KNEELING AND THE EXPRESSION OF MORAL EMOTIONS IN RELIGIOUS RITUAL

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Introduction

Some cultures consider the kneeling posture the most salient bodily expression connected to religious ritual practice. Closed, collapsed and lowered postures are generally perceived as either expressing submission and obedience or shame and atonement. Therefore, depending on the associated affective state (submission or shame), these postures might either emphasize power asymmetry (between the superhuman agents and human participants), or signal conformity with moral norms.

Study I

Examination of the evolutionary origins of kneeling in rituals and its link to the emergence of high (moralising) deities.

Hypotheses

H1: Belief in moralising high gods predicts kneeling in religious ritual directed towards a deity.
H2: Belief in high gods predicts kneeling in religious ritual directed towards a deity.
H3: Kneeling in religious ritual expresses submission/shame.

Methods

- 535 ethnographic descriptions (81 cultures) of ritual practices containing explicit mentioning of kneeling (HRAF World Cultures [1]).
- Culture level beliefs in moralising gods and high gods coding (SCCS [2]).
- Coding: 1) addressee of the kneeling, 2) what does the kneeling express.

Results

Type of deity beliefs and the kneeling orientation.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>CI high god belief</th>
<th>kneeling before deity</th>
<th>kneeling before something else</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High god absent</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0,326</td>
<td>0,515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High god</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0,491</td>
<td>0,184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moralising high god</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0,762</td>
<td>0,085</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson’s Chi-squared test  

\[ \chi^2 = 3.795 \]  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 299</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

- kneeling in rituals seems ubiquitous
- most likely pre-dating the emergence of both high gods not concerned with morality and morally concerned high gods
- kneeling is mostly used to communicate submission and respect (older type of behaviour and state compared to shame)
- type of deity belief does not predict use of kneeling

Study II

Cross-cultural comparison of shared cultural models related to the use of kneeling in religious rituals.

Hypotheses

H1: Czech and Mauritian cultural models differ in the salience of reasons for the use of kneeling in ritual posture.
H2: Czech and Mauritian cultural models differ in the salience of the addressees or objects of kneeling in ritual posture.

Methods

- Free-list technique [3] exploring semantic structures associated with kneeling in two different cultures.
- Czech sample (n = 169, online questionnaire), Mauritian sample (n = 35/40, interview).
- Responses translated and coded before analysis.
- Lists: 1) reasons for kneeling in religious rituals, 2) addresses/objects of the kneeling.

Results

Mauritian and Czech cultural models of reasons to kneel in religious rituals are not significantly correlated (r = .329, p = .136, n = 22). Highest ranking items are shown in Fig. 3.

CZ: humility, respect, submission  
MU: respect, forgiveness plea, (supplication) efficacy

Mauritian and Czech cultural models of the object/addressee of kneeling are not significantly correlated (r = .206, p = .371, n = 21). Highest ranking items are shown in Fig. 4.

CZ: priests, altars, fiancé(e)  
MU: god, not humans, priests

References


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