

1. INTRODUCTION (2/04)

Introduction to the anthropology study of symbolism

No prereqs, open to anyone

Run as combination of discussion and lecture

Readings keyed to each class, crucial that stay up, is core of course

No exam, just class participation and short papers

Will look at several kinds of symbolism anthropologists typically study.

1. **Myth.** Narratives, often set at beginning of world, very significant for life today but very different from today: Story of man who lives alone; one day comes home to find food cooked. So hides in bushes next time goes to forest, watches his dog turn into a woman, cook his food. Next time he keeps her from turning back into dog, marries her. Then more episodes...

But also everyday narratives: what I did yesterday; how I wrecked my car; why so-and-sos are no good; why all our projects fail; how I beat cancer.

2. **Ritual.** action of special sort. Some traditional African kingdoms, before new king put on throne, had to endure abuse, treated as vile. Famous Japanese temple rebuilt every twenty years, elaborate ceremonial at each step of taking apart and rebuilding.

3. **Magic.** Ritual that accomplishes something concrete. In society where I worked, man chants to animals before hunting, gets them to fall in love and come to him. If accidentally thinks of women while chanting, then no animals but lots of love affairs.

4. **Taboo.** prohibitions and negative magic, things shouldn't do. Don't eat pork, don't eat beef. If pregnant, eat crackers but not bread.

5. **Cosmology and symbolic systems.** Elaborate schemes of how the universe put together. In one system, 8 layers in universe. Soul must travel thru all 8 to get to heaven.

So we will be looking at lots of juicy, exotic stuff. But we will be looking at symbolism in our own society as well, often just as exotic, certainly a crucial part of life. Nothing secondary or trivial or decorative, often crucial issues in social life.

What is distinctive about anthropological approaches to symbolism?

Anthropology has borrowed from other fields concerned with symbolism, but we are different from most of them.

Many psychologists are most concerned with private symbols. Freudian analyst wants to decipher the symbols in patient's dream, use as key to patient's unconscious

When Freud looked at shared symbols, he often treated them as a kind of mass neurosis or psychosis

But anthropologists are most concerned with public, shared symbols. Something used or recognized by all the members of a group. And we do not treat public symbols as derivatives or offshoots of private symbols

Just because the symbols are public doesn't mean that their meanings are necessarily obvious. Some symbols may be public but obscure.

With the people I studied in the field, the Kuna of Panama, sometimes when I asked what something meant, it could be explained right away. Why did chief sing about termites in a tree trunk? Answer: It refers to a bad chief, who looks good on the outside but is rotten on the inside. For other symbols, they couldn't or wouldn't explain. At end of one ritual, they shoot a rooster with bow and arrow, I asked what it meant, they said they'd always done it that way, end of explanation. May even refuse to see as symbolic: a chief told me a myth, young men hiding behind a tree. I asked why that kind of tree, what did it mean? Chief said, well that just happened to be the tree that was there when they needed to hide.

Psychologists, when they leave the individual, often jump to the universal. Look for the meanings of a symbol in all cultures. e.g., every time someone dreams of a train going into a tunnel, always means the same thing. There may be individual variants--one patient may dream more often about trains, or a specific kind of train---but overall it is pretty constant. Jung and Jungians also looked for universals.

Anthros, on other hand, recognize wide variation in meaning from one culture to another. Some societies say the moon is female: the Kuna say it is an incestuous male.

Some cultures say dogs are wonderful, loveable; others that they are nasty, promiscuous, dangerous curs that eat, crap everywhere, and mount anything on legs. Others say neither, just that dogs very tasty.

Western culture makes much of the number three. Kuna and many other societies think four and multiples of four best: balanced, like the quarters of the universe. Chinese, I am told, avoid four because it sounds like the word for death.

So there can be great variation from one culture to the next. Also, the meaning in a particular culture is often most interesting and significant for how people understand and use symbols.

This doesn't mean that we won't find things that are similar from one culture to the next. We may even infer the existence of some universals. But mostly we want to read symbols in their local context.

Many students of symbolism most concerned with meaning. Anthros are very concerned with meaning, but also want to know how symbols *used*, what symbols do.

Symbols can help maintain the status quo, or they can convince someone to spend a lifetime fighting the status quo. They can take a child and turn him or her into an adult. They can sometimes even cure the sick. So we want to look at symbols in action.

The readings for this course consist mostly of article and chapter-length selections on particular cases. Some easy, some more difficult. We will discuss and work through the readings and try to build up some generalizations. I will also supply some generalities in class.

We will focus on particular kinds of symbolism and particular problems and issues in the study of symbolism. We will not be doing a history of schools of thought or theorists of symbolism. We will also not be introducing a lot of technical vocabulary, just a few basic terms and distinctions. Special terms are helpful sometimes, but in my opinion too many people working on symbolism and meaning get themselves lost in a thicket of terms and dogma.

[Class sessions will consist in large part of question-and-answer and discussion; in these notes, however, they are presented, with some exceptions, as discursive lectures.]