Symbolic Studies

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SYMBOLIC STUDIES   § 9556

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Linguistic, structural, and cognitive anthropology study symbols, signs, to-kens, icons, indices, and similar cultural or communicational entities and de-vices as parts of abstract systems elicited by investigators from texts, observations, and controlled interviews. This article, to the contrary, focuses on symbols in three types of social processes: political, ritual, and therapeutic. Much anthropological literature in the past few years has been concerned with symbols in social dynamics. More is promised, if the many panels and papers devoted to symbolic studies at the American Anthropological Association's annual meetings from 1972-74 prove to be reliable guides. A trend is detectable towards a renewed reconciliation between studies of pragmatic action and studies of symbolic action. Social dynamics provides the linking frame. Symbols are seen as instrumentalities of various forces—physical, moral, economic, political, and so on—operating in isolable, changing fields of social rela-tionships.

Firth (24) and Cohen (16) have recently drawn attention to the instrumental value of symbols, particularly with regard to what Cohen calls "the distribution, maintenance and exercise of power" (16, p. ix). Firth recognizes that a symbol is a device for enabling us to make abstractions, but insists that some end must be in view (24, p. 76). Symbols are "instruments of expression, of communication, of knowledge and of control" (p. 77). Firth particularly stresses the "significance of political symbols in power relations" (p. 84) that is, as in-struments of public control. He cites Deshen's study (17) of the relation of religion to politics in Israel and Friedrich's analysis (26) of the effect of political pressures on the mediating role of traditional ritual fiesta symbols in the chang-ing political system of Michoacan as examples of how external behavior may be controlled by use of symbols in public arenas.

Cohen finds that in terms of "the systematic study of dynamic inter-dependence between power relationships and symbolic action in complex soci-ety," which is the ground of his theoretical enterprise, he has to define symbols as "objects, acts, concepts, or linguistic formations that stand *ambiguously* [Cohen's emphasis] for a multiplicity of disparate meanings, evoke sentiments and emotions, and impel men to action" (16, p. ix). Such a definition throws into

relief Firth's distinction between "private and public" ways of interpreting symbols, and between public practice and private (or sectional) manipulation. For the same things mean, or are made to mean, different things for different people. This is particularly the case when the "things" are shared by the maximum number of people in a given collectivity. It does not matter whether the things shared are religious or political symbols (variously described as "dominant," "master," "key," "pivotal," or "central" symbols); the point is that the person or party who controls the assignment of "meaning" to them can also control the mobilizational efficacy their central cultural position has traditionally assigned to them. What Sally Moore has written of legal ideas, principles, and rules (48) is equally true of central religious and political symbols:

> They cannot be thought of simply as unambiguously defining prescribed and proscribed behavior. An important use of these ideas, well recognized by lawyers in their daily work but mostly ignored by anthropologists, is the operation of legal concepts as a manipulable, value-laden language and conceptual framework within which behavior may be described or classified for any number of instrumental purposes (p. 294).

It is this manipulability of symbols in social action which makes Firth (24) wary of committing himself to the belief that "symbol systems" are coherent and logical "as conceptual entities, as systems of thought" (p. 426). Rather do they confront us as lacking coherence, "with gaps, modifications, and inconsistencies." This is because of "the continual intrusion of pragmatic issues into the kinds of functions symbols are made to serve." Firth, Cohen, and Moore are only being true to their last as empirical social scientists. Symbols are multivocal, manipulable, and ambiguous precisely because they are *initially located* in systems, classified or arranged in a regular, orderly form. Complex, urbanized societies have generated classes of literate specialists, intellectuals of various kinds, including cultural anthropologists, whose paid business, under the division of labor, is to devise logical plans, order concepts into related series, establish taxonomic hierarchies, denature ritual by theologizing it, freeze thought into philosophy, and impose the grid of law on custom. Anthropologists have assigned overmuch prestige to the models held up to them by these and similar professionals and imposed upon the living tissues of dynamic social reality in non-Western cultures the branding irons of Western schooled thought. Even the "emic" schools deceive themselves if they think that, starting from "native" premises, they can uncover a native system of "implicit" thought analogous to the "explicit" philosophical systems of Descartes, Kant, or Hegel. If they do exhibit such a system, it is theirs not the natives'. Indeed, despair of finding systems in complex, postindustrial cultures may well motivate a search for them "among the primitives." It is not a question of "back to nature," but back to "cultural system." But such cognitive "pastoralism" (in the literary sense) is ill advised. In no concrete society is "system" realized. "On earth the broken arcs, in heaven the perfect round." But symbols operate among the "broken arcs" and help to substitute for the "perfect round."

Geertz (28), with characteristic succinct elegance, recently discussed the work of major anthropologists who study culture as a "symbolic system—by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way—according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression, or the ideological principles upon which it is based" (p. 17). He admitted, and here I am in close agreement, that this approach is "the source of some of the most powerful theoretical ideas in contemporary anthropology"; I also agree that it is "hermetical," in that it seals off cultural analysis, "from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life" (p. 17). Firth's "gaps, modifications, and inconsistencies," Cohen's "ambiguous" symbols, Moore's "maklable, value-laden language" are formulations which resonate with Geertz's insistence that "it is through the flow of behavior—or, more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation" (p. 17). His view that cultural analysis has been discredited "among reputable scholars" outside anthropology by its "construction of impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe" (p. 18) can hardly be endorsed too strongly. In my review (72) of Géneviève Calame-Griaule's *Ethnologie et Langage: La parole chez les Dogon* (13), I expressed a similar scepticism: "I tended to regard system as mainly the result of concrete interests and interacting wills rather than existing 'out there' in a world of beliefs, norms, and values" (72, p.60). Order came from purpose, not from *connaissance*.

Before I turn directly to the dynamics of symbolic action, I would like to draw attention to the "symbolic system" school mentioned by Geertz. The driving spirit and mainspring of this movement is David Schneider, who, in the past 7 years, has capped his remarkable teaching achievements at the University of Chicago with two influential books (59, 61), the second in collaboration with Raymond T. Smith, and a cogent article (60). His approach to cultural symbols developed out of a long-term empirical study of cultural aspects of American kinship. He found that it constituted a "system" dependent

> on a distinction between the "pure" domain of kinship, defined in terms of the symbol of coitus and differentiated into two major aspects, relationship as natural substance and relationship as code for conduct, and a "conglomerate" domain of kinship, differentiated into "the family" on one hand and an articulated system of person-defined statuses (genealogical) on the other (60, p. 123).

Perhaps the most important theoretical finding in these studies is that core symbols in "pure" cultural "domains" prove to be coincidences of opposites: substance or natural order is opposed to, yet united with, code for conduct, which is itself an instance within the larger class of the order of law. Thus in American kinship the symbol of "love" links conjugal and cognatic love together and relates them both through the symbol of coitus (61, p. 13). Each cultural domain contains a hierarchy of symbols devolving from a semantically bipolar core symbol. "The person may be thought of as the cultural definition of the actor in a social situation" (p. 16). But the "person" is "constructed out of

symbols and definitions from various cultural domains . . . in relation to particular contexts and systems'' (p. 17). Schneider (60) appears to consider that kinship, nationality, and religion, in American culture at least, ''are defined and structured in identical terms, namely, in terms of the dual aspects of relationship as natural substance and relationship as code for conduct, and that most if not all of the diacritical marks which are found in kinship are also found in nationality and religion'' (pp. 123-24). This only holds true for the ''pure domain''; differences between these cultural systems or symbol systems ''arise through the kinds of combinations and permutations they enter into with other 'pure' domains, and at the level of the 'conglomerate' domain.''

The search for core symbols of ''diffuse, enduring solidarity'' as centers of organization in cultural systems and subsystems of symbols has continued unabated since Schneider's formulations (59, 60). The following list lays no claim to exhaustiveness, but each book or essay has been strongly influenced by Schneider's approach: Barnett (7); Basso (8, 9); Boon (10-12); Carroll (14); Chock (15); Marriott & Inden (45); Newton (54); Silverman (64-67); Wagner (77-79); Witherspoon (81-83). Much additional work by these and others is in manuscript or in press. Clearly, the ''symbolic system'' mode of analysis is strongly flourishing.

This rich literature, with its assumption that cultural systems have a high degree of coherence, has contributed greatly to our understanding of normative models. But Geertz (28) speaks from the heart of the anthropological tradition when he defines ''anthropological interpretation'' as ''constructing a reading of what happens'' (p. 18). To divorce it from what happens, he continues, ''from what, in this time or that place, specific people say, what they do, what is done to them, from the whole vast business of the world, is to divorce it from its applications and render it vacant.'' It is in ''happenings'' that we best see how symbols can be detached from abstract systems of symbols (Lévi-Strauss's ''actors' conscious models'') with which they have previously been connected and ''hooked in'' to new ad hoc combinations of symbols to constitute, legitimate, or undermine programs and protocols for collective action. In *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (72) I provide some examples of these attributes (detachability, combinability) of symbols. For example, in a study of the Hidalgo Insurrection of 1810 in Mexico, I show how in the escalating process of revolt against Spanish overlordship, the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe snatched up by Hidalgo (the first caudillo, a criollo or Spanish descent, supported by other radical whites) became not only a moving focus for thousands of mestizos and Indians but also came to incorporate into its semantic field criollo as well as indigenous meanings. As Eric Wolf (84) has shown so well, Our Lady of Guadalupe has acquired meaning from pre-Columbian religious sources, notably from the attributes and functions of the Aztec mother of the gods, Tonantzin, in addition to those traditionally assigned to the Mother of God in Catholic theology and folk practice. Criollo notions of liberty, fraternity, and equality, some of them borrowed ironically enough from atheistical thinkers of the French Enlightenment and Revolution, have been incorporated into the

system of significance linked with the iconic vehicle of Guadalupe—which also contains indigenous ideas about the earth, fertility, lactation, motherhood, the homeland, etc. The insurrectionary process heated the crucible in which these new semantic combinations were made. Symbols are divorced through their "applications" from abstract or normative "symbol systems" and united or opposed to symbols taken from other systems. Ritual, political, jural, and "kinship" symbols should be considered not as constituents, essential parts, of some abstract, atemporal complex, but rather as dynamic systems of signifiers, signifieds, and changing modes of signification in temporal sociocultural processes. Our Lady of Guadalupe *lives* in scenes of action, whether of regular, annual, cyclical devotion by members of different regions, occupations, or religious associations, or as a multivocal symbol of popular powers, transecting class or local origins, in times of major societal crisis. She gains and sheds meaning with each success or failure in the political struggle. Conversely, Hidalgo, Morelos, Guerrero, Juarez, Zapata, Villa, and other heroes of reform and revolution have been posthumously transformed into symbols (whose sensorily perceptible "vehicles" or *significants* are statues, paintings, songs, incantations, and relics) by the "primary processes" of large-scale political action which made them historically "visible" as living men.

The processual symbology I have touched upon here has resonances not only with the "situation-analysis" developed by the Manchester school (Epstein 22, Gluckman 29, Van Velsen 75), and exemplified in monographs by Kapferer (36), Long (43), Mitchell (47), Turner (70) Van Velsen (74), and others, and with Turner's "social drama" analysis (70-72), but also with approaches formulated by Abrahams (1-3), Goffman (30-32), Hymes (34), and Singer (68, pp. 70-75). Here the concepts of "situation" and "performance" are crucial. Hymes (34) discusses Chomsky's substitution of the terms "competence" and "performance" for de Saussure's (58) *la langue* and *la parole* as "an important advance," since "competence" and "performance" imply "abilities and actions," whereas "language" suggests "an object of study abstracted from human beings and their behavior" (p. 130). But he gently chides Chomsky for paying "little attention to the skills that would disclose the social properties of syntax, semantics, and phonology as used in situations . . . there is no adequate conception of language as having organization beyond the sentence—and even the text —in terms of speech acts and speech events" (p. 131). For Hymes, "Chomsky's attitude is rather neoplatonic. Competence is an ideal grammatical knowledge: performance, the use of language, is largely an imperfect falling away." If this is the case, Chomsky's attitude is shared by the "thought-structuralists" (Cohen, 16), the ethnoscientists, componential analysts, and cognitive anthropologists, who seem to regard the study of concrete social situations as a study of "fallen man," his crystalline structures of thought flawed and fractured by passions and volitions. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss (41, p. 597) recently censured the present writer for placing ritual performances, with their "affectivité," at the center of investigation, rather than the cognitive structures of myth (sure guides to the cognitive "competence" performers bring into their actions). Even if explicit myths are

few and fragmentary, or do not directly relate to ritual in a culture, he would counsel us to seek out the *"mythologie implicite"* (p. 598) in the bits and pieces vouchsafed to us, the program which alone renders the ritual performances we observe intelligible, if still untidy.

Hymes's point that Chomsky's conception of the "creative aspect of language use" reduces "creativity" to novelty (34, p. 132) is important in this connection. For Chomsky, writes Hymes, idealized the "fluent speaker user," held to operate in a homogeneous community, thus making the object of linguistics implicitly an abstract individual. He ignored both the folkloristic and action anthropological approaches to "performance" which are concerned not only with the "novelty" of "sentences" (or units of nonverbal modes of communication) but also with their "appropriateness." An abstract individual cannot use sentences appropriately—for appropriateness is "a relation between sentences and settings"—which must be analysed as well. Only concrete individuals, linked to one another in "social situations," "social dramas," "cultural performances," or other social processual units, by rules of law or custom, or by interest or mere liking, can manipulate sentences creatively, using old sentences in new settings as much as new sentences in old settings.

Folklorists such as Abrahams (1-3) and Ben-Amos (6) are alive to these matters of *style* in performance and where style differs from stylization. The study of performance is not the study of flawed project; rather it is the study of events which may generate new cultural materials (symbols, metaphors, orientations, styles, values, even paradigms) as well as fashion novel patternings of social relationships with traditional cultural instruments. Novelty is the fruit of dynamics, which in human social life as frequently means encounters, opposition, conflict as amity, conjunction, and community. Not every process engenders, but the contemplation of static patterns seldom does.

The modern study of symbolic action and symbolic phenomena seems to be developing at the interface of hitherto unconnected or only weakly connected disciplines: social and cultural anthropology, microsociology á la Goffman, sociolinguistics, folklore, literary criticism (notably as practiced by Kenneth Burke), and semiotics (semiology). Vocabularies of concepts are being generated from this "liminal" space which include such terms as context, situation, event, definition of the situation, extended-case method, performance, communicative events, style.

Performance-analysis and event-analysis involve symbols as agencies and foci of social mobilization, interaction, and styling of behavior. Several anthropologists distinguish between symbol and sign (Cohen 16, Sapir 57, Turner 70). Thus "signifier" and "signified" are distinguished, or "vehicle" and *"designatum"* in accordance with the modern usage pioneered by Morris (50), and followed by Langer (39) and Geertz (27). "Signification" is the relationship between "signifier" (the sensorily perceptible vehicle or "outward form") and "signified" (the "meaning," "sense," "designation," "denotation," "connotation") of the symbol or sign. Symbol is distinguished from sign both by the multiplicity of its *signata* and by the nature of its signification. In symbols there

is some kind of likeness between signifier and signified; in signs there need be no likeness. Thus I would accept the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of a symbol as ''a thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought.'' Of course, for anthropologists, ''general consent'' is limited to the culture in which the symbol under attention is located, and the qualities of ''analogy'' and ''association'' are similarly culture bound. One culture's analogy is another culture's puzzle. Nevertheless, given the cultural context, a symbol's modes of signification are by no means ''arbitrary and conventional,'' though they may constitute accepted and specific meanings. The *vehicle* has metaphoric (implies a comparison with something) or metonymic (uses the name of something) relations with its *designatum,* in terms familiar to members of a given speech-community or culture. Thus among the Ndembu of Zambia, a tree which exudes sticky red gum (*mukula*) is metaphorically related to its *denotatum,* ''coagulated blood,'' and metonymically (in the precise lexical sense; all too often ''metaphoric'' has been forced in current structuralist literature to become a synonym for Sir James Frazer's ''sympathy,'' and ''metonymy'' for ''contagion,'' not only in Frazer's domain of ''magical beliefs and practices'' but also as general properties of human thought) related to ''maturation'' (*kukula* = ''to pass a point of maturation,'' with specific reference to the onset of the menses in women). From the Western cultural perspective we might be able to grasp the metaphor, for we have red holly berries and red-breasted robins as Christmas ceremonial symbols of Christ's blood (hinting also at pre-Christian Yule sacrifices). But we do not usually employ red vegetable substances as tokens or symbol-vehicles of ''maturity,'' whether male or female. Ndembu use a log of *mukula* wood as a collective seat for boys that have just been circumcised—they are compared explicitly as well as implicitly with menstruating maidens. In the West we have no *red* circumcision symbolism, and indeed circumcision is a concept detached from ''maturity.'' Nevertheless, the analogies and associations in the *mukula* semantic field of red, coagulating gum with blood in general, first menses and circumcision bleeding in particular, and with social maturity, healing, ''togetherness'' (and other *signata* discussed in my books), are not beyond the sympathetic scope of Western anthropologists. As Needham has recently reminded us (53, p. 136), there are ''experiential discriminations . . . that are universally made by men among their states of mind,'' some located in the human body, ''the one thing in nature that is internally experienced, the only object of which we have subjective knowledge'' (p. 139). Incidentally, this is why the colors, red, white, and black, seem so ''universally'' to have the *signata,* blood, milk (or semen), and feces (or decayed blood), whatever additional ''signifieds'' each may be regarded as possessing, or whatever euphemistic, substitute ''meanings'' may be assigned to them to mitigate their grossness or ''low-status'' energy.

Signs, besides tending to univocality (though sometimes even logical and mathematical signs cannot escape multivocality or polysemy; e.g. the ''minus sign'' = subtraction *and* negative quality) connect signifiers to signifieds by

arbitrary, discretionary, conventional links. These are not the result of caprice but of rational thought, and for purposes of economic utilization of time, energy, and cultural resources. *Signs* are especially involved in *signaling systems* (I would define "signal" in culture—as against the ethologists' usage—as cultural signs in their consequential capacity, in their dynamic, indicative role) and information processing. In their former capacity, they would include media-determined substitutes for letters, numerals, etc used in sending messages swiftly and unambiguously, such as the system of dots and dashes, or short and long sounds or flashes used in telegraphy known as Morse, or the heliographic codes which preceded it. As information devices the arbitrariness of their signification may make for concealment as much as for ready transmission, particularly in the case of *secret* codes, where *signans* is public, but *signatum* is private. "To crack a code" is tantamount to penetrating a rival's intentions; in wars and feuds this acquires a military value. The extreme case underlines the culturally relative and *cognitive* properties of *signs;* signs are often deliberate constructs for precise communicative purposes. As such they play important roles in social action—most prominently perhaps in technical, political, and economic action. But very often they can be fruitfully analyzed as abstract systems. The use of individual signs in contexts of action is directly correlated with the grammar and lexicon of the system of signs from which they derive their meaning. Univocal signs facilitate direct cause-effect relations, often of a trans-actional type. Some scholars (e.g. Firth 24, Weinreich 80) prefer to regard *sign* as a general category, of which, for instance, index, icon, signal, and symbol are subcategories (24, p. 75).

Symbols tend to be *iconic,* "where a sensory likeness-relation is intended or interpreted" (24, p. 75). I prefer the term "symbol" to "icon," however, since "icon" ("an image or picture of Jesus, Mary, or a saint") has too many precise historical associations in the Christian cultural tradition to make it easily oper-able in a semiotic context. A symbol also has a single *signans* and often multiple *signata.* In other words, the "vehicle" carries a load of "meanings." More accurately, some symbols, variously known as "dominant," "core," "key," "master," "focal," "pivotal," or "central" symbols constitute semantic sys-tems in their own right. Each has a complex and ramifying series of associations (24, p. 75) as modes of signification. Often *signata* themselves become signifiers of secondary semantic systems. Thus I (71) have shown how among Ndembu, *chishing'a,* a three- or four-pronged branch stripped of bark and sharpened at the tines, often employed as a temporary shrine to hunter-ancestors, on which offerings of meat were impaled, functioned as a signifier to which was attached several semantic subsystems (71, pp. 291-98). These rested on three founda-tions: *nominal, substantial,* and *artifactual.* The nominal foundation was the name assigned to the branch, the substantial base was its culturally selected "natural properties" and shape, while the artifactual was the completed *chishing'a,* the result of purposive activity (peeling bark, sharpening prongs, implanting in ground, etc). Informants derived the noun *chishing'a* from the verb *kushing'ana,* "to curse," and explained that this was because people

always quarreled over a hunter's allocation of joints of meat. It also stood for the envy felt by nonhunters for hunters. Finally, it meant the "pride," "dignity," or "self-praise" (*kudilemesha* or *kudivumbika,* reflexive verbal nouns meaning "causing oneself to be praised") a hunter feels at being so truly the cause of envy in others. *Chishing'a* has several synonyms (perhaps "allelonyms"?): *muchanka,* literally "the movement of fleeing game," relating to the hunter as predator (and as such classed with lions, leopards, and hunting dogs); and *mwima,* literally, "bearing fruit," referring to the forked branch—whose tines are adorned with horns of slain antelopes and other trophies, and whose crotches are adorned with pieces of meat, while the base and trunk are smeared with blood of slain animals—as a "fruitbearing tree" (an equation is made between the masculine work of killing game and the feminine work of bearing children, and indeed the same symbols are often used for hunting and progenitive phenomena). For the substantial basis of its meaning, five species of tree may be used (often dependent upon a diviner's ruling). All share three properties: bark string cannot be made from them, for this would "tie up" huntsmanship; they have hard, termite-resistant wood, for a hunter should toughly endure hardship; the wood is bright white under the bark, and whiteness, as I have shown in several books, is for Ndembu connected with a wide range of positive qualities such as good luck, health, good will towards others, and so on (e.g. 71, pp. 69-70). But each species has its own distinctive features. Each is, in fact, a distinct semantic subsystem, with its nominal and substantial semantic foundations. For example, the *musoli* tree is derived—as indeed is a whole family of terms—from *kusolola,* "to make visible, produce to view, reveal." Here the name is compatible with the tree's natural properties. For it produces much fruit which windfallen attracts antelope and other game from cover, thus producing them to view for the hunter to shoot or spear. Also, just as the fruit attracts animals, so will the hunter attract people and his fame (*mpuhu*) will grow (the positive aspect of what is negatively stated, in the nonverbal language of ritual symbols, by *chishing'a,* where fame is attested to by the envy of others). Another shrine-tree species is *museng'u,* derived from *kuseng'uka,* "to multiply or increase." The tree bears innumerable small fruits—the hunter who makes of it his *chishing'a* will analogously kill many animals, attract many people by his prowess, and enjoy fame. Incidentally, both these species figure prominently in rituals connected with female fertility, stressing the equivalence of prolific hunters and mothers; opposition is also expressed, for example, in the taboo on women's approaching a *chishing'a* closely under penalty of severe hemorrhage during parturition or menorrhagia. Space disallows extensive comment on the other species; each is a semantic subsystem.

As an artifact, a natural object whose structure or appearance has been changed artificially, *chishing'a* has three main features, each significant. The sharpened prongs or tines represent the "sharpness" or "acuity" (*kuwambuka*) of huntsmanship, a term also connected with the "whetting" of a knife. Hunters have to have acute senses (certain symbols identify diviners with hunters), and to display "sharp" intelligence in the face of changing circumstances. Secondly,

the bark is peeled from *chishing'a* to "reveal" (*kusolola* again) its white, auspicious inner quality (its *chisemwa,* innateness, from *kusema,* "to beget, bear"). Finally, a braid of *kaswamang'wadyi* grass (from *kuswama,* "to hide," *ng'wadyi,* "bare-throated francolin"—this represents the grass cover in which hunters and their quarry alike conceal themselves) is tied under the lowest prong. The prongs, where trophies are placed, represent "animals" (*anyama*), the main stem beneath the braid stands for "ancestral shades" (*akishi*). They come up from "the red grave" (*kalung'a kachinana*) to drink the blood offered to them as a result of the hunter's "sharp" power.

All these interpretations are not private speculations, but were given to me by several hunters. They form part of a complex verbal hermeneutic which encompasses the innumerable nonverbal symbols of Ndembu culture in "webs of [explicit] significance," to paraphrase Geertz (28, p. 5). This raises the important problem posed by Firth (24): what is the relationship between public and private interpretation of symbols? Firth has built the question into his definition of "symbol":

> where a sign has a complex series of associations, often of an emotional kind, and difficult (some would say, impossible) to describe in terms other than partial representation. The aspect of personal or social construction in meaning may be marked, so no sensory likeness of symbol to object may be apparent to an observer, and imputation of relationship may seem arbitrary (24, p. 75)

For Firth, "arbitrariness" may be as much a matter of private, idiosyncratic association as of social convention or stipulation. In the psychoanalytic "train of thought" method, in which the subject is given a word stimulus and then continually gives the ideas, as they come to mind, suggested to him by that word and by words evoked by it, it is only when the analyst has been able to uncover from all kinds of clinical data the "deep structure" of the patient's unconscious that he is able to grasp the "logic" underlying his associative modalities.

In reply to Firth's question, I would like to offer several suggestions. One is that signs are almost always organized in "closed" systems and owe their "meaning" to positional relationships, while symbols, especially dominant symbols such as *chishing'a,* are themselves semantically "open." This is a "two-way" openness. New signifieds may be added by *collective fiat* to old signifiers. On the other hand, individuals may add personal meaning to a symbol's public meaning, either by utilizing one or another of its standardized modes of association (say color, texture, shape, habitus, etc) to bring new concepts within its semantic orbit, or by including it in a complex of purely private fantasies. Such initially private "construction" may become part of public hermeneutic or standardized interpretation if the exegete has sufficient power, authority, or prestige to make his views "stick." Sometimes, for example, pronouncements made by acknowledged shamans or mediums in trance or ecstatic states—not infrequently induced by hallucinogenic substances—that old symbols should have new meanings, are conceded to be legitimate ways of adding signifieds to signifiers.

These properties of symbols—multivocality, complexity of association, ambiguity, open-endedness, primacy of feeling and willing over thinking in their semantics, their propensity to ramify into further semantic subsystems—are connected with their dynamic quality. Symbols are triggers of social action—and of personal action in the public arena. Their multivocality enables a wide range of groups and individuals to relate to the same signifier-vehicle in a variety of ways. Otherwise hostile groups may form coalitions in political fields by emphasizing different *signata* of the same *signans*. The greater the number of people, the more complex the division of labor; the higher the "plurality" of a society, the greater the likelihood that its dominant symbols will be simple at the level of *signans,* complex at the level of *signata,* and various in modes of *signification.* It would repay the attention of anthropologists, historians of religion, political scientists, iconographers, and many other scholars to study such dominant religious symbols as the Christian Cross, the Buddhist Lotus, the Jewish Scrolls of the Law, and the Moslem Koran in the terms indicated.

Dominant symbols shed and gain *signata* through time. This is not arbitrary but a product of social dynamics. At major points of change the *signans* itself may change, albeit only slightly. Thus the Eastern Orthodox empty Cross betokens stress on the doctrine of Christ Risen (influenced by Neo-Platonism), the Catholic Crucifix (with its Corpus) emphasizes Christ's Humanity and Sacrifice, while the Protestant empty Cross implicitly denies the continuing sacrificial character of the Eucharist. In this context, the term icon is indeed appropriate and can tell us something about the social and political dynamics of *signans, signatum,* and *signification.* Iconophiles stress *signans* over *signatum* in relating them, iconoclasts regard *signans* as unnecessary, even as obstructive. Iconophilic religions often develop complex and elaborate systems of ritual; symbols tend to be visual and exegesis is bound up with the ritual round. Iconoclastic religions are associated with radical reform and seek to purify the "underlying meaning" by erasing the *signantia,* the iconic symbols, which appear to them to be "idols" interposing themselves between individual believers and the truths enunciated by religious founders which have become merely the *signata* of iconic vehicles. Verbal exegesis, development of literacy, stress on "the Word," at least as much emphasis on "the Spirit" ("which giveth life"), on inward conversion, on healing through prayer and touch, characterize this destruction of visual icons and their substitution by verbal, tactile, and auditory symbols. Icons tend to form centers of social mobilization, words help to separate the individual from the traditional corporate group. Subsequent consociation is by contract and choice, forming a community of "saved" individual "souls." Douglas's distinction (20) between "group" and "grid" modes of religious behavior would be apposite here, the former being more iconic, the latter more "aniconic." Iconic symbols have more "body" to them, verbal symbols more "soul." This raises another aspect of the semantics of symbols. It is possible to see a dominant symbol's semantic field as "polarized." Alternatively, one may speak of its *signata* as clustering around two nuclei. One cluster refers to bodily experiences and phenomena, particularly to those which

indicate powerful emotional experiences (often in early life, adolescence, and young maturity). The other signifies ethical values and principles, religious doctrines, political ideals, family values, the moral components in law, rules of social organization—in short, what most makes for order, continuity, and harmony in society. I have called the first the "orectic" pole (from *orexis:* the conative and affective aspects of experience—impulse, appetite, desire, emotion). The second I have termed the "ideological" or "normative pole." There is clearly a closer associative link between the *signans* (or vehicle) and the *signata* clustered around the orectic pole than exists between the former and the normative pole, since the body's experiences are more concrete and universally shared by members of the species *Homo sapiens* than are the principles and rules of culture—at once more abstract and diverse. But here it is not a matter of two analytical dimensions or levels of abstraction. In their collectivity the orectic *signata* interact with the normative *signata,* not in any reified sense but through the actions of the men who live by and with the symbols the *signata* partly compose. The relationship between the categories of *signata* is a metaphoric one, in the "interaction" sense of metaphor championed by Richards (55). Two thoughts of different things are "active together" and "supported by a single word or phrase whose meaning is a result of interaction" (p. 93). Metaphor is "a borrowing between and intercourse of *thoughts,* a transaction between contexts." Richards supposed an interaction between "tenor" (= *signatum*) and "vehicle" (= *signans*). But since a single "vehicle" in the dominant symbol has multiple "tenors," a whole complex series of interactions among orectic and normative *signata* can be triggered by situational stimuli as well as between the "poles," considered grossly and in condensation (between ideas of "body" and of "soul," to employ a familiar Cartesian dichotomy). In nondualistic systems, such as certain influential schools of Hinduism, the distinction between *signans* and *signatum* disappears. Yet in ritual practice some distinction appears to be made.

I prefer to take the view that "signifiers" and "signifieds" are "meaningful" distinctions, can be detected in all culture, and vary independently, forming distinct semiotic "realms." For although dominant symbols have many *signata,* many *signantia* (especially in such ludic and liminal situations as festivals, carnivals, and the seclusion phase of many tribal initiations) seem to have either no *signata* or else incongruous *signata.* What Barbara Babcock-Abrahams (5) calls "a surplus of signifiers" can inhabit the same semiotic field as multivocal symbols (where there may be a surplus of signifieds). At the verbal level glossolalia, at the nonverbal level the production (by such techniques as fasting, meditation, the ingestion of hallucinogens) of large numbers of apparently "meaningless" patterns, shapes, color combinations, etc, may well represent the production of a pool of pure "vehicles" without *signata,* a crowd of "forms" in search of "meanings"! Some famous writers such as Rabelais and James Joyce, whose work responded to major cultural changes, seem also to have been prodigal in the generation of *signantia; Pantagruel* and *Finnegan's Wake* live on the level of "soul-less" signifiers, in reaction to a surfeit of "bodiless" mean-

ings. At other times and in other places a few dominant symbols seem to rupture from repletion of meaning; the released *signata* embody themselves in new vehicles—ritual and mythical systems develop as the new symbols are related to each other under the influence of social interests and the process of institutionalization.

In political processes, the manipulation of symbols is prominent; in ritual processes, the exhibition of symbols to actors, even the enactment of symbolic activities by them, is the cultural keynote. Symbols are here in their richest concentration, signs are sparse. Univocal symbols may be found—often as instrumentalities of the ritual process. They are not signs, since they are not systematically interconnected in an abstract system, but serve rather to facilitate a process which is very largely a procession of multivocal symbols. Here univocality is the handmaid of multivocality. Thus one may find objects, acts, gestures, words used for no other purpose but to further the action or to connect in time or space multivocal symbols and episodes into which the total ritual is divided. Several rich ethnographies of ritual processes have been published recently which provide some exemplification of these abstract statements. To cite some works outside the anglophone circle: da Matta (46, pp. 121-68) on carnival as a *rite de passage;* Lima (42) and Rodrigues de Areia (56) on divinatory processes and symbols among the Chokwe of Angola; J. P. Vernant (76), who has edited a volume on the relationship in several cultures and in different periods of history between divination and rationality—a semiotic tour de force; and Dan Sperber (69), whose neostructuralist approach to symbolism (influenced by Lacan's work) sees meaning as essentially located at the level of *signifiants* and in the ''mute'' structures they compose. For him, native exegesis is irrelevant; the essence of meaning in symbolism is in the structuring of *signifiants,* what I have called ''positional meaning'' (71, p. 50), though I mainly regard positioning, including ''binary opposition,'' as a performative strategy for selecting a single *signatum* from a multiplicity of *signata.*

Several outstanding books on ritual processes and symbols have been published recently in America and Britain. Legesse (40) examines the Gada system of the Galla of Ethiopia, in which age classes ''succeed each other every eight years in assuming military, economic, political and ritual responsibilities'' (p. 8), as it has been changing over several centuries as well as in its contemporary structure. An Ethiopian himself, without European or American patriotic axes to grind, he sought objective enlightenment from prestigious ''schools of thought,'' associated respectively with France, America, and Britain: the ''structural,'' ''empirical,'' and ''dynamic'' approaches. Each he finds wanting in some respect, for none has been able ''to reveal the nature of the dialectical process . . . the fundamental and nonconscious processes of change'' (p. 271). French structural anthropology fails ''because it has no access to empirical variability.'' American empirical anthropology fails ''because it has no tools for understanding the cognitive bases of structure.'' I wonder what our cognitive anthropologists and ethnoscientists would make of that! British dynamic anthropology (by which he seems mainly to designate the ''Manchester School'') fails

because it attempts to integrate the two types of data, rather than analyzing them separately and considering the possibility that they might be contradictory and therefore "generative." He recommends the method of "assymmetrical dialectics" (p. 259) which recognizes that structure and empirical variability are *two realities that have no common measure* (Legesse's emphasis), that is to say, they are assymmetric in the same sense that the mathematician uses that concept. One wonders with Adam Kuper (38, p. 10), however, in his critique of Cohen's *Two-Dimensional Man* (16), a book which postulated "a dialectical interdependence" between power relationships and symbolic action, whether both Legesse and Cohen, whose views I am greatly in sympathy with, are "suggesting that two *analytical dimensions* (Kuper's emphasis) can interact, dialectically or otherwise." Both these books are highly creative and exciting. I found personally congenial Legesse's view that "the same society that utilized a generally univocal mode of communication under normal circumstances began to invoke ambiguous classificatory and relational concepts in the fact of conflict. It was often the same concepts concerning roles and statuses that received a univocal emphasis at one stage and a multivocal emphasis at another stage" (p. 246). This view is akin to Cohen's: "A symbol will not do its work if it does not have (this) ambiguity and complexity" (p. 37), in situations of conflict and change.

Indications of renewed interest in symbolic processes and structures may be found in the appearance since 1970 of several new journals to join the well-established *Semiotica,* edited by T. A. Sebeok (63), ranging from *The Journal of Symbolic Anthropology,* edited by E. G. Schwimmer (62), and devoted mainly to neostructuralist and symbolic systems analysis approaches, to the excellent *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* (4), the idea for which came from the graduate students of the subfaculty of Anthropology at Oxford, and which contains many articles of a "symbological" character, some by graduates and others by established professionals. As general editor of a series of books published by Cornell University Press in a field triangulated by the broad topics of "symbol, myth, and ritual," I should also like to mention books by these authors: Deshen & Shokeid (18), Eliade (21), Errington (23), Firth (24), Manning (44), Munn (51), Myerhoff (52), and Turner (72). In press are contributions by: Babcock-Abrahams (5), Hiltebeitel (33), Jules-Rosette (35), Moore & Myerhoff (49), and Turner (73). It would be improper to exploit the opportunity offered me here to review recent symbological literature in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* by giving this series a "puff," but in fairness to the noneditorial authors, I can guarantee the high theoretical quality as well as eminent readability of each contribution!

I cannot conclude without mentioning a seminal article by Kleinman, "Medicine's Symbolic Reality" (37), which draws on the work of anthropologists (Geertz, Ingham, Tambiah, Yalman, Turner, Frake, Lévi-Strauss, and others) to make a synthesis of symbolic and structural analyses applied to medicine, the relation of modern linguistic developments to the study of medical systems, and historical and cross-cultural comparisons of elements of medical systems, citing Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (19) and Foucault's *Madness and Civ-*

ilization (24) among others. Kleinman calls for "the appreciation of medicine as a form of symbolic reality" (37, p.212). The connection between tribal ritual and therapy has long been noted by anthropologists, as has the dynamic interaction between ritual-therapeutic symbols and the development of morale in ritual subjects or "patients." When viewed as

> a socio-cultural system, as a practice and a human reality [embedded in] a given cultural context from which it derives its signification . . . the medical system forms an indissoluble and hierarchical whole in which healing acts are closely linked with ideas about disease causation and models for classifying disease. The whole is oriented towards the problem of effectively dealing with illness. From this viewpoint [unlike modern medical theory] healing is not the outcome of diagnostic acts, but the healing function is active from the outset in the way illness is perceived and the experience of illness organized (37, pp. 207-8).

The healing rite in "folk" or "tribal" medicine is seen to be more than the typing and labeling of diseases and symptoms and the restoration of health. It is rather the mobilization of efficacy through symbolic action for restoring internal integrity to the patient and order to his community. Ideas of personhood may differ widely from our Western, mainly Cartesian, assumptions of a dualism of body (extended substance) and soul (thinking substance) whose union is at best only accidental, in positing a multiplicity of components, united in different ways, substantial and accidental and with varying vital and posthumous careers. Here health represents a restoration of wholeness both to person and group; *mens sana in societate sana.*

Simply stated, we master the world through signs, ourselves by symbols. Symbolic action in ritual, politics, and medicine responds to this distinction.

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