

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 23  
**Religion, Ritual, and Creating and Maintaining belief**  
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- Kottak on religion
  - Table just to give you an idea of the variety and size of major religions
    - you don't have to memorize the details
      - **CE = Common Era = AD = Anno Domini**
      - **BCE = Before Common Era = BC = Before Christ**
  - some terms it uses (and doesn't use) about Islam that should be general knowledge
    - **Qur'an = Koran**: God's words written down by **Mohammed**
    - **Hadith**: supposedly first-hand accounts of things Mohammed said or did, supplementary to the Koran.
    - **Sunna**: the way of life of Mohammed, largely as recorded in the Hadith, which Muslims are urged to emulate.
  - comparable concepts for Judaism
    - **Torah**: the five books of Moses (also called the Pentateuch) Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
    - **Talmud**: Jewish oral teachings, written down around 200 AD, with extensive commentary added in the following centuries.
- **Revitalization movement**: social and religious movement that occurs at times of change or crisis, intending to change or revitalize society
  - Handsome Lake example (Iroquois)
  - Christianity
  - also called **millenary movements** or **millennial movements**
- **Cargo cult**: especially in Melanesia and Polynesia
  - General features:
    - Appeared after abrupt contact with well-equipped modern soldiers, explorers, miners, missionaries, colonial government officials, etc.
    - hope that great amounts of wealth (cargo) would be supernaturally delivered to the local people
    - usually that the rich, dominating foreigners will be killed or driven away
    - believe that specific practices mimicking the rich foreigners' behavior will bring this about
      - like marching in rigid formation
      - revering flagpoles
      - building airstrips, towers, etc.
      - talking into “radios”
      - this is magical technology to bring about a specific end
  - numerous different cargo cults, each led by a charismatic leader proposing some different magical practice
    - sometimes the same person who led a previous attempt that didn't work
  - often drew followers from distant regions

- often proposed by one visionary person, who collected followers hoping that this time, the visionary would have the trick that actually worked
- many versions and interpretations
- one common one based on beliefs about prosperity and ancestors
  - many Melanesians believed that material prosperity was a gift from their ancestors, in a literal and immediate way
    - this works fine to explain things in a slash-and-burn, big-man society
  - also believed in magical practices to control otherwise unpredictable forces
  - so when they encountered well-equipped 20<sup>th</sup>-century soldiers, missionaries, and administrators who came by boat or ship, they assumed that these foreigners had somehow figured out how to get extraordinary amounts of goods (cargo) from the ancestors
  - so they guessed about what was causing the ancestors to shower such wealth on the foreigners, and tried to do the same things to get the same result
  - many cargo cults involved the idea that the ancestors would switch back to the side of the locals and kill or drive away the foreigners
- Kottak suggests an interpretation based on big man systems
  - big men accumulated wealth only to give it away
  - the foreigners made locals work and were very wealthy by mysterious means, but never gave the wealth away
  - eventually, there would have to be a supernatural sanction for this immoral behavior
  - the practices of cargo cults were to call on ancestors or gods to hasten this return to justice
- Kottak also suggests that cargo cults did pay off in the end
  - by creating networks of followers of different cargo cults
  - created the connections and regional consciousness that eventually led to successful political action and representation
- Point: Cargo cults may initially seem senseless to us, but actually do make sense given the beliefs that the people already had
  - understanding them is an exercise in cultural relativism
  - that normal, adult, intelligent humans could believe in cargo cults suggests how extremely constructed beliefs can be
    - and should cause us to wonder which of our own beliefs might look as baseless to someone from a different culture
- **Syncretism** (in this context, **syncretistic** (or **syncretic**) religion)
  - Combination of beliefs from different traditions into something new
  - Example: Mixtec identifying Christ with the Sun
  - Example: Peruvian Catholicism
    - Parading images around the same as they did with mummies
  - Qoyur Riti pilgrimage
    - Nominally to site where a child saw Jesus
    - Also involves collecting sacred glacier ice
    - Costumed “bear” and “tropical forest indian” dancers

- Robbins: creating and maintaining belief
  - More on what ritual does, and how
    - creates an emotional impact
      - through being a special event, outside of daily activities
      - through being social, with others expressing the same ideas
      - through using symbolism to bring seemingly disparate aspects of life into a satisfying relationship
      - through music and visual pageantry, tricks, etc.
    - this brings people to associate the emotions produced by the ritual with the beliefs that the ritual is promoting
      - if you have a moving experience while praying during a church ritual, it is easy to think that what you felt was due to God
      - example: an Anglican choral mass in a British gothic cathedral
      - example: a mountaintop ritual to Pachamama
      - example: attending church services for social contact
    - Point: the emotion created by the ritual is attributed to the referent of the symbolism, suggesting that the referent is real and powerful
  - **Interpretive drift** (Tanya Luhmann)
    - changing belief due to involvement with a new activity
      - a shift in interpretation of events, or adoption of a new theory
    - As you learn and think about the new ideas (through ritual and/or social contacts), you start to figure out how they would apply to your reality
      - seeing patterns in events
      - seeing certain events as significant
      - paying attention to what you used to ignore as coincidence
    - you are looking for places to apply the new ideas in order to try them out; when a few coincidences fit the ideas, it can seem like validation of the ideas
      - Luhmann studying magic, has battery melt while imagining energy, has watch stop during a ritual
      - could be explained without the new ideas, and would not even seem associated with each other, but they fit the new ideas, so the events seem significant
    - after a few such events, one starts looking for more, and may find them
    - every fit seems to be an explanation, a discovery
      - the failures to fit are easy to ignore
    - the perception is not that one's beliefs have "changed", but that one has discovered something "true"
  - both ritual and the process of interpretive drift involve practice and repetition
    - you don't come to the belief and then start doing the rituals
    - rather, you start doing the rituals and gradually drift into the belief
    - "you don't go to church because you believe in God; you believe in God because you go to church"
  - once a belief is accepted, one will try to defend it against contradictory evidence
    - in order to avoid the psychological discomfort of cognitive dissonance

- **rationalization: secondary elaboration** of the belief in order to let it explain seemingly contradictory evidence
  - like the epicycles added to the earth-centric motions of the planets
  - among the Azande, if the poison oracle is wrong, it means that there was a technical problem with the poison, a witch interfered, the dead interfered, the diviner is incompetent, etc.
- **selective perception**: notice supporting evidence, discount contradictory evidence
- **suppress evidence**: similar idea; ignore contradictory evidence, perhaps by coming up with an alternative, non-contradictory theory
- **appeal to faith**: "it is just a mystery"
- **appeal to authority**: the Bible or Koran; Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, etc.
- **alternative standards of truth**: it is a beautiful idea; it is no more unprovable than other unprovable ideas; it may not be empirically true, but it is an effective myth; etc.
- Cultures are essentially just collections of beliefs
  - so if we want to understand cultures, we need to understand where beliefs come from and how they are maintained
    - religious and otherwise
    - if it is even possible or worthwhile to divide up beliefs this way
- Anthropologists often suggest that religious and cosmological beliefs tend to reflect the society that hold them
  - Elman Service (in Robbins) and Monaghan and Just, p 121-123: religion is a model of society, and for society
  - Elman Service: when we were pastoral nomads, God was our shepherd...
  - Ludwig Feuerbach: "Man created God in his image"
  - Emil Durkheim: cosmology (a society's model of the supernatural and natural world) is a representation of society
  - So religion legitimizes society
  - "Religion is society worshipping itself"