

PIOTR KALICKI*

(Jagiellonian University)

Culture as a Magic Text: Symbol Use in Magic Cultures

ABSTRACT

The essence of human nature – abstract thinking – is based on the use of symbols, i.e. sensuously perceptible signs with conventional, context-related meaning attributed to them by cultural semantic rules. Two different approaches to the relation between a sign and its meaning may be observed in culture: a symbol-reference approach and symbol-link approach. While the former claims that a sign is just a mere reference to its meaning with no real connection to it, the latter sees it as a kind of a gate or window through which the user opens himself to the reality to which the symbol refers. Therefore, in the symbol-link approach symbols are not purely conventional creations as in the symbol-reference approach, but possess also real bonds with their meaning. As a consequence, by using special signs one can, so to say, summon the meaning and cause certain effects in the physical world.

Magic texts and practices may develop only in those cultures which have adopted a symbol-link approach, because the very nature of magic consists of symbol manipulation in order to change reality. Given that culture may be interpreted much like a literary source, the phenomenon of magic itself may thus be understood as an interpretation of culture, and may be studied as *sui generis* magic text by semantics. Such a research is of special importance to archaeology and anthropology since the vast majority of known human cultures seem to have adopted a symbol-link approach and are therefore prone to the development of magic.

KEY WORDS

symbol, magic, culture, magical text, archaeology, anthropology, symbol-link approach, symbol-reference approach, sign, semantics

* Institute of Archaeology
Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland
e-mail: kalickipiotr.krak@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In a search for the essence of human nature, scholars have proposed various characteristics as factors that constitute it. To mention just a few: the ability to make tools (*homo faber*),¹ ability to speak² or use reason. However, the development of science falsified these criteria: tools may be made by primates such as chimpanzees;³ some examples of children raised outside society who were unable to learn or to speak have been reported⁴ and advanced computers are able to calculate even better than humans. The most important characteristic which is still considered to be exclusively human is abstract thinking.

It is quite significant that first undeniable signs of abstract thinking are associated with *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Their material correlates are the first graves with intentional funeral rites,⁵ advanced lithic technology⁶ and art.⁷ Particularly noteworthy is the fact that many of early manifestations of abstract thinking are associated with magic like shamanism⁸ or hunting magic.⁹ Abstract thinking is based on the use of symbols, which enable humans to go beyond tangible items and particular events into the realm of ideas, concepts and generalised conclusions. Abstract thinking is thus in fact symbolic thinking. As such it lies at the very heart of culture, because cognitive schemes and normative rules, which constitute the core of each culture, are both conceptualised and expressed as

¹ F. Engels, *Dialektyka natury* (1883), [in:] K. Marks, F. Engels, *Dziela*, t. 20, Warszawa 1969.

² A. Barnard, *Antropologia: zarys teorii i historii*, tłum. S. Szymański, wstęp J. Tokarska-Bakir, Warszawa 2006.

³ Ch. Boesch, H. Boesch, *Tool Use and Tool Making in Wild Chimpanzees*, "Folia Primatologica" 1990, Vol. 54, No. 1–2, p. 86–99.

⁴ A. Barnard, op. cit.

⁵ S. R. Solecki, *Shanidar IV, a Neanderthal Flower Burial in Northern Iraq*, "Science" 1975, Vol. 190, p. 880–881.

⁶ K. J. Kozłowski, *Early Upper Paleolithic Levallois-derived Industries in the Balkans and in the Middle Danube Basin*, "Anthropologie" 2004, Vol. 42, No. 3, p. 263–280.

⁷ O. Bar-Yosef, *The Upper Paleolithic Revolution*, "Annual Review of Anthropology" 2002, p. 363–393.

⁸ J. Lietava, *Medicinal Plants in a Middle Paleolithic Grave Shanidar IV?*, "Journal of Ethnopharmacology" 1992, Vol. 35, No. 3, p. 263–266; J. D. Lewis-Williams, *Wrestling with Analogy: A Methodological Dilemma in Upper Paleolithic Art Research*, "Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society" 1991, Vol. 57, No. 1.

⁹ W. M. Conkey, *The Structural Analysis of Paleolithic Art*, "Archaeological Thought in America" 1989, p. 135–154.

complex systems of interrelated symbols. Therefore the study of symbols is crucial in understanding culture and consequently social and cultural phenomena and processes.

USE OF SYMBOLS IN CULTURE

While facing the challenge of carrying out research on symbols we must start with an attempt to define the subject of our research. According to Campbell, a symbol is *an energy evoking and directing agent*.¹⁰ Despite the fact that symbols are considered to be a kind of signs it is quite difficult to distinguish them from other signs. Jung has proposed that a symbol is a sign which stands for something unknown, unclear, something which cannot be precisely defined.¹¹ However, in fact, in many cases we can hardly distinguish those signs which stand for something known and those which stand for something unclear or imprecise. Usually such a distinction is heavily dependent on the cultural and historical context. Therefore, such an approach it is of little use to anthropology and archaeology where we deal with signs created and used by culturally different groups, which are often poorly studied. In such cases we are unable to determine whether a particular sign is a symbol or not. This task is even harder when we study past societies which did not use writing.

In this context we may also mention Peirce's triadic distinction between iconic signs, symbolic signs and index signs, where in contrast with other categories symbolic signs' relation between the representamen and semiotic object is totally arbitrary, regardless of their real connection and resemblance.¹² Nevertheless, we face much the same problem as with Jung's theory – the rules which determine which aspects of the representamen and semiotic object are similar to each other and in what way, are predominantly of a cultural nature. As a consequence resemblance is, at least partially, rooted in culture. Therefore, iconic signs are in fact just a category of symbolic signs and consequently we cannot make a clear division between signs and symbols.

¹⁰ J. Campbell, *Flight of the Wild Gander: The Symbol without Meaning*. California 2002, p. 143.

¹¹ C. G. Jung, M.-L. von Franz, *Man and His Symbols*, Garden City, N.Y. 1964.

¹² Ch. S. Peirce, *A Letter to... Lady Welby* (1908), [in:] Ch. S. Peirce, V. Welby-Gregory (Lady Welby), *Semiotic and Significs: The Correspondence between C. S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, ed. Ch. S. Hardwick, Bloomington–Indianapolis 1977, p. 80–81.

To conclude, as the distinction between signs and symbols is not clear and the groups under study usually differ significantly from Western cultures, in this article notions of sign and symbol will be used synonymously.

In modern humanities there are two great theories explaining the nature of signs: the dyadic theory of de Saussure¹³ and the triadic theory of Peirce.¹⁴ While the former claims that a sign is composed only of a signifier (form of sign) and a signified (meaning), the latter sees it as a combination of the sign (representamen), semiotic object and interpretant. De Saussure¹⁵ suggested also that the relationships between the signified and the signifier is not a natural one; in other words, the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. This vision of a symbol, whose meaning is deeply rooted in context and dependent on the rules of cultural semantics, is generally accepted in modern humanities.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that both aforementioned theories are focused on the internal structure of the sign and its interpretation. De Saussure and Peirce intended to build a coherent theory explaining nature, structure and the function of symbols, not to explain how signs are perceived by those who use them. Their theories are meant to be universal descriptions of signs and their nature as it really is, regardless of the cultural and historic context. Clearly, the intention of both founding fathers of semiotics was to formulate general rules which apply to signs of all cultures and times, rather than to study the cultural visions of a sign, its nature, character and function. We may thus consider that both de Saussure and Peirce adopted an *etic* approach in their works. However, given the shift of research interests in modern anthropology from the *etic* to the *emic* approach, we experience a serious gap in our understanding of symbols. Thus, there is a great need to study ways in which symbols are perceived and experienced by their users.

It seems that while analysing the character of the relation between the signifier and the signified in terms of culture, we may distinguish two types: those who adopt a **symbol-reference approach** and those which attitude is based on a **symbol-link approach**.

In the symbol-reference approach, signs are seen as conventional, culture-related products of social processes. Therefore the relation between the signifier and the signified is thought to be purely conventional and arbitrary.

¹³ F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. W. Baskin, eds. P. Meisel, H. Saussy, New York 2011 [first edition 1916].

¹⁴ Ch. S. Peirce, *A Letter to...*, op. cit.

¹⁵ F. de Saussure, op. cit.

In other words, there are no real bonds between the sign itself and reality. Consequently, symbols are treated as axiologically neutral – the sign itself is neither good nor evil, only the meaning for which the sign stands may be evaluated positively or negatively. As a result, the symbol is treated as a kind of reference to its meaning. Moreover, the meaning of the symbol may be intentionally changed or even reversed. Such an act is not considered dangerous and it is also axiologically neutral itself. From that point of view signs are also passive – i.e. they are only a tool in the hands of a person or a society; they do not possess any inherent power by themselves. I propose to call such a vision of symbols and their connections with the real world *the symbol-reference approach*.

Such an approach is characteristic for post-Enlightenment Western cultures,¹⁶ where both in modernism and postmodernism, signs are considered to be purely conventional and arbitrary. As an example of modernist ideas we may mention the Marxist concept of base and superstructure, where the realm of symbols is seen as belonging to an ideological superstructure, which is a derivative of an economic base.¹⁷ Thus, according to the Marxist view, the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and depends on economic and, secondarily, also social and political factors. The emblematic idea for postmodern thought that the essence of literature lies in playing with conventions,¹⁸ is also based on the basic assumption that the relation between the signifier and the signified is purely conventional. Thus, we may conclude that the symbol-reference approach is dominating in contemporary Western societies.¹⁹

¹⁶ I am inclined to the view that there is no one **Western culture**, but rather a bunch of **Western cultures**. They are based on different basic world views (for example traditional, modern, postmodern etc.) and consequently despite historical and spatial bonds they vigorously compete with each other. I propose to call such basic worldview cultural paradigm (see *Towards longue durée archaeology: cultural paradigms and long term structures*, [in:] *Abstracts from 19th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists*, Pilsen Republic 2013).

¹⁷ A. Calinicios, *The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx*, London 2010 [first edition 1983].

¹⁸ S. Kvale, *Themes of Postmodernity*, [w:] W. Anderson, *The Truth About the Truth*, New York 1995.

¹⁹ It is quite interesting that both de Saussure and Peirce conceptualised the relation between the signifier and the signified as arbitrary. One may ask whether such an assumption is related to the nature of signs or to the influence of Western culture in which both scientists were raised. However, this important problem as to what extent culture is influencing scientific discourse is beyond the scope of this paper and will not be further analysed.

Despite the popularity of the symbol-reference concept in Western society, it seems increasingly clear that an overwhelming majority of known cultures have adopted a different idea of the relationship between sign and reality. From that perspective there is a strong, real connection between the signifier and the signified. This relationship is not necessarily natural in the sense that meaning is assigned to the sign by some natural or supernatural forces. Although such cases are common in many cultures, this second approach to symbols which I propose to call *the symbol-link approach*, is not based upon them. Rather its essence is the belief that there are close ties between sign and reality i.e. that using a sign means influencing reality not only on the intellectual or emotional level, but also on the physical and spiritual. The symbol may be thus illustrated by the metaphor of a window or gate which can open its user to the reality to which the sign refers. As a result, when one uses a sign, one summons its meaning and can consequently bring about changes in the world. These are not limited to feelings, consciousness or knowledge, but can also manifest themselves as physical or spiritual events. Symbols are conceptualised as active agents which possess an innate power and meaning due to the meaning they refer to.

As mentioned above, the vast majority of cultures adopt a symbol-link perspective. It is characteristic not only of traditional cultures of non-complex societies like the hunter-gatherers of tropical forests²⁰ and polar regions²¹ or hoe-farmers of South-East Asia,²² but also to almost every complex society in the world – both those of the past (e.g. China,²³ Central Andes²⁴) and present day non-Western civilisations (India,²⁵ Latin America²⁶ etc.). The symbol-link approach was also typical for Europe and the first signs of its decline may be observed in the late Middle Ages with the discussion about the problem of universals. The first big challenge to the symbol-link

²⁰ See for example G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Shamanism and Art of the Eastern Tukanoan Indians: Colombian Northwest Amazon*, Leiden 1987.

²¹ M. Schmidt, *Crazy Wisdom: The Shaman as Mediator of Realities*, [in:] *Shamanism: An Expanded View of Reality*, compiled Sh. Nicholson, Wheaton, Illinois–Madras, India 1987, p. 62–75.

²² N. Tapp, *Hmong Religion*, “Asian Folklore Studies” 1989, Vol. 48, 59–94.

²³ H. T. Morgan, *Chinese Symbols and Superstitions*, Detroit, Illinois 1972.

²⁴ J. L. Faux, *Hail the Conquering Gods: Ritual Sacrifice of Children in Inca Society*, “Journal of Contemporary Anthropology” 2012, 3(1).

²⁵ G. Chatterjee, *Sacred Hindu Symbols*, photographs S. Chatterjee, New Delhi 2001.

²⁶ D. Joralemon, D. Sharon, *Sorcery and Shamanism: Curanderos and Clients in Northern Peru*, Salt Lake City 1993.

approach was the Reformation and the dominance of the symbol-reference approach in Western civilisation started with the Enlightenment and continues till this day.

The main difference between the symbol-reference and the symbol-link approaches lies in the character of the relation between the signifier and the signified. While in the former the relation is indirect and by using a symbol one refers or alludes to its meaning, whereas in the latter the bond between the sign and its meaning is real and direct – consequently while using a sign, one summons its meaning, making it real and present. To provide one example: the dancer wearing a Kachina mask is not just playing the role of the Kachina spirit, but he is Kachina spirit himself.²⁷ The use of the symbol (Kachina mask) does not just allude to the myth, but it summons the mythical beings so that the myth is replayed in reality in a tangible and perceptible way. The dance is not the reproduction or imitation of the myth, but it is rather the return or re-happening of the myth itself in reality. The possibility of such a re-happening of the myth is rooted in the adoption of the symbol-link approach, which claims that signs not only refer to their meaning (reality), but also make the meaning present, real and active.

Other important difference between cultures characterised by symbol-reference or symbol-link conceptions are the consequences of modifying or reversing the meaning of the symbol according to one's will. It must be emphasised that we still analyse this phenomenon from an *emic* perspective i.e. how the symbol-user perceives the consequences of changes in the interpretation of symbols, rather than to what extent the new interpretation actually affects the real world. In cultures which take the symbol-reference approach, due to the fact that the relation between the signifier and the signified is considered to be an axiologically neutral social construct, a sign is considered to have neither an objective nor natural meaning. Therefore one may alter or even reverse its meaning without direct consequences for the reality. Quite the opposite is the vision accepted in cultures characterised by the symbol-link conception. According to the symbol-link approach, the use of sign means evoking the reality for which the sign stands. Usually once established, such a connection cannot be modified or rejected upon one's declaration. As a consequence, any manipulation of the sign's meaning or symbolic practice will directly affect reality, likewise in cases when the user has no such intention or even when he is not conscious that he is manipulat-

²⁷ Pollock D., *Masks and the Semiotics of Identity*, "Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute" 1995, p. 581–597.

ing a symbol. Therefore, while for cultures characterised by the symbol-reference conception, the manipulation of the meaning of signs is in general axiologically neutral, in cultures which have adopted the symbol-link approach it is almost always valued as positive or negative.

MAGIC AND THE USE OF SYMBOLS

In humanities various theories compete to explain the nature of magic. Based on the *etic* approach, anthropologists explained magic from functionalist, psychological and intellectualist perspectives. For example, Malinowski²⁸ claims that magic is a social institution that serves as kind of buffer to minimise risk employed in situations which are dangerous and with activities which are not fully controlled by humans. Magic is thus treated as a factor which allows man to control danger. According to Tambiah's symbolic approach to magic,²⁹ it is expressive rather than instrumental i.e. it serves to express a desired state using metaphors. Nevertheless, anthropologists usually focus on the origin or function of magic, not on the explanation of how magic works from an *emic* point of view.

Among users of magic, the two most popular models conceptualising the nature of magic are spiritual and energetic. While in the former, magic is associated with the spiritual world inhabited by supernatural beings like demons, spirits or ghosts, in the latter magic is a set of practices, expressions and texts that enable the magician to control some kind of life-sustaining and powerful force which is present in the universe. Modern magic models like psychological or informative emphasise factors that were unknown to past societies e.g. subconscious and information as a means of controlling cosmic energy. Nevertheless, all of the aforementioned models require that the magician must perform some symbolic activity. Magic is thus a manipulation of symbols to produce an effect in the real world.

Given the proposed distinction between the symbol-reference and the symbol-link approach, it is clear that magic is possible only in cultures with a symbol-link approach. To justify this hypothesis, we must begin with the conclusion of Evans-Pritchard's³⁰ work on magic among the Azande that

²⁸ B. Malinowski, E. R. Leach, J. Berry, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic*, London 1935.

²⁹ J. S. Tambiah, *Form and Meaning of Magical Acts*, [in:] *Culture, Thought and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, Cambridge, MA 1985.

³⁰ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, E. Gillies, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford 1976.

magic is culturally rational. Speaking more precisely, magic is instrumentally rational i.e. magic is considered by its users as an efficient and appropriate way of achieving desired goals. In other words, although from the modern perspective magic may seem irrational and superstitious, from the internal perspective of the culture when magic has developed it is rational and fully justified. Which factors are crucial for perceiving magic as a rational way of dealing with the world?

Anthropologists coined the notion of magical thinking as characteristic to traditional cultures and as an opposition to the Western rational worldview. However, contrary to the opinion of many anthropologists,³¹ magical thinking is not the result of any intellectual defect or lack of knowledge. The essence of magical thinking is based on the symbol-link approach, when the sign is active and one can evoke its meaning through its usage. Therefore magic, defined as the manipulation of symbols in order to cause changes in the real world, seems to be perfectly rational in cultures which have adopted the symbol-link approach.

The strict relation between magic and the symbol-link approach is supported by the fact that the persecution of witchcraft in Western culture ceased after the Enlightenment,³² when the symbol-reference approach started to dominate in European thought.³³ Another example may be postmodern art or literature, which is based upon the manipulation of symbols, contexts and conventions³⁴. Both magic and postmodern art and literature play with symbols and their meanings. However, where a postmodern artist seeks only the aesthetic, a magician finds the power to change reality. Therefore, while literature and art which play with symbols are extremely rare in cultures with a symbol-link approach, they flourish in the postmodern world ruled by the symbol-reference approach.

Moving on from the symbolic perspective on magic, the distinction between religious models and secular models of magic may seem of secondary importance. While in the former – the traditional type of magic – it is asso-

³¹ J. Fraser, *Form and Meaning of Magical Acts*, [in:] *Culture, Thought and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, Cambridge, MA 1985; L. Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, trans. L. A. Clare, New York 1925.

³² W. Behringer, *Witches and Witch Hunts: A Global History*, Cambridge, UK and Malden, Massachusetts 2004.

³³ It must be emphasised that in contemporary Western Europe there exist not one Western culture, but a bunch of different, conflicting, Western cultures (see footnote 16). Thus, referring to a rational or post-Enlightenment Western culture, I mean just modern and postmodern cultural paradigms.

³⁴ S. Kvale, op. cit.

ciated with supernatural forces or energies, in the latter it is connected with the achievements or discoveries of modern science or pseudoscience. The religious type of magic encompasses the spiritual model of magic and frequently also the energetic model of magic, while with the secular type of magic may be associated with the informative and psychological models of magic and sometimes also the energetic model of magic. Often, as in the New Age movement, old notions and ideas are hidden behind pseudo-scientific rhetoric, to adapt to a predominant rational discourse. However, the character of magic in all those types and models of magic is quite the same – its essence is the manipulation of symbols in order to change reality. Such a manipulation is based on the symbol-link approach to signs.

CULTURE AS A MAGIC TEXT

In contemporary humanities there is no doubt that culture may be understood and criticised much like literary sources.³⁵ Culture, being a network of inter-related symbols, may be also conceptualised as a kind of text written with symbols. In this perspective magic would be one of the many competitive interpretations of a particular culture. Within the framework of this interpretation it is accepted that man is not only able to change the real world through symbol manipulation according to his will, but also that such actions and practices at least at some occasions are appropriate and desirable.

Despite the fact that cultures characterised by the symbol-link approach accept the possibility of magic as a phenomenon which is real and effective, the axiological valuation of magic may be different. For example, while in the Andean world magic is generally seen as something morally positive or neutral (apart from so-called black magic),³⁶ in orthodox Catholicism it is considered to be a mortal sin.³⁷ Such a difference in the valuation of magic is associated with cultural normative rules and cultural values. As a general rule, it seems that magic is accepted in systems based on ideological or religious pluralism (e.g. Greco-Roman polytheism, Hinduism, postmodern New Age movement), while in systems with the orthodoxy-heresy dichotomy (e.g. Orthodoxy, Islam) it is generally considered to be evil. This general rule

³⁵ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Vol. 5019, New York 1973.

³⁶ L. Camino, *Cerros, plantas y lagunas poderosas: La medicina al norte del Perú*, Lima 1992.

³⁷ *Katechizm Kościoła Katolickiego*, tłum. z fr., 2117, Poznań 1994.

should be probably associated with the more general problem of freedom of interpretation of culture and its symbols within a particular culture. It may be suggested that, as interpretation of the text of culture has less rigid interpretative rules in pluralistic cultures, magic may be considered an acceptable interpretation of culture. In more monolithic cultures the rules for the interpretation of symbols and, as a consequence, culture are much more rigid, so neither magic nor heterodoxical interpretations of culture may be accepted.

To conclude, it may be suggested that magic may develop only in cultures based on the symbol-link approach, which claims that symbolic manipulation can be a direct cause of changes in the material world. However, magic as a cultural phenomenon, may be considered axiologically positive, and consequently become a mainstream social phenomenon, only in cultures characterised by ideological or religious pluralism. Therefore, despite the fact that symbol-link cultures with more rigid rules of interpretation (the orthodoxy-heresy dichotomy) of the text of culture acknowledge the real existence of magic, they consider magic to be an undesirable phenomenon and often also persecute it. In contrast, symbol-link cultures with less rigid rules of interpretation (religious/ideological pluralism) not only acknowledge the real existence of magic, but also value this phenomenon and include magic, at least at some situations as desirable or appropriate.

Since magic may develop only in cultures characterised by the symbol-link approach, these cultures should be studied as *sui generis* magical texts. It seems that a privileged method of study not only of magical texts *sensu stricto*, but also magic as a social and cultural phenomenon, should be semantics. Research on the complex network of interconnected symbols, which lie at the very heart of each culture, should focus on the relation between symbol usage and magic activity. Semantics *sensu stricto* of magic ought to address problems such as the criteria governing the selection of symbols used in magic, the rules concerning the formation of the relationship between a sign and its meaning (the principle of contagion or the principle of similarity). The syntax of magic should focus on issues like the differences between the use of the same symbol in magic and in non-magic activity, the role of the symbolic context for the use and meaning of symbols used in magic and the principles of making magic texts, especially spells. Finally, the pragmatics of magic should investigate magic practices, especially rituals and their social and cultural context, the influence of magic practices on culture and the social and cultural perception of magic.

It seems that unlike semantics *sensu stricto* and the syntax of magic which may be reasonably used to study only cultures with a symbol-link

approach, the pragmatics of magic are also applicable in cultures with a symbol-reference approach. Although in cultures which adopt the symbol-reference approach the real existence of magic is denied, it is still present as a cultural and social phenomenon treated as a kind of convention (literature, film, art) or entertainment (circus, showbiz).

Furthermore, the use of semantics is not restricted only to cultures of which we have written sources. Through the analysis of iconography we may also try to reconstruct the symbolic world of cultures without written sources. An interesting example of such studies could be the investigations of Makowski,³⁸ who after the meticulous investigations of iconography from ceramics, textiles and stone sculptures proposed the conception of glyph-emblems as a basic unit of symbolic language which dominated in the Central Andes during the Middle Horizon (ca. 600–1000 AD). Another way of studying past, illiterate societies are ethnographic analogies, both with contemporary or past traditional societies.

It should be also emphasised that problem of magic and magical thinking as a consequence of the adoption of the symbol-link perspective is of great importance to anthropology and archaeology, since the overwhelming majority of cultures are characterised by the symbol-link approach. Therefore, such a study is crucial to our understanding of past societies and contemporary non-Western civilisations.

The proposed approach is of great interest to anthropology for two main reasons. Firstly, it grants us a new insight into the comparative analysis of magic from the *emic* perspective and consequently it facilitates a deeper understanding of magic as a cultural and social phenomenon. It seems to be quite important that such an analysis would be carried out with a well-developed methodology of semantics and within a explicitly articulated theoretical framework. What is perhaps most interesting for archaeologists is the fact that human activity is influenced in a significant way by culture. Because culture is a complex net of interrelated symbols, understanding how they were perceived by people is quite important in explaining human behaviour in the past. Thus, without understanding culture at the *emic* level, we cannot explain it at the *etic* level.

Moreover, also from the *etic* perspective on magic and magical thinking, the distinction between cultures characterised by a symbol-reference approach

³⁸ K. Makowski, *Front Faces Figurines with Staffs in Tiahuanaco and Huari Iconography: Theme or Convention?*, “Boletín de Arqueología de Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú” 2001, No. 5, “Huari y Tiwanaku: Modelos vs Evidencias”, p. 337–374.

and symbol-link approach, offers us a new insight into the subject of study. Not only does it enable us to see magic as a fragment of a broader picture of symbol use in culture, but it also raises the question why some cultures have adopted the symbol-link approach while others opted for a symbol-reference approach. Solving this problem will require additional interdisciplinary research.

However, it should be noticed that the division between symbol-link and symbol-reference concepts, is carried out from the *emic* point of view. Therefore, such typology is of a descriptive nature and could not be directly applied to the explanation of the nature of symbols and their relation with the real world.

CONCLUSIONS

As magic is symbol manipulation in order to cause effects in reality, the key issue in studies concerning magic is the perception of symbols by their users. Given the fact that contemporary anthropology focuses more on the understanding of a particular culture in its own terms than on explaining social and cultural processes, the study of social and cultural perception of symbols gains even more importance. Cultures may adopt two main approaches: the symbol-reference approach and symbol-link approach. While in the former, the symbol is seen as a mere reference to its meaning, in the later it is considered to be a kind of gateway or window through which one opens oneself up to the reality for which the symbol stands. Magic, and consequently magical texts *sensu stricto*, is thus perceived as real and effective only in cultures characterised by the symbol-link perspective, because only in them is it conceivable that by using symbol one can influence reality non only on an intellectual or emotional level, but also on a physical and spiritual level.

Given the fact that culture may be studied and criticised like literary sources, magic seems to be one of the interpretations of the text of culture. However, even if symbol-link adoption permits the possibility of the real existence of magic, it does not determine its social valuation. While in pluralistic cultures which have no one, binding interpretation of culture, magic is tolerated or even accepted, in monolithic cultures characterised by the orthodoxy-heresy dichotomy magic is treated with great distrust and often is prohibited or considered evil. Of course this sketchy picture of social attitudes towards magic just reveals some general rules and does not fully encompass the complexity of culture. For example, in cultures in which magic is axiologically neutral or positive there is often a distinction between benevolent and beneficial magic (white magic) and harmful and dangerous magic (black

magic). From the symbolic point of view, of secondary importance is also the distinction between religious and secular models of magic.

Since the complex network of interconnected symbols lies at the very heart of the text of culture, the privileged method to investigate magical cultures is semantics. While semantics and the syntax of magic may be used with success only in cultures which have adopted the symbol-link approach, the pragmatics of magic may be applied also to study magic as a cultural and social phenomenon in cultures characterised by a symbol-reference perspective. Due to the fact that an overwhelming majority of known cultures accept the symbol-link approach, the use of semantics while studying magic and magical texts in contemporary non-Western and almost all past cultures is crucial. The only notable exception of past culture which adopted the symbol-reference approach, is post-Enlightenment Western civilisation. However early manifestations of this perspective on signs may be observed during discussion on the problem of universals in late Middle Ages and on a larger scale since renaissance philosophy and the Reformation.

Symbolic perspective on symbols and magic offers a new insight into magic as a cultural and social phenomenon. As such, it opens new lines of research in comparative anthropology and archaeology and allows us a chance to develop studies on magic from a broader perspective. Furthermore, dominant for millennia symbol-link conception provokes questions concerning the nature of signs and its relation with the real world. It seems that new investigations employing semantics could contribute in an important and innovative manner to our understanding of magic and magical texts.

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