



# **ANTHROPOLOGY AT THE EDGE:**

**Essays on Culture, Symbol and Consciousness**

**J. Ian Prattis**

University Press of America, Inc.

---

# Contents

## List of Tables and Figures

## Acknowledgments

## Preface

### I Beyond Structuralism

Chapter 1 Man and Metaphor

Chapter 2 "Parsifal" and Semiotic Structuralism

### II The Poetic Turn and Postmodern Reflexivity

Chapter 3 Dialectics and Experience in Fieldwork

Chapter 4 "Reflections" as Myth

Chapter 5 Reflexive Anthropology

Chapter 6 (with D. Blair) Opening Ourselves up to the Voyage of Anthropological Practise

### III Process and Form

Chapter 7 Celtic Festivals and Bilingualism Policy: The Barra Feis

Chapter 8 Sacred Dance and Cultural Bridges

Chapter 9 Death Breaths and Drivers: The Phenomenology of Shamanism

Chapter 10 Metaphor, Vibration and Form

### IV Paradigms

Chapter 11 Science and Sages - a Small Matter of Paradigms

### V Gaia and the Environment - Two Essays

Chapter 12 Issues of Inner Ecology

Chapter 13 Myth, Meditation and Transformation of Consciousness

---

## **Preface**

Students and colleagues over the past decade have encouraged, and frequently insisted, that I draw my thoughts, lectures and writings on symbolic anthropology into a collection of essays. I appreciate their prodding, yet the delay was not due to procrastination. I simply did not have a coherent structure in my mind into which my disparate thoughts and writings could readily fit. I also felt I did not know enough about symbolic anthropology. However, in 1995 the intensive preparation required for the presentation of a 12 week television course on Culture and Symbol made me realize that the structure I was looking for was inherent in how I taught. I thought of the television course, and now this volume, as an orchestral piece with an opening movement and statement of themes, followed by other movements, themes and harmonies, then a finale that returned to the opening themes with a crescendo drawn from a radical yet consistent orchestration. More pragmatically, this book is intended as a text, a companion piece to the television course on Culture and Symbol, and is designed for other institutions in addition to Carleton University.

The first movement of the volume - I. Beyond Structuralism - was for me a formidable task, because I had, and still retain, a great admiration for Claude Lévi-Strauss' work and scholarship. Yet I felt something was missing in his analyses. While I understood his semiotic necessity of stripping away the cultural content of categories in order to get at the invariant structuring principles of the human mind, this was at the cost of the symbolic

significance and transformative powers of the categories themselves. I felt that Lévi-Strauss had become trapped in the logic of his analytic model concerning the conception of the human mind. In Chapter 1 - *"Man and Metaphor"* - which was first published in 1984 in *Communication and Cognition* (Vol. 17, 2/3), I tackled the problematics of structuralism in terms of human adaptive capacities. Firstly, I established the logic of structuralism and then embarked on a tour-de-force through myth, science, poetry, and cave art to demonstrate the inadequacies of Lévi-Strauss' approach, particularly in addressing problems of consciousness and transformation. I stretched structuralism as far as I could by making analogies between elementary structures, archetypes and meditation symbols, and placed a construction on Lévi-Strauss' axioms that perhaps may not appeal to him.

I enlarge on my disagreement with Lévi-Strauss in Chapter 2 - *"Parsifal and Semiotic Structuralism"* - which was finally published in Ivan Brady's reader, *"Anthropological Poetics"*, in 1991. This work took an exceptionally long time to sculpt into a final form and I am still not totally satisfied with it. I include Brady's "Prelude" to this chapter as he skillfully places my endeavors with the Parsifal myth within its intellectual context and also identifies my competitors - Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss. In Chapter 2, the Parsifal myth is subjected to an intense scrutiny and Lévi-Strauss' analysis is criticized as permitting very limited kinds of conclusions. As an alternative I propose a mytho-poetic reading of the myth that requires both an internal view of symbols as transformation vehicles and an external context of theoretical reference points. The latter are drawn first of all from Carl Jung (1968) and then significantly from the arguments of Edmund Husserl (1970) with respect to "bracketing", a notion that I consider essential for the construction of a self-aware anthropology. In the analysis of the myth I focus significantly on the interaction between Parsifal and Blanche Fleur, and consider Blanche Fleur as a paramount manifestation of what Carl Jung called the "anima" complex (1957, 1968). Furthermore, I contend that a semiotic structuralist approach can only get at certain levels of a symbolic system. It is certainly unable to penetrate the archetypal mysteries of a complex such as the anima. My mytho-poetic unraveling of this myth is not so obstructed.

What lay "Beyond Structuralism" was a turn towards anthropological poetics, and a redefinition of subject-object relationships. This is the second movement - II. The Poetic

Turn and Postmodern Reflexivity. I was moving in the direction of postmodernism long before the term became fashionable in anthropology. I also felt that anthropologists knew much more than they expressed in their monographs and articles. Furthermore, that the unlocking of this knowledge required a deep dive into epistemology and the use of language forms that had a richer semantic corpus than everyday discourse. Rather than documenting ethnographic events within a predetermined modernist structure I felt it was necessary for anthropologists to develop complementary understandings from different standpoints. Many of my colleagues *did* understand the dialogism of different cultural assumptions but relegated their understandings to poetry that remained largely private, rather than representing their knowledge in public discourse. I tried to change all that in 1985 when the American Anthropological Association published my edited work: "Reflections, the Anthropological Muse". The last chapter of this volume is reproduced in this reader as Chapter 3 - "*Dialectics and Experience in Fieldwork: The Poetic Dimension*". I begin with the epistemological difficulties of fieldwork and propose poetic expression as one solution to these difficulties as it is a signifying process that can record the dialectical relationship between the observer and other. This epistemological shift with all its attendant consequences would, I argued, eventually bring about a radicalization of anthropology, and provide a vital spark for rethinking anthropology's foundations.

There were other radical streams of thought entering the discipline at this time that I discuss in Chapters 5 and 6 but let me stay with "Reflections" for a moment. Ten years later "Reflections as Myth" was published in *Dialectical Anthropology* in 1995 (V.20: 45-69). In this postscript to "Reflections: The Anthropological Muse", I collaborated with a number of graduate students at Carleton University to extend the postmodernist concern with the other to the pedagogic tradition of how we teach and communicate with students. The other in this instance is not the ethnographic other but the gifted students we have the privilege to teach and learn from. In a graduate class on Sign and Symbol I gave the students an exercise. It was to take one poem from each section of "Reflections", to treat the collection as myth and express what their chosen sequence signified. I was exceedingly impressed with their insights and analyses, and they made me realize that I should explicate my intent in putting "Reflections" together and furthermore they strongly hinted that I should more clearly elaborate my views of mythology and postmodernism. "Reflections as Myth" was created from their insistence, and I am grateful that Derek Blair, Lee Grigas and Olaf Krassnitzky stayed on my "case", as it were,

until the project was completed. Chapter 4 - "*Reflections as Myth*" - is an excerpt from the wider collaboration, which I would recommend to the reader, and with it is attached my thanks to a gifted trio of students. In Chapter 4 I articulate my intentions behind "Reflections: The Anthropological Muse" and place it firmly within postmodern dialogue.

This placement is further elaborated on in Chapter 5 - "*Reflexive Anthropology*" - which was published in the Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology in 1995. I take the concerns and implications of anthropological poetics and "pump-up-the-volume" by taking them to a higher level of generality. The discussion of reflexive levels is part of the process of re-evaluating what we do as scholars, in universities, public life and the field, and I delineate in more detail the exploitative relationship inherent in modernist anthropology. The pitfalls of this kind of endeavor are discussed in Chapter 6 - "*Opening Ourselves up to the Voyage of Anthropological Practice*". This work was co-authored with Derek Blair and published in "Merging Trajectories, New Horizons", a reader edited by Derek Blair and Bruce Cox, published by Carleton University Press in 1996. Blair's introduction to this chapter in the 1996 reader points out that our essay begins with a discussion of Logos and Eros as two epistemes. Logos is the realm of science and logic, while Eros is the realm of affective imagery and symbols. We argue that the rational stance of science does not make it a superior episteme, and demonstrate from recent ethnographic literature that extraordinary field experiences constitute valid data. Part of the thrust of the argument is the recognition that anthropologists have a lot to gain by regarding their cultural counterparts as other aspects of the reality that they themselves are constituted of. Derek Blair and I refer to this as "universal similarism" in our 1994 work, "Exploitation in the Field", published in a special edition of Anthropology and Humanism (Vol. 19, 1) edited by Edith Turner and Ivan Brady.

I begin the third movement - III. Process and Form - with Chapter 7 - "*Celtic Festivals and Bilingualism Policy: The Barra Feis*". This essay examines the symbolic significance of a Gaelic festival on the island of Barra, in the Western Isles of Scotland. It was published in "A Different Drummer" (Cox et alia, 1990), and demonstrates the cathartic effect of traditional symbolic values for cultural and economic transformation in the island community. The revival, presentation and internalization of these values was through the Barra Feis - a summer festival and year-round commitment to the Gaelic performing arts. I establish

the pre-conditions for this kind of transformation by emphasizing minority language bilingualism as a major factor that reinforced a sense of cultural identity. This reverses the usual equation about community development, economics and culture, which has a primary focus on class relations of political economy. I replace this focus with the consideration that cultural symbols, and their reinforcement, can operate as a catalyst not only for community solidarity but also for economic and political change.

Then I examine two instances of mythic enactment, sacred dance and shamanism, before writing a chapter on underlying process (Chapters 8, 9 and 10 respectively). I have always been fascinated with cultures that dance their myths, recognizing that here was a ritual process of transformation, deeply rooted in a culture's mythology and traditions. In Chapter 8 - "*Sacred Dance and Cultural Bridges*" - I analyze sacred dance as mythic enactment, a process that produces a cycle of meaning between symbolic form (choreography) and symbolic structures contained in the human unconscious and the body. My assumption is that mythology provides the blueprint for the ritual performance to root itself in individual consciousness. I make a direct correlation between the precision of movement and sound in sacred dance and entry into an altered state of consciousness. Considerations of ritual preparation and breath control are taken through a brief discussion of shamanic and classical Hindu cultures to develop a model for my on-going collaboration with a modern dance group, as it moves from the secular to the sacred domain of expression. At the end of this essay I return to problems of research methodology in terms of the post modernist concern with respecting the voice of the "other", which may well result in anticipated research endeavors being abandoned.

In Chapter 9 - "*Death Breaths and Drivers*" - I move the focus of mythic enactment from sacred dance to shamanism. In this piece of research I rely on my own phenomenology of working with shamans to arrive at a data base that explicates a model of healing. The emphasis on breathwork in the preceding chapter - "*Sacred Dance and Cultural Bridges*" - is expanded in the discussion of shamanic practises to describe the use of "Death Breaths" as a driver to simulate near death experiences, thus enabling entry into an altered state of consciousness. I code the various forms of the shamanic journey in this state as a dialogue with archetypal material that accelerates the individuation process. From the result of fieldwork

experiences with shamans and my participation in the healing and meditative arts over the past fifteen years, I derive a healing structure designed around the principles of safety, sacredness and personal responsibility.

In Chapter 10 - "*Metaphor, Vibration and Form*" - I move from the particulars of cultural festivals, sacred dance and shamanism to the general, to identify a process that I believe underlies all ritual enactment. Whether it is Joseph Campbell's analysis of the Hero's journey (1969), Victor Turner's theoretical and experiential interest in symbols (1974), or Charles Laughlin's cycle of meaning (1995) to mention only a few scholars, there is at work a particular kind of behavioral modification system. It begins with the mind and the meanings provided metaphorically for symbols, then proceeds to an intense focus on symbolic sequences in meditation or in ritual dramas so that the metaphor is taken into the body as physical experience. From this physical "ownership" and experience of the metaphor, the properties associated with it are encouraged, socially and ritually, to come to the surface and be enacted in the form of everyday behavior. I outline instances where this process works and where it does not.

In the fourth movement, IV. Paradigms, Chapter 11 - "*Science and Sages: A Small Matter of Paradigms*" - discusses the bias and distortion in science in terms of a paradigm shift that is necessary to expand scientific self awareness. (It may also support the radical shifts of emphasis in my own work!) In this essay I discuss the limitations and constraints of science as presently constituted in order to set the stage for the study of the interpenetration of physical and metaphysical properties of matter. I use this joint configuration to arrive at a different understanding of mantra - in particular the OM mantra, and then advocate a radically different perspective on the biology of the cell. Throughout this discussion there is an emphasis on meditation practices as the means to encourage scientific endeavor to shift into a more comprehensive level of explanation and understanding.

In the finale - V. Gaia and the Environment - are two essays that take the implications of my discussion of science into the arena of environmental issues. Chapter 12 - "*Issues of Inner Ecology*" - draws on the work of Rachel Carson, the Buddha and statements of traditional ecological knowledge. The role of human consciousness with respect to

environmental issues emphasizes attitude and value shifts and brings the spiritual dimension onto centre stage. In Chapter 13 - *"Myth, Meditation and Transformation of Consciousness"* - I acknowledge that the metaphysics of environmental issues attracts a great deal of skepticism particularly about the burden of proof. Mythology, however, provides a metaphorical means to support an argument about consciousness transformation with respect to the human-environment equation. I examine the Tree of Life myths as they provide a world wide template for human-planet-universe relationships and direct attention to the nature of balance. As an antidote to a maladaptive inner ecology I form a triad of meditation, the Dalai Lama and the Little Prince to support an argument about congruence and clarity.

With these final two essays I return full circle to the concerns of Chapter 1 - *"Man and Metaphor"*. In the first essay of this volume I examined human adaptive capacities from the perspective of structuralism. I found Lévi-Strauss' *"Science de l'Homme"* lacking because it was an inadequate tool to address the question of human consciousness. This very same human consciousness becomes the key actor in Chapters 12 and 13 concerning Gaia and the Environment. The finale of this composition thus returns to the opening themes of human adaptability but plays it out with a crescendo of consciousness, more in keeping with Joseph Campbell's music of the spheres (1990) than with Lévi-Strauss' *"View from Afar"* (1985).

## Bibliography

- Brady, I.  
1991 Anthropological Poetics. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield
- Blair, D. and B. Cox  
1996 Merging Trajectories, New Horizons: Anthropology from the Capital. Ottawa: Carleton University Press
- Campbell, J.  
1969 The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- 1990 Transformations of Myth Through Time. N.Y.: Harper and Row
- Cox, B., J. Chevalier and  
V. Blundell  
1990 A Different Drummer: Readings in Anthropology with a Canadian Perspective. Ottawa: Carleton University Press
- Husserl, E.  
1970 The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, (translated by David Carr). Evanston: Northwestern University Press
- Jung, C.  
1957 Animus and Anima. N.Y.: Analytical Psychology Club of New York
- 1968 Concerning the Archetypes, with Special Reference to the Anima Concept. In The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. Princeton: Princeton University Press (Collected Works No. 9)
- Laughlin, C.D.  
1995 The Cycle of Meaning: Some Methodological Implications of Biogenetic Structural Theory. In S. Glazier (ed): Anthropology of Religion: Handbook of Theory and Method. Greenwood Press
- Lévi-Strauss, C.  
1985 A View from Afar. N.Y.: Basic Books
- Prattis, J.I.  
1984 Man and Metaphor: An Exploration in Entropy and Coherence. Communication and Cognition, Vol. 17, No. 2/3, pp. 187-204
- 1985 Dialectics and Experience in Fieldwork: The Poetic Dimension. In I. Prattis (ed): Reflections: The Anthropological Muse. Washington D.C.: American Anthropological Association

- 1990 Celtic Festivals and Bilingualism Policy: The Barra Feis. In B. Cox  
at alia (eds): A Different Drummer. Ottawa: Carleton University  
Press
- 1991 Parsifal and Semiotic Structuralism. In I. Brady (ed):  
Anthropological Poetics. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield
- 1995 Reflexive Anthropology. In The Encyclopedia of Cultural  
Anthropology. New Haven: H.R.A.F., American Reference  
Publishing Company Inc.
- Prattis, J.I. and D. Blair  
1994 Exploitation in the Field. Anthropology and Humanism, Vol. 19, 1.
- 1996 Opening Ourselves up to the Voyage of Anthropological Practise.  
In D. Blair and B. Cox (eds): Merging Trajectories, New Horizons:  
Anthropology from the Capital. Ottawa: Carleton University Press
- Prattis, J. I., D. Blair,  
L. Grigas and O. Krassnitzky  
1995 "Reflections" as Myth. Dialectical Anthropology, Vol. 20, 1,  
pp. 45-69
- Turner, V.  
1974 Dramas, Fields and