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Symbolic Consensus in a Fang Reformatory Cult¹

JAMES W. FERNANDEZ

Dartmouth College
Hanover, N. H.

I

THE concepts of "consensus" and "symbol," like the proverb to non-literate peoples, appear to be for many students of human behavior work horses of theoretical discourse. Like the proverb, however, these concepts are ambiguous and almost always carry more weight than is analytically useful. Symbols surround us and when, for example, White argues that "all culture depends upon the symbol" (1944:235) we readily assent to their importance if we do not quite still grasp their meaning.² As for consensus, we see its consequences clearly enough. But, beyond the raising of hands or some other significant statement of allegiance and cohesion, do we really understand what is taking place in acts of consensus? In fact, culture is not something of which everyone carries an equal burden, and the study of symbolic consensus can demonstrate the disparate portions which culture-carriers appropriate or are assigned, and the dynamic consequences that proceed therefrom.

In an attempt to contribute to the understanding of these two terms and their relationship, I propose to employ them in discussing the religious ritual of an African reformatory cult. I shall avoid such rubrics as "common value attitudes," or "shared frame of reference," or "collective representations." In examining certain features of the cult, I shall keep in mind Sapir's argument that communication is identical with the cultural process and his catch phrase—"the essence of culture is understanding" (1931:78). I shall, in part, dispute and, in part, qualify Park's long-standing contention that "communication operates primarily as an integrating and socializing principle." (1938:195). The distinction between signals, signs, and symbols will be integral to the discussion.

The reformatory cult in question, Bwiti, appears among the Fang peoples of northern Gabon and the Spanish African territory, Rio Muni. It is a minority movement and not more than 10 per cent of the population are involved. When first in evidence at the turn of the century and until the Second World War the cult represented a reworking of the Fang ancestral cult, *bieri*. This was accomplished by the borrowing, almost entirely within the African tradition, of elements of ritual and belief from the ancestor cults of adjacent Northwestern Bantu peoples whom the Fang had been historically displacing in southwestern migration. There is a similarity of features in the ancestral cults of all the Gabonese Bantu but sufficient difference in detail as to provoke attention and elicit comparison. In the eyes of Fang reformatists the cult life of the southern Gabonese peoples, most notably the Metsogo and the Baloumbo, was more elaborate and more dramatic. In the context of the increasing frustration and religious

limitations of colonial controls, it was more effective in establishing contact with ancestral forces, themselves increasingly distant and increasingly compromised by lower and higher powers: witchcraft on the one hand, and God and the saints of Catholic Christianity on the other. It is only in the last 20 years, however, that a direct coming-to-terms with missionary Christianity has been attempted. But syncretism in this phase has been rapid. Many Christian elements have been incorporated. A Christian calendar has been adopted.

As is typical in almost all the African religious movements, fission is frequent and has produced polymorphism: (Veciana 1957:11) a variety of sub-cults. There are five main sub-cults of Bwiti among the Fang. The data here is taken from the principal sub-cult—*Dissoumba* of *Asumege Ening*, which separated from the parent tradition in the late 1930's and by 1960 was the major cult. It is found primarily in Gabon.

It is useful in categorizing African religious movements to think of two continuums on a bi-axial coordinate system (Fernandez 1964). On one continuum we mark the tendency toward nativism or the return to African tradition, on the one hand, and separatism or the acceptance of imported, usually Christian, elements on the other. The second continuum marks realism-rationalism, that is the instrumental search for satisfaction on the one pole as against the elaboration of a projective system, the search for expressive satisfactions on the other. At the present time, Bwiti, as a reformatory movement compared with other African religious movements, occupies a median position on both continuums. It is more nativistic than Kimbanguisme (Raymaekers; 1959); less nativistic than the Shembe movement in South Africa (Sundkler 1961); more instrumental than either of these two movements but much more concerned with expressive satisfactions than the National Church of Nigeria and the Cameroons (Parrinder 1953) or any of the "rebel" churches described for Uganda by Welbourne (1961). The *Asumege Ening* branch of the Bwiti cult with which we are concerned here is more nativistic and more expressive than all but one of the other Bwiti sub-cults. It frequently re-introduces by-gone Fang rituals and it has elaborated a complex cosmology and liturgy with which it is preoccupied.

Bwiti, like revitalization movements in general (Wallace 1956:265), and reformatory movements in particular, is characterized in its leadership by a deliberate, organized, conscious effort to construct a more satisfying culture. Leaders of the cult give evidence of this, for they sometimes visit Catholic or Protestant services or other cults with the express intention of discovering materials suitable for the further elaboration of their own cult life. *Asumege Ening* in Fang means "beginning of life," and cult leaders frequently detail their responsibilities in the idiom of reconstruction. They are aware that they are rebuilding in a new way something which has been destroyed. Not all the members of the cult, it is to be remarked, take this "promethean" view of their responsibilities to the culture of the cult, and what remains to be seen below is the extent to which they are "conscious" of reconstructive revitalization. We must also keep in mind for the purposes of the ensuing discussion that this conscious search results in a rapid turnover of beliefs and liturgical elements. The dynamic of

the symbol system is intensive; this is not unusual for revitalization movements, though unusual for religion in general which tends in its "church" as opposed to its "sect" form, to be fairly conservative in this respect.

The observations on the behavior of cult members in respect to their symbol system detailed here are based on participation in the life of two cult houses (*aba eboka*): six months were spent in a peripheral, recently founded *Asumege Ening* house in Sougoudzap, Woleu-Ntem, northern Gabon; and three months were spent in a founding house in Kougouleu, Kango, central Gabon. The latter was a point of origination for most but not all of the practices of the former. There were eleven members in the Sougoudzap cult house, six men and five women. At Kougouleu, 42 participants, 18 men and 24 women, danced the religion that calls the ancestors back from the deep forest, steps over death and discovers God (*Zame ye Mebege*) and his sister (*Nyingwan Mebege*). Direct inquiry as to the meaning of cult symbolism was not pursued throughout this period but in both cases at a quiescent period of cult life. Observations in periods of turmoil complement this more intensive research. Twenty full members of the cult with whom the ethnographer had established fairly confidential relationship were queried extensively, and it is the views of these 20 that we refer to here below. They represented all echelons of the cult.³

On the face of it, consensus prevailed in both of these cult houses, for all participants who were queried emphatically subscribed to the efficacy of the ritual involved. All informants believed that participation in the night-long ritual led to a state of *nlem-mvore* (one-heartedness), uniting all members of the cult. It seems appropriate to take this achievement of *nlem mvore* as the achievement of consensus. Informants frequently characterized this state as one in which *bot ba wogan* (people understand each other). Since this common understanding is obtained by ritual means, that is, apparently, by the ritual manipulation of symbols, and is itself achieved by a particular ritual, we may wish to call *nlem mvore* symbolic consensus. In any case, the state of *nlem mvore* indicates a high degree of social solidarity among cult participants. The degree to which understanding prevails among the membership in any logico-meaningful sense remains to be examined.

The achievement of this state, it must be pointed out, is remarkable both from the perspective of the Fang as well as that of the ethnographer. This is so because the growth of economic individualism and the abandonment of old ceremonial institutions has meant a great increase, in contemporary Fang life, of mutual distrust and suspicion unalleviated by the traditional forms of ritual reintegration. This has been especially the case within the kin group (*mvoga-bot*—village of patrilineally related people) where the traditional high expectation of solidarity has been most painfully disabused.⁴ Cult members boast of the achievement of *nlem mvore* as one of the great virtues of Bwiti. Naturally enough, Fang outside the cult, recognizing their own contemporary problems in fraternal interrelationships, are frankly skeptical that anything approaching "one heart" can any longer be obtained in Fang affairs. If we regard the penetration of "one heartedness" into social relationships outside the specific ceremonial

context, a two-to-three-day period occurring several times a month, we find some reason for this skepticism. The members of Bwiti (*banzie*) themselves recognize that the ritual achievement of *nlem mvore* is not pervasive in their interrelationships outside the ceremonial period. But they explain that it is the building up of "bad-heartedness" (*nlem abe*) in between times that provides one important reason for holding the Bwiti ceremonies again. In any case we are not concerned with the state of consensus outside the ceremonial context. Within it, participants maintain, it is effectively achieved.

The state of *nlem mvore* is ritually obtained in the following manner. Cult ritual commences at six in the evening and concludes at six in the morning. Dancing is continuous after 9:00 p.m. when preliminary ceremonies have purified the chapel, except for a lull at midnight and at 3:00 a.m. when prayers are addressed directly to the ancestors and to God. An alkaloid intoxicant, *eboga* (*Tabernenthes eboka*), is taken in moderate amounts to achieve an ecstatic state, though alienation is rarely so complete as to produce possession. In fact, and this is an anomaly in African religious movements, possession is regarded as impeding proper ritual development—it is considered unaesthetic. Nevertheless, the intoxicant is taken, to translate directly from the Fang, "in order to make the body light and to enable the soul to fly." The spiritual world—*mam ye esi ayat*—does not, in this cult, come to possess the worshipper. It is, rather, the worshipper who must leave himself in order to make contact with the unseen.

The ritual—its Christian influences will be noted—is two-phased. From six until midnight the members of Bwiti dance creation and birth: the creation of the world and the creation of man, as well as the birth of Adam and the birth of Christ are all thematically developed in the song and dance but are not systematically distinguished. These themes are not, in other words, presented serially but simultaneously. Hence, analysis must consider levels of meaning at any given moment of the ritual. Members of the cult, as we shall point out, differ in the extent to which they appreciate and achieve logicoaesthetic integration of these various levels of meaning.

After midnight we witness dancing representing death and destruction: the destruction of man's hopes in a benign world, the death of Christ, the expulsion from paradise, the flight from the savannah into the rain forest (a symbolic recreation of the actual Fang migration experience), and the passage from day into night. It is also after midnight that the membership establishes reunion—*esamba*—with the ancestor spirits which have been attracted into the cult house from the deep forest. It is in this reunion that the distinction between the living and the dead, and more important for us here, the distinction between the individual living cult members, is obliterated. All become *nlem myore*—one heart.

One particular ritual symbolizes this achievement. In the early hours of the morning the membership, carrying small pitch torches, line up in single file, closely compressed. In company to the subdued strumming of the native harp, *ngombi*, they file out of the chapel into the village, thence into the forest following a network of narrow cleared paths. They go out, it is said, in search for those lingering ancestors who have not responded to the dramatic invitations

extended to them from the cult house previously in the evening. After brief circulation in the forest they return to the cult house, maintaining the prescribed decorum. Here the leader, separating the harp player from the line, begins to turn it into a tighter and tighter circle. Shortly, all members are folded into a solid mass with torches held high above their heads where the individual flames unite in a single fire. They intone a low sign of satisfaction. "One-heartedness" is achieved.

This ritual is profoundly significant to the membership and, we repeat, all of the members among whom intensive research was carried forth testified to its efficacy. It does something for them which they find satisfying. It accomplishes for them a change of state—a cessation of felt deprivation and anxiety if one wishes—even if this only be temporary.

At this point, however, the data from extensive discussion with the 20 cult members in question reminds us of the fact of variation in the individual interpretation of commonly experienced phenomena. The field notes of any anthropologist regularly betray this fact of variation and we are quite accustomed to it though it may constitute an inconvenience in the face of such unitary terms as society and culture and a difficult-to-suppress tendency to think in terms of the group mind. It is a fact of field work that bears closer scrutiny than we have heretofore given it. In any case the individual data from the 20 members of Bwiti call into question the nature of the consensus that seems to have been so clearly established among them.

While all cult members recognized that the commonality of one heart was a remarkable consequence of cult ritual, only half of these informants recognized that the particular ritual described above symbolized the creation of *nlem mvore*. Moreover, it appears that the cult in the eyes of the members queried had a number of manifest functions and that these members differ in assigning priorities to, or even recognizing, these various functions. Of the 20 cult members, seven said that the main purpose of the ritual was to find and establish proper relationship with the Christian God who lies behind death and of whom the Fang had no traditional knowledge. Eight said that the main purpose of the cult was to reestablish contact with the abandoned ancestors and regain their tutelary blessing. The remaining three informants declared the purpose of the cult ritual to be various: guaranteeing the well being and tranquility (*mvwaa*) of the village, demonstrating to the European the validity of an African religion, and curing the individual illnesses of the worshippers.

A careful consultation with cult members turns up, therefore, considerable variance in the rationale of their participation. It should not be presumed, of course, that members have but one reason for participation. In fact, prolonged discussion with the individual informant almost always turned up a number of objectives to be reached through cult ritual. And though the individual may give priority to one, he will usually concede the validity of another's reasons for participation. What we find, ideologically, in the cult, then, is a congeries of purposes. Individuals select among these purposes apparently those that most suit their temperaments and most speak to their condition.

If we should ask how it is that cooperative participation continues in cult ritual despite a lack of consensus at this level, the obvious answer is that a cult rationale or charter is rarely explicitly stated, or if stated is phrased in such general terms as not to offend or exclude the particular purposes of various individuals. Secondly, and this is particularly true for the older cult house at Kougouleu, the participants rarely discuss or debate the rationale and are content that it should be taken for granted. Only cult leaders concern themselves with such matters, in competition with other cult leaders for membership—and in discussion with the ethnographer. In the Kougouleu cult we may even speak of a patterned avoidance of such ideological issues. Of such issues it is said: "We speak here with one voice," (*nkin da*) and the inquiry is then referred to the leader of the cult. It may even be argued that this patterned avoidance is a greater guarantee of integration and ongoing participation in cult life than the occasional expressions of egalitarian tolerance one gets from participants when they are confronted, usually by the ethnographer, with evidence of other, differing rationales.

These facts bring to mind Malinowski's concise definition of an institution as a group of people united by a purpose into an organization capable of achieving that purpose, (1944:39 ff.). Malinowski also speaks of the institutional charter as a set of ideas validating the purpose to be achieved. Integration in the cult is high, if we mean by that the degree to which participants fulfill their ritual role expectations and claim to derive satisfaction in so doing. Yet it is difficult to say that they are by consensus united around any given purpose or even that the articulation of a purpose in the form of the charter is felt necessary to the majority of participants. Perhaps one should speak of the purpose as a feeling of satisfaction offered through social solidarity, but a feeling is not a purpose until articulated to be so and it is only the ethnographer and not the Fang who could make such a statement. In short, Malinowski's definition of an institution in terms of a purpose seems too greatly to intellectualize the nature of integration that obtains within the institutions discussed here. The difficulty to which we shall return arises from the fact that we are dealing with two different kinds of integration—social and cultural.

The same ideological variability accompanying ritual behavior is, as we have already indicated, evident in respect to the ritual symbols involved. It is well accepted that a common system of symbols interpreted in a common way is a prime requisite for an integrated social system. It may be said that confidence in the appropriateness of one's own behavior, and security in the interpretation of others' behavior is obtained, in part, according to the symbols which accompany that behavior. In checking with informants we again find, however, considerable variation as to the interpretation of the key symbols involved. We are led to observe that in respect to this syncretistic social system, though common symbols are indeed necessary for integration, interpretation of these symbols in a common way is not a prime requisite.

One of the key symbols, for example, is the native harp (Fig. 1) (*ngombi*)—the central instrument in cult activity and the symbol which is borne out into

the forest in search of the ancestors in the procession we have already described. We find again a congeries of meanings attached to this symbol. Three informants, although recognizing its importance in cult ritual, see no meaning in it whatsoever. Most informants saw it as symbolic of the female principle of the universe—*Nyingwan Mebege*—the sister of God, though one informant regarded it as symbolic of God, the voice of God—*Zame ye Mebege*. They said things like, "In this harp we see *Nyingwan Mebege*. She speaks to us through its music and it conveys our prayers and thoughts to her"; or, "In this harp *Nyingwan Mebe*

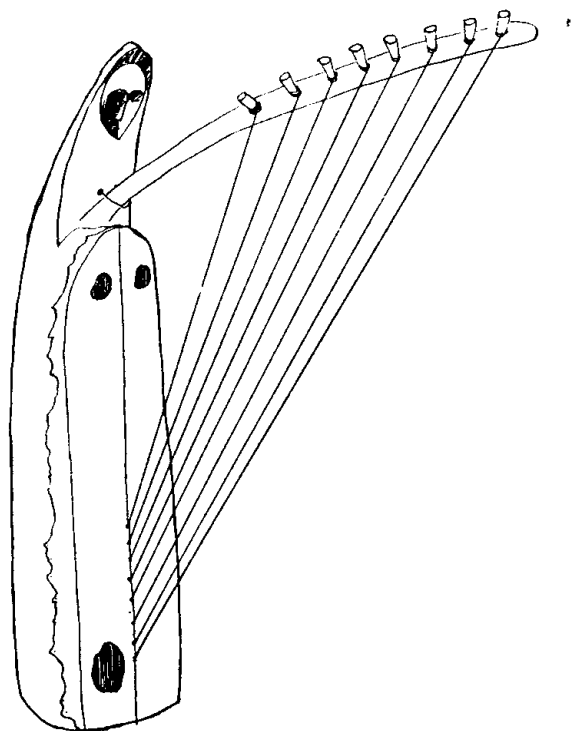


FIG. 1. Native harp (Ngombi).

comes among us." Half of these informants also gave elaborate interpretations of the various parts of the harp. The sounding box covered with antelope skin is symbolic of the stomach of the female principle, the source of all life. The support arm of the harp with its eight keys represents the backbone. The eight strings themselves are the sinews of the spiritual body of *Nyingwan Mebege*, and communicate, as do the sinews in the body, endurance and flexibility to the members.

These symbolic interpretations of the meaning of the harp are themselves shallow when compared to the elaborations provided by cult leaders, particularly the leader of the Kougoulou cult, a man of impressive mythopoeic imagination. In him the various elements of the harp are fully explained and achieve logico-meaningful integration of a high order. He points out that the two basic sexual

colors, white male and red female, which are painted on the right and left side of the sounding box represent that sexual union which is the source of vitality, the essence of the female principle. The support arm, which is the backbone, is representative of male potency since it is the backbone that gives to the male his sexual vigor. Thus the conjunction of support arm and sound box, backbone and stomach, also express sexual union. The integration of symbolic meanings into a meaningful configuration is further achieved in this man's mind by reference to the eight strings of the harp. The four cords of highest pitch are the feminine cords, those four of lowest pitch are masculine cords. As the harp is played, masculine and feminine tones intermingle in another manifestation of that union which is the source of vitality (*ening*). It may be remarked that this man's facility in discovering and adducing complex symbolic meanings in the various paraphernalia and phenomena which accompany cult ritual is one source of the respect which validates his authority. What needs explaining is why the range of interpretations known to him are not equally well known to his followers.

This variation in the interpretation of symbols is encountered in varying degrees with all the symbols of this syncretist ritual system. We may place symbols, therefore, on a continuum ranging from those whose meanings are patent to those which are either esoteric or apprehended but not understood. At the same time, we recognize that the individual members of the cult differ in their appraisal of any given symbol. A symbol whose meanings are quite patent to most members of the cult will be more elaborately interpreted by certain members, cult leaders particularly, as in the case of the harp. Two more examples will be helpful in making the point.

Three kinds of fire are kept burning in the cult house during the all-night ceremonies. Most common is a pitch "lamp" (*otsa*)—a cylinder of bark five to eight inches in diameter and ten to fifteen inches deep filled with the pitch of the okoume tree (*Okoumea Kleineana*) and set afire. The "lamps," of which there are usually two or three in the house, if properly tended, will burn ten hours or as long as the ceremonies last. On special ceremonial occasions, the climatic phase of a ritual cycle, for example, a small bonfire (*mewuba*) is kept burning in the exact center of the cult house. A third kind of fire occasionally employed is a long raffia torch (*nduan*) which burns vigorously and is swooped and swung by a dancer throughout the cult house. The intention of the torch is to purify the cult house and to put witches and other evil spirits to flight.

Fire was understood as a weapon against the infiltration of witches by all informants. Five, however, did not seem to recognize its capacity to purify and make clean. Members of the upper echelon, *nima na kombo*, *kombo* and *yemba*, were privy to fuller meanings of the pitch lamp and the bonfire. The pitch lamp, they pointed out, is symbolic of the life of man. All men are shells, husks in which the pitch, the vital substance of life, burns away until it finally burns out. These pitch lamps should remind the membership of life and death and the attempt to leap over beyond death which is one of the principal objects of cult practice.

In some cult houses, notably at Bifun near Lambarene, though not in the

two houses whose participants' views we are examining here, the spirit of man is created in a fire in the early moments of the evening by use of a mock forge with bellows and other traditional paraphernalia of iron-working (*nkom, nzong*). A dancer sitting to one side of the fire suddenly rises, quavers as the bellows work, and, drawing himself up, jumps over the fire. He is created. His death can be represented at any appropriate moment in the ritual by his jumping back over the fire. In cults who follow these practices the fire itself is commonly associated with the Holy Spirit—the red of the fire is the blood of *Nyingwan Mebege*,

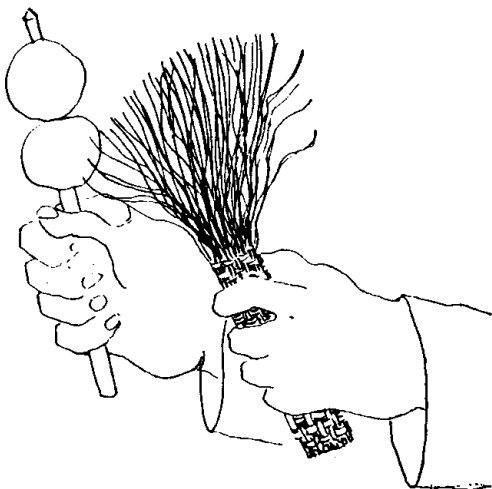


FIG. 2. Rattle (*tchoke*) and brush.

the sister of God, the spiritual source of vitality. The heat of the fire symbolizes God himself, the terrifying and the untouchable. The bellows, together with the ceramic fire nozzle, represent the male organ.

Another very common symbol is the rattle (*tchoke*), which is held in the right hand in company with a raffia brush, (Fig. 2) symbolic of the female organ, held in the left. In the process of the various dances these two rhythm instruments are brought together in such a way as to symbolize the sexual act.

All informants recognized that the *tchoke* was symbolic of the male member—its iconic qualities are fairly obvious. But only half of the informants recognized that the periodic shaking of the *tchoke* together with the raffia broom at certain ritual junctures was symbolic of sexual union and was intended to add power and force to ritual development—to give to the individual cult member the fertility he sought, the capacity to create his own world in true patriarchal patrilineal fashion.

It will be clear that we have presented here only the most contextually relevant linkages for some of the symbols manipulated in the ritual. In fact, a patient examination of these symbols in the presence of a sensitive informant and in the context of all Fang tradition would reveal a much broader range of

associations and interpretations—each symbol gathering unto itself a congeries of meanings—the product of all the situations in which it had appeared in Fang life and of associations both accidental and intentional which have attached themselves to it. Turner has demonstrated for the Ndembu what a subtle web of associations commonplace ritual symbols can call up (1961a, 1961b). Our purpose here, however, has been to demonstrate a variability in the interpretation of these symbols and a variability in the degree to which various culture carriers make out configurations in the relationships between various symbols, engage, in other words, in logico-meaningful integration.

The *banzie* regard the making out of configurative relationships and associations between symbols and between symbols and other events, beliefs, and items in experience with some awe. It is a form of penetration of the unseen and mysterious (*asok engang*), which was accomplished in former days also by diviners, by the eldest members of the ancestor cult (*bieri*), in the presence of the craniums of the ancestors (*nkukweng*), or at times of initiation into the cult. Thus it is said of the leader of the Kougoulou cult house, something of whose elaborate symbolic interpretations we have suggested above, that he is a man who sees far and has died often; he is familiar with the grave and all that exists there and shapes our lives here.

This man himself boasts of his ability to make out a multitude of meanings in the items and actions of cult life. He claims that it is because he has died and passed beyond the grave that he is able to deal so expertly in *efonan* (likenesses), the closest Fang translation for the term symbol. He sees connections, therefore, that the membership does not see and hence “pulls the world together” for them (*a long mesi*—literally, ties together the earth). “There is,” he once pointed out in conversation with the ethnographer, “a fundamental unity of things,” apparent to those, he implied, who understood “likenesses.” “Many things which seem different are really the same,” he went on to say. “There is so much diversity and conflict, all of which gives rise to *ebiran* and *nsem* (social and ritual sin) (Fernandez, 1962:260) because of the action of witchcraft (*mbwol*). The witches (*beyim*) have no other object than to confuse people and prevent them from seeing the unity of things. The witch wants to get people alone so that he can eat them, and that is precisely what Bwiti prevents him from doing.” It remains now to examine ways in which and at what level, this unity is achieved in cult ritual.

The data presented above confronts us with the fact that within such highly patterned behavior as ritual different cultural perspectives are in existence. Common symbols carry different weightings for different participants.⁵ Symbols which are elaborately expressive for some, conjuring up conceptions basic to the cult world-view, are simply *situation referential* for others—that is, insofar as they are signalled out for attention they refer back to the ritual itself out of which they sprang rather than to meanings beyond ritual activity. What are symbols for some informants, in effect, are signs or signals for others—simply clues to the conduct of ritual activity rather than expressive of cultural dimensions associated with but beyond that activity. The cult harp, the fire, the rattle

to which some cult members lend complex meanings to others are much more matter of factly experienced as the necessary paraphernalia of ritual activity, without which that activity could not go on, but otherwise not especially meaningful.

If research into the views of cult members shows that the significance and "symbolicness" of their ritual behavior is differentially interpreted, what can it mean, then, to speak of symbolic representations with any implication that they are collective? If we take Tylor's working definition of culture as repeated activities and shared ideas, the repeated activity of the ritual is obvious enough but we become more skeptical about the ideas shared. We become aware of the range of cultural ambiguities involved in social interaction.

No doubt, as behavior goes, ritual is a special case. We are forced, it seems, to recognize the relevance of Leach's observation as to "the essential vagueness of all ritual statements" (1954:286). The remarkable integrative effect of ritual, he maintains, rests in the fact that it can bring together in repeated activity persons who have quite a variant interpretation of the meaning of that activity. Ritual can achieve integration on the social level of interaction, between participants who on the cultural level—the ideological level of beliefs, rationales, interpretation of symbols—in fact, lack consensus. Ritual is, it is true, a special category of behavior; but the data we derive from it may have more general applicability, for the specialness of ritual lies only in the fact that it is a more tightly patterned and repetitive form of non-random behavior. We should not be prevented from generalizing upon its behavioral characteristics because of a Durkheimian commitment to a sacred-profane dichotomy. The analysis of ritual should impel us to ask questions about the essential vagueness of all social statements. Reflection on this problem puts one in mind of Sumner's tendency to expand the definition of ritual to include practically every instance of regularized behavior and to define it, finally, as "that process by which mores are developed and established"⁶ (1906:67).

What remains of interest is that such highly regularized activity betrays such variable perspectives on the meanings involved. This is a paradox which challenges explanation. If it is not to defeat it we must adopt some analytic distinction between activity and meaning. The principle that can be suggested at this point is that the more rigorously regularized social interaction becomes, the more highly trained the participants in carrying out an increasingly alternative free interaction, the greater possibility there is that the symbolic dimension of this interaction should have variable interpretation. This may be for two reasons. The participants are assured of solidarity in the forms of social interaction and need no longer seek it in cultural forms. If, in other words, coexistence is guaranteed socially, coherence need not be sought culturally. Participants may reflect this state of affairs by either manifesting a disinterest in cultural meanings or by prohibiting the gratuitous interpretation of these meanings. We find both these reactions in the syncretist cult examined here. There is very little discussion of cultural meanings within the cult except on the part of the cult leader. For all speak with one voice!

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSENSUS

An explanation such as the above forces a return to the concepts of symbol and consensus upon which it is based. We see the utility of distinguishing between signal, sign and symbol, on the one hand, and between two kinds of consensus, social and cultural, on the other. Taking the latter distinction first, the reader will be aware that we have employed the phrase "symbolic consensus" in two different ways. We have discussed the ritual achievement of social solidarity (*nlem mvore*—one-heartedness) as the symbolic achievement of solidarity. We have also examined the meanings for the participant of certain symbols manipulated in this ritual. This examination exposed lack of consensus. We must, it seems, recognize the existence of consensus at two levels, exactly as we must distinguish between social and cultural systems. Geertz (1957:34) following Parsons (1951:6) has made clear the value of two analytic perspectives: the social or causal-functional, on the one hand; the cultural or logico-meaningful, on the other. Integration in these two systems, Parsons argued, is not of the same type and there is, in fact, tension between them. Parsons elsewhere in a footnote to the elaboration of his system employs as we have the distinction between co-existence and coherence.

Systems of action are functional systems; cultural systems are symbolic systems in which the components have logical or meaningful rather than functional relationships with one another. Hence the imperatives which are characteristic of the two classes of system are different. In systems of action the imperatives which impose certain adaptations on the components result from the empirical possibilities or necessities of co-existence which we designate as *scarcity* and from the properties of the actor as an organism: in cultural systems the internal imperatives are independent of the compatibilities or incompatibilities of coexistence. In cultural systems the systemic feature is *coherence*; the components of the cultural system are either *logically consistent* or *meaningfully congruous*. (1954:173).

Following this approach in which it becomes clear that the requirements of social co-existence are not the same as cultural coherence, logical consistency and aesthetic congruity, it is not only convenient but necessary to distinguish between social and cultural consensus.

Social consensus we may define as an acceptance of the necessity for interaction and, following Max Weber's definition of the social situation as one in which people orient their actions toward one another, the agreement to orient action towards one another. This acceptance and agreement involves the acceptance of a certain set of signals and signs which give direction and orientation to this interaction permitting the coordination and co-existence of the various participants. A good example of social consensus is found in ritual action. In the example we have discussed here the individuals involved hold largely private and in abeyance a logico-meaningful perspective or judgment. They do so for the sake of a social-satisfaction—the satisfaction of orienting their activity towards each other with the resulting psycho-biological benefits whatever these may be—the security of acceptance, exaltation, esprit de corps, morale, well-being, enthusiasm or exstasis. To some degree in every social situation and to

a considerable degree in the example explored here, the individual must ignore or play hob with his own meanings for the sake of social consensus. He must be ready to interact and cooperate with others whether he understands or agrees with them in any intellectual sense or not. He does this for the sake of what Malinowski has called the satisfaction of "phatic communion" as opposed to logico-meaningful satisfactions⁷ (1923:315).

Cultural consensus is an understanding that one holds symbolic meanings in common. This recognition is obtained by explicit communication, discussion, and debate. The tension between this form of consensus and social consensus is illustrated in the ritual situation analyzed. Despite the achievement of social consensus (*nlem mvore*, one heart) we do not find among the informants queried a high degree of cultural consensus nor a concern with achieving it. In point of fact, we find a resistance towards the raising of logico-meaningful matters and a feeling that too great a concern with consensus at that level might actually interfere with social consensus—the readiness to orient actions toward one another and engage in ritual activity.

Given the dynamism of cult life, it is not difficult to understand why a preoccupation with logico-meaningful matters in lower echelon cult members is perceived by cult leaders as a threat to their cult—an attempt to set up a new group. In fact, it often indicates such intention, for divisive elements often make their case by reference to the logic or meanings evident in the ritual and its symbols.

Field data on the peripheral chapter of Bwiti where the ritual and ceremony had not been fully regularized so that ritual acts were not well coordinated and signals and signs not well learned gives us just such a situation. Cult life in the Bwiti chapter in Sougoudzap, Woleu-Ntem, northern Gabon was entirely disrupted during the fall of 1959 because of an ideological dispute as to the use and meaning of certain symbols in ritual. In this case the elderly leader of the cult persisted in certain pre-war practices: styles of ceremonial garb, use of the chest drum for dancing, two stages of initiation, a limited song cycle. For more than two years younger members of the cult susceptible to syncretisms and innovations emanating from central Gabon fretted under what they evidently regarded as an outmoded symbol system. From time to time they suggested modifications to the elderly leader and occasionally changes were incorporated at their suggestion. But no open criticism or discussion of the differing cultural perspectives took place. Cult life went on as usual and the ritual achievement of solidarity—the affirmation of social consensus—continued. Finally, the occasion of an initiation brought forth the impending ideological dispute. The cult leader was openly questioned on the meanings of the various symbols he planned to employ and openly contradicted when he proffered his explanations. Offended at this contradiction, he invited the dissidents to follow Bwiti elsewhere—where the "red path of eboga" was more to their liking. Thereupon, three-fourths of his membership abandoned his chapel, undertaking an arduous weekly journey of 21 kilometers to another and more progressive cult house. The old man was left with the immediate members of his family and a few dependents who, un-

concerned by ideological matters, continued to seek the satisfactions of social consensus in as convenient a way as practicable. Eventually, the dissidents returned to the village and built their own chapel. The elderly leader and his family after a period of time joined the dissidents and submitted to their ritual forms. In the face of a more active and socially satisfying cult house in the same village, his remaining dependents had abandoned him for the new cult. Soon his own ceremonies began to seem a solitary and pale reflection of greater activity at the other end of the village. The satisfactions of social consensus were so manifestly greater in the new cult that the closing of his own cult house was inevitable. The ideological problems of cultural consensus were forgotten in pursuit of those psychobiological satisfactions which a massively coordinated ritual can so richly afford.

Several things must be said further about this occurrence. First, Bwiti, as we have remarked, is a highly decentralized religious movement. The vitality of any particular cult chapel depends upon the ability of its leadership to interest the membership in cult activity. They have no other guarantee that their membership will not abandon them for another more attractive chapel. In some cults this can mean a high emphasis upon innovation and novelty in the symbolic accompaniments of ritual interaction. Balandier has remarked upon such an emphasis upon novel symbolic forms in the Bwiti cults he visited (1955:221).

It is understood in all the cults, however, that this innovation is the responsibility of the leadership—of those men, in other words, who have retired from the strenuous activity of the all-night dance cycle, and who sit in the back of the chapel to observe and discipline the orderly ritual progression of this cycle. The members of Bwiti make an important distinction between the active—dancing—members of the cult (*banzie*) and the passive leadership (*nima na kombo*—those who create). The latter have already danced much, died often, and seen far, and they have every right in their acquired otiosity to scrutinize the ritual symbols in a meaningful manner. This is, however, entirely inappropriate in active, dancing members of the cult. Thus, attempts at innovation stemming from them are usually interpreted as divisive in intent. Discussion of the meaning of the symbol system, though this could be easily justified by the ambiguities and uncertainties created by rapid turnover in this system, are usually suspect for the same reason. The failure of the elderly leader in the above case was obviously a failure of innovation. But the attempt by his membership to discuss the meaning of symbols was interpreted by him as a threat to his authority and his right to arbitrate such cultural matters. Some cults, it is true, do readily admit to discussion of ideological matters and all, at the moment of initiation, make some attempt to acquaint the new members with the esoterica—the ritual symbols and their meaning. But it is remarkable the extent to which, among an egalitarian people like the Fang, this discussion is carried on in the form of a didactic lesson from the leadership. Rarely is there a concerted and sincere attempt made to make sure that substantial cultural consensus exists throughout the membership—that the lesson is truly learned.

While we have detailed here ways in which the discussion of symbolic mean-

ings is limited in these cults, the two cult houses from which we have drawn the bulk of our observations embody some important differences. We must remark the anomaly for both that side by side with this reticence to discuss matters of meaning within the cult there is frequently an evangelical zeal without. Frequently members of Bwiti will wax eloquent about the culture of their cult to strangers or noncult members—people with whom let it be said they do not ordinarily interact—attempting to astound them with the esoterica involved. This characteristic, of great profit to the ethnographer, reflects no doubt the minority position of the reformatory movement and the desire of members to impress themselves upon their disdainful compatriots.

The difference between the two cults observed, however, is substantial in this respect. Members of Koungoulou cult in the nuclear area of cult life in central Gabon are much less willing to share their esoterica and observe the "speaking with one voice" requirement more strictly. Their cult life has become more stable because the charismatic leadership has translated itself into effective coordination of a ritual system which is itself highly magnetic and satisfying. Furthermore, in their area the cult has gained acceptance and they need not expound their virtues defensively. These conditions are lacking in northern Gabon, and many of the cults there continue to search for truly satisfying ritual forms. The habit of bragging about the culture of the cult tends to feed back into cult life itself as a highly critical attitude towards the symbol system involved. We have described above the disruptive consequence of this attitude.

The treatment of these important details should not allow us to forget the fundamental tension between social consensus and cultural consensus which we are seeking to demonstrate. One may argue that in the reformatory cult situation a rapid turnover of symbols makes cultural consensus particularly difficult of achievement. In the syncretistic process the awareness and articulation with other cultural systems in the interest of synthesis is such that old symbols are constantly replaced or acquire new dimensions. Cult leaders validate their authority by producing new symbolic forms and this clearly acts to increase the variation in symbolic interpretation on the part of participants. In such a situation the variability in symbolic interpretations can threaten social interaction if made explicit through attempts at cultural consensus. Particularly in the context of turmoil and anxiety of a society in transition, like the Fang, where role expectations are frequently frustrated and where, therefore, the compensatory satisfactions of social interaction even in ritual form are to be highly valued would the substantial consideration of cult symbols be seen as divisive and destructive. This is so even though the fact of disintegration in Fang society at large has produced a search for meaningful "signs" and symbols. Such are the factors at work in the syncretist cult situation we have described. They provide for a notable tension between society and culture because of lag in one or the other; in this case, social lag.

But the tension we are discussing, though more clearcut here, is not limited to such a transitional situation. It is certainly more general in human behavior. It is the product, first, of the idiosyncratic experience of every culture carrier

who possesses private as well as public symbols as well as private and public meanings for every symbol singled out for his attention by his enculturation (Leach 1958:150-152). Secondly, it is the product of the inevitable division of labor and structural differentiation produced in any social structure. The understanding of their field of behavior in terms of the meanings available to them are different for those in dominant as against those in subordinate positions. For these and other reasons persons who agree to interact and orient their behavior one towards another may yet evidence substantial lack of agreement about the meanings of the symbols manipulated in that interaction. We find men agreeing to interact—agreeing to coexist—even though they, in effect and to various degrees disagree about much of the meaning of that interaction. It is a much harder thing in human affairs, it appears, to subject that behavior to scrutiny at the cultural level in search of logical coherence and aesthetic compatibility: to agree to disagree, in other words, in a thoroughly intellectual way about the meaning of behavior that is already effectively coordinated.

SOCIAL SIGNALS, SIGNS AND CULTURAL SYMBOLS

We have said that social consensus rests upon the acceptance of a set of signals and signs and an agreement about their significance in the sense that there is acceptance of the appropriateness of these signals and signs as orienters of interaction in a specific social situation and a commonality of response to them. Cultural consensus, we have said, rests upon agreement as to the meanings of the symbols which accompany interaction. What follows and what needs to be discussed is the simplification that social consensus is consensus in respect to signals and cultural consensus a consensus in respect to symbols. Signs, as we define them here, occupy an intermediary relationship between the two spheres—social and cultural—with a foot in both.

The vessel of such an argument as this is easily foundered, however, on a congeries of resurgent problems. The most persistent of these are the problem of meaning and the problem of the distinction between signals, signs, and symbols. In respect to the perennial problem of meaning we limit ourselves to saying that the significance of a social signal lies in the action it stimulates; the orientation of behavior made to it in the process of interaction in the social situation in which it belongs. The meaning of a cultural symbol (it goes against the grain to talk about the significance of symbols), lies in the cognitive interpretation given to it by culture carriers in a much wider set of circumstances than its customary context. The meaning of a red traffic signal, for example, is not the same in terms of behavior if presented when one is seated in one's living room. In its context it means *stop*, but that is entirely inappropriate behavior in one's living room. There is no call for such a sign and it cannot imply or require any useful succeeding action in the living room situation. The American flag is significant in orienting behavior on the parade ground but it has meaning as well. We can interpret this manifold meaning equally well in the living room. It means the United States of America and its 50 states, and has developed through many historic stages and stands for purity, valor and unity. In other words, the

symbol as opposed to the signal has acquired a meaning involving associations beyond its significance within the social context where it customarily appears. Symbols may thus function in many disparate contexts. Morris, quoting Yerkes, has pointed out that the signal and sign, unlike the symbol, sooner or later lose their "meaning" apart from their context. The symbol is, therefore, more autonomous (Morris 1955:23-27). Similarly, Sapir speaking of two basic types of symbols points out that they both begin with situations in which a sign is dissociated from its context (1934:494). Parsons in the same vein recognizes this "autonomy," which he calls abstraction or generalization, in speaking of diffusion as a cultural problem not a social problem. "Thus symbols differ from need-dispositions and role expectations in that they are transmissible from one action system to another" (1951:159). Parsons needs but does not make a successful working distinction between signal, sign and symbol orientations in his social system. We can understand the quotation above more easily if we see need dispositions and role expectations as signal and sign oriented features of the social system.⁸

Beyond this matter of autonomy, however, the student rapidly discovers that clear discussion of symbolism is hampered because the term has been employed to "cover a great variety of apparently dissimilar modes of behavior" (Sapir 1934:492). We may note one sign-symbol distinction frequently employed which must be brought in line with our own signal-sign-symbol distinction. In this perspective signs in behavior are primarily genetic in origin and are subjective expressions of internal states of the communicating organism. Thus Kroeber:

Signs are primarily genetic in origin . . . they convey information to recipient individuals only as to the condition of the sign-producing individual. They alert one organism as to the condition of another. . . . True symbols, however, can convey information on other matters than the condition of the communicating organism. Such external information can fairly be called objective as compared with the essentially subjective nature of what is communicated by non-symbolic signs (1952:753).

This definition confronts natural signs only which are more akin to what has been called a "symptom" than to signals as understood here. We speak of signals in the conventional sense as items of communication which give orientation, like a traffic light, to action but whose significance is limited to the specific interaction situation and which evoke no meaning outside that situation.

The signals and signs which we have singled out in cult life are, it is true, symbols in the sense congenial to Kroeber in that their meaning is not natural or intrinsic to them in their situation but has been assigned arbitrarily by those who have developed the ritual of the cult. Thereafter, however, they function for a good many members of the cult merely as signals, that is, not as having special meanings in and of themselves but as having significance only in relation to the specific context of the situation—in this case the ritual situation—in which they function.

In psychological terms what seems to be involved with many participants in the ritual is a short-circuiting of behavior in respect to symbols. Whereas, as is frequently the case with Bwiti, the meaning of the symbols has been originally explained to the participants, this verbal mediation with its host of associations

is forgotten or repressed and these participants become directly accustomed to a stimulus-motor response.⁹ They see the "symbol become signal" and rather than going through the cerebral routine of explaining it they simply orient themselves towards it with the appropriate action. Symbols become signals in ritual if when sensed they no longer evoke explanations and associations but lead rather directly to highly patterned behavior. To a good many members of Bwiti, as we have suggested, ritual activity in respect to symbols is primarily a matter of stimulus-motor response and response chaining. For some, however, frequently those less involved with ritual activity, the explanations, and associations, the verbal mediation is important and what are signals or signs to many members are symbols to them. It may be said that these people fully participate in the culture of their cult though they may not be fully participant in ritual interaction. They deal in symbolic meanings, with the wealth of possible configurations they suggest, which enables them cognitively to construct a universe and reshape it at will.

If we follow Kroeber's definition that signals are genetic and subjective we are obliged to speak of the social and cultural use of "symbols" and we risk sweeping over with the same term the distinction we are seeking to point up. This distinction, however, did not escape White in his classic article on symboling.

That which is a symbol in the context of origination becomes a sign in use thereafter. Things may be signs or symbols to man. They can be only signs to other creatures. (1944:233).

It is true, referring to Kroeber once again, that the manipulation of signals and signs in the process of ritual interaction serves not only to orient action but also to alert participants to the emotional state of another or the others. Signals and signs can be, in other words, expressively manipulated and, in fact, the ritual we have described has powerful affective content and, hence, important impact on the attitudes of the participants. The distinction between signs and symbols which Kroeber suggests is that the essential function of signs is emotive and symbols cognitive.¹⁰ But this seems too simple a distinction and symbols are not to be excluded from an emotive function. The American flag or the Cross or the Cult Harp may be, for those who interpret them symbolically, abundantly productive of emotion as well. While an interpretation of these symbols in logico-meaningful fashion in the manner of our cult leader will help to locate the individual in his universe—contributing to his cognitive map—they also produce emotion usually because like signs and signals they carry with them, in the Durkheimian sense, affective references to the interaction situation in which they most customarily occur—in all these cases a ritual situation with the heightened emotion and exaltation characteristic of it. For Parsons, in fact, the most important starting point for any discussion of symbolism is the recognition "that every symbol has both expressive and cognitive meanings references" (1953:80).

The more closely we scrutinize the signal sign-symbol relationship, therefore, the more careful we become in suggesting a clear dichotomy. We are led to observe that all signals have symbol potential and all symbols act to one degree

or another as signals. Signals appearing out of their context may assume dimensions of meaning. Clearly a college boy who has hung a parking sign on his wall has made of it a symbol. Levy-Bruhl gives us many examples of the way in which natural signals appearing outside their customary context suddenly assume symbolic import for the "primitive" (1938). He characteristically suggests that the "primitive" is particularly susceptible to the portentous investment of signals—to the elaboration of symbols out of signs.

We see the close signal-symbol relationship in the research on which we are reporting. What was substantially a symbol to some cult members was a sign to others, significant only within the context of cult activity and meaningless outside it or at best, when brought up in discussion, re-referential, referring only back to cult activity. The range of variability of the interpretation of various symbols was thus quite great. For some the cult-harp was a fully autonomous symbol with a full weighting of associated meanings. For others it was almost exclusively a ritual object—a necessary element in the coordination of ritual interaction but otherwise not particularly meaningful in a cognitive sense. For some it was not even especially meaningful in an expressive sense. These facts remind us that the connection between signals, signs, and symbols is an intimate one. Perhaps signals and symbols are best treated, as Morris does in his science of semiotic, as polar varieties of sign (1955:27). In line with our thinking here a different distinction would be clearer. Our argument suggests a three part distinction between social signals, signs, and cultural symbols according to their autonomy from the situation in which they usually appear: their ability, in other words, to function in many slots in many different contexts. A signal is something singled out to stand for and thus simplify a condition of the larger situation of which it is a part. Socially it is used exclusively to coordinate and orient activity in that situation. A sign has much of the characteristics of signals as stated but is sufficiently free of its context to have superadded expressive meanings—inarticulated and therefore merely pregnant—which give it in its "mystery" high affective content. A symbol obtains its cognitive meaning rather than significance by its greater abstraction and in the fact that it elicits explicitly articulated associations though it may also give some orientation for action. The more it is verbally articulated, it seems, the more it loses affective content: "emotionally denuded" is Sapir's term. It may be mentioned that our term sign corresponds to his "condensation symbol"; our term symbol to his "referential symbolism" (1934:494).

In effect, then, a symbol is only a more abstracted and more intentionally interpreted signal which stimulates largely cerebral and verbal rather than gross motor behavior. They both, after all, come into being—are singled out—from a diffuse background in the interaction process though symbols because of the greater intellection involved may obtain to either greater complexity or greater definiteness. Signs, midway between signals and symbols, have multiple and often ambiguous meanings which are, perhaps because of this intermediary position, especially emotion producing. This is a consequence of their appearance in many contexts: autonomous relative to signals, mysteriously inexplicit relative

to symbols. We are not suggesting by the term autonomy that either signs or symbols have an innate meaning which exists apart from the contexts in which they have appeared.

In our own example we see the intimacy of the signal-sign-symbol distinction, then, in the fact that what is in effect a symbol to some participants in the cult is a sign or signal to others and, at the same time what in one context is treated by one person as a symbol with autonomous superadded meanings of its own in another behavioral context, usually of ritual action, is treated by him, despite its potential meanings, as a sign or simply as a signal. When on rare occasions the leader of the cult is dancing, the cult harp acts primarily as a signal in coordinating his interaction rather than as a symbol. The subtle interpenetration of signal, sign, and symbol behavior and its manifestation in the interpenetration of society and culture produces caution in the use of the analytic perspective being employed here. It does not counter its utility for it gives us, as has been emphasized, an important grasp of the fundamental tensions which lie behind social and cultural dynamics.

Since we are dealing with symbols of a religious movement the usual understanding of religious symbolism may seem to be at variance with the distinctions proposed here. The customary notion of a religious symbol as having a non-empirical referent, however, is entirely in keeping with the distinction we propose in so far as it suggests that symbolism and signs of all kinds, religious or not, possess meanings which are not simply a function of the particular social situations in which they appear. They refer beyond these situations. This "reference beyond" is what we are to understand in those who discuss religious or mythological symbolism when they tell us that these symbols are invested with *transcendent* meanings, that they are a coincidence of the particular and the universal, that they are "man's way of expressing the quintessence of his experience" past and present, (May, 1960, 34), and that they "revive the communion, indeed communion of present man with his mythical or perennial sources of life" (Kahler 1960:63).

It is well to point out that the consensus as regards specifically religious symbols in the syncretist cult data has the same variability as for other symbolism. Once again if we take the cult harp we find the majority understanding this as referring to the female deity, Nyinywan Mebege, and its music her compassion—understanding it as a strictly religious symbol. Still there are some cult participants who do not understand this non-empirical reference of religious type and some who treat it almost as a signal, or rather, as the harp is played in a number of modes, a set of signals. Ritual action proceeds according to directions given by the harp.

Therefore, we say that social signals are the guideposts and direction givers of social interaction systems. They are the "points de repere" of causal-functional relationships. They coordinate concrete coexistence. Cultural symbols are the summary points, the surface features referring to deeper systems of logico-aesthetic meaning which are not concretely present with them but are called up by them in association and explanation. Between these two elements of communi-

cation lie emotionally pregnant signs. It appears, thus, that the tension between society and culture, between causal-functional systems and logico-meaningful systems is not only a consequence of their inevitable incongruities but can be summed up in the tension between the symbol and the signal—the one immediate, dependent, imbedded in the existential situation of coexistence and coordinated interaction, the other autonomous with super-added meanings forever pulling the culture carrier's attention beyond his immediate situation to the larger implications of his actions—creating in him in other words self-awareness (Hallowell 1959:50-51). This tension between signal and symbol is often embodied in the sign.

III. CONCLUSION

In an influential article on "Communication and Culture" Park argued that "communication operates primarily as an integrating and socializing principle" (1938:195). The data we have presented from the Gabon reformatory cult of Bwiti shows us one area in which effective communication is resisted, in this case, in favor of ongoing ritual activity. We find in this cult variable interpretation of the "symbols" involved in ritual interaction while, at the same time, unanimous recognition of the effectiveness of the ritual. It achieves the kind of cohesiveness and solidarity the Fang call *nlem mvorc* (one heartedness). The ritual at once attracts the participants to it by the sheer interest they have in its forms, and exerts this cohesive influence upon them through their participation in these forms of ritual interaction. Yet while there is a rather elaborate symbol system manipulated in this ritual there is resistance towards attempting to establish consensus about the meaning of these symbols. "All participants speak with one voice," it is said, "and that voice is the voice of the leader." Apparently communication between members about such matters is felt to threaten the cohesiveness and integration obtained by the ritual.

The fact that we find manifest acceptance of the ritual activity and the signals and signs that accompany and give direction to it, yet resistance to explorations of symbolic meanings leads to the distinction between social and cultural consensus—the first agreement in respect to the interaction requirements of signals and signs, the second agreement as to the meanings of symbols. We note an incongruity and a tension between these two forms of consensus. Paradoxically a high degree of social integration in the sense of agreement about signals and signs and smooth coordination of interaction does not necessarily imply a high degree of cultural consensus. In fact, the more perfectly coordinated social interaction should be the greater opportunity there may be for variable interpretations of that activity and hence lack of cultural consensus. It is almost as if cultural consensus is sought in lieu of social consensus. Where high social consensus is evident further attempts at the achievement of cultural consensus may be felt to pose, as in the case studied here, too many uncertainties and threats to the cohesiveness already established. White has pointed out that what are in origin symbols often become merely signs. Our data seems to indicate that once this occurs there is a resistance to building them again towards

the status of symbols. The, at first blush, paradoxical proposition of high social consensus—low cultural consensus is supported in recent work by Downing showing that the greater the cohesiveness of a group the less influence it has on its members' judgments (1958:164-165). It also follows as a proposition from what has been said that if concern with symbolic meaning decreases with effective increase in the coordination of social interaction, then in transitional periods of low social cohesion the concern with symbols will be high. People will be looking for signs and anxious to interpret their meaning. To such inclinations must be traced the origin of Bwiti in the first place.

Park (1938) has a Deweyian vision of society as a moral order and he maintains that in the long run greater intimacy brings with it greater self-awareness and a more profound understanding each of the other. Communication in such a cohesive situation acts to humanize social relationships and to substitute a moral order for one that is only symbiotic. The vision is compelling but it may be only academic. The prospect of men both acting together socially and thinking together culturally in entire mutuality cannot fail to inspire, but it cannot cause us to forget the degree to which men value acting together and distrust thinking together about the meaning of that action. It cannot cause us to forget that the gut-feeling of moral community created by coordinated interaction such as ritual may be actually threatened by an attempt to achieve moral community on the cultural level where the symbolic dimensions of interaction must be made explicit. A gratuitous but relevant reference to French and English politics makes the point "en gros." The instability of the pre-Gaullist French and the stability of the English rests on the degree to which they strive to achieve a correspondence between social and cultural consensus. The French strive to consciously and rationally interpret their political activity with dynamic results. As regards the British we are struck by two things. The first is the concept of the loyal opposition—which is, as far as it goes, the institutionalization of the agreement to disagree on the cultural level. The second is summed up for the great majority in Walter Bagehot's thesis that the true source of strength in the government of England is the apathy of the population. "The best English people keep their minds in a state of decorous dullness" (1948, xv). Whatever may be said of Bagehot's English, to such a mental state as he describes aspire the majority of participants in the ritual we have examined. In contrast all these members of the cult keep their bodies in a state of intense kinesthetic participation.

Other visions than Park's appear in relation to the materials we have discussed. Malinowski (1923) in his discussion of the problem of meaning in primitive languages suggests that the relatively meaningless use of language which he calls "phatic communion" is a primitive trait, though plentiful enough in modern societies. We are becoming, he implies, increasingly reflective and thoughtful—increasingly concerned with the meaning of symbols and hence with more and more substantial forms of communication. In one respect this optimism is not shared by May who from a psychoanalyst's perspective feels that what he calls "transcendent symbols" (our signs) have lost their power to grasp and convey meaning. "They have been replaced by signs and techniques borrowed

from the scientific and mechanical spheres" (1960:28). And this has been done to the great detriment of man's ability, he says, to come to terms with himself and the human situation.

Finally we have Durkheim's vision as set forth in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) [and later presented more precisely (1960) that men will become increasingly obliged to respond to the impersonal demands of the organic collectivity and deal in the more and more explicit and abstract. Man's activity will become more and more rational and more and more strictly attentive to collective representations (1960:338-339)]. But Durkheim lacks the concept of culture which set against society would have given him a more revealing dualism than the personal-impersonal, individual-collectivity, sacred and profane dualism he pursued. We cannot share his vision automatically that man's communication moves towards an ever more rational commerce in collective representations. We repeat that a more coordinated social life may actually mean for the majority of participants a less explicit commerce in collective representations. The collectivity may feel itself best served by social and not cultural consensus.

Whatever may be said about these pronouncements on the human condition we find them reflecting one of the main points we have been arguing: namely that there is a changing, therefore, dynamic relation between attention to signal and sign systems and attention to symbol systems. They suggest the importance of what might be called signal, sign, symbol research. In pursuing this research we come to recognize the fundamental tension between society and culture—between the two fundamental and complementary perspectives in the study of human behavior (Kroeber and Parsons: 1958).

There are difficulties in such study. But even Radcliffe-Brown who was ever suspicious of explanations of what natives mean affirmed that there are methods of determining with some fair degree of probability the meanings of rites and other symbols (1952:143). He does not tell us what this may be. We see it as the obligation to study the comparative weightings given to and tensions between signal, sign, and symbol reactions—significance and meaning—in social systems. We must ask questions of the kind: how much symbolic elaboration is possible in any system; is there such a thing as an overelaborated symbol system; to what extent and at what level and how does the awareness of symbolic meanings interfere with coordinated social interaction (sign and signal behavior)? How is significance and meaning distributed in social systems? Under what circumstances do signals become signs and signals symbols and vice versa? All these questions which have not been actively pursued in anthropology demand that we understand when in human behavior we are talking about symbols and when we are talking about signs and signals and, equally important, what is meant when we speak about consensus. Of general importance in the study of behavior, these distinctions are inescapably relevant in the analysis of ritual.

The data presented here I think produces a useful caution. It has been necessary to point out that culture, logico-meaningful integration in respect to symbols, has been sacrificed among the majority of our informants for the sake

of ongoing social interaction. In counterpart there is an elaborate symbolic, logical, and aesthetic structure in the Bwiti cult. But this has been elaborated and is articulated by cult leaders and not by participants. For these few cult leaders at least cultural consensus is important and they well recognize that difference which Whitehead has pointed out between "the comparative emptiness of presentational immediacy" and the deep meaning created by symbolic representation and symbolic truth (1927:47). But a strong resistance to meaning remains. Such data may be salutary for anthropologists who live in an occupational subculture which sets high value upon cultural consensus. We may tend to overlook the obvious fact that there are many situations in which ignorance is institutionalized and in which social consensus, the so-called existential continuum of uninterpreted interaction, is more highly valued.¹¹ We may always be too persuaded by the Cartesian premise and overlook a very widespread postulate, "I participate therefore I am!"

NOTES

¹ The essentials of this paper were read at the 46th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, November 1962, Chicago, Illinois. The data is among that gathered on a field trip, 1958 thru 1960, in Gabon, Cameroon and Spanish Guinea. The support of the Ford Foundation and the Program of African Studies, Northwestern University is gratefully acknowledged. I thank the Committee on Faculty Research at Dartmouth College for a grant in support of publication of this paper. Valuable discussions have been carried on with Murray Kiteley, Philip Leis, and Nahum Medalia.

² Frequently explanation of these meanings is resisted. Humanists and others who deal in synthesis rather than analysis and capitalize in the indirect and esoteric sometimes decry the attempt to explain symbols . . . "our pragmatic tendency to look for the reality behind the symbol." We are cautioned that "as soon as a symbol is explained . . . it ceases to be a true symbol. It becomes a mere sign or token, artificial and lifeless, and its explanation not itself is the point of contact we have with reality . . . for a true symbol cannot be explained" (Johnson 1955:3). It may be true that a "symbol" as understood in this quotation remains more pregnant in an emotional way when unexplained. But to imply that it has greater meaning unexplained is simply a contradiction in terms unless one has exclusively an emotional theory of meaning. And in fact the quoted author goes on to tell us that the symbol is "a sort of fountain head from which a great many meanings and relationships flow . . . in knowing them moreover the symbol becomes heightened not lessened in significance." This inconsistent argument comes from a kind of obscurantism as well as a failure to distinguish between signals, signs, and symbols. This same difficulty is noted in psychoanalytic definitions of symbols and is brought on by the inchoate category of the unconscious (Stein 1955).

Resistance to the explorations of the meanings of symbols can come from quite another direction—from social scientists themselves who sometimes object that the meanings of symbols are so multitudinous and vague as to defeat analysis. But to construct theories by preventing problems from arising has no virtue. By saying that there are vagaries and complexities involved is not to say that important elements of human behaviour are not therein contained.

³ The social structure of the cult is, in contrast to traditional Fang life, clearly hierarchical, and the spiritual progress of the individual member is three-phased. A member passes progressively from the stage of neophyte (*mwani*) to adept (*bansie*) to knowledgeable director and initiator of ceremonies (*yemba* and *nyiman akombo*).

⁴ It is not only those who have some lineage or clan relationship who dance Bwiti

together. In no case of a cult of any size (over 25 members) were more than 40 percent of the male members drawn from the same clan. In view of the fact that there is reinterpreted ancestor worship in the cult this has posed problems. The answer has been to generalize the conception of spirits whenever obeisance to them is demanded within the ceremonial progress. Attention to particular lineage linked ancestor spirits usually takes place outside the chapel.

⁵ This fact is well enough accepted (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:155-157) although Monica Wilson in her valuable reports on kin and communal ritual found substantial agreement among Nyakyusa in the interpretation of the symbols concerned (1957:6-12). From the perspective of the data we are reporting on here such consistency seems remarkable. It may be the consequence of a research concern to offer a strictly sociological as opposed to a psychological analysis.

⁶ Sumner's rubbery definition of ritual is discussed by Ball, Simpson and Ikeda (1962). The more Sumner reflected upon the problem of ritual, apparently, the more he found in this exceptional form of behavior insight into patterned behavior in general.

⁷ Malinowski is discussing that use of language in which meaning is not primary. In "phatic communion," words are used rather to "fulfill a social function and that is their principal aim but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener . . . each utterance is an act serving a direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other. Once more language appears to us in this function not as an instrument of reflection of thought but as a mode of action" (1923:315).

⁸ In *The Social System* Parson's discusses the sign and symbol (1951:10-11) but does not make systematic use of the distinction. The problem of symbolism broadly considered is not, however, underestimated by him. In the conclusion of his long essay in *Towards A General Theory of Action* he recognizes the inadequacy of his discussion of symbols and urges that "there is probably no problem in the analysis of action systems which would not be greatly clarified by a better understanding of symbolism" (1954:242). In *Working Papers in the Theory of Action* (1953) his Chapter II, "The Theory of Symbolism in Relation to Action, attempts to round out his system in this area, but in a very impenetrable manner.

⁹ Fairly complicated patterns of stimulus-motor activity, of course, can be learned without benefit of verbal mediation and pre-neophyte children and young people spend a long enough period as cult spectators to learn the appropriate behavior patterns without extensive instruction.

¹⁰ V. W. Turner who has done some of the most interesting work on symbolism suggests in an article on Ndembu divination, following Jung, an opposite definition of sign and symbol. "The more esoteric a man's knowledge, the more will he tend to regard that item as a sign, and the more readily will he be able to allocate meanings to it . . . thus at the esoteric level of indigenous interpretation symbols approximate to the status of signs. They become objects of cognition and cease progressively to be objects of emotion. The more they are known, the more they are mastered, the less they are known the more they exert mastery" (1961a: 1). This contravenes normal usage of the term symbol in the sense that the symbol is ordinarily understood as a cognitive device, the sign as affect-laden and hence emotion expressing and emotion producing. Turner takes the psychoanalytical view which regards symbols almost exclusively as the highly charged representatives of complex and inchoate and largely unconscious emotional states. Our view here is that such "objective correlatives" as Turner refers to—representations of individual or collective internal states—have something of the quality of symbols but are not fully such until receiving the explanation due them by virtue of their associations. Otherwise they are merely pregnant with meaning and though this pregnancy may make itself felt on those that manipulate these signs and be an important factor in the quality and orientation of their interaction, the manipulators are not really engaged in cultural behavior until they, like the cult leader discussed here, begin to assess and employ the associations bound up in the symbols in some systematic way.

In our view as opposed to Turner's, it is signs that exert mastery and not symbols. It is the capacity to symbolize that gives mastery. Indeed it is that which has given mastery to the leader of the syncretist cult whose views we have exposed here. Such capacity implies the power to set symbols in their associative network. We would argue, in contrast to Greenberg (1959:72-73), that non-linguistic symbols in any given culture have some systematic relationship. They are not each "isolated" as he suggests. At least the symbols in the syncretist cult we are examining here "fit into a system of multiple related symbols"—a syntax in other words. The provocative feature of Turner's work is his attempt to discover what the "syntax" and semantics of symbols may be—what he calls their positional and exegetical meaning. Previously we have tended to consider them, as does Greenberg, as isolated and for that reason relatively uninteresting.

¹¹ The emphasis on social consensus has been remarked as a prime characteristic of African religious movements. For example Baeta discussing *Prophetism in Ghana* (1962) singles out, from his Protestant perspective, their "neglect of theological study." "There is a general tendency to exalt blind faith rather than encourage intellectual and spiritual wrestling with religious problems" (1962:132). And Balandier (1955:275) sees as a prime characteristic of equatorial religious movements a "reaction a l'encontre de toutes les forces suscitant et developpant la rationalisation."

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