

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 20: Feasting, Fasting, and Festivals

Today we consider major communal feasts and fasts. In such rites, there may be little overt attention to the presence of deities, but much emphasis on the display of religio-cultural sentiments. People are particularly concerned to express publicly - to themselves, each other, and sometimes outsiders - their commitment and adherence to basic religious values. Thus we see the “cultural performance” of Muslim communal fasting during Ramadan, huge feasts like the Kwakiutl potlach or the New Guinea pig festival, the elaborate celebrations of carnival, or the sober suffering of penitential processions in Europe and Latin America. For some scholars, beyond the general notion of social and cultural performances, these are “social dramas” by which the group enters into a dialogue with itself about itself; for others, they are limited occasions of “licensed reversal” or “ritual inversion” by which the status quo is taken apart, revitalized, and often reconstituted in changed ways.

The potlach, a type of competitive feasting among the Natives of the west coast, concerns displaying and transferring social privileges that confer status and prestige, as well as divine-human interaction and the interconnectedness of the cosmos as conceived by a primarily hunting and fishing society. Traditionally, these ranged from small to large depending on the event. On the more elaborate occasions (e.g. marriage, chieftanship, or erecting totem poles), invited guests were met by an enormous amount of food, an extravagant display of material wealth, and, through dances and speeches, formal testimonials to the sponsor’s wealth and status. The masked and costumed dances reenact sacred tales claimed as part of a family’s history, with social status being linked directly to possession of such dances and the pedigree they imply. By eating generously of the food provided and accepting the gifts distributed by the host, the guests are formally witnessing and acceding to the host’s status claims (i.e. to possess the rights to particular prestigious titles, dances, and masks).

Despite opposition, the Kwakiutl of Vancouver Island have managed to preserve their potlach tradition where others have not. Traditionally, they traded primarily in furs skins, slaves, handcrafted boxes and bowls. Yet the most valuable items were large, handcrafted copper shields with elaborate pedigrees attached. Their society was based on a hereditary ranking system composed of noble lineages, commoners, and slaves. Among the nobles were some 700 positions, each with a ceremonial name and special privileges, such as to perform certain masked dances relating to mythological events, deities and powers. By 1850, however, sustained contact with Europeans brought many new trade items that displaced the old in value, diseases that took a huge toll, and laws that outlawed the tribal warfare that provided the larger context to the potlach. In the colonial situation, however, the potlach actually became more elaborate and widespread, eventually emerging as the principal means to establish one’s rights to a hereditary position, which were more available than ever before due to the great drop in population.

A Kwakiutl potlach today requires much preliminary work (one in 1921 actually took 17 years preparation). Today it takes about a year to plan a potlach, at which some 700 guests are feted and given gifts. Modern work schedules necessitate that this be crammed into a weekend rather than the traditional week. Both handicrafts and purchased goods are gathered, and the food

preparation begins days before. A big meeting house is readied and the dances are rehearsed. When all have assembled within the carved posts of the big house, there are brief mourning rites for the deceased, some ritual trading of valuable coppers, and possibly a marriage before the first food is served or songs sung. At the proper time, a series of masked dances begin, led by those masks that have been inherited by the host family or acquired through marriage. The beautifully costumed dancers tell the story of the family's origin myth, which relates to how a particular ancestor made a special relationship with a divine being.

Many dancers impersonate important mythical beings and events in Kwakiutl cosmology, sometimes using elaborate props and tricks. The most elaborate dance is the *hamatsa*, where the dancer is a wild man possessed by the cannibal spirit. He is gradually subdued and domesticated in a series of ritual dances - but not until he and the servants of the cannibal spirit have chased people around looking for dinner. Other dances follow until late, and all participate. Finally, people bring out the gifts, they are distributed by the host, and visiting chiefs give speeches thanking and praising him for his allegiance to the old ways (they get paid in return). The main ceremony concludes about 3:00 AM, when most break up into smaller parties in homes.

Since the earliest ethnographic accounts, the potlach has been characterized as a primitive economic system of investment, a bellicose form of "fighting with property," or a crude materialism linked to an obsessive concern with social rank. In exploring the religious ideas behind it, however, others try to link the socioeconomic dimension with the Kwakiutl understanding of the ritual's role in a "consubstantial" cosmos - one in which humans, animals, vegetable life, and the supernatural are seen as an "incomplete segment" of the whole that must "share with others" or the entire system of nature would die. As such people must occupy their proper place in the total system of life and act responsibly within it, so as to acquire and control the powers that sustain life.

Among the many complex subsystems of cosmic exchange here, central is human-animal reciprocity. Potlach dancers perform the mythical events by which a lineage ancestor acquired special titles, powers, and favors from a supernatural animal donor, notably the ability to hunt that animal species successfully. In return, the ancestor and the descendants who inherit the title and powers are obliged to perform the rituals in which the supernatural animal is continually reincarnated. The animal flesh eaten at the potlach and the skins distributed testify to the death of the "form" of the animal and hence the release of its soul for reincarnation. Thus the potlach publicly witnesses the fact that the sponsor has inherited key powers that have enabled him to acquire wealth but also oblige him to sacrifice it. Likewise, the animal spirit who sacrifices its animal flesh and skin so that the human lineage may live and prosper counts on the sponsored potlach as a ritual death and funeral that facilitates its reincarnation. The ritual reinvokes the mythic human-divine interdependence, transmits it to a new generations, and fulfils the obligations inherent in it.

The potlach can be contrasted with the Indonesian *slametan*. A simple ritual at the heart of the Javanese religious system, it may be done for any number of special events. Usually held in the evening, neighbors and dignitaries are invited to a meal of traditional foods, each with a special meaning and blessed by a mosque official. With understated formality, incense is lit, Islamic prayers chanted, and the host gives a ceremonial speech. While men and women are

segregated, there is an emphasis on the general equality among the gathered guests and spirits. It is a symbolic representation of the social and spiritual unity of the participants: friends, neighbors, fellow workers, relatives, local spirits, dead ancestors, and near-forgotten gods all get bound, by virtue of their commensality, into a defined social group pledged to mutual support and cooperation. For the Javanese, the food and not the prayer are at the heart of this, because it attracts all kinds of invisible beings who come to eat the aroma of the food. The food shared among the human and divine guests is the central ritual means of reaffirming a Javanese sense of a consubstantial cosmos of human-human and human-divine interdependence.

Shared feasting is a common ritual means for defining and reaffirming the full extent of the human and cosmic community. Whether conceived as rigidly hierarchical or egalitarian, the principle of sharing food marks it as a community. While almost all religio-cultural traditions regard food and community in this way, some affirm a universal community by exhorting people to feed anyone in need; others demarcate the boundaries of a particular community by specifying with whom one can share food. Most also recognize a value in periodic fasting, either privately or communally. In contrast to communal feasting, however, the ritual logic of communal fasting points to some different purposes. While feasting seems to celebrate the consubstantial unity of creation, fasting seems to extol fundamental distinctions, lauding the power of the spiritual realm while acknowledging the subordination and sinfulness of the physical realm.

Private fasting was common in early Christianity and subsequent church history, yet fasting as a duty imposed on the whole congregation also became a regular feature of the calendrical year. Fasting during Advent and Lent were meant to prepare the Christian for the great holidays of Christmas and Easter. While the former may substitute fish for meat, as did the Catholic Friday fast until the 1960's, the Lenten fast was originally more severe - only 1 meal a day and only after sunset, a regimen later echoed in Muslim practices. By the 9th century, however, this single meal moved to noon and a light snack was allowed before bed. Yet meat was still forbidden, as were other animal products. Lent was the time in which the community publicly humiliated those guilty of grave sins. Some were initiated into the society of penitents by having ashes sprinkled on their heads, to be reinstated into the community on Easter Sunday. By the 11th century, all Christians were observing relaxed versions of this practice on Ash Wednesday. Penitence was certainly one of the main reasons for Christian fasting, but this was also an emulation of Christ's 40 days in the desert without food or water and a method of disciplining one's physical desires. Still, fasting has played a relatively subordinate role in Christianity compared to Islam.

Fasting during Ramadan is a central event in the Islamic year and one of the 5 pillars of Islamic practice in the Koran. It is integral to many people's sense of what it means to be a Muslim, perhaps the most central of Islamic rituals. In Ramadan, Muslims fast during daylight hours: they do not eat, drink, smoke, or have sex. If necessary, a fast can be broken for serious reasons (e.g. illness, pregnancy, menstruation, so long as it is made up later or food given to the poor). Among the devout, however, some even shun medicine or avoid swallowing their own saliva). Once darkness falls, Muslims break the fast with a light snack (e.g. dates and water), attend evening prayers, and then have a full meal (and another before dawn).

Since Ramadan commemorates Gabriel's revelation of the Koran to Mohammed, fasting

is linked to the sacrality and centrality of the scripture. This is especially so on the last 10 days, one of which is known as the “night of power” when “angels and the Spirit descended.” It is claimed that those who keep a prayer vigil until dawn will be forgiven their sins. The very devout may spend these 10 days in complete seclusion, then pray all night on the night of power, hoping for a vision of the light said to fill the world at this time. While Ramadan nights require special long prayers and prostrations, after the fast has been broken there are also feasts celebrated with friends, lights, and entertainment - which in some areas can be quite elaborate and indulgent. After Ramadan ends, there is a festival of feasting known as *Eid al Fitr*, when neighborhoods and villages put up decorations and people wear their best clothes to visit and congratulate each other. At this time, everyone with the means makes a charitable donation to the poor.

While some theologians stress how fasting disciplines human desires, even to the point of enabling one to experience one of the divine attributes (freedom from want), others stress more communal functions. Thus fasting is said to teach piety and self-restraint in both the individual and community. Both rich and poor alike experience the pangs of hunger and prepare themselves to endure any hardship to please God. Demonstrations of enthusiasm and empathy for the common corporate experience support this view, as does the fact that fasting sets Muslims off as a distinct community. Still, the logic of fasting in Islam and other traditions also seems to be concerned with the importance of purity, asceticism, and merit in demonstrating the individual’s submission to God. From this view, the communal aspects of fasting are a powerful assertion and extension of doctrinal conformity in a manner that serves to distinguish the devout from the casual believer. The role of peer pressure in this act of submission also points to the subtler ways a religious community socializes its members in physical practices that reproduce central doctrinal traditions and identities.

Contrasting with Christianity and Judaism, Islamic festivals put more emphasis on prayer and charity, with relatively little on shared meals. Perhaps due to its strict monotheism and association of festivals with paganism and license, such ritual appears to have been constrained and at times even opposed in Islamic history. There are only 2 official festivals, one concluding Ramadan and the other marking the end of the month of pilgrimage - and the designation “festival” may be too strong a term for either. Then again, popular or unofficial forms of local practice have adopted many festivals from Persian, Egyptian, and other pre-islamic cultures, often Islamicizing them as birthdays of Islamic saints or of the prophet himself.

In the first month of the year, another period of privation is followed by a communal meal, though not a festival. The first 10 days are ones of elaborate mourning for Mohammed’s grandson Husayn, who was killed in Iraq in battle between his followers and the army of the Umayyad dynasty. Devotion to him and his mother is particularly important among the Shia minority, who identify their origins with this murder by the followers of the Sunni majority to thwart the legitimate succession. Indeed, Husayn’s martyrdom sets the tone for Shiism as a minority religion of protest and suffering, while Karbala (the site of his murder) became for them an alternative to Mecca.

Unlike the Sunni, festivals are very important among the Shia, especially that which commemorates the death of Husayn. Men and women observe this mourning period by wearing

dark, unornamented clothing and attending services. Processions of devotees beat their breasts, weeping and wailing, to evoke the sufferings of Husayn and his mother. Passion plays dramatically reenact the Karbala battle itself with unusual intensity. Such ceremonies of remembrance and mourning are thought to atone for one's sins, earn entry into paradise, and ultimately bring about the final rectification of history. In large processions, some carry colorful standards and beautifully carved domed structures, said to be saints' tombs; others flagellate themselves with chains and knives, walk across coals, or recount poetic ballads of Husayn's sufferings and demise. At the end of the day, the saint's tombs are buried at a place designated as Karbala, and a meal prepared that is said to replicate one prepared by the ancient heroes from what they could find on the battlefield. In some places, these rites go on for 40 days, during which no weddings are held and sectarian violence is easily triggered. The Iranian Islamic revolution was depicted by supporters as a modern day version of the ancient battle between the evil Umayyad ruler and the righteous followers of Husayn.

Emotional processions displaying various physical mortifications were known in Medieval Christianity as well. Lay penitential processions, such as the Flagellants, often emerged during times of religious fervor and social unrest. Similar groups are active today in Spain and New Mexico. Gruesome physical mortifications were a public display that bore witness to elite spiritualism. Penitents marched barefoot, singing hymns and swinging their whips, distinctively hooded, which dramatically separated them from others while equalizing all distinctions of rank among them. While these may appear an extreme form of ritual fasting, they also share many features with ritual feasting, such as Carnival and Mardi Gras, which are occasions for excess and celebration before the season of Lenten asceticism begins. The masked costumes of carnival dancer, like the penitents garb, deny position and hierarchy; both have been accused of challenging sumptuary laws concerned with marking clear levels of social rank. At times, these costumed festivals could act as a powerful rebuke to the spiritual legitimacy and political power of major institutions based on social rank.

Carnival, an occasion for maximum social chaos and licentious play, may seem the pure opposite of ritual, yet many have appreciated the ritual nature of such bounded periods of orchestrated anarchy. Its traditions are considered especially ritualistic as they draw together many social groups normally held separate and create specific times and places where social differences are either laid aside or reversed for a more embracing experience of community. Such traditions also tend to follow customary rules, such as the appointment of a jester or king of fools to parody institutional power and order. Other standard ritual inversions in Europe have parodies of the Mass and Saint's Days processions, such as the so-called Liturgy of the Drunkards, and wild parades of masked revelers who spray the crowd with dirty water and eggs. While ruling classes tried to control such practices, they seem to have recognized the social usefulness of allowing the masses to let off steam. The mad rites of Carnival also remind the ruling classes of the power of the poor and the contempt with which normal citizens were apt to characterize political and religious authorities. Hence, some argue that rituals like Carnival can help change the status quo, while others that they actually work to reinforce it.

In post-reformation Europe, carnival began to die out as a public mass event while being reborn in the more formal and select world of the theater and masked ball. In the New World, however, it grew into a major national ritual in Brazil and had great importance in other parts of

Latin America, the Caribbean, and the U.S. In Rio, the central dance procession is primarily the work of samba schools who prepare all year the dances and costumes for the event. Coming from the lowest classes, these usually turn out to dance as glittering kings and queens - while their places in the parade are determined by lottery. While all of society participates, the upper classes do so more vicariously. The nearly opposite social situation prevails in the New Orleans carnival (Mardi Gras), held just before Ash Wednesday.

Since the mid 19th century, Mardi Gras has been dominated by elite private clubs called "krewes." Most of these have been segregated and refused female members, along with African-Americans, Jews, Italians, and all working class people. Yet alternative krewes have also emerged for groups so excluded. In the traditional krewes, members may be asked to contribute more than \$2000/year for club activities, especially the Mardi Gras parades and balls. Their elaborate staging of masked balls and parades with fancy costumes and floats effectively puts the highest levels of the social and economic hierarchy on display. Archaic spelling, allusions to Greek heroes and gods, and the masked and regal king of the carnival, all signal elite control of Mardi Gras symbols.

The closed systems of social status and prestige put on public display in such carnival traditions do not simply illustrate the tensions between elitism and populism, they literally perform them. Some worry that newer and less traditional krewes, working with city tourist commissions and the media, will begin to turn these into interchangeable marching bands with pom-pom girls and fast food. Others fear a city council ruling demanding integration of variously segregated krewes will destroy Mardi Gras completely. Many traditional krewes threatened to withdraw from Mardi Gras if forced. Others have been willing to go part way in racial terms, but many have still refused to accept women. Hence the ritual format here appears to put great emphasis on maintaining basic social distinctions of prestige and rank, even when the ritual itself is apt to play with these distinctions.

Carnival-like themes animate the popular *Holi* festival of northern India. Technically a calendrical rite marking the vernal equinox and the beginning of spring, it has been compared to the Roman *Saturnalia* and *Hilaria* and the April Fool's day of Medieval Europe. *Holi* involves a thorough disruption and inversion of the usual social order, as well as celebration of symbols of sexual fecundity. This is signaled by the lowest castes going about the day disrupting the normal social order by dousing people, particularly upper castes, with colored powder or water. Women also douse men or beat them with sticks. "The bully is bullied and the high are brought low." Lewd songs, the consumption of milk-yogurt laced with hashish, and the general revelry on the streets makes it risky to be out and about. *Holi* is a threat to not only one's clothes but also to morals, since its madness has been known to inspire promiscuity. Not surprisingly, the counterpart to *Holi* in southern India is known as the "feast of love," dedicated to Kama, the god of love. In parts of north and central India where the worship of Krishna is strong, *Holi* involves dramatic re-enactments of the god's amorous romps with boy and girl cowherds. The festivities end with an enormous bonfire, kindled at the rising of the full moon, that is personified as a female demon destroyed as punishment for her evil and to renew the world.

Like carnival and *Holi*, the festival or *matsuri* has been central to the social order - and anti-order - of traditional Japanese village life. Of Shinto origin and closely related to the cycles

of rice cultivation, *matsuri* essentially propitiate the deities that influence human well-being and the fruitfulness of the harvest. Still, these vary greatly in style, either serious or playful, traditional or modern and commercial. Recent evidence suggests they remain important occasions in communal life even in suburban areas and among immigrant communities. One of the most central *matsuri* is *Obon*, a midsummer festival marking the temporary return of the spirits of the dead. Most ceremonies include bonfires, lamps to light the way of the dead, dancing and singing, food offerings, entertainment of the spirits of the dead, and their firm dismissal at the end of the 3 day festival. Symbolically, the dead and the living are reconstituted as community, the effect of which is said to heighten fertility and facilitate the transformation of the recent dead into more remote ancestors.

Practices of feasting, fasting and social inversion have also been associated with the phenomenon of pilgrimage, though this is more often seen as a rite of passage. Still, Turner's theory of a period of *communitas* and cultural inversion at the heart of rites of passage has been helpful in making sense of various festival-like customs. It appears that ritual inversions can be meaningful on a much smaller scale as well. For example, anti-religious Jews who have been known to gather publicly to eat pork on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. Like many inversions, however, such acts of defiance may simply help mark off the normative values of the community. Whether they contain explicit reversals of the social order or not, the communal feasts and fasts discussed here all involve, at the same time, the display of both the hierarchical prestige social system and the interdependence or unity of human and divine worlds.