be to treat hypotheses as conclusions, place both before facts, and base this orientation upon unexamined value judgements.

Such thinking cannot do justice to the complexity of social phenomena. Nor can it recognize that rituals, ceremonies, myths and icons are important features of everyday life without which even revolutions could fail.

Of course, ideology is an essential feature in social research, and it often goes hand in hand with the analysis of rituals associated with power. But neither our understanding of ritual nor ideology is promoted by simplistic critiques that replace analysis with debunking, questions with presumptions, agnosticism with hostility. The social orders we are trying to understand are complicated; so must be our explanations of them.

The main point is that every social order must have symbolic means of maintenance and adaptation. Myth and ritual will be among these. If we are to critique ritual, it must be a substantive critique, based on the values and beliefs in play, not a formal critique based simply on the fact that it is a ritual. In complex societies, rituals and their uses are complex; so must be our analyses of them.

Beyond these concerns, the above simplistic view assumes that participants and audiences of myth and ritual are confused. While some may be some of the time, this is hardly a logical principle upon which to build a theory. It leaves us completely unable to explain why some people are not confused nor accounts for the meaningful experiences that people have via ritual and myth.

Ultimately, equating ritual with lying or confusion removes ritual and constrains it to the world of the unreal or distrusted. This cannot deal with the widespread nature of rituals and the variety of their results.

#### **Four Only Partly Adequate Conceptions:**

**(1) Ethological:** Ethologists - students of animal behavior - see rituals as conspicuous, patterned behavior with a signalling function. Rituals are displays linked to normally motivated behaviors that (a) promote better and more unambiguous signal function, both intra and inter specifically; (b) serve as more efficient stimulators or releasers of efficient patterns of action in other individuals; (c) reduce intra-specific damage; and (d) serve as sexual or social bonding mechanisms (e.g. head tossing a turning away by gulls). Essentially, behaviors have a communicative function - called ritual behaviors - and a process by which they develop - called ritualization.

There are important lessons here, but also important differences between human society and animal biology, between the human and biological sciences. Thus, the question of subjective experiences is methodologically ruled out in ethology, but foundational to the social sciences and essential to any adequate social theory. Culture far dominates human genetic evolution both throughout history and in the present. This is far different than stimuli triggering instinctive, inbuilt responses.

As for ritual, this is not merely adaptive, repetitive behavior which is genetically characteristic of a whole species, but occasional behavior by particular members of a single culture. Because ethologists are working at a different structural level than we are in the social sciences (e.g. evolutionary time and species-wide phenomena vs. historical time and individual variance) the phenomena they identify as human ritual are just starting points for us. To point out that speaking behavior is an evolutionary adaptation doesn't even provide clues to the questions

that constitute the substantive study of human communication.

Yet, we may still learn a few things from the ethological literature. We, as humans, have an evolutionary history and a physiological base, human communication is also patterned behavior, and the strict comparative behavioral method may help us to identify basic mechanisms of ritual communication. Eibl-Eibesfeldt thus lists changes that may occur in a behavior during a process of ritualization: (1) the behavior undergoes a change of function; (2) ritualized movement can become independent of its original motivation and develop its own mechanisms; (3) movements are frequently exaggerated in respect to frequency and amplitude, but simultaneously simplified as some drop out and others become prominent; (4) threshold values for releasing stimuli often change to such an extent that the more ritualized behavior pattern is more easily released; (5) movements frequently freeze into postures; (6) components of orientation are changed; (7) a behavior pattern that had previously varied in response to intensity of motivation and stimulus can become stereotyped, with constant intensity; (8) variable movement sequences become compressed into stereotyped and simpler ones; and (9) there often occurs the development of very conspicuous bodily structures (e.g. ornamental plumes, etc).

If, instead of food enticing and enlarged claws developing out of these evolutionary, patterning processes, the examples were subordination, stiff postures and colorful robes, this list could have been addressed to human ritual behavior. Though ethologists would have nothing to say about the meaning or experience of ritual, or any effects other than the behavior, as observers of behavior, they are highly skilled.

Goffman also points out that we can learn from the ethologists' orientation toward ritual as communicative behavior. It always has significance in relation to others and an unfolding course of behavior. It emphasizes future and other orientation, sometimes rudimentary social behavior with signs complex enough to offer information about the significance with which the behavior about to be performed should be taken (e.g. attack, play, courtship). However, studies of human ritual activity go further, usually emphasizing an orientation toward the cosmic or mysterious, the mythic past or tradition, sometimes even to the relative exclusion of the usefulness of ritual in the current and unfolding social situation. Ethology may be complementary, but is not sufficient.

Indeed, even this contribution must be put in context. It would not do to follow ethologists and equate ritual with their views of communicative behavior, as there is a much more elaborated conceptual framework in communication studies. Our interest in ritual is as a type of communication and an aspect of communication. Humans have many ways to communicate their orientation and intentions, ritual is but one of them. Even then, rituals have as much to do with ideas as they do behavior.

**(2) Freudian:** Sigmund Freud took the view that ritual had much in common with obsessive behavior, and that religion is like neurosis. His views have something in common with the prevalent lay use of the word ritual to refer to symptomatic patterns of small, repeated behaviors that may make the actor feel safer but that do not actually do anything (e.g. excessive hand washing).

Without the symptomology, this Freudian view quickly degenerates into the definition of ritual as habitual behavior that we have already rejected. As for the symptomology, this puts the student of ritual under a dark cloud: the assumption that there is something pathological about ritual action. As this does not jive with the experiences of most ritual participants, analysts are in no position to understand or explain the meaning of the ritual adequate to the data (except, perhaps, for those who already knew something was wrong with their thought processes and are seeking help).

Yet, there are still some useful points. Freudian analysis provides the key insight that ritual action is a sign of something not otherwise physically present, something phenomenologically elsewhere and unseen. When stripped of its treatment orientation and recast in terms of signs and signifier-signified relations, Freudian analysis draws attention to the fact that the behavior is a sign of something else, something it is not. Secondly, these meanings may go deeper than the present awareness of the actors, even as it serves as the basis for the power of their experience. There is, in important rituals, something numinous, something mysteriously self-powering that gives the experience a force for the faithful beyond their ability to recast the meaning in words. Ritual symbols work on consciousness by a logic that is mostly not in consciousness.

**(3) Sentiment and Solidarity:** Durkheim argued that the function of ritual was in maintaining the social order, specifically by way of sentiment and solidarity (e.g. holy days and rituals were a time-out, a time for coming together and engaging in a celebration and reaffirmation of the bonds people share, after which they would return to their daily roles refreshed and recharged in the reenergized social order). This provides a key insight into society's workings.

However, overemphasizing this part of Durkheim's theory is a bit too simplistic. First, it overemphasizes the maintenance of a given social order. Second, it provides too simple an idea of the devices of the social order: that society is held together mostly by sentiments, solidarity and consensus. While helpful to explain certain processes and events in which sentiment and solidarity are emphasized (e.g. the U.S. public's response in the aftermath of Sept. 11) all of this is too simple to explain the whole workings of a complex society, or any ritual for which multiple interpretations are prevalent.

Yet, this part of the Durkheimian tradition neglects his cognitive element: he felt the roles of ritual and religion in promulgating basic beliefs and moral principles were important. Moreover, he recognized that religion and ritual participated in the construction of basic cognitive categories and logics. Thus, ritual and religion give shape to the stuff of which even profane thought and action are constructed. As rituals promulgate definitions of reality, forms of thought and modes of evaluation, they also contribute to division and argument as well as commonality and solidarity (e.g. political conventions; church schisms; criminal trials). To get to this understanding, corresponding emphases on discourse and cognition are necessary. Rituals have cognitive functions and thereby participate in a greater variety of social processes than would be predicted of the celebration of solidarity alone.

**(4) Maintenance of the Status Quo:** It is often said that rituals function to maintain the

status quo social order. This is often true, but not necessarily so. Nor is it a function served exclusively.

In some cases ritual does express the social order and had positive affective functions. It may also do so cognitively. Insofar as ritual expression of a social order works to naturalize or preserve the taken for granted status of a given definition of reality, it also inhibits attempts to change that social order. Yet, as we have seen above, this can be complex, and contain the roots of conflict and change as well.

To the extent that rituals contain ideals, they serve as both evaluations and reminders of what is preferred, though neither agreement among members of the community nor approval of the status quo are presumed. In this way, ritual works as a social steering mechanism, much as can be seen in the case of the Watergate scandal of the 1970's. Rituals are not so often about the way the world is as they way it is thought that it ought to be. This can be used to challenge the status quo, as we see, for example, in liberation theology. To the extent that ritual can help maintain ideals against which present realities can be found wanting, ritual provides a rationale for, and may participate in, processes of social change.

As well, rituals, like other communication forms, are open to interpretation. Ritual cannot always and only function to preserve the status quo because the multivocality (openness to multiple interpretations) of dominant rituals in modern societies allows them to be used against the current state of affairs (e.g. a slave's interpretation of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in the 1850's). Moreover, ritual communication forms may serve as masks - ways in which dominated people can perform civility towards the powerful while preserving their cognitive freedom for disrespect (Ethiopian proverb: "when the gret lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts.") This preserves a space for freethinking that can support the emergence of resistance, conflict and change.

Social conflict is also often ritually structured in at least 2 ways: (1) the ritual expression of recurrent conflicts (e.g. between Mexican Americans and Anglos in the US Southwest); and (2) in more episodic and anti-institutional events like sit-ins, protest marches, verbal threats, chanting, etc. which are patterned performances meant to symbolically effect the serious life. Here again the ritual structure is expressing and maintaining a social order, but an order of protest and an expression of dissent. In such situations, the ritual expresses and constitutes the social order of an oppositional group - or performs the groups denigration of the status quo.

### **Some Special Problems in the Study of Ritual:**

**(1) Social Change:** Explanation of change is recognized as a problem for the student of ritual, and for the system theories with which ritual studies have long been associated. As forms of behavior, rituals are often slow to change, usually associated with ideas about tradition, stability and order over time. Often their justification is "that is the way things have always been done." Ritual study, in turn, has often been associated with structural anthropology, which presumed ritual to be the symbolic expression of a presumably stable social order and, as Rothenbuhler notes, this did not weather the dissolution of the colonial empires very well.

Many references could be given to those struggling with the breakdown of this structural anthropology paradigm, but perhaps the most classic would be Leach, who, serving in the Burmese army in WWII, bore witness to massive changes going on in many areas of the country. He could not ignore history nor social change, instead taking the view that societies an anthropologist is studying are not stable, but changing; not unitary, but mixed and multiple; not closed systems, but characterized by mixtures and interminglings of social forms and communities. Likewise, the rituals under study were both changing themselves and participating in larger social change. This was a breakthrough, with the study of both changes in ritual procedures and the participation of ritual in larger social changes becoming common in more recent literature.

Evidence of this is available in at least 4 forms: (1) anthropological literature on culture contact and the diffusion of cultural forms (including ritual) from one social group to another (e.g. American fast food; changes in eating family meals); (2) literature on historical changes in ritual and attendant institutional changes (e.g. what the Reformation did to the Catholic Church; historical changes in manners and dress); (3) revolutions accompanied by efforts to overthrow the rituals of the old regime and establish new ones appropriate to the new social order (e.g. what Christianity historically did to paganism; new holidays and celebrations in revolutionary France and the former Soviet Union); and (4) research showing that, as interpersonal and family relationships change, so do the ritual forms of the relation (e.g. deepening or loosening relationships resulting in changed ritual encounters; changes in how one deals with parents as one ages).

Two things are important about all these. First, ritual and social order are not the same thing, but analytically distinct. It is logically possible for ritual to change or not independent of its associated social order (history has many examples). Second, the relation between ritual and social order is, however, typically so tight that a reading of ritual has often been used as evidence of the social order. The relationship is complex and controversial, with differing interpretations (expressive, constitutive, fused, etc). Perhaps the best solution is just to say that ritual is a means of conducting the social order - one of the ways in which order is achieved.

There is a tendency to think of social order as a singular stability. If ritual is a means of conducting the order, then it must be singular and stable itself. This might preclude its role in social change - but this is also a misreading. Real societies are not singular, stable orders, but complex intermixings of various messy systems. Every small pattern of order in this mixture will have its own ritual forms - and their diffusion is one of the major mechanisms of social change (e.g. the introduction and diffusion of electronic media) Attention to the role of ritual in social change depends on historical thinking about historical evidence. This ultimately necessitated a change in the anthropological literature - one of the great advances in the human sciences in the past few decades.

**(2) Inventing Rituals:** Rituals, like all social conventions, do not spring from nowhere. They must at some point be invented - though this is at odds with the usual presentation of them as timeless. However, they are rarely a sudden invention by an individual author. Usually their origin is diffused across people, places, times, and perhaps also interests. If a particular individual can be identified as author, one must still place them in their social and historical

context and question the author's interests to truly understand what they are about. As well, we must recognize that invented rituals and formal institutions are clearly associated, with great potential for institutional advantage (e.g. sponsorships and product contracts for the Olympics).

While we may be rightly suspicious of such commercial examples, this cannot do away with the fact that more mundane rituals and traditions often emerge or are invented (e.g. holding family dinners on Sunday night may gradually become a tradition, but only reflectively so once someone misses).

The point is that people - both individuals and institutions - are inventing rituals and traditions all the time, or at least they are ritualizing - accentuating the ritual aspects of things. Yet at the level of institutions, there are further considerations (e.g. the legislated festivals of the French Revolution did not necessarily fly with the people: one is only likely to give one's heart to a ritual in the proper context). Much the same could be said of the ambiguous history of royal ritual in Britain. Rituals develop in historical circumstances and participate in the same processes of social change as any other symbolic form (e.g. the invented Scottish traditional outfit and cultural elements was invented by a collection of romantics and entrepreneurs after 1725; the modern Olympics involved a mish-mash of entrepreneurs promoting these games over time). Yet the important question here is, again, not such promotion of ritual, but whether such inventions or re-inventions will be eagerly received by the intended audience.