

- a Mexican Family (New York: Random House, 1961), pp. xi-xii.
3. Richard M. Dorson, Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2nd printing 1972), p. 272.
 4. Richard M. Dorson, "Is There a Folk in the City?" in The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition, ed. Américo Paredes and Ellen J. Steckert (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 44-45.
 5. The Huszár life history lacks a dated log of events, helpful in the interpretation of the other texts. No explanation for the omission is supplied.
 6. See Langness' suggestive discussion, Chap. 2, "Potential Uses of the Life History" in The Life History in Anthropological Science, pp. 20-31.

Symbols: Public and Private. By Raymond Firth.
(Symbol, Myth, and Ritual Series, edited by Victor Turner.)
Pp. 9 + 469, references, index.
Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1973 cloth.

Reviewed by Michael E. Bell

Firth's book is divided into two major parts, the first being theoretical and historical, and the second being the application of methodology to specific examples. In Part I, he discusses various conceptions of symbols (referring to works by philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and folklorists), briefly traces the history of interest in symbolism (beginning in the 19th century and concentrating on religion, ritual, and mythology), outlines several of the contemporary anthropological approaches to studying symbols, and then sketches some of the problems and potential insights provided by the study of symbols and symbolic behavior. In Part II, Firth applies a kind of general, socio-cultural approach to studying symbols to several specific examples: food symbolism among the Tikopia, the symbolism of hair (which is generally cross-cultural, but emphasizes the Western world, particularly the United States), the symbolic aspects of greeting and parting behavior (especially in terms of bodily movements), the symbolism of flags, and the meanings and interpretations of giving and receiving. In the last chapter, Firth raises some theoretical (and metaphysical) questions regarding the "substance" of symbols: Where is the substance located? In the symbol itself? In its putative

referent (or "surface" meaning)? In the less-obvious referent (or "underlying" meaning)? In the relationship between symbol and referent? Firth seems to answer these questions from a basically pragmatic, functional standpoint. But I'm getting ahead of myself; let's begin with Firth's definition of "symbol."

For Firth, "the essence of symbolism lies in the recognition of one thing as standing for (re-presenting) another, the relation between them normally being that of concrete to abstract, particular to general" (p. 15). Firth refers to Charles Sanders Peirce's tripartite division which distinguishes index, icon, and symbol. Symbols are arbitrary because they are interpreted according to habit or convention. Thus, in the presence of a certain symbol, one should be expected to behave according to some general social rule. Firth's major objection to Peirce's treatment of signs and symbols is that he did not take the "social component" far enough. Peirce did not discuss exactly how it is that symbols become conventional, that the rules are agreed upon by groups of people. This, according to Firth, is where the anthropologist can contribute to the study of symbols: "Essentially, as a social science, the anthropological approach is comparative, observationalist, functionalist, relatively neutralist [?]. It links the occurrence and interpretations of symbolism to social structures and social events in specific conditions" (p. 25). The philosopher reflects upon symbols and symbolization, but his treatment tends to be introspective and anecdotal. The anthropologist can make good use of philosophical frameworks by applying them to actual, observed social situations, where, presumably, they may be tested and refined.

Several significant points emerge in Firth's discussion of symbols. First, symbols are characteristically ambiguous. This apparent fact leads to conflicting interpretations which in turn generate social conflict and public debate (or even physical violence and warfare). This kind of ambiguity and subsequent conflict can be seen especially in the area of political and religious symbolism. One of the strong recommendations of Firth's work is his generous use of examples to illustrate general principles and ideas; without a variety of specific examples, much of Firth's discussion would be abstract and opaque. Firth seems to recognize this, for he presents the reader with examples ranging from religious rituals of the Tikopia to diplomatic practices between the United States and Japan in the post-Vietnam era.

Because symbols can be interpreted in various ways, the existence of alternative choices becomes an important area of inquiry. Although Firth is not very rigorous or explicit in his handling of freedom of choice in interpretation, he does indicate by liberal use of example how alternative interpretations of symbols

may become a source for changes in social, political, and religious institutions. Mainly by implication, Firth views culture and society as dynamic and processual: his instrumental conception of symbols and symbolism is apparent. Firth asserts that one should pay attention to the situations and contexts of a symbol's use. The primary problem for an anthropologist is to "examine the forms of symbolic statement, to try and understand the system of ideas they express, the order of the system, and the effects associated with the use of such symbolic concepts" (p. 428). Accordingly, Firth attempts to minimize the super-organic, reified approach to symbolism. For example, in discussing the limitations of "symbolic spheres," Firth says that "anthropologists sometimes have a tendency to write as if once a symbolic equivalence has been arrived at in one context then it is available for application in all other social contexts. I do not believe this to be the case" (p. 260). With occasional lapses Firth is successful in avoiding the idea that there is some constant or invariant meaning of a symbol which exists apart from specific contexts, either in the mind or as some ideal entity.

For me, the most irritating theoretical problem in Firth's book centers around his distinction between "private" and "public" symbols. At times, especially in the earlier part of the book, this distinction seems to be based on the notion of "understanding." A "private" symbol is one that is experienced and understood by a single individual; his knowledge and understanding is not shared by others. A "public" symbol, by contrast, is one whose meaning is known and understood by a collectivity of individuals. Firth uses examples of dreams and hallucinations to clarify the differences between public and private symbols. But if the criterion of "understanding" is used in making the distinction, several problems arise. Granted that the images one has while dreaming are certainly private in the sense that they are unique to one person--only he experiences the dream at first hand. But dreams are only images; they do not become symbolic until they are interpreted, assigned some meaning, or used in some specific context. Once images become symbols, it seems to me that they also become public. That is, the meanings are assigned--the symbols are used--according to some mode of interpretation which is socially generated and to which others have access, whether that mode be Freudian or the African Zionist Church.

It may be that this apparent problem arises from Firth's ambiguous use of language in defining the distinction between private and public symbols, for as I read through the book (especially the examples used in the later part of Chapter 6), I began to infer that the distinction was being based on "acceptance" rather than "understanding." For example, a person has a dream and gives it

a particular interpretation. Others understand his interpretation, but do not accept it as a valid one. At this point, Firth would term the individual's unacceptable interpretation a "private" one; thus, his symbols would be "private." Perhaps Firth could have avoided some confusion by avoiding the terms "private" and "public" altogether. They seem to connote a dualism which Firth denies implicitly throughout his book.

Any work which tackles a subject as broad and complex as symbols and symbolization is a likely candidate for criticism on the grounds that it attempts too much in too little space. I do not believe that it would be fair to offer such criticism of Symbols. To be sure, Firth neglects to mention scholars that another author might find germinal. (Personally, I would have included a discussion of Wittgenstein's views about language and meaning. Other folklorists may either be gratified or annoyed to learn that Max Müller is mentioned only once.) But Firth does not intend his book to be a "comprehensive general work" (p. 9). He has attempted to include a "range of ideas and material" (p. 9) that relate not just to the study of symbols, but more particularly to the study of symbols by anthropologists, "proto-anthropologists," and those who have had some recognizable influence on anthropological thinking. He has been careful to select exemplars which he sees as representative of larger approaches to the subject. If your favorite symbolist is not included in Firth's work, the chances are that a close intellectual relative stands in his place. I doubt that Firth could have carried out this study in any other way.

Folklorists may find Chapter 3 ("Development of Anthropological Interest in Symbols") particularly helpful in grasping the intellectual context of the emergence of interest in symbolism by folklorists. For example, most of us are familiar with the general impact of the romantic movement on folklore studies; perhaps fewer of us are familiar with the ideas of Karl-Phillip Moritz, Jacques Antoine Dulaure, and Friedrich Creuzer. Likewise, Chapter 4 ("Crystallization of Problems of Symbol Theory") treats a range of approaches and scholars, including ethnographic (and functional), psychological, and structural. Firth's discussion provides an easily accessible means to filling-in some of the gaps in our knowledge. If you have some expertise in one particular approach (or scholar), you may find Firth's description and analysis of it (or him) too superficial. You probably should not read Symbols with the intent of becoming an expert in one or another area of the subject, but rather to get a sensible overview of it. Firth provides ample references to allow you to pursue in much more detail any of a great variety of themes; therein lies Symbols' greatest value.