S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 5: Early Theories of Ritual

While one might think of starting the study of ritual inductively, that is, by reviewing interesting and diverse examples of rituals, then move on to look at the theories that try to explain what they are and what they do, the nature of the subject matter and scholarship might render this confusing. Much academic work does not proceed so directly. Rather, it involves a more circuitous process where theory leads to data for proponents to support, and critics to challenge, given theories. Indeed, what even counts as data depends much on what one already has in mind, or the problem one is trying to solve.

Interestingly, people have been engaged in various ritual activities since the earliest hunter-gatherers and tribal communities, yet it was only in the late 19th century that they began to perceive all such activities under the umbrella of "ritual" and identify them as "data" to test theories about the origin of religion and civilization. People thus began asking new kinds of questions about history and culture and began to seek out new forms of evidence. Moreover, the priority of theory or data in this endeavor is a classic chicken-or-egg issue: we identify something as data when we have theories that require it, and we formulate theories more clearly, subjecting them to challenge or support, when we can explain them with data.

Hence, it makes more sense to examine ritual with a survey of the major theoretical perspectives that have made people approach ritual as something identifiable and worthy of investigation. In the next few weeks, we will try to do several things: (1) provide a fairly complete framework of major methods and figures (i.e. a mental map/ blind spots); (2) provide background on the larger issues of religion, society and culture (i.e. provide social context for the above); and (3) demonstrate how creative and inconclusive these scholarly investigations can be. In other words, consider how attempts to understand our world do not yield answers as much as become part of the way that we create our world.

Some of the perspectives we will consider are concerned with things like: (1) the origins and essential nature of ritual and religion; (2) the role of ritual in the social organization and dynamics of societies; or (3) a focus on ritual as a form of cultural communication that transmits the cognitive categories and dispositions that provide people with important aspects of their sense of reality. All of these a represented by a variety of theorists, some who would not be happy to be associated with the others they might get lumped in with. Of course, the divisions and categories are tentative and meant to clarify interpretive similarities and differences. They should not be seen as clear or fixed. Thus, each major perspective is also, in many ways, represented by people who have challenged some of its core assumptions or mixed them in with others. Moreover, though some are quite old, they are still represented to some extent in current studies of ritual. Thus, while a loose historical thread runs through our material over the next few weeks, contemporary work often reaches back further than we think.

Myth or Ritual: Questions of Origin and Essence

The study of ritual started with a lengthy and influential debate on the origins of religion that resulted in three important styles of interpretation - evolutionary, sociological, and psychological - out of which new fields of scholarship emerged. The simple question behind this all was whether religion and culture were originally rooted in myth or in ritual. While the theoretical answers were far more diverse and nuanced than any simple answer would imply, their general emphases were still clear and decisive. Today we begin looking at this debate insofar as it influenced thinking about religion. There are four main lines of thought: (1) several early theorists who raised the issues; (2) the myth and ritual schools, which tended to see ritual as the source of religion and culture; (3) a loose set of phenomenologists of religion who tended to emphasize myth; and, finally, (4) the psychoanalytic approach, which borrowed heavily from all these areas. Today we will discuss the first two of these, move on to (3) in our next class, and then deal with (4) in the class following that.

(1) Early Theories and Theorists:

Max Muller (d. 1900) introduced one of the most influential early understandings of mythology in his comparative linguistic studies of the supposed Indo-European roots of Greek mythology. He felt that what we know as myths were originally poetic statements about nature, particularly the sun, made by Indo-Europeans - a nomadic people who migrated in many directions from the central Asian steppe about 1500 BC. Yet, their poetry was later misunderstood by subsequent generations of the cultural groups they conquered.

This perspective was quickly challenged by many, notably folklorist Andrew Lang (d. 1912) and anthropologist Edward Tylor (d. 1917). Tylor argued myth should not be seen as a misunderstanding, but a deliberate philosophical attempt to explain and understand the world. While these results were patently wrong, myth still cannot be simply dismissed as mere error and follly. Instead, it should be seen as an interesting product of the human mind, something providing insight into what he called “primitive” ways of reasoning. Hence, Tylor asserted an evolutionary perspective on human social development from “childlike savages” to “civilized man,” in the course of which some “primitive” explanations lingered on as “survivals” in modern religious customs. This approach to myth Tylor linked to its role in the origin of religion. He suggested religion originated in the experience of seeing the dead in dreams. “Primitive” people, he argued, explained these experiences through a theory of souls and spirits, essentially arguing that part of the deceased continued to live on somehow after the decay of the body. They also came to believe that similar spiritual or animistic forces inhabited nonhuman things like animals and plants. Tylor called this earliest form of religion “animism.”

William Robertson Smith (d.1894), a linguist and Old Testament scholar, followed Tylor’s evolutionism, but argued for the primacy of ritual over his notion of souls in the origins of religion and society. Religion, he felt, arose in activities that cemented the bonds of community. Thus, it was not rooted in speculative myths about the nature of things, but in rituals that essentially worshiped divine representations of the social order itself; religion did not exist for the sake of saving souls but for the preservation and welfare of society.

Robertson Smith’s famous work reconstructed the early Semitic ritual practice of sacrificing and consuming a “totem” animal, one held to be a divine ancestor by a particular

lineage group. While this theory of ritual sacrifice implies a kind of "gift" model where humans make offerings to ancestors or spirits in return for blessings, Robertson Smith boldly interpreted the Semitic sacrificial rite as a festive "communion" between humans and gods that effectively sacrilizes the social unity and solidarity of the group. In this view, ritual is the primary component of religion, and it serves the fundamental social function of creating and maintaining community. Hence, Robertson Smith relegated myth to a secondary place, arguing that it evolved as an explanation of what the rite was about when the original meaning was forgotten or confounded. In many places he argued that the myth was derived from the ritual, not the ritual from the myth - for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable; the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshiper.

Smiths investigations laid the groundwork for the basic tenets of three powerful schools of the interpretation of religion. The first was the "myth and ritual" school linked with Sir James Frazer, which argued that in order to understand a myth, one must first determine the ritual that it accompanied. The second was the sociological approach of Emile Durkheim, for whom religion was a social creation that exists not for the salvation of souls, but the preservation and welfare of society. The third was Freud's psychoanalytic school which adopted Smiths notions of totemism, primal sacrifice and the social origins of religious authority, guilt, and morality. This view took Smith's emphasis on ritual and pointed to modes of analysis and interpretation looking beyond what people themselves say about what they do or believe - an "anti-intellectualist" understanding of human behavior that views it as rooted in irrational impulses and not simply reasoning according to a primitive form of logic.

One of Robertson Smith's students, Sir James Frazer (d.1941), was also concerned with the experiences and activities in which religion originated. He started with Tylor's theory of myth as explanation, but came to see it as a secondary remnant or survival of ritual activity. For Frazer, ritual is the real source of most of the expressive forms of cultural life. Section after section of his famous book, *The Golden Bough*, developed Robertson Smith's view of the ritual sacrifice of the divine totem into a complex new theory, namely, that the universally diffused pattern underlying all ritual is an enactment of the death or resurrection of a god or a divine king who symbolized and secured the fertility of the land and the well-being of the people. For Frazer and his many later followers, this theme of the ritually dying and reviving god became the basis of all myth and folklore. He indiscriminately classified customs of various "primitives" of his day that he thought evoked this theme. As a result, the 3rd edition of his book (1911-15) ran to 12 volumes. Like his predecessors, Frazer wanted to cover the whole "evolution of human thought from savagery to civilization," as well as the survivals of primitive magic and superstition within the "high religions" of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

The Myth and Ritual Schools:

The works of Robertson Smith and Frazer together inspired what has come to be known as the "myth and ritual school." This is an approach to the historical and cultural primacy of ritual emerging in two interdependent branches: a group of biblical and ancient Near Eastern specialists and a group of Cambridge University classicists. In the first group, old testament scholar Henry Hooke (d. 1968) argued that myth and ritual - the thing and the thing done - were inseparable in early civilizations. The religions of ancient Egypt, Babylon, and Canaan were

primarily ritual religions centered on the dramatization of the death and resurrection of the king as a god in whom the well-being of the community rested. Essential to the ritual action was the recited story, which was deemed to have had equal potency. In time, however, the actions and the story separated and gave rise to distinct religious and dramatic genres.

Assembling the evidence for this theory led to various ambitious analyses of the near Eastern cultures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and early India, including the new year activities of the king in ancient Israel. Hooke and others reconstructed a set of rites synchronized to the seasonal cycle of planting and harvesting in which the king was first humiliated, then symbolically killed and descended into the underworld. He subsequently arose to re-establish order on earth through formal combat with the forces of chaos. Upon his victory over chaos, the king reclaimed the throne, celebrated a sacred marriage, and pronounced the laws of the land. The symbolic enactments of these events were accompanied by the recitation of the story as an extended narrative account of creation itself. While critics challenged the historical accuracy and scope of this interpretive reconstruction, it nevertheless became a powerful model of sacred kingship that scholars tried to apply in other cultural areas as well.

The Cambridge school of classicists systematically developed this theory by arguing that folklore and literature derive from the ritual activities of ancient sacred kings, not from the history of the folk imagination as many had believed. Gilbert Murray, Francis Cornford, and Arthur Cook attempted to show how this model of the dying and rising Near-Eastern god-king - also seen in the Dionysian fertility rites of ancient Greece - provided the structural models for Greek drama. Jane Harrison further attempted to root the origins of Greek myth, dramatic theater, and even the Olympic games in the ancient rites described by Frazer. She saw ritual as the source of myth; myths arose as spoken and somewhat secondary correlates to the activities performed in the rite. Harrison's evolutionary framework also suggested that the original ritual activities tended to die out, while the accompanying myths continued independently in various forms. She felt that once the myth lost its original relationship to a ritual, it might try to account for its own existence and enhance its intellectual coherence. Thus, while a myth may have arisen to accompany a ritual, if and when the rite died out, the story could attach itself to specific historical figures and events, or even be adopted as a pseudoscientific explanation of particular phenomena.

This argument crystallized the basic ideas of the Cambridge school and many scholars began to apply them even more broadly. Cornford, for example, traced several philosophical ideas back to their supposed origins in ritual; Murray applied the notion to the works of the Greek dramatist Euripides; and Cook analyzed Greek mythic heroes as "ritual concretizations."

The Cambridge school influenced scholars outside of the classics as well. Thus Weston (1920) argued that the romance of the Arthurian grail legend is nothing other than a "misinterpretation" of the fertility rite of the dying and rising god-king. Weston's idea influenced poet T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, as well as the literary studies of Northrop Frye. Others went on to analyze fairy tales, nursery rhymes, children's games, folk drama, law, language, even experimental physics, seeking echoes of an original ritual pattern preserved in them. Hocart's (1927) *Kingship* found a basic royal initiatory ordeal to be at the root of a variety of historical survivals. Raglan's (1937) *The Hero* argued that most myths and folk-tales, if they did not

specifically originate in ritual, are at least associated with ritual activities and reflected in ritual structures and patterns. While later criticized, this model of the ritually dying and rising god-king was taken as a direct historical influence on the character of the hero in folklore, religion, and literature. Throughout the 1930's and 1940's further research continued to fuel the myth and ritual school's argument for the historical and cultural primacy of this ritual (e.g. it is one major aspect of Joseph Campbell's work).

Theodore Gaster (d.1992) converted this dying and reviving god motif into the broader image of a "seasonal pattern" in all ritual by which it regularly renews and revitalizes the total world order. This seasonal pattern involves 'emptying" (*kenosis*) rites of mortification and purgation and the "filling" (*plerosis*) rites of invigoration and jubilation - in other words, rites of death and resurrection. Ancient institutions of kingship in which the king embodied the total world order epitomized the sequence and purpose of this ritual pattern. However, in Gaster's work, the place of myth shifts significantly. It is neither a mere outgrowth of ritual nor simply the spoken correlate of what is going on. Instead, it is the "expression of a parallel aspect" that effectively translates the very real and specific ritual situation into an idealized and timeless model. Yet, this eventually separates from the specific ritual acts to assume the form of literature, passing through stages of drama, poetry and liturgical hymns. While rite and myth should not be viewed as developing in a historical sequence, Gaster urged that the survival of the seasonal pattern within the very structure of different works of literature constitutes an argument both for the logical primacy of ritual and for the intrinsic ritual logic underlying all culture.

To back up these universal claims for the structure of ritual and culture, scholars continued their wide search for ritual patterns - in popular music, classic and contemporary literature. Indeed, Hyman (1955) argued that what had begun as a modest genetic theory for the origin of a few myths eventually came to make rather large claims on the essential form of the whole culture. Indeed, there was never a lack of critics to challenge any of the theories we have discussed. From Muller to Gaster, the premises, methods, and conclusions of the myth and ritual school were frequently probed and disparaged. By the 1960's, an impressive number of powerful critical analyses had accumulated.

Clyde Kluckhohn noted that although some myths are clearly related to ritual, it is silly to claim that all are. Not only is this impossible to prove, there is substantial evidence for a wider variety of relationships between myths and rites, including, in some cases, their complete independence from each other. The whole question of the primacy of ceremony or mythology is as meaningless as all questions of the chicken or egg form. On Kluckhohn's evidence, neither myth nor ritual can be postulated as primary. Kluckhohn, in order to improve the methods of the myth and ritual school, called for the testing of their generalities against real data and detailed studies of the actual relationships found between myth and ritual.

Joseph Fotenrose, nearly 30 years later, critically demonstrated that there are no historical or ethnographic data that can serve as evidence for the reconstructed pattern of the sacrifice in Near-Eastern kingship. His critique, the culmination of the challenges raised by Kluckhohn and others, effectively undermined the universalistic tendencies of the earlier generation of scholarship and their concern with origins.

Yet, despite these repudiations of Frazer's legacy, ritual has remained important in the study of religion and society (e.g. it has been central to the emergence of social functionalism in anthropology and to approaches pursuing the obverse: the historical and cultural primacy of myth. This latter - phenomenological - approach retains some of Frazer's ideas as influential (e.g. Segal argues the enduring value of the myth and ritual school's theoretical work. Even though many of the theories are wrong, they opened up important questions of the relation between practice and belief, religion and science, that have remained central to the study of religion since.