

SESSION NAME: RITUAL AND SYMBOLIC ACTIVITY

SESSION INSTRUCTOR: MANUELA IVONE CUNHA

RITUAL AND SYMBOLIC ACTIVITY

Magic and Religion

Two of the most salient topics concerning ritual and symbolic behaviour -- magic and religion -- have usually been characterized by opposition to science. But magic and religion are themselves notions that have in turn been dichotomized and set apart by a series of distinctions between them, established by a number of authors.

For example, 1) religion would involve individualized or personified spiritual entities – such as gods, ghosts and spirits – whereas magic would deal instead with impersonal and diffuse forces (Tylor 1958 [1871]). Or, 2) religion would be oriented towards the sacred and the transcendent in a non-utilitarian manner, whereas magic would aim instead to manipulate and use those supernatural forces. Along this line, prayer and sacrifice would be religious categories, as they pursue mainly the communication with the sacred and the expression of respect towards it. Even when they plead to the gods or intercede for something, it is implied in this plight that the gods will only do so if they wish. Magic, on the contrary, sets to force the intervention of occult powers and would imply the arrogant belief that it can control those powers (Frazer, 1996 [1890], Mauss 1950).

But these, to mention only a few, are somehow artificial theoretical distinctions. In every culture, it is, in practice, very difficult to disentangle what is magic and what is religion. Magical and religious attitudes are confounded in ritual performance, and it is arbitrary to sort them out. For instance, a rain-making ritual, which according to these criteria would be considered a magical activity, may entail references to gods and spirits, as well as invocations and sacrifices, which are regarded by the same criteria as

religious forms. In the same way every ritual, whether magical or religious, involves an idea of efficacy – although an efficacy of a certain kind, as it will be explained later on. Moreover, these distinctions between magic and religion are far from being neutral. They were the result of a specific Western history, a context in which they played an ideological role. It was during the 17th century that the rationalism of the Protestant Reform draw this kind of distinctions between magic and religion. Many catholic rituals were then accused of being sacramental magic and of manipulating the supernatural, while the real religion, as stated by the Reform, was declared to consist of a rational belief in a divine providence. And it was precisely these distinctions, as they were enacted in this context of symbolic competition, that were used by Victorian intellectuals such as Tylor and Frazer (Tambiah 1990). Thus what was at first an ideological dichotomy was employed by these authors as if it were a neutral and universal analytical category.

Symbolic Behaviour and Scientific Thinking

The main problem, however, lies with the opposition of these symbolic activities to science. Frazer was an important representative of a line of thinking that considered magic as a “bastard” science, a mistaken theory of causation. Before going into this point, let’s imagine that an alien anthropologist saw one of us, upset by some problem, kick a stone on the ground. The alien anthropologist could concluded about what he just saw that we consider the stone as the cause of the problem. Or, if he witnessed a girl kissing the photograph of her boyfriend, he could conclude that humans establish a causal connexion between things that are like one another, and that to them similar things permanently affect one another. Or, to give one more exemple, that by putting flowers on a grave some humans believe that the dead can smell them. No doubt we

would consider him as a terrible anthropologist. All of these acts are expressive and performative acts, and as such they are ends in themselves. We are acting out situations, expressing values, emotions, desires. We are not formulating a theory on the workings of nature or the laws of causation. But it was exactly this kind of intellectualist interpretation that Frazer applied to magic. In the face of this symbolic activity he wondered what would “primitives” think about nature that could account for their behaviour. He projected his scientifically oriented background onto an activity that is not meant to be oriented that way because it is not a scientific activity, it is a symbolic activity. One cannot compare what obeys to different logics, just as we don’t use scientific criteria to approach a work of art.

Consider a magic ritual aimed at someone. The fact that this ritual may involve substances that have once been in contact with that person (hair, nail-clippings, clothes) does not mean that the person performing it generally believes that all things that have once been in contact are continually affecting one another. The world would be a chaotic place and no sorcerer thinks that way. He knows perfectly well that in daily life they don’t. It is only when a ritual is performed that a certain kind of effects – symbolic effects – are to be expected. The substances used in the ritual are selected not because they are empirically effective, but because they are symbolically appropriate. The effectiveness lies in the whole procedure, the ritual itself. It is not inherent to the substances themselves.

Symbolic Effectiveness and Techno-Scientific Effectiveness

This leads to the issue of symbolic effectiveness. In all societies the effectiveness of symbolic activities is thought to be of a different kind from the practical, everyday techniques for doing things or from techno-scientific effectiveness. This is why no people

test ritual activities or magical substances experimentally, in the same manner they try out different kinds of clay for pot-making. They don't test empirically symbolic activities because there is no reason to do so. It would be absurd and inappropriate, for example, to hide out and check if the dead come to smell the flowers offered to them. As already stated, rituals are essentially expressive and it is because of this that they are often taken to be effective as well. There are some telling examples of how the nature of the efficacy involved in these different logics cannot be confounded.

1) The first example concerns a Thai village where the agriculture of rice combines a highly advanced technical knowledge on soils and cropping techniques with ritual actions. The villagers say that these ceremonies enable a good harvest. These same farmers also say that good agricultural techniques enable good harvest. There is no contradiction here because these are two different spheres. In what concerns the symbolic sphere, we already know that rituals are expressive and performative, that to act out a desire is to stage its importance and its coming true. Moreover, these rites situate rice production and the value of rice in the larger contexts of life (Tambiah 1990).

2) This is particularly striking in a second example, which concerns the answer given by a rainmaker to an anthropologist (M. Fortes) who invited him to perform the ceremony for an attractive fee: "Don't be a fool, he said, whoever makes a rain-making ceremony in the dry season?". The point is that this is a calendrical rite, it celebrates the changes of natural seasons, the end of a cosmic cycle and the beginning of another. These rites do not so much instrumentally "cause" rain as they complete a course of events, the results following upon its performance. These rituals, that are geared at regular astronomical and calendrical changes, have an anticipatory and expressive nature and

they would be totally misunderstood if they were analyzed according to the logic of positivistic causality (Tambiah 1990).

Explanations of Misfortune

Magic or witchcraft may also aim at explaining things, such as misfortune. But, even here, this doesn't necessarily entail a contradiction with the empirical knowledge of cause and effect. This is so because witchcraft does not aim to explain every misfortune, but only the one which cannot be explained otherwise. What we would consider as a coincidence or a mystery, for the Azande from Southern Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]), for instance, is more satisfactorily explained by witchcraft. A boy who has walked dozens of times on this same trail before, one day trips over a log which has always been there. He cuts himself and the wound becomes infected, whereas he has been wounded dozens of times before without subsequent infection. Witchcraft becomes the answer.

A support of a grain storage bin falls, injuring the people sitting under it. The Azande know perfectly well that the support fell because the termites have eaten it, in the same way they know that the people were sitting under the barn because the sun was hot. But these two causal chains intersected exactly at the same moment and at the same place.

We don't know why. This is where witchcraft enters. It is not so much directed at explaining "how" things happen – the Azande are quite aware of it and resort to natural causality – but at explaining "why" they happen.

In other words, these are not incompatible logics but complementary ones. Most people, in every part of the world, resort to both in different circumstances. The Big Divide mentioned in a previous session, a divide opposing societies governed by scientific reasoning to societies governed by symbolic thinking, is therefore quite misleading. To

conclude, ritual and symbolic activity don't have to be compared to science because they stand in different spheres and their effectiveness is of a different nature. Be it in actions, words or gestures, ritual has an efficacy by the mere fact of being performed. To say or to act out things solemnly, emphatically, or publically endows those words and actions with a special force and meaning (Lévi-Strauss 1974; Turner 1968).

Literature Cited and Recommended Background Reading

- Beattie, J. 1964. *Other Cultures*. New York: The Free Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1976 [1937]. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*. Oxford University Press.
- Frazer, J. G. 1996 [1890]. *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*. New York: Touchstone.
- Lambek, M. (ed.). 2002. *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*. Blackwell.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 1974. *Anthropologie Structurale*. Paris: Plon.
- Mauss. M. 1950. *Sociologie et Anthropologie*. Paris. Presses Universitaires de France.
- Tambiah, S. 1990. *Magic, science, religion, and the scope of rationality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Turner, V. 1968. *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Taylor, E. B. 1958 [1871]. *Primitive Culture. Researches Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*. New York: Harper