Nordic Journal of African Studies 1(1): 5–25 (1992)

Pits, Pots and Snakes - An Anthropological Approach to Ancient African Symbols[1]

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In the Eastern highlands of Zimbabwe, among the hills and valleys of the Nyanga mountains, you will come upon big, man-made pits whenever you walk from one homestead to the next. Every pit has the same size and shape. It is circular, with a diameter of eight meters. Its six-to-ten-feet-high walls are made up of big stones with a flat surface. You may enter the pit through a narrow, covered tunnel, if you go on your knees. Or you may jump down into it from the brim, where you sometimes can trace the foundations of former huts, with an equally circular shape. But before you enter, you should make sure that there are not any snakes down there. That is what the people who live among the pits always tell you.

These pits, which were built in the sixteen hundreds, have been intriguing the archaeologists for several generations.[2] Why were they constructed? What were they used for? To keep slaves? Goats? Pigs? Small cattle? And why did people go to so much trouble to build perfectly circular enclosures of heavy stones? Was it to make sure that their most valuable assets were not stolen?[3] These are some of the questions and answers that archaeologists have come up with.

Being a cultural anthropologist interested in cultural symbolism I am not always posing the same kinds of questions as the archaeologists do. Since I am doing my research among people who live today, and whom I can talk to and observe in their everyday activities, I find it a lot more interesting to try to find out what they think and feel, rather than to identify the practical functions of their material equipment. The questions I pose are concerned with meaning, rather than utility.

Or, maybe I should say that my questions are concerned with the moral and cultural messages that may be hidden in the shape of artifacts, and in the organization of space. But they are also concerned with the emotional messages that sometimes can be traced by the way people apply, modify, negotiate, or interpret the symbolic system of their culture.

With questions like these at the back of my mind, I am right now - during a second period of fieldwork in Manicaland - trying to explore the meanings of some of the symbols that seem to be at the very heart of the cultural heritage of the Shona peoples. One of these symbols is the *circular enclosure* - the one that has the shape of the Great Enclosure of the National monument of Zimbabwe, or that of the pit structure in Nyanga, or that of an ordinary, contemporary cooking hut as well.

Another core symbol in the Shona cultural heritage is, I feel, the *conical tower*. I am not only thinking of the huge conical tower that was constructed just inside the long, narrow entrance at the eastern part of the Great Enclosure, some 800 years ago. I am also referring to the many different versions of conical towers that I can see in contemporary Shona homesteads, or in their vicinity. One is the male granary, the *duri*, which was built on a cliff or hill above the homestead as late as 30 years ago. Another is the phallic snuff container, which is kept in the cooking hut, close to the *chikuwa* (the combined pot shelf and family altar), to be used when the father of the homestead wants to get in touch with his ancestors.

A third symbol that has attracted my attention is the *snake*. I am referring to snakes in many different forms: the snakes that are supposed to dwell in the pits in Nyanga, and the snakes that you will find as a decoration around the neck of old clay pots as well. I also have a hunch that it is the same snakes that appear as decorations on the walls of the ancient stone enclosures, where they are called "chevron patterns". Maybe it is the same snakes that you sometimes find undulating on the wall around the cooking hut, when it has been properly painted. And - as I will argue in this article - it is even possible that it is the same snake that is supposed to bite the pregnant woman's uterus, when she is about to give birth.

But this snake is not only found around pits, pots and circular enclosures of different sorts. You can also see it undulating around the feet of the prime symbol of independence in Zimbabwe, that is, the so-called Zimbabwe bird. The prototype of the Zimbabwe bird is the stone sculpture that was found in four copies when Great Zimbabwe was "rediscovered" by European travellers in the late nineteenth century. These stone birds, each of which crowns a high pillar, are supposed to have been situated on top of the walls of the Great Enclosure.

When shown a picture of the Zimbabwe bird, any adult man or woman in Manicaland will identify it as an eagle that they call *chapungu*. When describing it they will say that it is "the bird who never drops a feather". Further, they say that it is *chapungu* that will come and flap its wings in order to punish the women who work on the land on a *chisi*-day (=the fifth day of the traditional week, which contains only four workdays).

The proud head and neck of this "authoritarian bird" are conjoined so as to represent the shape of a tower - another version of the conical tower. But this tower does not stand entirely free, on its own feet. There is a snake undulating around its legs. Hence, the snake seems to be embracing the round and the erect forms as well. What does it mean? Or rather, what do these *combinations of symbols* mean when related to each other?

These ancient core symbols appear to me like key words in a secret language. But they are not merely "works", that is, isolated entities with a lexical significance. Taken as isolated phenomena, I don't think that they confer any secret messages to the people who see them, use them or talk about them. Possibly, some might regard them as simple icons, for instance by associating the conical tower with a phallic form. But an icon is not a symbol. A symbol bespeaks

a complex concept or emotion, rather than just duplicating another object.[4] And, generally, it is not until several icons or metaphors are combined that any symbolic meaning will emerge. When viewed in relation to each other, the metaphors will form a symbolic language, with a structure and a syntax of its own.

LEARNING A SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE

To learn the symbolic language of a culture is a process that may be compared to that of learning a spoken language. If you grow up in the culture concerned, you don't have to reflect upon the structure of its language - nor upon the meanings, syntax, or phonology of that language. The *symbolic* language of a culture is learned pretty much the same way. Also, although any language adheres to its particular rules and structure, there are ample opportunities for any individual to improvise, or to develop his own adaptations according to his own experiences, and to the situation at hand. Inheriting a culturally shared symbolic language does not imply that people think as automatons. Rather, just as with the verbal language, the culturally inherited symbolic language provides the means for sharing and expressing the personal experiences of individual human beings.

To the foreigner, the learning of a culturally institutionalized, symbolic language is a more difficult task. You cannot look up the "words", that is, the metaphors, in any known dictionary - whether you try with Freud, Jung or something else. And you cannot try to borrow any of your familiar grammars - whether composed by Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, or somebody else. You have got to learn it like a child, who is interacting face-to-face with its teachers. This means that you have to sit down, right in the centre of the social life, in that same, small world where a child learns his culture.

In the context of the Shona peoples in general, and in that of the Manyika in particular, this centre is the cooking hut that is found in every rural homestead. There, you will have to listen and to observe, until you notice that certain key metaphors tend to pop up over and over again, like key words in a language. You will have to follow the winding paths of these metaphors, and try to identify what kinds of situations they seem to apply to, and you have to notice how they shift meanings according to context.

Now, if this is the way an anthropologist learns about the meanings of the symbolic system of a foreign culture - how could such an approach help an archaeologist? How can the understanding of the symbolic system in a contemporary culture help us to understand the past? The answer to that question depends to a certain extent upon how we look upon the relationship between culture and society, and what kind of theoretical perspective we apply when talking about cultural continuity and social change.

I will return to these issues by the end of this paper, and part of the argument of it will be that we need to revise some of the "grand theories" of social and

cultural change. Instead of only focusing on what happens in "the big world" of social and political macro-structures, we need to pay more attention to what happens in "the small world" of social micro-structures, before we approach the issue of cultural continuity and social change.

But before I embark upon these theoretical issues, I would like to share with you some of the labour and doubts and hunches and experiences that I have had while trying to approach an understanding of the symbolic system constituted by the relationship between the enclosure, the tower, the snake - and the bird.

PUBLIC ORDER AND PRIVATE SECRETS

The process of interpretation has been a long one, and it is not yet finished. It all started about seven years ago, when I first arrived in Zimbabwe, in order to carry out fieldwork in the Eastern highlands. I spent eight months in Manicaland, mainly working in some villages in Mutasa district. With the help of a research assistant and a tape recorder, I collected ethnographic information in a quite efficient way - from a superficial point of view. I asked all those usual practical questions about everyday life - the "utility questions": "How do you cook? How do you plant? What do you plant and when? Where is the man's field? Where is the woman's garden? Why is the woman's field always situated so low down? Where does the woman keep her clay pots, her mortar, her grinding stone? Where are the man's utensils? Why are they so high up?

The answers to all such questions tended to be just as practical as the answers an archaeologist tends to find when he is analyzing his hard data. The woman's field is situated low down in the valley, because there she will be close to the well or the river, and can easily fetch water. The man's fields are high up because he cultivates grain that thrives high up where it is drier. The woman's pots are placed low down because she needs them frequently, and can easily reach them that way. The man's weapons are placed higher up, because he does not need them so often. Besides, he is "higher" than the woman, isn't he?

Even questions about religion and rain ceremonies were answered along the same practical lines: "We have rain ceremonies in order to get rain". Or: "We pray to our ancestors in order for them to help our sons to find a job." Or: "I use this snuff container when I pray, because otherwise my dead father would not listen."

But beyond these practical answers, I soon found that something else was at stake. Maybe not in the sense that people were consciously hiding a deeper truth. They did not even seem to be conscious about any hidden meanings at all. But as I saw how certain principles were repeated over and over again, like a recurrent theme in a symphony, I began to focus on those principles. One such principle was, for instance, the issue of "high" and "low". The women's gardens were "low", the men's fields "high". The woman's pots were kept in a low place, the man's weapons in a "high" place. The woman's granary was situated "low" in the

homestead, while the crumbling remnants of the deceased father's granary were high up, on the cliff above the homestead.

I also saw that the same principles seemed to imbue the ideas of the ancestor cult, at least the more "official" part of it, which is concerned with the chief's ancestors, who are supposed to be responsible for the rain. The chief's ancestors were said to dwell in the sky, from where they would let the rain fall, if properly approached. They were generally referred to as "fathers", that is, men who had produced children. When I was alone with some women, they would even go further and tell me that in order to become an ancestor who gives rain, the man must be potent when he dies. They would also tell me that the crucial point of the rain ceremonies was when the women of the royal clan were performing sexually exciting dancing and singing on the top of the ancestral mountain, thereby inspiring their fathers in the sky to let the rain fall.

As a contrast to these rainmaking fathers in the sky, people would often tell stories about female spirits dwelling low down, below the surface of the earth, in the pools and wells. Almost everybody had some story to tell about the *nzuzu* - the beautiful lady in the pool, who would entice somebody to come close, in order to draw him down to the pool. There, she would offer him horrible food for some time. The food was said to be black, bitter and rotten, or "mud, worms and raw fish". But if the victim politely accepted that food for some time and obeyed the woman, he would then get wonderful white food - rice and all sorts of delicacies. At last the woman would let him swim up to the surface of the pool, where he would suddenly find himself lying on a reed mat, born again, to a new life.

In this symbolic language I could feel two different levels of meanings. One that was concerned with the social order - whatever was male and superior was located high up, whereas whatever was female and inferior was located low down. The other level was, I felt vaguely, one that was concerned with some early experiences of the child. I could perceive an oedipal theme there - the royal ladies exciting their fathers in heaven. I could also perceive the theme of loss of the early paradise, and the ambiguous mother, who is both good and evil. As I went deeper in my conversations with the elderly women and asked them about breastfeeding and weaning, I thought that I could see the logic of the story of the mermaid. The women told me that they had been breastfeeding their children until 18 or 24 months, while avoiding intercourse with their husbands. During all that time, they had been sleeping with the child, and keeping it close to the body day and night. But then, at a certain point, when the wife had agreed with her husband to "open the ears of the child", that is, to resume sexual intercourse, she had smeared her nipples with chilipepper and weaned the child from one day to the next. At the same time, the happy days close to the mother were gone. The time was ripe for the child to learn how to behave, and to obey, these old mothers told me: "When the child is taken away from the breast and from its mother's back, he must learn to know *tsika* (= respect, good manners) and to *kuteera* (= to listen, to obey)".

The good mother would thus be transformed overnight. Transformed from the indulgent, attentive woman "who gives white food", while holding her child close

to her body day and night, into a strict, distant lady who gives orders and bitter food - bitter and black like whatever is evil and aggressive.

The phantasy of a woman who drags her victim down into a pool is not peculiar to the Shona, though. More than twenty years ago, the development psychologist Margaret Mahler found the same fantasy prevailing among American children who had been kept in what she calls "a parasitic symbiosis" by possessive mothers. These mothers had been nursing their child for two or three years, more to satisfy their own needs than those of the child. Mahler's conclusion was that the fantasy portrayed the "reengulfing" mother, who deprived her child of the opportunity of a gradual development of individual independence, or "individuation" (Mahler 1970).

When I was listening to the stories about the Shona mermaid, the *nzuzu*, Mahler's research struck me as a relevant point of comparison. Yet, I felt that this aspect of the Shona imagery of "low women" was too well integrated in a coherent system of symbols to be reduced to a mere childhood experience, which maybe was not even shared by all. I realized that the feared mother in the pool did not only represent an emotional contrast to the revered father in the sky. The two figures also formed a couple - a pair of systematically juxtaposed symbols of how female and male relate to each other as a matter of principle. This principle was displayed in the spatial symbolism of everyday social life and production, and in the official aspects of the religious cult as well - that is, the cult of the royal ancestors.

Thus the high/low principle of social and religious order seemed to be culturally institutionalized, and not merely reflecting personal childhood traumas. Rather, it appeared to epitomize the structural and structuring principles of the public, social order. The reasons why the male tools, such as knives, spears, and bows and arrows, were placed "high" on the wall, while the female pots and mortars were placed "low", were thus cultural, rather than emotional.

STRUCTURE AND SEX

But still, I felt that that was not all there was to this symbolic language. The high/low distinction between male and female was not only expressed in those spatial relationships that are concerned with the social order. It was also present in the shapes of male and female artifacts - the former being erect, the latter being round and compact. This applies especially to those tools that are crucial in food production, all the way from foraging, hunting and agriculture to grinding and cooking. Every single artifact used in these productive processes appears to be imbued with sexual meanings.

These meanings are never articulated, though. Rather, they are revealed through the rules connected to the use of the tools. Most of these rules pertain to the potency of the male members of the household. Thus, for instance, a man must not sit on a mortar, nor look at the burning of new clay pots, nor sit on a log that

has one end in the fire - lest he get impotent. Further, a woman must never leave the ladle immobile in the pot boiling *sadza* (= a stiff porridge of maize or finger millet). If she does, it is said that the ladle will get burnt, and this implies that the men in the homestead will become impotent.

To approach the underlying meanings of these rules is not easy, though. The Shona in general, and the Manyika in particular, are keen on maintaining decent and even prudish behaviour in public. They are reluctant to talk about such rules, and will evade any questions about the significance of sexual metaphors. In fact, even a remote, indirect hint at sexual meanings is considered shameful, unless you are joking partners. In a mixed company of men and women, or when representatives of two adjacent generations are present, the rules of behaviour are very strict. You must avoid body contact, and ideally even eye contact. You should not share the same bench, nor hand over a gift without an intermediary person, and never ever reveal any strong emotions, or communicate bad news.

To talk about sadness, grief or failures is just as shameful as to talk about sex. To reveal what is inside your heart and body is compared with the worst and most dangerous of all states - that of lost body control. For instance, if a person faints, or if he for some other reason loses control over his muscles, it is considered to be potentially fatal.

Against this background, it was not easy for me to approach the meanings of the symbolic world of the kitchen. As long as any man was present, it was impossible. But I managed to find my way around. I began with the clay pots. One day, as I had been observing the interaction between a woman, stirring her *sadza* (a stiff porridge), and two men who were sitting on the men's bench in the cooking-hut, I waited until the men had disappeared before I began to ask my questions.

- Why did you say *pamusoro* (=excuse me) to the men, when you removed the ladle from the boiling pot?

- Well, it is just a custom.

- What do the men have to do with *your* pot and *your sadza*?

- Well, they have to do with the ladle. If the ladle gets burnt, they will not be able to procreate. That is why I have to remove the ladle if I must leave the boiling pot for a moment.

- So it is not the porridge that gets burnt, if you stop stirring, but only the ladle?

- Yes, only the ladle.

- Does this mean that the pot is like a woman's womb?

- No, the pot is just a pot.

- Is that true for all pots?

- Yes, it is the same with all pots.

- Now, tell me about how you do when you want to tell the bridegroom's people that the bride is a virgin.

- We will first let the girl's paternal aunt check her virginity. Then, if she has found that the girl has not been "spoiled", she will take a clay pot, fill it to the brim with water, and hand it over to the man's paternal aunt. But if she is not a virgin, some of the water will be poured out.

- Does this mean that the clay pot is like a girl's womb?

- No, the pot is just a pot. Besides, we don't do this very often nowadays. We just say that "the girl is full", or "she is not full", the woman added.

- Oh, I see. That means that it is the *girl* who is like a clay pot, and not that the clay pot is like a girl, is that right?

The woman burst out laughing, rose and went up to me, in order to slap the palm of her hand against mine: "Now you know *everything*," she exclaimed, and continued to laugh.

We had suddenly become joking partners. And I had learned something about symbols. The pot is not a symbol of the womb, or of the woman. It is the other way round. Instead, the woman's womb is like a pot, and that makes quite a difference. It means that the pot and the ladle are not simple sexual metaphors, or icons, even if we might feel that their shapes would suggest that. Rather, it is the woman and the man, that is *the human beings*, who are subjected to the same processes as those that are at work in the material world of artifacts. What is happening to the artifacts will thus happen to the human beings too. At last, I could understand why men become impotent when ladles are burnt.[5]

MAN AND NATURE

If this was true for the ritual handling of artifacts in the homestead, something similar must apply to the rituals that are performed as part of the royal fertility cult, I felt. I knew that the Manyika had rain ceremonies every year, just before the rainy season is supposed to begin, in November. Chief Mutasa, who is the sacred king of the Manyika, must first give his permission for people to start their preparations for the rain ceremonies. Then, in all the different subchiefdoms in his

kingdom, people will start to brew beer to sacrifice to the ancestors of the royal clan. The sacrifice is offered by a group of old ladies and gentlemen, who all belong to the royal clan. These old "sisters" and "brothers" will proceed up to the top of the mountain, where their local chiefs have been buried. There, they will light a fire with two pieces of wood, one of which is called "the man", while the other is called '"the woman". They will then dance around the fire and sing, sipping a little of the beer now and then. The dances are supposed to be obscene, like the words of the rain songs. This is said to excite the male ancestors, their "fathers" in the sky, and make them release the rain.

At first, I was struck by the obvious sexual and incestuous symbolism in this fertility ritual. The paternal male ancestors high up were supposed to fertilize the low, maternal earth, after the heat and fire of sexual mimicry performed by sisters and brothers. Sky and earth appeared to be like male and female, high and low. The new crops would be the children. It seemed to be a ritual in which the sexual relationship between human beings would somehow affect the processes in nature. But when some women tried to explain this ritual to me, they said it was the other way round - although they expressed it in quite practical terms. They said:

- If it does not rain, we will not get food, and that will make it impossible for us to get children. You cannot make children when you are hungry.

Thus, what happens in nature will affect human beings. My simplistic interpretation seemed to fall short. The Manyika did not believe that nature was like themselves, or that the sky was like the man and the earth like a woman. Rather, it is the man who is like the sky, and the woman who is like the earth, and what happens to sky and earth will happen to themselves as well. This implies that it is not the human being who is the mere agent, manipulating forces in nature, in order to perform "magic". The agents are outside the person. A human being is just a reflexion of forces that are superior to him, or her.

This semi-platonic view makes the sexual symbolism more decent, and absolves Man from the burden of being a responsible manipulator. Yet, the relationship between Man and the forces outside himself is continuously expressed in a symbolic idiom that works both ways, and demands his collaboration: "If we don't perform rain ceremonies, it will not rain." And in the way the rituals are performed, we can very well see the sexual meanings - they are even sung with words. But outside the ritual context, these meanings are never articulated, and often not even recognized, or permitted to come to the fore of conscious, reflexive thought.

HUTS AND WOMBS

The most striking example of this "unconscious consciousness" is a conversation I once had with some women about the symbolic meaning of the cooking-hut. In the rural areas, a woman's cooking-hut is always built in the traditional manner, even among well-to-do people, who can afford to build square houses with modern kitchens. The cooking-hut is round, and has a thatched roof. On top of the roof, the grass is tied together so as to form a "knot", which is called *guvhu* (= navel). Inside the hut, there is a hearth on the floor, and a plastered bench on one side for the men. In the innermost part of the hut there is a plastered potshelf, which is also used as the family altar. Many huts have their walls decorated with a chevron-pattern, which looks like a stylized snake undulating on the inside and the outside of the circular wall.

When I began to ask about why people always wanted to have their cooking-huts built in the traditional style, I just received evasive answers, like "That is the way the women want it", or "That is the way the men want it". At last I decided to ask a couple of women quite frankly, if they thought that the cooking-hut and the woman's womb were similar. The answer was no.

- The cooking-hut is just a cooking-hut, they said. It is a house for cooking and eating, and a house where you can be together with your family. Another woman added, that it is a house to keep warm, close to the fire, and where you feel safe, protected from strangers.

- It is the place where we can feel close together, as when we are singing, or telling fairy-tales, or performing our prayers to the ancestors. All the family should be around when we do that. In the old days it was also the house where the father and the mother slept together, and where the small children slept as well. There, close to the fire, new children were conceived, blessed by the ancestors who could see it all in the light of the fire. It is also the house in which the woman delivers, on a reed mat, just inside the door, and where a dead man is placed during the night before his burial. The fire is then put out, and the corpse is carried out to be buried.

After having been told all this, I turned to one of the women and asked:

- Don't you think that this hut and the mother's womb are similar, then?

- Oh, no, she answered promptly.

- But tell me, how do you go about when you carry that corpse out of the hut in the morning?

- Well *that* I can really tell you, for that is something I know. It is carried out with the head first, because *that is the way a child is born*.

To this woman, the meaning of the cooking-hut may very well have been the one she first elaborated on: security, protection, warmth, and communion. But these emotional meanings are not discussed or verbalised in everyday life. Instead, they are expressed in the tacit idiom of the human body. Whereas the public social order is expressed in the idiom of space, the emotions associated with close, human interaction are expressed in the idiom of the human body. High and low will be transformed into parts of the male and the female body. A symbolic womb will express emotions, rather than sexual feelings.

Now, if this applies to wombs, whether in the shape of huts, pits, pots, or other round "enclosures", what then about the phallic shapes? Can they mean anything else than what they seem to signify?

It took me seven years to answer that question, with reference to the symbolism contained in the Shona culture. Already during my first research period in Zimbabwe, I had been struck by the phallic shape of the crucial metaphors in the religious cult, and by the seemingly phallic associations in everyday life as well. However, it was not the conical tower in the Great Enclosure of Great Zimbabwe that had intrigued me most, nor all those other conical artifacts that are referred to as "phalli", by the archaeologists. What intrigued me most was the shape of the Zimbabwe bird: an eagle, that stretches his head and neck upwards, into an erect phallic form. I saw the same shape in real life, every time I witnessed how a man performed a ritual greeting. He would stretch up his neck and head on top of a straight back, in such a way that he looked just like the *chapungu*, that is, the Zimbabwe bird. At the same time, he would form his hands into the straight beak of that eagle, while clapping them four times, in greeting. The woman, on the other hand, would form her hands and her body into a "round" shape, compact, and low down, while respectfully greeting the man by clapping her hands.

Although one could easily interpret these body shapes so as to signify a phallic and a womb-like form, they also seem to communicate a message of pride and humility, respectively. But how can one know for sure? What kind of evidence could possibly be produced to show one thing or the other?

THE BIRD WHO NEVER DROPS A FEATHER

As I came back to Zimbabwe in September 1991, I began to ask people about *chapungu*. What did they know about a bird called *chapungu*? First, I received various translations of the word. Some said that the *chapungu* is the bateleur eagle, some others insisted that it could not be that eagle, since the bateleur has a red beak, while the *chapungu* has not. He is black and white. But whatever translation or description people would present, they all agreed on the most

important characteristic of the *chapungu*. They said: "It is the only bird who never drops his feathers. You can never, ever pick a feather from a *chapungu*. He will not let you do it". They would also add that he dwells high up, beyond reach of anybody who tries to approach him.

When I heard that, I suddenly remembered a fairy-tale that I had been told several times, when I was here seven years ago. It was about a *murora*, a daughter-in-law, who lived with her mother-in-law, and was constantly bossed around. Her humiliation came to its extreme point, when the mother-in-law even deprived her of her clothes. At last, a big bird came to save her. He asked her to sit on top of his back, and then flew away with her. He flew higher and higher, until at last they reached the sky. "Here", he said to the girl, "up here, nobody can ever take your clothes away any more."

To be humiliated, ashamed, deprived of one's clothes and stripped naked - that is like having one's feathers plucked. What could be more telling than the eagle called *chapungu*, if somebody wants to express his strivings for independence and superiority, and his capacity to control his own body?

The *chapungu* were found in four copies at Great Zimbabwe. They are supposed to have crowned the Great enclosure, on top of its walls. The Zimbabwe bird thus seems to be an apt symbol of a man who is not controlled by anybody but himself. Yet, the *chapungu* is not only the symbol of a king and his superiority. It still haunts the fantasy of both men and women in the rural areas. It is alive, even today, among ordinary people, although nobody claims to have seen a *chapungu*.

So, what does *chapungu* mean? What does he signify in the symbolic language of the Shona culture, and what does he mean to the people who want to tell fairy-tales about him?

I think that *chapungu* cannot be understood if one has not seen (or heard of) the decoration around his feet. Once again, we have the chevron-pattern there. Like a snake embracing a tree, this chevron pattern undulates around the feet and legs of the bird, and holds it fast. The proud eagle looks as if it cannot fly away.

But, who knows if it is a snake? It just looks like the undulating chevron-pattern of the old claypots, and like one that can be seen as wall decorations - on kitchen-huts, and ancient stone enclosures as well.

I think that I received an answer a few weeks ago. I had been coming upon the pit-structures in Nyanga for a couple of months, while beginning my second period of fieldwork among the Manyika. This time I had settled in Matema village, where almost every homestead has an ancient pit, or *kwira*, behind the refuse heap. I kept asking every elderly man what he thought about these pits - why they had been constructed, and what they had been used for. They all came up with different answers. Some told me that the pits were built to keep the calves separated from their mothers during the night. Some other men told me that they were built to protect cattle from wild animals, or to protect people during the Shangani wars. It did not seem to bother them that the Shangani wars took place in the eighteen-hundreds, whereas most of the pits were constructed 200 years

earlier. Still another man said that the pits were used to protect both people and animals during the last war, before independence. It did not bother him when I said that the white Rhodesians would easily have seen the people in the pits, and that they might have placed themselves on the brim to shoot everybody down. "No", he said. "They could not do that, we were protected by the *kwira*".

The word he used for "protect" was *kupotera*. There are several words for "to protect" in Chimanyika, but *kupotera*, or *kupoteredza*, refers to a special kind of protection. It is the protection provided by another person's body.

THE EMBRACING SNAKE

One day in December, I decided to accompany a couple of women and their children to Matema school, in order to assist at the Parents' day. While passing the pits on our way to the school, we heard the same warnings from the boys as I was used to hearing by now: "Watch out for the snakes in the *kwira*." I did not pay attention to it, since I had heard it so often.

As we arrived at the school, I decided to take a seat on the last bench, behind all the mothers who crowded the narrow benches, each with a child on her lap or on her back. Most of the mothers had toddlers on their laps, while watching the big children performing for the parents. All these mothers were holding their children in the same way: in a firm grip, with their arms formed like a round fence, or "container" around the child. Some children were sitting quite still, obviously relaxed and content in the arms of their mothers, who looked like immovable rocks, with an expression of face like a sphinx. Some other children tried to stand up on their mother's lap, while bending forwards and backwards, sometimes pinching the mother's breast or cheek. But no matter what the child did - the mother just kept her fixed posture and her immobile face. And no matter how much the child was moving or trying to expand his space - he could not affect the mother, or move beyond her firmly enclosing arms.

When I had been watching these wrestling toddlers for a while I began to think about how it would have been if the mothers had been Europeans. They would have responded to the child, either by cuddling it, or by loosening their grip of the child. Some would have let the child down to the ground, maybe just in order to pick it up again very soon. It would probably have been some sort of game between mother and child - the game of "holding on" and "letting go". In any case, the whole ambiance would have been one of a more active interplay between a moving mother and a moving child - back and forth, up and down. I also think that some of the mothers - and the children too - would have become somewhat nervous after a while. They would not have been able to sit still for six hours, like these mothers and children.

But these Manyika children did not seem to be impatient, and not a single one complained. Whenever they wanted, they could suckle the mother's breast. Still at the age of one to two years, they were close to the mother's body most of the day,

and the whole night. And the mother's will was constantly dominating the child's. Later, when the child would have gone through the sudden weaning, the mother would still be "the king". She would calmly and promptly administer her short commands to the child, and dominate its life completely, for the next five to six years or so. In the small world of mother and children, the woman has a position that is very different from that in the public life: the mother is the supreme ruler, while the child is the humble subject.

I decided to ask my closest neighbour what she would call the mother's firm grip around her child. What would she say about that position - when the mother is holding her arms like a ring around the child, with her hands clasped as a kind of "lock"?

- *Kupotera*, my neighbour replied. *Kupotera* is to protect. Protect by embracing somebody like that. It is to surround someone with the body.

- Can it also mean something else?

- Yes, if you *hide* behind another person's body, that is also *kupotera*. And you can say *kupotera*, when a snake undulates around a thing, such as when it coils itself around a tree.

I reflected for a while. *Kupotera* - was that not the word that the men always used when they talked about hiding in the *kwira*, the round pits where the boys always said that the snakes were? The *kwira* would "protect" (*kupotera*) them from the enemies. And snakes, *nyoka*, was that not what the women always called their stomach pains, particularly when the contractions had set in before the delivery of a child? I decided to ask again, and leaned forward to the same neighbour.

- The snakes that a woman has in her stomach, can they too *kupotera*?

  Yes, that is what they are doing all the time. They surround the woman's *shupa* (= calabash, uterus), and it is when they begin to bite the *shupa* that the child wants to get out, in order *to be set free* (*kusungunguka*).

Kupotera and *kusungunguka* to be protected by embraces and to be set free ... was that what all these metaphors were about? The round enclosure with its undulating chevron pattern, the cooking hut with its zig-zag pattern outside and inside the wall, the pot with its traditional pattern that was half rounded as an undulating snake and half pointed as the stylized chevron? Was *that* what was implied in the Zimbabwe bird, too, who appears to stretch up its head so as to reach the sky, but who cannot fly, since his legs are locked in the firm grip of an undulating, "protecting" snake?

Maybe this is the true meaning of these symbols - the meaning to those women who still paint the walls of their cooking-hut without knowing why they

do it, and the meaning of those teenage boys who call out warnings for the snakes whenever they pass a *kwira*. When employing this symbolic language, they are probably not thinking of maternal wombs or embraces. And when they tell the story of *nzuzu* - that beautiful lady who engulfs people in her pool, and then turns out to be a bossy woman administering commands and punishments together with bitter food - when telling that story, they are probably not thinking of their own mother, or of traumatic experiences in their own childhood. Maybe they have not even had any such experiences themselves, although many other Shona children in the past probably had them. But they use a culturally shared and long-established language of symbols to express some of those ambiguous emotions involved in close interpersonal interaction that we all share as human beings. These ambiguous emotions are concerned with the predicament of being close to, yet independent of other human beings. They are concerned with the issue of how to safeguard one's individuality, while still longing for communion, or even symbiosis. They are concerned with *kusungunguka* and *kupotera* - to be set free and to be protected.

CULTURAL SYMBOLISM AND THE SELF

However, if such feelings may be found universally, as part of the predicament of being a social, human being - why would they be expressed in this particular symbolic language, and why would these symbols take on such a primordial importance in a particular culture?

I would like to approach the first question by referring to what I have already briefly touched upon in connection with the transformation of spatial symbolism to body metaphors. In probably all societies, people tend to use spatial symbolism to mark distinctions, or to create a structure, and thus order. Spatial distinctions keep people and things apart from each other, and thus prevent the emotional confusion of blurred boundaries.[6] But when people are overwhelmed by emotions that are difficult to sort out in a rational way, they tend to express these feelings by using the language of the body. Not only do they use the body in action, they also tend to "think" with the body. The human body, or even the animal body, is employed to create a language of symbols that is more apt to express ambiguous feelings than any verbally articulated language.

In some cultures, we find that some particular parts or processes of the body that are connected with eating and digestion are employed as key metaphors. In some other cultures, the focus may be on blood and body fluids. Or the shadow.[7] And so on. In the Shona culture, the focus is on those parts and processes of the body that have to do with procreation. There may be particular psychological reasons for this, for instance those implied in the way mothers have been handling their infants and toddlers in Shona society since time immemorial.[8] But there is also a cultural reason why the process of procreation serves as a folk model of ambiguous interpersonal relationships.

The cultural reason is constituted by the fertility cult, which has been a primordial religious concern among the Shona peoples for at least 800 years. Maybe it has been a practical concern, too, for people who developed their particular version of Bantu agriculture in a region where rainfall may be sometimes scarce. But whatever the cause may have been for the development of a religion preoccupied with fertility, the symbolic language employed to express this preoccupation has a powerful emotional resonance in any human being. Maybe its resonance is particularly powerful in people whose early interaction between Self and Other was one of very intense body contact with a tender mother who was practising two years of sexual abstinence, while caring for her most important achievement in life - her child.

By intimating such a possibility, I have also approached the second question: why would these symbols take on such a primordial importance in a particular culture? The answer to this question is not self-evident, and I would not like to reduce an entire symbolic language in a culture to a matter of mother-and-child relationship. But I do contend that our experiences of close, interpersonal interaction with other human beings are essential for the way we perceive our own Self. And *that* is an issue of overwhelming, emotional importance in our lives. Who am I? How do I relate to you? How do I relate to the rest of the world? Am I an isolated, individual entity, or do I belong with somebody else? Am I superior, inferior, or equal? Do I dare to come close? Am I loved? Do I have a value?

Questions like these continue to preoccupy most people throughout their lives, even if they don't articulate them verbally. These questions are all concerned with the relationship between the Self and the Other. This relationship is moulded in face-to-face interaction. It is created and recreated, or modified and developed, each time that we enter into a new personal relationship. We tend to *become* the Self that the Other makes of us.

But even if an adult person may develop and modify his Self in new, unique relationships as he gets older and spiritually more mature, he will to some extent depend upon those early models of Self-Other relationships that were created by his face-to-face interaction with people who were close to him while he grew up. Our interactions with mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandmothers and playmates - they all contribute to the moulding of models of social relationships. In the Shona culture, we find a significant illustration provided by the application of the classificatory kinship system. Virtually everybody that surrounds the growing child in a big homestead, or even in its neighbourhood is related to him as a mother, a father, a sister, a brother, or as an inferior in-law who had married one's sister, or as superior in-law, from whom one's brother had received a wife.

Now, if the face-to-face relationships that we are involved in while growing up often serve as models for future relationships, or at least if they tend to colour, or mould them, it is quite logical to assume that the language by which adult social relationships are expressed has something in common with that of our face-to-face interaction earlier in life. The relationship between an adult Self and a close Other will be affected by the emotionally loaded experiences that they have

had before. The earlier, and the more intense these experiences were, the more they tend to be dressed in the same symbolic language, whenever something reminiscent of these experiences turns up again. The mother's embracing, and maybe sometimes smothering arms will be recognized when the boy is struggling for his independence 15-20 years later. But since it is a very complex feeling that touches deep, emotional layers in him, he cannot sort it out in articulate discourse, or by a rational analysis. He reverts to the body language by which his mother communicated with him. It is on this point that his culture helps him to identify and express the problem.

A well integrated culture with a consistent symbolic language has the capacity to objectify unsorted problems of the Self, and of the relationship between the Self and the Other. By providing concrete images and metaphors that have a "logical" relationship, a culturally established system of symbols may relieve a person from the trouble of trying to sort out his social problems on his own. Instead of analysing and articulating the problems connected with his selfhood, he may tell a fairy-tale about *nzuzu* or *chapungu*. Or he may indulge in telling myths about incest in the royal family. Or he may build round pits, or huts or stone enclosures with an undulating snake along the wall. Or he may make a sculpture of a proud eagle as the emblem of national independence.

Whatever he is doing, when he uses these culturally established symbols, he is probably expressing personal problems related to the Self - whether they have been caused by early experiences, or by social interaction later in life. As a general rule, the symbolic language that a well integrated culture provides has a great deal of consistency. Its different "words", or metaphors, are connected in such a way that its "grammar" and "syntactic rules" are self-evident to those who have grown up in that culture. No metaphors are there at random. They will all make sense, once they are being combined according to the "natural" rules of a particular cultural system. These rules become "natural" by the way they are related to a host of intermingled factors, such as the social structure, the explanatory models of health and illness, the folk conceptions of bodies, animals, plants and minerals, the subsistence system, the agricultural techniques, and so on. The pattern is there, ready to use, for anybody who is well integrated in his own culture. He may not be able to identify it as a pattern, but he is able to employ it, and to create art and myths and architecture that are consistent with this pattern. But everytime he employs the conventional, symbolic language of his culture, he is also saying something about himself, and about his own experiences.

CHANGE, CONTINUITY, AND "THE SMALL WORLD"

Now, for how long can such a pattern persist in a society? For how many decades or centuries can the symbolic system of a culture remain fairly unchanged? This question brings us to the issue of whether anthropological interpretations of symbols can be of any value to the archaeologists who study the past.

Many grand theories have been put forward to deal with cultural continuity and change. Most of them have focused on the large-scale social system of society. That is, they have focused on what I would like to call "the political system", rather than the social system. There are, first of all, the marxist theories of changed relations between social classes, as a result of changing relations between the people and the economic resources they live off. Then there are all sorts of demographic theories, all the way from Durkheim to Kenneth Burke, who claim that modern individualism was an outcome of the desintegration of clans and tribes, or of the growth of cities. We also have migration theories, diffusionist theories, economic theories, and what have you.

As a general rule, these theorists either contend or assume that culture is some sort of loose luggage that is thrown overboard as soon as it does not fit the overall political and economic structure, or whenever there is no more practical use for the specific ideas of a particular culture.

Culture is thus seen as an epiphenomenon to economic or political structure, for instance "class structure". An equally functionalist view of culture may be perceived in theories that are inspired by liberal economists, who assume that any cultural idea has some sort of "use value", and that a creature called Economic Man tends to create or dispense with cultural values, according to his practical needs. That would imply, among other things, that technological change would automatically result in cultural change. If this were true, we would not find many round kitchen-huts in Zimbabwe today.

In contradistinction to the grand social theorists, I don't see cultural continuity and change as a matter of large-scale relations between social classes, tribes, nations, or economic interests. Nor do I see culture as a matter of fashion, loose luggage, or barter between migrating or trading tribes. In my view, a culture is constituted by the conceptions, explanations and values that a particular people share about their social life, and the language, customs and symbols by which they express these beliefs and values. Within this broad definition of culture I identify the language and the symbolic system as the very essence of a culture. Both are constructed according to coherent patterns, that have an inherent consistency and logic. Certain words or metaphors may be changed now and then, according to fashion, borrowings from other cultures, and so on. But the new words or metaphors will be integrated as synonyms in the old language - whether it is verbal or symbolic - and follow its grammatical and syntactical rules. Because of the fact that it constitutes a *system* with consistent rules for the combination of metaphors, people cannot suddenly dispose of a major part of it, just because of new trading partners, new political leaders, or even a new technological invention. Not unless this invention drastically changes *the small world* where they live their daily lives.

In accordance with my contention that close face-to-face interaction is the social fabric by which a system of key symbols is woven, it is the *small* world of everyday life that provides the materials for the construction, continuity and change of a culture. The small world is the world that people can see and smell

and hear and feel with their bodies, and where they interact face-to-face with other people. As long as this small world remains the same, the culture of the people who live there will also remain unchanged - regardless of who acts as the *chapungu* in Harare or Great Zimbabwe, and regardless of whom these rulers are trading or fighting with.

The Manyika child who still today grows up in a homestead with the traditional family setting, with a mother who crouches on the floor below the father, while keeping the child in a firm grip that he cannot escape - that child will probably hold on to the symbolic language he has inherited from his grandmother. And as long as his physical environment is the same as it was some hundred of years ago, it will continue to provide material for the concrete images of which this symbolic language is composed. The snakes and birds and pits and pots will mean something to him, as long as they are still visible in his own small world, and as long as the social relationships in this world are the same.

But if he grows up with a constantly absent father, who is in Harare or elsewhere or if his mother moves to town and decides to take up a job away from home, and to wean him after two months, and if he never sees any birds or snakes, nor any grandparents, uncles or in-laws - well, then he will lose his understanding of the symbolic language of his culture. Although changes in the *big* world may be the ultimate cause of the changes in his *small* world, it is in "the small world" that the decisive cultural change will be experienced by the growing child.

The conclusion we can draw is that it may still be possible for an anthropologist to provide clues for the interpretation of ancient archaeological sites in many African cultures. But it is not an easy task to find the relevant clues, or to identify the truly "traditional" symbolic system. More and more, the "small" world of the Africans tends to change due to large-scale changes in the "big" world. But provided that you take your time, and seek out some of those places where the "small" world is relatively intact, you might still be able to do something for the archaeologist who wants to interpret the past. Maybe you can also do something for those African intellectuals who have long abandoned their own "small" world, but who want to understand their own history. It is still possible to do it, but not for much longer, I would guess. The new generation of Africans in Zimbabwe and elsewhere will soon be growing up in a world without birds and snakes and clay pots and round huts and grandmothers -and maybe even in a world without mothers, or at least without the old kind of mother. When the last of those old, small worlds has disappeared, it will be too late to try to understand the meanings implicit in ancient monuments like the Great Zimbabwe.

NOTES

1. This paper is a modified version of a talk given to the Prehistoric Society of Zimbabwe, in Harare, January 15th, 1992.

2. See especially Roger Summers' by now classical Nyanga book (1958), which resulted from his excavations in Nyanga in the 1950's. See also Sutton 1988, references there.

3. "The resultant pit is approached through a finely constructed curving tunnel under the platform. Such an elaborate device would surely have been constructed only for really valuable stock" (Sutton 1988:22).

4. My understanding of the concept of "symbol" comes close to that of Suzanne Langer (1953).

5. In his book on the symbolism of the Karanga (southern neighbours of the Manyika), the German physician Herbert Aschwanden states unambiguously that "*Mugoti* is a phallic symbol and refers to the penis of the husband" (p. 187). In some other contexts, Aschwanden elaborates on the Karanga men's dread of *paraphimoses* (pp. 36, 69 ff.), which is said to be equivalent to a "dry" penis (= immovable foreskin). Shona men sometimes compare a "dry" penis to a "hot" (and too sexually active) woman.

6. For further elaboration on spatial versus bodily symbolism in African cultures, see the introduction to Jacobson-Widding 1991.

7. See the contributions to Jacobson-Widding 1991, especially those in the second part of the book. Cf. also Jacobson-Widding 1983 and 1990a; and Riesman 1977, 1984. Concerning the particularly stressed sexual and incestuous symbolism in the cultural heritage of the Shona peoples, see Jacobson-Widding 1990b.

8. African mothers in general are probably contributing more effectively than European mothers to what psychologists call "the libidinization" of the child's body, simply by having the child's body close to her own for almost 24 hours a day, for nearly two years. In some African cultures (among them that of Shona) the mother used to perform an active and conscious "libidinization" of her child's body, by massaging the private parts of the baby (cf. Aschwanden 1983:35). These customs seem to have been abandoned today, but it is not unlikely that the intensity and articulateness of the sexually resonant symbolism has been affected by this practice in earlier times.

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