

## Rezensionen

**Barnard, Alan:** *Genesis of Symbolic Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 194 pp. ISBN 978-1-107-65109-8. Price: £ 16.99

“[T]he search for the beginnings of symbolism, and all that goes with it, is possible” (3). Upon this premise, Alan Barnard embarks on illustrating the insightfulness of ethnography in approximating the genesis of symbolic thought, by delving into the last 200,000 years of our evolutionary trajectory, which he deems to merit greater attention than was granted in his 2011 book “Social Anthropology and the Human Origins.”

Barnard commences by painting the interdisciplinary background for his exploration of the origins of symbolism through an introduction of cognitive, linguistic, philosophical, and archaeological issues (chap. 1), and a review of the fossil, genetic, and material evidence (chap. 2). Having contextualized the topic, he then moves towards his particular field of expertise. He initially demonstrates the interdependence of kinship and sociality with the totemic, mythological, and cosmological milieu, and suggests that since sharing would have been advantageous for our hunter-gatherer ancestors, their kinship, and thus their symbolic belief systems, would have also been flexible (chap. 3). Their religiosity in particular may have been monotheistic; as Barnard agrees with Father Wilhelm Schmidt, the founder of this journal, in that contemporary hunter-gatherers in Africa constitute a suitable proxy (chap. 4). In turn, the need to construct mythological narratives would have instigated the emergence of recursive languages, which led the author to the speculation that linguistic pluralism may not have been uncommon amongst earlier humans, such as the inhabitants of Blombos Cave, South Africa (chap. 5). Having pinpointed the African origin of the earliest symbol and language-using humans, Barnard then acknowledges their world heritage by describing their dispersal across the planet (chap. 6), before making a pivotal contradistinction between such hunter-gatherers and the agro-pastoralists of the Neolithic (chap. 7). Given that the former were characterized by sharing and freedom, while the latter emphasized accumulation and sovereignty, their supernatural domains would have, not surprisingly, been largely at odds, for magic practiced by hunter-gatherers tends to be collective and benevolent, whereas that practiced by agro-pastoralists tends to be idiosyncratic and malicious. Barnard hence sees the Neolithic as a time during which humanity became impoverished in terms of both social-

ity and symbolism. He thus concludes by calling on interdisciplinarity in tracing our social- and symbol-enriched past (chap. 8).

Given that “[s]ociety, or sociality, as it is found among *Homo sapiens sapiens* is in its essence about symbolism” (87), this volume attests to the promising potential of social anthropology in enriching the narratives typically constructed by prehistoric archaeologists, biological anthropologists, and scholars studying the origins of language. Aspiring to their synergistic coalition, Barnard follows a fruitful interdisciplinary path towards the origins of symbolism by drawing upon a wide range of disciplines, such as: linguistics, genetics, paleoanthropology, archaeology, rock art studies, religious studies, folklore, sociology, psychoanalysis, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, and social anthropology. While his multidimensional arguments occasionally lacked in flow and interconnectedness, a useful cross-disciplinary array of terms has been included in the glossary, in order to assist the varied readership of this book.

However, interdisciplinary communication requires a shared definitional starting point, that was not clearly established in this work, as the author’s conceptualization of symbolism is rather abstruse. Being admittedly “reluctant to define the ‘symbolic’ too specifically,” Barnard has drawn from within the domain of social anthropology in order to provide a loose conceptualization of *symbolic culture* as both cultural and deeper than *material culture* (fashioned artefacts) and *aesthetic culture* (which may include culturally understood objects, whether fashioned or not) (17). Yet the exact criteria for making such distinctions remain elusive. His notion of symbolism becomes further convoluted considering that he appears to have been influenced by both Saussurian semiology (9) and Peircian semiotics (78) – two doctrines that are largely antithetic (Milton Singer, *For a Semiotic Anthropology*. In: T. A. Sebeok [ed.], *Sight, Sound, and Sense*. Bloomington 1978: 202–231). Although not explicitly subscribing to Saussure’s semiology, he seems to be treating symbols as bipartite holders, rather than tripartite mediators, of meaning – an approach indicative of the linguistic idiom admittedly dominating social anthropology (71). The representationalist perspective, however, has been recently challenged by an increasing minority of academics for disregarding the pragmatic side of signification. Taking into consideration the preoccupation of social anthropology with practices, their conflation with the onto-

logical realm of language overlooks their nonlinguistic action-constitutive meaning, which can instead be successfully described by dint of pragmatism. To this end perhaps, Barnard later touches upon Peircian semiotics, by acknowledging the indexical relation upon which the meaning of early ornamental shell beads must have been grounded (78). However, while such meaning is recognized as not purely arbitrary in nature, it is nevertheless treated as symbolic in the anthropological sense provided above (i.e., holding a deeper cultural meaning). Yet, from a Peircian point of view, a symbol is by definition purely arbitrary (Göran Sonesson, *The Meaning of Meaning in Biology and Cognitive Science. A Semiotic Reconstruction*. *Sign System Studies* 2006.34: 172). In this light, the indexicality of the shell beads should deprive them of any sort of symbolic connotations. Hence, since the various approaches to symbolism are incompatible and abstruse, a narrower and clearer conceptualization would have been a fitting cornerstone for such an endeavor.

Yet this should not be taken to detract from this volume's broader picture. As Alan Barnard deftly demonstrates throughout his laudable discourse, ethnography has certainly a lot to teach us, both within and beyond the academic sphere, regarding the entwining of subsistence mode and worldview. For by indicating the fundamental differences in the way of living – or rather more appropriately, thinking – between the earlier hunter-gatherers and the Neolithic agro-pastoralists, he resonates on some contemporary ideological issues. Nowadays, we do not engage in mythological narration, nor do we get to know our fellow humans literally as kin; we do not acquire deep knowledge of the environments we live in, nor do we know how to use the little, if any, spare time we have left (124). Upon such realizations, Barnard reasonably suggests we understand and celebrate the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, as “[t]hat lifestyle is what made us human in the first place” (148). Informed by archaeological findings, anthropologists are thus urged to trace the beginnings of this way of life, for – put in literary locution – “that is what is in our ‘blood’” (147). As Pistorius informs the young narrator Emil Sinclair on the human condition, in Hermann Hesse's “*Demian*” (London 2006: 117): “just as our body bears in it the various stages of our evolution back to the fish and further back still, we have in our soul everything that has ever existed in the human mind.” Granted, however, we have ostracized much ancestral ideology from daily practice, hunter-gatherer ethnography proves indeed imperative in understanding the minds of our sapient ancestors, as well as our own.

Antonis Iliopoulos

**Beidelman, T. O.:** *The Culture of Colonialism. The Cultural Subjection of Ukaguru*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. 385 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-00208-2. Price: \$ 30.00

This book can be described, charitably, as versatile and rich, or less charitably, as uneven. This reviewer found parts of it very insightful and enjoyable, and others somewhat frustrating.

It is Beidelman's fourth and, as he professes, last book on “the Kaguru,” a smallish ethnic group in eastern Tanzania. He bows out from his long research career in and on this area with a book that is part a researcher's memoir of his working life, part fairly conventional ethnohistory, and part a fine-grained account of the working of “Indirect Rule” in his research area during the late colonial period. Beidelman is in the privileged position of having encountered indirect rule, even if a late incarnation, still in working order during his earliest fieldwork stays, and the book certainly makes the case that detailed recollections of this period continue to reward study.

Beidelman first discusses anthropologists' views on colonialism in general and indirect rule in particular, and then gives an overview of Kaguru history from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. The meat of his story, though, is in the five chapters arranged under the heading “Colonial Life.” They examine his research context in 1957–58, the set-up of Kaguru “Native Authorities,” the functioning of chiefs' courts, late-colonial conflicts with the authorities, and the area's relations with the wider Tanzanian polity and society. A discussion of post-colonial change and continuity, with emphasis on the latter, rounds the book off.

There is historical information here on many things worth knowing about, including the Kaguru's interaction with the ill-fated “Groundnut Scheme” at its Kongwa site, and the form one rural region's economic and political marginalisation took on at the end of colonialism. Much of the book, though, is a close-up accounts of “indirect rule in practice.” Such an account is not novel, but the genre does not, to this reader, grow old; certainly not if it contains as much telling detail as is the case here. As an American outsider, Beidelman observed British officials with a detached eye, and recollects striking expressions of everyday racial hierarchies, such as the insistence that servants go barefoot and avoid their employers' gaze. He also gained much familiarity with the African personnel of indirect rule, and shows how personal animosities and alliances, African intermediaries' self-interest, and their deference to the British presence, shaped administrative practice.

The result was far removed both from prefabricated British accounts of “traditional” chiefly authority, with their emphasis on collectivism and consensus, and from the modernising or civilising principles that British officials cited to justify interference with “tradition.” Beidelman here is reminiscent of Martin Chanock's “Law, Custom, and Social Order”: like him, he makes very clear that the power of appointed chiefs did not have “traditional” legitimacy, but rather derived from backing by the colonial authorities. It was seen as arbitrary, partisan, and often exploitative. Nevertheless, talk of “tradition” provided a powerful idiom in which to debate power. This was so even if the debate did not reach the ears of the British officials who ultimately underwrote chiefly authority.

Implicitly, Beidelman thereby makes a strong case against seeing the late colonial period as too far removed from the interwar one. It is striking how much the British officials and African intermediaries he encountered in the