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On Symbolic Meaning

DISCUSSIONS IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND CULTURE HISTORY
from the Institute for Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology
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1. INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have witnessed an increasing interest in symbolism among social anthropologists. This interest has developed within a non-reductionistic theoretical framework, i.e. resting on an assumption that symbolism should be studied as a phenomenon in its own right and not as an aspect of non-symbolic circumstances.[1] But within this framework no consensus has been reached among social anthropologists concerning the nature of symbolic meaning. A large number of more or less disparate theoretical approaches in studying symbolism has been established. Among these, however, there seem to be two more general lines of analytical enquiry: one is to question the use of the concept "meaning" in relation to symbolism (e.g. Sperber 1974), the other consists of efforts to develop the semantic analysis of cultural meaning (e.g. Aijmer 1984a, Barley 1983). This paper will concern itself mainly with issues relevant to the latter approach. Our present interest is to consider some questions concerning symbolic meaning which appear central and controversial from an anthropological point of view, foremost the question of what empirical phenomena we refer to when we speak of the "meaning" of a symbol or the "meanings" communicated by ritual. We will in this endeavour refer to linguistic investigations of meaning in natural languages, and ask ourselves what are the differences and similarities between meaning in culture and in language. We will not, however, try to arrive at a definition of the concept

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[1] Reductionistic approaches seek to reduce the order of symbols in society to an aspect of certain hypothesized pragmatic systems.
- Functionalistic approaches build on the assumption that symbols are elements in an unconscious codification of pragmatic strategies. The pragmatic aspects may be either the survival of the individual, the survival of certain groups of individuals in society, or the survival of society in its ecological environment.
- Structural-functionalism holds that symbols and symbolic acts unconsciously function to ensure the perpetuation of social life in society.
- Structuralism, which in certain of its variants must be viewed as reductionistic, argues that the order of symbols in any society is essentially an unconscious expression of the organization of the human mind and, ultimately, the physical organization of matter.

of "meaning" in this context - a task not advisable since the empirical phenomena in question still are to a large extent unexplored.[2] Nevertheless, it may be wise to make it clear that the term "meaning" in this paper will be used heuristically in any of its two main senses: a) denoted, signified, and b) that which is meant or intended.

One thing beyond doubt is that cultural symbols, in their occurrence in social contexts, are ordered according to conventions. Even if informants are totally unable to explicate the meaning of symbols and the meanings conveyed by ritual and myth, they are very often certain as to the proper occasions for the display of symbols and the intricate organization of symbols in ritual. We can also be sure, inferring from these facts, that people are aware of symbols as distinct units of culture, even if they cannot expound their meanings verbally. The aim of any theory of symbolism is to account for the order of symbols in given societies, in face of the often encountered inability of people to explicate to satisfaction the reasons for this order.

Non-reductionistic semantic approaches in the study of symbolism hold that the order of symbols is to be explained with reference to the meanings which the symbols in a cultural tradition have for the native people: with reference to their communicative functions and to the nature of cultural semantics. Taking this assumption as a point of departure in our discussion, we now have three general paths of enquiry: to penetrate processes of symbolic genesis and articulation, to explore the formal semantic properties of symbolic expression, and to investigate how symbols are interpreted and understood. Since it is reasonable to assume that symbolic organization to a significant extent is constructed in order to be interpreted and understood, it seems wise

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[2] The notion of "meaning" has by many scholars been considered as one of the most problematic, ambiguous, and controversial concepts in the humanities and the social sciences. As a "very Casanova of a word in its appetite for association" (Black 1968:163), it has been used in a number of different senses. While we in colloquial English find approximately 10 different usages of the term (Fries 1954:63, Hobart 1982:41), the academic use of the word is even more diversified. Leo Abraham (1936) found no less than 50 distinct meanings of the term in its use in philosophy and psychology, while Ogden & Richards (1927:186-7) distinguished 16 broad usages of the word in the social sciences.

to start our discussion by considering the comprehension of symbolic meaning, thereafter turn to the subject of cultural semantics, and lastly discuss genesis and change of symbolic expressions. We will first, however, make a few general remarks on meaning in language and meaning in culture.

In linguistics, word-meaning is commonly defined as: "the reciprocal and reversible relationship between sound and sense" (Ullman 1962:17). The meaning of a linguistic sign is thus essentially to be found in its reference to a concept, which in turn more or less obviously relates to entities in the world of experience. Words (or more correctly, morphemes) are, according to syntactic rules, ordered into sentences which convey propositional meaning. The meaning of a sentence is a function of the meanings of the words it contains as well as of the syntactic order of the words.[3] Words are the (intuitively) basal elements of meaning in natural language, which is essentially understood as an auditory system of communication whereby information is transmitted with a high degree of economy between human beings.

The meaning of cultural symbols may appear to be of a rather different nature compared to the meaning of linguistic signs. Just to mention a few divergences:

- We find symbols for which no obvious referent can be determined. Individuals who partake in expressive acts involving such symbols are often unable to verbally clarify the meaning of them, or they give widely different interpretations. Anthropologist may also, after an analysis of the cultural systems in focus, reach very varying conclusions as to the referents to these enigmatic symbols.
- The same problems pertain to many expressive acts in which symbols are employed. If ritual is a mode of communication, why are the participants often unable to provide other than trivial and unconvincing answers, if any, to questions relating to the message of the ritual?
- The sequential order of symbols in cultural expression appears to be of marginal significance for the meaning of the expression. There is little evidence for a "syntax" of cultural symbols.
- Symbolic communication in cultural expressions, as ritual and myth, appears uneconomic. The same, or comparable,

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[3] The meaning of sentences in actual speech is also dependent of the context in which an utterance is made.

instances of symbolic articulation are repeated over and over again. The degree of redundancy is high.

There are thus important differences in the nature of meaning between linguistic signs and cultural symbols. But as we will see in the following discussion, many of the semantic phenomena which are found in cultural expression are also found in language - albeit in many cases marginal in relation to the general features of linguistic semantics. We will attempt to clarify the basis for the similarities as well as the dissimilarities between language and cultural expression.

2. COMPREHENSIONAL MEANING

Assigning meaning to symbols consists basically of a mental operation in which the individual associates symbolic objects (or acts) with something apart from their material and physical existence. If the individual is to reach any understanding of the cultural expressions in which symbols appear, it is necessary for him to establish such associations. There is formally no limit to the alternative associations which the individual may establish in order to reach this understanding. He may recognize any of a symbol's features, in order to find an association which gives the symbol a meaning which is compatible with his idea of what the cultural expressions in which the symbol appears are about. For the sake of our further argument we may distinguish between "un-contrived" associations, in which the natural physical features of a symbol, and features of the natural contexts in which it occurs, is recognized, and "contrived" associations, in which culturally contrived features of symbols and contexts are recognized. As an example of such associations we may consider earthenware jars in Dowayo society (West Africa). Besides their ordinary use in the household, jars play a central role in several important Dowayo rituals. Figure 1 gives some examples of potential associations to earthenware jars in the Dowayo cultural tradition.[4]

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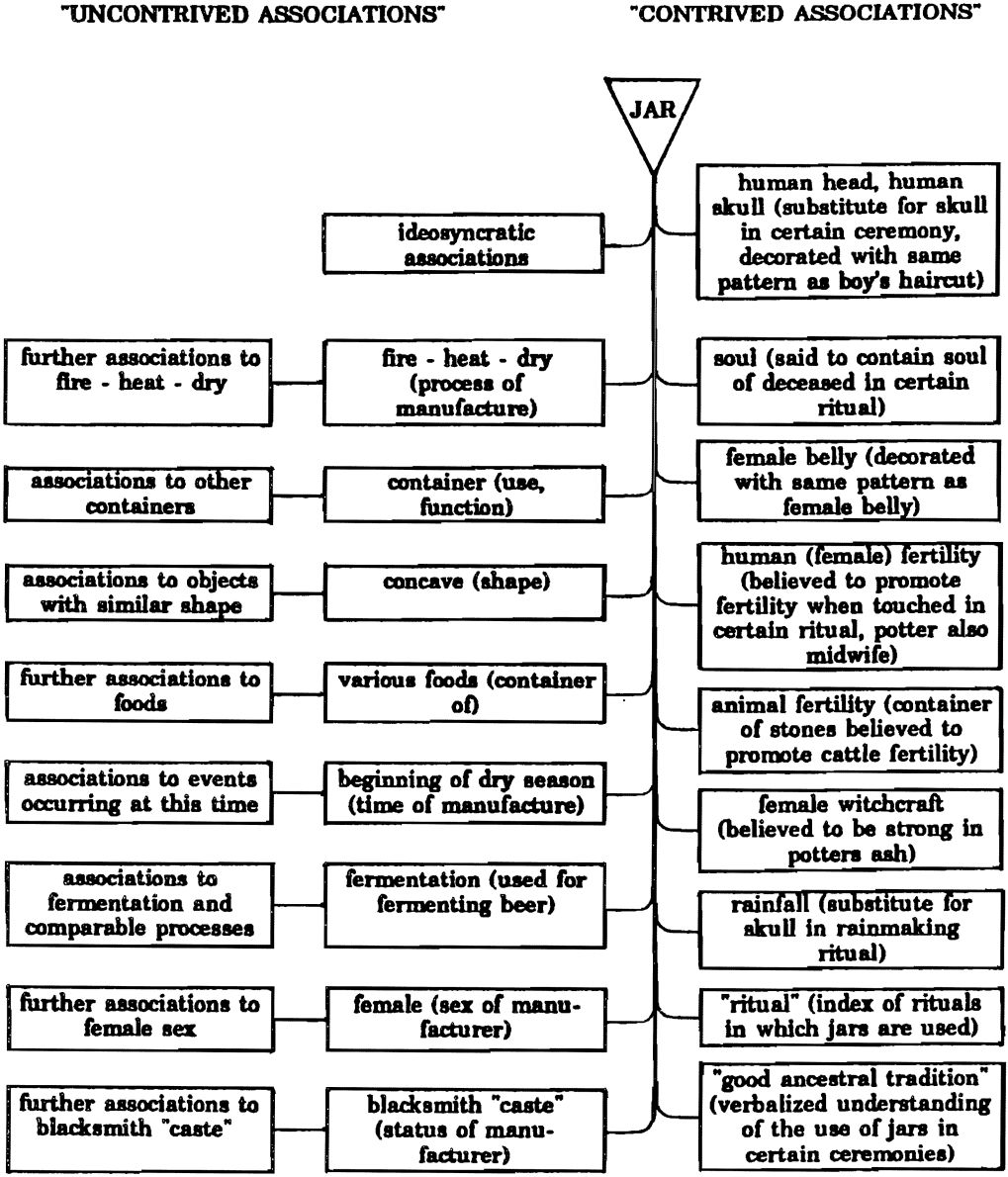
[4] The ethnographic information presented in this figure, and in the following ones, is extracted from Barley, 1983. The figures are merely illustrative and do certainly not depict all associations and semantic relations pertaining to jars in Dowayo culture.

Figure 1.


"UNCONTRIVED ASSOCIATIONS"
"CONTRIVED ASSOCIATIONS"
JAR
ideosyncratic associations
human head, human skull (substitute for skull in certain ceremony, decorated with same pattern as boy's haircut)
further associations to fire - heat - dry
fire - heat - dry (process of manufacture)
soul (said to contain soul of deceased in certain ritual)
associations to other containers
container (use, function)
female belly (decorated with same pattern as female belly)
associations to objects with similar shape
concave (shape)
human (female) fertility (believed to promote fertility when touched in certain ritual, potter also midwife)
further associations to foods
various foods (container of)
animal fertility (container of stones believed to promote cattle fertility)
associations to events occurring at this time
beginning of dry season (time of manufacture)
female witchcraft (believed to be strong in potters ash)
associations to fermentation and comparable processes
fermentation (used for fermenting beer)
rainfall (substitute for skull in rainmaking ritual)
further associations to female sex
female (sex of manufacturer)
"ritual" (index of rituals in which jars are used)
further associations to blacksmith "caste"
blacksmith "caste" (status of manufacturer)
"good ancestral tradition" (verbalized understanding of the use of jars in certain ceremonies)

The meaning assigned to a symbol by the individual may be highly idiosyncratic. Principally it is dependent on two factors: on the individual's cultural knowledge, and on his personal powers of imagination.

An individual with a limited cultural knowledge may interpret a symbol only as an index of certain activities to which it is associated by convention: e.g, a jar in the skull-house of a Dowayo rainchief gives the information that the jar probably has been used in rainmaking ceremonies. A more encompassing cultural knowledge allows for the extraction of "deeper" levels of significance. If we again consider the Dowayo rainchief's jars we find that knowledge of the importance of jars in rainmaking ceremonies may lead to the conclusion that the jars cause rain through some mystical property. Still "deeper" levels of meaning are reached if it is known and considered that certain jars are treated in the same way as ancestral skulls. This association between jar and ancestor is compatible with an idea of rainmaking as involving activation of ancestral supernatural power. The cultural knowledge of individuals may vary significantly according to the personal inclination to take interest in forms of symbolic articulation, and according to their social position in society.

The personal imaginatory powers of individuals, and the multitude of individual reasons why they should be activated, also allow for varying interpretations and understandings of symbols. With no such reasons, or low imaginary power, the individual is likely to adopt conventionalized interpretations and understandings of the symbol and the cultural expressions in which it occurs. Individuals who have some reason to activate thier imaginatory powers - because of dissatisfaction with the conventional understandings of a symbol - may stress any of the associations of a symbol in giving meaning to it and to the expressive acts in which it occurs (or is by them suggested to occur in). A hypothetical example could read like this: a Dowayo woman with a feministic ideology could hold the belief that rainmaking was made possible because the rainmakers jar - through its various female associations - embodies a female life-giving aspect which also encompasses rain. She could, consequently, establish herself as a female rainmaker, ritually manipulating the jars according to a ceremonial order of her own invention, an order thought by her to better correspond to the basic metaphysical premisses of rainmaking than the order commonly followed (which appears to focus on the

association between skull and male ancestor). We could also imagine a structuralistically inclined student of anthropology (not a very talented one, however) who proposes that the use of jars in rainmaking is to be understood as an inversion of the process of fermentation, which occurs in the jars when they are used for making millet beer. In the natural process of fermentation, diminutive spherical units of air move upwards through a liquid, as millet is transformed into "water", while, on the other hand, the cultural process of rainmaking produces a state in which diminutive units of liquid moves downward through air, resulting in the transformation of rainwater into millet as the crop absorbes it. Several other oppositions could be referred to (see figure 2) in such an attempt to explain the use of jars in Dowayo rainmaking ritual by assigning to them a certain "meaning" based on ideosyncratic associations betweeen jars and certain features of Dowayo physical and social world.

Figure 2.

	FERMENTATION	**RAIN**
aspects of process:		
genesis	natural	cultural (ritual starts rain)
characteristicts	air moves upwards through water	water moves downwards through air
location	inside jar	outside jar
geographical location of initiation	downhill	uphill
instigator (sex)	female	male
instigator (social position)	polluted black-smith "caste"	holy rainchief
effect	millet transform into water (beer)	water transforms into millet (as rain irrigates and absorbes into crops)
etc.	x	x^{-1}

To acknowledge that meaning to a certain extent is an individual construct illuminates the effectiveness of symbolic expression. The opportunities for extracting different meanings make it possible for the individual to unite idiosyncratically the cultural world with his own world of personal experience, to relate the symbols of ritual, myth and religion to his own individual history of life and to his emotions. In the Dowayo example we could imagine a person who assigns a special significance to the ritual use of jars because of his strictly individual associations to jars (for instance, he has certain vivid childhood memories of jars and their manufacture since his mother was a potter).

But cultural meaning cannot, of course, be accounted for only in terms of individual interpretations and understandings. If the order of symbols in a society should be accounted for with reference to a communicative function, we must assume that symbols convey meanings which are comprehended quite uniformly by categories of individuals in that society. In any cultural tradition, the understanding of symbols is, to a high degree, conventionalized. The essence of this conventionality is an implicit or explicit *agreement* on the general meaning of symbols and cultural expressions among groups of people. Such an agreement is based on a collective acknowledgment of the relevance of the messages articulated through cultural expressions. The agreement will manifest itself in the overt behavior, related to symbols and symbolic articulation, of people (participation in ritual and other forms of overt display of symbols, verbal articulation of statements concerning symbols, and verbal use of symbols in myth, proverbs, linguistic metaphors, etc.), and since this behaviour is apparent to every individual, social life will take place *as if* symbols and symbolic expressions have a certain intrinsic meaning recognized by a plurality of individuals. The conceptual persuasiveness of the impression of symbols which have intrinsic meanings entail that these meanings will generally constitute the core of an individual's understanding of these symbols, and that the ideosyncratic interpretations and understandings - considered from a cultural perspective - will be peripheral. This implies that a habitual rather than an innovative mode of assigning meaning to symbols characterise the great majority of events in social life. It is thus the "contrived" associations rather than the "un-contrived" ones that become the core of the individual's construction of

meaning. The conventional meaning of cultural symbols should therefore be sought primarily in their use in cultural expression, and only secondarily in their "un-contrived" natural features (cf Barth 1975:189, see below). We can illustrate this line of argument with the example of the Dowayo jars. The use of jars in rainmaking clearly indicates an equation of jar with ancestral skull, since these jars are treated as skulls are treated in other contexts. We must assume that this association is generally agreed upon in Dowayo society, and that rainmaking, in its instrumental endeavour, articulates messages concerning Dowayo society and universe that are apprehended as relevant by a plurality of Dowayo individuals. In the eyes of a Dowayo individual, rainmaking takes place *as if* jars had an inherent meaning closely related to ancestral power - as if jars actually were containers of ancestral power. If no special circumstance is at hand, it is therefore more likely that a Dowayo individual will adopt such an understanding rather than one based on a radically different association of jars with other entities.

Agreement on the meaning of symbols and symbolic expression may be both explicit and implicit. Explicit agreement is verbal agreement. For example, among the Minangkabau of Western Sumatra no feature of society seems to be without its explicitly asserted meaning - although individuals may occasionally disagree on which meaning is the right one (see Errington 1984). Explicit agreement on the meaning of symbols may also take the form of an idiom of mysticism and secrecy. According to such idioms, symbols are not to be interpreted, and the "understanding" of them is of a kind that it may shared with other persons only through acts and verbal expressions of an enigmatic character. Explicit agreement may also be totally absent or very vague, as is the case in the Dowayo example; symbols and rituals are not verbally explicated. When asked for the reason for their carrying out rituals in the conventional manner the Dowayos just say that the rituals constitute an intrinsically good ancestral tradition.[5]

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[5] "Questioning rapidly enters the vicious circle the fieldworker comes to know well. '-Why must the floor (of a hut containing a jar during a certain ritual) be unbeaten?' 'Because it would be bad.' 'Why would it be bad?' 'Because the ancestors told us so.' 'Why did the ancestors told you so?' 'Because it would be bad.'" Barley 1983:28.

The nature of the implicit agreement is complex and problematic to inquire into. The principal point is that people interpret and understand cultural messages, but may not be able to account for their understanding verbally. The meaning of symbols, and the cultural expressions in which they figure, may thus not be transmitted verbally between individuals in a society. We must assume the existence of a certain unconscious mode of information processing, the nature of which is to a great extent scientifically unexplored.[6]

Explicit and implicit agreement on symbolic meaning coexist in human societies. Explicit agreement on symbolic meaning generally appears to be rationalizations and verbalizations - in the words of Edwin Ardener (1980:308), the "language shadows" of cultural meaning - that satisfy a wish of the native population to be able to account for features of their cultural tradition. Although these verbalizations may give the anthropologist insight in some levels of cultural meaning, they are "native" explanations and models of cultural phenomena which seldom give the anthropologist sufficient information to enable him to account for the ordering of symbols in the society with reference to their communicative function and semantic interrelations.[7]

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[6] A few examples from contemporary "western culture" may illuminate what kind of interpretation and understanding we are referring to here. When we listen to an enjoyable piece of music, we feel that we are touched by it. The tonal harmonies associate to modes, feelings and ideas, and there is usually a general consensus among listeners as to what a certain piece of music "means". All attempts to "translate" the music into verbal statements are seriously impaired by the fundamentally different nature of musical and verbal expression. But also verbal expression may be subject to implicit understanding. When we read a novel that has caught our interest, we get mentally and emotionally absorbed in the story. Often we are quite unaware of why a particular novel has caught our attention, but through self-reflection we may arrive at an understanding of the reasons why. In general, the story is a metaphor of significant themes in our individual life. The public appreciation of the novel depends on these themes being shared by a plurality of individuals.

[7] We may note that anthropologists have very different opinions on the nature and relevance of native symbolic exegesis. Two conflicting standpoints are represented by Bernard Juillerat (1980) and Ron Brunton (1980a, b). Juillerat seems to hold the position that all peoples actually do have an extremely well developed exegesis which

Frederick Errington (1984:21), for example, makes the following conclusion concerning the symbolic exegesis of the Minangkabau, referred to earlier:

> "... [T]hese explanations were from my perspective much to shallow to be convincing. They seemed shallow because they appeared so prolific, facile, ad hoc, and dogmatic, and because they focused on what were in my view the superficialities of overt form...the Minang and I were following different assumptions about the nature of ... explanation".

The anthropologists task is to inquire into the implicit agreement on symbolic meaning in order to arrive at a scientifically satisfying model of symbolic organization and communication in a given society.

Social categories in societies often agree on partially different interpretations and understandings of symbols and cultural expressions. This frequently takes the form of an uneven distribution of cultural knowledge - either in the form of certain groups having more such knowledge than others, or in the form of groups having comparable amount of knowledge but of partially different content. We can often infer from anthropological monographs that unequal distribution of cultural knowledge is present in a particular society, but it is seldom that studies are concerned with the full implications of this fact. In the analysis of a ritual, for example, a general "message" may be arrived at by considering the presumed cultural knowledge of the most initiated

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fully accounts for the "mathematical order" of their religion. If anthropologists do not encounter such an exegesis, it is because they have failed to brake the shell of secrecy which surrounds it. Juillerat therefore recommends his colleagues to follow his own example and conduct fieldwork for a period of 10-15 years. Brunton, on the other hand, refers to cases in which symbolic exegesis no doubt is absent, and in which individuals clearly never ever had considered questions concerning the meaning of their rituals. Brunton argues (as well as Barth 1975:226) that cases when anthropologists have encountered seemingly "deep" native exegeses, as have Juillerat and Victor Turner, this is because they have "trained" their informants to supply it through a procedure of questioning and discussion. Brunton (1980b) says:

> "The time he [Juillerat] insists necessary for field research should be more than enough for the persistent anthropologist, convinced that inarticulateness is simply a mask, to 'train' an informant to produce exegesis".

group in the society. The question of why groups with limited access to the total amount of cultural knowledge nevertheless seem to find meaning in symbols and rituals, has generally been passed over. A notable exception to this is Fredrik Barth's "Ritual and Knowledge Among the Baktaman of New Guinea" (1975). Barth shows how the unequal distribution of symbolic knowledge between groups of Baktamans (women, little boys, and each of the seven initiation sets comprising older boys and men) leads to significant differences in how symbols are interpreted and how rituals are understood by individuals belonging to these groups. In the Baktaman case individuals from different socio-cultural groups participate together in rituals, the members of each group having their quite distinct idea of the concerns of the ritual and of what symbols mean. Within each group the agreement on the meaning is being strengthened when individuals observe a collective action which they conceive as dependent on the particular meaning *they* assign to the events being an *instinsic* meaning.

The agreements on symbolic interpretation and understanding are organized in terms of contexts: one symbol may be comprehended as having different meanings in different contexts. The differences in meaning may be small - the meanings being shades of each other - or they may be great, amounting to genuine homonymy. This means that we may not infer the meanings of a symbol in one context from its meanings in another. If we return to the Dowayo example, we remember that jar was related to ancestral skull in some instances of cultural expression and to human fertility (particulary the womb) in other instances. We may presume that Dowayos imlicitly agree on assigning different meanings to jars in different contexts, and that a jar itself does not strictly represent anything - but is semantically related to, among other things, skull and womb. These semantic associations are "activated" in certain contexts and remain latent in others. The notion of "contextual meaning" provides a solution to the problem of "surplus generativity" of representational symbolism (Barley 1983:67). If jars are associated with wombs, we may ask why women do not believe that they run the risk of infertility if they happen to break such a jar - a belief which would follow logically if jars were generally equated with wombs in Dowayo cultural thought. But acknowledging that meaning is contextual makes these facts less problematic. Jars in their ordinary use are apparently not equated with wombs.

To sum up: to assign meaning to a symbolic object or act is basically to associate it with something apart from its material and physical existence. This association may be established quite idiosyncratically by individuals, but is essentially of a conventionalized nature, based on implicit or explicit agreement between individuals. The agreement concerns the meaning of symbols in different contexts, and may be specific for socio-cultural groups in a society. When we speak in general of the meaning of a symbol or of a cultural expression in a certain society, we refer to this conventionalized meaning, which in terms of actors is the meaning that an *idealized* native actor must be presumed to associate with symbols and expressions if the data collected on social and cultural life in a particular society shall be possible to account for by a scientifically satisfying anthropological model.

If we compare this idea of symbolic meaning with the linguistic view of word-meaning, we find that the two are quite similar in many respects. The meaning of a speech-sound is based on an association with a conceptual referent. This meaning may to a certain extent be idiosyncratic,[8] but is basically an agreement on a conventional meaning - which may be quite dissimilar in different socio-cultural groups. Words may, furthermore, have significantly different meanings depending on the syntactic and pragmatic context in which they occur. There are also, as we will soon see, important differences between symbols and signs in the aspects just mentioned, but it is when we consider the essentially *implicit* nature of the understanding of cultural symbols that we encounter a nearly total dissimilarity. Even if occationally the speech of persons may be veiled and enigmatic, language remains basically an instrument for explicit communication. We assume that this difference is founded on the circumstance that the substance of cultural expression are themes and ideas which do not readily lend themselves to verbal expression. As examples we may think of ideas concerning the meaning and nature of life, pre-life and afterlife, notions of political and other forms of power, ideas concerning the relations between the sexes, and between human beings and animals, ideas concerning the distribution of fortune and misfortune, notions of the nature of natural phenomena as rain, draught and fertility, etc.

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[8] See, for example, Osgood & Suci & Tannenbaum, 1957.

Cultural expression, furthermore, not only entails the articulation of messages involving these complex and evasive ideas and themes, it also illuminates them, makes them believable and tangible, and through this, makes imagined powers and states possible to allocate and manipulate through symbolic acts.

In order to understand why cultural symbols have a compelling capacity to express themes and ideas which are intrinsically hard to express with linguistic signs, we must examine the semantic nature of these two modes of communication. A number of points pertaining such an inquiry will be discussed on the following pages.

3. SEMANTICS OF CULTURAL SYMBOLS AND LINGUISTIC SIGNS

It seems that many of the differences between the semantic nature of linguistic signs and cultural symbols can be related to their different potentials for being associated with other entities for reasons other than convention. This difference is founded on the existence of significant dissimilarities in the material and physical qualities of cultural symbols and speech-sounds, and dissimilarities between the contexts in which they occur.[9] Speech-sounds are ephemeral, substanceless, and momentary phenomena which are created with the only purpose of transmitting information, and they are therefore not normally found outside the context of speech. These features makes the speech-sound's potential for association with something apart from its conventionalized conceptual meaning marginal (though not totally deniable, as we will see). Cultural symbols, on the other hand, have a high "associative potential". As we have seen from the Dowayo example, symbols acquire associations in several different ways: from their appearance *qua symbols* in cultural expression (ritual, myth, display of symbols, and linguistic forms as metaphors in language, riddles, formalized oratory, and proverbs), through their existence in contexts outside the

[9] There is apparently also a difference in the functioning of the genetically determined neurological apparatus for processing speech vs. other coded information. But the phylogenetic origin of this difference is in part determined by the said difference in material and physical qualities between linguistic signs and cultural symbols.

realm of cultural expression (in their "natural" state), and from their physical form and substance. It is important to note, however, that since both speech-sounds and symbols have a function as *signum* in human communicative systems with a common principle of creating meaning through associative connection, the difference in associative potential between them is one of *degree* and not an absolute one. This is why it is hard to isolate any phenomena exclusively belonging to either linguistic or cultural semantics, but also the reason to why it is easy to see that significant differences exist between the two. We will in greater detail discuss these matters below.

Motivation

On the previous pages we have argued that symbols to a certain extent have conventional general meanings, that is to say, they have referents. When we investigate the relation between a cultural symbol and its referent(s) we find, as a rule, that it is *motivated*, i.e. it is possible to find an inducement to why a certain entity (object or act) has been chosen to represent a certain notion. One such essential inducement is that symbol and referent share one or more "un-contrived" semantic features. We may illustrate this relation with Dowayo jars, which, it will be remembered, in Dowayo cultural tradition symbolically are equated with both human skull and womb (figure 3).[10]

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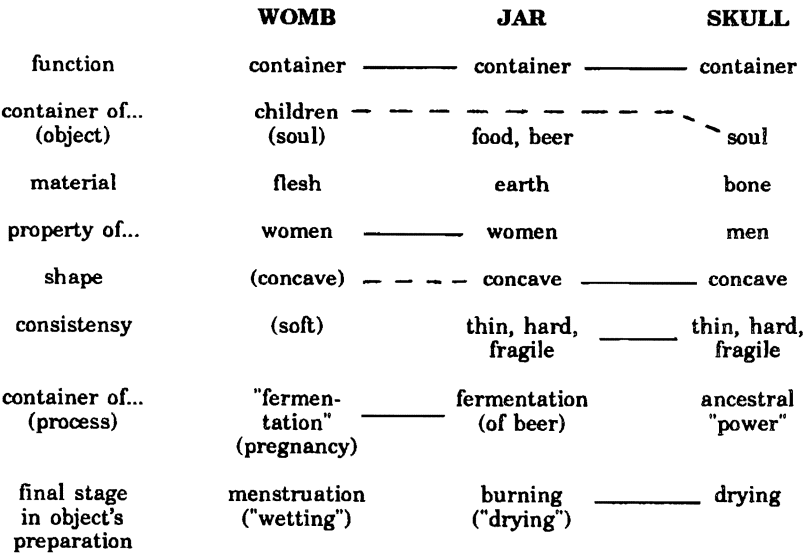
[10] The equation of fermentation and pregnancy in Figure 3 may perhaps appear far-fetched, but is actually encountered in a great number of cultures. As an example may be mentioned that in the slang of the Swedish county of Värmland, a woman who is pregnant is said to have been "put on" fermentation (yeast). In this particular context pregnancy seems to be equated with both the baking of bread and the illegal production of alcohol. The first kind of fermentation shows an analogy to pregnancy through its "swelling" character, and because it is primarily the concern of women. The second kind of fermentation is analogous to pregnancy in the respect that it is a process of maturation initiated by men under circumstances concealed from the public, and because men, according to the moral values of Värmlandic cultural tradition, show their masculinity by having initiated such a process with a successful outcome.

Figure 3.



The phenomena of motivation by the sharing of semantic features can also be found in language. Even though the "substance" of a linguistic sign (morpheme or word) gives less opportunities for association than the various features of cultural symbols, qualities of a speech-sound is related to properties of its referent in phonological motivation ("onomatopoeia").[11] Linguistic research during the last decades has

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[11] This relation can be either *primary* or *secondary*. In the primary type the speech-sound is an imitation of a sound made by the referent, or the sound which *is* the referent (e.g. "Bang"). In this case we thus find a linguistic sign which in fact is found in other contexts than that of verbal articulation, and its associations in that context provides its motivation. In the secondary type of phonological motivation the speech-sound evokes a movement, quality or state of the referent. It is of interest to note that while some words are undisputable onomatopoeic, a large number of words may be interpreted as onomatopoeic with the help of human imagination. For example: Charles Nodiér, the French romanticist, made the following reflection over the word "catacombe":

"It is impossible to find a sequence of more picturesque sounds in order to render the noise of the coffin rolling from step to

shown that this type of motivation is more common in language than has been believed hitherto. Mary LeCron Foster (1978), for example, claims to have discovered the existence of pan-linguistic onomatopoeic patterns relating certain basic meanings to the phonetic form of words designating these meanings in languages all over the world.[12]

Anthropologists (e.g. Barley 1983, Gell 1975) have argued that structural analysis may reveal other, less obvious, forms of motivation of cultural symbols. The core of their argument is that the relation between two or more symbols may mirror the relationship between their referents according to the general structure (R=referent, S=symbol):

$$R_1 : R_2 :: S_1 : S_2$$

This alleged kind of motivation may be called "internal", since it concerns the internal structural relations between

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step on the sharp corners of stones, and suddenly coming to a halt in the midst of the tombs" (quoted from Ullman 1962:89).
The quest for motivation has even led some persons to perceive analogies between the referent of a word and its written form. E.g., it has been pointed out that the written word "locomotive" resemblances a locomotive, with the "l" as funnel and the "o"'s as wheels (Ullman 1962:91).

This striving for the detection of motivation may be taken as an example of how meaning may be constructed according to the cultural knowledge and awareness of the interpreter. By applying a certain conventionalized mode of interpretation, a new significance of the words is established. The words cease to be arbitrary representations. A hidden and secret nature of them is found, and they become more closely connected - identified - with their referents: the word "catacombe" becomes the sound of an activity carried out in catacombs, while the written word "locomotive" itself becomes a locomotive, albeit in miniature and stylized form.

[12] "For example, a global meaning of *outward expression or spread* underlies words containing a verbal root of the form (or something very like) - [p...l] - (vowel absent or interposed) in all of the world's languages that I have examined to date. In English, this meaning and its phonological expression (English [fl] derives from Proto-Indo-European [*pl]) occurs in words such as *flood, fly, flow, flat, full, field*" (Foster 1980:388).

symbols, while the form in which symbol and referent share semantic features may be called "external", since these features are of the external appearance of the symbolic object or act (Barley 1983:24). We may illustrate "external motivation" by considering Dowayo jars together with Dowayo blacksmith's bellows. Blacksmiths, with their families, constitute an endogamous "unclean" caste in Dowayo society. The female members of this caste are potters. Now, if one of the distinguishing occupational features of a female potter (jar) is associated with the female procreative organ (womb), this provides a motivation for an analogous association - that between a distinguishing occupational feature of a male blacksmith (bellows) and the male procreative organ (penis):

jar : womb :: bellows : penis

We may as well say that the association bellows-penis motivates the association jar-womb, since this former association also is externally motivated (the smith is of male sex, the bellows have a shape similar to the male genitals, and an analogous ejecting function), or that the two associations provide a mutual motivation. Factual evidence for the association between bellows and penis is found in beliefs concerning the illness thought to be caused by the blacksmith's pollution. This illness implies an unnatural "outgrowth" of penis.[13] We may note that the illness believed to be caused by the female form of blacksmith's pollution - transmitted by potters - appears to be the inversion of the one caused by the male form: it consists of an "ingrowth" of the vagina. This fact appears to strengthen the evidence for a general structure providing motivation for symbolism concerning procreational matters.

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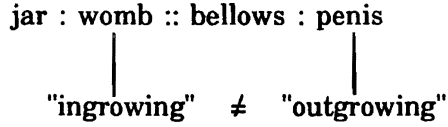
[13] The male form of the illness, "zaase", is actually thought to cause a prolapsed anus. Anus is, however, in this context quite obviously a substitute for penis, since the Dowayo men have an ambition to keep the actual operation of circumcision a secret to women - they are told that the boys who are initiated go through an operation in which their anuses are sealed with a piece of cowhide. The male form of "zaase" is thus an illness which transforms the part of the male body allegedly treated in circumcision (anus) into the part for which it is a substitution (penis).

Although we may distinguish two structural forms of linguistic motivation - "morphological" and "semantic" (Ullman 1962:81-82) - none of these appears to correspond closely to the alleged "external" motivation in cultural symbolism. Only if we leave the morphemic level and look at linguistic forms such as proverbs, riddles, and metaphors, do we find comparable structures. This fact may indicate that the symbolic associative relationships, which are taken as evidence for "internal" motivation, should instead be viewed as alternative articulations of cultural messages. In the case of Dowayo jars and bellows, one could perhaps argue that the meaning of the beliefs referred to above concern the pollutive capacity of the blacksmith "caste", and that this capacity to inflict illness takes on different forms for men and women depending on differing presuppositions concerning the sexes in connection with pollution. The possibility of making an abstract equation like:



does thus not depend on associations between symbols and notions which follow a structural "logic", but rely instead on the articulation of cultural messages which take on alternative forms when expressed in diverse ways and in diverse contexts.

Apparently, the sharing of semantic features between symbol and referent is one of the main reasons why a particular symbol has been chosen to convey its conventional meanings. But in symbolic motivation we never find determination and causality. If there would be determination, we would expect to find a high degree of homogeneity in symbolic expression in human society: comparable meanings would be signified by similar symbols. Such a homogeneity is not found. We may only discern a few generally human cultural expressions, as the symbolic association between social power and height.[14] It is thus impossible to assert the necessity of a certain symbol

[14] Concerning this relationship, see Brandes, 1980.

to convey certain meanings in a culture. It may be possible, in some cases, to judge that the apparently most suitable symbol of those available do indeed signify a certain meaning (e.g. Barth 1975:160, Lewis 1980:28). In other cases, however, one must conclude that objects which seem extremely well suited to convey certain meanings are not employed as symbols at all, and that these meanings are symbolized by other, seemingly less appropriate, symbols (e.g. Barth 1975:72-73).

It is of interest to note that the existence of parallel metaphors in otherwise unrelated languages is surprisingly extensive (Ullman 1962:225-6). For example, the pupil of the eye is metaphorically called "little girl" or "little boy" in more than thirty languages belonging to culturally and linguistically different groups. An explanation of why such parallel metaphors are more common in language than in cultural symbolism would presumably have to take into consideration that linguistic metaphors relate to comparatively clear-cut and simple concepts, which refer to objects, acts, and states, and appear in quite similar form all over the world, while cultural metaphors, i.e. symbols, relate to obscure and complex notions which pertains to circumstances that may be unique for a particular society.

Polysemy

Many anthropologists have concluded that a crucial feature of cultural symbols is their capacity to have multiple referents, i.e. to be polysemous. A symbol's multitude of potential associations constitute the prerequisite condition for polysemy. In the example of the Dowayo jar we saw that jar referred both to human skull and to womb. But the polysemy of cultural symbols do not only imply that a symbol may have different meanings in different contexts and for different socio-cultural classes of people. The symbol never ceases to connote *all* of its associations in its appearance in cultural expression, and in particular it connotes those gained through its use *qua* symbol. Nigel Barley (1983:38) makes the following conclusion concerning Dowayo jars and similar Dowayo symbols:

> "...the power of such images often lies precisely in their ability to maintain several simultaneous references without being clearly reducible to any one."

The polysemy found in language shows some similarities with that of cultural symbols. In the case of figurative language, the different referents of a word share semantic features (for example: similarity in shape between a human or animal eye and the "eye" of a needle). Furthermore, linguistic polysemy is often found when words are used in different contexts and when words become specialized in their use by particular socio-cultural groups. But linguistic polysemy is never based on the sharing of semantic features between a sound and its referents (if we return to our example, the sound [eye] is not similar in "shape" to an actual eye). In contrast to cultural symbols, the associative capacity of the speech-sound is apparently too low to allow multiple associations. Furthermore, the contextual and social differentiations mostly involve just shades of the same basic meaning. But most important is that both the ephemeral nature of the speech-sound, and the semi-unconscious habitual mode of ordinary word-understanding which implies a low awareness for the associative possibilities of words by speakers, make the speech-sound's associative and connotative capacity in everyday use marginal. Polysemous speech-sounds may, therefore, in their everyday use, be regarded as *de facto* mono-semous. It is principally in poetry, riddles, and comparable linguistic forms of expression that the polysemy of words becomes mobilized at a level where they significantly influence the meaning of verbal expressions.

"Associative meaning"

As our idea of cultural symbols is that they acquire meaning through an association with something apart from their material and physical existence, a symbol may be associated, not only with referents, but also with other symbols. This suggest that the meaning of a symbol is constructed both by its reference to notions and by its reference to other symbols, and, consequently, also by the meanings associated with these. If we once more return to the example of the Dowayo jars, we must presume that the use of jars in rainmaking ceremonies - although this use is primary related to the "skull"-meanings of jars - also activates the "womb/fertility" meanings of jars to a certain extent - meanings which have been generated largely through the ceremonial use of jars in other rituals than that of rainmaking. This aspect of symbolic meaning has been emphasized by anthropologists in the

last decades (Aijmer 1984, Barth 1975, Barley 1983). The meaning of a symbol must be viewed as principally generated through the associations it acquires in its use in cultural expressions. Fredrik Barth (1975:189-90) arrives at the following conclusion concerning symbols in Baktaman culture:

> "...the relevance and meaning of such symbols cannot, to my understanding, be derived deductively from their natural features. A highly significant, and often dominant, source of meaning seems to be the very operations which the Baktaman perform on these symbols in their rites: through such contrivances associations and identifications are created which constitute a tradition of knowledge and understanding in which the symbolic values of these concrete objects are largely generated."

We often see that certain symbols or groups of symbols, "key symbols" (Ortner 1973), are central in the associative systems of symbols. The different paths of meaning of these symbols are intensely used in cultural expression. "Key symbols" seem to exert a semantic "gravitational pull" (Barley 1983:44) on other symbols.

It is of interest to note that associations between signs, affecting their meaning, is, to a certain extent, also present in language. The concept of "associative field" has proved to be of great value in semantic analysis. The associative field of a word comprises all words to which it is associated. The association is based on similarity in sound and in sense.[15]

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[15] "...[T]he referential definition of meaning must not lead to an atomistic view of language, in which each word would be regarded as an isolated and self-contained unit. In addition to the very special and *sui generis* relationship which binds the name to the sense, words are also associated with other words with which they have something in common, in sound, in sense, or in both. The noun *light*, for example, will be connected with *darkness, day, sun*, etc., by associations between the senses; with the adjective *light* 'not heavy' because the two words are homonymous; and with the adjective *light* 'not dark', the verb to *light*, the noun *lightning*, etc., on both formal and semantic grounds. This principle plays a significant part in changes of meaning and in the structure of the vocabulary..." (Ullman 1962:63).

Objectified representations

We have hypothesized that the function of symbolism is not only to convey messages concerning complex and diffuse notions, but also to make these notions believable and tangible. Cultural symbolism makes possible manipulation of powers and states comprised by such notions through the performance of expressive acts. This function seems to be related to an important quality of symbols which obliges us to admit that the use of the concept "reference" in describing the semantics of symbols has serious impediments. This quality is that symbols which are concrete objects may embody their "referents" to such an extent that they become much more than representations. We may say that these objectified representations actually *become* what they are "referring" to. They are syntheses of representation and referent; they appear in their own light as concrete and elaborated entities with a deep significance largely acquired in their taking part in cultural expression - through associations established in their use in display, ritual and myth.[16] Such symbolic objects seldom figure in "mundane" contexts of every-day life. They are exclusively confined to the sphere of cultural expression.

For example, the statues and relics of saints in Roman Catholic Europe are ceremonially treated by their venerators as they were the saints themselves. This symbolic activity is, by and large, formed by ideas of how one should treat living persons to gain their favor, and further by the ideas of the Roman Catholic church on sainthood and liturgical form. In the cults of saints we may assume that people try, with a manipulative intention, to grapple notions of fortune and misfortune, fertility, existential problems, and the like. The relics and statues of saints are, however, quite precisely defined "conversion devices" for the transformation of the imagined supernatural power, pertaining to the celestial realm of God, to the realm of human beings, where this power is believed to affect processes and states pertaining to the said notions. The relics and statues of saints are thus symbols which refer to vague notions, but they are much more than only representations: they have assimilated these notions and have been culturally constituted as specified

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[16] For an interesting discussion of this aspect of symbols, see Wagner, 1978:24-31.

instruments for the appropriation and manipulation of imagined powers. They are regarded as beings with consciousness and a higly distinct individual character.

But objects and acts may also show no more than a slight "contrived" associative connection with other entities. Such objects and acts figure mostly in everyday contexts and are not focal elements in elaborated forms of cultural expression, for example: tools, vehicles, furniture, common clothes and foods, ways of walking, etc. The associative connection is manifested through, for instance, decorations, colours and smells, and more generally, through a certain "style". In these cases it is not the object *in toto* which is symbolic, but only a certain feature of it. By incorporating such symbolic features in otherwise "signalling innocent"[17] objects and acts, the symbolic meaning of these features become "tagged" to the objects and acts in question. We have thus encountered a type of symbols which are less concrete than those discussed in the paragraph above - they basically consist of patterns and qualities. The fact that such symbols generally seem to have less complex and multifaceted meanings than the "objectified" ones, appears to support the line of argument proposed in this paper. The semantic character of these less concrete symbols show more similarities with the character of linguistic signs than the semantics of "objectified" symbols do.

Although speech-sounds are not objects, also they may assimilate and "objectify" their referents, even if this does not take the dramatic proportions which we may witness in the world of cultural symbols. Words used in formal oratory, prayer, magical spells, blessings, etc., are by speakers perceived to have a special significance, to embody certain notions, and must be considered as referring to the same type of diffuse and complex notions that cultural symbols do.

Phenomena in which meaningful patterns and qualities are superimposed on words and sentences are well-known to linguists. Conventionalized patterns of intonation, for example, add a general meaning of "question" or "statement" to sentences. It is interesting to note that the meaning of such patterns appear to be more constant both syncronically and diacronically than the meaning of separate morphemes, in analogy to the more stable meaning of cultural patterns and qualities compared with cultural symbols.

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[17] A term coined by Martin Wobst, c.f. Conkey 1980:225

Syntax and clustering

If we are to understand a linguistic phrase, it is not enough to know the meaning of each of the words it contains. We must also consider the "grammatical meaning" encoded in the syntactic organisation of words. For example, the following two sentences contain the same words but have different meanings: "John gave an apple to Peter"; "Peter gave an apple to John". The syntactic construction (subject - predicate - accusative object - dative object) assigns a certain basic meaning to its parts. In the case of cultural symbols we do not find directly comparable semantic phenomena to any great extent. Sequences of symbols in cultural expression are not a rule, and when such sequences are realized, they seem more to stress the message of the expression rather than to add any significant meaning to it (Barth 1975:209). Instead symbols are in cultural expressions simultaneously articulated. In cases when the sequential ordering of ritual do have a significant meaning, as in "rites de passage" and in sacrifice, this order is related to certain well-defined phases of ritual, which are determined by the performative intention of the ceremony, and not to anything comparable to linguistic syntax. The differences concerning syntax and meaning between linguistic signs and cultural symbols can, at least partially, be attributed to the differences in physical qualities between the two. Speech-sounds *must* be uttered in a sequence, while a sequential display of cultural symbols would be a contrivement detrimental to the polysemous nature of symbols. Communication through syntactic expression of signs is useful only when the signs are unambigous enough to ideally limit the understanding of a message to only one alternative.

We have now pointed to some semantic characteristics of cultural symbols which help us to understand why such symbols are commonly used instead of linguistic signs for non-analytical expression of themes and ideas concerning evasive and complex notions of abstract powers, states, and processes. The physical concreteness of cultural symbols compared to the relatively "substance-less" nature of linguistic signs seems to entail that cultural symbols have a higher potential than linguistic signs for association. Consequently, to a significantly higher degree the former are motivated, are *de facto* polysemous, comprise associative meaning, and may become "objectified" syntheses of representation and referent.

Since speech-sounds do have a certain, but limited, potential for association, through their sound and sense, linguistic signs are not totally lacking these semantic characteristics, they are just less pronounced. The difference in their prominence is, however, so great that the syntactical organization of signs, which is dominant in language, is virtually absent in cultural expression, where a simultaneous conveyance of symbols is predominant.

We may sum up this part of our discussion by stating that the capacity of cultural symbols to compellingly communicate themes and ideas which are intrinsically hard to express verbaly relates to two general conditions pertaining to the apprehension of cultural meaning.

First, since cultural symbols are polysemous and have "associative fields", symbolic expression can be extremely rich and dense in meaning. Different aspects of the ideas and themes - even logically incompatible ones - which are the subject of expression may be communicated simultaneously, and may be represented in a multiplicity of alternative forms, each presenting a unique version of the content of these ideas and themes. Simultaneous and polysemous expression also allow for a wide variety of interpretations and understandings, thus permitting individuals and communities of individuals to assign more or less different meanings to one and the same instance of expression. This means that cultural expressions can be the collective concern of a society even if individuals and communities of individuals entertain conflicting opinions as to the meaning of the message as well as to the actual matters which symblically are refered to. Consequently, cultural expression is not a medium for analysis or debate, but for a multifaceted collective discourse.

Second, since cultural symbols are often concrete and tangible, they may assimilate their evasive and abstract referents, and in a way *become* and go beyond the referents as self-existent cultural constructs. Such symbols do not only occur in cultural expression as communicative elements, but also, and perhaps foremost, as entities with specific roles in the manipulations of metaphysical states and powers which generally are the concern of such expressions. A full understanding of the meaning of these symbols must therefore not only consider their semantic associations with referents and other symbols, but also their role in symbolic action - a function that in the most complex form of cultural expression, ritual, may be described with concepts such as "trans-

form", "channel", and "connect". Modern anthropology has abandoned the orthodox Durkheimean postulate that symbolic universes are reflections of social conditions. Instead it is emphasized that cultural expressions, as ritual and myth, present *alternative* worlds, which stand in intricate relationships to each other and to the actual social conditions. Recent anthropological investigations (Aijmer 1984b; Ferriera 1987) have suggested that cultures should be understood as comprising a plurality of distinct domains of knowledge, each governed by its own presuppositions, and that symbolic expression essentially concern the inter-linking of these domains. This general function of symbolic expression in culture render "key symbols" an important trancendental quality that must be considered when we speak of the meaning of these expressions and symbols.

The fact that ritual *do* things is related to the extensive redundancy of cultural expressions. When symbolic acts are performed not only to express things, but to instrumentally accomplish something the result of which is not immediately apparent (as, for example, curing illness and promoting fertility), the acts may be repeated over and over again, in a similar form or with slight variation, in an endeavour to guarantee a desired result.[18] It is not surprising that the extreme cases of reduplicative redundancy in language is found in verbal forms where an instrumental intention is combined with a reference to diffuse and complex notions, as in magical spells and prayers.

4. ORIGIN AND CHANGE OF SYMBOLIC MEANING

We have assumed that the order of symbols in society to a large extent can be explained with reference to the communicative function of symbols - they are carriers of meaning. But

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[18] An effect of redundancy in cultural expression is that repetition of slightly varied sequences of symbolic acts facilitates the comprehension of the basic meaning of the expression. It is, however, doubtful if this circumstance is the *cause* of redundancy. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963:229) seems to propose this idea:

> "...The question has often been raised why myths, and more generally oral literature, are so much addicted to duplication, triplication, or quadruplication of the same sequence... The function of repetition is to render the structure of the myth apparent."

we have this far only discussed how symbols are interpreted and understood, and how prominent characteristics of the semantics of cultural symbols relate to the content of symbolic expression. It is now time to say briefly something about how the order of symbols in a society comes about and how it may change.

The meaning of symbols, and of symbolic expressions, is subject to change in all cultural traditions. The complex interplay between ideas, social relations and material resources in a society never reches an equilibrium, and therefore constantly induces modification of symbolic meaning. The need for change of meaning may also be actualized in cases where certain significant circumstances (droughts, epidemics, etc.) induce people to quesdion their old beliefs and favour new ones. We could, with Dan Sperber (1985), speak of an "epidemiology of culture". There is a constant production of symbols and expressive acts, and of more and less conventionalized interpretations and understandings according to which symbols and acts are comprehended. This production is always initiated on the individual level. Individuals may combine already established symbols into novel forms of expression, or they may assign symbolic meaning to previously "signalling innocent" objects and acts. They may also interpret symbols and cultural expressions in new ways, and through their behaviour non-verbally relate these new meanings to other individuals. But from this individualistic production of symbols and meanings, it is only the "products" which are collectively accepted that become incorporated in the cultural tradition.[19] It is only those features of culture which are continuously accepted by human communities which will continue to be part of the culture (see, for example, Barth 1975:229ff). With the term "acceptance" we mean, in this context, that individuals consciously or unconsciously comprehend the cultural expressions in question as meaningful and relevant.

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[19] Claude Lévi-Strauss (1971:560) writes, concerning myth:
"All literary, oral, or written creation can, at the beginning, only be individual. But once given over to oral tradition as the latter is produced among non-literate peoples, only structured levels that are based on shared foundations remain stable... Individual works are all potential myths, but it is their collective adoption that actualizes ... their 'mythicism'."

It is important to note that not only do *forms* of cultural expression change, also the *interpretations* of forms which have remained quite unchanged over a period of time are the subject of change. We can, for example, expect to find cases where a particular ordering of symbols in a ritual can be fully explained only with reference to meanings which were assigned to the symbols in times past, while the understandings among participants in present time principally are limited to an apprehension of the symbolic ordering as "mystic", "powerful", and "beyond understanding", and therefore for them worth perpetuating in unchanged form. The same circumstances can be encountered in some of the cases where a particular cultural expression has been "borrowed" from another, culturally dissimilar, society.[20]

While it is false to assume that cultures are well-integrated semantic systems, we must acknowledge that there exists a certain striving towards consistency - at least within cultural domains where the confrontation of cultural elements is inevitable. The consistency sought after is apparently not of the kind proposed by Lévi-Straussean structuralism, i.e. extremely "symmetrical" and "logical" constructs, ultimately to be explained with reference to a supposedly binary functioning of the human brain, but instead a "harmony" between the various meanings assigned to symbols and expression, favoured through the cultural intuitions of individuals (see Barth 1975:238). Since the meaning of symbols is principally derived from their use in cultural expression, this means that a change in symbolic meaning in one symbol or in one cultural expression may lead to further changes in meaning in other symbols and cultural expressions, this leading to still further such changes, etc. Thus the inducement to symbolic change may come from within the symbolic universe itself.

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[20] We find comparable phenomena in language. Obsolete and foreign language is commonly used in prayers, incantations, etc. For example, in non-arabic Islamic countries, the Koran is read in Arabic during religious ceremonies, irrespective of the fact that a majority of participants may not understand the arabic language. Although neither speaker nor listener linguistically understand what is read, we must assume that the reading aloud of the arabic words is somehow meaningful for the participants.

The change of meaning of symbols in a society may be studied in two general ways. One way is to employ a macro-perspective in which the meanings of a society's symbols are mapped in a sequence of periods in time and correlated with social and other historical changes affecting that society (e.g. Bloch 1986). Another way is to adopt a micro-perspective grounded on minute observation of ongoing social life, in which actual individual invention and collective acceptance (or rejection) of symbols and interpretations is observed as well as the vanishing of symbolic meanings (e.g. Barth 1975). The interplay between individual innovation and collective acceptance of symbolic meaning is a process largely unexplored by social anthropologists. This lack of interest is disappointing since valuable insights into the nature of cultural semantics could be gained through such studies.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has attempted to clarify two pairs of seemingly paradoxical observations. The first pair is: - while symbolic meaning, for the individual, is strictly speaking whatever he may chose, we can nevertheless speak in general terms of the meanings of symbols in a certain cultural tradition. The second pair is: - while cultural and linguistic semantics at large appear to be of radically different natures, we can nevertheless observe a considerable number of semantic traits which are common to both.

In our attempt to clarify the first pair of observations, we have argued that the individual may associate a symbol with whatever entity he prefers in order to render it meaningful, but that certain associations present themselves to the individual with superior compellatory force. These associations are those which are contrived in the cultural expressions of a society. The collective use of symbols in social life gives the individual an impression of symbols as having intrinsic meaning. The relative stability of the contrived associations of symbols - i.e. the order of symbols - speak of an implicit agreement among individuals that the messages articulated through, and the symbolic acts accomplished in, cultural expressions are relevant to them as members of a certain cultural tradition.

When we considered the second pair of observations, we assumed that the semantic similarities between linguistic signs and cultural symbols relate to their common function as *signum* in human communicative systems with a common principle of creating meaning through cognitive association. The dissimilarities relate to the circumstance that cultural symbols have a concrete physical nature, while linguistic signs consist of ephemeral sound. This difference entails several significant dissimilarities between language and cultural symbolism; in their "associative potential", and, consequently, in the degree to which a number of semantic characteristics are present in the two modes of communication, in their capacity to "objectify" notions, and, further, to the extent in which they have a compelling capacity to express complicated and diffuse notions and ideas.

We have argued that the order of symbols in cultural expressions is the result of a cumulative process in which symbolic elements are added and removed according to a fluctuating non-verbalized agreement among individuals. How, then, shall the anthropologist explore the symbolic expressions of specific cultural traditions?

If we were to learn a totally foreign language, with no interpretative help at all at hand, the only possible strategy would be to observe closely the contexts in which the different speech-sounds occurred. Such a juxtaposition of words and contexts of use would gradually give information enough to enable us to assert the meanings of a substantial part of the vocabulary. Any analysis of the meaning of cultural symbols and expressions must be based on a similar investigation of the precise contexts in which individual symbols appear. The facts discovered by such a procedure make it possible for the anthropologist to construct a *hypothesis* concerning a cultural system (comprising notions, symbols, actions, actors, social contexts, etc.) which ideally accounts, in an economic way, for all known data.

Since both cultural expression and language are systems of human communication, it is relevant for the anthropologist to seek inspiration in linguistic models. But as there are significant differences between language and cultural expression as communicative modes, the direct application of linguistic models in anthropology seems to be of doubtful value. Anthropologists must develop analytical devices that are appropriate for the specific phenomena of cultural communication. At present, however, it does not seem wise to con-

centrate efforts on the development of theories concerning symbolic meaning, since the actual culdural phenomena such a theory would be deduced from are not known to any great extent. What is needed is instead detailed studies of symbolic meaning in particular cultural traditions. Such studies will provide a basis for subsequent development of a theory of symbolic meaning.

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