

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 7: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Ritual

In some respects, Robertson Smith's work on the social primacy of ritual suggested the presence of unconscious forces in shaping social behavior. The religious sacrifice and sharing of a totem animal by a whole tribe as a means of cementing the social bonds of the group would have been the last thing in the minds of participants as the main purpose of the rite. Essentially, Robertson Smith suggested that, underlying the more immediately obvious and rational reasons for performing a rite were causes for social behavior about which the group itself knew nothing. The "real" purpose and significance of ritual were different at times from what the actors themselves believed. This insight was soon echoed in the work of Sigmund Freud (d. 1939), who developed theories of repression, the unconscious, and psychoanalysis as an interpretive approach to buried levels of meaning. Yet it was Frazer's portrayal of totemism that influenced Freud most directly, a theory of religion that relied heavily on psychological rather than social elements by suggesting that "primitives" developed religion to explain and rationalize perplexing psychological experiences having to do with dreams, nature, and the effectiveness of magic.

In a 1907 essay, Freud drew a provocative comparison between the obsessive activities of neurotics and those "religious observances by means of which the faithful give expression to their piety," such as prayers and invocations. For Freud, the neurotic's innumerable round of little ceremonies - all of which must be done just so - along with the anxiety and guilt that accompany these acts, imply a similarity between the causes of religion and the causes of obsessional neuroses. Freud suggested these had a common root in the psychological mechanisms of repression and displacement - specifically, the repression of sexual impulses in the case of neurosis or antisocial impulses in the case of religion. This parallel led him to conclude that one might describe neurosis as individual religiosity and religion as a mass neurosis. In this article, Freud took a step that proved to be fundamental to his subsequent studies of religion and ritual; that is, he moved smoothly from analysis of so-called individual neuroses (obsessive behavior) to analysis of so-called universal social neuroses (religion). Assuming a basic identity between individual psychic processes and social processes (what sociologists dismiss as the sin of reductionism), Freud began to reconstruct the psychological development of the human race on the basis of his clinical reconstructions of the psychic history of specific patients.

After reading early anthropologists like Frazer, Robertson Smith, and others, Freud attempted to apply his earlier ideas to an analysis of totemism and its taboo against harming the totem animal. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud first argued that the similarities between the repression that produces obsessive neuroses and that which gives rise to religion are ultimately identical. In both, the repressed content was incestuous sexual desires. The evidence could be seen with particular clarity in "primitive" religion. Here Freud focused on totemism's association with the practice of exogamy, whereby the members of one totem group could neither marry nor have sexual relations with each other - even though they were not blood relatives. He saw this as revealing "an unusually high grade of incest dread or incest sensitiveness." Drawing on Frazer's less than reliable data, he added that one of the oldest and most important taboos in primitive society is not to kill the totem animal nor to have sex with totem companions of the other sex.

These are things so strictly forbidden, he assumes, they must really be greatly desired. Then, after noting that totems are frequently identified as father or ancestor, he concludes that both totemic prohibitions and their basis in underlying desires “agree in content with the crimes of Oedipus,” that is, killing his father and having sex with his mother. Having elsewhere identified the “Oedipus complex” as a stage in adolescent psychological development when a young boy must overcome his desire for his mother and murderous envy and fear of his father, Freud argued that the totemic system itself resulted from the same conditions that give rise to the Oedipus complex.

In the conclusion of his study, Freud used Robertson Smith’s depiction of a primal sacrificial meal, one in which the totemic animal was slaughtered and eaten by its own clan, and mixed this with Charles Darwin’s idea of the primal horde. This suggested that “there is only a violent, jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away the growing sons.” Hence Freud developed an interesting, if bizarre, scenario of the early history of the human race: “One day the expelled brothers joined forces, slew and ate the father, and thus put an end to the father horde...The totemic feast, which is perhaps mankind’s first celebration, would be the repetition and commemoration of this memorable, criminal act with which so many things began, social organization, moral restrictions and religion.”

Freud theorized that brothers, consumed by guilt, then attempted to undo their crime by renouncing the women for whom they had killed the father and prohibiting the killing of the totem, which was considered a father substitute. Thus, primordial patricide resulted in the totemic cult with its taboos against killing the sacralized totem and against incest, though the latter taboo is extended to all sexual relations with non-kin women from the same totemic group. Although this totemic cult hides the reality of its own origins in desire and murder, it still promotes the repressed longings, ambivalence, and guilt of the original crime throughout its subsequent development into increasingly more complex forms of religion, forms that include the deification of the murdered father and a sacrificial rite of communion with him.

Freud thus concluded that taboos are inseparable from ritual practices since ritual is the acting out of the obsessional neurotic’s mechanism of repression. In other words, the taboo necessitates the ritual: “We cannot get away from the impression that patients are making, in an asocial manner, the same attempts at a solution of their conflicts and an appeasement of their urgent desires which, when carried out in a manner acceptable to a large number of persons, are called poetry, religion, and philosophy.” This exemplifies the Freudian interpretation of ritual: it is an obsessive mechanism that attempts to appease repressed and tabooed desires by trying to solve the internal psychic conflicts that these desires cause.

While Freud focused on religious ritual, Theodor Reik (d. 1969) applied Freud’s early psychoanalytic principles to various forms of ritual. He suggested the appropriateness of a psychoanalytic focus on the action of ritual, instead of myth, similar to how Robertson Smith claimed the primacy of ritual over myth. Reik was aware of the significance of the information that could be gleaned about people’s activities quite apart from their verbal (mythic) accounts. Yet he didn’t assume that ritual is older than myth. Rather, he believed that myth predates ritual and remains basic to the understanding of the seminal psychological conflicts in early societies. Indeed, myth “in its original state preserves in a far less disguised form the memory of those

events which led to the institution of religion.” Yet for Reik, analysis of religious rituals paves the way for understanding myth, dogma, and cult “just as an intensive study of the ceremonials of obsessional patients invariably leads us to the larger structures of their dreams, obsessional ideas, conscientious scruples and compulsive acts.” Methodologically, psychoanalytic ethnographers might begin with the ritual, but they must work backwards, even past the original myth, to uncover what is thought to be the “real” story of desire or repression, fear, and projection that is at the root. Unconscious motives are the profoundest and most explanatory, the unconscious myth is the true one. Explanation to uncover this true myth will thus uncover the meaning of the ritual in what Freud called “the return of the repressed.”

A few theorists have tried to pull a more positive interpretation of ritual from Freud’s writings. Building on allusions to the therapeutic value of ritual, these tend to emphasize how ritual and religion are means for a healthy accommodation of the repression of desire demanded by all culture and civilization, rather than the means used to create and then police this repression. Bruno Bettelheim (d. 1990) thus argued that initiation rituals are effective means to integrate asocial instinctual tendencies and to adjust to prescribed social roles. Breaking with Freud’s idea that Oedipal conflict and castration anxiety rooted in fathers’ jealousy are the source and underlying logic of male initiation rituals, that their purpose was to “create such anxiety and make secure the incest taboo,” Bettelheim argued that these instead attempt to resolve the ambivalence described in Freud’s idea of the male envy of the sexual organs and functions of women - especially male awe of female reproductive power - and adjust to the social role prescribed for their sex. Similarly, Volney Gay argued that Freud’s theory of religious ritual could be interpreted such that “ritual behavior is a product of the non-pathological, often beneficial mechanism of suppression” - not repression. Hence, “rituals might, to the degree that they aid the ego’s attempt to suppress disruptive or dangerous id impulses, further the cause of adaptation” or healthy maturation.

Psychoanalysis and the myth and ritual theory had a great influence on each other. Harrison’s work, which we discussed earlier, essentially expanded Frazer and enlisted the new psychological terminology about emotion and desire. Rank’s *Myth of the Birth of the Hero* reduced various hero myths to several key episodes in which the hero enacts an Oedipal scenario. Raglan’s *The Hero* saw the ritual pattern of the dying and rising god as linked to an ancient regicide that echoes the murder of the father in Freud. Many interpreters of religion over time have developed the use of psychoanalytic readings of themes from the myth and ritual school, while the grand ambitions of Robertson Smith, Frazer and Freud to determine the ultimate origins and universal meaning of religion and human culture itself still echo today.

Thus Rene Girard has conducted a series of studies depicting ritual, religion, society, and culture as all emerging from a foundation in primal violence. He describes a process in which desire, channeled through the ritual of an original murder, is ultimately enshrined in every social institution, including language. He articulates a notion of asexual primal desire, one rooted in a “mimetic” need to imitate another, thereby creating both a model and a rival. To curb this, and even to repress consciousness of both the violence and desire, a human victim is seized as a scapegoat and ritually sacrificed - the means by which the community deflects or transfers its own desire and violence onto another, someone who has been made into an outsider, an “other.”

For Girard, scapegoating lies not only at the beginning of human history, but also at the beginning of a sociocultural process that continually repeats and renews both the violence and the repression that renders the violence deceptively invisible. "Violence, in every cultural order, is always the true *subject* of every ritual or institutional structure." As the sacrifice of a scapegoat, ritual lies at the heart of all social activity. As with Freud, this ritual process is the invention of society. In a variation of the totemism argument, Girard argues that the group becomes conscious of itself as a group in relationship to the sacrificed totem victim, not by means of identification with it, but by contrast to it as "other." The danger that looms when an "other" has been identified and characterized with projected desire and violence gives rise to the ritualized killing of sacrifice. The solidarity of the group is ultimately the result of this ritualization, understood in Freudian terms as the repression of original impulses of desire and violence. Beyond Freud, there are Frazerian echoes here of the dying and reviving god in Girard's description of the killing of the victim and its eventual deification when resurrected as a god. Even Eliade's themes of the ritual repetition of primal myths find their way into Girard's larger theory.

Finally, the writings of Joseph Campbell (d.1987), which became quite popular in the 1960's, 80's, and even today, offer another curious amalgamation of the myth and ritual school, psychoanalysis (via Carl Jung), and comparative mythological studies (via Eliade). Campbell's synthetic approach is obvious in the four functions he outlined for both myth and ritual: (1) a metaphysical or mystical function that induces a sense of awe and reverence in human beings; (2) a cosmological function that provides a coherent image of the cosmos; (3) a sociological function that integrates and maintains individuals within a sociological community; and (4) a psychological function that guides the individual's internal development. Campbell is also well-known for his theory of a universal "monomyth," one underlying all myths and many other cultural developments, which is composed of basic stages like separation from the world, penetration to a source of great power, and then a life-enhancing return. This monomyth, he argued, is most readily perceived in the myth of the hero, which echoes the theme of the dying and rising god. Campbell's claims for the universality and modern relevance of the monomyth - that it is found everywhere and is the key to unlocking everything - captures something of the vision of ritual elaborated by both the early phenomenologists and the myth and ritual schools. In some of his well-known books, such as *Primitive Mythology*, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, *Myths to Live By*, *The Mythic Image*, and *The Power of Myth* - the theories of these schools continue, not only to influence people's interpretations of the world of religion, but also to shape that world.

These, then, are the major exponents of the psychoanalytic approach to myth and ritual.