BOOK REVIEWS

The Interpretation of Symbolism. Edited by Roy Willis. London. Malaby Press. xv, 180pp. £6.75.

Each of these six papers has for its aim a "symbolic analysis". This means, they coincide in "a concern to reveal the meaning of symbolic ideas and symbolic (or 'ritual') behaviour, what, in terms comprehensible to us, observers from an alien culture, they 'stand for'." Such is the view of the editor, truer than he perhaps intended, for his statement points to the limitations, as well as the direction, of the collection.

The volume is the product of one of the sessions of the decennial A.S.A. conference, held in 1973, under the general title of 'New Directions in Social Anthropology'. That title, as well as the traditional push of A.S.A. volumes beyond mere clarification and exposition, carries an insistence that the work should at least attempt some major theoretical breakthrough. One has a right to expect, from such a volume, a seminal statement of the problematic in question. That this is lacking derives, largely, from the nature of the enterprises undertaken by the individual authors.

The papers all operate within a disturbingly similar framework. From the culture in which he or she did fieldwork, the author selects one aspect, redolent in symbolism, to be the central matter of the analysis. The meanings of this aspect of its symbols, implicit and explicit, nearer and more distant, are then teased out, through an agglomeration of other aspects of the culture. Whether the original choice falls on everyday actions, spells, rituals, archaic or current texts; in each case the enquiry extends beyond that factor to all the other symbolic elements of the culture. Thus each paper limits itself to the exegesis of the symbolic system of a single culture. Certainly 'comparative' elements from elsewhere are often cited, just as theoretical concerns often come in for peripheral treatment. But, starting from a single feature of a single culture, the weight is always on that feature, and its ramifications within the culture, and still there is insufficient space for a full and satisfactory treatment.

To call attention to this fact is as much praise as it is complaint. In "breaking through the classical constraints" of symbolic studies (Editor's Introduction), the authors have accepted the implications of two injunctions, neither of them new, but only rarely followed through in this field in the past. Firstly, since symbolic systems are codes, languages, wholes, they must be studied as totalities, and pseudo-dictionaries of what 'referents' particular symbols 'represent' are inadequate. Secondly, that symbolism - meaning at once active and reified - is present wherever men are, penetrates all levels of activity (and is therefore the central concern of anthropologists). These two facts join in an absolute militation against reductionism. It is this that the authors, to their credit, have accepted. But the consequences they choose to draw are unfortunate. For in each case they have adopted this liberation as an impulse to total exegesis. The attempt has become to provide an encyclopaedia of a culture, rather than a dictionary.

One could, given the space, argue against the notion that such a task is worthwhile, on the grounds that our aim is not the knowledge of 'other cultures', but reference to ourselves. But whatever one's opinion on that, the fact remains that such total exposition is impossible in anything less than a book. To attempt the enterprise in this format leads ultimately to nothing other than frustration and dissatisfaction.

The authors are not entirely without a sense of their responsibility to theory. They almost all avow that their papers are merely an early stage in the ongoing dialectic between 'data' and 'thought'. But, aside from the feeling that something more than that is called for here, what suggestions there are of theoretical directions are hardly exciting. One can accept, for the most part, that the specific level of our work requires the exegesis of particular cultures. But the authors in this volume all seem still to be bound by the idea, that the general level is inhabited by 'universal characteristics of culture', to be discovered by 'comparative studies'. That attitude is a by-product of the 'dictionary of symbols' approach, reductive by its very nature. There is no sense that the authors are seeking to establish a new general level, correlate to their 'new', broader approach to specific studies.

I am not demanding that 'answers' to general level 'questions' should be provided in this volume. But I am arguing that the generalised problematic at least should receive some direct treatment, some attempt at formulation. This, all the more so, because the papers forever, yet tantalisingly, push one towards it. At their worst the individual papers are competent; at their best highly elegant. And because of this they are always interesting, always pushing one forward, to further questions on the nature of symbols and their interrelationships, the implications of their role as the penetrative force of ideology, and the methodology required to approach these matters.

If one offers the criticism that the book does not drive forward as it might, it is only because one cares so much. In an incidental collection, or a festschrift, one could more easily accept the static nature, the limited aims, and praise it for its excellence within those limits. Of an A.S.A. collection, particularly at a time when a push forward is much needed, one must say, that elegance is not enough; it is even retrograde, for it enforces the dissipating tendency to consolidation and recuperation.

Martin Cantor

Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society. ed. Arthur P. Wolf. 1974 Stanford U.P.

This is a collection of 14 papers first read at a conference in California in 1971. The conference was the fifth of six conferences on Chinese society. In the Introduction Arthur Wolf assesses the contributions made by the various papers and outlines the main argument of each. The Afterword by Robert J. Smith, an anthropologist of Japanese religion is a comment on the papers by an outsider, and a brief comparison of Chinese religious variation with that found in Japan. Of the others, the main bulk of the book, all (except Maurice Freedman's, which is a survey of the sociological study of Chinese religion) are based on fieldwork in Taiwan or Hong Kong. The topics cover a range of themes including Taoist ritual, Cantonese Shamanism, the relationship between this world and the supernatural world. As might be expected, where most of the contributors are American, the majority of essays are concerned with Taiwan.

The question of variation in religious belief and practice, which as Wolf says in the introduction is the 'first question that students of religion in complex societies must face', is the domimant theme to emerge from the collection. Robert J. Smith comments how during the discussion of the papers 'I was struck by the extent to which

the situation resembled a field interview. Each participant seemed to be dealing with all the others as though they were informants. Those who had conducted their research in Hong Kong expressed great interest - and sometimes polite incredulity - when informed of practices and beliefs on Taiwan.' Even within Taiwan and Hong Kong marked divergences are apparent. Indeed, even within the individual, there is room for many conflicting points of view. As Margery Topley in 'Cosmic Antagonisms: A Mother-Child Syndrome' points out, because of the lack of commitment to a single cosmological system, a Cantonese mother has a variety of explanations available to her to account for a sickly or fractious child. As is evident by Smith's comments above, the full extent of possible variety was not apparent to the contributors until they had heard each others' papers.

Nevertheless, Freedman argues in 'On the Sociological Study of Chinese Religion' that 'the religious ideas and practices of the Chinese are not a congeries of haphazardly assembled elements... Behind the superficial variety there is order of a sort... of a kind that should allow us to trace ruling principles of ideas across a vast field of apparently heterogeneous beliefs, and ruling principles of form and organisation in an equally enormous terrain of varied action and association'.

In his capacity as editor it is Wolf who emphasises the variation and the need to specify the conditions under which one interpretation is preferred over another.

It is impossible in a review of this scope to do justice to the many themes covered in the other essays, underlying most of which is a concern with the social and political background to certain beliefs and practices. Hence, for instance, there is Donald R. DeGlopper in 'Religion and Ritual in Lukang' analysing one case in detail, the public ritual in the city of Lukang in Taiwan in the hopes of discovering 'the less obvious relationships of religion and society'.

However, four of the articles (Feuchtwang, Wolf, Wang Sung-hsing, Harrel) which can be loosely grouped together, examine the relationship between laymen and the supernatural. It is clear that for the Chinese the supernatural are divided into three types: gods, ghosts and ancestors. But as Wolf points out, these are not exclusive categories: 'One man's ancestor is another man's ghost'; and Harrel discusses the circumstances in which a ghost may become a god. All four papers show clearly, moreover, how the supernatural pantheon reflects the world order, the gods and ancestors forming the heavenly bureaucracy, ghosts being the beggars and outcasts of that 'society'. Wolf raises the important point that in view of this analogy, peasants and elite obviously have a very different attitude to supernatural beings. Indeed he makes the point that the bureaucracy in Heaven and on earth are two parallel systems: the governor of an area does not appeal to the local gods to bring rain, he orders them to do so.

The essays are fascinating and detailed ethnography and go a good way towards analysing particular variations of belief and practice in small corners of Taiwan and Hong Kong. The overwhelming question of what those beliefs have become on the Mainland is unfortunately not possible to answer in anything like the same degree of detail and has largely to be left aside. But there is still the task as Wolf says, of attempting to account for the variation within the whole - if it is a whole - of Chinese society in 'residual China'

Diana Martin

Books Received

The Piaro. A People of the Orinoco. A Study in Kinship and Marriage. Joanna Overing Kaplan. Clarendon Press. Oxford University Press 1975. xvi, 236 pp. £8.00

Cohesive Force. Feud in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Jacob Black-Michaud. Basil Blackwell. Oxford. 1975. xxx, 270 pp. £5.50

Woman's Evolution. From matriarchal clan to patriarchal family. Evelyn Reed. Pathfinder Press. New York. 1975. xviii, 491 pp. £2.05

Fifth International Directory of Anthropologists. Current Anthropology Resource Series, editor Sol Tax. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London. 1975. x, 496 pp. £18.