

Analysis of Ritual: Metaphoric Correspondences as the Elementary Forms

Turner's suggestive analysis of African ritual symbolism (1) enhances one's appreciation of the complexity of expressive phenomena. There are, however, methodological and theoretical cautions to be raised. First, the approach he advocates attacks the problem of representations at the most difficult point of analysis. Symbols of the kind singled out by this method are repositories of many, highly condensed meanings, and this polysemy, or multivocality, can rarely be explained by local peoples. Interpretation, therefore, is hindered by this great complexity of meaning and little confirmation in local culture. Second, there is a more direct approach to expressive phenomena, of which ritual is but one kind.

While exegesis of anything and everything is the order of the day in university culture, it is much rarer in traditional cultures. Empirical research, in fact, shows that it is usually quite difficult to obtain the significata of symbols. In studies of eight different African religious movements (2), exegesis was easy to obtain in only two, and in only one did it approach the completeness and clarity necessary to support empirically a complex theory of symbolism such as Turner's. This is not to deny the theory, but only to suggest that it is very difficult to tie down to local awareness and motivation. This difficulty applies even more to the ideological pole of symbolic meaning than to the sensory, or orectic, pole of meaning. The ideological components of the moral and social order to which ritual symbolism is said to refer—"the principle of matriliney," "the unity and perdurance of society," "the structural and communal importance of femaleness"—are all manifestly of much greater salience in anthropology than in the particular local culture. In most cases, in short, the explication of symbols rests upon an interpretation of observed usages rather than upon local exegesis.

One may find rare informants who will confirm the significata, but there is always the question of whether they are learning our culture or we are learning theirs (3). As a case in point, Turner holds that most African languages have a term for ritual symbol. Although his informants have agreed that this is what the terms *ififwani* (likeness) and *chijikijilu* (a landmark, or blaze) really mean, I suspect that the

ethnographer is here more the teacher than the taught. My own experience with the widespread African term "likeness" is that it means just what it says—a likeness, a resemblance, a correspondence of one thing to something else (4). One may extend that concept to cover the complex notion of ritual symbol, but that extension conforms more to analytic necessity than to local lexicon.

There is a more direct approach to expressive phenomena. This approach rests upon the recognition that a symbol is simply an abstract and autonomous metaphor (5) and that the ritual system is, in essence, a system of enacted correspondences. A metaphor (and related tropes) is the statement, explicit or implied, of a correspondence between some subject of thought in need of clarification and an object that brings some clarity to it. Metaphor, not symbol, should be considered the basic analytic unit of ritual because ritual and ritual symbols spring from metaphors. Ritual symbols may be complex repositories of correspondence, and doubtless they are important entities of orientation in ritual episodes; however, the effective cause of behavior lies in the metaphoric statements (the subject-object correspondences) contained in ritual symbols. A metaphor is an image predicated upon a subject by virtue of some sense of apt correspondence perceived in the culture, and it is this image which is efficacious in the subject's experience and in planning his performance in the ritual process (6). When metaphor is employed, one is directed to the subject upon which the image is predicated and to the motivation for selecting the likeness. This is true whether the metaphor is "the king is a lion" or "breast milk is the latex of the muddy tree." But a symbol, because it is abstract and because its meaning varies with its context, loses its clear relation to specific subjects. One loses hold of what means what to whom and ends up speaking of a symbol as referring to "the principle of matriliney." Consider the lion as the symbol of the British Empire. Upon what subject or set of subjects is it predicated? What is the motivation of the predication? Answers may be provided by careful analysis of observed usage in specific contexts (7), but in the end that analysis will come down to statements of correspondence.

The study of metaphor in respect to rituals and other expressive events involves one in the process in language by which subjects are related to objects and, more important, by which subjects gain identity (8). This last point is important, for one of the principal motivations of behavior is the gaining of a desired or the escaping of a feared identity. Moreover, the creation of metaphors is part of the earliest stages of language acquisition, in which the emerging awareness of the child struggles with subject-object relations and takes, in metaphoric predication, many diverse objects from many domains upon itself (9). The study of metaphor, much more than the study of symbols, relates to theories of image and identity formation, which are fundamental to the study of behavior. Studies of symbols have tended to have little relation to major developments in the behavioral sciences.

While, in respect to exegesis, the study of metaphor in expressive events is subject to some of the same problems as the analysis of symbols, in my experience informants speak more readily about ritual process—"Here we are the body of Christ," "There we are the army of the Lord"—as correspondences than about the meaning of symbols. In fact, the statements informants made about the *undumila* medicina, discussed by Turner as a ritual symbol of the Nyakyusa of Tanzania, come down to a set of metaphoric or metonymic correspondences: "Husband's penis is pungent root," "vagina is cup," "copulation is biting root and eating salt" "man and woman are penis and vagina." One often encounters resistance to the explication of symbols—a tendency to grant them ineffable, if not mystical, character. "They should not mean but be" is a response by no means limited to ritualists of the Western world. The concentration on ritual as a system of enacted correspondences leaves less to the imagination and leads more directly to the experience of participants.

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References and Notes

1. V. W. Turner, *Science* 179, 1100 (1973).
2. J. W. Fernandez, *Microcosmogeny and Modernization* (Occasional Papers, Centre for Developing Area Studies, McGill University, Montreal, 1969); *J. Relig. Afr.*, in press.
3. This question has repeatedly arisen in respect to the Griaule school in French ethnology and particularly in respect to Griaule's masterwork, *Dieu de l'Eau* (Les Editions du Chêne, Paris, 1948), his extended interviews with the Dogon savant Ogotemméli, in which the latter lays

- out the Dogon cosmology. The problem is avoided in a structuralist approach of the kind practiced by C. Levi Strauss, in which, presuming on the universal structures of the "savage mind," ethnology becomes a form of intercultural instruction. Our contacts with other cultures are made not so much in the interest of learning other cultural ways as in seeing emerge, through mutual instruction, an understanding of universal mental operation. If informants fail to confirm structural interpretations, one is entitled to fall back on one's own. Thus the proposition of universal structures is not satisfactorily put to an empirical test!
4. J. W. Fernandez, *Am. Anthropol.* 67, 902 (1965).
 5. W. M. Urban, *Language and Reality: The Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symposium* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1939);
 - W. A. Shibles, *An Analysis of Metaphor in the Light of W. M. Urban's Theories* (Mouton, The Hague, 1971).
 6. G. A. Miller, E. Galanter, K. H. Pribram, *Plans and the Structure of Behavior* (Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, New York, 1960); J. W. Fernandez, in *Social Use of Metaphor*, C. Crocker and D. Sapis, Eds. (Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, N.Y., in press).
 7. S. B. Ortner, *Semiotica* 4, 324 (Spring 1973).
 8. Metaphoric or metonymic statement can appear in other than the X is Y form (the king is a lion), as C. Brooke Rose [*A Grammar of Metaphor* (Humanities Press, New York, 1958)] shows, but that form is primary.
 9. J. W. Fernandez, *Daedalus* 101, 39 (Winter 1972).

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