

FIRTH, RAYMOND. SYMBOLS: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE (in the series Symbol, Myth, and Ritual edited by Victor Turner). Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973, 469 pages, \$16.50.

Reviewed by Judith Lynne Hanna

This book is a useful introduction to symbolism for the dance scholar and student. The author, an anthropologist, notes the fashionableness of the study of symbolic behavior which was stimulated by the impact of the theory of communication and semiotics, the act of signifying and the theory of meaning. He begins by presenting examples from the news to illustrate the extent to which the notion of symbol has come to permeate popular thought. Then, in the next four chapters, he summarizes some of the anthropologically relevant concerns about symbolism from the fields of literature, classics, art, theology, philosophy, and psychology. Firth focuses on some of the considerations of anthropologists and the development of anthropological interest in symbols. The vocabulary used by scholars in these disciplines is explained. A series of their methodological and epistemological criticisms and questions are presented to offer parallels and direction to contemporary work. So the volume has utility to dance scholars who can draw upon the summary of expositors on symbol exegesis, function, and structure to apply to their own problems.

A minor caveat: Firth argues that "the art of Western societies poses a problem of the expressiveness of its symbolism which is not present to the same degree in the societies normally studied by anthropologists, namely the gap that tends to exist between artist and public. Here what the symbols express may be elite values, protest values, interest group values" (p. 77). He then discusses political and religious symbols. As John Blacking and James Fernandez, among other anthropologists who have studied the arts note, the expressive meanings of symbols used by the artist in nonwestern societies are not equally--nor often even widely--understood by the "public". The symbols used may also express elite values, protest values, and interest group values. These may be based on--and sometimes be exclusive to--age, sex, association, occupation, political status, and so on.

Belying the dust jacket claim of the book being "a comprehensive survey of the function of symbolism in human thought and behavior" --a claim not made by the author in the text, it should be noted--is the surprising neglect of some work by sociologists, political scientists, and scholars of nonverbal communication, and the not surprising neglect of discussing dance as a form in which symbolism is couched. For example, although Firth does mention C. Wright Mills and Harold Lasswell,

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the work of H. D. Duncan is slighted and that of Murray Edleman, Albert E. Schefflen, and Paul Ekman is altogether overlooked. These authors focus on the involvement of symbols in relations of power and status as does Firth in his own work on political symbolism.

In the last chapters of his book, in order to exemplify some of the issues introduced in earlier chapters, Firth presents a series of illustrations where public and private symbolism--food, hair, flags, greeting and parting, giving and getting--seem to be closely inter-related. Nowhere among a multiplicity of examples does he note the presence of dance fulfilling the functions of providing identity, differentiating status, communicating, apprehending the world, etc., the ways in which, as symbol it "relates to interests and aims of groups and individuals," and how it is "involved when decisions are taken in interpersonal contacts" (p. 74). Firth feels that "the nature of the art forms which give symbols their expressive power" is beyond the anthropologist's scope (not all anthropologists agree!). However, his focus is "on what forms can be constructed so as to convey meaning most forcefully, or most sensitively" (pp. 46-47).

In all fairness, Firth does point out the misleading view of the eminent philosopher, familiar to dance scholars--Susanne K. Langer, that dance is an individual abstraction of the sense of power among "primitive societies"; and in support of his view that it is far more complex and encompasses a variety of functions, he cites several anthropological studies (those by E. Evans-Pritchard, Roy A. Rappaport, Marie Reay, and himself (pp. 57-58) in which these are discussed.

In sum, the book has utility as a compilation of much of the history of the study of symbols and the different conflicting theories and methodological aspects of anthropological analyses of symbolism. Firth's ultimate statement specifies what he perceives to be the primary problem of the anthropologist in the study of symbols (which seems to me is relevant to the dance researcher): "To examine the forms of symbolic statement, to try and understand the system [reviewer's emphasis] of ideas they express, the order of that system, and the effects associated with the use of such symbolic concepts" (p. 428). Earlier he notes: "symbols have become important, not for what they represent, but for what they themselves are thought to express and communicate. They have come to be regarded not as surrogates or evasions of reality, but as a kind of higher form of reality" (p. 166).