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RELIGION, MYTH, AND MAGIC:

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION

COURSE GUIDE

Professor Susan A. Johnston
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Religion, Myth, and Magic:
The Anthropology of Religion

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Cover image: A Huli boy participates in his first ceremony as a novice warrior with male clan members in the southern highlands of Papua New Guinea © Jan Hasselberg

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Course Syllabus

Religion, Myth, and Magic:
The Anthropology of Religion

Photo courtesy of Susan A. Johnston

About Your Professor

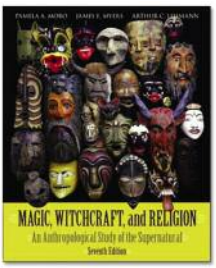
Susan A. Johnston

Susan A. Johnston is a part-time faculty member in anthropology at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. She teaches a variety of courses in anthropology and archaeology, including the archaeology of the Celtic peoples, archaeological myths and mysteries, and the anthropology of religion.

Professor Johnston has carried out archaeological research in Ireland since the 1980s and has worked in various other places such as India, England, and Rhode Island. She is particularly interested in the analysis of religion and ritual in the past, and her research has focused on the analysis of ritual sites. Since this analysis requires using models drawn from other cultures and other times, she maintains an interest in religion and ritual in both anthropological and historical contexts.

She is currently conducting research at the ceremonial site of Dún Ailinne, County Kildare, Ireland. This site saw a variety of ritual uses between 3500 BCE and 400 CE, being used as a place for burial in the Neolithic and Bronze Age and as the ceremonial center of the rulers of the ancient kingdom of Leinster. She has published a number of articles and research reports, but her most recent publication, with Dr. Bernard Wailes, was on excavations carried out at Dún Ailinne, a book entitled *Dún Ailinne: Excavations at an Irish Royal Site, 1968–1975*.

You will get the most from these lectures if you have Pamela A. Moro, James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann's *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).



Duk-Duk Dancers, ca. 1918

Duk-Duk (pronounced “dook” as in “book”) was a secret, male-only society, part of the traditional culture of the Tolai people of New Britain Island in Papua New Guinea. Although still active, the society is now mainly featured as a tourist attraction.

Introduction

Religion is something that appears to be universal in human cultures. In all the societies that we know about, there is some aspect of ideology and behavior that we can identify as religious. While not all people in a given society have the same ideas about religion, it is nevertheless a shared phenomenon that is arguably central to human cultural life. Since we can recognize this shared aspect, there are obviously some things that all religions share; however, the ways that religion is thought about, functions in society, is experienced, and impacts cultural life all vary almost infinitely. This course looks at both of these questions—what is shared by religions cross-culturally, and some of the ways that they differ. In particular, we will consider the following issues:

- What is religion, how have people analyzed religion in the past, and what is the most useful way to think about it given the many ways it is seen in both familiar and unfamiliar cultures?
- How are widely shared aspects of religion, such as rituals, myths, magic, and symbols, used in the context of religion and what can we learn from their analysis?
- What can we say about the origins of religion, is it something that humans have always had, and how can we learn about religion in the past?
- Where do new religions come from, what sorts of forms do they take, and how are they viewed by those who subscribe to existing religions?
- How does religion understand such common human experiences as death, illness, and misfortune, and how does it provide ways to deal with them?
- What is the relationship between religion and other aspects of society such as gender and politics, and how does one affect the other?

By using cross-cultural research from anthropology, as well as a few other disciplines such as archaeology, history, biology, and psychology, we explore the question of how religion can be understood as a fundamental experience in human cultural life.

Lecture 1:
What Is Religion?

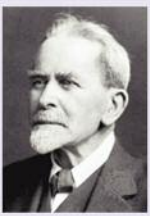
The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Clifford Geertz's "Religion" and Dorothy Lee's "Religious Perspectives in Anthropology" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

If we're going to talk about religion, the first thing we need to think about is a definition. All human cultures have aspects of their beliefs and behaviors that we can categorize as religion, and so in that sense it is a human universal.

There are some general characteristics that all religions in all cultures share, but, to borrow a phrase, the devil is in the details. While all cultures have religion, there are myriad ways in which that can be experienced and expressed. Large, urban-based societies may have a multitude of different choices for religion, while smaller, less complex societies may all share the same one. Religion changes over time and space, sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly; the same religion can be experienced in different ways at the same time by different participants, and it may change for a single individual in different contexts.

Given all this variety, it has been a challenge to try to define religion in any kind of all-encompassing way. Edward Tylor, an early student of cultural variety, kept it simple, and defined religion in 1871 as a belief in spiritual beings. James Frazer, whose monumental work *The Golden Bough* became a classic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, followed a similar path, referring to it as "a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of Nature and of human life." Both of these men reflect the early attempt to define what religion *is* rather than what religion *does*, an approach that ultimately failed due to the staggering diversity of religious beliefs and behaviors that emerged with increasing research on human cultures. For example, while the belief in the existence of nonhuman beings is certainly extremely common in religions, such beings are not always central to religious practice, and, even where they are, they rarely encompass the whole scope of religion in society.

Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917)



James George Frazer (1854–1941)

Karl Marx (1818–1883)

David Émile Durkheim (1858–1917)

Four men who attempted to provide a definition for religion in cultural context during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

More recent approaches have emphasized the social function of religion, how religion works in society. This kind of approach was at the heart of Karl Marx's now-famous statement in 1843 (in his introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*), which reads, in full, that "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." Marx believed that ideology in general, and religion in particular, served to make the world a more bearable place. While this might make religion sound like a good thing, Marx argued that the reason the world could be unbearable was due to the fact that those at the top of society were oppressing those at the bottom, and that this was supported by both ideology and religion. These served to convince people that society was the way it ought to be, and so prevented them from thinking they could change it for the better. This reflected Marx's own belief that society as he saw it was generally bad for people, and that it needed to be revamped.

By contrast, Émile Durkheim, another theorist whose ideas on religion have been central to its study, saw society as constantly in danger of fragmenting. Thus, for him, religion was one of the things that kept it from flying apart. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, published in 1912, he defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a church, all those who adhere to them." This definition, which also includes some reference to beliefs in its idea of the sacred, particularly emphasizes the way religion works to keep people together, giving them a sense of community.

A more modern version of this idea is that offered by Clifford Geertz, in his 1966 article "Religion as a Cultural System." He saw religion as "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Rather like Durkheim, Geertz sees religion as something that has a function in society, but his idea of its function is to provide a world view that seems given, basic, because of its social context and the way it is presented. It is a view of the world that just "seems" right.

All of these definitions have their pros and cons. They all make good points about how religions are experienced, but they also fall short in some ways. I already noted the problems with emphasizing spiritual beings. Similarly, Durkheim's idea that religion works to keep people together hardly holds up in today's world, where religion has at times been a focus for conflict and antagonism. And while Geertz's definition of religion is probably the broadest, it is almost too broad—it seems like the same definition could also apply to culture itself, which is also a symbolic system and provides a worldview that is taken as given. In that case, how is religion different from culture?

So where does that leave us? While all definitions have their problems, we have to have something we can work with. I am taking an anthropological approach in this course, and anthropologists tend to focus on culture as a system of ideas about the world and also on the ways people behave as a

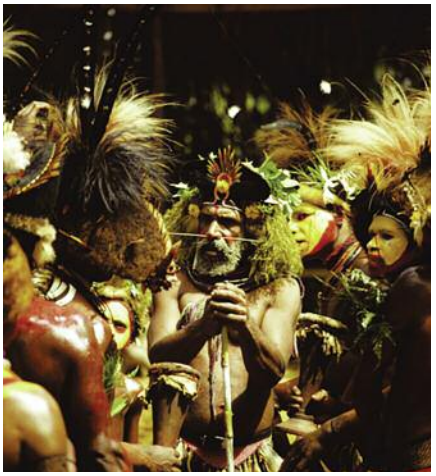
result of those ideas. Religion in this approach is part of culture. With this in mind, the definition I like comes from anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. I don't think he ever published it anywhere, but it's the one he used when he taught the class I took from him. In this definition, adapted a little to reduce the jargon, religion is a system of beliefs and behaviors that formulates and answers questions that are important, recurrent, and must be answered.

Let's look at the individual components of this definition. First, religion is composed of both beliefs and behaviors. That's obvious, but it is worth saying anyway. It is partly about what people believe and partly what they do in terms of those beliefs. In addition, it is a system. That means that it is embedded in a network, in this case culture itself and all its parts. It tends to mirror culture such that, for example, if the society is hierarchical then so is the religion. Ideas about economic relationships, gender, or power are usually also reflected in religion, such that the two support each other. Further, as a system, changes in one part cause changes in the other parts. If ideas about gender or power, for example, change, so does religion, and changes in religion equally cause changes in all the other parts of the system. Religion is a part of culture and so reflects it and is reflected by it.

So far, then, that's what religion *is*. But what does it *do*? According to Appadurai, it formulates and answers particular kinds of questions. This means that religion not only provides answers to questions, an idea that is fairly common in Western societies today, but it also in a sense decides what those questions are. They aren't just any questions, but rather questions that have particular characteristics. First, they are important. That means that they are questions whose answers are significant in some way, not trivial questions whose answers don't really matter that much. They are also recurrent, which means they come up again and again, not only in every generation but also across cultures in both time and space. And they must be answered, so that we can manage to live our daily lives. These are questions whose answers we need for psychological well-being, to make us feel in control of our lives. Some of the questions religion commonly answers are things like, Where did we come from? Why is the world the way it is? Why do bad things happen? Why are we different from other people? or, What happens when we die?

This can be considered a basic definition; some religions are more pervasive than others, and so, for example, in addition to important questions it may also address trivial questions. As I said, no definition is perfect, and there are pros and cons with this one too. But I like the way it emphasizes both what religion is and what it does, and I like the fact that it doesn't have reference to anything supernatural (more about that later). It seems to include most of the religious aspects of cultures that I'm familiar with (though I can hardly claim to know all of them), and even a few that aren't conventionally seen as religion. For example, science could also be included under this definition, and that actually makes some sense. While we conventionally see science and religion as diametrically opposed, if we take a step back, both are ways of viewing the world, and science also has beliefs (for example, that the world follows rules that are knowable) and behaviors (for example, the scientific method), and formulates and answers questions on that basis (for example, how did the world begin?).

Now, I'm not saying that they are the same, because clearly they aren't, any more than the religion of the Kaluli people of Papua, New Guinea, is the same as that of the Quakers. In fact, ideally, we should really be talking about "belief systems" rather than "religion," because of the way we use the word *religion* in normal conversation. But we're sort of stuck with the language, and so we'll work with it as best we can. In the way we'll approach it, science is a belief system just like Christianity is a belief system and Jainism is a belief system. The human brain is an amazing thing, and can incorporate several belief systems, so they aren't necessarily mutually exclusive, just as religion and science aren't mutually exclusive. But we can separate them out for the purposes of analysis, and so we'll be talking about various belief systems that fit the definition I just gave, and we'll be calling them religions. But you should keep in mind that the category of religion is enormously broad, and can include a wide diversity of beliefs and practices.



A meeting of tribal leaders in the Bosavi region in Papua, New Guinea, 2005.

A business meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in York, England, 2005.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How did Karl Marx view religion?
2. In what ways are science and religion similar?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

Bowie, Fiona. *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*. Somerset, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006.

Websites of Interest

1. The *Open Anthropology Cooperative* is a social network open to all with an interest in anthropology. — http://openanthcoop.ning.com
2. Professor Michael D. Murphy of the University of Alabama provides an extensive listing of links on the anthropology of religion from around the world. — http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/419/419www.htm

Lecture 2:
Religious Specialists

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Michael Fobes Brown's "The Dark Side of the Shaman," William Howells's "The Shaman: A Siberian Spiritualist," and Victor W. Turner's "Religious Specialists" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

Religion is a part of culture that deals with some of the fundamental aspects of experience, and as such it has the potential to involve enormous power in a social sense. This may sound melodramatic, but religion often touches on the basic issues of human life, things like where we go when we die and why things are the way they are. It therefore typically involves people with special knowledge, or special attributes, or a special background to carry out religion in some contexts. While there is enormous variation in the roles such individuals may play, all cultures have people whose social positions include a specifically religious function. These are individuals we can call religious specialists.

There are various ways to try to categorize religious specialists. For one thing, they tend to mirror the larger culture, so that, for example, if the culture is hierarchical then the organization of religious specialists is likely to be hierarchical too. Society's ideas about things like gender are also reflected in how the role is understood. Beyond this, it gets more complicated. One way to approach religious specialists is that proposed by anthropologist Victor Turner. He used the terms "priest" and "shaman" as archetypal categories, which perhaps aren't ideal because of the specific characteristics we tend to associate with those roles in U.S. culture. But if we adapt Turner's approach slightly, we can think in terms of two ends of a continuum of religious specialists, with a multitude of variations in between.

A variety of religious specialists.

At one end we have individuals whose religious role is institutionalized and whose practice of that role is full time. It's what we might think of as that person's "job." This kind of role exists independently of the person per se; it is part of the institutions of the society. Such specialists typically have formal training so that they can carry out rituals and other activities according to religious protocols. Since they are trained by a formal body, these activities are less likely to vary in significant ways, or, put another way, there is a relatively narrow range of activity that is defined as orthodox. Think of a typical religious service in the United States, which often follows a particular pattern every time it is carried out. Also typical is that those at this end of the continuum act on behalf of a deity or deities, that is, they are oriented toward the deity as their principal focus rather than society, and so act on the deity's (or deities') behalf. Thus communication with the deity (or deities) is most commonly through the medium of ritual rather than directly. Imams, rabbis, priests, and ministers are probably the most familiar people to carry out this kind of role in U.S. society.

At the other end of the continuum we have specialists who do not inhabit an institutionalized religious role. Such a role is still culturally defined and understood, but it typically isn't carried out in the context of a formal institution. There isn't a standardized training regimen carried out by a hierarchical organization, and so consequently there may be greater latitude in how such specialists' activities are carried out. Learning what is necessary for their role is more likely to happen in the context of something like an apprenticeship, and so they are more likely to be idiosyncratic, resembling their particular mentors rather than a more formal institution. These roles are often part-time, with the individual spending most of his or her time doing pretty much what everyone else is doing. But when they do carry out their religious role, they typically do so on behalf of society rather than a deity or deities. Rituals are more likely to be held at the request of people in society rather than because a deity requires it. In the context of such rituals, these kinds of specialists are more likely to interact with the other world directly, communicating personally with spirits or other beings or visiting the other world themselves.

Such communication is often done through the medium of trance. The concept of trance is an extremely complex one, and there seems to be no consensus as to whether or not it even exists in an objective, measurable way. But regardless of whether it can be independently verified, people experience trance as something other than any of the ordinary states of consciousness such as sleep, reverie, or wakefulness. For present purposes, we can therefore accept that it exists, if only as a culturally defined phenomenon. Trance is usually entered as the result of particular kinds of circumstances. It is often induced by rhythmic actions, such as dancing, chanting, or drumming, or extreme physical states such as exhaustion or pain, or by artificial substances such as drugs. For example, trance is sometimes the result of participating in the Native American Oglala ritual of the Sun Dance, where skewers attached to ropes are inserted in the flesh around a man's pectoral muscles; various means, including suspension from the ceiling of the dance structure, are then used to cause the skewers to be torn out. The Dobe people of southern Africa traditionally carried out rituals where they danced for several hours, after which they entered trance

and were then able to channel their power into healing other people. Healing is also the goal of religious specialists among the Aguarana of Peru, who ingest a substance called “ayahuasca” to enter trance. Once an individual “learns” about trances, then she or he may enter the state spontaneously, usually in response to a particular social context.

Probably the most common term used for religious specialists at this end of the continuum is “shaman.” This term has a long history in anthropology, coming originally from the Tsungas language of Siberia, and some anthropologists (e.g., Alice Kehoe) have argued that the word should only be used when talking about this particular cultural group. Their view is that the word has been used so widely that it has lost all meaning except for a vague association with primitiveness, which they see as not only inaccurate but also perhaps racist. Others (e.g., Paul Bahn) have argued that there are enough similarities among religious specialists of this kind that a category is warranted, and shaman is a valid description because of the way it is understood in anthropology. In either case, whether or not the word is used in a specific or general sense, shamans clearly anchor this end of the continuum of religious specialists. As described by William Howells in the 1950s, Tsungas shamans, both men and women, entered trance to carry out divining and both the diagnosis and healing of the sick. This was accompanied by singing and drumming, and accomplished with the aid of animal spirits from the other world.

As outsiders who typically don’t believe in the reality of these kinds of encounters with spirits and the other world, many anthropologists have wondered about how religious specialists perceive what they do. There is good evidence that many see what they are doing as a performance, which they deliberately orchestrate; they mimic animal noises, they use ventriloquism, they alter their own voices, they pretend that they are in contact with various beings. This has some implication that they, too, may not entirely believe. However, there are a number of ways to think about this. They may see what they are doing as the actions of spirits, even though they recognize their own contribution to it—they are orchestrating the experience, but it’s the spirits that are prompting them to do it, giving them the skills or allowing them to do it properly. Or they may believe that the overall system is real, e.g., that people are cured by spirits, but that they themselves do not have the power, or are not spiritual enough, or skilled enough, or disciplined enough, to call them. Or they may not believe that it is possible to encounter spirits, but they believe in the overall worldview where there are spirits who heal people. In this

A shaman of Altai

A colorized photograph of a Khakas shaman woman from a postcard by Russian ethnographer S.I. Borisov taken in the southern Siberian region of Khakassia in 1908.

case, they admit to fooling people but the goal is to convince them so that they are open to the power of spirits. Or, indeed, they may not believe in the whole thing, and are simply manipulating the system for power or prestige. Belief is a complex phenomenon, and there may be many variations in belief among the members of a culture, or within individuals in different parts of their lives.

Across cultures, the range of religious specialists is enormous. Some act in the context of society while others do it more for personal fulfillment. It's also the case that a given society is not necessarily characterized by only one kind of religious specialist. In large, complex, urban-based societies, there may be both priests and shamans, rabbis and healers, and even in societies that are less complex there may be different specialists for different things—some who heal, some who read omens, others who carry out ceremonies like initiations or marriages. It all depends on the particular needs as understood in the context of that society's religion. However, they all have such specialists, which raises the question of why they are needed. Why is religion something that seems so often to require special people? There may be many reasons. For one thing, religious activity often requires special knowledge, which may take time to acquire, whether through formal institutions or more informal apprenticeships. Religious specialists may also be culturally understood as needing special characteristics in order to perform their role—descent from a particular group or individual, birth in a particular place or at a particular time, or being physically marked in some way. Or they may have to have had some unique experience, such as a call or other encounter, to demonstrate their fitness for the role. It is often recognized that religious specialists have to deal with power or knowledge that could be dangerous, and so they require particular training in addition to their knowledge and personal characteristics or experiences. They are also sometimes seen as the only people who have the authority to carry out some rituals, such as marriages or funerals, and that authority may derive from some of the qualities already noted. Whatever the specific cultural understandings, religious specialists are found in all societies, where they carry out many and varied functions as required by the rich diversity of human religious life.

A traditional Jewish wedding ceremony performed by a rabbi.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How can religious specialists be categorized?
2. What is a shaman?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

Helvenston, Patricia A., and Paul G. Bahn. *Waking the Trance Fixed*. Louisville, KY: Wasteland Press, 2005.

Kehoe, Alice Beck. *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking*. Prospect Height, IL: Waveland Press, 2000.

Lee, Richard B. *The Dobe Ju|'hoansi*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993.

Powers, William K. *Oglala Religion*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977.

Websites of Interest

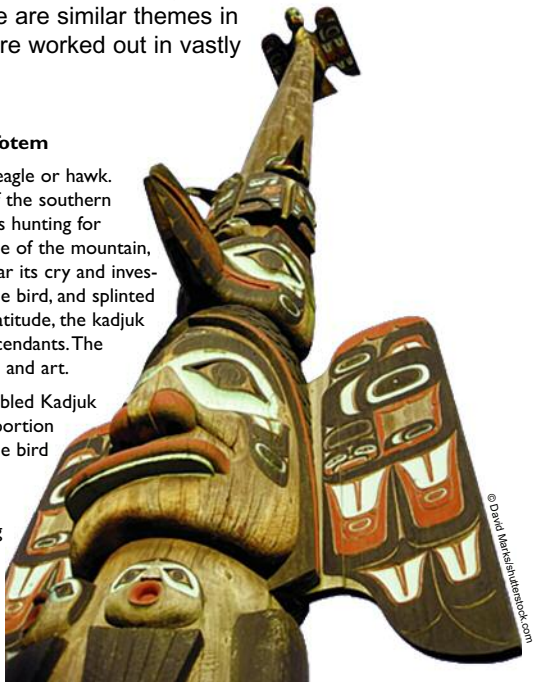
Foothill College (Los Altos Hills, CA) provides a *YouTube* link for a short subtitled movie related by an Inuit shaman to an interviewer. The story offers insight into the shamanistic practices in this Inuit village, including taboos and curses. — http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kxdqjn1sFM8

Lecture 3:
Mythology

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Scott Leonard and Michael McClure's "The Study of Mythology" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

Mythology is one of the oldest aspects of human culture studied in anthropology. It was something that was readily apparent when other cultures were first encountered by anthropologists—when asked to explain something about their culture, people often made reference to myths. This seemed unusual (though it really isn't; more about that in a minute), and consequently many of the famous early anthropologists paid at least some attention to myth. Franz Boas, the person probably more responsible than anyone else for developing American anthropology, documented hundreds of myths, particularly among Native Americans of the northwest coast. He was struck by their richness and variation, how they reflected particular kinds of cultural concerns, and how specific myths were deeply connected to their individual cultures. By contrast, Claude Levi-Strauss, who also studied mythology cross-culturally, focused on how there were similar mythic themes in many otherwise separate cultures. To him, this meant that there were similar concerns shared widely by human cultures, which were reflected in similar themes in myth.

While they took different approaches to the analysis of myth, both men were right—there are similar themes in many bodies of myth, and they are worked out in vastly



The Kadjuk Bird Totem

The kadjuk is a mythical bird similar to an eagle or hawk. The story, as told by the Tlingit tribesmen of the southern coastal areas of Alaska, is that the kadjuk was hunting for marmots and inadvertently dove into the side of the mountain, breaking both wings. Hunters chanced to hear its cry and investigated. They climbed the mountain, found the bird, and splinted its broken wings, thereby saving its life. In gratitude, the kadjuk vowed to protect the hunters and their descendants. The Tlingit memorialize the bird in their carvings and art.

The totem pole pictured here shows the fabled Kadjuk bird sitting atop the pole. The undecorated portion of the pole symbolizes the lofty habitat of the bird and the high esteem in which it is held.

Below the kadjuk is carved a raven with its breast forming the headdress of his wife, Fog Woman, who holds two salmon, which she produced, the first in the world. There are two large-faced creatures at the base of the pole that represent the marmots being hunted by the kadjuk bird.

different ways in different cultures. But apart from the specific differences in analysis, the main contribution of people like Boas and Levi-Strauss was to realize that the myths they studied weren't just stories that aren't true. This is how the word is used in ordinary speech, as when we say that getting a cold from sitting in a draft is "just a myth." Instead, these anthropologists realized that myth has an important cultural function that is related to truth, but in a different way.

As with defining religion, there are a number of ways to define myth, none of them entirely satisfactory. So perhaps the best way to think about myths is in terms of their characteristics. First, myths are narratives. That means they are stories, in the sense that they have characters and a plot, a beginning and an end. Something happens in myth that is brought about by the actions of individuals. But myths are different in important ways from other cultural stories that we tell. For one thing, myths are sacred. That means that myths touch on the same aspects of culture as religion does, important things like why the world is the way it is or where we came from. In terms of the definition of religion we started with, myths therefore provide direct answers to some of those important questions that religion deals with. Myths also often take place in the distant past, sometimes the extremely distant past, before the world was formed or humans were on the Earth. Not all myths are told about the remote past, but because they often deal with beginnings or the basic nature of something, it makes sense that they would have to tell about a time before those aspects became the way they are now.

So myths are sacred narratives that usually, but not always, are set in the past, and sometimes in the inaccessible distant past. They answer important questions, usually of a religious nature (though there may be secular myths). But what makes myths of particular interest to anthropologists and other students of culture is their meaning, and so their relationship to truth. Unlike the common usage of the word, myths in the anthropological sense may or may not be factual. Some people in a culture may believe that they happened in a literal way, others don't believe they happened, and still others may not have thought about, or aren't sure, or any number of other possibilities. However, regardless of factuality, myths are still true. They speak to some aspect or value or characteristic of a culture in a true way, even if the events they relate aren't themselves factual. You can think of this as analogous to a movie or novel. These are explicitly not factual; that is, they are fiction, and yet they can still convey truth. Like myth, truth in this sense lies in the meaning given to or taken from the story rather than whether or not the story is seen as factual. Indeed, that is why myths are told and are important—because they are about something that is considered meaningful to a society.

Consider the famous story of George Washington and the cherry tree. As the story goes, George, as a boy, chopped down his father's prize cherry tree, and when confronted by his understandably furious parent, admitted that he had done it. Now, did this really happen? Who knows? There are probably people in American culture who believe it did, others who seriously doubt it, and others who never really thought about it or are uncertain. But the story gets told again and again, because it speaks to values we think are important in our culture (and particularly in our leaders)—honesty, integrity, personal

responsibility, and courage. This isn't a religious myth, but it is a secular one, and it functions in the same way. It is a way of expressing some of our important cultural values in a narrative form, and it doesn't really matter whether it is factual, strictly speaking.

Myths are therefore important because their analysis can tell us what a society considers important, how it sees the world, and how it thinks about itself in cultural terms. Luckily for anthropologists, all cultures have myths, and their analysis can not only tell us about that culture; comparisons between myths of different cultures can also reveal significant similarities and differences between those cultures. For example, in his book *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*, Edward Schieffelin relates the creation myth of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea. In essence, it tells how, in the distant past, there were no trees or rivers or animals, only people on the land. When the people began to get cold and hungry, a man stood up and assigned a role to everyone, telling one group to be trees, and one group to be fish, and so on, until all the animals, plants, and natural features (like hills and rivers) were brought into existence. Those who were left remained human beings and were the ancestors of those who live there today.

Compare this story to one of the origin myths in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. This story is also a sacred narrative that touches on important religious issues, which some people believe is factual and some believe is metaphorical, and some people are in-between. In this story (as told in Genesis, chapter 1), God created everything in the world over a specific period of time, with each major aspect being created on separate days. At the end, God created humans, both male and female, who became the ancestors of humans living today, and put them in charge of the plants and animals to use for their food. Then, on the last day, He rested, pleased with the work He had done.

Now this story is similar in some ways to the Kaluli myth and different in others. On the one hand, both happened in the distant past and both tell about how everything in the world resulted from a deliberate act of creation. Also in both, there is a sense that it was the human need for food and other resources that prompted that act of creation (though it happened in different contexts), which was carried out by a single individual. It is apparently also the case that, in both myths, the act of creation was carried out by someone explicitly gendered male, though the significance of this may vary and I suspect wouldn't be accepted by everyone in the respective cultures. On the other hand, there are many differences between these two myths. The most obvious is that, for the Kaluli, creation was the result of human action, while in the biblical version it is God who is responsible. Also, from a more symbolic perspective, in the Kaluli myth all life starts out as essentially the same stuff that is then tailored in particular ways to meet specific needs, while in the Genesis myth there is the sense that everything is created separately, as individual and unique categories of life. Humans preexist everything in the Kaluli myth, while they come last in the biblical one. And while human needs are met by creation, there is no indication of the reason that God in the biblical myth created everything; it is simply done because God wanted to do so, not because, as in the Kaluli myth, humans needed these things to survive.

More could certainly be made of this comparison, and it would take more space than I have here to go on and see what this analysis might then tell us about the similarities and differences between these two cultures. But you get the idea. You can probably think about this further and make some interesting observations of your own based on these two myths. It's also worth noting that the biblical myth as I related it isn't the only one there, and isn't the one that has Adam and Eve and the use of Adam's rib. That one follows this more general one in Genesis. But myths are flexible like that, and culture chooses to tell the version that it finds meaningful in a particular context at a given point in time. Myths can therefore also change over time to reflect changes in culture. As an example, Schieffelin notes that, as Christianity became more popular among the Kaluli, the man in the myth who changed the existing humans into plants and animals has been increasingly identified as Jesus when the myth is told. So it's interesting not only to compare the myths of different cultures, but also to look at how myths in a given culture have changed over time.

The anthropological analysis of myth shows that it plays a significant role in how religion is expressed and explained in a cultural context. Myths are one way in which those important, recurrent questions can be answered in a religious framework, and so they are central to the role religion plays in society. This is why understanding myths is an important way to understand not only religion, but also culture itself. Myths are therefore not only sources of truth and meaning for those who tell them; they also provide meaning for those seeking to understand other cultures and how they experience the world.

God creating the land animals in a Vittskövle (Sweden) Church fresco, ca. 1480s.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the most common characteristics of myths?
2. What cultural meanings are there for the "flexibility" of myth?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

Schieffelin, Edward L. *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Websites of Interest

The *Encyclopedia Mythica* website contains over seven thousand articles on mythology from around the world. — http://www.pantheon.org

Lecture 4:
Symbols

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Raymond Firth's "An Anthropologist's Reflections on Symbolic Usage" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

Symbols are an integral part of the human experience. Archaeologists use the first evidence for symbolic behavior as a significant watershed in the appearance of human culture, and the ability to understand and use symbols is often considered a definitive criterion distinguishing humans from nonhuman animals. Symbols are at the core of language, both spoken and written, and culture itself is a symbolic system.

The definition of the word "symbol" can be very complex, and there is a whole field of analysis called semiotics specifically concerned with the details of the meaning of symbols. Here, we can think in simpler terms. A symbol can be thought of as anything that stands for something else because of some perceived connection. On the one hand, this can be purely convention. The shapes you are reading right now, which are being translated into sounds in your thoughts and then into meaningful language (I hope), don't have any particular connection to the sounds and meanings they represent. A letter, like a "B," represents a particular sound simply because of convention—you learned in childhood that this is what it represents, and there is no particular association between that shape and the particular vocalization that makes the sound "B."

More interesting for anthropological analysis are symbols that have particular meanings because there is a perception that they share or represent some quality or other association. In this case, the meanings are not necessarily inherent in the symbol, but there is a perceived link of some kind. For example, think of a pig. In United States culture, pigs typically represent negative things—greed, sloppiness, laziness—because of the way their lifestyles are perceived. They roll in mud, they have a strong smell, and they have rather messy eating habits. However, they are also smarter than many domestic animals, at least as measured in human terms, and so could just as easily have come to represent intelligence. In other cultures they can be considered positive symbols. During the Year of the Pig in China, pigs were seen as good luck, and the symbol appeared widely in a positive context in popular culture. There's no particular reason why they are positive in some cases and negative in others. It's just the way they are perceived and given meaning in cultural terms.

The meanings attached to symbols can also be quite complex, and a given symbol can encompass both positive and negative meanings in a single culture, depending on context. I just suggested that pigs are generally considered negative symbols in the United States, but we also have piggy banks, suggesting an association with thrift and wise money management. Think about something like an American flag. The display of an American flag would probably be considered a symbol of general support for the country, but if it is at the center of a protest march it might mean something else entirely. Burning the flag would be seen as a negative statement, unless the people are, say, members of the American Legion and are in fact disposing of the flag in the correct manner. In this case, burning the flag is a positive thing—flags that have become ragged and worn are supposed to be burned, as an act of respect, rather than thrown in the trash. So the same symbol can have complex and even contradictory meanings in the same culture.

The ability of symbols to encompass multiple meanings is what makes them culturally powerful. In this sense they are very efficient, packing a potentially huge amount of significance into a single image that is readily understood by those who see it. As cultural beings, raised in cultural worlds, we understand this significance, often in ways that are almost unconscious. It's likely that you understood the various flag examples I just gave without giving much thought to them. That's because the flag is a familiar symbol, and we are accustomed to attributing all of these various meanings to it. However, we don't always use symbols in familiar ways, and we can also change or challenge the usual meanings by manipulating that same symbol. Probably the most familiar place in U.S. culture where this happens is in art, where symbols may be used in new and unusual ways that can be surprising, amusing, or shocking. However, even when used creatively, it is the association of a symbol with a core of shared meanings that gives it its significance.

An interesting example of this is a symbol that has become pervasive in U.S. culture, the ribbon. Folklorist Jack Santino, in an article for the *Journal of American Folklore*, traces the history of this symbol as a yellow ribbon from its beginning as a song by the group Tony Orlando and Dawn. From there, it was used, first, as a symbol in support of American hostages taken by Iran (1979–1981) and then it reappeared in the first Gulf War to show support for American soldiers. Since that time, it has exploded as a cultural icon, representing different causes depending on color; for example, domestic violence (purple), breast cancer awareness (pink), AIDS awareness (red), and autism (multicolor). The symbol has become so recognizable that an actual ribbon is no longer necessary; a picture of one is sufficient. Now, if you think about this symbol, what are the various meanings that it has had, and how are they related—what is the continuing core that makes all of the symbols related? I'll let you work it out on your own time, but just to start the ball rolling, it has something to do, perhaps,

"Support Our Troops" yellow ribbon-style magnet displayed on the back of a vehicle.

with things like situations that are bad and over which the person has no control, a desire for a positive outcome, and a general notion of support.

This quality of symbols makes them very useful for cultural analysis. The analysis of symbolic meanings can reveal a lot about how a culture thinks about itself and the world around it. Asking what particular symbols mean in particular contexts and observing how they are used in various ways can provide useful insights to otherwise hidden cultural meanings. Given the complexities of symbols, it's hardly surprising that this kind of analysis is often called "unpacking" the meaning of a symbol. And it's not always a straightforward process, either. There's an interesting example given by anthropologist Daniel Miller in his book *Artefacts as Categories*, which analyzes the use of pottery in an Indian village. It's a complex analysis, but one part talks about a type of pottery that is made for a specific social occasion, and always appears on that occasion. Despite being pressed repeatedly in different ways at different times, the villagers were unable to give any consistent account of the deeper meaning of that type of pottery. It was simply something that was "supposed to be there." In this case, people couldn't really articulate any specific meaning for this pottery, except that it had meaning of some kind in its simple presence. This is the complexity of the human use of symbols.

I haven't really talked much about the specific use of symbols in a religious context, but of course all of these observations apply there as well. Indeed, the use of symbols may be particularly potent in a religious setting because of the potential importance of religion itself. Religious symbols familiar in U.S. culture, such as the cross, the Star of David, or the Qur'an, have been used in complex ways to both support and challenge religious behavior. The same is true in other cultures as well, both in terms of the complex meanings of symbols and the potential conflict over their use. In her book *The Art of Kula*, Shirley Campbell analyzes the use of particular colors and motifs on canoes associated with *kula*, a kind of ritualized exchange system first described by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. This exchange takes place in various parts of the Pacific around Papua New Guinea, but Campbell's research was conducted on Vakuta, one of the Trobriand Islands. As the canoes made for this trade are decorated, certain animals are carved into the surface in order to imbue their powers into the canoe. For example, ospreys and egrets are carved because they symbolize skilled and rapid flights, which the islanders hope will also characterize their voyage. Bats are also carved, but in a somewhat different manner. They are skilled fliers, but they also have oddities—they fly at night, and they fly without being birds—so their powers are somewhat tainted and they can't quite be trusted. To deal with this they are carved behind the ospreys and egrets, where they can, in effect, be "watched over" and their powers harnessed in a positive way.

Colors are also used on Vakutan canoes and both magically imbue the canoes with power and amplify the symbolic meanings of the animals. White is associated with purity, youth, and innocence, but also with some implication of blandness, analogous to the use of "vanilla" in this sense in English. Red is for the power of the fullness of life, fertility, and the excitement of sexuality, but also with the potential for manipulation that this can bring. Black is associated with old age and death, but also the wisdom, power, and restraint

that comes with age. These three colors are combined on the canoes with all the associated meanings, and they are also combined with animals. Bats, with their slightly suspicious power, are painted black, while ospreys and egrets are painted white and emphasized in red, incorporating the color of seduction. Power is thus derived from both the presence of the colors and animals and also the combination of both and their positions on the canoes. All of this is not self-evident, but rather is culturally situated such that those who are members of Vakutan society can understand these meanings. By talking to them about these symbols, what they mean, where they are located, and how they are applied to the canoe, Campbell was able to understand not only the decoration on the canoes but a number of other aspects of their society as well.

© Shirley F. Campbell, from *The Art of Kula*.

Above: A side view of a carved and painted prow board that decorate a canoe used by Vakutan Kula voyagers.

Right: A head-on view of the backboard from a Vakutan canoe.

Thus symbols are important cultural elements in a number of different ways. Within a particular culture, the use and manipulation of symbols makes important statements about individuals, groups, societies, and cultures, their relationships to each other and to the larger world. By "unpacking" the meaning of symbols and the ways they are used, anthropologists are also able to understand these meanings, which gives them greater insight into the cultural worlds of the people whose lives they study.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What gives a symbol its significance?
2. Why is “unpacking” a good word to use to describe the analysis of symbols?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

Campbell, Shirley F. *The Art of Kula*. Illustrated ed. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002.

Articles of Interest

Santino, Jack. “Yellow Ribbons and Seasonal Flags: The Folk Assemblage of War.” *Journal of American Folklore*. Vol. 105, pp. 19–33, Spring 1992.

Websites of Interest

Professor Shirley F. Campbell (Australian National University, Canberra) provides a website for additional information and images about the carved art from the people of the Trobriand Islands. — http://www.netspeed.com.au/cr/theartofkula/default.htm

Lecture 5:
What Is Ritual?

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Victor W. Turner's "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

The definition of religion used here emphasizes two components. It is an ideology, a set of ideas about the world and our place in it, but it is also behavior, what we do, how we act, in the context of those ideas. For some societies, or for some individuals in a given society, religious ideas underlie all or most human action. In others, it only plays a direct part on some occasions, being invoked on special occasions or in specific contexts. But all religions have some behavioral component, and this typically takes the form of ritual. In this sense, ritual can be seen as the main expression of the behavioral side of religion. There are, of course, rituals that are not religious, and these also share the characteristics that I'm about to describe. But in the context of religion, ritual can be a powerful thing, deriving its significance from the ideology that underlies it.

Because ritual is activity that takes place in an observable way, and because of its ties to a worldview that was sometimes seen as exotic and strange by outsiders, it has been the focus of anthropological study almost since the beginning of the discipline. Anthropologists such as Victor Turner, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Ruth Benedict all documented rituals among the cultures they studied, including initiations, magic, and many other kinds of formal religious activities. They realized that understanding ritual is rather like the analysis of symbols that I talked about in the last lecture. There are many complex meanings interwoven through rituals, which themselves use symbols, and those meanings can be expressed, challenged, or changed in a ritual context. By watching rituals, talking to people about what they did and why, and sometimes even participating in them, anthropologists can gain insight into the meaning of the ritual, its religious context, and the larger social and cultural significance of both.

As members of a society, we tend to recognize rituals without thinking consciously about it. For example, if you accidentally wandered into a wedding ceremony, how would you know what it was? While no two weddings are exactly alike, there is a core of behaviors and symbols that are shared by most weddings that allow us to identify what is happening. Some of these are specific to the wedding ritual, but others are more general things that rituals in general share. We can think of these as a set of characteristics that allow us to identify ritual when we see it. This is important because there is always a set of behaviors that are appropriate to particular rituals. The characteristics of ritual are then what indicate to the participants of the ritual what is expected of them.

The first thing is that rituals are repetitive. This is the way that the word is used in informal language, such as talking about the "morning ritual" that we

do every day. But in the more formal sense, ritual is repetitive on a number of different levels. Rituals themselves often incorporate repetitive elements—drumming, chanting, dancing—and they are also typically repeated throughout the year or every time a particular need arises. More generally, some rituals are repeated cross-culturally, in the sense that particular kinds of ritual occur in most cultures, like weddings and funerals. It is the repetitive aspects that lie at the core of the ritual experience and are arguably central to its function.

Closely related to being repetitive, ritual is also formulaic. This means that a ritual has a specific formula that must be followed for the ritual to be considered properly carried out. Rituals have a particular order or sequence of events, they must include certain elements or people, or they must happen in particular places. If the formula is not followed, then the goal of the ritual may not be achieved. Sometimes this might be a fairly minor thing, with the participants having a feeling that the ritual simply wasn't satisfying in some way. In other cases, the result is more serious. Where rituals are intended to make certain things happen, such as changing a single person into a married one, if the proper formula isn't carried out then the change hasn't occurred. A common example of this cross-culturally is when the dead aren't properly treated. One function of a funeral, in a cultural rather than a literal sense, is to transform a living person into a dead person. A common belief cross-culturally is that the result of an improper transition is a ghost. These are people whose deaths are somehow seen as incorrect—their bodies weren't properly buried, or their deaths occurred under improper circumstances. The movie industry, from the classic *Night of the Living Dead* to the more recent *Ghost*, has based many plots on just such beliefs.

As a cultural category, we are able to recognize when ritual is happening, oftentimes even when we don't know the precise nature of the ritual. This is because ritual is "framed," which means that it is set off from everyday life by various indicators. These can take may forms. Rituals typically occur in specific places, often places where nothing but ritual ever happens. They may involve people, for example religious specialists or out-of-town guests, who are not usually around. Rituals may also be marked by the use of special

Funerals for members or veterans of the military contain many religious and martial rituals.

objects, clothing and other personal adornment, music and other vocal elements, and many other markers that one could see, hear, or smell that indicate that this is a special occasion. Framing elements also include behaviors that are not normally seen, either at all or in everyday contexts. While some rituals do not include this kind of element, it is often the case in ritual that participants are allowed or even encouraged to act in ways that would be discouraged or forbidden in any other context. A familiar example of this is the group of related rituals that occur before Lent, including Mardi Gras in New Orleans and Carnival in Brazil. On these occasions, people are encouraged to behave in ways that would be considered unacceptable at other times of the year, in contrast to the restraint and moderation required in the weeks leading up to Easter. Framing elements are therefore perceptual indicators that indicate a ritual is occurring, and the particular framing elements associated with a given ritual are culturally recognizable indicators that this ritual is happening and therefore how one should act according to cultural expectation.

As part of this framing aspect, rituals are also symbolic. This can occur on a number of different levels. As I just noted, framing elements may themselves be symbolic, as in the use of objects, chants, or costumes that themselves carry symbolic meanings. Ritual is one of the places where the experience and manipulation of symbols can have significant individual and cultural effects. In addition, rituals themselves may be symbolic, in that the overall action of the ritual itself has symbolic meaning. An example would be Christian communion, a symbolic reenactment of the Last Supper. In some cases, symbols appear within ritual in less conspicuous ways, but in some cases, they are the main focus of ritual. In this context, everything I said about the power of symbols to create, express, and alter meaning becomes even more significant—the ritual context, in a sense, can intensify the power already inherent in the symbols themselves.

A Christian sacrament generally considered to be a commemoration of the Last Supper, the final meal that Jesus Christ shared with his disciples before his arrest and eventual crucifixion. The consecration of bread and a cup of wine within the ritual recalls the moment at the Last Supper when Jesus gave his disciples bread, saying, “This is my body,” and wine, saying, “This is my blood.”

Finally, rituals are goal-oriented. Rituals are carried out for a reason. They are intended to accomplish something, and this can run the gamut. Some rituals are more diffuse in their goals, and may be intended to express a sense of community integration, experience particular emotions, or celebrate some larger community aim. They may also have quite specific goals, such as to transfer people from one social role to another, communicate with the other world, or transform people in various culturally meaningful ways. Participants in a ritual may experience those goals superficially or intensely, depending on their particular circumstances. But regardless of the specifics, rituals are intended to have an effect on the world and/or the people in it.

The study of ritual is at the core of anthropology, and there are myriad examples we could talk about. The Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, whose origin story I talked about earlier, used to carry out a ritual in which a religious specialist provided a conduit for communicating with the dead. This involved singing and a kind of drumming with a rattle. Once the person achieved the proper state, audience members could speak with dead spirits, often for the purpose of providing healing for relatives who were sick. The Lakota, one of the Native American groups who make up the larger group sometimes known as the Sioux, have a ritual known as a vision quest. Here, individuals who want to gain knowledge about various different things go to a special, chosen place apart from that where they live. They fast, and stay there alone, until they have a vision. They typically then return to talk about their vision with someone who has the ability to interpret it, in order to make sense of the sometimes confusing images. Rituals like these are often about healing, as are the trance dances of the Songhay people of Niger. In this ritual, people who have the ability to encounter spirits of the other world directly dance until they go into trance. At this point they are possessed by those spirits, and may then ask them questions to gain other kinds of knowledge that can be used for healing and other purposes. This is analogous in a broad sense with the similar trance rituals done among practitioners of Vodou, the religion of Haiti that is also practiced in some parts of the United States.

While these few examples of rituals are varied in their intent and cultural context, they all share the five characteristics described before in terms of their structure, and thus are recognizable in the most general sense as rituals. They also give some sense of the breadth of human ritual life. There are literally millions of rituals carried out in the context of human society, and their study provides insight into one way humans interact with the world and each other in the context of religion. Recognizing ritual is thus important as a first step.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the ways in which rituals are repetitive?
2. What has enabled religion to be a focus of anthropological study since nearly the inception of the discipline?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

Powers, William K. *Oglala Religion*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977.

Schieffelin, Edward L. *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Stoller, Paul. *Fusion of the Worlds: An Ethnography of Possession Among the Songhay of Niger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Websites of Interest

The *Anthropology.net* website was established to promote and facilitate discussion, to review research, to extend stewardship of resources, and to disseminate knowledge relevant to anthropology. This link provides a number of short articles and links about burial rituals. — http://anthropology.net/2008/06/30/cross-cultural-burial-rituals

Lecture 6:
What Does Ritual Do?

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Elizabeth G. Harrison's "I Can Only Move My Feet Toward *mizuo kuyo*: Memorial Services for Dead Children in Japan," Bronislaw Malinowski's "Rational Mastery by Man of His Surroundings," and Victor W. Turner's "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

While recognizing ritual is important, the whole point of ritual is that it accomplishes something. A ritual's effects can vary enormously from the relatively trivial to the profound, and while they are rooted in ideology, these effects may be experienced concretely in the physical world. This dual nature is at the heart of ritual. In one sense, the effects of ritual are all about how things are thought about. A single person who gets married hasn't actually changed in any measurable way in a physical sense. Rather, people now think about that person differently—they are married rather than single. However, the perception of the person changes how they act and are treated in the physical world. They may be able to do things that they couldn't do before, go places they couldn't before, or have access to aspects of culture that they didn't have before. So while, at its base, the ritual hasn't physically changed the person, the change is nevertheless real in the cultural world. This is why ritual is structured the way it is, why it is important to do the ritual correctly. If the ritual isn't right, then people aren't prompted to perceive the person differently, and so the change hasn't really happened. Putting it another way, the most direct way to assess whether the ritual has achieved its goal is to determine whether the ritual was done correctly, and if there is some sense after the fact that the goal wasn't achieved, then it is likely that the first thing to be considered is whether the ritual was done correctly.

There are many ways to think about the function of ritual. As anthropologists, we are interested in both the way people themselves understand their culture as well as the way that culture can be understood from an anthropological perspective. The latter includes not only indigenous views but also the way those cultures compare to others in different places. This means that anthropologists sometimes suggest interpretations of aspects of culture that the people themselves are not necessarily aware of. If the anthropological interpretation is different than the indigenous view, then it can be evaluated in several ways. When this interpretation is explained to people, do they generally accept it even though they never thought about it in this particular way? This often happens in cultural analysis. If people don't accept it, however, then is there evidence that supports this view regardless of people's agreement with it? If so, then the analysis might be valid anyway. This can be a tricky balance to maintain. Neither view is inherently "right" in this approach; they just come from different perspectives. In the Trobriand Islands of the Pacific, for example, there is a group of rituals designed to offer magical protection to men when they are fishing in the deep ocean. Deep-sea fishing is potentially very dangerous, and

so they perform the ritual to ensure that they don't come to harm. At the same time, Bronislaw Malinowski, the anthropologist mentioned before, noted that they only perform fishing magic when they are in deep ocean, and not when they are fishing in the much safer lagoon. He argued that this is because there is little risk of injury or death in lagoon fishing, while both are possible in deep-sea fishing. He suggests that, in the latter case, there is a psychological need to do something to protect themselves when engaging in risky fishing. So the function of Trobriand fishing ritual is to protect men when they fish in the deep ocean, but it is also to provide a sense of control in an otherwise uncontrolled and dangerous situation. Both functions are "correct"; they just work on different levels of analysis.

So rituals can have several goals, sometimes at the same time. Probably the most generally shared goal is that ritual draws attention to some aspect of culture. During the ritual, some part of culture is taken from its everyday context and highlighted, brought to the forefront of the participants' experience. This reinforces a particular view of that aspect which is then shared by the participants, creating a sense of solidarity, a sense of cultural identity. Examples of this would be the Fourth of July in the United States, or other kinds of memorials such as reading the names of victims of AIDS or the Holocaust. This may be the sole intended goal of the ritual or it may go further and change the way that aspect is viewed or experienced. For example, Elizabeth G. Harrison has discussed the ritual in Japan known as *mizuko kuyo*, which is a memorial service for children who have died. In her analysis, women often perform the ritual because they feel guilty about the death for a variety of cultural reasons having to do with women's roles in Japanese society. By performing the ritual, Harrison argues, these women can turn their experience of the death into something more positive. The ritual allows them to feel that they are still taking care of their child as a mother should, even though the child is no longer living. Thus they are taking negative aspects of

Jizō statues at Zōjō-ji Buddhist temple graveyard in Tokyo

Jizō is a bodhisattva revered in East Asian Buddhism. He is one of the most loved of all Japanese divinities and is seen as the guardian of children, particularly children who die before their parents.

their culture and role and using ritual to turn them into something more positive to help them deal with the experience.

Because rituals are often performed in a group setting, they can also have a kind of teaching function. The cultural aspects that are highlighted in ritual may provide a lesson in how to behave in a culturally appropriate way, or indeed, how not to behave in the case of things like punishing wrongdoers. Both the actual participants and those who are watching the ritual will be able to observe cultural reactions to particular kinds of ideas and behaviors. One of the best examples of this is a traditional American wedding, where gender roles and expectations are highlighted in a ritual setting. In fact, in a wedding they are often exaggerated—the differences between men and women are starkly drawn by everything from clothing (the standard white dress versus the black tuxedo) to behavior (men are supposed to be reluctant to marry, while women are supposed to be so eager to do so that they will fight to catch the bouquet). Even the audience participates in this, with the groom's side and the bride's side in wedding seating. Now this isn't really typical of male-female relationships, but in the ritual setting it is considered important to highlight gender roles because they are at the heart of the cultural ideas about marriage. In this context, both the participants and the audience are therefore given a kind of cultural lesson in the cultural stereotype, even if they then go on to live their own version of it in real life.

In some cases, this acting out of cultural norms is literally turned on its head in what anthropologist Max Gluckman called "rituals of rebellion." In these rituals, behavioral norms are specifically inverted, and particular groups of people are encouraged to act in a way that would not be acceptable in other contexts. Gluckman cites several examples, as when Zulu women behave aggressively and even obscenely, taking on tasks usually done by men, during the harvest festival. More familiar examples might be Halloween, as it is celebrated by adults who may dress up in costumes and act out fantasies or explore other identities, or Mardi Gras, as I noted before, where people are encouraged to express sides of themselves (sexuality or more licentious behavior) that are not normally expressed. These kinds of rituals have a number of functions. For one thing, they undoubtedly allow people to "let off steam" in a culturally appropriate way. But they also, paradoxically, reaffirm social norms by controlling rebellion in culturally sanctioned ways. These aren't real rebellions but ones that take place in the context of ritual, and after the ritual is over everyone returns to the normal social context.

One of the most pervasive functions of ritual cross-culturally is to change a person's social role. I've noted these before in passing, but they are a well-established type of ritual first described by Arnold van Gennep. In his book *The Rites of Passage*, van Gennep described the structure these transition or transformation rituals share. First, the individual is separated from his or her original social context. This may happen by literally removing the person from his or her usual place or by marking the person in some way as different. Examples would be things like engagement rings, which mark a person as no longer single (but not yet married), or the ritual kidnapping of children in many cultures that precedes their initiation into adulthood. Then there is the actual transition, the heart of the ritual itself. This is where the actual

transformation takes place and is the main focus of ritual activity. This stage has been described by anthropologist Victor Turner as "liminal." This comes from the Latin word for "threshold" (*limen*) and is the place where the person is neither what they were nor what they will become. While not wanting to sound melodramatic, this is seen as a dangerous place in many ways, because, if the ritual goes wrong, then the transformation will not be made and the person will, in a cultural sense, be "stuck" between states. The clearest example of this is a funeral ritual. While we usually don't think of them this way, funerals are really rituals designed to move a person from the living context to the dead, and when they go wrong, the results can be bad—as I mentioned before, this is often how ghosts are understood to have been produced. But even in other rituals, for example a wedding, there would be a sense of incompleteness if the ceremony was interrupted before the pronouncement was made. So this stage is surrounded by ritual in order to ensure that what is supposed to happen in fact does happen.

The transition stage may be relatively brief, as in a short wedding ceremony, or may literally take months, as children are instructed in the knowledge and behavior appropriate to adulthood. In the latter case, this part may even take place elsewhere, apart from others in society, for example in a secluded part of the forest, and the initiates may not be allowed to have contact with others in society during this period. The Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea mentioned previously had such a ritual, which traditionally took months to complete. By contrast, the girls' puberty ritual among the Apache, as described by Claire Farrar in *Thunder Rides a Black Horse*, takes about four days, and while the girls stay in a separate place they are still within the community. Whatever the nature of the transition, however, once it is complete there is "reaggregation," a jargon word for the reintroduction of the person back into society in his or her new role. Using the wedding example, it would be the point where the officiant pronounces the couple husband and wife. In the other examples, it would be when the initiates are brought back to their homes and officially pronounced adults, when they may have new names, new residences, or new responsibilities such as being allowed or expected to marry. In this way, rituals perform a variety of functions, teaching, celebrating, mourning, transforming, all of which are central to human social life as it is experienced through the media of religion and culture.

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Apache teenage girl undergoing a four-day puberty rites ceremony, which celebrates a girl's first menstruation and her newfound womanhood. For the duration of the ceremony she is the embodiment of the White Painted Woman, the holy woman of the Apache.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What are the goals of rituals?
2. What are “rituals of rebellion”?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

Farrer, Claire R. *Thunder Rides a Black Horse: Mescalero Apaches and the Mythic Present*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1996.

Gluckman, Max. “Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa.” *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa: Collected Essays with Autobiographical Introduction*. Reprint. London: Routledge, 2004 (1954).

Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.

Websites of Interest

Cultural anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Mauro Luis Devin Campagnoli, University of Torino (Italy), maintains a website that includes cultural, musical, and societal information (including initiation rites) of Baka Pygmies and other pygmy tribes in the Central African rainforest. — http://www.pygmies.info

Lecture 7:
The Nonhuman World

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Karen McCarthy Brown's "Voodoo" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

One of the aspects of religion that is probably universal among human cultures is the idea that there are dimensions to reality that lie outside the ordinary, everyday, human world. In fact, I'd venture to say that it is universal, though with humans that's always a little risky. We have a way of being contrary whenever anyone tries to apply something to each and every one of us. But the idea that there is another world that differs from ours and yet may have a significant impact on it is found in all of the cultures that I'm familiar with, though it does vary enormously. It varies in terms of how that world is understood, of whether and how it is inhabited, and in the degree to which it affects the ordinary human world. But whatever form it takes, this kind of belief lies at the core of religion from a general human perspective.

Given the almost infinite variety of forms such beliefs take, it can be tricky to talk about in broad terms. Probably the most common word used in English to describe this is "supernatural," and the widespread nature of such beliefs is attested by the fact that some idea of the supernatural is incorporated into many definitions of religion itself. The early work of Tylor and Frazer that I mentioned in the first lecture provides examples of this approach. However, while the idea of what we would consider supernatural beings certainly is central to what are sometimes called the "world religions," such as Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, these are not necessarily representative of human religions overall. Instead, while religions usually have some notion of another world inhabited by beings with a different nature than humans, these often differ from a strict understanding of the idea of "supernatural." If we understand this to mean, literally, above nature, then the concept is not always applicable. First, these other worlds are commonly seen as part of nature, another aspect of the natural world and not something separate from it, or separate from it but inextricably interwoven with it. Second, this world is typically not perceived as superior to nature, in control of it as is seen in the world religions I mentioned, but rather simply another dimension of it, neither above nor below the natural world. So the word "supernatural" is probably best avoided, even though this does sometimes cause linguistic complexities.

The coyote spirit mythos is one of the most popular among Native American cultures. He fills the role of trickster, messenger, or even creator in the legends of many tribes.

If we leave aside for the moment the idea that another world might actually be real, we can see that there are universal aspects of human experience which make this idea perfectly reasonable. For one thing, the world is a complex place, full of aspects that are difficult to understand based solely on what we can immediately perceive. Why does it rain? Why do people get sick and die? Why do seasons change? How is it that people differ from each other? How are babies created? These are all questions whose answers are not always readily apparent, and so it is quite rational to think that they may have been caused by unseen forces working in or from a reality other than the observable, everyday one. Further, the experience of living as a human being probably also contributes to this explanatory framework. We experience ourselves as, in some sense, inhabiting our physical body but being in some way separate from it. This is based on ordinary experience, the sense that our mind or personality is different from ourselves as biological systems. This sense is supported by other kinds of experiences such as dreams, daydreams, hallucinations, or simple creative imagination in which we feel that our inner selves have an independent existence. Such experiences appear to be universal, and may provide the basis for concepts of the other world or other kinds of beings. It's not much of a leap to think, for example, that if we have what we call "souls" then so might other living things.

It's worth noting, however, that anthropologists have always struggled with whether to think of such worlds and beings as real in an objective sense or not. In the context of anthropological analysis, anthropologists accept as given that cultural beliefs are real for those who believe them. This is what is sometimes called "cultural relativism," and is an important part of anthropological research. You have to start with the idea that people's world views make sense in their own cultural context in order to understand how they work. However, anthropologists have typically not accepted these ideas as "real" in their own worldview, largely because anthropologists come from different cultures with different ideas of how the world works. However, this is not always the case. Probably the most famous example is the series of books by Carlos Casteñeda, in which he describes his supposed encounters with various unusual circumstances with the guidance of his teacher, Don Juan. However, Casteñeda has been largely discredited in anthropology, not because of his experiences, but because it is unclear if he actually ever did the research he claims to have done (see the book *The Don Juan Papers*, edited by Richard de Mille, for a discussion of this issue). More convincing is the work of Paul Stoller. In his book *In Sorcery's Shadow*, he tells the story of how he decided to become apprenticed as a sorcerer among the Songhay of Niger, in Africa. While he presumably started his research not believing in the reality of sorcery, by the end he not only believes that he caused harm to someone through a spell, he also is compelled to flee the country because he believes he is under magical attack. A few other anthropologists have also written of such experiences, so it is not always the case that anthropologists don't accept the reality of other worlds as experienced in the cultures they study.

There are probably lots of ways to talk about the beings who inhabit other worlds in general terms, but the one I find most useful is to think in terms of two cross-cutting continua. One considers whether their effect in terms of humans is good or bad, and so ranges from positive to negative. The other

continuum measures their degree of independence from humans, or how closely connected they are to human life. If we consider the extremes of this scheme, that gives us positive/independent beings, positive/dependent beings, negative/independent beings, and negative/dependent beings. Of course, there is a wide range of variation in between these ends, but some examples at least give us a place to start. In the first group, positive/independent, we might think of deities who want good things for people as a whole but who have a separate existence from them. The God of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity would fit here, as would other deities such as the goddess figures common in modern pagan religions (such as Wicca) or the animal spirits that provide spirit guides or helpers in some Native American religions. At the other end would be negative/independent beings. This would include the counterpart to the Christian God, Satan, as well as other malevolent spirits who seem to exist solely to plague humanity. These may be brought in to work against humans, but they still have a fundamentally independent existence.

The other group would be the dependent beings, who can be thought of as aspects of humans or even former humans. An example of the former that are negatively disposed would be among the Kaluli of Papua, New Guinea, where illness was attributed to the actions of the spirit aspect of a person that left the body at night, called a *sei*. The *sei* caused harm in the other world, often by mutilating the ordinary spirit aspect of another person, which could then cause sickness and death in this world. Another example would be ancestor spirits who are not happy about being dead, and therefore must be encouraged to go to the next world. In some cultures, the possessions of the dead are destroyed because, if they aren't, the dead spirit will remain attached to this world and cause havoc for the living. Destroying their possessions facilitates their separation from this world. The Japanese *mizuko kuyo* that I mentioned before is also in part about this kind of situation, where there is often a belief that the spirit of the dead child will cause sickness in this world if it is not appeased by ritual. However, not all ancestor spirits are ill-disposed toward the living. In traditional Chinese religion, ancestors are happy to work on behalf of their descendants if those descendants perform the rituals correctly so that they won't be forgotten.

Between these extremes, of course, there are many variations. Returning to the Kaluli, they believe in a group of spirits called *mamul*, who are pretty much right down the middle of both continua. They live in the other world, which exists as a kind of different dimension alongside and interwoven with ours, and they live their lives much as humans do. They are not dependent on humans, nor do humans interact with them in any consistent way; they don't worship them or attempt to appease them. But, in the course of their normal lives, *mamuls* sometimes do things such as hunt, and in that process they can cause the death of a human by killing their spirit aspect (which appears as a pig in their world). The reverse can also happen, with humans accidentally killing *mamuls*. It's nothing that either side can do anything about, since there is no way to know whether or not a pig is also a spirit. It's just one of those things that sometimes happens. Neither side intends bad or good to the other, but their actions can have significant effects on both.

Trickster figures would also fit somewhere in the middle of the continua. Beings like Coyote, among some Native American religions, or Loki of

traditional Scandinavian religion, are neither bad nor good, but their actions can affect the lives of individual humans. Similarly, the spirits of Vodou (spelled either "*lwa*" or "*loa*") who possess humans on ritual occasions are invited to do so because, in exchange for enjoying human things like company, food, and alcohol, the spirits can give advice or provide insight into important problems for their human hosts. They, too, have neither inherently good nor bad intentions toward humans; it all depends on how humans treat them.

These are only some of the multitude of nonhuman beings who inhabit the nonhuman worlds that are an important part of many religions. They provide explanations for things that are otherwise difficult to understand, and ways of interacting with the world that allow us to have some influence on how our lives are lived. Whether or not they are thought to exist in any objective sense, they provide meaning for humans who believe in them, and so contribute to a more satisfying cultural experience of the world. From an anthropological perspective, therefore, they are an important window onto how that world is seen and experienced through the medium of religion.

The Chinese custom of burning "ghost money" and paper materials to honor ancestors.

Joss paper (literally "gold paper"), also known as "ghost money" or "spirit money," are sheets of paper that are burned in traditional Chinese-deity or ancestor-worship ceremonies during special holidays. Joss paper, as well as other papier-mâché items, are also burned in traditional Chinese funerals to ensure that the spirit of the deceased has lots of good things in its afterlife.

Different types of spirit money are given to distinct categories of spirits. The three main types of spirit money are copper, silver, and gold. Copper is given to newly deceased spirits and spirits of the unknown. Silver (*yin*) is given to ancestral spirits as well as spirits of local deities. Gold spirit money (*jin*) is given to higher gods such as the Jade Emperor. These distinctions between the three categories of spirit money must be followed precisely to prevent confusion or insult of the spirits.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What aspects of human existence make the idea of the supernatural seem reasonable?
2. What is meant by a positive/independent deity?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

De Mille, Richard. *The Don Juan Papers: Further Castaneda Controversies*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1990.

Schieffelin, Edward L. *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Stoller, Paul, and Cheryl Olkes. *In Sorcery's Shadow*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1987.

Websites of Interest

Webster University (St. Louis, MO) provides a discussion on the practice of voodoo in Haiti in an article titled "African Religion Syncretism" by Bob Corbett, who maintains a website on Haiti. — http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/voodoo/syncretism.htm

Lecture 8:
The Origins of Religion

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Dean Hamer's *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes* and Christopher Stringer and Clive Gamble's *In Search of Neanderthals*.

I have suggested that religion is a universal part of human experience, something that is common to all human groups. This doesn't mean that all individual humans are religious, or that ideas about religion are all the same, even in a given culture. Obviously they aren't. But it does mean that, in all human cultures, there is some aspect that anthropologists can identify as religion, in terms of its form or its function or both. Religion is therefore fundamentally human. Now, if this is so, then it begs several questions. Why is religion a universal part of being human? Has it always been a part of human life? Did it evolve with us and appear when anatomically modern humans did, some two hundred thousand years ago? Or is it something that we had a capacity for but that didn't emerge until more recently? While we can't answer these questions definitively, there are a number of observations that we can make that will at least get us started in thinking about them.

When we look at other aspects of culture that are shared, there are two broad approaches that we can take. One reason humans share things is that we all have the same biology. While there is considerable variation in the details, overall we share the vast majority of what makes up our physical selves. This leads to the second approach, which is that, since we are so similar biologically, we also have the same basic problems that we need to solve. Therefore, we tend to solve them in similar ways. In one sense, these obviously work together. For example, we need to eat, and so all humans need to procure food. We are biologically suited to a particular range of foods in order to have a healthy diet, and insofar as those foods require certain methods to obtain and process them, we engage in similar subsistence activities. Humans evolved to have meat as one component of their diet and so, before we began to raise our own animals, we all had to hunt. Thus the fact that hunting was a human universal is partly biological (the nutritional appropriateness of meat) and partly a similar solution to a similar problem (hunting to obtain meat).

Is there any application of this to religion? Well, there has been considerable investigation into a possible biological basis for religious experience. Books like *The God Gene* by Dean Hamer review some of this evidence, but basically what they show is that studies of brain function and genetics have indicated that we are biologically predisposed to have religious experiences in particular kinds of ways. It is possible to watch how the brain works and which parts of it are engaged while a person has a transcendent, mystical, or ineffable experience, and research has shown that such things are experienced in similar ways. That is, the same parts of the brain are active when different people have what we might call similar religious experiences, so it would appear that there is a biological aspect to it all. However, does this in

any sense "explain" where religion came from? Can we say that religion appeared because we developed a biological basis for it?

In one sense, yes. Obviously we can't have an experience unless we are biologically able to do so. If religious experience has a biological basis, then clearly we couldn't have religion without those structures in the brain, or genes, or whatever they are. So there is a biological precondition that must be met before religion can appear. However, there are several reasons why this doesn't really get us very far in understanding religion or its origins. For one thing, it doesn't explain why there is almost infinite variety in religion in terms of its structure, content, and meaning. Going back to my food example, the fact that we all need to eat explains why we get food, but it doesn't say anything about why some cultures define some things as food that other cultures refuse to eat, why we eat in some contexts and not others, why different people in the same society eat different things, or why particular foods have particular meanings in a symbolic or ideological sense. As an anthropologist, these are much more interesting questions to me, and knowing that we have to eat to survive doesn't really answer any of them. Religion seems to be the same thing. Knowing that we have a biological capacity to have religious experiences doesn't tell me why cultures have different religions, why some religions are strongly mystical and others aren't, why some religions favor some people and disenfranchise others, or why some individuals reject their society's religion while others accept it. I might also point out that, if there is a biological basis for religion, that doesn't tell us anything about whether any particular version of it is "real" or not. The fact that I have the anatomical ability to perceive aliens from another planet doesn't tell me anything about whether or not those aliens exist. I can imagine aliens, and if they ever come calling I will presumably be able to see them. But whether they are out there is still an open question and has nothing to do with human biological ability. The same can be said about religion.

So if there is a biological capacity for religious experience, then has it always been a part of our physical make-up? Well, that's a question that is also tricky to answer. Part of the issue has to do with recognizing evidence for religion in the archaeological record. Because beliefs are an intrinsic part of religion and beliefs aren't directly preserved in the ground, it can be hard to know when we are looking at something indicative of religion and when we aren't. We can, of course, see some aspects of religion in archaeology—anything that has a physical presence can theoretically be preserved for archaeologists to find. But there are things that humans believe in that don't have a physical expression, and there are things that are physically present that don't have any particular meaning in a religious sense. So the tricky part is knowing when we are looking at something religious. There are a few things that are almost always religious. Burials, for example, can be assumed to have religious implications whenever they are found, since death is a basic religious concern. We'll talk more about archaeological evidence for religion next time. But in the earliest part of human history, even burials aren't always straightforward.

Another problem arises because the biological aspects are also sometimes complicated. Based on current evidence, anatomically modern humans, meaning humans that we think are the same as we are biologically, first

appear around two hundred thousand years ago. So if we are looking for the first evidence of religion, we should look to these populations. However, there are two potential wrinkles. One is that, since this is so long ago, we don't have anything left of the biological remains of our ancestors except for bones. Bones can tell us a lot, and using every kind of analysis that we can muster, we are fairly sure that these ancestors were essentially modern humans. But it is worth noting that, when we are talking about the biology underlying religion, we are talking about brains and genes, not bones, so we can't say for sure that the brain structures that have been identified in humans today were the same two hundred thousand years ago. We just don't have the preserved brains to look at. This is relevant to the origins of religion because it means that we have to rely on other kinds of evidence to identify the presence of religion. And that evidence simply isn't there. We don't have any archaeological evidence (that is, physical, cultural things) from these early humans that we can say are definitively religious in nature until more than one hundred fifty thousand years after they appear. So did they have the biological capacity to experience religion that long ago, and if they did, did they have beliefs that were religious, but didn't have any physical expression that would have been preserved in the ground? We simply don't know.

The other wrinkle is the Neandertals. "Neandertal" (it can be spelled with either a "t" or a "th," but either way it's pronounced with a hard "t," not "th") is a label for a fairly widespread group of individuals that lived in Europe and parts of Asia. The dates for the earliest Neandertals are debated in anthropology, but by one hundred fifty thousand years ago Neandertals were well established and by twenty-five thousand years ago they were gone. Neandertals were relatives of modern humans, and in many ways they were very similar to us. They would have looked different from us, mostly by having more sloping foreheads, lacking the prominent human chin, and being more muscular and stocky. But they also walked fully upright, made stone tools, hunted animals, and probably gathered plants for food. There is also evidence that they occasionally had ornaments such as beads and bracelets, and since these presumably had aesthetic meaning, Neandertals must have had some capacity for symbolic thought. But could they have had religion? Biologically, we come up against the same limitation as we did for modern

The first Neandertal burial site in France was discovered in 1908 at La Chapelle-aux-Saints. There was evidence that the burial was purposeful and not happenstance.

humans—we don't have the right body parts preserved to say for sure. But what we do have is some evidence for burial.

As I said, for modern human society, burials are indicators of religious activity, because death is a fundamentally religious issue. But Neandertals weren't modern humans, and we don't know how they might have differed in their perceptions of the world. Their burials are clearly intentional, but what they might have meant is difficult to determine. In modern human burial, we know that bodies are buried in formal ways, often with grave goods that in some cases are made specifically for burial. The bodies are often in the same position in a given culture's cemeteries, and they are sometimes buried in structures such as coffins or tombs. For the Neandertals, however, none of these characteristics are clearly evident. Artifacts found in Neandertal burials could easily have been simply personal possessions or indeed the tools used to perform the burial itself. Ochre, a reddish mineral composed of iron oxide, has been found in some Neandertal burials, but it is also an extremely common, naturally occurring substance, and it's usually difficult to tell if it was already in the ground when the person was buried. Neandertal burials are in no consistent position or in any kind of burial structure other than a simple pit. So, basically, there is no clear evidence of ritual associated with Neandertal burial, only of burial itself. And things can be buried for many reasons short of religious meaning. Trash is buried because it is unpleasant to have around and can attract animals. So were Neandertal bodies buried for simple disposal purposes? Or was there some ritual associated with their burial that didn't leave any physical evidence? Or were they buried because of sentimental attachment, something with emotional significance but short of religious meaning? Again, we simply don't know. All that we can say for sure is that early humans and their relatives lived for over one hundred fifty thousand years without leaving any clear, physical evidence for religious behavior. If we are looking for evidence of the origins of religion in archaeology, then we will have to wait until about thirty-five thousand years ago, when we first see evidence of human symbolic behavior.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why is the biological capacity for religion a limited avenue of exploration?
2. Why is it difficult to determine much about religion from skeletal remains?

Suggested Reading

Hamer, Dean. *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes*. New York: Doubleday, 2004.

Stringer, Christopher, and Clive Gamble. *In Search of the Neanderthals*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993.

Other Books of Interest

Trinkaus, Erik. *The Shanidar Neandertals*. New York: Academic Press, 1983.

Websites of Interest

The *Psychology Today* website provides an article from June 2008 by David Elkind, Professor Emeritus of Child Development at Tufts University titled "Origins of Religion in the Child." A discussion area for the topic is provided on the site. — http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/digital-children/200806/origins-religion-in-the-child-5

Lecture 9:
Analyzing Ancient Religions

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Pam J. Crabtree and Douglas V. Campana's *Exploring Prehistory: How Archaeology Reveals Our Past*, chapter 10, and Cynthia Eller's *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*, chapters 6 and 7.

As noted in lecture 8, understanding ancient religions has its own set of challenges. The main issue is that religion is about both beliefs and behaviors. Archaeology, which studies material culture, that is, the things people leave behind, can have a tough time with beliefs, which are ideas and perceptions rather than physical things. The best source for these is written documents. If we have them, and if they say something about religion, then we can potentially get some insight into religious beliefs. However, documents have their own problems. For one thing, people didn't start writing until, at the earliest, about 3000 BCE. That means that, for over 95 percent of human history, there was no writing at all. Also, even when writing was done, it was limited to particular places, like Mexico, Egypt, and China, and to particular groups within a culture. It was often confined to elites, people with wealth and power, and so most people aren't represented by what was written down. And what was written down isn't always useful in terms of understanding religion. In the past, the idea of recording things for posterity wasn't very common, and so what we get are things that were of concern at the time. For example, we have the names of deities written down as part of ritual, but since everyone at the time knew those deities, why they were being invoked and what they meant, there was no need to write that down. It was obvious. So even our written sources are limited.

While religion is partly beliefs, of course, it is also behaviors, and behaviors often leave behind physical traces. This is where archaeology comes in. People can potentially leave all sorts of traces that archaeologists can recover, such as burials, ritual structures, offerings, figurines, paintings, or monuments that are the direct result of religious behavior. The challenge for archaeology is, first, to recognize that what they are looking at is the result of something religious, and, second, to try to interpret what it might mean. Rarely do we have certain, direct evidence for either of these, and so we have to construct an argument based on evidence that is incomplete and uncertain. It isn't hopeless, but it is tricky.

The earliest evidence that we have of something that we can argue is religious is the body of artistic representations that appears in various places around thirty-five to forty thousand years ago. By this time, the Neandertals are largely gone. There is some evidence that, in parts of Europe, they may have held on until as late as thirty thousand years ago, but it is likely that they were not numerous at this late date. Modern humans had emerged as the dominant species in Africa, Europe, and Asia, and from that time on the archaeological remains that are recovered represent our biological ancestors. For religion, the evidence takes the form of paintings and carvings on rock

surfaces, mostly in caves but also in open-air settings, and figurines made from ivory, bone, stone, or sometimes clay. These are best known from parts of Africa, Australia, and Europe, with the European material having received the most study. Probably the most famous examples are those from Spain and France, such as the caves of Lascaux, Altamira, and Chauvet, but sites such as Ubirr Cave in Australia and the site known as the "Apollo 11 Cave" in South Africa are equally impressive. In some of these places, indigenous peoples have continued to make these kinds of depictions up to the present day, while in Europe, it stopped about twelve thousand years ago.

Among the oldest rock paintings, these stone slab fragments with a painted zoomorphic pictogram have been dated to between 27,000 and 23,000 BCE. It can be inferred that the population(s) responsible for these art remains were hunter-gatherers. The painted slabs were discovered by Wolfgang Wendt in 1969 in the "Apollo 11 Cave" of the Huns Mountains in southern Namibia.

An enormous amount of research conducted over more than a century has gone into trying to understand the meanings of these representations. Humans are sometimes depicted, though animals are typically far more common, and they are occasionally accompanied by shapes we don't recognize, such as lines, squares, and other geometric forms. Sometimes there is a clear relationship between the various images, such that some kind of scene appears to be intended, while in other cases the images seem random, placed individually with little concern for what else might already be on the surface. Possible explanations for why this art was produced range from various kinds of ritual to a simple desire to decorate the walls of living sites, and all of these arguments have some merit. It is also virtually certain that there is no single explanation for all of it. However, the one thing that can be said is that we will never know in a literal sense what the depictions meant. Does a horse represent gender, or a deity, or a myth of some kind, or a season, or something more general like speed, strength, or endurance? Or is it just a horse? There's no way to know. All we can say is that these depictions represent the actions of women and men in a multitude of cultural contexts over thousands of years.

Obviously the depictions meant something to those who made them, but do we know that they were ever religious? There are several lines of evidence that suggest that at least some of them were. Depictions of things that don't happen in nature, like flying people or humans with animal heads, suggest the kinds of nonhuman beings that I talked about before as being a typical part of religion. Also, some sites are clearly not living sites, and are located in places that are not easily accessible, like small recesses deep in cave systems. This suggests perhaps a ritual setting, where access was limited to

specific participants or that required special skills or knowledge to find. Finally, there are cultures where people still make depictions like these today. While the meanings have obviously changed over such a vast amount of time, in a very general sense most cultures say that sites like these have religious importance. If we assume that people in the past weren't significantly different than today, then we can argue that the same was true then. So it seems reasonable to argue that at least some of these paintings and figurines represent the earliest direct evidence we have for religion.

As we get closer to our own time, evidence for religious activity becomes more abundant, but unfortunately it isn't necessarily any easier to interpret. We start to see burials around the same time as the earliest paintings and figurines that I just talked about. Sites like Dolni Vestonice (Czech Republic), Paviland (Wales), and Lake Mungo (Australia) all date to around this period, showing that humans had begun to dispose of the dead in formal ways. Structures that are arguably religious, such as temples, come later in time, probably having something to do with humans starting to live in settled communities. This doesn't happen until after ten thousand years ago. And, of course, after 3000 BCE, we start to get writing in some limited places, which opens up other possibilities for understanding ancient religion. But while we have increasingly abundant evidence that allows us to begin to interpret how our ancestors might have experienced religion, there is still a great deal of room for disagreement.

A good example of this is the idea that there were cultures in the past where women had a prominent, or even dominant, social position, and that this was supported by a religion centered on a female deity and female practitioners. This idea has become well-known in modern Western cultures, and is particularly popular among modern pagan religions. For those who see the modern position of women as less than it should be, this is a very appealing notion, and provides a context in which to call for a "return" to this ancient practice. But is there evidence for it? Well, it depends on how you interpret it. For one thing, there is no evidence in recent history or modern society for a culture in which women had a dominant social position relative to men. Instead, we run the gamut from relatively equal to highly male-dominant in terms of public, recognized social power. So if it existed in the past, it hasn't existed as long as we've had written documents and the ability to talk to people about their culture. Some writers have also pointed to places where female figurines and other depictions suggest a dominant female religious presence. An example of this is the site of Çatalhöyük, in Turkey (7500 to 5700 BCE), where excavations have

Seated female figure flanked by two lionesses (or leopards) from Çatalhöyük, Turkey, dating from the Neolithic age.

revealed paintings and figurines, some of them clearly of women. At least some of these are arguably religious. So can we conclude that they represent a female-centered religion?

Maybe. For one thing, at least some of the figures identified as female are in fact androgynous, that is, they lack any obvious sexual characteristics. In these cases, we don't know if they were female, male, or sexless. We have to be careful assuming that anything that isn't obviously male must be female. Also, figurines in themselves don't have to be religious. They might be toys, models for instruction, secular art, or the result of rituals that aren't religious. It is noteworthy that one of the most famous figurines from Çatalhöyük, an obese, seated woman, was found in a trash deposit. That doesn't mean it couldn't have been religious, but it should at least make you wonder. And even if they were religious, it doesn't follow that women must have been central to the larger religion. Modern analogies tell us that there is enormous variation in the meanings attributed to gender and how it is represented in religion. Figures of the Christian Mary, the Indian deity Kali, and the Greek goddess Athena are prevalent in their respective cultures, but it wouldn't be accurate to say that Christianity, Hinduism, or ancient Greek religion were female centered. Indeed, it is arguable that, in some of these cultures, women have a very low social position which is supported by these very deities. For example, Kali, who is a very scary goddess frequently depicted with severed heads on her belt, arguably can represent what happens to women when they get social power. If so, then she is an object lesson rather than a role model, both for traditional Indian society and for the interpretation of ancient religions. In the end, we simply don't know what these paintings and figurines meant in terms of religion, or of gender roles in the larger society.

So while we have evidence for ancient religions, it is often the case that their specific content remains elusive. But that doesn't mean we can't say anything at all. For example, it is interesting that we don't have direct evidence of religion until more than one hundred fifty thousand years after anatomically modern humans appeared. This could mean many things. Perhaps, as I noted last time, it's because the structures in the brain that allow us to experience religion hadn't yet formed. Or it may be that there was a fully formed set of religious beliefs and behaviors, but that they didn't have any physical aspect that would leave archaeological evidence. However, it may also be that religion is something that developed to deal with a particular set of cultural problems. In other words, religion may not have appeared until there was a need for it, and maybe the need wasn't felt until forty thousand years ago. This may have something to do with the increasing intricacy of social life as human populations grew, moved into new environments, encountered different groups more frequently, and began to see the natural world in new and more complex ways. This may have required particular changes in the brain or it may have been entirely separate. But either way, once humans began to develop religion as a way to understand the natural and social world around them, it remained a significant part of human culture to the present day.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What might suggest that an ancient painting or carving is religious in nature?
2. Why might the prominence of goddesses not indicate sexual equality in a culture?

Suggested Reading

Crabtree, Pam J., and Douglas V. Campana. *Exploring Prehistory: How Archaeology Reveals Our Past*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006.

Eller, Cynthia. *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Bahn, Paul. *Cave Art: A Guide to the Decorated Ice Age Caves of Europe*. London: Frances Lincoln, 2007.

Websites of Interest

1. The French Cultural Ministry provides a movie showing the Lascaux cave art. — http://www.lascaux.culture.fr/#/en/02_00.xml
2. The Institute of Archaeology at University College London provides information on the excavations and different aspects of the research being conducted through their Çatalhöyük Research Project in Turkey. — http://www.catalhoyuk.com

Lecture 10:
Dealing with Death

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Paul Barber's "The Real Vampire," Peter A. Metcalf's "Death Be Not Strange," and William E. Mitchell's "A New Weapon Stirs Up Old Ghosts" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

One of the universally shared aspects of human existence is death. All of us die eventually, and all human cultures have a need to understand why we die, what happens after we die, and whether there is any connection between the living and the dead. Such questions are both important to answer and yet impossible to address based on direct experience, at least in the ordinary sense. It is also the case that, while we typically don't think of it this way, the dead need to be properly transitioned from the living society to the dead. While, obviously, people die for biological reasons, the dead, while not physically present, are still a part of society. Thus ritual is required to properly move the dead from the living to whatever social role the dead inhabit. In this sense, funeral ritual is a "transition ritual" like those I discussed earlier, whose function is to move people from one social role to another. Death is thus quintessentially religious according to the definition I am using in this course, raising questions that must be answered.

There is of course enormous variety in the ways different cultures understand death. Most common, however, is a shared idea that there is a life force in the body that departs at the moment of death. In American culture, we call it the soul, and we only see ourselves as having one. But in other cultures, there may be several such souls, each of which has a different part to play in a human life. The Jívaro of Ecuador have three souls, only one of which gives life to the body, while the Dahomey of Benin, West Africa, have at least three, one of them the personal soul and another from the ancestors. Since this life force is no longer in the body after death, it follows that the idea that this life force is under attack when a person is ill is very common. I'll give you some examples of these ideas later, when we talk about witchcraft, but for the moment it is enough to observe that this life force is the aspect of a person that is widely believed to survive in some form after a person's death.

Skull and bones design on a headstone at La Recoleta Cemetery in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

If it survives, then this raises the obvious question—where does it go? While cultural beliefs about this vary enormously, the common underlying idea is that part of the function of death rituals is to culturally manage the separation between body and soul that now exists. For example, in traditional Christian beliefs in the United States, funerary ritual typically ends with disposal of the body through burial (or, less commonly, with cremation). The soul, however, which is understood to be eternal, was separated from the body at the moment of death, and is now in the afterlife, in Heaven, with God. This happens automatically, without any specific ritual intervention, though we do perhaps both mourn and celebrate the fact in the context of funerals. Somewhat paradoxically, while it is understood that the body will decompose, we often go to great lengths to be sure that this process doesn't happen too soon. Bodies are embalmed to delay decomposition, and any physical indicators of death are minimized in the process. There are too many possible cultural and psychological reasons for this to go into here, but they would include our association of the person with the physical body and so our discomfort at the thought of decomposition, as well as ideas about connections between death and disease.

In sharp contrast, Peter Metcalf, in his article "Death Be Not Strange," describes the funerary beliefs and rituals of the Berawan people on the island of Borneo. The central belief is that the soul's connection to the body is, in a sense, only partly severed at death. Instead, as long as the body remains whole, the soul hangs around, miserable, homeless, and potentially dangerous. It can't enter the land of the dead until the body is completely decomposed and nothing is left but dry bones. Until that happens, the person is unhappy, and it is possible that the soul can cause illness among the living. More frightening, it is also possible that the body itself, partially decomposed and rotting, can become reanimated with evil spirits of non-human origin. Such a monster would be invulnerable to human weapons since it is already dead, a nightmarish prospect indeed. So the body is kept nearby and its decomposition closely monitored, until there is nothing left but bones. At that point, the bones are gathered up and interred in a mausoleum, and the soul's passage to the land of the dead is celebrated with a feast. In a nice turn-around of cultural relativism, Metcalf relates how, when asked by the Berawan, he described funerary ritual in the United States to them. You can imagine their horrified reaction to the idea that the body is preserved and left untended; not only are the spirits of our loved ones trapped indefinitely by this practice and prevented from their final journey to the land of the dead, but our lands are carpeted with potential zombies.

The idea that the souls of the dead might hang around and cause trouble is not uncommon. Many cultures believe that the spirit might be reluctant to give up the joys and pleasures of this life, and might even be angry that they are no longer in the position to enjoy them. In some cases, therefore, funerary ritual is designed to facilitate their moving on, as with the Berawan. In others, however, the dead are not seen as unhappy, but rather in possession of special knowledge by virtue of being dead, and in some circumstances they might be willing to help the living. In these cultures, the ancestors are a welcome part of living society. Among the Wape of Papua New Guinea, success in hunting is attributed to ancestral approval (and a lack of success to their

being unhappy with the living), and in traditional Chinese religion, ancestors for whom the proper rituals are performed will reward their descendants with rich harvests and harmonious lives. So the dead may be either well- or ill-disposed toward the living, and this may to some extent depend on how the living respond in the context of funerary ritual.

One of the more exotic examples of funerary ritual is cannibalism. This practice has a special place in many Western cultures, being used to symbolize everything that is barbaric and inhuman in other human beings. In American culture, it is the ultimate in savagery, typically associated only with the criminally insane (the rare examples when it was done in desperate circumstances where there was no other option for survival are in a different cultural category). Indeed, this idea is so deeply ingrained in Western society that anthropologist William Arens wrote a book which proposed that, contrary to the myth, there has never been a society that regularly and systematically practiced cannibalism. Instead, he argued that cannibalism has always been used to denigrate other cultures. Arens's book has been criticized sharply in anthropology, and the consensus is that his thesis isn't supportable; there is good evidence that a number of societies have practiced cannibalism in a variety of cultural contexts. However, it does underscore the place that cannibalism holds in the Western imagination.

While there are various contexts in which cannibalism is known, such as warfare, it is also part of the funeral rituals of some cultures. One of the most detailed discussions of it is in Beth Conklin's book *Consuming Grief*. Conklin describes funerary ritual as it used to be practiced among the Wari' of Brazil. While it has since been largely eradicated in recent times, there are people alive who not only remember how and why it was done but also participated in it themselves. For the Wari', there are a number of reasons why consumption of the dead makes cultural sense. First, it is seen as the most respectful way to treat the body. Instead of putting it into the ground (which they now do, but which encountered enormous resistance when it was first mandated by the Brazilian authorities), which is seen as dirty, wet, and cold, consumption incorporated the substance of the body into that of the person's relatives. The body literally was retained in the community of its loved ones. Also, in a way similar to the Berawan, removing the body was a way of encouraging the spirit to go to the afterlife, and not hang around the living causing trouble. Other things were also done to accomplish this, such as tearing down the person's house and reconfiguring paths around the village. Finally, this was seen as an act of kindness for the relatives of the deceased. Those who did the eating were usually relatives by marriage rather than blood relatives, and this was something the former did out of sympathy for the latter. The presence of the body was a reminder of the loss of the person, and by consuming it, this reminder was lessened or eliminated. It was seen as the kindest and most considerate way to deal with the dead.

So funeral ritual, which of course derives from cultural views of death, provides a way to deal with death and the dead in a culturally appropriate manner. But that ritual doesn't always work correctly. Sometimes it goes wrong, as I noted in the discussion of ritual; when the transition from the living to the dead isn't culturally "right" then there are often negative consequences. I noted that ghosts are commonly thought to result (which would include angry spirits

like an improperly transformed Berawan), but Paul Barber, in his book *Vampires, Burial, and Death*, makes a similar case about vampires. Here, it isn't so much that the funerary ritual was incorrect, however, but that the death itself was somehow wrong. Barber's argument is that, in the parts of Eastern Europe where vampire beliefs originated, vampires were a rational explanation for conditions of a dead body that were seen as improper. In these cultures, where digging up a body that had been buried was seen as "disturbing" it, people had little familiarity with the process of decomposition. While there was a generalized belief that the body sort of "melted away," a decomposing corpse is actually quite active. As decomposition proceeds and gasses are released, the body may expand and contract, produce noises, appear flushed with blood, or retain flexibility. All of these are not expected in a corpse, which was widely believed to be quiescent. So when people exhumed a corpse looking for evidence of a vampire, they often found conditions to be different than expected, confirming their suspicions that something about the death was wrong. And no one went looking for a vampire unless there was a reason. In this case, it was often because of epidemics, where people were dying in larger than usual numbers, also not typical in how death was understood. So vampire beliefs provided an answer to questions raised by the seemingly unusual circumstances of death in these villages.

It would be possible to go on endlessly about death practices in other cultures and how they can be understood anthropologically. But these few examples will suffice to illustrate that, just as death is of universal concern in human societies, the ways death is understood, and so culturally managed, are equally infinite. Death is perhaps the ultimate unknown, yet we still feel the need to know about it. How do we understand the fact that a person can be part of the active, living society one minute, and the next be lifeless and gone forever? What is it that was there that is now gone? And has it gone to some other place or is it still here? These are all crucial cultural questions, and, cross-culturally, they are usually the domain of religious life.

A broken coffin in the shape of a cow reveals the bleached bones of a person long deceased on the island of Sarawak, Indonesia. Other bones, animal and human, lie strewn in the area.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. Why are funerary rites in the United States so appalling to the Berawan people of Borneo?
2. How might cannibalism represent kindness toward the dead?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

Arens, William. *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology & Anthropophagy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Barber, Paul. *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Conklin, Beth A. *Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001.

Websites of Interest

The *Access My Library* website provides free access to over 30 million articles from top publications available through local libraries. An article titled "Spirits of the Hereafter: Death, Funerary Possession, and the Afterlife in Chuuk, Micronesia" by Katherine B. Dernbach was published in the March 2005 issue of *Ethnology*. —
http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-140490313/spirits-hereafter-death-funerary.html

Lecture 11:
Magic and Witchcraft

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are James L. Brain's "An Anthropological Perspective on the Witchcraze," E.E. Evans-Pritchard's "Consulting the Poison Oracle Among the Azande," George Gmelch's "Baseball Magic," and Naomi M. McPherson's "Sorcery and Concepts of Deviance Among the Kabana, West New Britain" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

Like religion itself, magic and witchcraft are aspects of culture with which early anthropologists were fascinated. There are undoubtedly a number of reasons for this. First, they are interesting topics. But I also think is has to do with the fact that they seemed terribly exotic. Witchcraft was something that the mostly American and European researchers associated with their own past, and so it was interesting to them that there were still people who found these ideas and practices meaningful. However, to some extent this is not entirely accurate; what constitutes magic is largely a matter of definition, and there is an argument to be made that there was and still is quite a bit of magical thinking in Western cultures.

For most Westerners, what we think of as witchcraft is the stereotypical idea of old, gnarled women stirring pots of unknown content and casting evil spells on the unsuspecting. And it is true that the word "witch" has come to be associated with something negative in English. However, a witch can also be thought of as any person who practices magic, whether for good or bad, and it is this use of the word that has been embraced by modern pagan religions such as Wicca. So we have to think about the term "witch" as also including healers and other positive users of magic, or we can also just use the indigenous term for magical practitioners. "Magic" is a little harder to define, but in general, magic refers to an action carried out by someone that has an effect on someone or something at a distance, without any physical connection between the two. There is also the implication that the effect is the result of forces that are different than the everyday forces we all know about. For example, the Aguaruna of Peru previously mentioned cause illness by sending spirit darts into the body of a person, which must be removed by a healer to effect a cure. A similar idea underlies illness among the Jívaro of Ecuador, whose specialists use *tsenstak*, or spirit helpers, to make people sick or to cure them.

For many in Europe and the United States, magic and witchcraft are seen as part of history, and indeed, the identification and punishment of witches was extremely common in parts of both places, in particular in the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Much of this activity fell on women, though not all of it; there were places in Europe where men were an equal proportion of the accused and in a few places they were the majority. However, overall, about 80 percent of them were women. The outbreak in Salem in 1692–1693 would also be included in this, though in much of the United States at this time beliefs in witchcraft were waning. A considerable amount of research has been carried out in trying to understand witchcraft in this period, and

explanations run the gamut from cultural understandings of gender to the hallucinogenic effects of tainted wheat. It is worth noting in passing that the theory, most fully argued by Margaret Murray, that it was an attempt by the Christian church to stamp out a pre-Christian pagan religion has generally been rejected by historians (Ronald Hutton has critiqued this idea most clearly in his book *The Triumph of the Moon*).

By the modern era, witchcraft in Europe and the United States had ceased to be a common framework for explanation. But is magical thinking in general gone? It all depends on how you define it. For one thing, as I noted, magic and witchcraft are central parts of modern pagan religions, and so they are part of our culture in that sense. But it is also true that magical thinking in general is still relatively common. A good example is described by George Gmelch in his article "Baseball Magic." Gmelch discusses how baseball players engage in behaviors directly comparable to that of the Trobriand islanders mentioned before. As described by Malinowski, Trobriand islanders perform magic when they are in situations that are dangerous, and therefore perceived as beyond ordinary control. Gmelch argues that baseball players do the same thing; they eat the same breakfast, wear the same socks, or perform the same hand motions because they believe that these are associated with their success in the game. In particular, he notes that pitchers are prone to such activities because they have, on the one hand, the most responsibility for the game's outcome and, at the same time, the least direct control over it. They are, in effect, the deep-sea fishers of baseball. Now, you might dismiss these as superstitions, and they certainly fall into that category as we use it. But I would make two observations—first, one person's superstitions are another person's religion; and second, they presumably do these things because they believe (whether strongly or weakly) that they just might have an effect. So they are in fact magical in their cultural context.

Aguaruna Shaman in Ceremonial Dress

The Aguaruna live primarily in the Amazonas region along the Marañón River, which becomes the Amazon River downstream. Tribal shamans are of two types, *iwishin* or *tajímat tunchi* (curing shamans) and *wawek tunchi* (sorcerers), although the same person may be both at different times. Sorcerers inflict illness by using spirit darts, and curing shamans cure by using their darts to eliminate the sorcerer's darts.

In this respect, we can therefore think about magic and witchcraft as rational responses to particular kinds of circumstances. In some early research, anthropologists often thought of magic as "bad science," that is, what people did before they understood how the world "really" worked. However, this doesn't hold up. The main piece of evidence that questions this is that, when people are exposed to science, they still may hold magical beliefs. This is true in other cultures as it is in the baseball example I just described. Where magic provides one way to cure illness, people often

continue to use traditional healers alongside Western medical approaches even when the latter are readily available. It may have to do with the perception of the illness, or with its severity, but it is well attested that different systems can easily coexist if there is a desire for it to happen. And if people in the quintessentially scientific cultures of the West can still behave magically, as Gmelch argues, then anyone can.

In terms of religion, magic and witchcraft can be thought of as ways of answering questions of the kind I described in the definition I gave. In particular, they provide a framework for understanding and dealing with misfortune. One type of misfortune is illness, and I've noted several examples in which magic is both the cause and cure of it. I've also mentioned the *sei*, the spirit aspect of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, who caused illness by attacking the spirit aspect of its victim in the other world. The cure for this was for a healer to send his spirit aspect into the other world and repair the damage done by the *sei*. Determining who has caused the illness is also a common magical task. Since the actions of the magical person are typically not done in public, it is not always evident who is responsible, so some kind of divination is required. Among the Azande of north central Africa, one form of divination is done with the "poison oracle." This is usually done after other kinds of methods are used to narrow down the list of possible suspects. A specialist then administers a small amount of poison to a chicken, and suggests a name as a possible candidate; the question is posed such that, first, the chicken should die if it is that person, and then, with a second chicken, that it should live. This way all bases are covered (since interpreting oracles can be tricky). Similarly, among the Kaluli, a *sei* was identified either through the healer seeing the person's spirit aspect in the other world, or by the victim, who could sometimes see the *sei* while in a weakened state.

Having identified the evil-doer, there is always a penalty involved. Kaluli *seis* were hunted down and killed. For the Azande, where it was possible to be a witch without knowing it, magical practitioners were often given a chance to make amends for their magical actions, since responsibility was a more complex consideration. Similarly, the Kabana people of the island of New Britain, having established a sorcerer's identity, then held a kind of trial in which the person

The Azande Poison Oracle

British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard photographed two Southern Sudanese Azande men consulting the poison oracle (*benge*) in 1927. The man at the left is administering the poison to a chicken, while the man at the right is addressing the oracle. These consultations took place away from habitation, often at the edge of cultivations, so as to ensure secrecy and to avoid pollution and witchcraft.

was identified in public. This was intended to put pressure on the sorcerer to give up his antisocial ways. In Europe and the United States, the penalty for witchcraft varied from prison or banishment to execution. Cross-culturally, to some extent, it depended on how witchcraft was seen. For the Kaluli, there was in effect no "cure" for being a *sei*, and so the only solution was death, while for the Kabana, being a sorcerer was a learned skill which could be abandoned if the individual wished. In Salem, interestingly, of the more than one hundred fifty people who were accused and convicted, only those who refused to confess, twenty in all, were executed. This suggests that there was the possibility for making amends in this cultural context as well.

These few examples can be taken to suggest that a more general function of witchcraft is as a way to deal with people who represent bad behavior as culturally defined. Overall, it can be said that those identified as magically causing havoc typically embody all that is negative in society. For the Kabana, a sorcerer is someone who has taken away the autonomy of the victim, his or her ability to be a responsible person, which is an important cultural value in this society. For the Kaluli, *seis* act alone, in secret, at night, in a way that is sneaky and underhanded; this contradicts the socially approved norm of open, public action that allows for the participation of others. In Europe, where women were supposed to be attached to a man (their husband or father) throughout their lives, witches were often women who lived alone, on the margins of society, and behaved in socially inappropriate ways. Even in Salem, the analysis by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum presented in their book *Salem Possessed* shows that the accused and accusers were on opposite sides in a series of disputes between the residents of Salem Village and Salem Town (which together made up the greater Salem area). Thus the accused represented, at least from the accusers' point of view, something fundamentally wrong in their society.

This doesn't mean that the people in these various societies don't really believe in witchcraft. While I have no doubt that, being human, there are always people who cynically use magical beliefs to get back at social enemies, nevertheless the majority still believe that this system is real. What magic and witchcraft provide is a framework for understanding why there are people who deviate from the norm, what the possible effects of that deviation might be, and how best to deal with it. Indeed, accusations of negative magical practice are rarely random; yes, they usually fall on those with whom you have had problems in the past, but then, who is more likely to want to cause you harm through the use of magic? It is precisely those people with whom you don't get along that will wish you ill. But the system also provides a way to deal with these troubles. Where they are seen as something that can be overcome, the penalties are likely to take the form of providing a context for some resolution; where they aren't, then the solution is a permanent removal from society. So witchcraft and magic fit into the context of religion by providing a way to manage misfortune, illness, and conflict, which are universal among human societies and which must be resolved in a way that makes cultural sense according to the society's worldview.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What arguments are there for the presence of magical thinking in U.S. culture?
2. What cultural questions might magic and witchcraft answer?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

Boyer, Paul, and Stephen Nissenbaum. *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*. Abridged ed. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976 (1937).

Hutton, Ronald. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Schieffelin, Edward L. *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*. 2nd ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Websites of Interest

The *African Traditional Religion* website maintained by Chidi Denis Isizoh provides a variety of articles about the "meeting points" of the three major monotheistic religions and traditional African religious practices, and many other interesting topics. — http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel

Lecture 12:
Religion and Gender

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Daniel Gordon's "Female Circumcision in Egypt and Sudan: A Controversial Rite of Passage" and Homa Hoodfar's "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

One of the questions that religion universally deals with is gender differences. In the social sciences, a distinction is made between sex, which is biologically defined, and gender, which is socially defined. While the two may be seen as intimately connected, in fact there are many variations in how the two are understood. On the one hand, sex is typically seen in Western society as fairly straightforward. There are two chromosomes, labeled X and Y, and if you have two Xs you are female and if you have one X and one Y you are male; one of two sets of anatomical traits then follow from this. However, it is worth noting that this is not always the case. For one thing, there are variations on this pattern, only some of which are obviously pathological. For example, people are sometimes born with three X chromosomes, and sometimes this causes health problems and sometimes it doesn't. Similarly, some people are born with one X and two Ys. This was initially thought to cause an aggressive personality, but subsequent research has not supported this hypothesis. Like XXX individuals, XYY people may have noticeable symptoms or they may not. In addition, anatomical variation can also occur during the development of the fetus, regardless of which chromosomes the person has. People may be born with two sets of sex organs, or underdeveloped ones, and while this is not typical it does occur. So there is actually considerable variation in biological sex even though we may not know it is there and typically think little about it.


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Father and son in kitchen making cookies.

While sex is biological, gender is cultural. It is all the things that are understood to be typical of a person based partly on biological sex. Cross-culturally, everyone recognizes that there are usually two sets of anatomical traits. However, the cultural meanings that derive from these have enormous variation. In the United States, for example, there is a constant social discussion about what is typically male or female and whether or not these have their basis in biology. I suspect this is because we have certain cultural ideas about the meaning of biology—if something is biological, then we see it as more natural, more inevitable, and

there is often some understanding that it's a bad idea to go against your biological predisposition. For example, if it could be demonstrated that women are biologically more capable of dealing with children, what would this mean? Does it mean that therefore women *should* be the ones dealing with children? What about those women who don't, because they aren't good at it or simply don't enjoy it? And what about men who both enjoy it and are good at it? Would we see them as somehow unnatural, as contradicting their biology? Since there are many examples of both in the United States, it suggests that, if there is a biological predisposition, it isn't a very strong one. And yet these ideas are common, largely because of the way we understand the meaning of biology from a cultural perspective.

In fact, humans are fundamentally "biocultural" (that is, a product of the interaction of our biology and our culture). Neither really takes precedence, particularly in matters of behavior, and this is very evident when we consider gender. There are really no universals in terms of how men and women are thought to be. In some cultures, gender roles are relatively flexible. I would suggest that this is increasingly true in the United States, as what is considered socially normal becomes broader for both men and women over time. In other cultures, gender roles are more narrowly defined and the boundaries are more strictly upheld. However, there will still be individuals who differ from expectations based on their biology. One way that cultures deal with this is to redefine particular individuals in terms of gender as they enter into different social contexts. One of the famous anthropological examples of this is the Nuer of Sudan and Ethiopia. Traditionally, the Nuer were patrilineal, meaning that children belonged to their father's kinship group. They also inherited cattle, which were a major source of wealth and social prestige, from their fathers, and so women typically had no access to this means of achieving social position. However, a woman from a wealthy lineage who had no children could in some circumstances marry another woman. In this context, the woman became, socially, a man, and any children her wife produced inherited from her. Thus she was able to pass her wealth on to her children rather than losing it to a male husband's family. Such a situation, while unusual to Western eyes, is not all that uncommon cross-culturally.

Hijra at a Hindu wedding in Kutch, India.

Another way to deal with variation from the expected norm is to simply increase the number of genders, and allow for more than the usual two. Known in anthropology as "third gender" categories, this particular solution is found in a number of societies. One is described by Serena Nanda for traditional India in her book *Neither Man Nor Woman*. Called *hijra*, they are biologically men who, by definitions in the United States, would be considered homosexual. However, according to traditional Indian

culture, they can't be men because of their sexual orientation, and so they instead become *hijra*. While *hijra* are biological males, they wear women's clothing and act in what is considered a more female fashion. In traditional Indian religion, someone in this role is neither a man nor a woman, but rather a third gender, and as such can mediate between the other genders. Due to their anomalous position, they claim a special ritual role and can be seen dancing at weddings and the birth of children in order to bless the occasion. Somewhat paradoxically, their anomalous status is seen as conferring on them a particular ritual power to affect fertility and marital happiness. Because of cultural changes in India, which include some degree of secularization, the money that the *hijra* make from this ritual function has decreased, and so they have also turned to prostitution. In an unfortunate cycle, this has further eroded the perception of their ritual power, requiring increased reliance on this form of income.

Another well-known anthropological example of third genders was found among a number of Native American groups. Historically, gender in these cultures was also defined differently than it is in the United States, and there are accounts of extra gender categories for both men and women in various groups. The term *berdache*, derived from a French word, is often used for these gender roles as a group, though different cultures had their own names for them. One of these is the Zuni of the southwest, who traditionally defined the *lhamana* as people with two spirits, both male and female, combined in a single individual. Will Roscoe, in his book *The Zuni Man-Woman*, tells the story of one such individual named We'wha (1849–1896). In traditional Zuni culture, the *lhamana* was identified as someone with a male body, but who had an interest in things associated with both men and women. They were identified through a combination of visions and dreams, as well as their own personal preferences. We'wha, for example, wore female dress and made pottery (a female activity), but also engaged in farming and weaving, both usually male activities. The *lhamana* also had a ritual role, like the *hijra*; they could dance in both male and female dance lines, and they had special roles in other ceremonies.

These alternate understandings of gender are not only socially accepted; they are supported in various ways through religion. For the Nuer, the taking of a wife by another woman (who then becomes a social man) is sanctioned through the religious ritual of marriage. In India, the *hijra* point to several Hindu myths in support of their role, including the story of Lord Rama, who went into a forest for fourteen years. He told "all the men and women" to leave, but the *hijra*, being neither, remained; at the end of his exile, Lord Rama found them waiting and blessed them for their devotion. The Zuni creation myth also includes a two-spirit *kachina* called *Ko'lhamana*, who is captured in battle, transformed, and then becomes a mediator figure. Thus gender is socially structured and understood, but usually given meaning in a religious context. This is also the case in less exotic ways. Gender roles are often illustrated and justified through mythology and the behavior of deities. Where men are dominant in society, male deities typically have more power than female ones. However, as I noted before, one is not always the mirror of the other. Female deities in particular can have considerably more power than their earthly counterparts. Rather than being models for human behavior, female deities may

have a better position specifically because of their nonhuman status, or they may provide a cautionary tale for why human women should be controlled in their own society. Religion thus provides a way of understanding gender roles in society, but doesn't necessarily provide a model for them.

Gender differences may also be marked in ways that are understood as having a religious basis. A familiar example is the practice of veiling, in which women cover themselves in public to varying degrees, ranging from a simple headscarf to complete coverage of the head and body, including the face. This is most common in Muslim societies, but is known elsewhere. There is some debate as to whether veiling is specifically required in Islam, and it depends on how specific pieces of text in the Qur'an and elsewhere are interpreted. Another practice that is far less common is what is sometimes called "female circumcision." This refers to a range of practices in which a girl's genitals are modified with varying degrees of severity ranging from a largely symbolic nick to draw blood to the complete removal of the external genital features and the closing of the genital area. This is also known from a variety of cultures, the majority in Africa, being most prevalent in Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Female circumcision predates Islam in some places and is carried out in non-Islamic countries, and there is debate as to whether it is allowed, encouraged, or forbidden in Islam. Regardless of how these practices may appear to outsiders, it is important to understand how they are perceived by those who practice them. Veiling may be seen as restrictive, but it may also be understood as a marker of religious faith or cultural identity. Female circumcision, in its most severe forms, appears brutal to Western eyes, yet it is typically carried out by women for cultural and religious reasons, and it is crucial to understand these reasons if we are to understand the practice itself.

As a cultural category, gender would be expected to have some connection to religion. One of the most fundamental social and cultural questions is why humans differ from each other, and sex differences are basic to human life. As a fundamental concern, then, how cultures understand and experience gender would be expected to have a religious component. This is borne out when we look at gender in its social context and how it is situated in cultural terms. Religion provides one framework both to understand where gender differences come from and to organize and experience gender in a social setting. As such, then, studying gender almost always requires an understanding of its larger religious context.

A modern Muslim woman on a cell phone in New York.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What is an example of a "third gender" category, and how does it relate to the religion of its culture?
2. How does religion provide a way for understanding gender roles in a society?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

Gruenbaum, Ellen. *The Female Circumcision Controversy: An Anthropological Perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Nanda, Serena. *Neither Man Nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990.

Roscoe, Will. *The Zuni Man-Woman*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991.

Articles of Interest

Obermeyer, Carla Makhlouf. "Female Genital Surgeries: The Known, the Unknown, and the Unknowable." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. Vol. 3, number 1, pp. 79–106, 1999.

Websites of Interest

Former news personality and journalist Bill Moyers is featured on the Public Broadcasting System's *Perspectives on Gender and Religion*. — http://www.pbs.org/moyers/faithandreason/perspectives3.html

Lecture 13:
New Religious Forms

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Karen McCarthy Brown's "Voodoo," Alice Beck Kehoe's "The Ghost Dance Religion," T.M. Luhrmann's "The Goat and the Gazelle: Witchcraft," and Anthony F.C. Wallace's "Revitalization Movements" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

It is common in the United States to think of religion as something old that started long ago, and to some extent religions are validated by the fact that they date from an earlier time. There is even some tendency to be suspicious of newly formed religions, and yet all religions were new at some point, and even old religions have changed in important ways over time. Since religion is intimately connected to society, and society is always changing, religion would be expected to change accordingly. As a discipline, anthropology has been around for over one hundred and fifty years (depending on where you start the clock), and so researchers have been in a good position to study new religions and religious change, and how the process sometimes works.

One of the central concepts to this study is "syncretism." This refers to the process by which two religions that were originally separate come together to form a third religion. While the third religion is new and separate from the old, it incorporates elements from its parent religions. One of the most common situations where this happens is when one group conquers another, imposing their religion on the victims. While some of the conquered group take on that religion, new forms can also emerge, resulting in syncretism. However, syncretism doesn't require conquest; it can also happen when two religions come into contact through otherwise peaceful circumstances. One set of religions that are the result of syncretism are Vodou, Candomblé, and Santeria, practiced predominantly in Haiti, Brazil, and Cuba, respectively (as well as elsewhere). While there are important differences between these three, each is the product of slaves from various African cultures being brought together and forced to live in largely Catholic countries that had been colonized by people of European origin. These slaves brought their own religious traditions with them, and these continued to be meaningful. But they were also encouraged or required to adopt Catholicism, and this resulted in syncretism. The new religions that formed combined elements of African religions (including Yoruba, Fon, and others from west Africa), Catholicism, and sometimes of the indigenous people of these three places (for example, the Taíno, who lived on several islands in this region).

You can see this in some of the things that these three religions share. While all have their own deities and spirits, the core is composed of beings that represent a new synthesis of both Catholic saints and deities from several African and indigenous traditions. They typically have African names and yet they are also understood to represent Catholic saints, and saints' statues are sometimes used to represent them. As noted before, practitioners are

possessed by spirits in the context of ritual, during which they may gain healing, or insight into problems, in exchange for letting the spirits enjoy the benefits of human existence for a time. At the same time, they may also feel perfectly comfortable going to Catholic mass and observing some of the life rituals like baptism in a Catholic context. Adherents of these religions, while seeing themselves as practicing a separate religion, nevertheless recognize that it includes elements of others, and they may move between them without seeing any kind of contradiction.

Another version of syncretism is seen in what anthropologist Anthony F.C. Wallace called "revitalization movements." In his research into a variety of Native American religions, Wallace realized that several of them shared certain characteristics, and these could also be more generally applied to the beginnings of a number of other religions. In Wallace's formulation, revitalization movements take place in a specific kind of social context, usually one of conquest and colonization. First, the people who are colonized feel a degree of individual stress, that their religion and their culture aren't working the way they should to make sense of the world. This would obviously be the case in a conquest situation. This then spreads to the culture itself, where traditional practices at a group level seem ineffective or unsatisfying, and there is therefore widespread pressure for culture change. As a response to this, then, revitalization occurs, in which both traditional and new values are combined into new patterns to provide a more satisfying framework for experience. Sometimes, while a new religion is produced, there will still be a look back to the past, when things worked better, and there will be a sense of returning to old values even though new elements are an important part of the formula. While this is clearly a form of syncretism, it has its own specific character, and can be usefully applied to the analysis of a number of religions.

Wallace's classic example of revitalization is what has come to be known as the Ghost Dance, a Native American religion described by Alice Beck Kehoe in her book of the same name. By the late nineteenth century, most of the United States had been conquered by European Americans, and the emphasis for Native Americans was on assimilation or pacification. Enormous pressure was put on the country's indigenous inhabitants to

An illustration of a Ghost Dance based on photographs of James Mooney, 1887. Inset: Paiute shaman Wovoka (ca. 1856–1932), in a photograph taken ca. 1910.

conform, and traditional lifeways had been severely disrupted or permanently eliminated, including religious practice and beliefs. Only a few groups were still putting up any active military resistance. Into this situation came a man named Jack Wilson, also called Wovoka, who was a Paiute weather doctor. In 1889, Wovoka became ill, and in that context had a vision in which he received a message from God. The message was for people to live a "clean, honest life" and return to traditional values of hard work and peace. The central ritual to facilitate this was the "circle dance" in which people danced slowly, sometimes for days, in harmony with each other. The dance was to provide a model for the way life should be lived, also in harmony. The belief was that, if everyone danced, then the expression of faith and love would sweep evil from the land and renew goodness and abundance. Sometimes, while dancing, participants were visited by the spirits of dead relatives, and so the dance became known as the "ghost dance." Wovoka didn't proselytize, but nevertheless his message was so compelling that it spread throughout the west, from his home in Nevada to Oklahoma, California, and the Dakotas. The events of Wounded Knee, South Dakota (1973), caused the religion to wane, but it has been revived in recent years and continues to be practiced in some places.

While Wallace derived his model from Native American religions (and there are others in addition to the Ghost Dance), it can also be usefully applied to other religions. For example, the reformulation of Judaism under Moses can be interpreted this way, as can Jesus and Christianity. In both cases, people had been conquered (the Jews in Egypt and the Christians by the Romans), and there was the perception that things were not going the way they should. Both, too, emphasized simplification, a return to the basic values of the past, and that if this was done then a more satisfying life (here or in the next life) would result. While there are differences from the Ghost Dance, this model does make sense of some aspects of the origins of these religions, and it can also be applied (albeit with differences) elsewhere, for example Protestantism as a reformulation under Martin Luther or the Baha'i faith in the context of Islam.

Another example that conforms in certain ways to this approach is the group of modern pagan religions that I will refer to as Neopaganism. There are many variants within this group, with the most well-known probably being Wicca, and by most counts it is the fastest growing new religion in the United States and Europe. One of the central characteristics of Neopaganism is that there is no single set of beliefs that must be followed, so it can be hard to generalize about it. But there are some shared aspects, including an emphasis on a female deity, a spiritual connection with the natural world, and a belief that magic (however defined) can have real effects. Another common thread is that adherents generally come to the religion because they are dissatisfied with the religions they know. This is typically because they are seen as too constraining, too tainted by their particular history, and/or too male-centered. While there is no conquest situation here, there is often a sense of victimization, both in a modern and historical sense. Historically, Neopagans often connect their beliefs to those of pre-Christian Europe, and see the persecution of witches in the Middle Ages as an attempt by Christian governments to suppress those religions (which they believe were still being practiced by those identified as witches). As it

stands, the evidence that this happened, or that Neopagan beliefs accurately reflect ancient pre-Christian ones, is not convincing, and most researchers instead derive Neopaganism from various figures in the 1950s and 1960s. Consequently, this interpretation of the past is becoming less significant in the Neopagan community. However, these connections have sometimes provided a way for Neopagans to claim an ancient lineage for their religion in a culture where religions are typically valued in direct proportion to their age.

At the same time, there is also sometimes the belief that religions like Christianity and Judaism were corrupted by mostly male administrators, who fashioned the modern version to increase their own power and prestige. In this formulation, Neopaganism can be seen as a way to get back to the original beliefs, which were simpler, more satisfying, and uncorrupted by hierarchy and greed. This is also reflected in the idea that modern society has lost touch with the basic forces of the natural world, with the rhythms of the seasons and the creative power of the individual and the community. Neopagans try to return to these through their rituals. Further, because Neopaganism is often misunderstood and seen as threatening by some Christian groups, there has been persecution in recent times, and Neopagan rituals have been disrupted and their rights to worship challenged. Thus Neopaganism can also be interpreted in some ways in the context of revitalization. It advocates a return to basic, simpler values, and it seeks to revitalize what is experienced as an unsatisfying religion in the context of perceived (and sometimes real) negative pressure to conform.

To some extent, the origins of modern religions cross-culturally are difficult to untangle given the amount of time that has sometimes passed. However, in some cases, anthropologists are well situated to observe both the emergence of new religions and significant changes to existing ones. These are not only interesting phenomena to study in their own right; they can also give us insight into the processes that produced the religions that have become such an integral part of so many cultures today.

Handfasting Ceremony

Handfasting is a celebration held by Wiccans as a commonly used term for their weddings. Some Wiccans observe the practice of a trial marriage for a year and a day. Some Wiccan practitioners believe handfasting should be contracted on Lammas Day (on or about August 1), which has roots in both Anglo-Saxon and early Christian celebrations of wheat harvesting. A common marriage vow in Wicca is "for as long as love lasts," rather than the traditional Christian "till death do us part."

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. How is synchretism linked to revitalization groups?
2. What are central aspects of Neopaganism?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

Brown, Karen McCarthy. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Kehoe, Alice Beck. *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2006.

Pike, Sarah M. *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Websites of Interest

1. A directory of online resources on new religious movements is available through the *AcademicInfo* website. — http://www.academicinfo.net/nrms.html
2. Bowling Green State University provides a website with links and eye-witness accounts on the Wounded Knee Massacre and the Ghost Dance Religion. — http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/acs/1890s/woundedknee/WKghost.html

Lecture 14:
Religion and Politics

The Suggested Readings for this lecture are Michael Barkun's "Reflections After Waco: Millennialists and the State," Alice Beck Kehoe's "The Ghost Dance Religion," and Robert S. Root-Bernstein's "Darwin's Rib" in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (7th ed.).

One of the common changes that impacts the context of religion in modern cultures is its separation from the political arena. For most of human history, where there have been political structures, these have typically been fully integrated with the religious aspects of society. As society became more complex and government became more formalized, religion provided both a justification for the status differences between people and a way to legitimize the power structure that rooted it in basic cosmological principles—those in charge were there because the deities wanted them to be, and the rightness of the universe depended on their continuing to stay that way. Over time, however, in many cultures, this connection has gradually weakened, and secular government has become common among complex, urban-based societies, allowing for religious pluralism and at least a formal value for tolerance. In the United States, there is an explicit principle separating religion from government, and yet this separation is often breached in many different ways, resulting in a constant dialogue about how religion, which is central to American culture, should be played out in the public sphere.

The fact that religion can sometimes provide a context for conflict with the government is not a recent phenomenon. One of the best studied examples of this derives from the Ghost Dance that I talked about before. In the late nineteenth century, when it was being formulated and spreading widely, there was still armed conflict between the United States government and several Native American groups who resisted assimilation. Wovoka and his Ghost Dance religion preached peace, but Wovoka was unable to control his message as it spread widely throughout the region. In some settings, the Ghost Dance became entangled in the idea of armed conflict, and the idea developed that shirts worn while dancing would then protect the wearer from bullets. In contrast to Wovoka's intention, the Ghost

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Soldiers of the 7th Cavalry bury the Lakota Sioux dead in a common grave weeks after the massacre at Wounded Knee, 1890.

Dance for these participants became a precursor to battle. Further, while Wovoka didn't explicitly exclude European Americans from participating in the Ghost Dance, he did think that those who most vigorously oppressed Native Americans wouldn't benefit from it. It therefore became, in addition to a religion for creating harmony, a celebration of Indian identity. Such a ritual would not be inherently threatening, but in the climate of the time, when assimilation was seen by European Americans as the best outcome for both the smooth operation of society and the happiness of Indian people, anything that celebrated a separate identity created a problem. And this was, of course, enhanced by rumors of Ghost Dances being done as a precursor to battle. It is thus not surprising that the Ghost Dance played a part in the tragic events of Wounded Knee in 1890. In the early stages of that confrontation, escalating tensions were further heightened by a Ghost Dance ritual, which some interpreted as an indicator of violence to come. While it is clear that some Native Americans did intend to fight, it was the perception of the meaning of the ritual, rather than the ritual per se, that fueled the fire. In the end, the dead numbered thirty-nine soldiers and one hundred fifty-three Lakota Sioux, including at least forty-four women and eighteen children.

Perception of religion has always played a significant role in its social context. A useful exercise in thinking of this is to consider the word "cult." This is a word we typically use to describe a group that is religious in a sense, but whose beliefs and actions we find inappropriate, socially unacceptable, or downright immoral. However, this is arguably about perception. Many, if not most, religions were, in their beginnings, perceived as wrong or threatening. This is well attested for Christianity, and has also been true at various times for Judaism and Islam. Yet all of these religions would now be considered legitimate, and all have adherents whose beliefs and practices are respected. So is "cult" just a word we use for religions whose content we find problematic? This is not to say that we should automatically approve of all religions. But perception can be everything. The Branch Davidians are a Protestant sect who split from the Seventh-Day Adventists, and one group who lived in Waco, Texas, was led by a man named David Koresh. In an analysis of events in 1993, Michael Barkun considers the result of labeling this group as a cult. Early that year, allegations of sexual abuse within the group prompted the United States government to try to close down the compound where they lived. This led to a siege lasting almost two months and which ended with the deaths of Koresh, dozens of group members (some of them children), and four federal agents.

Independent of the facts of the incident (which are disputed by both sides), Barkun suggests that calling the group a cult had a significant effect. First, Koresh was automatically seen as delusional and his followers were assumed to be brainwashed. This meant that their beliefs were not taken seriously, and instead it was assumed by the negotiators that self-interest would be their main motivator. The actions of the federal agents also validated both Koresh's worldview, which portrayed the world as corrupt and violent, and his power to hold world attention and paralyze government forces. Barkun argues that, had agents instead been patient, waited out the situation, and been willing to negotiate on the basis of religious beliefs, they might have been able to show group members that Koresh's worldview

wasn't accurate and thereby possibly weaken his hold. There is, of course, no way to know what might have happened, but Barkun makes an interesting case that labeling the group as a cult predisposed a particular approach to the standoff and contributed to the violent outcome.

Also at issue in the debate on religion and politics is what constitutes religion and who gets to decide when something is religious. One of the most contentious issues in recent American society has been the teaching of biological evolution. While many people with a variety of worldviews happily embrace both religious and scientific ideas on the origin and development of life on Earth without seeing any contradiction, some groups of Christians view these as irreconcilable. In their interpretation of Christian theology, only one version has acceptable moral implications. They therefore see it as their duty to try to convince the rest of society that this is so. Specifically, they have sought to include "creationism," that is, a Bible-based version of life, in the science curriculum of the public schools. What is interesting about this from an anthropological point of view is the way that creationism has been presented to the larger society. On the one hand, the United States government is theoretically secular, and by extension so is the public school system, which is not allowed to promote any particular religious belief. This idea is generally supported by the majority of Americans, most of whom also accept a scientific worldview. But creationism is fundamentally a religious version of life, and so would be prohibited from science classes. In order to minimize the religious aspect, therefore, proponents have created "creation science," also known as "intelligent design," which takes a religious account and tries to present it as scientific. However, the two don't really mesh; religious knowledge isn't required to follow the rules of science, and science is based on the idea that the world is knowable and ultimately testable. So we end up with a religious idea presented as nonreligious in order to introduce it into a place where society says religion is not supposed to be. It is a comment on the flexibility of both religion and culture that such a thing would even be contemplated.

Another example where definitions create complications is in the recent discussion of Halloween. A number of Christian groups have protested the celebration of Halloween both in general and in the public schools because they perceive it as religious (typically equating it with "paganism") and as incorporating imagery that they find problematic. In his book on Halloween, Nicholas Rogers traces the history of the holiday, showing that, while it can be traced to medieval Christian observances, there is little if any connection between Halloween and any pre-Christian religion. This is partly due to the fact that we can say very little with certainty about these religions. Historical and archaeological evidence have limitations, as I discussed earlier, and while we can trace their physical remains we rarely have any insight into their underlying beliefs. However, what we do know is that the general character of Halloween isn't paralleled in pre-Christian religions; instead, its roots lie in All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, both traditionally part of the early Christian calendar. Halloween imagery is clearly evidenced in early Christian societies rather than in pre-Christian ones (for example, there is no evidence in the latter of a figure equivalent to Satan) and, while there is evidence that November first might have had some calendrical significance prior to Christianity, there is no way to know how (or even if) they may have celebrated it. And yet, not only have

some Christian groups condemned it on the basis of its supposed pagan roots, Neopagans have re-created it as a major holiday that they celebrate as part of the change of seasons. So while (based on a variety of informal polls of my students over the last few years) most people no longer see Halloween as having religious significance, for some groups such meaning is still claimed and given significance.

The examples I have discussed here have mostly focused on conflict between religion and politics because it is here that the differences are most sharply defined. When each side has to stake its ground there is a tendency to portray each position in more stark terms. However, it is worth noting that, even in our pluralistic and complex modern society, religion and politics are not always at odds. While there is an argument to be made that it would be virtually impossible for an atheist to be elected president in the United States, the fact that our leaders are typically religious has not always meant an erosion of the separation of church and state. This is no doubt due to the fact that religion is intimately intertwined with culture, such that it tends to reflect what the larger culture considers important. Where tolerance and pluralism are valued, religion reacts accordingly, while a need for specific interpretations and exclusivity can also be accommodated. It is this ability of religion to be what humans need it to be that has caused it to remain a basic aspect of society shared by all human cultures.

Candles burn on graves at Wszystkich Świętych Cemetery, in Warsaw, Poland.

All Saints' Day (officially the Feast of All Saints and also called All Hallows or "Hallowmas" ["Hallows" meaning "saints," "mas" meaning "Mass"—the preceding evening, Halloween, is the "Eve of All Hallows"]) is a feast celebrated on November 1 in Western Christianity, and on the first Sunday after Pentecost in Eastern Christianity in honor of all the saints, known and unknown.

In Western Christian theology (particularly Roman Catholic), the feast commemorates all those who have attained the beatific vision in heaven.

In Poland, and other central and eastern European countries, an All Saints' Day tradition is to light candles and visit the graves of deceased relatives.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

Questions

1. What effect did calling the Branch Davidians a “cult” have on the events in Waco, Texas?
2. How is the introduction of “intelligent design” into schools an example of the flexibility of religion and culture?

Suggested Reading

Moro, Pamela A., James E. Myers, and Arthur C. Lehmann, eds. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*. 7th ed. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 2008.

Other Books of Interest

Kehoe, Alice Beck. *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2006.

Rogers, Nicholas. *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2003.

Websites of Interest

1. The PBS series *Frontline* and WGBH Boston produced a show titled “Waco: The Inside Story” about the Branch Davidian movement. — http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/waco/
2. The History Channel website has a detailed and objective history of Halloween. — http://www.history.com/content/halloween

GLOSSARY

ancestral spirits	The souls or ghosts of ancestors. A belief in ancestral spirits is consistent with the widespread belief that humans have at least two parts—a physical body and some kind of nonphysical spirit. The spirit portion is generally believed to be freed from the body by death and continues to exist. Ancestral spirits are often seen as retaining an active interest and even membership in their family and society.
animatism	A belief in a supernatural power not part of supernatural beings. For those who hold this belief, the power is usually impersonal, unseen, and potentially everywhere. It is neither good nor evil, but it can be powerful and dangerous if misused.
animism	A belief that natural objects are animated by *spirits*. This belief can take diverse forms. Things in nature may all have within them different spirits—each rock, tree, and cloud may have its own unique spirit. In contrast, all things in nature may be thought of as having the same spirit. In both forms of animism, the spirits are thought of as having identifiable personalities and other characteristics such as gender.
bewitching	Using magical acts and/or the assistance of supernatural beings to cause something to occur. Bewitching is an integral part of *witchcraft*.
contagious magic	Magic that is based on the principle that things or persons once in contact can afterward influence each other. In other words, there is a permanent relationship between an individual and any part of his or her body. As a consequence, believers must take special precautions with their hair, fingernails, teeth, and clothes. If anyone obtained these objects, magic could be performed on them and would cause the person they came from to be affected.
cult	A devoted religious group, often living together in a community with a charismatic *prophet* leader. Cults are generally considered to be potentially dangerous, unorthodox, extremist groups by the dominant religious organizations in a society.
divination	A *magical* procedure by which the cause of a particular event or the future is determined.
god/goddess	A powerful supernatural being with an individual identity and recognizable attributes. Another term for a god is a deity. Like *spirits*, gods have individual identities and recognizable attributes (gods are male and goddesses are female). However, gods and goddesses are more powerful than spirits and other lesser supernatural beings—they can effectively alter all of nature and human fortunes. As a result, they are commonly worshipped and requests are made of them to help in times of need.
hallucinogen	A mind-altering drug that can cause profound hallucinations or an altered state of awareness. Most hallucinogens used for religious purposes by shamans and others are derived from plants.
hunter-gatherers	People who obtain their food by foraging wild plants and hunting wild animals.
indigenous	Referring to the native population of an area.

latent function	The function of a ritual as revealed by analysis. These functions usually differ from the *manifest function*, which is the purpose for which people say they are carrying out a ritual. Latent functions are things such as promoting a feeling of community or reinforcing gender roles.
magic	Using ritual formulas to compel or influence supernatural beings or powers to act in certain ways for good or evil purposes. By performing certain magical acts in a particular way, crops might be improved, game herds replenished, illness cured or avoided, animals and people made fertile. This is very different from television and stage "magic" that depends on slight-of-hand tricks and contrived illusions rather than supernatural power.
manifest function	The purpose of a ritual as understood by the people who carry out the ritual. This is usually different from any other functions that a ritual may have, such as providing for social solidarity or controlling unwanted behavior (known as the *latent function*).
modal behavior	The statistically most common behavior patterns within a society. Those who do not exhibit these patterns are usually labeled as social deviants. What is defined as modal behavior varies from society to society.
monotheism	A belief that there is only one god. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are usually considered to be monotheistic religions.
norms	The socially expected behavior patterns or rules for behavior within a society. Norms differ from culture to culture.
Polytheism	A belief in more than one god. Hinduism is usually considered a polytheistic religion.
priest/priestess	A religious leader who is part of an organized religion. Different religions have different terms for these individuals—they may be known as rabbis, ministers, mullahs, imams, or by other terms. They are the keepers of the sacred law and tradition. They are found mostly in large-scale societies.
prophet	An individual who receives divine revelation concerning a restructuring of religious practices and usually of society as well. Prophets call for dramatic change while priesthoods usually act as conservative forces in preserving long-standing traditions.
religion	A system of beliefs and behaviors that formulates and answers questions that are important, recurrent, and must be answered. *See the discussion of this term in lecture 1*.
revitalization movement	A conscious, organized movement that attempts to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of an indigenous culture or to gain control of the direction and rate of culture change being forced on them. These movements have also been referred to as messianic, nativistic, and millenarian movements. They were especially common among indigenous societies of European colonies. The Cargo Cults of New Guinea and the Ghost Dance Movements of the North American Plains Indians are examples. Millenarian

	movements typically have a prophet leader and religious beliefs requiring a major leap of faith by their followers.
rituals	Stylized and usually repetitive acts that take place at a set time and location. They almost always involve the use of symbolic objects, words, and actions. For example, going to church on Sunday is a common religious ritual for Christians around the world.
secular	Relating to worldly rather than religious things.
shaman	A religious specialist who is in direct contact with the spirit world, usually through a trance state. A shaman often has spirit helpers at his or her command to carry out curing, divining, and bewitching. Shamanistic power is acquired individually, usually in physical and/or mental solitude and isolation from other humans.
spirit	A supernatural being who has less power than a god or goddess. It may be an ancestral spirit or simply a spirit that inhabits a natural object or even all of nature.
sympathetic magic	Magic based on the principle that "like produces like." For instance, whatever happens to an image of someone will also happen to them.
syncretism	An amalgamation or incorporation of traditional and introduced alien culture traits. In Southern Mexico and Guatemala, the Maya Indian combination of mutually exclusive indigenous religious and European Christian beliefs to create a new composite religion is an example.
trancing	Activity that results in an altered state of consciousness in which an individual is in a hypnotic-like mental state or at least profoundly absorbed. This is a common tool used by shamans and others all over the world to enter the spirit world.
witchcraft	Actions involving magic or supernatural powers. While anthropologists have traditionally seen the purpose of witchcraft as doing harm, more recent analysis has broadened this definition to include the activities of modern Western European and North American witches such as Wicca. The latter are members of an organized religion.

Suggested Readings:

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Eller, Cynthia. *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.

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Other Books of Interest (continued):

Helvenston, Patricia A., and Paul G. Bahn. *Waking the Trance Fixed*. Louisville, KY: Wasteland Press, 2005.

Hutton, Ronald. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

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Articles of Interest:

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These books are available online through www.modernscholar.com or by calling Recorded Books at 1-800-636-3399.