

## INTRODUCTION TO PART I: SYMBOLIC CATEGORIES

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The attempt to clarify the concept of “symbolic category” is confronted with two difficult questions; “What is a category?” and “What is symbolism?” Both have been the subjects of profound debates in philosophy. However, we need not tackle these problems at the abstract level of philosophical arguments. Our point of departure is the experience of African hunter-gathers; i.e. Pygmies in the tropical rain forest and Bushmen in the Kalahari desert. In order to provide the readers with a preliminary clue on how I propose to approach these questions, I would like to propose several key words: nature (or natural environment), social context, body (or embodiment), and indigenous ontology.

Before examining the two questions raised above, I have to comment on the reference frame for my argument. The papers collected here do not share a single theory or methodology. They are, as it were, connected to one another through “family resemblance.” The only feature common to all the papers may be the ambition to understand, as vividly as possible, how symbolic categories are experienced from the indigenous point of view. In order to integrate the diversified subjects into a single picture, I shall adopt the framework of cognitive anthropology or, more broadly, of cognitive science.

What is a category? First, it is necessary to criticize the anthropocentric or language-centric view of what constitutes a category. Imagine, for example, a bitch encountering another dog. If the latter is also female and has not been ‘her friend’ since she was a puppy, ‘her’ fur along the backbone will, unintentionally I suppose, bristle. If the latter is male, ‘she’ will approach ‘him’ wagging ‘her’ tail. We can recognize a kind of categorization, which emerges from the behavioral organization of this dog. Among the infinite number of ‘objects’ in the surrounding world, ‘she’ responds in a specific way to a particular class of objects, namely conspecifics. Furthermore, these conspecifics are divided into two mutually exclusive categories: females and males.

This argument surely cannot be accepted by the dominant view of what constitutes a category. According to this view, a category consists of a set of objects, which is defined by necessary and sufficient conditions. These conditions can ultimately be determined by some algorithm with constituents, which are, ideally, mathematical signs. However, a number of recent theories contributing to the “cognitive revolution” (Shore, 1996) claim that this classical view has been undermined by prototype theory (D’Andrade, 1995). The synthetic version of prototype theory is supported by two pillars, “basic level effect” and “prototype effect,” both of which were derived from the interdisciplinary enterprise of “cognitive science,” which includes anthropology (especially studies of folk-taxonomy), psychology, and linguistics (especially studies of metaphor). The prototype effect comprises a number of cognitive models. The most important in the present context is the model

of “radial category,” which is typically exemplified by the classificatory particles in the language of the Dyirbal, an Australian aboriginal group (Lakoff, 1987). Prototype theory suggests that human competence to categorize the surrounding world is firmly rooted in the “embodiment” of the mind, which is the product both of biological heritage and of cultural convention (Varela et al., 1991; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Now, let us return to the African hunter-gatherers living in the tropical rain forest or in the dry savanna. Their categorization of plants and animals is interwoven with their embodied experience of walking, running, picking fruits from the trees, digging bulbs in the sand, catching game animals, and so on. Their ontogeny, the most fundamental categorization of the world, as well as the image schema organizing their thought (Johnson, 1987), emerges from recurrent and incessant experiences of being held by a mother, hearing lullabies or loud choruses in the night, being shaken to dance rhythms, and so on.

Where does symbolism feature in this picture? According to the naturalistic semiotics developed by T. Sebeok, symbols are defined as the signs which are encoded arbitrarily (Sebeok, 1975). In contrast to this, another kind of signs, i.e., signal, index, symptom, and icon, are all characterized by the motivated connection between the “signifier” and the “signified.” However, this definition is too broad for our present purposes. In contrast to this, the influential theory proposed by E. Leach equates symbolism with metaphorical expression, the most essential of which consists in the semantic interaction between two different “contexts” (or “domains” in terms of cognitive science). However, Leach’s theory cannot explain the flexible nature and emotional effect which are intrinsic to symbolism, because it presupposes a completely conventionalized system of codes (Leach, 1976).

D. Sperber’s *Rethinking Symbolism* sheds doubt on Leach’s presupposition that symbolism is based on the shared system of encoding-decoding conventions. According to Sperber, the essential work of symbolism is “evocation” and “multiple focalization” which do not depend on the code system. This theory paved the way for “relevance theory” as developed by Sperber and D. Wilson, which is widely welcomed as a revolution in communication theory in general (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

The most “relevant” point for the present context is that Sperber’s theory of symbolism presupposes the opposition between “visible” and “invisible” or, more broadly, between “sensory” and “extra-sensory.” Let us return to the example of the dog. If your dog sniffs quite interestedly at the spot where another dog has urinated, you can very easily assume that ‘she’ holds some distinctive representation (non-linguistic, of course) in ‘her’ mind. But you cannot imagine what this representation is; no matter how close the partnership between the dog and you may be. Where you can cognize only one smell the dog distinguishes 20,000 smells in one “smell space.” Most of the smells that are usually enjoyed by the dog are beyond your sensory ability. Compared to the dog, you are almost “blind” to smell (Churchland, 1995).

The fact that Sperber refers to smell as a prototypical experience of symbolism deserves special attention. Although some odors are metonymically connected with some “objects,” we can neither see, nor hear, nor touch the “smell of air.” It is

also quite difficult for us to categorize the smells as themselves, especially when we do not succeed in identifying their source object. There is evidence that suggests that human language is usually short of vocabulary for smell comparable to the “basic color terms.”

Now we can define a symbolic category as a set containing some peculiar kinds of beings which we can neither see, nor hear, nor touch, i.e. which are extra-sensory. For the sake of convenience, I would like to designate such beings as “intangible beings” because tactile sensation lies at the base of all other kinds of sensation except the sense of smell. In the context of anthropological research, if one can neither see nor hear the beings that the people insist do exist, even after a long enough stay in their community, one will demarcate a symbolic category which covers these intangible beings. The most interesting of these categories for anthropologists are labelled “God,” “Supreme Being,” “spirit,” “supernatural,” etc. Sperber deals with indigenous belief to the effect that such intangible beings actually exist, by regarding it as the “proposition with quotation marks.” Later this is displaced by another analytic concept, i.e. “reflexive belief” (Sperber, 1996).

We face quite a serious problem here. Can we validate the anthropologist’s confidence that the intangible beings can be neither seen nor heard? It is not surprising that this confidence is never doubted by those who give far higher priority to the scientific approach based on “reason” than to the interpretive approach. For example, J. Lett asserts that “... misdirection, dissemblance, and sleight of hand is the standard stock-in-trade of illusionists in every culture in the world” (Lett, 1997: 70). Lett seems unable to bear the obscure relativism which too often traps credulous interpretive anthropologists. At least one of the contributors to this volume, M. Sawada, opposes this kind of “rationalism,” while I am more sympathetic to the agenda proposed by Lett.

However, we should not come to a standstill in the face of the confrontation between rationalism (or scientific universalism) and relativism (or sympathy to the indigenous ontology *per se*). We have to remember that our point of departure is in the embodied experience of African hunter-gatherers. It is a crucial point that this experience is embedded both in the social context of their everyday life and in their incessant interactions with the natural environment. Even if we, born and reared in industrial societies, cannot see and hear the intangible beings and cannot help putting them into a symbolic category, we can identify concrete figures of plants and animals as the embodiment of these beings. We can also understand that the manifestations of these beings’ existences is repeatedly negotiated, reinterpreted, and reinforced in everyday social interactions among the people, as well as in their interactions with animals and plants. This condition provides us with the most valuable clue. If we try hard enough, we will be able to recognize as many “natural kinds” as the hunter-gatherers themselves do. For this task, we can make use of our “scientific knowledge” concerning biological classification, ecology, ethology, and so on. As is predicted by the synthetic prototype theory, it is an advantageous condition for us that the indigenous categorization is usually very consistent with biological classification at least at the “basic level,” i.e. the generic level in the hierarchical model of folk-taxonomy (D’Andrade, 1995). Furthermore, we can make use of another ability as fieldworkers, namely to record face-to-face

interactions, to carefully listen to people's discourses, and to "interpret" them from the actor's point of view.

However, the above argument, which may sound too optimistic, leads us to reconsider an analytical tool, which can by now be considered to be a classic distinction, namely that between etic and emic classification (Pike, 1967). Since this distinction was introduced into the discipline of cultural anthropology, unfortunate misunderstandings have often arisen, which assume that it implies dichotomous approaches to culture. Moreover, it is often presupposed that this methodological dichotomy corresponds to the opposition between the people's actual "behavior" and their internal "experience." More plainly, the "etic approach" is equated with the objective explanation of sociocultural phenomena from the external point of view, while the "emic approach" is identified with the sympathetic comprehension of subjective experience from the internal one (cf. Harris, 1980). However, in the original sense of morphemes in phonology, the researcher of human behavior, as well as of sociocultural phenomena, always has to analyze the emic distinction of categories by referring to etic categories. If either is lacking, any "scientific" understanding of human experience is impossible.

Olivier's paper reveals the essential problem that researchers face when applying the etic/emic distinction to music, arguably the most representative of all domains in which "embodied" experiences are organized in culturally specific ways. Among the Ju|'hoan of the Nyae Nyae region, Olivier identified more than 200 musical pieces, and carefully examines their "categorization." She uses the term "category" in a restricted sense, defined by purely musical criteria. It is tempting to consider it as being equivalent to the etic side of her description. But, the problem is not so simple. Unlike in phonetic categorization, the distinctive features pertinent to musical categorization range across different levels of musical performances, namely instruments, vocal rhythm and period, as well as rhythmic patterns of accompaniment (clapping). Further complexity is constituted by the fact that certain categories form repertoires, which are defined as sets of pieces that do not necessarily share the same distinctive features, but which are linked to specific circumstances. The relationship between vernacular names and categories is also intricate. Olivier pays special attention to the polysemic or skewed uses of the same term in different contexts.

Far from being extra-sensory, music – as sound, voice, and dance – lively stimulates sensation. However, Ju|'hoan music is connected with the intangible world in an essential way. Forty of their musical categories, making up about half of the musical heritage, are grouped together under one generic term that denotes "supernatural energy." It deserves special attention that this group of categories is highly organized into a tree-like structure, both in terms of nomenclature and in terms of its mode of performance. Olivier emphasizes that, in spite of the above characteristics, the Ju|'hoan musical heritage is open not only to the introduction of new pieces through inter-ethnic contacts but also to the creation of new categories from within the group. Finally, Olivier concludes very cautiously that the musical categorization proposed in her paper should not be regarded as a direct translation of the cognitive representation maintained by the Ju|'hoan themselves.

Sawada's paper throws light not only on the intricate relationships between "name" and "category," but also on the European ethnocentrism which has been prevalent in the studies of African religion. He argues that the pioneering scholars of the Mbuti Pygmies, strongly influenced by the theory of "primitive monotheism," made use of African deities in order to prove the universality of the Christian God. Citing his own ethnographic description of the Efe Pygmies, Sawada emphasizes that the core of the Pygmy worldview is life after death which is vividly experienced by the people in occasional interchanges with the dead inhabiting the depth of the forest.

Apart from the bias produced by European researchers' Christian background, Sawada pays attention to another difficult epistemological problem, namely the synonymous or polysemous correspondence between names and "the conception of the being which is difficult to perceive with the senses." The latter is equivalent to what I have called "symbolic category." The people themselves are never confused by either the synonymous or polysemous names of symbolic categories, because they always encounter these categories as concrete beings with specific characters and bodily figures. However, many anthropologists separated these beings from the actual sociocultural context, and "invented" them as omnipresent and omnipotent beings. This disembodiment of the symbolic category is evidently rooted in the long tradition of European philosophy; the dichotomies of material/immaterial and natural/supernatural. Sawada's conclusion is straightforward. We should return to the indigenous experience itself in which the people see and hear the dead.

Terashima's paper, though concentrating not on supernatural but on natural kinds used by Mbuti and Efe Pygmies, shares with Sawada's paper the criticism of Cartesian dichotomies. The striking feature of this paper is that its analysis is based on an extraordinary stock of knowledge accumulated by the researcher concerning plants and animals in the Ituri forest. Terashima identified as many as 750 species of plants and 170 species of animals. He elucidates that there is a clear difference between Pygmies' relationship with plants and their relationship with animals. The plants supply the most basic needs of the people for material, health, and food. On the other hand, the use of animals is largely restricted to their consumption as food. The most important characteristics of the man-animal relationship are the intricate regulations imposed on eating meat. Being correlated with physical condition and social status, this regulation provides the people with a kind of mental map for explaining the causation of various diseases, as well as for thinking about their social world. In this sense, animals are agents carrying symbolic messages. At the same time, they are also sympathetic cohabitants in the forest.

The above contrast between plants and animals does not imply that plants are merely passive objects which are to be exploited. On the contrary, twice as many plant species are used for ritual as they are for food. The symbolic power hidden in plants is extracted not from the physical/chemical traits intrinsic to plants but from "conversation" between man and plants. The relationships of plants, animals, and man elucidated in this paper stand in sharp contrast both to the Christian view of the hierarchy in the nature, in which man occupies the highest status, and to the Buddhist view which draws a wide gap between animals (including man)

and plants. Terashima concludes that man, plants, and animals are interconnected by “horizontal networking” in the Ituri forest.

My paper, providing ethnographic description of knowledge and practice concerning animals among the |Gui and ||Gana Bushmen, shares a number of issues with Terashima’s paper. In particular, it is also based on the biological classification of natural kinds, and places great emphasis on the analysis of food regulation. Here, I would like to explicate the theoretical model proposed by this paper in the light of the above argument. Hunting, an outstanding way of man’s exploitation of nature, is composed of a series of physical interactions between man and game animals as “tangible beings.” These interactions are made possible by deictic cognition produced by perception. However, this cognition is always connected with another kind of cognition, indirect cognition, which is oriented towards “intangible beings.” Furthermore, the connection between these two kinds of cognition is differently motivated by two opposite directions of intention; prospective and retrospective. Thus, hunters’ cognitive space can be divided by two coordinates; deictic/indirect cognition and prospective/retrospective intention.

However, if one tries to place the embodied experience of eating in this cognitive space, a serious difficulty arises. The point is that, although the process within the body is immediately present to the subject, it is beyond both kinds of cognition; deictic and indirect. This argument suggests the special significance of understanding the hunter-gatherers’ practice of avoiding some animal meat or imposing taboos on it. The most valuable hint is obtained from the |Gui/||Gana’s belief in a kind of “extra-sensory” influence from one’s body to that of another, be it men or animals. If such a kind of “invisible force” is included into the category of intangible beings, it can be concluded that hunter-gatherers’ embodied experience itself is the most essential source which generates symbolic categories.

This introduction has demonstrated that the seemingly diversified papers of Part I are interconnected by “horizontal networking.” All papers give unique insights into the symbolic categories which emerge from the close relationship between African hunter-gatherers and their natural environment. They also grasp the meaning of these categories for the peoples’ embodied experience which is embedded in concrete sociocultural contexts. Epistemologically, these investigations constitute a challenging enterprise that aims to integrate external observations and internal points of view. However, even if we achieve this integration, it does not mean that we commit ourselves to the hunter-gatherer’s ontology of symbolic categories. When we return to the hunter-gatherers’ experience, does our own ontology as anthropologists come to coincide with their internal ontology? Answering this question is left to further inquiry.

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