



**Understanding Anthropology Through Interpretation of
Symbolic Forms of Expression**

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Executive summary: One can get the impression that symbolic forms of expression exclusively involve looking purely at the theme “symbols” This is not to be overseen, however, it is important to stress that one has to do with symbols and its forms of expression. The usage of symbols should not be understood as a limitation of interpretation e.g. only within the genre “rituals”, but properly be addressed through relevancy. From this, the author attempts to lead the contribution to where the interpretation should be seen- in a broader perspective, and show how the effect of symbols within different themes become visible and take shape.

In the beginning, it becomes fundamental to treat the word “symbol”, for mapping what one puts in this expression. Making the starting point unorthodox and sober-minded, one could easily say that symbols are words that synonymously explain and represent objects’ realities. Transformed into examples, many with the author would say that: an animal such as the dove stands for peace, blue colour stands for coldness, red colour stands for warmth, while the flag and the state arms are national symbols. However, already here we should be critical. I.e., is everyone agreeing that e.g. the flag represents the national homogenous? Alternatively, differently given, does it mean that everyone being the proprietor of a flag has a homogenous understanding of the sense? According to e.g. Ernest Gellner related to the question of homogeneity, it is not so that nationalism imposes homogeneity, it is rather the objective need for homogeneity that is being reflected through nationalism.¹

About these questions, the author mainly shows that the anthropology through times has been able to contribute with different views regarding symbolic forms of expressions, and the frames to them. It has been shown that very little on this earth is of universal art, and this field is neither an exception. It is thus necessary that the analyses successively being put forward mirror critical evaluations to the material presented, and that it be discussed out of contextual relativity.

¹ Cf. E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford 1983, pp. 39-87.

1. Political macro symbols

1.1 Symbolic forms of expression: perspective of power

To draw the focus on 'large' symbols within political terms, today's fighting for independency in different places in the world is relevant to mention. Looking at the 'Muslim parts' once belonging to the Soviet Union, it is clear that e.g. the population in Chechnya no longer will identify themselves with the Russian people or the Russian flag.² One of their most significant symbols for resistance is a green band, which, normally, is being tied around the forehead or the gun. This is meant to symbolise a sign of fighting spirit, where unity and combating the Russians to the last drop of blood stands as central. The Chechnya rebellions are prepared the outcome might end in dying, whereas the green band supposedly would 'lead' them to paradise. I.e., in Islam, the colour green is synonymous with paradise, and the use of the colour in circumstances such as these is no new phenomenon, but has rather existed through a long time. The use of this phenomenon is not unique among the population in Caucasus, as this is also being made visible by their Arab brothers in the Israel/Israeli occupied territories by Hamas/Hizbollah, Al-Faran guerrilla in Kashmir, and in Europe among the former Bosnian-Muslim government forces. However, it is important to remember that not everyone is/was automatically under the same roof, as some might contribute in passive sympathy while others sit, waiting and seeing how to react. One might say it here has to do with "Imagined Communities", something the author intends to address a few critical words (cf. with the Malkki-example below).³

Benedict Anderson describes an imagined community where he says that we in a nation confess ourselves to the unity of one people and one state, but that we in reality are connected to an abstract community. This, because certain people inside the state have agreed the nation is a symbol synonymous with community and loyalty to one another, but that this becomes distant for the people within the state since they, among themselves, are not possessing loyalty and belonging seen as *Gesellschaft*.⁴

It is rather plain to understand Anderson's expressing, but one may be tempted to pay attention to one matter. In his model of explanation, he puts particular weight on that it is the mass media and the educational authorities that, by far, are the primary spreaders of information of communities that in reality becomes imagined; but how to explain the continuity in relation to the abovementioned? Dedication of knowledge can today be read and learned in a different way than earlier, without having contact with the instigator, but to a certain point, it will mount out towards an origin. In other words, if one, historically seen, looks at the ways of communication, it is a larger possibility of finding oneself 'closer' to the origin and 'the truth' in earlier times than compared with today. The people of Chechnya will however to a certain degree have an imagined community, but one can say that this people on an 'imagined scale of community', will find themselves on a closer level to the ruler of the originality than e.g. a modern nationalistic state. Since, their own possibility of influence towards an imagined path of community in these former Soviet-Russian occupied areas hardly saw the daylight.⁵ We can only imagine how there likely would exist different levels of symbolic community by the Chinese, if approximately one billion Chinese had been more homogenous than they are today.

² Cf. e.g. J-J. Jensen & M. L. Magnusson, *Rusland- samling eller sammenbrud?*. Esbjerg 1995.

³ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. London 1983.

⁴ Cf. e.g. F. Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundbegriffen der reinen Soziologie*. Darmstadt 1935.

⁵ Cf. e.g. Å. Egge, *Fra Aleksander II til Boris Jeltsin*. Oslo 1993.

In the home territories of the author, more closely, in Finmark (being a Norwegian county situated in the very north), one might say that similar features took place concerning the usage of some of the Sami-peculiar.⁶ E.g. Trond Thuen attempts to show the dilemmas and problems the Sami political leaders face in the Sami's fight to become recognised as an indigenous people inside the Norwegian state. By not going beyond the task through deepening the transactional and significant sides of that case, they are although worth mentioning in order to see the paradoxical development that took place. A chasm was constructed because one, simultaneously with approximation in the daily life by interacting with Norwegians, made the Sami to a frivolous minority in their relation towards the central authorities.

Successively, the majority became a symbol of dividend and abuse of power towards a minority. Naturally, at an early stage, contrasts were formed, and the primary symbols in Sami circles successively became the reindeer and the tent. This, to show clear distinctions on how the way of living and existence was between the "majority" in the Parliament versus the minority in Finmark. In addition, in this relation (cf. with the example above), some were more eminent than others, concerning 'leading' the representative factor. Since, it could be said that with a symbol such as the reindeer, this would not reflect upon every Sami's daily life, but the identity carrying magnitude was being kept. The reasoning could be argued in that: all those being Sami do not run a management of reindeer, but all those working with reindeers are Sami. In the case of the Sami, this politics showed to be fruitful.

Alternatively, had the Sami 'all the way', from beginning until end, this in the back of the head, i.e., this overhanging theory about the effects of the symbols? It is worth to question this, since the speculation mainly points in the direction that Thuen, in the aftermath, has upgraded the significance through metonymical aspects. To the latter, said differently, that matters in this case have been added a larger overall importance in the aftermath, than what was meant at the actual time of being.

If one were to look for other anthropologists' views on their of evaluating ways of expression through use of symbols seen in relation to the abovementioned, e.g. Sherry B. Ortner can give us a certain insight.⁷ She uses the word "key symbols" that might contribute to argue an understanding in accordance with the Sami's use of the reindeer and the tent. Quite simply, Ortner explains "key symbols" as central symbols. Furthermore, she embroiders a typology for analysis of the key symbols, and she shows how symbols can be categorised out of the primary areas of usage- through thought and action. Here, she makes the distinction between "summarizing symbols" and "elaborating symbols". Summarising symbols can, in the case of the Sami, explain the reindeer's place in the conflict. This appeals to the engaged and sensitive, and stands for completeness (cf. eg., with the Norwegian national flag's sense on the Constitution Day 17 May); while, for example the tent (which, by the Sami, was put up outside the Parliament), ranges within the frames of elaborating symbols.

Ortner divides elaborating symbols in two sub groups, which she names "root metaphors" and "key scenarios" By the elaborating symbols, it is not the sensitive loaded that is being weighted, but rather the analytical means of assistance around the activity of thought. Key scenarios can verify the set-up of the tent as a symbolic action, since it could be explained as a cultural program of action- a sort of ideal/idol (i.e., Ortner with Horatio Alger as example) pointing at the goal as well as the means. This put up against e.g. Clifford Geertz, it could be seen as a further development of his

⁶ T. Tuen, *Meaning and Transaction in Sami Ethnopolitics*. Stensilserie A, Samfunnsfag nr. 41, Tromsø 1982.

⁷ S. B. Ortner, "On Key Symbols" in *American Anthropologist*, 1973, 75/II, pp. 1338-1345.

distinctions between symbols “of” and symbols “for” (with Geertz’ wording: “... models of reality...” and “... models for reality...”).⁸

However, the weakness is also shown. Since, in addition to that one, with Anderson’s terms, may have an imaginary community where one ostensibly has not much in common personally, Ortner does not refer to any model that regulates what is including and excluding objects within e.g. summarising symbols. Consequently, the lack of permanent criteria is absent. When we compare this with Thuen’s work, the ‘reindeer Sami’ will be the ones becoming including and representative, while the rest ‘joins in on the ride’. However, why then precisely the reindeer as the representative? It would be more natural in relation to their opinion to re-present their own ‘national suit’ for a recognisable and broad identity? For most other Norwegians, one should not either believe that it is the lion – despite of it symbolising the state arms – which brings the feeling of unity 17 May? The national suit (which the Norwegians have used several billions on), or the cow, which likely more people have a relation to, well, why is not that more eminent/summarising than the lion?

1.2 Symbolic forms of expression: perspective of violence

In political violence perspectives, it also shows that it appears symbolic forms of expressions. In connection with this, e.g. Lisa Malkki’s fieldwork might be representative.⁹ Her fieldwork is done at two different places for Hutu refugees. The one place relates to the town Kigoma, where Hutus live, having a hope to return home, but which consider it unrealistic. These Hutus live with a pragmatic-practical identity adjustment, in a cosmos political practice, and are positive to assimilation and citizenship in Tanzania. The Hutus in the refugee camp Mishamo think differently; they want to re-establish Burundi for the Hutus the way it once upon a time was. They say the Hutus in Kigoma are ‘different’-Hutus. The life in Mishamo is being looked upon as tense, because the power the Tanzanian camp authorities carry out as a minority is understood as antagonistic. This is also being compared to how the Tutsis treated the Hutus before they had to flee.

They find themselves in a “liminal phase”, where it has not taken place an integration process, and where they still are to be understood as refugees without neither belonging in Tanzania nor Burundi.¹⁰ Alienation of the Hutus in the camp as if they do not belong anywhere, a sort of “matter out of place”, develops as such that the Hutus make themselves conscious towards how the course of history has degenerated, which becomes symbols to re-establish their position in understanding of the world.¹¹ Since, if they have the history to hang on to, it shows that even they should not be understood as anomalies.¹² In the exile (the camp), a “Hutuness” has produced, which is developed in such a way that the Hutus look upon themselves as one people with an own nation- they are no longer unclean and placed outside.¹³

⁸ C. Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York 1973, pp. 87-125.

⁹ L. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago 1995.

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. V. Turner, “Social Dramas and Ritual Metaphors” in *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*. Ithaca 1974, pp. 23-59; H. Eidheim, “When Ethnic Identity is a Social Stigma” in *Aspects of the Lappish Minority Situation*. Oslo 1971, pp. 50-67.

¹¹ Cf. M. Douglas, “Animals in Lele Religious Symbolism”; “Pollution”; “Couvade and Menstruation” in *Implicit Meanings*. London 1975, pp. 27-71.

¹² Cf. Douglas, *op cit*.

¹³ Cf. Douglas, *op cit*.

As e.g. Bruce Kapferer in his work on the Singhalese whereas history and ontology play a large role in politics, one could say the similar of Malkki's descriptions (as e.g. the subtitle of her book illustrates, i.e., "Violence, Memory and National Cosmology").¹⁴ The Hutus fight for the ability of how they are able to return to Burundi, is given out of arguments about their past as "Abantu", which they like to call themselves ("Abantu" means "human being", while the terminology "Hutu" is the Tutsis' name on the Abantu meaning "slave"). They have made rock-steady several memories about the foundation of Burundi, the arrival of the Tutsis from the north, the Tutsi dominated hierarchy, the colonial period and the Belgians' 'protection' of the Hutus, the time after the colonial period and the foundations of Burundi as a republic, the massacre of 1972 and thereafter the exile.

This becomes consequently generated and interpreted through conceptions of history and symbols. Violence, for example, is a part of what Malkki categorises under "native history", and which for the Hutus contributes to legitimate use of violence in order to re-establish both Burundi as an independent republic and their place in the cosmology. This will for them be to move out of the liminal phase, it will again be order, and they will be understood as pure.

The author looks upon Malkki's model of analysis in her evaluations of the "mythico-history" with some scepticism, which is shown through her "panels" of the history of the Hutus. Her form of method creates problems, amongst others, by her presentation of the material (violence), as it might be understood as a standardisation of the course of history. The doubtful is furthermore that the construction rests upon 'chosen' representatives and their stories, which is to count for all Hutus. Consequently, different stories are not being given on variations that have existed, or given different aspects and variations from a broad spectre of human beings, but a simplification and homogenisation of the course of history. Such striking problems are also being discussed by e.g. David Riches, where one, amongst others, treats different point of views on violence and use of violence in a given incident, and explains the entitlement for the carrying out of violence as a legitimate/illegitimate action.¹⁵

2. Socio-cultural micro symbols

2.1 Symbolic forms of expression: perspective of metaphor

Looking upon how for example Turner's symbolic forms of expression appeared in the examples Ortner/Malkki, a use of his ways of conception is also applicable under this theme. Metaphors can be used differently under various issues, and thus important to illustrate. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the works of e.g. Anne Salmond, Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski as well as Gustav Thaiss.¹⁶ Duly, these works are

¹⁴ B. Kapferer, *Legends of People, Myths of State: Violence, Intolerance, and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia*. Washington 1988.

¹⁵ D. Riches, *The Anthropology of Violence*. Oxford 1986.

¹⁶ A. Salmond, "Theoretical Landscapes. On a Cross-Cultural Conception of Knowledge in D. Parkin (ed.) *Semantic Anthropology*. London 1982, pp. 65-88; F. Coronil & J. Skurski, "Disremembering and Remembering the Nation: The Semantics of Political Violence in Venezuela" in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1991, 33, pp. 288-337; G. Thaiss, "The Conceptualization of Social Change Through Metaphors" in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 1978, XIII, pp. 1-13.

all 'classified' under different categories, but the common entity for these works is their reputed and use of metaphors in diverse ways.

Turner will with his work point to that social life is in constant change.¹⁷ Turner discusses how different metaphorical systems influence which conclusions are being drawn. Furthermore, he claims that a change in the use of metaphors appears in the language within social change, and debates how the use of metaphors inflicts on theory building and scientific paradigm. His work looks upon the relation between social drama, process analysis, structure/anti-structure and semantics in ritual symbols. Turner attempts to change the focus on the study of religious symbols, to be about ontology (cf. with Kapferer's description of the Sinhalese's use of religion as symbolic form of expression in nationalistic ontology).¹⁸ As a starting point, he has Stephen C. Pepper's "root metaphor".¹⁹

A root metaphor gives a set of categories that arrange aspects through experience. It is a type of metaphor that helps us to think how all things hang together, a way to understand the world. The development takes place in a slow process, where it cannot be found static structure. This is being shown expediently through looking at the abnormal condition – the social drama – for consequently to be able better to understand the normal. The metamorphosis is described in the social drama, which contains four sequences with social events of interim duration. Shortly, the four phases involve: encroachment, crisis if no solution, the re-establishing phase (central in the study of social change), reintegration or legitimisation of the irrecoverable schism. Furthermore, Turner stresses the difference between "*communitas*" and "*societas*". *Communitas* is a disordered and unstructured social community, where it could be developed emotional-, spontaneous-, ecstatic feelings (especially in liminal phases). *Societas* is the structural-, formal-, responsibility shaped community. Furthermore, he has linked these two forms towards structure and anti-structure. By structure, Turner means that which separates people, defines the differences among them, and limits their actions. With anti-structure, he means those sets of relations that are unstructured and untamed.

There does not come about all too much empirical facts from the work, since this model has been noticed being based on the material from the fieldwork among the Ndembu. However, around all rituals, Turner says, one or another form of dominating symbol is being introduced. In social dramatically events, this symbols are being explained in metaphorical terms as multi vocal, a melting of separated meanings as well as polarisation of meaning. The symbols' references – e.g. the human being – tend towards polarising between the ideological (the social and moral order), and the sensual (biological and physical meanings). Empirically seen with the Ndembu's milk tree, the ritual actions become linked together, and it is being generated in a conglomerate of different spheres.

The work can be seen as a critic of Ortner. Ortner debates 'from above' around symbols that already exist, and shows selective ways on why certain symbols are of more importance than others. Ortner has not 'collected' forms of expression in a melting pot in order to get a product. She has the starting point in the product (key symbols), where she e.g. discusses the importance of the symbol "the flag" and its ingredients. Turner, one might say, starts in the other end, and 'from below'. On the contrary, to Ortner, Turner has a process of a melting pot, where more considerable expressions and meanings melt together in a metamorphosis, and becomes represented by a dominating symbol. Since Turner, after this process, chooses to call it dominating symbol, it may seem as if Turner not entirely writes off the importance of

¹⁷ Turner, *op cit.*

¹⁸ See Kapferer, *op cit.*

¹⁹ Cf. S. C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses*. Berkeley 1942.

other symbols within the same context. The contrast is Ortner, who in a context already has key symbol(s), whereas forms of expressions and meanings are baked into the conception. Looking implicitly on Turner's works with rituals, one might be critical towards his interpretations. As far as the author of this contribution knows, Turner has a tendency to interpret beyond the actors' own notions, so that he, beyond the observable ritual connections, sees 'hidden' coherences the actors themselves do not experience and avow. These experiences are included holistically in Turner's theses. A step further, and one might ask oneself what is Turner's process analysis, and how shall that be interpreted? Looking at it this way, where is the limit at Turner's understanding of theory and empiric? Additionally, *de facto*, how selective is the method, also seen in relation to Ortner's?

Thaiss also operates with metaphors, where they are interpreted both in the structural analogy and, particularly, the sensual analogy.²⁰ The purpose of Thaiss is to show that among the religious leaders in Iran – in order to illustrate social change and modernisation – the Islamic system of belief is used symbolically. Firstly, this is being validated with the religion being seen as a framework, particularly as rhetorical and communicative; out of literary critics and socio-linguistic. Secondly, it is explained as an approach to religion through Robin Horton's New-Tylorism, where phenomenon in religious imaginations, which otherwise are unexplainable, can be explained because they in reality are intellectual creations or theoretical models.²¹

Through metaphorical presentations of man/woman relations, human actions are linked to an imagined cosmic-ally order, whereas pictures can be pulled down to the level of the human being. Metaphors and terminologies that are being used to characterise women are those of the same being used to condemn the Shah of Iran's politics of modernisation. When the society of the religious leader is presented as a woman, the masculine becomes a metaphor of something that is stronger and can resist the pressure. The Iranian society 'has a relation' to the West, where Iranian men have not been able to prevent this. In this way, by metaphorically playing on men's feelings, the religious leaders wish to lead them to action.

The problem with this is that one gets a subjective one-way communication, where men dominate the channels of information, where the reality with (great) probability becomes camouflaged.²² Also scientifically seen, this will not have much weight – where one of the metaphors' most basic functions is here said to be expressed through feelings – reasoned that the feeling's vocabulary is not well enough registered and developed. As known, feelings are not adequate waterproof 'evidence', and this thus holds an imagination of moving around in a world based on ambiguity and suppositions.

3. Final remarks

The author has here tried to detect that symbolic forms of expressions by anthropologists can be manifold. As it has been shown in the contribution, in an anthropological understanding, one might claim that symbols operate over a broad spectre without regards to borders. Take for example the author's choices of headlines and their division in form, which, as such, can be by symbolical. Would everyone agree on

²⁰ Thaiss, *op cit*.

²¹ R. Horton, "Neo-Tylorism: Sound Sense or Sinister Prejudice?" in *MAN*, 1968, Vol. 3, pp.625-634.

²² Cf. e.g. E. Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women in S. Ardener (ed.) *Perceiving Women*. London 1975, pp. 1-17.

what seemingly for the author stands as large political macro symbols, will count as a universal complex? Hardly, the answer would be to that.

Perhaps the Sami are unsympathetic to the author's 'placement' and interpretation of their events. Alternatively, that the Iranian religious leaders – after having read this – create new metaphorical pictures on how they interpret the West. One here sees some of those problems that may appear, when one replaces 'first reality' with 'second reality'. What can be said to be positive, according to Lévi-Strauss, is that human beings have these processes of thought to create order and context. Otherwise, everything would have been parted and chaotic.

The red line, which particularly has been stressed through the contribution, has focused on the immensely difficult job that person has, which sets the 'borders' for who, what, how and why the symbolic forms of expressions shall count. The danger lies in that one abate objects by far, and develops an abstract relation to the 'actually' All this, in order to create a classification where one size is to fit all. After all, symbols have not created the world, but the world has created symbols.

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