
UNIT 11 SYMBOLIC AND INTERPRETIVE APPROACH*

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Objectives

In this unit you will learn about:

- how is culture a symbolic behaviour;
- Evolution of symbolic behaviour in Homo Sapiens;
- Classification of symbols and symbolic behaviour; and
- Some classical anthropological works on symbolism.

11.0 INTRODUCTION

That I am writing this unit that will be read by students are acts based on our ability for symbolic behaviour that sets humans apart from all other animal species. Only the human brain has the capacity for analogic behaviour or ability to think beyond immediate and obvious correlations. Humans alone have the ability to classify a diversity of objects and actions into abstracted, analogic categories and to communicate using a complex and interrelated system of symbols we call language. Just imagine how difficult or impossible communication would be if there was no language, and also the almost unconscious process of classification that language entails. Whenever we are talking to each other, we continue to use, not reference to specific objects and actions, but to classes of objects and actions; for example, 'the boy is running'; uses two broad categories, that of boy, an object, and running, that is an action. If you just reflect (another peculiarly Homo Sapiens ability), you will realise that almost all words we use refer to classes and not to specifics, of any kind. In this unit we shall discuss the evolution of symbolic behaviour in human culture and how this work has been looked at by the anthropologists through their works on symbolic behaviour and interpretation.

11.1 WHAT IS A SYMBOL?

The most basic requirement of a symbol is that it should have a material existence, that is, must be grasped by the senses. It is also suspended in a web of meanings

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that constitutes a culture. A symbol is not a stand-alone entity, it connects to other symbols and may also have different meanings in different contexts. It signifies and stands for relationships that have meaning in their social and cultural context. Symbols can be used metaphorically as well. It is not possible to understand the significance of any symbol if one is not well versant with the cultural milieu in which it is produced. Let us take for example, a '*raakhi*', that can be a simple thread, or an elaborate ornament, but what is symbolised is a relationship contextualised within a broader culture, namely the bond between brother and sister in South Asia. It may even cut across religions, but is definitely regional. Also, symbolism has deeper reverberations, it has mythology and folk lore that surrounds it. It also has emotional and historical significance and is well publicised in popular media and literature. But most importantly, it is meaningful to all who live or have familiarity with the culture.

Culture is not just an interconnected network of symbols, but of the meanings that lie behind them. The brother and sister relationship that the *raakhi* symbolises is embedded in a culture where kinship ties are very important. Society is patriarchal so that sisters do not inherit the family resources. Since brothers inherit, they are under moral obligation to support the sister. Here we are talking about a social significance as well as the primacy of certain types of relationships in particular regions. Again, these relationships and social significations may also be tied to ecological and economic dimensions, to historical conditions and sometimes extraordinary circumstances. For example, the Nuer, a pastoral community, studied by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1940), had a culture that revolved totally around their cattle. Their daily routines and their sacred cosmology were rooted in their relationship to their environment, that was mediated by their dependence on their cattle as a mode of livelihood. For the Nuer then, the cattle provided the base for most of their symbols and metaphors and one could understand the Nuer culture through their cattle symbolisms alone. A major catastrophe like the Second World War, created its own corpus of symbols and meanings. For most of the western world, the Swastika, for example signifies evil, suffering and racism; unlike its sacred meaning for the Hindus.

Symbols are in a very basic and simple way, representations, but not necessarily actually representing what they stand for. The relationship between what is represented (the signified) and what represents (the signifier); is highly arbitrary and complex. Semiotics, as the study of symbols is attributed to the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1931-35), defined as the study of 'Signs'. A sign is anything that conveys a meaning. The generalised category of 'sign' can be further subdivided into:

- a) 'Index': The signified has an associational relationship to signifier; for example, certain numbers are often projected as an index of growth, in other words, these numbers have an association with a process called growth, in whatever way it is defined. When we take body temperature, the movement of the mercury in the thermometer has an association with, or is an index of body temperature that in turn is an index of health. Therefore, symbols are not isolated but related to larger associational relationships with other systems and symbols.
- b) 'Icons', that have a physical resemblance to what they stand for, like the image of a deity, or something that resembles the deity, or thing that is represented. Icon can also be used for a person or thing with a symbolic association to something that it resembles or represents, like we can say Sachin Tendulkar is an icon of cricket.

- c) 'Symbol', where the meaning is totally arbitrary, like in a language, the association of certain sounds with certain objects is totally arbitrary.

However, for the linguist, Ferdinand Saussure, 'signs' is arbitrary and symbols have an association with the object they represent. In anthropology, symbols are used in the way they have been described by Clifford Geertz and others, as systems of meanings, culturally ascribed. Firth, who tried to apply Peirce's definitions in anthropology, found that it was difficult to abide by Peirce's classification as in actual application, meanings differed, as cultural meanings are contextual, shifting as contexts change. The same symbol or attribute may be interpreted differently by different actors and by same actor, differently in a different context. For example, to a devotee, an image may not be an icon, but a real person and he or she may relate to it as such. Meanings that symbols have are not inherent in them or in any quality that they may have. These are attribute to them by the relationships that people have to them and to each other. These meanings are experienced emotionally in a situation of social interaction, like the feelings of sibling love that is evoked when a piece of thread is tied by a sister on her brother's hand. There is nothing in the thread or in the persons of the brother and sister that evokes such a sentiment, yet it is evoked by the cultural interpretation and the myth and ceremony that surrounds the social interaction.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What is a symbol?

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- 2) What is a sign?

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- 3) Give the subdivisions of signs.

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11.2 EVOLUTION OF SYMBOLIC BEHAVIOUR IN HOMO SAPIENS

The earliest evidence of human culture is their tool making behaviour that began from the middle Palaeolithic onwards and is evidenced in the form of stones, flaked to form tools. As Foster (1994: 383) has pointed out, the making of tools involves a pre-conceptualisation, a plan, a design, that is only possible through a well- formed cognitive ability. According to Wynn (1979: 383) the Acheulian period tool makers exhibited the capacity for whole-part relations, spatio-temporal substitution, symmetry and other such capacities that indicate that their mental organisational ability was no less than that of modern humans. In other words, they achieved what any modern human would have, given the same resources and technological know-how. There is evidence from the Acheulian times of markings on stone that are deliberate representations like drawings indicating alreadyemerged creative or art making ability, that is the most salient expression of analogic thinking. Art is a way of representing ideas that exist in the mind of the artist to the others in her or his group. What is chosen to be depicted and the manner in which it is depicted depends upon the culture from which the relevance of the symbols is drawn. For example, the graphic drawings found inside caves in the pre-historic times often used only some part of an animal to depict the entire animal, which means that the others in that culture were able to recognize the animal from that part and also that particular aspect of the animal was considered to be important at the level of the collective. Like if a reindeer was depicted by its horns, then it must be a symbol that was recognized at the group level, and hence culturally derived. Palaeolithic art is mostly representative of animal symbols, mostly in motion. It also indicates that humans were more interested in the action or process rather than in the objects in a static manner.

As theorised by Mary Douglas (1982), much of cultural symbolism, is derived from the human body or from nature itself. The earliest representations, even in the sacred texts, derive from the body. The Hindu Varna system for example, is rooted in body symbolism, with the different varna, seen as originating from different parts of the body of the cosmic being, Purusa. Douglas uses the term Natural Symbols, to designate this paradigm. However, she makes it clear that even when arising from the body, the systems of symbols vary over societies and are coded by the community that has a common social experience, derived from a shared history. They appear natural only because the social origins are obscured in the past. However, from this assumption of deeper community origins of symbols it also follows that similar communities, with perhaps similar histories, may give rise to similar natural symbols, as nature, including the human body remains a common factor for all societies. As societies change, their values change and some symbols can be rejected, as the authority that backed up the meaning of that particular symbol, is no longer seen as legitimate. Therefore, Douglas considers symbols as capable of change in their meanings or becoming redundant altogether, if the social context in which they had meaning, no longer exist. For example, with the advent of modernity, the symbolism of the varna system is no longer acceptable, in fact few young people are even aware of it.

A positivist and highly generalised theory of symbols is given by Lévi-Strauss (1963) who associated the roots of symbols to the universal structure of the human mind. Lévi-Strauss devoted much of his scholarship to show how the binary

oppositional character of the human mind is expressed in different system of symbols, differently organised in various cultures, but which can all be reduced to an essential dualistic character of the mind's cognitive abilities. Put more simply the human mind cognises things in terms of their opposite, like for example light can only be understood in terms of its opposition, dark. A symbolic system like Totemism, to Lévi-Strauss, offers a system of coding, in terms of a dialectical process of understanding to understand relationships and basic structural principles of society like marriage and kinship.

Check Your Progress2

4) What is the earliest evidence of human culture?

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5) Who used the term Natural Symbol?

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6) Who associated the roots of symbols to the universal structure of the human kind?

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11.3 CLASSIFICATION OF SYMBOLS AND SYMBOLIC BEHAVIOUR

Mary Douglas (1982) comments that since all communication depends on symbols, they can be classified variously. Symbols can be single referents or multi-referents, they can have single meanings or be polysemic (having multiple meanings), they can be very diffuse to very condensed. Turner's work on the Ndembu (1968) is a classic example of condensed symbols, symbols where a single signifier condenses a multitude of referents, encompassing entire cosmologies and associated social organisations and value systems. The Ndembu of Zambia have a society of strong descent groups as well as local groups, that

are horizontally stratified by age groups and cult groups. The Ndembu have a system of colour classifications drawn from nature and inscribed on the human body. They believe there are active principles, or life forces within the human body with different colour codes, black bile, red blood and white milk. They find analogous colours in nature in the sap of the milk tree, black clay and red resins and black of charred wood. These colours are used in a complex display in rituals and body decorations to encapsulate the cosmological principles that integrate the human with the environment and the supernatural world. They also integrate the social world with the cosmos. Turner's (1968) work on ritual and colour symbolism are considered classics of symbolic studies.

Ruth Benedict's work *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1934), set the trend to look for the symbols that would be representative of the core values and themes of any culture. Benedict had identified the chrysanthemum and the sword as the two key elements for the understanding of Japanese national character. Inspired by her work, David Schneider (1968), in his analysis of American Kinship also identifies the two "core" and opposed symbols of kinship in America as nature and law; both of which he finds is expressed in the marriage or conjugal bond. For Americans, the conjugal bond, which is a legal bond between two unrelated individuals is realized in the sexual relationship that begets children, a natural phenomenon that creates the primary blood relations of parents and children and of siblings. All other relations are derivatives of these and express the same logic of differentiation of blood and law. What Schneider calls 'core' symbols are referred to as 'dominant symbols' by Victor Turner and Key Symbols by Sherry Ortner.

In her article in the *American Anthropologist* (1972: 1338-1346), Ortner defines what she calls Key Symbols as certain objects, themes or stories among other possibilities that expresses the most core values and goals of a culture. She has even given a methodology by which to identify the key symbols of a culture and for which she gives five indicators; namely, they are mentioned as culturally important by the people bearing that culture, they arouse emotions, both positive or negative, but are rarely dismissed with indifference, they keep reappearing in many different contexts, are referred to and represented in many ways, there are narratives and cultural elaborations around them and they are also subject to taboos and restrictions. All key symbols are in the public domain for they are collectively shared. Anthropological literature indicates that key symbols can be anything from animals, practices, folktales and narratives, religious and secular symbols like the national flag and dominant religious icons like the Christian cross, the Buddhist chakra and the Hindu 'Om'.

Ortner further classifies the Key Symbols into a continuum from Summarising to Elaborate, while actually focussing on the two ends. Summarising encapsulate multiple ideas and emotions that represents to the members of that society, some theme or themes, most pertinent and relevant to them, which form the core of their existence and therefore are capable of provoking intense emotions and actions. For those who consider the nation as a core aspect of their lives, the national flag is a key symbol that evokes all the themes that the nation means for them, like unity, identity, sacrifice and patriotism. Most religious key symbols evoke the entire cosmological principles of that religion, like the Om for the Hindus, the prayer wheel or Chakra for the Buddhists and so on. Summarising symbols perform a synthesis of ideas and emotions and a single object or action can therefore trigger a multitude of emotions, even actions.

The Elaborating symbols are those that deconstruct the complex and dense themes to make them more comprehensible and communicable, and easier to follow. They are marked by their recurrent appearance in various aspects of daily life and do not command the high emotion and focus of the summarizing symbols. They are necessary for successful social interactions and for the manoeuvring of daily life.

These elaborating symbols can further be divided into Root Metaphors and Key Scenarios. While the former is oriented towards thought, that is provides the cognitive orientations, the latter provides the cues for action, like a screen play or script. While the first help people understand the world around them in terms of comprehension and analysis the latter tells them what to do and under what circumstances. From the root metaphors one can identify the unifying principle underlying a variety of experiences and also see the reflection of these experiences in the metaphor itself. For example, cattle provide the root metaphor for the Dinka, who use them to classify and understand other aspects of their world, like colour classification, time schedules and seasons, aesthetics and visual experiences and so on. The latter are roadmaps for action. An apt example of a key scenario in India is the enactment of the Ramlila, where all the actions appropriate for various categories of kin and also other status holders in society are elaborated as ideal son, ideal husband, ideal wife, ideal brother and so on. These are also frequently alluded to in daily conversation and narratives; like for example if someone oversteps any restrictions it is referred to as overstepping the 'Lakshman Rekha' and devotion is idealised as equivalent to that of Hanuman, and brotherly duty as that of Lakshman. Thus, most Hindus find a guideline for future action in this script that is a key scenario par excellence.

Check Your Progress3

7) Whose work is a classic example of condensed symbols?

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8) Name the two key elements in Ruth Benedict's work used to define the Japanese National character?

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9) Who used the term core symbol?

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10) Victor Turner referred to Schneider’s ‘core symbols’ as ——?

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11) Whose work deals with ‘key symbols’? Identify some key symbols.

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11.4 SOME CLASSICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL WORKS ON SYMBOLIC AND INTERPRETIVE APPROACH

Mary Douglas (1982) has devoted herself to analysing whether symbols are just expressive, in a neutral sort of way or whether they actually act upon the social situation to produce effects that may vary from society to society. Ritualism, is defined as an empty symbol, that has no meaning but is enacted only as a routine, as a habit by people in society, who otherwise have no inner connect with what they are doing. For example, many people perform a daily ritual of worship, more as a routine and as a deference to received traditions. They adhere to given rules and regulations of performance of the rituals and are more attentive to these details than to their emotional responses or even to the idea of divinity or some entity for which the ritual is being performed. In other words, the ritual, that has no ostensible function, is in itself taken as efficacious, if performed correctly and is therefore a powerful symbol in itself.

On the other hand, there are groups and communities who perform rituals with no such rigidity, not bothering about rules but about the emotional and devotional content. For example, she quotes from the ethnography of David Aberle (1966) that the traditional Navajo, were highly ritualistic, they believed that they must follow all the rules and regulations of performance of rituals, they believed in supernatural sanctions for the breach of taboos and rules of performance of rituals. The pre-colonised Nahavo were closely knit community with close cooperation and unity between matrilineal kinsmen, who had strong mutual support systems with strong sanctions against any kind of disruption. People feared the breaking of rules, not because they thought in terms of morality and values, but because they were scared of the consequences of such a breach, that would primarily lead to and which ultimately was a breach in social order. In this way her analysis follows that of Durkheim, who had first pointed to the social functions of rituals. However, under colonisation, the Navaho, moved away from their origin systems of social control, when the Americans took over the legal and political roles,

earlier performed by their close-knit clan organizations. They lost most of their livelihood of sheep herding and the cooperation of kin groups for tending and grazing sheep was also gone. They were attacked by disease and loneliness in the reservations and suffered socially, culturally and emotionally. Most of the Navajo then switched to the Peyote cult, that involved a direct communion with the divinity or supernatural, through smoking of an intoxicant plant. Here there were no strict adherence to codes and to formal ritualism, but a loosely structured, spontaneous and personalised form of communication, that was beyond rules and based on emotions and faith. The ritualist symbolic system here was now weak and did not exert any control. Douglas extends the discussion to include other groups like the Bantu and the pygmies, who live in close association with each other but have very different lifeways and social organization. Studied by Turnbull (1961) in the Ituri forest, the pygmies are a classic study of a hunting food gathering band. From a comparison of the two, the agricultural Bantu with permanent village settlements have strong ritualistic behaviour, are bound by many rules and follow strict procedures for performance of their rituals, whereas the pygmies, who have loosely structured bands and wander around for hunting and food gathering with a strong emphasis on individuality in their culture, have no rituals to speak of. They relate to their environment with inner faith and beliefs that are more personalized than group oriented. Douglas then concludes, "that the most important determinant of ritualism is the experience of closed social groups. The man who has that experience associates boundaries with power and danger" (1982:14), the opposite happens with groups with weak boundaries who then place less emphasis on ritualism and are likely to be more individualistic. Also, as she points out in the case of the Bog Irish and the English churchmen in London, the marginalized and disadvantaged are more likely to depend on their own ritualism for comfort and support while the better placed have more universalistic and individualistic values.

Since symbolism is at the base of all human behaviour, there cannot be any ethnographic possibility without referring to some symbols or symbolic actions. One cannot for example describe any ritual or any life cycle ceremony or religious structure, without describing its symbolic meaning, what they mean to the members of that culture. Edmund Leach's article 'Magical Hair' (1958) has received much attention, as he tried to combine psychoanalytical and anthropological theories about the body. As we have seen earlier, body symbolism is a core of symbolic theory. The body symbolism also provides a common ground to explain similarities of symbolic expression across cultures. Leach had written his article following upon the publication by Berg (1951) linking shaving and hair cutting of the males to symbolic castration and the libidinous association of hair with sexuality as a recurrent theme across cultures. In his article Leach comes to the conclusion that in ritual terms long hair signifies uncontrolled sexuality, short, tightly bound hair signifies restricted sexuality and shaven hair, celibacy. In many religions but not in all, monks shave their hair, men generally keep their hair short and even if kept long, it is bound.

In later analysis Leach (1976) has described the ritual symbolisms of time; how certain annual rituals keep time and allow for the cosmological reckonings of the cycles of the universe. He theorised that time is not measured as a continuity, as a linear phenomenon that is irreversible, but in terms of intervals marked by symbolic inversions, reversals from ordinary life. Take for example water running from a tap, instead of viewing it as a continuous stream, one can also visualise it

as one drop following another, so that there is a possibility of discontinuity between one drop and the next. Annual rituals often have masquerades, role reversals, and the flouting of social norms as an integral part of the performances and rituals. Such 'reversals' are actually marking of the intervals, so that one phase of time becomes separated from another to indicate that one phase is over and another is going to begin. Often it is the same phase and not another, that is time can be cyclical and reversible also.

Interpretive Approach

To understand interpretive approach, the student has to first refer to the work of Max Weber, to whom sociology was a comprehensive science of social action, but as Aaron (2020: 169) explains, the emphasis is on comprehension, by which Weber meant the meaning given to the action by the actor. Here he deviated significantly from the positivist approach, where any action was understood by the meaning given to it by the observer, or the anthropologist, like Turner's explanations of ritual symbolism. To Weber, one needs to understand the action in terms of the actor's frame of reference and also when we understand something as rational, it is again rational as per the knowledge of the performer. The interpretive approach therefore looks at and comprehends the world from the actor's point of view. He defined rational action both in terms of a goal, and in terms of a value, and there is always an interdependence of these aspects. For example, if we consider science to be rational, then the goal of science, is that of finding the truth, but this is rational only in relation to the value that the scientific person puts on truth; if it were not so, the goal would have been different. Therefore, the rationality of any action is dependent upon the value that is held by the actor. To give another example, the value of a religious person lies in the realm of the sacred, and therefore his or her action needs to be understood in relation to that value. If the value is in the realm of devotion, then the goal will be likewise and hence the action will be rational only in that context and not in that of science. Geertz took off from Weber's famous adage, that men are suspended in webs of significance of their own meanings, and developed the interpretive approach in anthropology.

The interpretive approach formed a bridge between the earlier positivist approach and the later post-modern approach, by bringing subjectivity into the analysis. It raised question regarding explanation, by questioning the possibility of a purely objective and externally situated analysis purely looked at from the point of view of the analyst. Geertz brought in a paradigmatic change in methodology by introducing the concept of thick ethnography. By this Geertz meant that the ethnographer cannot be an impartial observer, but must try to get into the mood and motivations of the people she is observing. His thick description of the Balinese Cock Fight is often given as an example of thick ethnography, where he tries to analyse, not the function of the cock fight, but the emotional and mental involvement of the participants, their rationale for action as looked at from their own perspective and the nuances of emotional play that occurs during the entire event. Geertz, following Weber, brought about a change in anthropological methodology, where the observed was equally involved within the framework of explanation. Culture was to be comprehended and not to be analysed. It was not important to know the instrumental or functional aspects of any action but its meaning and the role it played in the life of the actors.

According to Clifford Geertz (1973), while culture is a system of symbols, the different subsystems within a culture are marked by their own system of symbols, and the power of these symbols are linked to their motivational capacity. According to Geertz the most powerful symbols are those that lie in the realm of the sacred, as the sacred is the most esoteric of all cultural realms. To Geertz, to understand a culture, one needs to interpret the symbols, for which one needs a very deep understanding of the culture, possible only through what he calls as ‘thick ethnography’. The meaning of any behaviour is not manifested at the surface but is obtainable by both the subjective interpretation of the actor and the external contextualization within the broader meaning system of the culture that has to be ascertained through in- depth qualitative fieldwork. Without reference to the way the actors understand and interpret their actions, it is not possible to get a realistic understanding of any culture. Since meanings are internal to the culture, they can be accessed only through intensive interactions with the members of that culture. Symbols are not just systems of meanings, but they are also associated with deep seated emotions and may stimulate moods and motivations, especially those that are associated with the sacred realm. Thus, symbols can stimulate both a state of mind, what Geertz refers to as a mood, and motivation for actions. The powerful symbols are situated in the realm of the sacred as the sacred stimulates our inner most emotions and pushes us to cross boundaries. However, religion is not the only source of sacred symbols that can be rooted in other forms of non-rational behaviour like nationalism and ideology. For example, for the Communists, the Red Book is comparable to the Bible.

Check Your Progress 4

12) Discuss Mary Douglas work on symbolism.

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13) Explain Clifford Geertz’s ‘thick ethnography’.

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11.5 SUMMARY

Symbolism is a vast area covering a large part of anthropological research and theorization. Symbolism runs through all the various anthropological theories, each of them having analysed symbols within their own framework of theory and academic interest. Though more closely associated with the interpretative field, symbols have been analysed within the positivist framework as in the works

of Lévi-Strauss, Leach and Victor Turner and more interpretatively in the works of Geertz, Christine Hugh-Jones, Pierre Bourdieu, and others who have taken into account the intuitions and narratives of the informants into their analysis. While Lévi-Strauss and Leach have attempted a universal, generalised structuralist analysis, Turner, along with other functionalists like E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown have done symbolic analysis in the particularistic framework of unique cultures. The interpretative framework that takes into account the subjective interpretations of the actors and is done with an intense qualitative depth looks for meanings within the cognitive map of the culture itself.

For more theoretical discussions on symbolism the student can look up the works of Gluckmann (1962), Sperber (1974) and Wagner (1986), who have done pioneering work in the area of symbolism. Gluckmann had analysed the symbolic dimension of rituals. Symbolism remains a hall mark of anthropological analysis and has been used by theorists of all genre.

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11.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Refer to section 11.1
- 2) Refer to section 11.1
- 3) Refer to section 11.1
- 4) Refer to section 11.5
- 5) Mary Douglas
- 6) Lévi-Strauss
- 7) Victor Turner in his work on the Ndembu (1968)
- 8) Chrysanthemum and the sword as the two elements.
- 9) David Schneider
- 10) Dominant symbol
- 11) Sherry Ortner. For the second part of the question refer to section 11.3.
- 12) Refer to section 11.4
- 13) Refer to section 11.4