Problems and Ideas concerning Ideology in the Construction of "Religion" and "Ritual" as Analytical Concepts

Normalized Categories in Archaeology and Other Disciplines

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Abstract

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Religion and ritual occur more and more frequently in archaeological interpretations. Concepts have by nature a universal character and this in turn may easily lead to obscurities and evasive reasoning. My article focuses on two books in which the authors (Talal Asad and Catherine Bell) emphasize the complexity behind these notions. They discuss how and why they are often used in such ahistorical terms. They also stress something that we tend to forget regardless of which subject we belong to, namely, that these concepts have been formed in modern Western history. I conclude by giving some examples of doctoral theses from the last decade and how they employ religion and ritual in their interpretations.

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Introduction

There has been a growing interest in religion and ritual, or rather in using these concepts as a basis for explanation, in archaeological studies. The wish to focus on religion and ritual may be related to the broader change in archaeology from natural science towards a more humanistic direction during the last ten to fifteen years. Several articles and doctoral theses show that interest in an archaeology of religion not only has been more accepted but may also contribute to a new way of explaining different aspects of prehistoric life.

Religion and ritual have usually been deemed to be beyond the reach of social analysis in archaeology. They have now been included once again after more than a century of exclusion. Recent developments in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and history of religion have had an intense debate about these concepts.

How can we as archaeologists use them, what can we learn from other fields when we create new interpretations of prehistory? The material remains are generally sorted into social aggregations of different kinds, such as culture, economy, technology, ritual, religion, and so on.

The reason for framing material into different concepts is understandable but it can also lead to confusion. For example, "culture" can be defined in a variety of ways. The need to discuss culture as a concept in connection with archaeological studies has lately been stressed by a number of authors (Kobylinski 1996). It has also been pointed out that "religion" has had a background position compared to a more framing concept like "culture" (Dommasnes 1991, p. 48).

Michel Notelid (1996) discusses the subordination of religion in archaeology. He argues that this tension originates in a negative dialogue between science and religion in the nineteenth century. This attitude was both important and understandable, then. What Notelid stresses is that we still work according to this negative strategy in which function has a higher value than religion (ibid., pp. 320 f.). Archaeology tends to exclude religion and ritual because they were considered in the 1960s and 1970s, and still are in many cases, to be a methodological and scientific problem. This is why we are still waiting for new directions or rather to escape from the concepts (ibid., pp. 323 ff.). In archaeology of religion on the other hand, Notelid stresses that there is a tendency to be ahistorical and mystified when archaeologists use Mircea Eliade's phenomenology (ibid., p. 336). To avoid this kind of reduction of both these extremes he argues for an innovative and critical archaeology of religion that should go side by side rather than hand in hand with other perspectives (ibid., p. 340).

Every concept has a history of its own but this history derives almost exclusively from modern Western thought. The prevalent use of "religion" and "ritual" can sometimes function in a negative way and narrow our minds. Even if we never will be able to transform our ideas and our knowledge into something different – and why should we? – there is a risk of using concepts in an ahistorical way. Studying the history of different concepts can therefore be fruitful for a better understanding of the inherent complexity when we use "religion" and "ritual" as cognitive tools.

Asad's critique of "religion" as an analytical concept

In his comprehensive book *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), Talal Asad discusses the religious history of the West. The concept of "religion" can function as a mirror of the way the West defines itself and other non-Western cultures. Asad stresses that we work with religion as a concept and a phenomenon from a transhistorical point of view. Religion is by definition not universal. Its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, and the definition itself – religion – is a historical product that derives from a discursive process (ibid., p. 29). This opinion in many respects contradicts the phenomenological approach to religion, in which the concept can be seen as a dimension separated from the profane, and only then be understood. The phenomenology of religion was originally (at the end of the nineteenth century) a way of classifying religious phenomena, to describe common features in different cultures. It later developed into different schools that worked with explanations concerning these common features. Mircea Eliade's theory about archetypes, religious phenomena that are common to all humans irrespective of time and place, has been under much debate. Although his theories have been heavily criticized, they are still widely used and function as a source of inspiration for a number of different disciplines, among them archaeology (Barbosa da Silva 1982, pp. 109 f.; Schjødt 1989, pp. 22 ff.).

Asad accentuates that "religion" is connected with both history and practice in the modern West, something that theology tends to obscure (ibid., pp. 1, 43). Religion as a universal category, separated from power, is a definition created in the post-Reformation era. It was after the fragmentation and downfall of the unity of the Roman church in the seventeenth century that the first attempts were made to find a more universal definition of all known religions. The pioneering interest in Far Eastern religions,

combined with the works of Renaissance scholars about classical antiquity, led to the creation of what later came to be formulated as "Natural Religion". The common denominators existing in all societies were "beliefs – (about supreme power), practices – (its ordered worship), and ethics – (a code of conduct based on rewards and punishments after this life)" (ibid., pp. 40 f.). "Natural Religion" was soon accepted as a universal phenomena and separated from natural science. Asad emphasizes that the separation was supported by both sides, and this was important when the modern concept of religion was constructed. Since 1795, when Kant declared that although there may certainly be different confessions there can only be one religion, scholars of different disciplines have worked with classification into lower and higher religions rather than with the essence of religion. Asad writes, "From being a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge, religion has come to be abstracted and universalized" (ibid., p. 42).

Asad stresses that this "movement", in other words the new understanding of the concept, is part of a wider change that includes "a new kind of state, a new kind of science, a new kind of legal and moral subject" (ibid., p. 43). His criticism of how the concept has been used can in this sense be of importance because all concepts change meanings and suffer from different kinds of obscuration. This may help us to reach a more profound understanding of the complexity inherent in "religion".

Asad uses a modern classic in religious studies, Clifford Geertz's *Religion as a Cultural System*, from 1966, as a starting point for this discussion. The article was reprinted in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) and is widely used in archaeology as well. Asad stresses that this is done only to find the transhistorical essence in our understanding of the concept of "religion". Asad's book is not a critical review of Geertz's total work on religion. Brian Morris (1987) has however criticized Asad's earlier article (1983) for not taking Geertz's more substantial studies into account. Geertz, like many of his contemporaries, was dissatisfied with earlier ahistorical implications, but Morris also admits that Geertz's tendency to see religion as an immune faith prevented him from exploring social forces that produced religious beliefs and practices (Morris 1987, pp. 314 ff.).

According to Asad, Geertz's distinction between religious and secular dispositions is not valid since he makes one discursive process out of two. There will always be an authorizing process by which religion is created. The argument that something is religious partly because it occupies a conceptual place within a cosmic framework does not mean that religion is separated from an authorizing process; a process in which religion is both defined and created (ibid., p. 37).

Western history is full of examples where the systematic exercise of church authority rejected or accepted pagan practices. Asad shows that Geertz therefore takes the standpoint of theology "when he insists on the primacy of meaning without regard to the process by which meanings are constructed" (ibid., p. 43). Asad sees this desire to separate religious from non-religious as "a product of post-Enlightenment society" where Christianity was more or less relegated to one sphere – individual belief (ibid., p. 45).

Religion is a matter of belief, a psychological sphere that can only be discussed outside science, a result of the common-sense approach in archaeology, just as Notelid argued. Religion is mystified and connected with "something else". Mats Malmer argues, for example, that a religious place is a place without a settlement, a place without the common (Malmer 1988, pp. 98 f.). Bo Gräslund seeks to explain the universality behind death beliefs among primitive people on the basis of a biological mechanism affected by a high intellect. He refers to literature in anthropology, comparative religion and archaeology and sums up different aspects of these conceptions emphasizing the belief (Gräslund 1989, pp. 67f.).

Asad asks "what kind of affirmation, of meaning ... must be identified with practice to

qualify as religion?" Geertz's explanation that belief is a precondition for religion is due to his own modern and privatized Christian surrounding. Asad makes a point when he says that an obscure precondition such as individual belief, "a positive attitude towards the problem of disorder ... would have horrified the early Christian Fathers or medieval churchmen" (ibid., pp. 45, 47). This also leads to the quite illogical consequence that any philosophy that explains the human condition like this could be called a religion, or alternatively religion is seen as a more primitive way of explaining the human condition (ibid., p. 46). To view belief as a precondition for religion, rather than as a knowledge process, is the main problem according to Asad. Then comes the difficulty of not only understanding and explaining other religions but also Christianity in the Middle Ages when "Familiarity with all such (religious) knowledge was a precondition for normal social life, and belief (embodied in practice and discourse)" (ibid., p. 47).

To conclude Asad's critique: if we accept a universal view of religion we also accept the way in which the concept has been embodied in the ideas of the modern West. Westernization, or the project of modernization, includes the making of Western history. Asad stresses the asymmetry between Western and non-Western histories. The West defines itself, in opposition to all non-Western cultures, by its modern historicity. The West embraces the world with this unique historicity. We define ourselves as "the universal civilization" of modern Europeans. We make history whereas the others resist the future. Asad's major concern in this book is therefore the exploration of Western history in order to demonstrate how we create universal and normalized concepts.

If we accept "belief" as the only or the main condition for religion, then the logical consequence would be that science is the contemporary new religion because we first and foremost believe in a scientific or common-sense ideology. Science is embodied in both practice and discourse, and is therefore more powerful. This common-sense ideology makes us look for recognition in the material rather than illumination. Asad calls for an "unpacking" of this "comprehensive concept" into "heterogeneous elements according to its historical character" (ibid., p. 53).

Bell's critique of "ritual" as an analytical concept

A similar discussion of ritual is Catherine Bell's work *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1993). This is an extensive and intimate book where she presents different cultural interpretations of ritual. Her interest in rituals has at least in one respect led to the same characteristic as Asad's, a kind of reduction and a "less-ness" when it comes to generality and universality. She claims that a modification or rethinking of ritual could be more effective in spurring a shift of paradigms than newly designed terms. Her wish is just to shake it up a little (Bell 1993, pp. vii, 7).

Theories have usually suffered from the same bifurcation of thought and action despite different approaches from historians of religion, sociologists and anthropologists. The concept was used to replace "liturgy" and "magic", which were an older and more problematic way of distinguishing high religion (ours) from primitive superstition (theirs). The notion of ritual thus expressed a major shift in the way European culture compared itself to other cultures.

Ritual was perceived as a universal category and has been widely used as a concept to describe such different aspects as "religion" and "society". More recently it has been "fundamental to the dynamics of culture" (ibid., pp. 6, 14). This line can also be followed in the archaeological discipline, where rituals mostly have been studied through burials. The complexity in the treatment of the dead in prehistory reflects ideological changes in archaeological theories over time. Mortuary practices were formerly used to explain European culture and religion. Functional and processual approaches analysed society, and the

post-processual direction since the 1980s has used death rituals for interpretations of symbolic and communicative dimensions in material culture. Bell emphasizes that the notion of ritual "has been integral to a mutual construction of both an object for and method of analysis" (ibid., p. 14).

Although there are variations in methodological perspective, Bell is persuasive when claiming that ritual has been stuck in solid description independent of methodology: "Ritual is a type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing social or cultural forces comes together". Her examples include the ritual integration of belief and behaviour, tradition and change, order and chaos, the individual and the group, subjectivity and objectivity, nature and culture. Bell shows that this consistency is a result of a "theoretical discourse on ritual that is structured by the differentiation and subsequent reintegration of two particular categories of human experience: thought and action. Ritual then becomes a theoretical construction that limits our analytical flexibility (ibid., p. 16). The risk with this type of approach is that the division between thought and action easily becomes translated so that ritual is seen as pure activity performed by the "actor", whereas the "observer" (in this case the anthropologist) thinks (ibid., p. 28). The thought–action dichotomy is easily altered into a "thinking" subject and an "acting" object. And even worse, Bell pushes it to its logical conclusion, a "thinking" subject and "non-thinking" object" (ibid., p. 47). Bell wants to restore the actor to a thinking subject and she emphasizes that it is the ritual activity we should focus on. There is a reason for this activity, this social act, and ritual should not be seen as a "self-steering" phenomenon (ibid., pp. 67 ff.).

Both Bell and Asad see a danger in the distinction between instrumental activity and more practical activity. Therefore Bell wants to focus on ritualization rather than ritual. Ritual activities must be understood in their own context. In this way it becomes more difficult to generalize or to use "ritual" as a theoretical model, but on the other hand this rethinking can highlight the complexity involved in human practices called rituals (ibid., pp. 140 ff.).

Rituals have been studied as instruments for social control, power and politics, but Bell emphasizes that there is a relationship characterized by both acceptance and resistance (ibid., pp. 196, 219). She stresses the importance of understanding the power relationship within ritualized behaviour. Power relations are complex by nature, and Bell finds Foucault's theories useful for the understanding of ritual activities. Like Foucault, she emphasizes that power is "embedded in social bodies and interactions of persons", it is not "external to its workings". The construction of power relationships in ritual activities involves domination, consent and resistance, in other words, both effects and limits (ibid., pp. 197 ff.). She finally proposes four perspectives that could be useful in ritual studies: (1) how ritualization empowers those who more or less control the rite, (2) how their power is also limited and constrained, (3) how ritualization dominates those involved as participants, (4) how this domination involves a negotiated participation and resistance that also empowers them. Bell points out that it is usually the first aspect that is most documented in ritual studies (ibid., p. 211). Therefore, she accentuates that ritual behaviour *engages* (rather than *appropriates*) minds and bodies in a set of tensions that involve both domination and resistance. Earlier studies tended to focus on how people are controlled by ritual. The crucial point in Bell's reasoning is that ritual activities involve resistance as well as consent. The resistance is an important feature of the efficacy of the rite. The ritual way of acting, the ritualization of activity that Bell sets up as a framework to reanalyse the ritual concept, is a flexible strategy that must be understood in its own context (ibid., pp. 213 ff.)

This "one-way strategy" is also common in archaeology, where rituals usually have been interpreted as formalized and with the purpose of empowering those who control the rite. Due

to the fact that we can never be observers of social acts, we are stranded with what is left after a long-since performed ritual. This is both a methodological and a theoretical problem. What can we really tell by studying prehistoric rituals? Can we work with the range and complexity of ritualized behaviour? Is it possible to trace a flexible strategy involving consent as well as resistance? Or to reflect over an activity in prehistory rather than a ritual? Can we work with questions like these with archaeological material or will we inevitably produce interpretations full of intuitive and unreachable spirituality?

Some approaches to religion and ritual in archaeology

During the last decade several doctoral theses concerning religion and ritual have been published: Bennett 1987, Karsten 1994, Knutsson 1995, Olausson 1995, Artelius 1996 and Kaliff 1997, to mention some of them. The general trend is to work with graves, although there are exceptions (Karsten and Olausson). The authors approach the material from different angles, but a more or less outspoken wish is to tackle the problem of spiritual subordination in archaeology.

Agneta Bennett criticizes earlier studies for only working with the "social message" in grave material, without considering the religious aspect. She emphasizes that religion is superior to the social expression. The graves primarily reflect religious conceptions, and she argues that "changes in external and internal grave type were of purely religious origin" in the Migration Period. Her hypothesis is a change in belief from a spiritual to a more bodily concrete afterlife (Bennett 1987, pp. 189 ff.; Lagerlöf 1991, p. 127).

Tore Artelius also accentuates religious meaning when studying the ship as a symbol in Bronze Age burial tradition. He criticizes earlier research for concentrating on economic and political explanations of the ship. He uses Jung's theory about archetypes as well as phenomenological ideas and concludes that the physical variation expressed in the ship symbolism, both synchronically and diachronically, is a result of a social influence on a totally stable and unchangeable religious idea. The symbol cannot be used for social purposes if the religious content is affected or distorted, so the religious content of meaning is likely always to be the same (Artelius 1996., pp. 120 f.). He argues finally that the ship's primary function as a symbol of a complex religious meaning, and its secondary function as expressed in power structures and social affiliation have been alternately emphasized (ibid., p. 121).

This kind of explanation contradicts examples from Crete and India, where we have instances of rites that have been performed in exactly the same way and with the same type of artefacts for more than 3000 years, although the religious meaning has changed (Johansen 1991, p. 173). When Artelius writes about the religious "meaning and idea" it is difficult to grasp what he really means. Why can this symbol, in this case a ship, only function in one field of religious meaning? If the ship is an archetypal symbol it can function in various religious contexts, although the Christian tradition did not need one (see Andrén 1993, p. 51). Is it possible to trace changes and stability in religious ideas through single symbols or rituals?

This is the subject of Per Karsten's study of tradition and change based on Scanian Neolithic votive offerings. He admits that a deeper understanding of religion is difficult to reach and he compares his own work on votive offerings with "an attempt to reconstruct Christian religious ideas and ritual framework through, for example, the geographical spread, form and metallic content of chalices" (Karsten 1994, p. 27). This understanding of ritual that Bell is arguing against easily leads to a study of a "self-steering phenomena", and the question is still unanswered in most cases, namely, why and when is it a suitable strategy and what kind of activity does it contrast with? Studies that concentrate on single phenomena in religion and ritual at least show

that what is "left over" after an activity seems to be the same over long periods. How can it be suitable for so long and in a changing environment, might be questions we should focus more on, and why is a strategy not suitable suddenly, after hundreds or sometimes thousands of years?

Helena Knutsson has approached the subject in some sense by discussing ritual activity and how it differs between hunter-gatherers in the Mesolithic and the less mobile farmers in the Neolithic and onwards. She emphasizes the signification of emotions in human behaviour, and she believes that there are some universal traits that can be traced from the ethnological records to archaeological ones, namely, the ritual activity versus a lack of one. The hunter-gatherers, according to Knutsson, lack burial and grieving rituals as well as ideals concerning power (Knutsson 1995, pp. 166 f.). This argument is based on used versus unused flint artefacts in graves, something I find a bit insubstantial, but the question itself is interesting and provocative. What types of activity, lifestyle and surrounding affect ritual and religious behaviour?

Another contributor to this field is Anders Kaliff, who seeks to give a broader interpretation of burial sites. The grave should be interpreted as a cultic site with different activities rather than just one purpose, the burial function. Kaliff acknowledges the phenomenological approach and therefore believes in a fundamental homogeneity that can be traced behind religious phenomena in many different religions. He also refers to older "traditional archaeology" because of the interest in religion and eschatology at the beginning of the century. Cognitive processualism, as represented by Renfrew and Zubrow (1994), and applied to cult, ritual and other cognitive problems, is more appropriate according to Kaliff; the post-processual direction has a subjective and relativist view when focusing on prehistoric people's thoughts and feelings (Kaliff 1997, pp. 9 ff.). He also emphasizes that a powerful insight, a personal religious experience and empathy are relevant for an archaeologist's interpretations of remains connected to the religious sphere (ibid., p. 16). Although Kaliff is inspired by phenomenology of religion and presents its ideas as a basis for an archaeology of religion, he uses Dumézil's genetic comparative method in combination with a phenomenological approach as a basis for interpretations of his archaeological material. This is inspiring and fruitful in connection with the complex question concerning the "grave", how we understand and associate with this quite emotional word (ibid., pp. 14 ff., 117 f.). The risk, though, when using two methods in this way, is to make this rather complex question look easy, the time-span between the Late Bronze Age – Tacitus – and the Icelandic epics is considerable!

Jens Peter Schjødt has discussed the limits of the phenomenology of religion (1986, 1989) and he remarks that Eliade's analyses are difficult to evaluate because he seldom "lays much weight on the inclusion and description of the cultural context in which the described phenomena take place". We should therefore "proceed with the greatest caution if we wish to apply his theories". Schjødt emphasizes that Eliade's phenomenology should not be used (as it has been used in analyses of rock carvings) as an indicator to demonstrate that a certain form is associated with a particular meaning "if we have no sources from that very culture which enable us to come to that conclusion" (Schjødt (1986, pp. 185 f.). Schjødt might be right when he more or less openly criticizes archaeologists for not considering that the phenomenological approach has been under much debate (ibid., p. 184).

Conclusion

Works like Asad's and Bell's both demonstrate that concepts like religion and ritual have a complex history to start with, and that the more we work with them the more reduced they get. But this "less-ness" does not make it less interesting. The archaeological contributions have shown that this kind of approach can widen the

understanding of prehistoric sites, for example, how they are categorized (Kaliff 1997; Olausson 1995), but also how they have been understood in different traditions of research depending on which period they belong to, for example, the ship symbolism (Artelius 1996).

The tendency to focus on religion and ritual in archaeology is doubtless here to stay, and the studies that I have mentioned above show that, although this is still an ambiguous topic, archaeologists have started to challenge this complex issue. There is an apparent tendency to be influenced by ideas from phenomenology of religion, and my intention here is not to make an evaluation of their spiritual approach. If Weber's future vision of our Western society is right, though, the Protestant religion will disperse in rationality. Religion, emptied of its religious content, will survive only as a spirit, a function (Weber 1978, pp. 85 f.). The modern "magical" and spiritual mentality in our Western society corresponds to the phenomenological approach in archaeology. It could be described as a religious and spiritual experience in secularized society and in profane archaeology. This might be unavoidable, but we can avoid too much universality without becoming fully rational.

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