

Recommended Citation

Harrison-Buck, Eleanor and Peshkova, Svetlana (2013) "Ideology, Ritual Practice, and Cultural Heritage: An Introduction," *Spectrum*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum/vol3/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Journals and Publications at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spectrum by an authorized editor of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu.

Spectrum

Volume 3
Issue 1 *Fall 2013*

Article 1

10-1-2013

Ideology, Ritual Practice, and Cultural Heritage: An Introduction

Eleanor Harrison-Buck

University of New Hampshire, Durham

Svetlana Peshkova

University of New Hampshire, Durham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum>

IDEOLOGY, RITUAL PRACTICE, AND CULTURAL HERITAGE: AN INTRODUCTION

Eleanor Harrison-Buck and Svetlana Peshkova, Editors

This third issue of SPECTRUM includes seven research articles, as well as a poetry contribution to our new “Creative Forum.” In this issue, contributors examine a diverse array of topics that touch on ideology and ritual practice in a variety of social contexts, as well as the importance of preserving and protecting the world’s cultural heritage. Here we introduce the articles and discuss some of these major themes that are explored in this issue.

Ideology and ritual practice permeate the daily lives of peoples across the globe and through time and are found in a variety of social contexts that range from individual households to public forums influencing state-level political and economic affairs. Following Read and Gonzalez (2000:4-6), we define *ideology* as an organized system of thoughts, often pertaining to creation myths, worldviews, the supernatural, and a reality that lies outside the immediate control of humans. In this way, ideology and, by extension, myths help to make sense of the unexplainable and are believable because they rely in part on the tangible, observable world and often involve actions that have real repercussions. An excellent example of this is the practice of human sacrifice, where such rituals have serious consequences at the end and are not simply theatrical performances or ceremonial reenactments of mythic tales. **Emma Pankey’s** article describes the practice of child sacrifice among the ancient Maya. She wrestles to understand such actions that seem abominable to us, and argues that this ritual practice expressed the direct relationship that existed for the Maya between children and the regeneration of key cultigens, like maize. The actions of sacrifice that underwrite these ancient ideologies are predicated on the belief in reciprocity and balance with the supernatural forces of the earth, which is based on widely shared beliefs in the regeneration of life through death observed daily in the sowing and cultivation of their plants.

In human societies, worldviews can express a cosmic order that is linked to a calendar system that serves to structure real events, like the planting season, as well as mythic events in the past. This was the case for cultures across Mesoamerica who shared a calendar system and the belief that there were multiple ages or worlds before the present one. The ancient Maya are perhaps best known for elaborating on this calendric system, marking the beginning of their current world at 3114 B.C. According to their calendar, this great cycle was said to end on December 21, 2012. **Evelyn French’s**

SPECTRUM, Issue 3, Fall 2013, pp. 1-3

article in this issue describes the ideology that underlies the Maya calendar and provides a critique of the “myths” that were perpetuated by contemporary “doomsayers” leading right up until this “fateful” day.

Many would describe the ideologies of such doomsday fanatics as extreme. Another example of extreme ideologies is the orthodox worldview and ascetic practices of the anchoress of medieval Europe from the 12th to 14th centuries. **Monica Stewart’s** article describes this “chosen path” of women who were charged to live an extreme life of religious devotion to Christ, expressed through rituals of bodily denigration, sexual celibacy, and life-long seclusion in a cell attached to the church. She cross-examines the anchoress’ worldview through the lens of sexuality and queer theory, as well as personhood and permeability and concludes that these ascetic rituals were a religious expression that brought them spiritually closer to the purity and love of Christ.

Fogelin (2007:56) describes important differences between ritual and religion and argues that “ritual is a form of human action that leaves material traces, whereas religion is a more abstract symbolic system consisting of beliefs, myths, and doctrines.” While archaeologists tend to focus on the material remains, socio-cultural anthropologists can explore the cognitive realm of religious belief that often is elusive in the archaeological record. In his article, **Joshua Beaucher** interprets the religious significance of tobacco use among the Maya by cross-examining the archaeological evidence with recent ethnographic studies of tobacco use among the Maya of highland Chiapas. He convincingly argues that tobacco was not only viewed as a “cure all” among these indigenous groups, but also an entheogen of great power that served to protect humans from a range of ailments and potential threats, including natural and supernatural forces. Another substance of ritual importance to the Maya was cacao—the coveted chocolate bean. **Hillary Christopher’s** article describes cacao’s use from the earliest Maya occupation onward, noting that it served as a staple in ritual feasts among Mesoamerican groups. She concludes that while the role of cacao in feasting activity has a long history, cacao drinking vessels became recognized as powerful ideological objects unto themselves and, by Classic times, were regularly used in social exchanges as forms of elite political currency.

Although ideology often is related to religion, **Alecia Bassett’s** article demonstrates that it also can reflect political ideologies that reinforce messages relating to power and identity. While exploring the history of pseudo-archaeology in both Nazi Germany and colonial America, Alecia critiques the misuse of archaeology in relation to cultural heritage. Her study examines how archaeology has been appropriated to propagate certain racist ideologies and to reap commercial benefits. She concludes that pseudo-archaeology must be combatted in order to defend against its detrimental effects, including racist attitudes and the threat it poses to the tangible, cultural heritage.

Similarly, **Karilyn Sheldon's** article addresses the commercialization of Pompeii and the public perception of this site as a tourist attraction, rather than an important piece of Italy's heritage and cultural identity. She proposes that to change the public perception, there must be an ideological shift where the site's history and heritage are presented to tourists and locals, and also a change in conservation practice, where site preservation and public stewardship are emphasized.

In this issue, all the articles raise critical questions over how we come to understand a culture's history, their ritual practice, and the meaning(s) and long-term impact of their ideologies. To address these themes of history, ideology and ritual practice, the contributors examine a range of written and non-written materials, including epigraphy, ethnography, ethnohistories, myths, pictures, sculpture, and architecture, among other things. As a result, the articles offer a variety of methods and a diversity of content that is sure to stimulate further ideas, discussion, and debate.

Finally, we have included for the first time in this issue of SPECTRUM a new segment involving creative writing. **Austin Clifford Brooks** offers "A Poem from Falluja," which concludes the issue. The poem recounts experiences of some Iraqi citizens during nearly a decade-long occupation by American military (2003-2011) and demonstrates that empathy exceeds territorial and socio-cultural boundaries. This poem exemplifies the panhuman empathy that is stimulated among students of anthropology through their exposure to socio-cultural differences in the world, encouraging them to reflect on their own ideologies and histories. We want to thank all the contributors. For future issues, we encourage submissions of both research articles and creative writing involving the subject of Anthropology.

Eleanor Harrison-Buck and Svetlana Peshkova *Department of Anthropology, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824; spectrum@unh.edu*

REFERENCES CITED

Fogelin, Lars

2007 The Archaeology of Religious Ritual. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36:55-71.

Read, Kay A. and Jason J. Gonzalez

2000 *Handbook of Mesoamerican Mythology*. ABC-CLIO, Denver, CO.