

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Thursday, 10 November 2005

Reading

- Marina Roseman, *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest: Temiar Music and Medicine*, chs. 1-3, pp. 1-79.
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Ritual is used to exorcise negative entities. Remember Csordas and his study of Catholic Charismatics in which spirits were able to possess individuals. But this weren't limited to only evil, as there was joy, jealousy, and lust. It was up to the person to seek exorcism.

There is a modern tendency to look down on such alternative healing practices.

Scheper-Hughes and Lock talked about Western **bodily alienation**, offering a Marxist analysis that argued for a return to the self/*soma* (akin to a worker's alienation from his product).

Symbolic capital has become mechanized into the capitalistic economy. The rise of industrial capitalism has also shown the rise of schizophrenia and eating disorders.

Is there something particular about Western culture that makes us so alienated? Why is the alternative medicine industry so large? What are people seeking there that they aren't getting from traditional scientific medicine? What is the meaning that is missing?

The 1970s saw the rise of the **discourse of reflexivity** in anthropology. What is the effect of the anthropologist on the people he/she is studying? Feminist anthropology also emerged, offering **standpoint theory** which most anthropologists take into account implicitly. **Engagement with others is always tied into relations of power.**

student presentation

Roseman's focus is on the power and performance of ritual.

The Temiar are people of open spaces, their lives are structured around the sounds of the rainforest. Mediums channel spirits of the rainforest.

Sounds are social constructions with cultural values attached to them. Specific sounds are only wholly intelligible to members of the culture in which they occur.

The Temiar had a ubiquitous concept of the **upper-level soul** and the **lower-level soul** as well as the **unbounded** and **bounded**. Everything had this dichotomy (humans, mountains, almost any entity).

Humans were comprised of the following:

- ☞ The **head soul** was responsible for thoughts. The **heart soul** for feelings and awareness.
- ☞ **Odor** emanated from the lower back and can harm/infect someone else and there was ritual to recognize its presence and protect against it (e.g. saying "odor, odor, odor" when passing

behind someone – showing protection of personal space as one can be eaten by another’ odor). Odor is immaterial but perceptible – it is possessed but can also be transmitted. One “carries” odor more than “has” it.

☞ The **shadow** of person could disengage from him/her and wander around, affecting others.

In healing rituals and dreams, the spirit goes out and finds another. Dreams and trance were **controlled detachment**. Prolonged absence of the head soul for a person would eventually lead to **soul loss**, which was debilitating (somewhat akin to depression, but not entirely so).

The concept of the **path** was integral to the Temiar.

During dreams or rituals, there was controlled detachment of the spirit. Mediums were usually male, with his head spirit wandering and meeting another as a spiritguide. The spiritguide teaches the medium a dreamsong. Later, this song is used during ritual to reconnect with the spiritguide and heal people.

Temiar **inner/outer dichotomy**: heart as emotion vs. head of vocal experience

Spiritguides manifest as human form. The heart spirit appears in the form of an animal. Blood is the fluid of the heart spirit.

Temiar society is structured around **generalized reciprocity**. When people give something, they open up themselves and give part of their selves and this places them in a vulnerable position. The Temiar will not ask outright for anything because if you are denied, then your vulnerability puts you at risk for illness.

Anyone can experience omens in dreams or encounters with spirits. The healer is in a position of **receptivity** – one can only become a medium at the request of a spiritguide. The spiritguide teaches the song over time and it is then recapitulated in ceremony as the male sings it and the women chorus repeats. Mediums’ spiritguides reflect the surroundings – here we have the **translation of environment into culture**. The medium sings the song during ritual, connects with the spiritguide, the spiritguide travels, and then returns to imbue the medium with knowledge.

There is **social differentiation** despite the claim that all have the potential to be a medium – only some end up actually being mediums.

- ☞ More men than women are mediums, probably attributed to men having more adeptness and being more calm and judicious. Wives of the mediums act as chorus leaders, and the women chorus follows the path set by the male medium. There is also the stylized harangue (which address social conflict) of women to balance the power of the predominantly male mediums.
- ☞ Another layer of differentiation is among mediums themselves – some are more powerful than others depending on the number of spiritguides and the strength of their spiritguides.
- ☞ Roseman argues that the Temiar is an **egalitarian** society but some individuals clearly have more power than others and this is how they **negotiate the social order**.
- ☞ The Malaysian government designated leaders among the Temiar and these were usually the mediums – reinforcing the **prestige/persuasion** of the mediums.

Professor James' commentary

Roseman says the Temiar are pretty egalitarian with issues regarding marriage and inheritance, for example. *Inequality/gender issues are thus addressed through ritual to make the society complementary.*

The woman's harangue rises above all sounds at night. This speaks to the Temiar notion of the **household as permeable** – the Temiar don't want to feel constrained but want some security. The harangue serves as an indirect way to express grievances. But this doesn't mean that women are subordinate – they're very active in ceremonies and even lead some songs.

- ∞ The wife of the medium is a powerful position too. This is analogous to Favret-Saada's bewitching article in which men lose force and the unbewitching process allows the woman her voice and to be an active agent.
- ∞ **Ritual processes are where gender and power tensions get worked out.**

Furthermore, consider the Temiar rituals in contrast to Yolmo repression. The rituals express anger and frustration and serve as a **vehicle to transform social frustration.**

Shift of the **conceptualization of odor** from contamination to self-concern (sanitation/health).

- Roseman discusses **intersubjectivity**, how different parts of the self interact with others. The **person is multiple.**

Roseman's **theoretical methodology** vs. Desjarlais' sensory methodology – how to study? Roseman language paralleled Desjarlais'. We can't just look at songs/dreams at the symbolic level – we must *engage* in daily life. This begs the question, to what extent do you get involved in everyday life? (This is easier in smaller communities, as Roseman and Desjarlais studied in.)

Weber emphasized **“meaning.”** In *The Sociology of Religion*, he discussed charisma. Roseman was informed by Weber and Geertz (who argued for the reading of **culture as text**). Geertz said signs were easily interpreted – a **semiotic analysis**. Desjarlais critiqued Geertz for missing the **sensory experience** of daily life.

Disadvantage of text: Roseman does not give attention to **politics** and **social life** of community.

p. 16-17: During seances, females act in male roles. Maleness as a symbolic repertoire is momentarily appropriated. **Gender roles are thus subverted in ritual!**

Discussion of film: *Of Men and Gods*

Gay Haitian men appropriate styles of women.

Gay men transgress the **gendered division of public space** by selling in the market. There is still a strong stigma against homosexuality. Yet, through ritual, the individual takes on the gendered performance of whatever spirit possesses him/her (i.e. men may act feminine, women act masculine when possessed).

One explanation commonly used for homosexuality is “the spirit chose me.” **Religious practice serves as a space where ambiguity of gender can become public.** Religious leaders are often

liminal figures located in between social categories.

Bodily movement, such as walking, is gendered and culturally patterned.

The gay men supplicate the spirits they serve to ameliorate their social situation.