

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 21
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
 - **Muslim**: believer in Islam
 - “Moslem” is seen as old-fashioned
 - **Qur'an = Koran**: God's words, heard and recited by the **Prophet Mohammed**, memorized and written down exactly by his followers
 - **Hadith**: supposedly first-hand accounts of things Mohammed said or did, supplementary to the Qur'an
 - the words and actions of devout but ordinary people, not divine
 - **Sunna**: the way of life of Mohammed, largely as recorded in the Hadith, which Muslims are urged to emulate.
 - comparable concepts in Judaism
 - **Torah**: the five books of Moses (also called the Pentateuch) Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
 - the word of God through Moses
 - **Talmud**: Jewish oral teachings, written down around 200 AD, with extensive commentary added in the following centuries
 - the wisdom of scholars, not divine
- **Revitalization movement**:
 - also called **millenary movement** or **millennial movement**
 - social and religious movement that
 - occurs at times of crisis, decline, or oppression
 - intends to change or revitalize society
 - sometimes back to a remembered better past
 - sometimes to something new and better
 - typically led by a charismatic prophet, teacher, etc.
 - examples:
 - Handsome Lake religion
 - Iroquois (Native Americans of Upstate New York)
 - started around 1800, led by Handsome Lake
 - in response to
 - mistreatment by US after aiding the British
 - resettlement onto reservations
 - alcoholism problems
 - promoted adoption of European ways of farming and residence
 - ending matrilineal organization and inheritance of land

- shifting from communal longhouses to individual, patrilineal nuclear families
- Ghost Dance movement
 - many Native American tribes
 - started in 1889 by a Paiute visionary named Wovoka
 - believed that if enough people participated in the Ghost Dance, the ancestors would return and the Native Americans would be restored to their place in the old world
 - most famously adopted by the Lakota Sioux, leading to the massacre at Wounded Knee
- Church of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) (arguably)
- Christianity (arguably)
- **Cargo cult**: especially in Melanesia and Polynesia
 - General features:
 - Appeared after abrupt contact with modern soldiers, explorers, miners, missionaries, colonial government officials, etc.
 - who had lots of goods (“cargo”) but did not apparently have to work to get them
 - and did many strange, useless things
 - marching in formation
 - saluting flags
 - using radios
 - various prophets interpreted these odd behaviors as magic that got their ancestors to provide the cargo
 - they would convince others to join them in trying to duplicate the magic
 - marching, saluting, talking into “radios”, etc.
 - hoping that this would cause the ancestors to bring great amounts of wealth (cargo)
 - and drive off the lazy, greedy foreigners who were exploiting them
 - this was 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 including people who had tried other cargo cults and given up when they didn’t work
- one explanation is based on Melanesian 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 20th-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 the meanings of reciprocity in big man systems
 - big men accumulated wealth only to give it away
 - in contrast, 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: Peruvian Catholicism
 - Parading a painting or sculpture of the Virgin Mary, Christ, or a saint the town or region the same as they did with mummies of the Inka ruling families
 - Qoyur Riti pilgrimage
 - Nominally to site where a child saw Jesus
 - Also involves collecting sacred glacier ice
 - Costumed “bear” and “tropical forest indian” dancers
 - this is a mixture of Catholic and indigenous beliefs
 - goat sacrifices on festival of the cross days in Moquegua...
- Robbins: creating and maintaining belief
 - Ritual helps to create belief
 - creates an emotional impact
 - it is a special event, outside of daily activities
 - social, with others expressing the same ideas
 - uses symbolism to bring seemingly disparate aspects of life into a satisfying relationship
 - involves music
 - visual pageantry (clothing, props, choreography, etc.)
 - sometimes mystifying phenomena or trickery
 - people associate the emotions produced by the ritual with the referents of the symbols of the ritual (the beliefs that the ritual communicates with the symbols)
 - the emotion of the ritual suggests that the beliefs it refers to are real and powerful

- 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 due to social obligations or for social contact, but eventually being swept up by the ritual
- 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
 - For one reason or another, you start talking with believers, or reading, or attending rituals
 - You hear lots of people using and believing in the ideas
 - through simple repetition and exposure, the ideas start seeming less outlandish, and more plausible
 - You are trying to understand the new ideas, so you are looking for examples and applications to your own life, try the ideas on for size
 - when a few coincidences fit the ideas, it can seem like validation of the ideas
 - you pay attention to things you would previously not even have noticed, or would have ignored as coincidence
 - but now that you have the new ideas in mind, you notice things because they seem to fit the new ideas
 - example: while Luhmann was studying magic, a bicycle battery melted while she was imagining energy; her watch stopped during a ritual
 - previously would not have even considered that these things were connected
 - but now fit the new ideas, so the events seemed 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"
 - you start thinking there is something to these new ideas...
- 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
- Hence the claim:
 - you don't do the ritual or practices because you believe...
 - you believe because you do the ritual or practices
- or, in more familiar terms
 - you don't go to church because you believe in God;
 - you believe in God because you go to church
- which in turn suggests how important cultural or social norms of behavior are
 - by shaping what we do, they shape what we believe

- once a belief is accepted, a person will try to defend it against contradictory evidence
 - in order to avoid the psychological discomfort of cognitive dissonance (clash of contradicting ideas)
 - between the belief that is held to be true
 - and the evidence that seems to show that it is not
 - solution: find a way to discount, ignore, or suppress the contradicting evidence
 - eliminating the disturbing 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 Qur’ran; 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.
- Anthropologists often suggest that religious and cosmological beliefs tend to reflect the society that hold them
 - this is an outsider’s, etic view of religion, not an emic one that a believer would propose
 - Elman Service (in Robbins): religion is a model of society, and for society
 - 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”
 - kind of a radical idea, but think about it...