2012 | *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2 (2): 406–30

| Unedited |

On not understanding symbols
Toward an anthropology of incomprehension

Roger M. KEESING
Transcribed and edited by Jordan HAUG

A major thrust in contemporary social anthropology has been a deepened concern with *meaning*—with the ways in which "a particular system of symbols . . . confers order, coherence, and significance upon a people, their surroundings, and the workings of their universe" (Basso and Selby 1976: 3). In anthropology this focus has most often been narrowed to ritual, viewed as a domain where cultural symbols are used in quintessential form.

In their concern with meaning, anthropologists have undoubtedly become better interpreters of cultural symbols, both more clever and wise. But I am concerned that in their sheer interpretive virtuosity, many symbolist anthropologists may be overlooking, even disguising, some mundane realities of the ritual process. Too often they assume, without examination, that when culturally patterned meanings can be discerned in ritual, native participants have access to these meanings—and that rituals "work" because they evoke and orchestrate shared understandings.

Here I will suggest that native actors participating in ritual need not share the same meanings; that a great many of them probably make very superficial interpretations of ritual symbols; and hence that the evocation and orchestration of

---

Editor's note: Roger Keesing wrote the first drafts of *On not understanding symbols* in 1978. After several versions of the manuscript circulated among his colleagues, Keesing decided to revise his analysis extensively. He eventually included snippets of the paper's ethnographic material in some of his later ethnography on Kwaio religion (1982). His final version of *On not understanding symbols*, half of which is found only in a hand written form, was never published but nonetheless is an important precursor for much of Keesing's later critiques on the "anthropology of meaning" (1985, 1987a, 1989a, 1990) and work on Kwaio religion (1982a, 1993). Keesing's final version of the manuscript, from which this paper is based, is found in Roger Keesing's Papers (MSS 0427) in the Tuzin Archive for Melanesian Anthropology housed in the Mandeville Special Collections Library at the University of California, San Diego. Jordan Haug transcribed and edited the manuscript. Minor modifications to the text were made to point the reader to relevant supporting material. Citations for references published after 1978 have been added in the editing process (with author-date citations placed in brackets) to give a broader sense of where this particular paper lies in Keesing's oeuvre and the broader ethnographic literature on the Kwaio. David Akin provided critical comments and inspiration in the editing process.

 ISSN 2049-1115 (Online)

"deep" interpretations of symbols among a congregation cannot be necessary to the performance or perpetuation of ritual. I will deal almost entirely with ethnographic material from the Kwaio of Malaita. But as Devil's Advocate I will generalize the argument to suggest that the same is probably true of most societies anthropologists study. Let me set out the argument more explicitly.

My thesis briefly summarized is this:

1. The symbolic systems of a community are structured, as it were, in layers—from outer, transparent, meanings down to inner ones, access to which requires increasing degrees of esoteric knowledge / poetic imagination / philosophical insight / and global perspective.

2. Distribution of the knowledge required for deep interpretations is a matter of the political structure of the community. Who knows what depends on age, sex, sacredness, etcetera, and on the intellectual abilities and personal predilections of individuals.

3. Because meanings depend so heavily on what individuals know, the same ritual sequence or myth may evoke highly diverse meanings for members of the community—from literal, superficial, mundane constructions to "deep" and global ones (see Sperber 1975: 119–49).

4. The "function" of ritual, and ritual symbols, in the community thus cannot be to evoke shared understandings of the latter sort—even if a highly coherent structured system of symbolism is part of the cultural heritage of a community.

5. The existence of such a coherent symbolic structure requires only that enough members of the community have access to the deeper symbolic layers of the culture to perpetuate these structures, progressively add to and modify them, and maintain their coherence—and these need be only a small minority in each generation.

At first glance, such propositions may seem easily accommodated within symbolist anthropology. But my doubts are aimed not only at "overinterpretation" of cultural symbols, but also at a way of thinking about "culture" that has underlain much of the anthropological quest for meanings (Keesing 1974, [1987a; cf. Keesing 1990]);[1] a view of culture as transcending partial realizations in the minds of individuals that disguises the social and political contextualization and historical dynamics of knowledge in communities [Keesing 1982c; cf. Keesing 1991].

1. Clifford Geertz (1973) and David Schneider (1969, 1972, 1976) in the American tradition, Mary Douglas (1996) and Victor Turner (1967, 1974) in the British tradition, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) and Louis Dumont (1966) in the continental, have each, I think, moved rather too quickly and uncritically from the fact that social action is collective to the apparent corollary that cultural meanings are shared. The rationale for this jump has been made most explicit in the cultural theories of Geertz and Schneider. To say that "culture consists of socially established structures of meaning," as Geertz does (1973: 12), points us toward the real world; to say that "anthropologists should deal with culture as a system of symbols and meanings in its own right and with reference to its own structure," as Schneider does (1976: 214), takes us away from it.

Before I turn to the Kwaio data, an epistemological caution is needed. Most interpreters of ritual symbolism assume that native actors understand meanings at unconscious "levels" whether or not there is a public exegesis. The evidence supporting a symbolic analysis, where there is no exegetic tradition, must be indirect. Internal consistency and coherence, elegance, and sheer plausibility become prime criteria that the analysis is correct—sometimes supported by the idiosyncratic exegesis of a Muchona the Hornet (Turner 1967: 131–50) or Ogotemmêli (Giaule 1965). Within such an epistemological paradigm it is virtually impossible to demonstrate that some or most native actors do not make the interpretations, and construe the meanings, attributed to them. One must attempt to do so by indirection—by showing, for example, that knowledge is distributed in the community in such a way that only some people command the information they would need to make "deep" interpretations of symbols, that only a limited number of individuals in each generation contribute to the creation and modification of ritual, that native actors regard one another as more or less knowledgeable about symbolic meanings, and so forth. I shall adduce evidence of these sorts for the Kwaio—evidence that, within the prevailing paradigm, can only be suggestive, not conclusive. But that in itself should serve, in Devil's Advocacy, to make a wider point: that symbolist anthropology teeters precariously on a thin database, propped up by the faith of the anthropological community.

Kwaio religion

The Kwaio of Malaita, Solomon Islands, are one of a dwindling number of Pacific peoples whose traditional religion and ritual system is still fully followed [Keesing 1982a]. About 2,000 Kwaio speakers living in the mountainous area above the east coast of Malaita continue to practice their ancestral religion in communities that are sociologically substantially intact.

Kwaio propitiate *adalo*, the "shades" of the dead,[2] both immediate forebears and ancient ancestors, to sustain a protective mantle of *mana*,[3] and thus to maintain stability, good living, and prosperity (Keesing and Fifi`i 1968; Keesing 1970, 1976, 1977). Maintaining ancestrally defined boundaries between the polluted and the pure, the sacred and the profane,[4] male and female, the ancestors and the living, is

2. Kwaio use the term *adalo* to refer to ancestors as social actors, and use the term *nunui 'ola*, or "shade thing" (where *nunu-na* is the shadow of a person, animal, or object) to refer to their state, as noumenal beings (Keesing 1977, 1979, [1982: 95–111; cf. Akin 1996]).

3. The Kwaio term is metathesized as *nanama*. The "mantle" conception is implicit in linguistic forms (Keesing 1979, [1982: 46–49]); Kwaio do not describe *mana* directly in physical terms, but when pressed refer to it as a kind of invisible ingredient or quality whose presence or absence can be inferred from events in the phenomenal world (people or pigs staying healthy or getting sick, people earning money or being insolvent, taro growing well or badly). Occasionally they use the pidgin term *baoa*, or "power," as a substitute or gloss for *nanama* [Keesing 1984].

4. Kwaio cosmology sets up a threefold opposition between *sua* (defiled) / *mola* (mundane) / *abu* (sacred). The middle term is unmarked such that one of the two oppositions is recurrently neutralized to set up the oppositions polluted : pure (*sua* : *mola*) and profane : sacred (*mola* : *abu*).

an everyday preoccupation. Focal concerns in ritual are with restoring proper boundaries when they have been breached by pollution, by death, or by procedural error; and in doing so, restoring *mana*.

In very young childhood, all Kwaio learn that their immediate social world includes unseen spirits. They see their elders talking to them, receiving messages from them. The occurrence of rain, one's illness, the death of a pet pig, are talked about as the result of ancestral displeasure. A child learns that the complicated rules the *adalo* impose, and enforce as all-seeing in and around the clearing, are a matter of life and death—what foods can and cannot be eaten, what water can be drunk by whom, where the water bamboos must be put, and where one sleeps and sits and defecates.[5] House and clearing are partitioned by invisible lines, to which rules separating male and female attach. A boy of five or six partakes of sacrifices in shrines, undergoes a sacrament, and stays in the men's house with his male relatives overnight before he is desacralized. A young girl takes part and undergoes a sacrament, and stays in the men's house with his male relatives overnight before he is desacralized. A young girl takes part and undergoes a sacrament when her group stages a major ritual cycle.[6] Divinations, magical cures, and procedures are part of daily life in a tiny Kwaio settlement. Some of the more complex ritual sequences, particularly those preceding a mortuary feast, are likely to have taken place in one's immediate group every three or four years, through one's childhood. A girl will have seen a rather different range of ritual events than a boy, from a different perspective; she is likely to have attended a mother in childbirth seclusion, and to have gone through elaborate rites of purification.

There are few procedures, in Kwaio ritual, that are esoteric and hidden from public view. What happens in a shrine or a men's house can be seen and heard by all males beyond infancy. There are no initiation rites, no esoterica restricted to elders. I am not dealing with a case where ritual is hidden in folds of secrecy from which women, young people, initiates, commoners, or non-priests are excluded.

Kwaio religion is unusual in another respect: the virtual absence of myths. Kwaio oral tradition centers around epic narratives recited with chanted accompaniment at feasts. Most of the narratives recount chains of killings in the distant or fairly recent past; some describe other events in the lives of powerful ancestors. They describe a world like the one Kwaio live in and, with few exceptions, events that are naturalistic rather than "superempirical" (Keesing 1978). Kwaio rituals do not enact or dramatize mythic events, as is so common in the aboriginal Americas, Australia, and other parts of the tribal world.

Kwaio cosmological schemes define states and categories, establish oppositions of sacredness and pollution, nature and culture, ancestors and living, and map out

5. "That's forbidden" (*e abu*), is a constant admonition to children who find themselves in a world governed by a bewildering array of seemingly arbitrary rules. In Kwaio, *abu* is the relax of Oceanic *tapu*, and has the two sided-meaning of sacred/forbidden [Keesing 1982]. The semantic bridge between these senses of "taboo" is that the rules for conduct are imposed by ancestors. [See Lewis 2003 on ancestral cults and "public morality."—Ed.]

6. Particularly after death of a priest or a high sacrifice (s*uuŋa*) entailing cremation of a piglet. These (which in some cases coincide) plunge a kin group into extreme sacredness, and lead to a sequence of rites of desacralization.

the spatial correlates of these states. But there is little concern with explicating natural phenomena, or how the world got to be as it is—these are not matters of interest. The myriad detailed rules and taboos and procedures are accepted simply as "customs that originated with the ancestors" [Keesing 1982b; see Akin 2005]. Kwaio are pragmatically concerned with following the rules of human life, and singularly unconcerned with explaining its ultimate nature.

Kwaio ritual

Kwaio ritualize their encounters with their *adalo*, particularly their collective encounters. These encounters are precipitated by illness, death, or misfortunes, which are attributed to ancestral displeasure because of desecration, defilement, or other human errors; or they are initiated to maintain a protective mantle of *mana* [see Keesing 1984]. These collective encounters bring a kin group into intimate, immediate contact with ancient ancestors and their awesome powers and dangers. The procedures for engaging in transactions with *adalo*, for enlisting their powers, and for then progressively removing the dangerous sacredness of these encounters are elaborate and complicated.

The death of a decent group's priest is a time of special disruption and danger. Although in everyday life the living and dead are in constant communication, they exist in separate realms. The priest, as intermediary, is exposed to powers and dangers: he is, as it were, irradiated by sacredness. His death opens a kind of door between the living and dead, exposing descent group members (and close cognates and spouses) to sacred powers.

While the bereaved group is in liminal sacredness, they are subject to food taboos, mourning restrictions, and rules isolating them from normal social life. Through a series of rites of desacralization, the restrictions that set them apart are progressively lifted; the boundaries and categories of regular life are restored.

My primary "text" will be a ritual procedure that occurs in the sequence after a priest's death. In slightly modified form, it occurs in the sequence of desacralization rites after a high sacrifice; and in attenuated form, prior to a mortuary feast. Hence it is a procedure every Kwaio adolescent boy will have seen (and many will have participated in), and one Kwaio girls and women will know about although they are not allowed to see it. This sequence, *beritauŋa*, illustrates the themes and styles of Kwaio ritual, and will serve our purposes well. I will give a composite version, glossing over minor variations between the rite as performed by various kin groups.

The rite physically circles around a lean-to shelter (*taualea*) in which the pigs to be sacrificed at the "feast of the dead" are tethered. The main mortuary feast then spans the next two days, coming to a climax the evening of the second day with the presentation of valuables to the men who buried the dead [Keesing 1982].

In preliminary stages, the *taualea* has been constructed; a sacred post (*bounimae*), or "post of the dead," is planted in the ground inside the *taualea*, which is then thatched with fishtail palm fronds [Keesing 1982: 164–167]. A bunch of immature areca nuts, a cluster of complete taro plants with small corms (*fo`ofo`o*), sometimes an immature coconut, and a sprig of evodia (*la`e*) bespelled by the priest are hung up in the *taualea*. The pigs for the feast have been tethered in a prescribed order, with a prominent place reserved for pigs brought by the out-married women of the kin group. The cast of characters in *beritauŋa* is as follows:

the man who has succeeded the dead priest; the man who has been in liminal seclusion keeping taboos for the death; a secondary priest who conducts rites for the kin group's women; and young men of the group (their number determined by the number of pigs tethered for the feast). Prior to *beritauŋa*, the participants, who have been in mourning dishevelment, shave and cut their hair in a specified order, decorate themselves, and go off into the forest to wash and then ritually rehearse the magic (*`uiŋa*). At this stage, women and girls retire to the dwelling houses and must stay there until the *beritauŋa* has been completed.

When the men and boys performing the rite come back into the clearing, sacralized by their ritual purification and *`uiŋa*, each holds leaves of green cordyline; the priest, leading them, holds an immature coconut and a sprig of evodia (*la`e*).

I will quote verbatim a Kwaio priest's account of the procedure.

> Then they go up to the *taualea*, led by the priest, each one holding his cordyline. They shout as they enter the clearing [so the women will go into the house out of sight]. They go inside the *taualea*, entering the right side and circle to the right [counterclockwise], and stamp their feet when they get around, with the priest beside the *bounimae*: "two" they count. Then they go around again: "four." And then again: "six." And again: "eight." Then they crouch down at the foot of the sacred post. They *tania adola* [lit., "hold the ancestors"].
>
> The priest holds the coconut [at this stage referred to as *siufa*, from *siu* or "wash"]. The priest calls on the *adalo naa mamu* [the ancestor that conveys powers of attracting wealth, for this particular kin group] He calls the ancestor, the others repeat after him. He begins with the first *siufa* ["washing"], and goes on until ten; each time the others repeat. The priest says "*siufa maamamu* [I *mamu*-ize the attraction of pigs]," and the others repeat. The priest says "*siufa maamamu* [I *mamu*-ize the attraction of money]," then the others. He says "*siufa maamamu* [I *mamu*-ize the attraction of men]," then "*siufa maamamu* [I *mamu*-ize the attraction of women]," then "*siufa maamamu* [I *mamu*-ize the attraction of coconuts]." The others repeat each time. He names ten things [the rest being kinds of ritually used taro and fish]. Then the priest calls the names of the ancestors, from the most ancient to the most recent.
>
> Then the priest husks an immature areca [betel] nut, and mixes it with lime and evodia leaf in a bamboo tube [that has been hanging on the sacred post]. Then he paints the cheek of the consecrated pig tethered at the base of the sacred post, then the expiatory pig, then the women's pig, then the women's priest's pig, then the pig of the senior out-marrying women; then those brought by her juniors in order of age. Then the priest paints the betel mixture on the chests of the men. All this time, the women have been in the houses. The men go outside the *taualea*. The priest bespells a sprig of evodia, and then chews betel. He chews evodia with it, then *ribasia* [spits on the chests of] the men. Then they husk coconuts and make taro-and-coconut puddings [separate puddings for the priest, taboo-keeper, and women's priest, and one for the rest, each made with a different coconut husked in a specified order]. The priest chews betel and evodia again, and *ribasia* [spits on] the puddings. Then the men eat [cf. Keesing 1982: 164–67].

The same ritual complexity continues in later phases. Who can eat the sacred parts of which pigs and other endless details continue to be specified. But for our purposes, this will be a large enough slice.

Taking the *beritauŋa* rite as text, I will ask what these symbols and symbolic acts "mean" to the participants, spectators, and, in this case, the women temporarily excluded in the nearby houses.

What do the symbols "mean"?

The problem I encountered in analyzing and interpreting *beritauŋa* and other Kwaio ritual sequences is this. An understanding of what the rites "mean," in terms of the goals they seek to achieve, and how the ritual acts represent or enact the major themes, is widespread if not universal among culturally competent participants. Yet such publicly recognized, more or less explicitly, interpretations are quite limited in two ways. First of all, many of the specific acts and objects remain uninterrupted, in this more-or-less public tradition: they are simply the conventional way "it is done," the ways enjoined by the ancestors. Second, the interpretations and understandings in this exegetical tradition are relatively shallow and superficial.

It may be possible, by drawing on esoteric knowledge about magic and ancestors, deriving insights from gifted and specially knowledgeable informants, looking at the whole symbolic system in structural terms, and drawing on western metatheories of symbolism, to construct more deep and global interpretations of Kwaio ritual symbolism. This, of course, is conventional procedure in symbolist anthropology; but here my doubts begin. Can we legitimately attribute these deeper symbolic structure to Kwaio actors? To some of them? All of them? Can we reasonably speak of these structures as part of "Kwaio culture"?

Let us look at the case of *beritauŋa*. Culturally competent Kwaio actors (that is, almost all adolescents and adults) know that *beritauŋa* is performed to generate *mamu*, and that *mamu* is the invisible attraction that will draw people and their shell valuables to the mortuary feast that follows the ritual performance.[7] *Mamu*, in its most literal sense, is the emanation of odor that irresistibly draws fish to bait and bees to flowers.

Beritauŋa is seen as directed at the living through the mediation of ancestors. The offerings of sacrificial pigs will enlist general ancestral support through the medium of *mana*. This generalized ancestral support is then channeled to specific ends by performance of magical routines, including *beritauŋa*, weather magic, magic to keep the peace among the guess, and magic to ensure they do not go hungry.

The two sides of *beritauŋa*, as offering to ancestors and magic directed at potential guests, are recognized in the commonplace exegeses and indeed explicit in the rite itself. The "washing" of the pigs with coconut water and painting of their cheeks with betel mix makes them so irresistibly attractive to potential guests that if necessary they will dismantle important valuables to secure the length of shell beads that is the minimal contribution for a guest. But the painting and splashing

7. See David Akin's work (1999) for more about the convergence of "attraction" between money and shell valuables among the Kwaio.—Ed.

also renders the sacrificial pigs consecrated to ancestors especially desirable, and marks the participants, and the men and boys who are splashed and painted as well, for special *mana*. The *mamu* theme could scarcely be missed by participants since what they recite aloud in unison is a magical spell, which "*mamu*-izes" the pigs, and so on. The immature taro, coconuts, and betel hung in the *taualea* represent the attractions of the feast to potential guests—attractions of food, enjoyment, and sociality.

The presence of the ancestors in the rite, with their locus around the "posts of the dead," is also explicit. The sacredness of the whole "feast of the dead" centers around this ancestral presence, with the *taualea* shelter and the posts within as focal points. Just as the ancestors who first cleared the land and still are its ultimate owners receive first fruits of taro pudding or yams before the living can partake, so they—as the senior members of the kin group and the source of its power—are the first to partake of a mortuary feast.

Some of the objects and substances used in the rite are explicitly interpreted at this level of public, surface interpretation. Evodia (*la`e*), a powerfully aromatic flowering shrub cultivated in Kwaio settlements, is explicitly an agent of *mamu*. This usage is pervasive in Kwaio ritual, and generally understood. Prior to a desacralization rite (*molaŋa*) after the death of a priest, the bereaved group presents valuables to a coastal fisherman, who contracts to provide fish for the feast; the new priest then throws bespelled sprigs of evodia and another aromatic shrub into the water, to magically attract the fish that have been ordered. The association of evodia as magical "bait," here and elsewhere, is overt and inescapable.

Evodia (*la`e*), catalyzed by an officiate's saliva, also serves as an agent of the desacralization rite (*ribaŋa*) done before meals and communion with spirits, in the *beritauŋa* rite, and in many other contexts, prior to the sharing of food with ancestors. Here evodia bespelled, chewed, and spat upon food and those partaking of it, is an agent of *molaŋa*, as a message to the ancestors: it neutralizes the dangerous sacredness to which commensality would otherwise expose the living. Evodia as agent of desacralization in these contexts, as well as agent of attraction in other contexts, is quite explicitly understood.

The publics interpretative tradition is less developed in regard to the cordyline the participants in *beritauŋa* hold. Cordyline varieties are used over and over again in Kwaio rites, and are cultivated in and around most settlements. The public tradition associates green cordylines in a general way with ancestors, as agents for warding off and as markers of sacred places. Red varieties are associated, at this surface symbolic level, with feuding and vengeance.

But for many specific acts, objects, stances, and procedures, this interpretive tradition provides no keys, and indeed motivates no search for hidden meanings. Why fishtail palms? Because that is what you put on *taualea*. Why these and not something else? Because they are the thatching of the ancestors. Why? A pointless question—Why a coconut? Because that's what you have to break open to get coconut water—Why are taro puddings with coconut cream filling used in some contexts but puddings with grated coconut used in other? Why round puddings or square, "fresh" pudding or baked? The public tradition offers no answers, indeed it neither poses nor entertains such questions.

But when I first undertook serious analysis of Kwaio symbolism, in 1969–1970, I of course was not content with surface interpretations. Armed with a vague theory

of ritual symbolism derived mainly from Victor Turner (1967, 1974) and T. O. Beidelman (1966), a superficial knowledge of psychoanalytic theory, and conversance with French structuralism, I sought deeper meanings. The whole span of Kwaio ritual became a field of meanings that could be deciphered only in systematic terms; the individual objects or acts, I supposed, would be multivocal symbols whose deployment with one another in particular contexts in terms of a covert grammar, expressed a particular constellation of meanings.

Access to this grammar, and the polysemy of particular key symbols—coconuts, cordyline, betel mix—could come partly through the exegeses of a Kwaio Muchona, if I could find one. It would come partly from strategic guesses about symbolism based on the physical nature of the acts, objects, and substances: was the coconut water symbolic semen? Was the "post of the dead" phallic, a sort of primitive cosmic pillar? Was the betel mix blood, and if so, did it represent death, war, or sexuality? Access to the grammar would come partly from probing the cultural uses and natural properties of plants, trees, and substances: what was it about fishtail palm that might make their fronds symbolically salient? It would come in part from global analyses of cosmology, from analyses of texts and fragments of myth.[8]

So I probed deeper, using such clues as I could find—though a Kwaio Muchona never arrived on my doorstep. A series of pervasive structural oppositions emerged in Kwaio cosmology, posing sacredness and pollution as mirror images; and this scheme was mapped in the spatial organization of Kwaio settlements and dwelling houses (Keesing 1977, 1979, [1982a: 58–64]). The cosmological inversion of sacred and polluted realms emerged in many ritual contexts. The procedures whereby, after the death of a priest, a man of the bereaved group retired to his bed in the sacred men's house, out of sight of women and attended and fed by a young man, was a striking mirror image of childbirth seclusion, where the mother retires to her bed in a hut in the forest below the clearing, out of sight of men, and is attended by a young girl. The liminality of the taboo-keeper (*suru` ai*), in symbolic death and with the ancestors, as the inverse of the mother creating life was in turn illuminated by the cosmology of Lau, in north Malaita, where a similar inversion of sacredness and pollution is developed around the opposition of skull and uterus (Maranda and Maranda 1970).

In probing deeper symbolism I arrayed systematically the ritual uses and associations of color, looking for a symbolic code of the sort Turner (1967) describes for the Ndembu. For Kwaio, color symbolism is less developed, but systematic patterns emerged nonetheless: green as symbolic of life, fertility, permanence, stability; red as symbolic of war, violence, anger, and of course blood, with its many associations; black associated primarily with darkness, hence most commonly expressing secrecy or concealment.

Color symbolism is deployed, of instance, in the ritual use of cordylines. Cordyline, in Kwaio as in many other parts of Melanesia, is used as a symbol of stability and continuity. The leaves, kept dry above the fire, can be preserved for

8. Perhaps even from other parts of Malaita, Lau (Ivens 1930; Maranda and Maranda 1970; cf. Keesing 1992a), To'abarita (Hogbin 1939), Baegu (Ross 1972), or 'Are'are (de Coppet 1977; de Coppet and Zemp 1978), where religion and ritual are quite similar but where cosmology, myth, and eschatology are more extensively developed.

decades; the plant, long-lived, serves to mark ancient shrines and men's house sites. Taking root easily, cuttings can actually be planted ritually. And the many green and red varieties of *Cordyline fruticosa* can serve as effective vehicles of color symbolism: red used in vengeance magic, green to keep away malevolent spirits and misfortunes, to symbolize ancient ancestors in yam first fruits rites, or to solicit ancestral communication, as in the *beritauŋa*.

Kwaio cosmology defines a set of states and realms, and transitions between states and boundaries between realms are a focus of ritual and indeed of everyday life. The noumenal world of the spirits and the phenomenal world the living; the sacred, the mundane, and the polluted; nature and culture; socially open and closed to the outside world, are all marked off as states, and transitions between them are ritualized. Physical symbols of state transition—burning, breaking open, chewing, ascending or descending—represent transfers from the phenomenal to the noumenal, from the sacred to the mundane, and so on. Much of Kwaio ritual procedure iconically encodes such transitions, using smoke, spittle, aromatics, and other physical representations of transactions with the ancestors.

An analysis of the *beritauŋa* rite, in such terms, would divert us from the major point I shall advance. Let me illustrate the symbolic analyses I assayed on the basis of my 1969–1970 fieldwork by examining the "post of the dead" (*bounimae*). The post is not physically imposing—some four feet tall, three to five inches in diameter. For some groups for whom this element of the rite is particularly central, descendants of the ancestor from whom it is said to originate, the post is especially sacred, and is wrapped with consecrated forest leaves. For other groups it is simply a length of the tree fern.

Most directly, as the public exegesis would have it, the post is an abstract physical representation of the ancestors. It is the locus of their presence in a rite whose composition includes living and dead member of the group. More abstractly, the post represents continuity back to ancient ancestors—a symbolism reinforced not only by its form but by its being implanted in the ground, in Kwaio a pervasive iconic representation of continuity and permanence. That continuity represented by the post bridges the gulf between the physical world of the living and the noumenal world of the spirits, making it an appropriate vehicle for the symbolic offerings of shell valuable and areca tied to it.

The post, I inferred, represents as well the nurturance of the living by ancestors. The tree cut for the post in the fully elaborated version of the rite is *Alstonia scholaris*, the canonical milk tree of Kwaio ritual and magic, and Cyathea tree ferns used in the more mundane version, the pith of which is fed to children and pigs, is also an appropriate symbol of ancestral nurturance solicited in the rite.

The evidence for a phallic theme is less substantial. If this is an underlying element, it is a sexuality, as in Indian symbolism (Leach 1958), of fertility and creative powers: it is noteworthy that the leaf wrapping is green, not red, despite the availability of red in the vegetable world as coded in Kwaio culture.

Who understands the symbolism?

In my subsequent Kwaio research I have been led, both by problems in the data and changes in my own theoretical perspectives, to question whether such symbolic meanings are part of "Kwaio culture," in the sense that understanding them is part of the cultural competence of fully socialized native actors. Given the

gulf between the surface interpretations and the deeper ones I had postulated, given the often indirect and fragmentary evidence I had pieced together in making these interpretations, and given the fact that these fragments often came from esoteric materials not generally accessible to the community, and even from the myths and cosmologies of other Malaita peoples, I was led to wonder whether Kwaio actors understood these covert meanings. Did they need a command of them in order to enact the rituals, in order for the rituals to "succeed," and in order for the structures to be perpetuated?

It is probable that most Kwaio understand, unconsciously, some symbolic meanings that are not part of the public tradition. This would seem to be true of some sexual symbolism—for example, the phallic banana, which is forbidden to women, except in the menstrual area for part of the menses. But is it true of symbolism in general? In my 1974 and 1977 research, I probed these questions in as many ways as I could think of.

On the occasions rituals were performed, I discussed the procedures and events with as wide a range of participants and onlookers, young and old, male and female, as I could. Since the usual response, if I structured my queries in any formal way, was referral to a suitable expert—someone who would make certain that my recording of "the custom" was "straight"—I was forced to be informal and indirect, to inject casual queries where they would fit: "What will they do next?" "What is that part for?" "What is he holding?" "Why do they use that and not__?" "What kind of leaves are those?" "Do they have to use that kind? . . . Why? . . . What is that tree like? . . . and so on." What I could extract from each subject varied enormously, so the corpus of such conversations hardly represents any effective sampling. Kwaio of course responded with the devices used around the world to deflect ethnographers who ask foolish questions: "That's just the way we do it," "Because our ancestors did," etcetera.

I have also elicited from many individuals in non-ritual contexts their knowledge and beliefs about trees, plants, birds, fish, and other natural objects and phenomena used in or referred to in ritual, probing for knowledge of the attributes that provide "keys" to ritual symbolism (cf. Ortner 1973).

I became convinced, through this investigation, that some Kwaio men and women *did* understand the deeper symbolic designs I had analyzed; but that most did not. Those who did were men and women I will loosely class as "experts"—although they were experts in different ways and different degrees about different things. They would amount to no more than fifteen percent of the adult population, although the fuzziness of the boundary—expertise being a matter of degree—makes any rigorous head counting inevitably arbitrary.

This expertise is partly a matter of intellectual abilities and inclinations. As I have indicated, knowledge of genealogies, ancestral stories and epics, ritual details and cosmological metatheories, and magic could be acquired by anyone with the talent and interest; but that requires formidable intellectual feats and memory, and a commitment to learning.

The oldest son of an important priest is in a favored position; he will be taught magic, ritual procedures, genealogies, and esoteric lore as preparation to succeed his father. But young men in this position may have neither the talent nor the interest to sit at their father's feet for long hours learning sacred lore while the lures of carefree hunting, visiting, and flirtation beckon. Old people despair of the

irresponsibility and disinterest of the young, and therefore any young person, male or female, prepared to sit and learn is likely to find eager teachers. Master feast-giver `Elota describes in his autobiography how he alone, among his age-mates, sat at the feet of genealogical and ritual experts and absorbed their knowledge while others played (Keesing 1978). My friend Maenaa`adi is in his mid-twenties, the youngest of nine children of a relatively knowledgeable priest now about seventy. The two oldest sons are in their late forties, and neither is particularly knowledgeable or bright. But Maenaa`adi is already an incredible repository of knowledge, gleaned not only from his father but also from the priests and experts of surrounding descent groups. His command of genealogies is staggering, he has distinguished himself as a singer of epic chants, and his knowledge of stories of ancestors and old feuds and killings is encyclopedic. He is also keenly analytic. He has reached this position of expertise through talent, inclination, and commitment. Near the end of my recent fieldwork, we went on a three-day trip into a remote area where he had distant relatives. Wherever we paused, he probed our hosts for details of ancient happenings and remote genealogical skeins that connected to his. My ritual tutor Louŋa commented not long ago, that "In every group there is only one person who really knows about sacred things, about ancient times, about the genealogies and the ancestors." There might be two or three, but often there is none.

A woman with sufficient talent and interest can acquire essentially the same knowledge. Thus `Eteŋa and Fenaaoli, whose life histories I have been working through, are repositories of such knowledge and the power and respect that go with it. `Eteŋa is renowned for her powers of magic and divination. A woman of such powers is often sacralized through a special relationship with a particular ancestor early in life (whereas many women are sacralized only after menopause); once sacred she cannot be in close contact with menstruating women, and is subject to a long list of taboos partly paralleling those of a priest [cf. Akin 2003].

Let me briefly indicate some of the distinguishing qualities of such experts:

1. Global cosmological knowledge.

   Experts characteristically have a more global view of cosmology. I will illustrate with ideas about the soul. The shades of the dead are ever-present participants in social life, as *adalo*. But Kwaio also have ideas, usually vague, about a land of the dead (Anogwa`u) to which souls go after death. I asked a wide range of informants about the land of the dead. Most said they knew little or nothing about it, and offered no solution to the apparent paradox of the shade of the dead being in two different places (yet did not posit two separate shades or souls). Many speculated that the shade goes to Anogwa`u first, then comes back to stay with the living. Those I class as experts characteristically had a well-developed (though not always uniform) conception of Anogwa`u and a theory (again not always uniform) of two soul-components. And the model of Anogwa`u was one that helps to illuminate ritual symbolism: there are two paths through which the dead enter the "village" at Anogwa`u, one lined with green cordylines for the souls of those who died "natural" deaths, one lined with red cordylines for the souls of those who had been killed.

2. Knowledge about particular ancestors.

   Experts characteristically are repositories of stories about ancient ancestors—their places of origin, events in their lives, the nature and sources of their powers, their genealogical relationships to other ancestors. These stories provide the bases for specific food taboos, ritual injunctions, ritual procedures, and so forth. As with the *bounimae* post or the fishtail palm leaves, such stories may provide the information required for deep symbolic readings of ritual sequences. In many cases they are the only approximations to exegeses of ritual symbolism. Such exegetic traditions as exist in Kwaio are characteristically passed on with the teaching of ritual procedure, tales of ancestors, and magic—hence in many cases are accessible only to experts. Although such stories are not fully esoteric, and are potentially open to those genuinely committed to learning lore, many would be recited only in sacred contexts or in serious teaching (in this way they can be distinguished from publicly recited epic chants).

3. Knowledge of magic.

   Knowledge of magical spells and validations constitutes property, while other ritual knowledge is more freely available. Experts usually command extensive knowledge of magic, which is passed onto them as they are acquiring other kinds of expertise. The symbolism of publicly enacted rites may be transparent only in the light of some accompanying magical knowledge, which is limited and esoteric. Thus dark purple coleus is used in some rites. But only a person who knows the accompanying magic is likely to understand that it symbolizes disguise and hence protection from vengeance seeking ancestors, since the parallels of darkness and invisibility are drawn in the spells and are not otherwise explicit or transparent. Again, the circumstances of birth afford opportunities but do not lead directly to expertise. The brilliant feast-giver `Elota tried to teach large bodies of magic to his sons and daughters. But the son confesses that he was able to remember only a few of the procedures in which he was instructed, and his oldest daughter ruefully admits she was unable to memorize any of them (cf. Keesing 1978).

4. Special tutelary relationships with ancestors.

   An expert is likely to have a close and special relationship with an ancient ancestor/ancestress (occasionally with two or three). The "tutelary" ancestor will be a special channel of power or information on which such an individual will depend (even though consecrated pigs are kept for, and powers enlisted from, as many as a dozen ancestors). Almost all adults have close relationships with the shades of dead attachment figures—parents, grandparents, siblings, children—but relatively few have them with ancient ancestors, who are powerful and dangerous.

6. Communication through dreams and possession.

   Although the shades of all humans wander in dream only "experts" (conceived as individuals who have close, special bonds with

> powerful ancestors) are given important information in dream encounters. Such a person will encounter his or her ancestral ally in the guise of, say, his friend or neighbor and will receive information—an impending death, a hidden violation of a pollution, which if not expiated will bring misfortune, the success or failure of a planned venture. Such messages are given in the form of signs, partly conventional, partly requiring insightful interpretation. A person who regards him/herself as having such a special bond, hence as dreaming "true" dreams—and is so regarded by other members of the community—will communicate these messages upon awakening. Most people view their dreams as "just rubbish," filled with spurious or doubtful messages; if they communicated them, others would respond with doubt or derision.
>
> Possession, in which an ancestor "rises up in" and speaks to or through a person is experienced less commonly (see Keesing 1978). But such an experience is regarded as a source of spiritual guidance and confirmatory of a person's special bonds of sacredness.

The people I am categorizing as "experts" were, in varying degrees, able to make global, deep, metatheoretical interpretations. For instance, Fenaaoli, a knowledgeable and articulate older woman, has given a number of global, metatheoretical statements that will serve to illustrate. In discussing with men a series of taboos applying to menstruating women that prohibit their chewing betel, breaking open a coconut, and making a taro and coconut pudding, Fenaaoli viewed them as the inverse of the ritual acts following high sacrifice or death of a priest: to perform these acts in the menstrual area "on top of" the acts performed in ritual would by implication defile the latter part of the general symbolic design in which sacredness and pollution are symbolic mirror-images, a point she developed quite explicitly in other contexts [cf. Keesing 1987b].

Experts were also deemed capable of making "grammatical" modifications of rituals. The full sequence of desacralization rites after death of a priest or a high sacrifice is burdensome and costly for a descent group. When members of a descent group are keeping strict taboos, they are not only inconvenienced; they are often prevented from keeping conflicting obligations (see Keesing 1968, 1970). For the death of a less sacred or important person, the taboos and observances are scaled down, but in ways that leave considerable leeway for variation. A recurrent temptation for a bereaved group is to lighten their ritual burdens and particularly to shorten the duration of desacralization the death would normally call for.[9]

These and other departures from normal ritual procedure often evoke criticism from outsiders. Sometimes these criticisms reflect niggling and rigid traditionalism. But more interestingly, they sometimes reflect a deeper metatheoretical understanding on the part of the critic, and address an inappropriate permutation of procedure. I overheard my ritual mentor, Louŋa, discussing with another expert the modified form of burial ritual a descent group closely linked to his own used after death of their priest:

9. Rarely a person specifies on his deathbed that only minimal taboos are to be kept, a direction that has been followed in the instances I have recorded.

> They didn't know what they were doing. Step one when you bury a priest is [the details need not concern us]. Step two is___. Step three is___. Step four is___. Step five is___. They decided to leave our three and four, and to do five. But you know as well as I do that it doesn't make any sense to do five unless you did three and four.

Such "ungrammatical" changes of procedure probably can become more widely adopted, and in the long run may contribute to changes in the "grammar." But in these and other contexts, failure to understand the meaning of ritual is commonly attributed by experts to the lack of expertise of those who often must stage ritual performances. A Kwaio officiate need not understand the deep symbolic structure and meaning of a rite to stage it properly, but to create appropriate permutations of standard procedures requires a deeper understanding.

It was also apparent that ritual experts were the ones with the greatest power, inclination, and ability to create new ritual forms. Although Kwaio insist that ritual forms are ancient, this is in fact a matter of dogma. New symbolic forms are being created, and existing ones substantially modified, in each generation, and Kwaio, when pressed and faced with examples, will concede that this is so. To them there is no ultimate contradiction, since the ancient ancestors who handed down these procedures are participants in contemporary life, in constant contact with their descendants. A change or major innovation is validated and accepted only if it is taken as coming from an ancestor through a human medium—whether in dream, possession, divination, or other revelation. Innovation is thus a matter of commanding symbolic metatheory, of the dynamics of unconsciousness, and of politics.[10]

Unconscious understanding?

Do native actors understand symbolic meanings even though they cannot verbalize them? Obviously in some instances they do. Anthony Forge's (1966: 30, 1973) data on phallic noses in Abelam symbolism illustrates a kind of social analogue of the repression of psychoanalysis, a dogma of denial. Such denial seems fairly common in the tribal world, where the symbolism is quite transparent. Some peoples apparently maintain a more sweeping dogma of denial, insisting on totally literal significance of all ritual symbols. That a single object may carry a range of

10. Two examples of major innovation, one around 1920 and another in perhaps the 1880's, must suffice. Prior to about 1920, a man could not become a priest or in fact achieve full ritual adulthood (marked by partaking of a pig consecrated to an important ancestor) as long as his mother was alive: the vagina through which he was born was polluting him by contagion. Through ancestral revelation, under political circumstances I am trying to piece together, this rule was eliminated—in part as a response to the first inroads of Christianity (see Keesing 1967). Some forty years earlier, prevailing practices of exhuming skulls and burying them or placing them in burial caves gave way, for most kin groups, to wrapping them in bark and placing them in shrines; there were attendant changes in the sequence of mortuary ritual. Here the circumstances are harder to reconstruct, but the changes were taken to be ancestral in origin [cf. Keesing 1989b]. There is some fragmentary evidence that the new practice was initially adopted by a single descent group through a single major revelation through a single individual; and it subsequently spread to other groups as, in divination, decedents were queried about where they wanted their skulls interred.

conscious, preconscious, and unconscious meanings has been persuasively argued by Donald Tuzin (1972) in his analysis of Ilahita Arapesh yam symbolism.

There undoubtedly are acts and objects which are "understood" by many or most Kwaio at unconscious levels even though no exegeses can be offered, except of the most literal sort. A probable example is hair symbolism. Head shaving and mourning dishevelment, where hair and beard are allowed to grow rank, carry cultural meanings of purification, loss, liminality (where the unkempt mourners become "like *adalo*"), and, at deeper psychological levels, presumably have sexual meanings. Some other objects and acts have sufficiently transparent sexual referents beneath the level of cultural exegeses that we can, I think, hypothesize that most Kwaio unconsciously "understand" them.

A wider argument has been made by some recent students of symbolism: that symbolism, being fundamentally nonverbal in nature, evokes understandings that cannot by their nature be made explicit, except in secondary glosses.[11] Whether all, some, few, or no individuals in a particular society can give such verbal glosses is fundamentally irrelevant to the ritual process. But this pushes us toward an unexamined and indeed unexaminable assumption that all native actors understand symbolic meanings, and pushes us toward a precarious epistemological position where our only criteria of analytic adequacy are logical and aesthetic.

"How" ritual symbols "mean"

The argument that native exegesis—its presence, absence, or content—is fundamentally irrelevant to the nature and power of ritual symbols as vehicles of communication has been advanced by a number of theorists (see Gell 1975). Ritual symbols, it is argued, carry messages that are by their nature radically different from the messages expressed in language, and thus are not only largely hidden from consciousness but translatable into language, if at all, only in partial or distorted ways. This view of symbolism, in relation to art, has been cogently developed by Gregory Bateson (1972), and in relation to dance, in a quote attributed to Isadora Duncan: "If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it" (quoted in Bateson 1972: 137). The symbolism of art—and of ritual, perhaps—is not "about things," but "about" *relationships* (ibid.: 139), for which "things" may provide, as it were, empirical exemplars at different levels. (In the realm of ritual, for example the Ndemba "milk tree" may symbolize a relationship of which breast milk, motherhood, nurturance, maternity, and social solidarity are empirical manifestations.) If this is so, it has been argued, we cannot expect native actors to be able to tell us what rituals are about; and if they give us exegeses, we must view them as, at best, distorted translations into another symbolic medium.

This is a view with which I have much sympathy, but it is one whose implication has not, I believe, been followed far enough. In the realm of language, a native speaker must master the system of meanings to be linguistically competent: each utterance encoded or decoded is a test of the speaker/hearer's semantic theory. If we take a semiotic view of other realms—say dress (Sahlins 1976: 179–204)—the native signs shift radically.

11. These rather vague metatheories of symbolism seem to rely on intuitive and aesthetic interpretation, selectively using fragments of ethnographic evidence (see Beidelman 1966; Willis 1975; Douglas 1996; Ortner 1973).

A native actor, as part of his or her cultural competence, learns to dress appropriately, to use clothing to express a self-image, to convey messages; eccentricity in dress is as usually studied, as is conformity. Each presentation of self in clothing, each interpretation of others through clothing, is something of a test of one's mastery of the semiotic code, through a less direct test than the exchange of utterances, in that actors can be in varying degrees, oblivious to the messages expressed to and by them (a matter of differential cultural competence, we might say, but also of context and preoccupation).

But if there is no exegetic tradition, ritual is markedly different from a semiotic point of view. Cultural competence demands that one be able to stage, participate in, or act as audience toward ritual performances, to express appropriately overt emotional stances (of fright, reverence, grief, and so forth). But there is no test of *understanding*. If you use the right object in the right way, perform the prescribed acts in the right sequence, laugh, weep, or run away when you are supposed to, then you are a culturally competent ritual participant. Whether you perceive the relationship, interpret the deeper symbolic meanings or message, or unconsciously supply the hidden referents of symbols, is nowhere put to the test.

There is a growing body of evidence that the human faculties to perceive iconic patterning are quite different from, and complementary to, the faculties of language and logic, and that individuals vary widely in the development of these faculties. Could it be that the native expert and the symbolist anthropologist, both rarely gifted with such interpretative powers, enter into a kind of dialogue of cocreation in which they together discover and create "a culture"? The rites and myths of course are there as texts, part of the ideational heritage of the community, and so, in a sense, are the meanings. But in what sense? For whom are the meanings meaningful [see Keesing 1985]?

Ritual and the politics of knowledge

There is another, political, side of the ritual process that the quest for meaning obscures [Keesing 1987a]. Here Fredrik Barth's (1975) study of Baktaman ritual is illuminating. While recognizing that exegeses are not part of the cultural competence of Baktaman, he documents levels of symbolic meaning access to which depends on information and life experience. In the Baktaman climate of secrecy and initiatory mysteries, novices and women have access to only the outer layers of symbolic meaning. In discussing color symbolism for instance, Barth notes that "actually very few Baktaman bring the necessary knowledge to their reading of the colours on a shield so that they can decode the full message. . . . The women will have only . . . public contexts . . . from which to develop their understanding of the colour code . . . " (Barth 1975: 177–78). He then analyzes the "keys" to "deeper understandings" as revealed to males in the successive initiatory revelations of the Baktaman cult hierarchy.

Barth's examination of the sociology of knowledge in Baktaman opens an important path for exploration, though one he merely points to. Ritual symbols do not merely *communicate*: they may be constructed so as *not* to communicate, except within an inner circle (here the Australian Aboriginal material comes to mind). The *opacity* of symbols may itself define social relationships between the participants; the polysemy of symbols may serve to stratify degrees of understanding, and degrees of exclusion.

The relatively superficial constructions most Kwaio participants and onlookers appear to place on the acts and objects of *beritauŋa* do not derive from politics of secrecy and mystery. Such keys to understanding as Kwaio tradition provides could be sought out by almost anyone. But differences in interest, commitment, intellectual ability, social status, access to information, and life experience seem to have generated diverse perspectives on ritual that militate against the sharing of meanings that Dan Sperber (1975: 137) hypothesizes, where "cultural symbolism focusses [*sic*] the attention of the members of a single society in the same directions, determines parallel evocation fields that are structured in the same way."

Where the knowledge that provides partial "keys" to understanding is unevenly distributed, and individual perspectives and commitment are diverse, a "shared orientation" to ritual symbolism seems problematic. Where individuals do make deep interpretations they may well not follow cultural channels: the form of the *bounimae* and the splashing of coconut liquid on the pigs tethered at its base may well evoke sexual constructions—of phallus and semen—for some participants even though the exegetic clues point mainly to different meanings about ancestors and nurturance. Here again, Barth is helpful in showing how the wide range of potential referents a ritual object *could* metaphorically represent is culturally narrowed, often quite arbitrarily; and how that narrowing may depend on knowledge commanded by some native actors, but not all.

Do we need to assume that all native actors unconsciously understand deep ritual symbolism to account for the processes of creation, continuity, and change through which such cultural forms emerge and endure? Is it an article of faith that we want, or need, in order to understand how rituals work? Let me turn briefly to these two final questions.

The dynamics of innovation and permutation

If I am correct about Kwaio—and, by implication, many other tribal societies—understanding deep cultural symbolism is not a concomitant of the socialization process but partly a matter of selective access to and command of information. To be adequately socialized is to know how to stage and participate in rites, not necessarily to understand their inner layers of meaning. If this is the case, how are the systematic structures of symbolism preserved, and how are "grammatical" new forms created? The answer for Kwaio is that major modifications of ritual and other symbolic systems are made mainly by the experts in each generation. By Kwaio definition, of course, they are made by ancestors, and communicated through their descendants in dream, possession, or divination. Sociologically, such communications are viewed as authentic or spurious according to the sacredness of the human medium and their accordance with the "grammar" of symbolism to which ritual experts have access. In all probability, a local congregation will accept a dream that a rite should be conducted in modified fashion if it comes through their priest and is a plausible modification. The chances of adoption, as an innovation spreads beyond a local congregation, depend increasingly on its conformity with a general symbolic grammar as well as the ritual importance of the original innovator/medium and the good fortune of those who are practicing the new form—that is, whether it visibly succeeds in enlisting desired ancestral support.

If so, the preservation of coherent symbolic designs across generations is largely in the hands of a small segment of the Kwaio population, those whom I have categorized as experts. It is not an inherent property of *la pensée sauvage*, or "untamed thought" (see Lévi-Strauss 1966), that mysteriously stamps its impress on cultural forms [see Keesing 1992b]. It is not a mystical strain to order and structure inherent in collective symbol systems; the preservation of such symbolic coherence is, I think, as much a political process as a cognitive process [Keesing 1982c, 1993]. This is not to say that *only* the experts in Kwaio society modify symbolic forms; such modification, in small and potentially cumulative ways, is continually going on in local descent groups, as a matter of convenience, approximation, simplification, experimentation—and partial ignorance. It is to say that despite the continual small shifts in procedure, structural coherence is maintained across generations largely because of the impress of expertise, construed as ancestral will.

Ideas of pollution and its containment and the mirror-imaging of sacredness and pollution date back in northern Malaita, well over a thousand years, probably closer to two thousand; the propitiation of punitive/succoring ancestors to secure *mana* through sacrifice of pigs, and the ritual use of cordyline, evodia, and other sacred shrubs probably goes back three or four thousand years, with unbroken lines of cultural continuity to modern Kwaio practice. The Kwaio have gradually developed distinctive variants of these ancient patterns, creating new forms, modifying existing ones, and placing new constructions on old themes. Such processes surely reflect "the human mind" and the strain for cognitive order, but they also reflect the dynamics of politics, the uses of ideology and knowledge. These processes cannot be understood, I believe, if we take meaning as our central problem and look at symbol systems as elegant designs as if they were preserved in a timeless vacuum.

If my suspicions about levels of understanding of symbolic meanings are correct, prevailing symbolist approaches also lead to a spuriously intellectualist view of how rituals *work*. Let me turn briefly to this question.

How does ritual "work"?

If a communion of shared meanings, at deeper levels of symbolism, is not occurring among participants and onlookers in Kwaio rites such as *beritauŋa*, where do these rituals derive their power? Symbolist theorists see the deployment of cultural symbols in ritual as a quintessential expression of a people's deepest values and ultimate concerns; the moral order and the social order are dramatized and schematized in an emotionally charged setting. Symbols such as the Ndembu "milk tree" (Turner 1967: 19–47), with a broad spectrum of referents—abstract, moral relationships, social relationships, and emotionally laden primary experiences—give the enactment of rites a special force in the lives of individuals and the solidarity of groups. But such intellectual and emotional communion would seem to require that the fully socialized participants in ritual understand the meanings of Ndembu "milk trees" or Kwaio coconuts. If, at least for the Kwaio, my doubts are correct—if the constructions actors place on the rites are highly variable and characteristically relatively shallow and partial—then we are led to doubt prevailing dogmas: to ask why rites such as *beritauŋa* are viewed by participants as so important, why they endure, and how they "work."

In the process of taking what I believe is an excessively intellectualist approach to ritual, one can too easily adopt a perspective as observer that is external to and removed from the subjective worlds of tribal peoples. For a Kwaio participant in ritual, ancient and powerful ancestors, the source of the powers on which human effort and life itself depends, *are invisible coparticipants*. Your group invites these awesomely powerful spirits to come and partake of a feast, and follows the rules and procedures they laid down of old, and now monitor and enforce, so as to enlist their support and solicit their powers. The immediate presence of these spirits is obvious to every participant, young or old, knowledgeable or not: the rites constitute a series of conversations and transactions with them. If these procedures are carried out correctly and the ancestors are satisfied, one's pigs will grow, one will be free from illness or injury, one's garden will thrive, one's business ventures will succeed. Any error, however tiny, may bring disaster—a death, financial ruin, crop failure. Kwaio ritual is crucial, dangerous, collective work. Barth makes a similar point for Baktaman:

> [Rites] *do* something as well as *say* something. . . . An analysis [of] . . . ritual events *merely* as communicative events constructs spurious problems and invites the use of inappropriate concepts. . . . To have persons—such as novices and women—participate in a (mystical) productive enterprise which they do not understand is rather different from merely speaking to them in a secret language which they cannot interpret. It is the *concerns* of Baktaman ritual—taro, growth, pigs—that integrate even the most passive and excluded categories . . . into the cult and make of the whole population one unified congregation with a common purpose. . . . (1975: 209–10, emphasis in original)

Small wonder that the rites after the death of a Kwaio priest or a high sacrifice are times of heightened emotion for members of the group whether or not they read any deep meanings into the sprinkling and painting of pigs, into posts and leaves and coconuts. To be emotionally caught up in the rite you need only know, as all Kwaio do, that the ancestors are present and that correct enactment is a matter of life and death, prosperity or disaster.

In short, Kwaio rituals are times of heightened emotion because their participants have placed themselves in mortal danger in quest of power; the rituals endure because without them humans could not achieve their goals or indeed survive. In such an atmosphere, moral values, social groupings, and premises about the universe and its powers are surely reinforced. But that, I think, does not depend on the shared understandings of symbolism so often attributed to tribal peoples.

One might object that this begs the crucial theoretical questions: by accepting an "inner" view of why rituals are necessary and dangerous, and what ends they serve, one is deflected from asking why the Kwaio ritualize their encounter with ancestors, and why indeed they populate the world with unseen spirits controlling human life. Why break coconuts, hold cordyline, chew betel? Why these objects and not others? Why not simply pray for *mana*, without elaborate procedures?

To begin to answer such questions we need a powerful theory of religion-in-society which goes far beyond symbolist conceptions of cultural structure and meaning—a theory that integrates and takes into account human psychological

propensities, and at the same time views the ideational worlds humans fashion and transform as superstructures in relation to the real ones they live in: a theory that is historical even where the histories must remain unknown. We cannot answer these questions within a paradigm that takes meaning as its central problem; or by functionalist argument, in whatever guise.

Conclusions

My argument is not, of course, a totally new one, but it runs against prevailing streams. The evidence I have advanced for Kwaio is, I realize, far from conclusive. One would need to make much more systematic observations than mine, and would have to probe in much greater depth the psychological experiences and perspectives of individuals, before one could be certain—for the Kwaio or other tribal peoples—that inability to give explicit exegeses of cultural symbolism did not mask covert understanding. Perhaps all adult Kwaio understand far more, and more deeply, than the surface interpretations they can verbalize.

In playing Devil's Advocate, I am calling for systematic research that could help to provide firmer evidence on what now seems to me to be a matter of faith. An anthropology of ritual need not, I think, be a matter of faith.

I regard the questions I have raised as quite open. The doubts I have expressed are intended as a catalyst to further research, not as a reverse profession of faith. But to pursue that research, we will need a conception of culture and of social process that does not assume the "sharedness" of "culture" as a symbolic system. I agree with Donald Tuzin (1972: 251) that "Studies that rely on cultural data in the analysis of symbols face the dilemma of having to adopt . . . the . . . untenable premise that all individuals in the culture subscribe to these symbols in the same way and to the same degree."

We need a theory that takes "culture" to consist of knowledge in communities, and takes as problematic its distribution, coherence, and perpetuation. Here, as in all anthropology, theoretical clarity and empirical research are mutually dependent.

References

Akin, David. 1996. "Local and foreign spirits in Kwaio, Solomon Islands." In *Spirits in culture, history and mind*, edited by Jeannette Marie Mageo and Alan Howard, 147–71. New York: Routledge.

——. 1999. "Cash and shell money in Kwaio." In *Money and modernity: State and local currencies in Melanesia*, edited by David Akin and Joel Robbins, 103–30. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

——. 2005. "Ancestral vigilance and the corrective conscience in Kwaio: *Kastom* as culture in a Melanesian society." In *The making of global and local modernities in Melanesia: Humiliation, transformation and the nature of cultural change*, edited by Joel Robbins and Holly Wardlow, 183–206. Aldershot: Ashgate.

——. 2008. "Concealment, confession, and innovation in Kwaio women's taboos." *American Ethnologist* 30 (3): 381–400.

Barth, Fredrik. 1975. *Ritual and knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Basso, Keith, and Henry Selby. 1976. "Introduction," In *Meaning in anthropology*, edited by Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby, 1–9. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Bateson, Gregory. 1972. *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Beidelman, T. O. 1966. "The ox and Nuer sacrifice: Some Freudian hypotheses about Nuer symbolism." *Man* 1 (4): 453–67.

de Coppet, Daniel. 1977. "First exchange, double vision." *Journal of the Cultural Association of the Solomon Islands* 5: 23–39

de Coppet, Daniel, and Hugo Zemp. 1978. *'Are'are: Un peuple mélanésien et sa musique*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Douglas, Mary. (1970) 1996. *Natural symbols: Explorations in cosmology*. 2nd ed. London: Barrie & Rockliff.

Dumont, Louis. (1966) 1980. *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications*. Revised ed. Translated by Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont, and Basia Gulati. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Forge, Anthony. 1966. "Art and environment in the Sepik." *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1965: 23–31.

———. 1973. "Style and meaning in Sepik art." In *Primitive art and society*, edited by Anthony Forge, 169–92. London: Oxford University Press.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Gell, Alfred. 1975. *The metamorphosis of the cassowaries: Umeda society, language and ritual*. London: Athlone Press.

Griaule, Marcel. (1948) 1965. *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An introduction to Dogon religious ideas*. Translated by Germaine Dieterlen. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hogbin, Herbert Ian. 1939. *Experiments in civilization*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Ivens, Walter George. 1930. *Island builders of the Pacific*. London: Seeley-Service.

Keesing, Roger M. 1967. "Christians and Pagans in Kwaio, Malaita." *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 76 (1): 82–100.

———. 1968. Nonunilieal descent and contextual definition of status: The Kwaio evidence. *American Anthropologist* 70 (1): 82–84.

———. 1970. Shrines, ancestors, and cognatic descent: The Kwaio and Tallensi. *American Anthropologist* 72 (4): 755–75.

———. 1974. "Theories of culture." *Annual Review of Anthropo*logy 3: 73–97.

——. 1977. *Kwaio Religion*. Solomon Islands Cultural Association. Honiara: Special Publication.

——. 1978. *'Elota's story: The life and times of a Solomon Islands big man*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

——. 1979. "Linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge: Some doubts and speculations." *American Anthropologist* 81 (1): 14–36.

——. 1982a. *Kwaio religion: The living and the dead in a Solomon Island society*. New York: Columbia University Press.

——. 1982b. "'Cultural rules': Methodological doubts and epistemological paradoxes." *Canberra Anthropology* 5 (1): 37–46.

——. 1982c. "Kastom and anticolonialism on Malaita: 'Culture' as political symbol." *Mankind* 13 (4): 357–73.

——. 1984. "Rethinking 'Mana'." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 40 (1): 137–56.

——. 1985. "Conventional metaphors and anthropological metaphysics: The problematic of cultural translation." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 41 (2): 201–17.

——. 1987. "Anthropology as interpretative quest." *Current Anthropology* 28 (2): 161–76.

——. 1987b. "Ta'a Geni: Women's perspectives on Kwaio society." In *Dealing with inequality: Analyzing gender relations in Melanesia and beyond*, edited by Marilyn Strathern, 33–62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 1989a. "Exotic readings of cultural texts." *Current Anthropology* 30 (4): 459–79.

——. 1989b. "Sins of a mission: Christian life as traditionalist ideology." In *Family and gender in the Pacific: Domestic contradictions and colonial impact*, edited by Margaret Jolly and Martha Macintyre, 193–212. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 1990. "Theories of culture revisited." *Canberra Anthropology* 13 (2): 46–60.

——. 1991. "The uses of knowledge in Kwaio society." In *Man and a half: Essays in Pacific anthropology and ethnobiology in honour of Ralph Bulmer*, edited by Andrew Pawley, 277–86. Auckland: Polynesian Society.

——. 1992a. "Kwaisulia as culture hero." In *History and tradition in Melanesian anthropology*, edited by James Carrier, 175–82. Berkeley: University of California Press.

——. 1992b. "Some problems in the study of Oceanic religion." *Anthropologica* 34 (2): 231–46.

——. 1993. "'Earth' and 'path' as complex categories: Semantics and symbolism in Kwaio culture." In *Cognitive aspects of religious symbolism*, edited by Pascal Boyer, 93–110. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Keesing, Roger M., and Jonathan Fifi'i. 1969. "Kwaio word tabooing in its cultural context." *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 78 (2): 154–77.

Leach, Edmund. 1958. "Magical hair." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 88 (2): 147–64.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. (1958) 1963. *Structural anthropology*, Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Basic Books.

———. (1962) 1966. *The savage mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lewis, I. M. (1971) 2003. *Ecstatic religion: A study of shamanism and spirit possession*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

Maranda, Pierre, and Elli Köngäs Maranda. 1970. "Le crâne et l'uterus: Deux théorèmes nord-malaitains," In *Echanges et communications: Mélanges offerts à Claude Lévi-Strauss à l'occasion de son 60ème anniversaire*, edited by Jean Pouillon and Pierre Maranda, 829–61. The Hage: Mouton and Co.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1973. "On key symbols." *American Anthropologist* 75 (5): 1338–46.

Ross, Harold. 1972. *Baegu: Social and ecological organization in North Malaita*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Sahlins, Marshall. 1976. *Culture and practical reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Schneider, David M. 1969. "Kinship, nationality and religion in American culture: Toward a definition of kinship." In *Forms of symbolic action*, edited by Robert F. Spencer, 116–25. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

———. 1972. "What is kinship all about?" In *Kinship studies in the Morgan centennial year*, edited by Priscilla Reining, 32–63. Washington, D.C.: The Anthropological Society of Washington.

———. 1976. "Notes toward a theory of culture." In *Meaning in anthropology*, edited by Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby, 197–220. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Sperber, Dan. 1975. *Rethinking symbolism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Turner, Victor. 1967. *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

———. (1962) 1969. *Chihamba, the white spirit: A ritual drama of the Ndembu*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

———. 1974. *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Tuzin, Donald F. 1972. "Yam symbolism in the Sepik: An interpretive account." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 28 (3): 230–54.

Willis, Roy G., ed. 1975. *The interpretation of symbolism*. London: Malaby Press.

Roger M. KEESING (1935-1996) was an eminent cultural anthropologist best known for his work among the Kwaio of Malaita, Solomon Islands. Keesing wrote preliminary drafts of *On not understanding symbols* in 1978. At the time, he had been a professor at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Australian National University and headed the department of anthropology for two years. Throughout his life, Keesing made significant contributions in anthropology on topics as wide and varied as kinship, language, politics, religion, custom, and cognition. Never one to shy away from debate Keesing was known as a prolific and energetic scholar who was deeply committed to both the discipline of anthropology and the people of the Solomon Islands.

Jordan HAUG is a graduate student at the University of California, San Diego. He has done extensive archival research on ethnographic materials found in the Tuzin Archive for Melanesian Anthropology. It was in those archives that he found Roger Keesing's unpublished paper, *On not understanding symbols*, and edited the paper from Keesing's hand writing notes. Jordan is currently preparing for fieldwork in Misima, Papua New Guinea where he will study the intersection of hope and spatiotemporal control in the wake of Christian revival and post-mine closure.