

Anthropology 1130
Assignment 1: Analysis of a Ritual
Due in class February 20, 2008

Introduction

This assignment requires that you apply anthropological methods and theories to the analysis of a ritual. You are required to observe a ritual or ritual behavior of your choosing. Then, in your paper, you will describe the ritual you witnessed and analyze it according to the definitions of ritual provided in class and in the textbook.

This handout explains how to observe a ritual, analyze it, and write-up your findings. Please complete the observation and write-up by February 20.

General Information

Your essay should be about 5 or 6 pages in length, double spaced. I am expecting 1200-1500 words. Citations and references must be provided if you cite your textbook, although no library research is required for this assignment. You may use the MLA or APA citation systems or the system that anthropologists use (see, for example, *American Anthropologist*). Good writing counts. Please proof-read your paper and get someone else to do so too. (Make sure they can write!)

This assignment is due at the beginning of class on February 20. It is worth 25% of your grade and it will be marked out of 25. If you hand it in after February 20, it is considered late and you will lose 1.5 points per week (6%), starting on February 20.

Recommended Process: Summary Version

1. Choose a ritual to observe.
2. Observe the ritual.
3. Make notes about what you saw.
4. Write an essay describing the ritual and offering an analysis of it.

Recommended Process: Detailed Version

1. Choose a ritual to observe.

The ritual you choose does not have to be a religious ritual in that it does not have to deal with the sacred, supernatural, or occur in a place of worship. Still, when choosing your ritual, you might want to consider our definition of ritual (and the one in the textbook), including the ideas that rituals are patterned, recurring, and times of heightened attention to symbols. Feel free to bounce your ideas off of me at any time too.

Possible examples:

- Birthday party
- Activity in a place of worship
- A dating ritual
- A wedding or part of a wedding
- A sporting event
- A family activity

2. Observe the ritual.

Observing a ritual may take a short or long amount of time. Be sure to set aside enough time to see exactly what is happening. It is easier to observe carefully if you are not fully involved in the ritual. Ideally, you will find an unobtrusive place to watch what is going on.

3. Make notes about what you saw.

Keep track of all elements of the ritual in a small notebook. You will want to note, at minimum, what happened, who was involved, the reaction of the audience, and symbols used or identified during the event.

Note: it may not be possible to take notes while the ritual is going on. Make sure you have some time immediately after the ritual to note what you saw.

4. Write an essay describing the ritual and offering some analysis of it.

In the essay, it will be useful to describe the activities associated with the ritual, what the ritual is for, what kind of ritual it is, and some indication of the symbols involved. You might think about the classifications of ritual we used too, including ideas about prescriptive, situational, periodic, and occasional rituals. Remember, in lectures (and in the text book) we defined several types of rituals based on what happens in them and when they occur.

Your essay should include the following components:

- a. Introduction: set up the paper for me by telling me briefly what ritual you have observed.
- b. Description of the ritual: tell me what happened, who was there, and offer other details about what was involved.
- c. Analysis of the ritual: offer some comment about the type of ritual and its purpose for participants. You should draw on the textbook and the course lectures to help you do this.
- d. Conclusion: summarize your findings and wrap up the paper.

Other Notes

- This is primarily an observation assignment, which is to say that you do not have to do any library research. If you cite the textbook, please do so properly.
- Questions that might help you as you are preparing your research:
 - What actions make this event different from other events that the participants participate in everyday?
 - How often is it repeated?
 - What does the ritual say about the culture or society performing it?
 - What do these rituals accomplish?
 - What symbols are used; how and why?
 - What myths are expressed and what do they mean?
 - How are ritual elements used, and what for?

(Not all questions are going to be relevant in every case.)

- It may be helpful to think of this paper as ‘proving’ or ‘demonstrating’ that the event you witnessed is a ritual. Use me as your audience and convince me that what you saw is a ritual. I’ll be thinking about the possibility that it is not a ritual when I read the paper.