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978-0-521-27197-4 - Other Tribes, Other Scribes: Symbolic Anthropology in the Comparative Study of Cultures, Histories, Religions, and Texts

James A. Boon

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This illustration is taken from the frontispiece of J. P. Béranger, *Collection de tous les voyages faits autour du monde par les différentes nations de l'Europe*, Vol. 5. Geneva, 1778–9. See Chapter 2.

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Symbolic anthropology in the comparative study of cultures, histories, religions, and texts

JAMES A. BOON

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To my teachers

“Spectatorship” is in England a filial characteristic, linked with dependency and submission, while in America spectatorship is a parental characteristic linked with dominance and succoring . . . An Englishman when he is applauding another is indicating or signaling potential submission and/or dependency; when he shows off or demands spectatorship, he is signaling dominance or superiority; and so on. Every Englishman who writes a book must be guilty of this. For the American, the converse must hold. [*Other tribes, other scribes.*] His boasting [booking] is but a bid for quasiparental approval. [Confessed.]

Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*

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The only counterpart of the dialectical method is pure empiricism. If we can find no universal law by virtue of which one cultural form necessarily issues from another, until at last the whole cycle of forms has been comprehended – then, it would seem, the totality of these forms can no longer be looked upon as a self-contained cosmos. Then the particular forms simply stand side by side: their scope and specific character can be described, but they no longer express a common ideal content. The philosophy of these forms would then necessarily amount to their history, which, according to its object, would define itself as history of language, history of religion and myth, history of art, etc. At this point a strange dilemma arises. If we hold fast to the postulate of logical unity, the universality of the logical form threatens ultimately to efface the individuality of each special province and the specificity of its principle – but if we immerse ourselves in this individuality and persevere in our examination of it, we run the risk of losing ourselves and of finding no way back to the universal.

Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*

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They have a way in their language of calling men the halves of one another.

Montaigne, *Of Cannibals*

How can I inscribe the power of symbol systems to establish cultures that appear intellectually consistent, emotionally compelling, and convincing even as they change? Yet any culture viewed from outside – one’s own in particular – appears as thoroughly arbitrary, indeed outlandish, as all the others. How can I demonstrate that the difference between any two human languages, and cultures, is as intriguing as the possibility that chimpanzees, for example, might have language? Indeed, chimps as a species would require many thousands of mutually unintelligible languages, each capable of concerted misinformation, to rival human communication. How can I use somber-sounding analytic distinctions like arbitrary/motivated, conventional/constitutive, models of/for, without reducing cultures to numbing jargon? Indeed, without comparative analytic frameworks, every culture, whatever its “genius,” remains impenetrable. Such are, rhetorically, the dilemmas of the anthropologist of symbolic forms.

Anthropology is as abstract as information theory yet as palpable as the eerie confrontation between the New World and the Old, represented in the frontispiece. That encounter (and others like it) never precisely happened. Yet this inevitable “misrepresentation” – there were neither giant Pantagonians nor generally enlightened European emissaries – cannot be explained by simple empirical error. Rather, the explanation lies in the fact that cultures meet indirectly, according to conventional expectations of the cultures themselves. The comparison of cultures requires not that we reduce them to platitudinous similarity but that we situate them apart as equally significant, integrated systems of differences. A “culture” can materialize only in counterdistinction to another culture. This statement is no hocus-pocus but merely acknowledges that before any culture can be experienced *as a culture* displacement from it must be possible; and contrary to notions of the Enlightenment, there is no place outside it to be except in other cultures or in their fragments and potentialities.

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The same paradox applies to language(s), or really (language)s. Any given language and culture seem perfectly adequate for the discernible needs of communication; yet within a given language and culture, other languages and cultures can be rumored; we even find ourselves believing in them, although we never experience them directly. Cultures interpenetrate symbolically, as they are constituted. Anthropologists from any culture (and they exist in every culture) engage in translating and interpreting the rumors of other cultures. Professional anthropologists (and their analogs exist in every culture and in every time) specialize in the diverse signs and symbols by which humans communicate according to variant social forms that are differentiated and perpetuated, even as they change.

This book develops related issues. Several chapters (1, 4, 7) introduce notions of signs and symbols from linguistics and culture theory. By renouncing the belief that a purposive direction underlies the history of language, linguists have managed to render change intelligible. Similarly, semiotic approaches often reject causal determinism in favor of systematic diversity, enriched translations, and comparative interpretations.

Other chapters (3, 6) compare ideas of social and institutional differentiation in the writings of Durkheim, Mauss, Weber, Marx, Hocart, and others. Durkheim never quite outgrew evolutionism, and Weber just barely saw beyond the historical specter of routinized bureaucracy. Yet their works helped dissipate confidence that civilizations develop with an irreversible thrust. After Durkheim and Weber, no progressive teleology could be either casually inferred from some primitive past or prophesied into an uncertain future. Both writers were too attentive to the specifics of ethnography and history, especially in the ideals and values we call religion.

Another issue (Chapters 1, 3, 5) concerns the telltale conviction of professional anthropology that diversity of human meaning is properly investigated “in the field” during fulsome experiences preferably documented in monograph form. Fieldwork is often misconstrued as an experimental laboratory and has become a central disciplinary doctrine. My attitude toward fieldwork is playful, because I find the concept an ideal and action that should be simultaneously debunked and preserved. Accordingly, Part I begins with reflections on fieldwork and the kinds of writings it is expected to produce. I trace ideals of descriptive reportage to certain Enlightenment assumptions, which I then critique from historical perspectives. Part II turns to several prominent bodies of comparative social theory, which I reread with an eye toward tribal and traditional civilizations in an effort to interconnect them. My critique of Enlightenment assumptions continues apace as I turn to a review of issues and elements of the semiotics of cultures. These chapters lay the foundation for Part III, where comparative social theory and mythology, structural analysis, and interpretive theories of texts and contexts, both ethnographic and historical, are combined in a discourse of cultures.

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Throughout these sections I adjust concepts relating to kinship and marriage, religion, social hierarchy, mythic codes, ritual performances, intellectual history, and literary criticism to treat aspects of cultural comparison, with examples from Bali (my own fieldwork area) and variant Indo-European traditions. Introductory and concluding sections explore topics ranging from anthropology's understandable obsession with sensational customs to inklings of philosophic negativity – even *frissons* of nothingness – disturbing recent studies. The Appendixes contain several concerted reviews of developments and debates in structuralism and symbolic interpretation. The book's fluid discussion of fieldwork values, historical hermeneutics, comparative typologies, contemporary semiotics, and exotic societies and texts remains suggestive at best. My aim is to provide convincing examples of the interrelationship of these concerns.

My subject matter and its organization draw inspiration from a challenge expressed by Clifford Geertz:

To take the giant step away from the uniformitarian view of human nature is, so far as the study of man is concerned, to leave the Garden. To entertain the idea that the diversity of custom across time and over space is not a mere matter of garb and appearance. . . is to entertain also the idea that humanity is as various in its essence as it is in its expression. And with that reflection some well-fastened philosophical moorings are loosed and an uneasy drifting into perilous waters begins. [Geertz 1973:36]

I proceed in a manner less sequential than episodic; my method is dialectical, drifting. Sources proliferate as the book advances; critique strengthens motives; and if a critique requires adversaries, I choose materialism and psychologism and their contraries, idealism and behaviorism – the misleading alternatives of a lingering positivist, even utilitarian, ideology (rife in the Enlightenment and partly restored in the anthropological school of functionalism). At the core of the study lies the fact that not only are cultures plural, but so are the methods for investigating them. Cultures, histories, and methods communicate discursively across a semiotic paradox, because methods themselves are produced from cultures proceeding through time.

I proceed by interrelating opposed yet complementary comparative approaches: Frazer/Malinowski (Chapter 1) interpretation/analysis (Chapter 2), Marx/Mauss (Chapter 3), Saussure/Peirce (Chapter 4), intercourse/discourse (Chapters 6 and 7), and so on. An organic solidarity between two approaches – one associated with *L'année sociologique* (particularly Durkheim, Mauss and, subsequently, Lévi-Strauss), the other associated with Weberian and Parsonian frameworks shifted to anthropology (particularly in the works of C. Geertz and D. M. Schneider) – remains a covert structure, the cryptotype, in Whorf's sense, of the entire study. If forced to synthesize these oppositions, I would find least objectionable a radically cross-cultural version of Kenneth Burke's

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Augustinean–Coleridgean–transcendentalist–pluralist “dramatism” of polar meanings and motives (with a tilt toward negative dialectics). But then, I’m American; and any synthesis, even this one, will be finally rejected.

Also American, among other things, is one of the book’s recurrent devices, which an illustrious predecessor has categorically excused:

No apology is needed for following the learned custom of placing attractive scraps of literature at the heads of our chapters. It has been truly observed by Wagner that such headings, with their vague suggestions of the matter which is to follow them, pleasantly inflame the reader’s interest without wholly satisfying his curiosity, and we will hope that it may be found to be so in the present case. [Twain and Warner 1873/1969:xxii]

Unlike Mark Twain, however, the present work lets only a bit of French and German and an occasional Indonesian term or Latinism obscure its policy of relentless translation. On the other hand, in 1873 young Twain presumed to set his mottoes “in a vast number of tongues,” for the reason, he explained, “that very few foreign nations among whom the book will circulate can read in any language but their own; whereas we do not write for a particular class or sect or nation, but to take in the whole world.” Then in 1899, still twinkling, the ever-thoughtful Twain finally did his readers the courtesy of appending a translation of his quotations – including Chinese, Chippeway, Ethiopic, Old French, Sindhi, Italian, Choctaw, Japanese, Egyptian, German, Latin, Old Irish, Hawaiian, Javanese, Sioux–Dakota, Arabic, Arrawak, Hebrew, Yoruba, to name a few – but only so as to renew *The Gilded Age*’s copyright (Felheim 1969:viii)! Mottoes and epigraphs are also forms of acknowledgment. This book is in part an elaborated set of mottoes, acknowledging the authors and cultures that are its sources yet paradoxically interlacing them in one language – to which Twain did not resort until twenty-six years later!

Finally, I adopt a policy elsewhere promoted by Edmund Wilson: I give considerable space to quotations of authors, times, and cultures. I purposely cite at greater length than is customary. The company is diverse – Frazer, Weber, Malinowski, Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, Samuel Purchas, Robert Lowie, Hocart, Clifford Geertz, pre-Enlightenment arguments, Balinese culture, Talcott Parsons, Ruth Benedict, cross-cousins, the *Ramayana*, Saussure and Peirce, and Edmund Wilson himself, as well as others—making it vital to let the texts unfurl in order to catch their multiple drifts. Besides Twain and these other authors, times, and cultures, I should add more conventional acknowledgments to this initial *avertissement*. Portions of this work have appeared in several publications with patient editors. Stephen Graubard included part of Chapter 2 in a 1980 *Daedalus* issue, “Intellect and Imagination,” where it was called “Comparative De-enlightenment: Paradox and Limits in the History of Ethnology.” Irene Porter-Wennis and Jean Umiker-Sebeok edited a special issue of *Semiotica*, “Cultural Semiotics” (1979), in which part of Chapter 4

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appeared as “Saussure/Peirce *à propos* of Language, Society, and Culture.” Charles Keyes and E. Val Daniel include much of Chapter 6 in a collection called *Karma: An Anthropological Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Finally, David Wagenknecht included portions of Chapter 7 as “An Endogamy of Poets and Vice Versa: Exotic Ideals in Romanticism/Structuralism” in an issue of *Studies in Romanticism* entitled “Structuralism and Romanticism” (1979).

During the course of writing, I benefited from the responses of discerning audiences. Materials in Chapter 1 were presented at a Brown Symposium at Southwestern University organized by T. Walter Herbert in 1980 and at a conference at Emory University entitled “Intellect and Imagination,” organized by an industrious committee including Robert Paul. Johannes Fabian enabled me to try out parts of Chapter 2 at Wesleyan University in 1978. Chapter 3 has developed in part from graduate seminars taught at Duke and Cornell universities. Different parts of Chapter 4 have been discussed at talks organized by Hildred Geertz and James Fernandez at Princeton University and at a panel (“Reading and Writing Ethnography”) at the American Anthropological Association meetings (1975) organized by Roger Abrahams and John Szwed. Chapter 5 originated in a talk at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton, organized by Clifford Geertz. I discussed related materials at the University of North Carolina, thanks to James Peacock, Ruel Tyson, William Peck, and others; in a special seminar and a talk at Cornell’s Society for the Humanities that were organized by Michael Kammen; and at a talk at Brown University that was arranged by William Vanech. Parts of Chapter 6 were discussed at two Social Science Research Council conferences on Southeast Asian aesthetics organized by A. L. Becker and Benedict Anderson, and David Szanton, first at the University of Michigan, then at Cornell; talks based on Chapter 6 were presented at McGill University, thanks to Lee Drummond, and at a panel on “The Anthropology of Experience” in 1980 organized by Edward Bruner and Victor Turner. Finally, Chapter 7 benefited from long discussions with Bob Montiegel and many others associated with National Public Radio who were involved in the series “A Question of Place.”

This book was begun at Duke University and was written largely at Cornell University, where I have enjoyed the resources of the Department of Anthropology, the Southeast Asia Program, and the Society for the Humanities. Three trips to Indonesia (with results that figure in Chapter 6) were made possible by the Ford Foundation (1971), research fellowship from the National Institute for Mental Health, (1972), and the American Philosophical Society (1981). My research in Bali in 1972 was sponsored by the Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia. Topics in Chapter 5 were pursued during two years at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton (1973–75), and during a year as a fellow at Cornell’s Society for the Humanities (1978–9). I am

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particularly grateful to historians O. Ranum, R. Trexler, and C. Holmes, who tolerated my trespasses during these stints.

The length of even a partial list of individuals whom I feel encouraged this study is perfectly embarrassing. I thank most of all my teachers, colleagues, and students who were willing to engage in free-wheeling, unhurried conversations about social, textual, and interpretive issues that are as irresolvable as they are inescapable: C. Geertz, J. Peacock (who first taught me cultures), J. T. Johnson (who first taught me texts), D. M. Schneider, A. T. Kirsch, M. Singer, R. J. Smith, J. Eidson, D. Greenwood, R. Blair, L. Rosen, D. Holmberg, L. Hochberg, and others.

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