

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 9: Functionalist Approaches to Ritual 2

Now that we have introduced functionalist approaches to ritual, and discussed its early proponents, we move on to consider exponents of what Bell refers to as “neofunctional systems analyses.” One of the chief exponents of this position is Roy Rappaport, who focuses largely on language.

Rappaport takes ritual to be a form or structure, defining it as the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers. In the reading I gave you, he attempts to unpack the implications of this definition, noting that no feature of ritual is peculiar to it. Rather, it is the conjunction of its features that is unique.

The first feature of ritual is formality. Rituals tend to be stylized, repetitive, stereotyped, often but not always marked by propriety and good taste, and they also tend to occur at special places and at times fixed by the clock, calendar, or special circumstances. While there are problems in distinguishing some events from others on the basis of formality, especially since this is more a behavioral continuum in practice, suffice it to say that ritual falls toward the more formal, less variant end of the continuum. Indeed, Rappaport is mainly concerned with rituals sufficiently elaborate to include what could be called “liturgical orders,” more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances repeated in specified contexts. This idea of “liturgical order” is extended here to include not only the fixed sequences of words and acts providing form to individual ritual events, but also to the fixed sequences of rituals that lead people around circles of seasons, along the straight paths that depart from birth and arrive at death, through the alternations of war and peace or along the dream tracks that cross Australian deserts.

While ritual is characterized by formality, all that is formal, stereotyped, repetitive or decorous is not ritual (e.g. types of art and architecture). It is important to recognize, next, that performance as well as formality is necessary to ritual. It is the *sine qua non* of ritual, for if there is no performance, there is no ritual. Performance is not merely a way to express something, but is itself an aspect of that which it is expressing. Yet, again, we have to be careful: not all formal performance is ritual (e.g. ritual and drama: one has an audience that passively watches to be entertained; the other has a congregation that actively participates for other reasons. One is “only acting,” the other is “in earnest”).

To say that ritual is “in earnest” is not to say that its formal action is instrumental in any ordinary physical sense. Indeed, another of ritual’s defining attributes - at least as proposed by some - is that it is not instrumental. Some thus distinguish between ritual and technique (of which the former is decorative and the latter instrumental); others claim that ritual not only communicates something, but is taken by those performing to be doing something as well (e.g. communicating).

There seem to be two broad classes of messages transmitted in ritual. First, whatever else may happen, in all rituals participants transmit information concerning their own current physical, psychic, or sometimes social states to themselves and to other participants (i.e. one’s

status in the current structural system). Rappaport goes further, referring to these as “indexical” transmissions, and to this information as “indexical.” By this he means that, beyond the obvious messages concerning current states being transmitted by participants (e.g. present dominance or submission by animals), human rituals go further. In them, the sum of the messages originating among and transmitted among the participants concerning their own contemporary states is not coextensive with the information content of the ritual. Additional messages, although transmitted by the participants, are not encoded by them. They are found by participants already encoded in the liturgy. Since these messages are more or less invariant, obviously they cannot in themselves reflect the transmitters contemporary state (e.g. Mass). These Rappaport refers to as “Canonical.” That which he refers to as the indexical is confined to the here and now, the canonical is not. The indexical always make references to processes or entities, material or putative, outside the ritual, in words and acts that have, by definition, been spoken or performed before. Whereas the indexical is concerned with the immediate the canonical is with the enduring.

One of ritual’s most salient characteristics is that it is not entirely symbolic. Rappaport follows Peirce’s tripartite classification of signs into symbols, icons, and indices. A *symbol* is merely associated by convention with the signified (e.g. “Cat” as a class of creatures). With such symbols one can escape from the here and now to dwell upon the past, future, distant, hypothetical or imaginary, and with a complex symbolic system, such as language, an unlimited variety of messages may be encoded through the orderly recombination of a small number of basic units. Complex symbolic communication is, in fact, a hallmark of humanity. After symbols, *icons* share sensible formal characteristics with that which they signify (e.g. a map to a geographic area). Finally, *indices* are “really affected by” that which they signify (e.g. a rash is indexical of measles, a dark cloud of rain, smoke from the barrel to a gunshot). An index is caused by, or is part of, that which it indicates.

Canonical messages, concerned with things not present and often not even material, are, and *can only be*, founded upon symbols, though they can also employ icons and may even make limited use of indices. Then again, information concerning the current state of the transmitter may transcend mere symbolic designation and be signified indexically. Thus, Rappaport refers to such information as indexical.

It is from the canonical content of liturgy that are drawn the categories that give meaning to whatever indexical messages are transmitted. We come, that is, to the relationship of the indexical to the canonical. It is a complicated relationship. In many conventional utterances the speaker is not only saying something, but doing something - achieving a conventional effect (e.g. in traditional Islam, repeating “I divorce thee” three times does the trick). This is not mere application energy to matter to achieve a physical result, but what some philosophers have referred to as “performative utterances” or “speech acts.” Rappaport refers to these as “performatives,” noting their importance lies not in their persuasive effect on others, but on what they declare regardless of persuasion. An action of some sort is completed in the very performative gesture or utterance itself. Thus we may say that it actually brings into being the state of affairs with which it is concerned. Thus it is not merely performative, but “factitive” as well. While many actions completed in ritual are performative (e.g. marriages), not all are. Some do not bring into being the state of affairs with which they are concerned, but merely commit those performing them to do so sometime in the future (e.g. dancing that commits one to help

another in war in the future).

While many liturgies are performative, this is not confined to ritual (e.g. ‘The bar is closed’). Nevertheless, there is a special relationship between ritual and performativeness. The formal characteristics of ritual enhance the chances of success of the performatives they include. Like any other acts performatives can fail (e.g. as much as I’d like to, I couldn’t crown myself king of Canada and make it stick). This would be an instance of a faulty performatives. Ritual performances can fail. Thus, the formality of liturgical orders helps ensure that whatever performatives they may incorporate are done by authorized people with respect to eligible persons or entities under proper circumstances and in accordance with proper procedures. Moreover, the formality of ritual makes very clear and explicit what it is that is being done. Ritual not only ensures the correctness of the performative enactment; it also makes the performatives it carries explicit, and it generally makes them weighty as well.

The performativeness of ritual is important is that, say, in magical or occult rituals, performatives may hide their conventional nature from the actors, thus enhancing their chance of success. As well, the magical power of some of the words and acts forming part of liturgies derives from the factitive relationship between them and the conventional state of affairs with which they are concerned. The efficacy of ritual may extend beyond the purely conventional and into the organic, for people do occasionally die of witchcraft and they are sometimes healed by faith.

Perhaps the best reason for considering the performativeness of rituals is, paradoxically, that certain rituals are not themselves obviously performative but may make performatives possible. There seems to be more to some or even all liturgies than the performatives they incorporate, and some may not seem to include performatives in any simple sense at all. Many religious rituals do not seem directed toward achieving simple conventional effects through conventional procedures. Although simple performativeness is not critical of ritual, something similar, but of a higher order is: the conjunction of formality and performance - that which is implicit in the act of performing a liturgical order.

Liturgical orders must be performed. Without performance there is no ritual, no liturgical order. Rituals no longer performed are dead, no longer given voice by people’s breaths nor energy by their bodies. A liturgical order is an ordering of acts or utterances, and as such it is enlivened, realized, or established only when those acts are performed and those utterances voiced. The performer is not only transmitting messages s/he finds in the liturgy - s/he is participating in - becoming part of - the order to which his own body and breath give life.

Since to perform a liturgical order, a relatively invariant sequence of acts and utterances encoded by someone else, is to conform to it, authority or directive is intrinsic to liturgical order. Yet something more intimate is involved. A peculiarity of ritual communication, and canonical messages, is that in ritual the transmitters and receivers of communication are often one and the same. At least the transmitter is always among the receivers. As well, the transmitter-receiver becomes fused with the message s/he is transmitting and receiving. In conforming to that which his performance brings into being, and which comes alive in its performance, he becomes indistinguishable from it, for the time being. For a performer to reject the canonical message

encoded in the liturgical order that is being realized by his performance as he is participating in it seems to be a contradiction in terms. By performing a liturgical order the performer accepts, and indicates to himself and to others that he accepts, whatever is encoded in the canons of the liturgical order in which he is participating. This message of acceptance is the indexical message that is intrinsic to all liturgical performances, one without which liturgical orders and the canonical messages they encode are nonexistent or vacuous. While they may often choose not to participate, participation sends a message.

This shows how myth and ritual differ in an important way: ritual specifies the relationship of the performer to what he is performing while myth does not. To recite a myth is not necessarily to accept it (e.g. in kids stories), and a myth survives as well on the printed page as it does on the tongues of the living.

Returning to performatives, while all ritual may not be performative, rituals make performatives possible. There are a variety of factors that must be fulfilled if performatives are to come off (i.e. they must be done by proper persons under proper conditions; there must exist accepted conventional procedures in society for achieving them, such as dubbing one a knight). Rappaport argues that the relevant conventions are themselves rooted in ritual. The performance of ritual both establishes the existence of conventions and accepts them simultaneously and inextricably. Ritual is meta-performative and meta-factitive as it establishes, stipulates and accepts the very conventions in respect to which conventional states of affairs are defined and realized.

The claim that acceptance is intrinsic to performance seems, on the surface, rather dubious. This requires some comment.

First, to say the performer accepts the authority of the liturgical order in performing is not to say he is doing anything very grave. The gravity of acceptance depends upon whatever the order represents, which varies. Next, acceptance is not the same as belief. Belief - an inward, subjective state - is not the same as a public act visible to both witnesses and the performer himself. Liturgical orders, however, are public and participation constitutes a public acceptance regardless of the private state of belief. Acceptance is a fundamental social act and forms a basis for public orders, which unknowable and volatile belief or conviction cannot.

Indeed, acceptance is not only not belief, but does not necessarily imply it - some may be persuaded to bring their beliefs into line with ritual, others may struggle or attempt to transcend it. There is also lots of room for insincerity, deceit, etc. Yet just imagine the state of affairs if public order were required to depend on the continuing acquiescence of the private processes of those subject to it - on their belief, sincerity, good will, conviction, for these surely must fluctuate constantly. These are intrinsic to the very acts that make social life possible for those who relate to each other in accordance with voluntarily accepted conventions. Though liturgical performance does not eliminate infelicities, it does to some extent offset their effects by rendering them irrelevant. It is the visible, explicit, public act of acceptance, not the invisible, ambiguous private sentiment, that is socially and morally binding.

To say, then, that a liturgical is authoritative and its canons accepted in performance thus

does not say the performer will believe everything and behave well according to its rules and norms. Yet even if not, this does not render secret heretics or notorious reprobates' acceptance meaningless or empty. Liturgical performances establish conventional understandings, rule and norms in accordance with which everyday behavior is supposed to proceed, not to control that behavior directly. Whether or not one abides by the rule one has obligated oneself to do so. If one breaks it, one violates an obligation one oneself has avowed.

In sum, ritual is unique in at once establishing conventions, that is, enunciating and accepting them, and in insulating them from usage. In both enunciating conventions and accepting them, it contains within itself not simply a symbolic representation of social contract, but a consummation of it. As such, ritual, which also establishes a boundary between public and private processes, thereby insulating public orders from private vagaries (and vice versa) is *the* basic social act.

To say that ritual is the basic social act implies that it is in some sense moral, for the social subsumes the moral. Not all rituals are explicitly moral, but morality, like social contract, is implicit in ritual's very structure.

While moral dicta may form part of the canon that a liturgy carries, morality is intrinsic to ritual's structure in a more subtle way. In specifically factitive rituals like ordinations, dubbings, and peace declarations, such utterances can be contrasted with ordinary descriptive statements. The adequacy of descriptive statements is assessed by the degree to which it conforms to the state of affairs purportedly described (true or false). The relationship of performatives - particularly factitives and commissives - is exactly the reverse. Thus if someone is formally ordained a priest and then commits crime after crime, we do not say that the ordination was faulty, but that the state of affairs was. We judge the state of affairs by the degree to which it conforms to the stipulation of the performative ritual. Hence, liturgical orders provide criteria in terms of which events - usage and history - may be judged. As such, liturgical orders are intrinsically correct or moral. Morality is inherent in the *structure* of liturgical performance *prior* to whatever its canons assert about morality itself or about whatever in particular is moral. This morality is not limited to the structure of simple factitive and commissive rituals, which seek to establish particular states of affairs, but is intrinsic as well to rituals that seek to establish conventional orders.

Since virtually all rituals include acts as well as words, and often objects and substances as well, suggests that not all messages are communicated equally by all media. Formal postures and gestures may communicate something more, or communicate it better, than do the corresponding words. Actions sometimes speak louder than words (e.g. kneeling in subordination; giving penal signs in Freemasonry). Acts have a virtue not possessed by words or the objects and substances rituals may employ.

Yet while, in ritual, transmitter, receiver and canonical message are fused in the participant, we need to think about what constitutes the participant - especially given the possibility of discontinuity between public and private processes. Rappaport proposes that the use of the body defines the self of the performer for self and for others. In kneeling, then, he is not simply sending a message that he submits in words that come from his mouth. He identifies

his inseparable, indispensable and enduring body with it. It is not mere words: he puts his visible, present, living substance on the line. Doing may be an especially powerful way of saying.

As ritual acts and objects have special communication qualities, so do words. While acts and substances represent substantially that which is of the here and now, the words of liturgy can connect the present to the past, the future, the beginning or end of time. In their very invariance the words of liturgy implicitly assimilate current events into an ancient or ageless category of events, something that speechless gesture, moral substance or expendable objects alone cannot. The symbolic quality of invariant words can escape the present and represent the canonical (e.g. the cross is assigned symbolic value by words).

The informative aspects of the physical and verbal aspects of liturgy thus seem to complement or even complete each other. Perhaps it is better to say that, by drawing himself into a posture to which canonical words give symbolic value, the performer incarnates a symbol. He gives substance to that symbol as that symbol gives him form. The canonical and the indexical come together in the substance of the formal posture or gesture.

Invariance is characteristic of rituals, and it may be that both the sacred and the supernatural arose out of the union of words with ritual invariance. First, however, we must discuss the sacred. Rappaport takes sanctity to refer to the quality of unquestionableness imputed by a congregation to postulates that are in their nature neither verifiable nor falsifiable (e.g. God is one). If ritual, then, is a form of communication, and information always contains a degree of uncertainty, then ritual contains no information in this respect as it speaks to certainties. Certainty and unquestionableness are closely related, and one of the grounds of the unquestionableness of such postulates, which we may call “ultimately sacred,” is the certainty of their expression.

Yet it is one thing to say that a message is certain and another to say it goes unquestioned. Whether a statement will be challenged does not rest solely on the properties of the statement itself but upon the disposition of those to which it is presented. To participate in ritual is to accept that which it encodes. This is entailed by participation in an invariant order that the participants themselves did not encode. Liturgical invariance, while it invests what it encodes with certainty, secures the acceptance of its performers.

While this distinguishes the sacred from the divine or supernatural, it may be the invariance of sacred utterances may imply the objects of those utterances, the extraordinary speakers who first uttered them in antiquity, or perhaps beyond. Gods and spirits as well as social contract and morality may be intrinsic to the structure of liturgical order.

While sanctity is apparently rooted in ultimate sacred postulates typically without material significata, it tends to flow to other sentences which do include material terms and which are directly concerned with the operation of society (e.g. the golden rule). Association with ultimate sacred propositions certify things like the correctness and naturalness of conventions, the legitimacy of authorities, the truthfulness of testimony, etc.

The greater the invariance of the sacred or spiritual than the social components of

liturgical orders provides them with a certainty beyond the certainties of social orders currently existing. Even with fluctuation in the here and now, there is an apparently eternal and enduring meta-order within which social orders themselves may be transformed. The adaptive implications of the greater invariance of the non-material than the material are important. Yet, while the concept of the sacred and the notion of the divine would be literally unthinkable without language, it may also be that language and the social orders founded upon it would not have emerged without the support of sanctity. Language and its conventions may be seen as arbitrary by users in the face of alternatives, with lies and alternatives posing problems for any society whose structure is based on it. Thus, if there are to be words at all it is necessary to establish *The Word*, and this is established by the invariance of liturgy.

Hence, liturgy offsets some of the problems intrinsic to symbolic communication, particularly lying, by moving in 2 opposite directions. On one hand, it eschews symbolization in favor of indexicality in at least some of its representations of the here and now. On the other it sanctifies references to that which is not confined in the here and now.

In sum, truthfulness, reliability, correctness, naturalness and legitimacy are vested in conventions and conventional acts by their association with ultimate sacred postulates. These notions are closely related to that of unquestionableness, which Rappaport identifies with the sacred. In turn, this is closely related to certainty and acceptance, and they to invariance. The invariance of ritual, which antedates the development of language, is the foundation of convention, for through it conventions are not only enunciated, accepted, invested with morality, but also sanctified. Indeed, the concept of the sacred itself emerges out of liturgical invariance.

Yet, as important as liturgical invariance may be, surely language and the human way of life has to be founded on more than a trick of information theory. Yet the sacred is only one component of a more inclusive phenomenon Rappaport calls the Holy. This also includes the “numinous” as its nondiscursive, ineffable or emotional aspect. In religious experience, “communitas” or “effervescence” is one of its manifestations. Erikson suggests that numinous emotion is rooted in the relationship of the preverbal infant to its mother, which is similar to the worshipers’ experience of God. It is learning to trust the mother that makes later language learning possible, learned in what Erikson calls daily rituals of nurturance and greeting.”

Thus, while Rappaport earlier argued that liturgy’s invariance gives rise to the sacred, this designates only the discursive aspect of a broader category called the Holy. The sacred, constituted in language, is that segment of the Holy which faces language, reason, the public order and their problems. The Holy also has a non-discursive, affective and experiential aspect: the numinous. As the sacred may emerge out of the invariance of liturgical orders, so may the numinous be invoked by ritual’s unison.

The canons of liturgy, in which are encoded both postulates concerning that which is ultimately sacred and sentences concerning temporal social order may, then, receive in the rituals in which they are enunciated the support of numinous emotions. Indeed, even where there is some denial of order, some license in ritual for the outrageous, these denials of order are seldom absolute, and while there may be denials of the world’s order, liturgical orders are usually concerned with more than the order of the world here and now. They also proclaim an order that

transcends time, an ultimate or absolute order of which present affairs are only a contingent part. In effect, this exposes the present for what it is and prevents it from becoming ultimate.

Rappaport, finally, returns to the question of the acceptance of convention involved in participating in liturgy. Recall that he insisted ritual acceptance is a public act, but not necessarily associated with inward acceptance. Here he goes on to say that formal acceptance in the absence of something much more profound is a shaky basis for society. Thus, he posits the numinous which, when it is experienced, supports public acceptance with conviction or belief. The achievement of numinous states, of unification with something greater, is often very convincing and meaningful for those who have achieved it, and provides, for them, a deep underpinning, a shoring up of visible acceptance.

Interestingly, however, sacred propositions and numinous experiences are the inverse of each other. The former are discursive but their significata are not material. Numinous experiences are immediately material (physical and psychic states), but far from discursive. Ultimate sacred postulates are unfalsifiable; numinous experiences are undeniable. In ritual's union ultimate sacred propositions seem to partake of the immediately known and undeniable quality of the numinous. While this seems illogical, it doesn't bother the faithful. In the union of the sacred and the numinous the most abstract and distant conceptions are bound to the most immediate and substantial of experiences. We are confronted, finally, with something remarkable: the unfalsifiable supported by the undeniable yields the unquestionable, which transforms the dubious, the arbitrary and the conventional into the correct, the necessary and the natural. This structure, Rappaport suggests, is the foundation upon which any human way of life, any human society, stands - and it is realized in ritual.