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978-1-107-02569-1 - Genesis of Symbolic Thought
Alan Barnard
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Genesis of Symbolic Thought

Symbolic thought is what makes us human. Claude Lévi-Strauss stated that we can never know the genesis of symbolic thought, but in this powerful new study Alan Barnard argues that we can. Continuing the line of analysis initiated in *Social anthropology and human origins* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), *Genesis of symbolic thought* applies ideas from social anthropology, old and new, to understand some of the areas also being explored in fields as diverse as archaeology, linguistics, genetics and neuroscience. Barnard aims to answer questions including: when and why did language come into being? What was the earliest religion? And what form did social organization take before humanity dispersed from the African continent? Rejecting the notion of hunter-gatherers as 'primitive', Barnard hails the great sophistication of their complex means of linguistic and symbolic expression and places the possible origin of symbolic thought at as early as 130,000 years ago.

ALAN BARNARD is Professor of the Anthropology of Southern Africa at the University of Edinburgh, where he has taught since 1978. He has undertaken a wide range of ethnographic fieldwork and archaeological research in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, participated in the British Academy Centenary Research Project 'From Lucy to Language: The Archaeology of the Social Brain' and serves as Honorary Consul of the Republic of Namibia in Scotland. His numerous publications include *History and theory in anthropology* (2000) and *Social anthropology and human origins* (2011). In 2010 Professor Barnard was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by
Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107025691

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First published 2012

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barnard, Alan (Alan J.)

Genesis of symbolic thought / Alan Barnard.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-02569-1 (Hardback) – ISBN 978-1-107-65109-8 (Paperback)

1. Symbolic anthropology. 2. Language and languages—Origin.

3. Human evolution. 4. Thought and thinking. I. Title.

GN452.5.B37 2012

306.4—dc23

2011052551

ISBN 978-1-107-02569-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-65109-8 Paperback

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Sociology cannot explain the genesis of symbolic
thought, but has just to take it for granted in man.

C. Lévi-Strauss

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Preface

When I finished writing *Social anthropology and human origins*, I wanted to explore one area of human origins in greater depth. The earlier book looked to a great extent at primates, fossil hominins and the archaeology of humans living long before language, art, symbolism or religion. It touched too on these later developments, but the present subject, the genesis of symbolic thought, cries out more than any other for engagement with social anthropology. It is as much part of our discipline as it is of any other, and exploring it is not only to the benefit of, say, archaeology, but also to the benefit of social anthropology itself. Indeed, the genesis of symbolic thought is not even always in the past: symbolic thought is generated every time a person thinks symbolically. In this book, though, I am concerned primarily with new developments in the study of human origins. Much of what I say also reflects both on humanity's present and on anthropology's glorious past.

Proto-humans certainly had, in some sense, sophisticated communications skills with which to deal with practical matters. They had collective behaviour: they had society. They also had 'culture', but they did not think symbolically. The origin of symbolic thought is one of the great questions of social anthropology, as indeed it is of archaeology. However, for the last hundred years or so, mainstream social anthropology has not confronted it. When last we did, both social and biological anthropology and archaeology too were very, very different from what they are now. Intelligence was being measured with callipers, and we were being told that the missing link was a strapping young Englishman called *Eoanthropus dawsoni*, with a big head and an ape-like jaw, who long ago lived on the Sussex Downs and played cricket. This book is a twenty-first-century history of the last 200,000 years, and

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more significantly (at my guess) the last 130,000 years or so, when humans began to think symbolically.

Let me comment briefly on terminology. In general, given the choice I tend to prefer the more English-sounding terms and to use traditional labels where appropriate, but modern place names. In English, I prefer the traditional Neanderthal to the modern German spelling Neandertal. There is only one correct Linnaean Latin term, which is *Homo neanderthalensis*. ‘Rhodesian Man’ is now archaic and goes in inverted commas, but *Homo rhodesiensis* is the correct Linnaean Latin. One cannot change either to incorporate the word Zambia, the modern name for the colony of Northern Rhodesia in which the fossil was found. However, I use the modern name Kabwe for the specific place where it was found, rather than its colonial name Broken Hill. The most complex problem is what to call the hunter-gatherers of southern Africa. Both Bushman (which in my usage is gender-neutral) and San (which, correctly used, should be common gender plural) are in common English usage, and I use them interchangeably or according to context. There is no ‘correct’ term though. In Khoekhoegowab, the language from which it comes, San (actually, Saan) can be as derogatory as Bushman, and many Bushmen object to being called San. Alternatives like Khoe, Ju/’hoan, Kua and so on never work in English, since they can all have more specific ethnic meanings as well as generic ones. In the past, I have sometimes used N/oakhoe or Ncoakhoe (Naro for ‘Red Person’) or Basarwa (which is the usual term in Setswana, etymologically: plural prefix (noun class for humans) – San – diminutive suffix), but the use of these terms creates similar problems, at least whenever they are used in any languages other than Naro or Setswana.

I will not name *all* the many individuals who have helped, in various ways, to allow me (often unknowingly) to stand on their shoulders, but I am grateful to them all the same. A social anthropology of human origins, even with respect to the genesis of symbolic thought, is utterly dependent on research in other disciplines: from genetics to linguistics, from archaeology to art history, from neuroscience to comparative anatomy, from folklore to religious studies. But, of course, it is dependent too on ethnography and anthropological theory, not just in the present, but through the history of social anthropology. Therefore, let

me acknowledge collectively my sometime collaborators and close colleagues, my teachers, my intellectual ancestors and the many passing acquaintances whose impact on the development of my ideas is greater than they know. If I may pick out just a few, I am grateful to Fred Coolidge, Robin Dunbar, Tecumseh Fitch, Chris Henshilwood, Jean-Marie Hombert, Jim Hurford, Tim Ingold, Wendy James, Chris Knight, Adam Kuper, David Lewis-Williams, Dan Sperber and Tom Wynn for their inspiration and, in some cases, simply for being at exactly the right place at the right time. However, none of them has had a direct input to what I have written here, and some may disagree profoundly with my arguments – but, I hope, not too much.

Thanks also go to colleagues in conferences and seminars where I have talked on the issues touched on here, specifically in Bern, Edinburgh, Halle, London, Montreal, Oxford, Stellenbosch and Utrecht, both for offering me the chance to present ideas on early symbolic thought and for providing the necessary feedback on my more idiosyncratic ideas. And thanks too to my wife Joy (whose training is in archaeology and in law) for aiming to temper my more extreme theoretical speculations with common sense and the demand, at each stage, for evidence – however hard it is to come by.

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