On Key Symbols

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This paper reviews the use of the notion of "key symbol" in anthropological analysis. It analyzes phenomena which have been or might be accorded the status of key symbol in cultural analyses, categorizing them according to their primary modes of operating on thought and action.

IT IS by no means a novel idea that each culture has certain key elements which, in an ill-defined way, are crucial to its distinctive organization. Since the publication of Benedict's Patterns of Culture in 1934, the notion of such key elements has persisted in American anthropology under a variety of rubrics: "themes" (e.g., Opler 1945; Cohen 1948), "focal values" (Albert 1956), "dominant values" (DuBois 1955), "integrative concepts" (DuBois 1936), "dominant orientations" (F. Kluckhohn 1950), and so forth. We can also find this idea sneaking namelessly into British social anthropological writing; the best example of this is Lienhardt's (1961) discussion of cattle in Dinka culture (and I say culture rather than society advisedly). Even Evans-Pritchard has said,

as every experienced field-worker knows, the most difficult task in social anthropological field work is to determine the meanings of a few key words, upon an understanding of which the success of the whole investigation depends [1962:80].

Recently, as the focus in the study of meaning systems has shifted to the symbolic units which formulate meaning, the interest in these key elements of cultures has become specified as the interest in key symbols. Schneider (1968) calls them "core symbols" in his study of American kinship; Turner (1967) calls them "dominant symbols" in his study of Ndembu ritual; I called them "key symbols" in my study of Sherpa social relations (Ortner 1970).

The primary question of course is what do we mean by "key"? But I will postpone considering this problem until I have discussed the various usages of the notion of key symbols in the literature of symbolic analysis.

Two methodological approaches to establishing certain symbols as "core" or "key" to a cultural system have been employed. The first approach, less commonly used, involves analyzing the system (or domains thereof) for its underlying elements—cognitive distinctions, value orientations, etc.—then looking about in the culture for some figure or image which seems to formulate, in relatively pure form, the underlying orientations exposed in the analysis. The best example of this approach in the current literature is David Schneider's (1968) analysis of American kinship; Schneider first analyzes the kinship system for its basic components—nature and law—and then decides that conjugal sexual intercourse is the form which, given its meaning in the culture, expresses this opposition most succinctly and meaningfully. Schneider expresses his debt to Ruth Benedict, and this debt turns out to be quite specific, since the other major work which embodies this method is Benedict's The Chrysanthemum and the Sword (1967). The sword and the chrysanthemum were chosen by Benedict from the repertoire of Japanese symbols as...
most succinctly, or perhaps most poetically, representing the tension in the Japanese value system which she postulated. She did not arrive at this tension through an analysis of the meanings of chrysanthemums and swords in the culture; she first established the tension in Japanese culture through analysis of various symbolic systems, then chose these two items from the repertoire of Japanese symbols to sum up the opposition.

In the second, more commonly employed approach, the investigator observes something which seems to be an object of cultural interest, and analyzes it for its meanings. The observation that some symbol is a focus of cultural interest need not be very mysterious or intuitive. I offer here five reasonably reliable indicators of cultural interest, and there are probably more. Most key symbols, I venture to suggest, will be signaled by more than one of these indicators:

1. The natives tell us that X is culturally important.

2. The natives seem positively or negatively aroused about X, rather than indifferent.

3. X comes up in many different contexts. These contexts may be behavioral or systemic: X comes up in many different kinds of action situation or conversation, or X comes up in many different symbolic domains (myth, ritual, art, formal rhetoric, etc.).

4. There is greater cultural elaboration surrounding X, e.g., elaboration of vocabulary, or elaboration of details of X’s nature, compared with similar phenomena in the culture.

5. There are greater cultural restrictions surrounding X, either in sheer number of rules, or severity of sanctions regarding its misuse.

As I said, there may be more indicators even than these of the key status of a symbol in a culture, but any of these should be enough to point even the most insensitive fieldworker in the right direction. I should also add that I am not assuming that there is only one key symbol to every culture; cultures are of course a product of the interplay of many basic orientations, some quite conflicting. But all of them will be expressed somewhere in the public system, because the public symbol system is ultimately the only source from which the natives themselves discover, rediscover, and transform their own culture, generation after generation.

It remains for us now to sort out the bewildering array of phenomena to which various investigators have been led to assign implicitly or explicitly the status of key cultural symbol. Anything by definition can be a symbol, i.e., a vehicle for cultural meaning, and it seems from a survey of the literature that almost anything can be key. Omitting the symbols established by the first approach cited above, which have a different epistemological status, we can cite from the anthropological literature such things as cattle among the Dinka and Nuer, the Naven ritual of the Iatmul, the Australian churinga, the slamanet of the Javanese, the potlatch of the northwest coast, the forked stick of Ndembu rituals, and from my own research, the wheel-image in Tibet and food among the Sherpas. We could also add such intuitive examples as the cross of Christianity, the American flag, the motorcycle for the Hell’s Angels, “work” in the Protestant ethic, and so on.

The list is a jumble—things and abstractions, nouns and verbs, single items and whole events. I should like to propose a way of subdividing and ordering the set, in terms of the ways in which the symbols operate in relation to cultural thought and action.

The first major breakdown among the various types of symbols is along a continuum whose two ends I call “summarizing” vs. “elaborating.” I stress that it is a continuum, but I work with the ideal types at the two ends.

Summarizing symbols, first, are those symbols which are seen as summimg up, expressing, representing for the participants in an emotionally powerful and relatively undifferentiated way, what the system means to them. This category is essentially
the category of sacred symbols in the broadest sense, and includes all those items which are objects of reverence and/or catalysts of emotion—the flag, the cross, the churinga, the forked stick, the motorcycle, etc. The American flag, for example, for certain Americans, stands for something called "the American way," a conglomerate of ideas and feelings including (theoretically) democracy, free enterprise, hard work, competition, progress, national superiority, freedom, etc. And it stands for them all at once. It does not encourage reflection on the logical relations among these ideas, nor on the logical consequences of them as they are played out in social actuality, over time and history. On the contrary, the flag encourages a sort of all-or-nothing allegiance to the whole package, best summed up on a billboard I saw recently: "Our flag, love it or leave." And this is the point about summarizing symbols in general—they operate to compound and synthesize a complex system of ideas, to "summarize" them under a unitary form which, in an old-fashioned way, "stands for" the system as a whole.

Elaborating symbols, on the other hand, work in the opposite direction, providing vehicles for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas, making them comprehensible to oneself, communicable to others, and translatable into orderly action. Elaborating symbols are accorded central status in the culture on the basis of their capacity to order experience; they are essentially analytic. Rarely are these symbols sacred in the conventional sense of being objects of respect or foci of emotion; their key status is indicated primarily by their recurrence in cultural behavior or cultural symbolic systems.

Symbols can be seen as having elaborating power in two modes. They may have primarily conceptual elaborating power, that is, they are valued as a source of categories for conceptualizing the order of the world. Or they may have primarily action elaborating power; that is, they are valued as implying mechanisms for successful social action. These two modes reflect what I see as the two basic and of course interrelated functions of culture in general: to provide for its members "orientations," i.e., cognitive and affective categories; and "strategies," i.e., programs for orderly social action in relation to culturally defined goals.

Symbols with great conceptual elaborating power are what Stephen Pepper (1942) has called "root metaphors," and indeed in this realm the basic mechanism is the metaphor. It is felt in the culture that many aspects of experience can be likened to, and illuminated by the comparison with, the symbol itself. In Pepper's terms, the symbol provides a set of categories for conceptualizing other aspects of experience, or, if this point is stated too uni-directionally for some tastes, we may say that the root metaphor formulates the unity of cultural orientation underlying many aspects of experience, by virtue of the fact that those many aspects of experience can be likened to it.

One of the best examples of a cultural root metaphor in the anthropological literature is found in Godfrey Lienhardt's discussion of the role of cattle in Dinka thought. Cows provide for the Dinka an almost endless set of categories for conceptualizing and responding to the subtleties of experience. For example:

The Dinkas' very perception of colour, light, and shade in the world around them is ... inextricably connected with their recognition of colour-configurations in their cattle. If their cattle-colour vocabulary were taken away, they would have scarcely any way of describing visual experience in terms of colour, light and darkness [1961:13].

More important for Lienhardt's thesis is the Dinka conceptualization of the structure of their own society on analogy with the physical structure of the bull. "The people are put together, as a bull is put together," said a Dinka chief on one occasion" (Ibid.: 23), and indeed the formally prescribed division of the meat of a sacrificed bull is a most graphic representation of the statuses, functions, and interrelationships of the major social categories of Dinka society, as
Ortner] ON KEY SYMBOLS 1341

the Dinka themselves represent the situation.

In fact, as Mary Douglas points out, the living organism in one form or another functions as a root metaphor in many cultures, as a source of categories for conceptualizing social phenomena (1966). In mechanized society, on the other hand, one root metaphor for the social process is the machine, and in recent times the computer represents a crucial modification upon this root metaphor. But the social is not the only aspect of experience which root-metaphor type symbols are used to illuminate; for example, much of greater Indo-Tibetan cosmology—the forms and processes of life, space, and time—is developed on analogy with the quite simple image of the wheel (Ortner 1966).

A root metaphor, then, is one type of key symbol in the elaborating mode, i.e., a symbol which operates to sort out experience, to place it in cultural categories, and to help us think about how it all hangs together. They are symbols which are “good to think,” not exactly in the Lévi-Straussian sense, but in that one can conceptualize the interrelationships among phenomena by analogy to the interrelations among the parts of the root metaphor.2

The other major type of elaborating symbol is valued primarily because it implies clear-cut modes of action appropriate to correct and successful living in the culture. Every culture, of course, embodies some vision of success, or the good life, but the cultural variation occurs in how success is defined, and, given that, what are considered the best ways of achieving it. “Key scenarios,” as I call the type of key symbol in this category, are culturally valued in that they formulate the culture’s basic means-ends relationships in actable forms.

An example of a key scenario from American culture would be the Horatio Alger myth. The scenario runs: poor boy of low status, but with total faith in the American system, works very hard and ultimately becomes rich and powerful. The myth formulates both the American conceptions of success—wealth and power—and suggests that there is a simple (but not easy) way of achieving them—singleminded hard work. This scenario may be contrasted with ones from other cultures which present other actions as the most effective means of achieving wealth and power, or which formulate wealth and power as appropriate goals only for certain segments of the society, or, of course, those which do not define cultural success in terms of wealth and power at all. In any case, the point is that every culture has a number of such key scenarios which both formulate appropriate goals and suggest effective action for achieving them; which formulate, in other words, key cultural strategies.

This category of key symbols may also include rituals; Singer seems to be making the point of rituals as scenarios when he writes of “cultural performances” (1958), in which both valued end states and effective means for achieving them are dramatized for all to see. Thus this category would include naven, the slametan, the potlatch, and others. The category could also include individual elements of rituals—objects, roles, action sequences—insofar as they refer to or epitomize the ritual as a whole, which is why one can have actions, objects, and whole events in the same category.

Further, scenarios as key symbols may include not only formal, usually named events, but also all those cultural sequences of action which we can observe enacted and reenacted according to unarticulated formulae in the normal course of daily life. An example of such a scenario from Sherpa culture would be the hospitality scenario, in which any individual in the role of host feeds a guest and thereby renders him voluntarily cooperative vis-à-vis oneself. The scenario formulates both the ideally valued (though infrequently attained) mode of social relations in the culture—voluntary cooperation—and, given certain cultural assumptions about the effects of food on people, the most effective way of establishing those kinds of relations. Once again then, the scenario is culturally valued—indicated in this case by the fact that it is played and
replayed in the most diverse sorts of social contexts—because it suggests a clear-cut strategy for arriving at culturally defined success.

I have been discussing the category of key symbols which I called "elaborating" symbols, symbols valued for their contribution to the sorting out of experience. This class includes both root metaphors which provide categories for the ordering of conceptual experience, and key scenarios which provide strategies for organizing action experience. While for purposes of this discussion I have been led by the data to separate thought from action, I must hasten to put the pieces back together again. For my view is that ultimately both kinds of symbols have both types of referents. Root metaphors, by establishing a certain view of the world, implicitly suggest certain valid and effective ways of acting upon it; key scenarios, by prescribing certain culturally effective courses of action, embody and rest upon certain assumptions about the nature of reality. Even summarizing symbols, while primarily functioning to compound rather than sort out experience, are seen as both formulating basic orientations and implying, though much less systematically than scenarios, certain modes of action.

One question which might be raised at this point is how we are to understand the logical relationships among the types of key symbols I have distinguished. As the scheme stands now, it has the following unbalanced structure:

summarizing vs. elaborating

root metaphor key scenario

I would argue that this asymmetry follows from the content of the types: the meaning-content of summarizing or sacred symbols is by definition clustered, condensed, relatively undifferentiated, "thick," while the meaning-content of elaborating symbols is by definition relatively clear, orderly, differentiated, articulate. Thus it is possible to make distinctions among the different order-
certainly be consequences for thought and action as a result of a crystallized commitment, but commitment itself is neither thought nor action. The point perhaps illuminates the generally sacred status of summarizing symbols, for they are speaking to a more diffuse mode of orientation in the actor, a broader context of attitude within which particular modes of thinking and acting are formulated.3

This is not to say that nothing analytic may be said about summarizing symbols beyond the fact that they catalyze feeling; there are a number of possible ways of subdividing the catalog of sacred symbols in the world, some no doubt more useful or illuminated than others. My point is merely that the particular factor which subdivides elaborating symbols—the thought/action distinction—does not serve very powerfully to subdivide the category of summarizing symbols, since the summarizing symbol is speaking to a different level of response, the level of attitude and commitment.

We are now in a position to return to the question of “key” or central status. Why are we justified in calling a particular symbol “key”? The indicators provided earlier for at least provisionally regarding certain symbols as key to a particular culture were all based on the assumption that keyness has public (though not necessarily conscious) manifestation in the culture itself, available to the observer in the field, or at least available when one reflects upon one’s observations. But the fact of public cultural concern or focus of interest is not why a symbol is key; it is only a signal that the symbol is playing some key role in relation to other elements of the cultural system of thought. The issue of keyness, in short, has to do with the internal organization of the system of cultural meaning, as that system functions for actors leading their lives in the culture.

Broadly speaking, the two types of key symbols distinguished above, defined in terms of how they act upon or are manipulated by cultural actors, also indicate the two broad modes of “keyness” from a systemic point of view, defined in terms of the role such symbols are playing in the system; that is, a given summarizing symbol is “key” to the system insofar as the meanings which it formulates are logically or affectively prior to other meanings of the system. By “logically or affectively prior” I mean simply that many other cultural ideas and attitudes presuppose, and make sense only in the context of, those meanings formulated by the symbol. The key role of an elaborating symbol, by contrast, derives not so much from the status of its particular substantive meanings, but from its formal or organizational role in relation to the system; that is, we say such a symbol is “key” to the system insofar as it extensively and systematically formulates relationships—parallels, isomorphisms, complementarities, and so forth—between a wide range of diverse cultural elements.

This contrast between the two modes of “keyness” may be summed up in various ways, all of which oversimplify to some extent, but which nonetheless give perspective on the point. (1) “Content versus form”: The keyness of a summarizing symbol derives from its particular substantive meanings (content) and their logical priority in relation to other meanings of the system. The keyness of an elaborating symbol derives from its formal properties, and their culturally postulated power to formulate widely applicable modes of organizing cultural phenomena. (2) “Quality versus quantity”: The keyness of a summarizing symbol derives from the relative fundamentality (or ultimacy) of the meanings which it formulates, relative to other meanings of the system. The keyness of an elaborating symbol derives from its formal properties, and their culturally postulated power to formulate widely applicable modes of organizing cultural phenomena. (3) “Vertical versus lateral”: The keyness of a summarizing symbol derives from its ability to relate lower-order meanings to higher-order assumptions, or to “ground” more surface-level meanings to their deeper bases. (The issue here is degree of generality of meaning. Whether more general meanings are
termed "higher" or "deeper," "ultimate" or "fundamental," by a particular cultural analyst seems a matter of personal preference.) The keyness of an elaborating symbol by contrast derives from its ability to interconnect disparate elements at essentially the same level, by virtue of its ability to manifest (or bring into relief) their formal similarities.

All of these terminological contrasts—form/content, quantity/quality, lateral/vertical—are really perspectives upon the same basic contrast, for which we have no more general term; that is, when we say a summarizing symbol is "key" to the system, we mean that its substantive meanings have certain kinds of priority relative to other meanings of the system. When we say an elaborating symbol is key to the system, we refer to the power of its formal or organizational role in relation to the system.

But at this point we must stop short of reifying the distinctions, for, in practice, the contrast between the two broad types of key symbols and the two modes of "keyness" may break down. It seems empirically to be the case that an elaborating symbol which is accorded wide-ranging applicability in the culture—played in many contexts, or applied to many different sorts of forms—is generally not only formally apt but also substantively referential to high level values, ideas, cognitive assertions, and so forth. Indeed, insofar as such high level formulations are made, a key elaborating symbol of a culture may move into the sacred mode and operate in much the same way as does a summarizing symbol. And, on the other hand, some summarizing symbols may play important ordering functions, as when they relate the respondent not merely to a cluster of high level assumptions and values, but to a particular scenario which may be replayed in ongoing life. (One may think, for example, of the Christian cross evoking, among other things, not only a general sense of God's purpose and support, but also the particular scenario of Christ's martyrdom.)

Thus we are brought to an important point, namely, that we are distinguishing not only types of symbols, but types of symbolic functions. These functions may be performed by any given symbol—at different times, or in different contexts, or even simultaneously by different "levels" of its meaning. While there are many examples of summarizing and elaborating symbols in their relatively pure forms, the kinds of functions or operations these symbols perform may also be seen as aspects of any given symbols.

To summarize the original scheme briefly, key symbols may be discovered by virtue of a number of reliable indicators which point to cultural focus of interest. They are of two broad types—summarizing and elaborating. Summarizing symbols are primarily objects of attention and cultural respect; they synthesize or "collapse" complex experience, and relate the respondent to the grounds of the system as a whole. They include most importantly sacred symbols in the traditional sense. Elaborating symbols, on the other hand, are symbols valued for their contribution to the ordering or "sorting out" of experience. Within this are symbols valued primarily for the ordering of conceptual experience, i.e., for providing cultural "orientations," and those valued primarily for the ordering of action, i.e., for providing cultural "strategies." The former includes what Pepper calls "root metaphors," the latter includes key scenarios, or elements of scenarios which are crucial to the means-end relationship postulated in the complete scenario.4

This scheme also suggests, at least by the choices of terms, the modes of symbolic analysis relevant to the different types of key symbols. The first type (summarizing symbols) suggests a range of questions pertaining to the cultural conversion of complex ideas into various kinds of relatively undifferentiated commitment—patriotism, for example, or faith. The second type (root metaphors) suggests questions applicable to the analysis of metaphor in the broadest sense—questions of how thought proceeds and organizes itself through analogies, models, images, and so forth. And the third
type (key scenarios) suggests dramatistic modes of analysis, in which one raises questions concerning the restructuring of attitudes and relationships as a result of enacting particular culturally provided sequences of stylized actions.

This article has been frankly programmatic; I am in the process of implementing some of its ideas in a monograph on Sherpa social and religious relations. Here I have simply been concerned to show that, although a method of cultural analysis via key symbols has been for the most part unarticulated, there is at least incipiently method in such analysis. It is worth our while to try to systematize this method, for it may be our most powerful entree to the distinctiveness and variability of human cultures.

NOTES

1 This is a revised version of a paper presented at the symposium “Method in Symbolic Analysis,” 70th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, New York, November, 1971.

2 While I am not using the phrase “good to think” precisely in the way in which Lévi-Strauss uses it, there is obviously some parallel between my discussion of root metaphors and Lévi-Strauss' discussion of “the science of the concrete” (1966).

3 Cf. Geertz's discussion of “moods and motivations” in his “Religion as a Cultural System” (1966), which is dealing with similar issues.

4 There are a number of schemes in the literature of semiotics to which this scheme may be compared, although none are isomorphic with it. Probably the closest is the tripartite scheme derived from philosophical psychology, which divides the symbolic functions into the affective, the cognitive, and the conative (cf. Miller 1964).

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