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MYTH, RITUAL and the MIDDLE CLASS

Emory professor's cultural studies cut across generations

By Bo Emerson/Staff

The sweat lodge is dome-shaped, built of interlaced saplings and covered with blankets. Inside, it's pitch-black and blood warm. Vance Littlebird, a hugely proportioned Cheyenne healer, scatters flakes of cedar and sweetgrass on a pile of heated lava rocks at the center of the lodge, filling the interior with pungent incense. Then Littlebird, chanting in Cheyenne, tosses a dipper of water on the rocks. The temperature rises to suffocating, brain-frying heights. As the 15 participants sing to the beat of a deerskin rattle, their sweat glands spring open, and rivulets of moisture course down their bodies like salty Chattahoochees. Finally, Littlebird opens the flap on the round door and the blessedly cool late winter air rushes in.

Bradd Shore, anthropologist and Emory University professor, uncrosses his legs and crawls through the circle of light into his back yard in east Cobb County, where he's hosting this Native American ceremony.

Shore has been to many an exotic locale, examining ritual and myth in primitive societies. On this occasion, the exotic locale has come right to his own cul-de-sac. Dressed in shorts and a "Don't Worry, Be Hopi" T-shirt, the stocky scholar couldn't be happier.

"We came, we sauna-ed, we conquered," he crows, his bright pink face wreathed in a beatific smile.

Shore and his fellow academics are sweating together under the auspices of Emory's Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life, or the MARIAL Center, an interdisciplinary program founded just a few months ago and directed by Shore.

The center exists to study American ritual, ranging from Cheyenne purification rites to the elaborate ceremonies of the senior prom. In a sense, Shore's subject matter has moved from Samoa to his own back yard. While his new focus seems prosaic, the genesis of the MARIAL Center has the mythic overtones of a fairy tale.

The way Emory folks describe it, Shore was minding his own business back in 1998 when members of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation dropped by and started poking around. They asked some questions, interviewed his colleagues, then dropped a \$3.6 million offer in Shore's lap: Start a center to research ritual and myth in middle-class American family life, concentrating on the Southeast.

Shore's question was: "Why me?" He'd spent his career dodging fungus infections and doing fieldwork in the South Pacific, taking more than 20 trips to Samoa. "Americans don't have rituals and myths," he said. "That's for Samoans."

Shore, 56, is kidding, of course. He has written incisively about American ritual, most notably deconstructing baseball in the 1996 book "Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture and the Problem of Meaning" (Oxford University Press). In that volume he uses both anthropology and cognitive psychology (i.e. the study of how we know what we know) to demonstrate how culture, meaning and basic human thought are inextricably linked. Baseball, in this setting, isn't just a pastime for Americans, but a part of the American brain.

Yet his expertise was distinctly un-American. He would have to begin applying his knowledge of ritual to Thanksgiving dinners and Super Bowl parties, instead of Aboriginal walkabouts. "The more I thought about it, the more excited I became," he says.

He wrote a proposal and assembled a faculty of eight professors from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology and religion. (One has since dropped out.) With a green light last fall, he took on the task of dressing up the gloomy quarters where the group is housed. They meet in the former Georgia Mental Health Institute on the Emory West Campus, a one-time asylum with steel grids over the windows that kept the suicidal from leaping and the criminally insane from escaping.

Shore snapped up some Persian rugs on eBay, installed ficus trees, leather furniture and his own gorgeous digital photographs of orchids and Alaskan peaks, and the place became quite homey.

Drawn by the force of Shore's genial charisma, not to mention the fruit-and-brie platters that he provides for all his colloquia, the MARIAL staff has cohered into an interdisciplinary unit.

They even sweat together.

"I always thought the purification was metaphorical," jokes medical anthropologist Peter Brown, toweling off after the cleansing ceremony in Shore's back yard, "but I feel remarkably clean."

Among the research projects sponsored by the MARIAL Center is Brown's inquiry into the "fitness/fatness cycle" of American life --- the ritual exercising after New Year's Day, the ritual porking-up during summer barbecues and Christmas parties --- which seems to ape the feasting and fasting of other cultures.

Brown, and others, give Shore credit for attracting the Sloan Foundation money, which could grow to \$11 million if the contract is renewed, which appears likely.

"This is all Bradd Shore," says Marshall Duke, Emory's Candler Professor of Psychology. "All of us feel so fortunate he was able to do this."

Under MARIAL's aegis, Duke and associate Robyn Fivush plan to interview 100 Atlanta families to learn how Americans create their own mythic family histories, and how these

tales of grandparents and great aunts make families more unified and emotionally resilient.

Researchers such as Duke and Shore suggest that this resilience is disappearing as American family life gets squeezed by dual-career parents, dwindling family time, and the disappearance of even such basic American rituals as the family dinner.

“Families are not eating together and are not talking together,” says Shore.

This concern is, in fact, a main interest of the Sloan Foundation, which has created four similar centers around the country to study the problems of dual-career middle class working families.

“We felt that anthropologists would have a lot to bring to the table because of their methods,” says Kathleen Christensen, program director of the Sloan Foundation’s Centers on Working Families. “They do intensive field work, they live with people, they get a sense of what’s happening in a way that surveys and questionnaires don’t.”

Like other Sloan centers, Emory’s will generate not just scholarly research, but practical applications. (An example: Shore will analyze how Littlebird uses traditional ceremony to deal with alcohol and drug abuse among Cheyenne adolescents in Lama Deer, Mont. In exchange for access, MARIAL will provide a grant to allow Littlebird to expand his program to help more reservation youth.)

Shore’s own research into the scheduling of family ritual seems esoteric, but the problems that it probes are very practical: How do American families organize their competing calendars?

Take Shore’s family. The children of working-class Jews from Tenafly, N.J., Shore and his siblings are distributed around the country, yet they try to regather yearly for a winter holiday. This year they finally found time to get together in mid-February. His own nuclear household, including wife Linda and college-age children Emily and Robert, manage the conflicts by remaining flexible.

“We’ve been known to celebrate Thanksgiving on a Friday, if necessary,” Shore says.

On a recent Tuesday evening Shore is motoring to Covington to talk to a prospective family for his project.

Bill and Cathy Laseter and their four children live in the same small town where their ancestors grew up. They are surrounded by relatives, enmeshed in a web of community ties, and they eat together every evening.

As representatives of the modern family bedeviled by time pressures, the Laseters are a bit on the relaxed side.

“They’re too perfect,” Shore says with a sigh, pulling up to their magnolia-shaded family home, adorned with brick-lattice garden walls and wrought-iron balconies.

Shore sits down to a supper of chicken-and-dumpling soup that came from a great-grandmother’s recipe. “My grandmother used to make this soup, except with matzoh balls,” says Shore.

“This is what I bring when people die,” says Cathy Laseter. At that comment Shore’s anthropologist ears begin twitching. Aha! Special foods and funeral rites! Maybe we have something here.

Later, Shore interviews the Laseters about their schedules, their clubs and activities, tape recording the conversation and taking photos with his digital camera. Driving back to Atlanta around 10 p.m. with a lecture yet to prepare for the next morning’s class, he explains the difficulty of doing anthropology in the heart of middle-class America.

“Doing field work in exotic locales, you have the competence of a 5-year-old,” he says, thanks to language barriers and cultural ignorance. Here, one has the competence of an adult, but the opposite problem of blindness to the familiar.

“I have to remember,” Shore says, “to look at this as if I don’t know anything about it.”

THE BRADD SHORE FILE

Born: June 14, 1945, in Jersey City, N.J.

Education: Undergraduate degree in English (with an emphasis on Shakespeare) from the University of California at Berkeley; master’s and doctorate in cultural anthropology from the University of Chicago. (Shore teaches an unusual course co-listed in the English and anthropology departments called “Ritual in Shakespeare.”)

Family: Married to Linda Shore, a flight attendant with United Airlines. Two children: Emily, 20, a junior at Emory University, and Robert, 18, a senior at Walton High School.

Work: Anthropology professor and director of Emory University’s Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life; president of the Society for Psychological Anthropology; currently co-organizing Margaret Mead’s papers (800,000 documents) for an exhibit next year at the Library of Congress.

Amusements: Digital photography, jazz and fountain pens.

Quote: “I struggled because I was very shy and bookish,” Shore says of his field work in Samoa. “It was like, for me, being in a big frat party, with ukulele music and singing and dancing, and I just wanted to be alone and read my book. The part of me that is outgoing and gregarious, the part that makes speeches and lectures, this is the Samoan part of me. I was remade in Samoa.”

--- Bo Emerson