Symbols

Public and Private

Raymond Firth

Series Editor: VICTOR TURNER

Symbol Myth and Ritual

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RAYMOND FIRTH

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

My anthropological interest in symbolism was aroused more than forty years ago, among the Tikopia people of Western Polynesia. Their pagan rituals embodied many symbolic actions and symbolic statements of a vivid and complex kind, and interesting questions were presented as they converted from paganism to Christianity. But my earlier attraction to Romanesque art already bore on the problem of relation between religious symbolism and structure of society in a pre-industrial phase.

The aim of this book is to help to give perspective to the anthropological study of symbolic forms and processes and the functions of symbolism. It is meant neither as a textbook nor as a comprehensive general work. I have written about a range of ideas and material that seem relevant to me in understanding the problems of symbolism, and in what I have said of symbolism in art, literature, and religion I have no specialist knowledge. As well as giving some review of the present state of knowledge in anthropological studies of symbolism, I have tried to do three things. To provide some time-dimension, I have examined some of the ideas on symbolism put forward at the end of the eighteenth century and in the early nineteenth century by mythologists, dream-philosophers, cult-analysts – some of whom might be described as proto-anthropologists – and I have continued the study as anthropological interest crystallized until the present day. To provide breadth I have brought into discussion of the nature of symbolism hints of a few selected contributions from other fields of knowledge, including philosophy, since I think anthropologists need to be more aware of the depth of such studies in symbolism. Thirdly, I have deliberately cited examples of symbolic behaviour and statements about symbols, taken from newspapers and other ephemeral sources, because to my mind

they show something of the richness of material open for investigation in modern industrial society.

In all this, while not, as I have once been labelled, an 'unqualified empiricist', I have been very aware of the problem of evidence. I think speculative reasoning in anthropology is stimulating and necessary for the development of theory, but it is easy in the study of symbolism to let it pass for fact. In anthropology, our imagination will have to be welded to honest craftsmanship if in the long run it is to carry conviction.

In 1967, as the guest of Victoria University, New Zealand, I delivered the Chancellor's Lectures, beginning with 'Giving and Getting', in which I put forward some of the ideas in this book. When I was asked to become Sara H. Schaffner Lecturer at the University of Chicago for the Fall Quarter of 1970, I was stimulated to expand those themes in the direction of specific studies of symbolism, which seemed appropriate in view of the very lively interest in symbolism in the Department of Anthropology there. By the generous terms of the Lectureship, which was instituted by Mr Joseph Halle Schaffner in honour of his mother, the University was asked to give the lecturer such hospitality as would provide him with a free informal atmosphere in which to work and mingle with all members of all grades of the academic community. I am very grateful to the University authorities, and especially to Bernard S. Cohn, Chairman of the Anthropology Department, and my other colleagues there, for all the help and hospitality they gave me then and later.

I have since added to the Schaffner Lectures, and have presented parts of this book at various stages to audiences at Cornell, Case Western Reserve, Columbia, McGill, Princeton, the London School of Economics, the University of Hawaii, the University of British Columbia, the University of Toronto, and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. I mention in particular also that a version of material on the symbolism of exchange was given as the Dr David B. Stout Memorial Lecture before the Undergraduate Anthropology Club of the State University of New York at Buffalo, in April 1970. From discussions arising from these lectures and seminars I have profited much, and am grateful for the warmth of my reception on these occasions. A substantial part of the mat-

erial and general argument of Chapter 9 has appeared in another form as a contribution to a volume of essays in honour of my colleague Audrey Richards—*The Interpretation of Ritual*, edited by J. S. La Fontaine (London, Tavistock, 1972). I acknowledge with thanks the agreement of editor and publisher to my reproduction of this material.

More generally, I am indebted to many colleagues for stimulus in preparing this work, particularly to Fred Eggan, Mervyn Meggitt, Joan Metge, Jan Pouwer, David Schneider, Terence Turner, Victor Turner, Nur Yalman, for interest and encouragement at various stages. Also I should mention especially Barbara Babcock and Judith Schapiro, whose many helpful thoughts included reference to Charles Feidelson's book on symbolism in American literature, and Guy Michaud's study of the French Symbolists. Finally, clarity of expression in the first part of this work, and the thought of the whole, have benefited distinctly from talks with my wife, who blends stimulus with criticism in a way I acknowledge with gratitude.

London, August 1972 *Raymond Firth*

I

Chapter 1

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST'S REFLECTIONS ON SYMBOLIC USAGE

Symbolization is a universal human process. But we still need to understand much more about it, especially in its comparative aspects, in different societies, different classes, different religions. Pervasive in communication, grounded in the very use of language, symbolization is part of the living stuff of social relationships. Western literature is shot through with references which recall to us questions of existence and identity in symbol terms. In an essay on The Poet, Emerson wrote of the universality of the symbolic language: 'things admit of being used as symbols because nature is a symbol' (but so is culture) – 'we are symbols and inhabit symbols'. In *Sartor Resartus* Carlyle held that in a symbol there is both concealment and revelation. Oriental writings show analogous views. What is it in such statements that some of us find so attractive? Is it truth or illusion about human personality? And if these are not questions for anthropologists to answer, can we at least comment meaningfully upon the forms of such statements, the conditions of their utterance, and their social effects?

In intellectual circles, symbolism in literature, art and religion has long been a subject of study; philosophers and linguists have scrutinized the concept of symbol in its more abstract significance. I show later why I think such treatment is of interest to anthropologists. But anthropologists are also concerned with the ways in which ordinary people think about symbols, behave symbolically in their daily life as members of a society, and consciously interpret what they do as having symbolic meaning.

The essence of symbolism lies in the recognition of one thing as standing for (re-presenting) another, the relation between them normally being that of concrete to abstract, particular to general. The relation is such that the symbol by itself appears capable of

generating and receiving effects otherwise reserved for the object to which it refers – and such effects are often of high emotional charge.

POPULAR RECOGNITION OF SYMBOLS

Now, what is very striking about the contemporary social scene is the wide currency of the notion of symbolism, and the overt, frequent use of the term symbol to describe objects, persons, actions, relationships of public interest.* In recent years particularly, the popular press gives many examples. I pick out a few almost at random.

Countries are often spoken of as symbolized by their products. So it has been said that in the early part of this century, peat, potatoes and parish priests meant Ireland, and that these 'are still valid symbols'. But a product of one country has been taken as a symbol of some international organization because of some special quality of that product. So a Chinese animal, the rare giant panda, has been made a symbol of the World Wildlife Fund, and its image is embossed on a plaque pledging furriers not to handle skins of other endangered species. In the socio-political field, national military bases abroad have long been 'a symbol of world leadership'. Meetings of heads of state have taken on a quality far exceeding the empirical content of the occasion. A personal exchange of views of the President of France and the Prime Minister of Britain about the Common Market could, it was thought, serve a future historian of Europe as a 'symbolic turning point' in the twentieth century. President Nixon's journey to Alaska to greet the Emperor of Japan – 4,000 miles for a talk of fifty minutes – in late 1971 was interpreted as 'an essentially symbolic gesture' which it was hoped might ease some tension in Japanese-American relations; the meeting was 'of enormous symbolic importance'. The President's visit to the Peoples' Republic of China was regarded in American quarters as 'an exercise in symbolic diplomacy' – where the fact of his going to Peking would be of more diplomatic importance than any substantive agreements that might be reached while he was there. But since the

* The term has come also into the commercial field as a label, for example a London biscuit firm (of high respectability as a supplier by appointment to a member of the Royal Family) is called Symbol Biscuits Limited, with an elephant's head as its mark.