

Reading and Doing Ethnography

Social Anthropology 314

4.3 Symptoms, Substitutions, Placeholders

In interpretation, one thing stands for another

- >> As a symptom
- >> As a substitute
- >> As a placeholder
- >> As a proxy

The logic of culture is often the logic of dreams: the logic of sneaky & indirect associations.

There are worse and better ethnographic interpretations

- >> "Near to the data" vs "Far from the data"
- >> Too obvious vs too implausible
- >> Too little theory vs too much

Large Thing (Russell Edson)

A large thing comes in.

Go out, Large Thing, says someone.

The Large Thing goes out, and comes in again.

Go out, Large Thing, and stay out, says someone.

The Large Thing goes out, and stays out.

Then that same someone who has been ordering the Large Thing out begins to be lonely, and says, come in, Large Thing.

But when the Large Thing is in, that same someone decides it would be better if the Large Thing would go out.

Go out, Large Thing, says this same someone.

The Large Thing goes out.

Oh, why did I say that? says the someone, who begins to be lonely again. But meanwhile the Large Thing has come back in anyway.

Good, I was just about to call you back, says the same someone to the Large Thing.

The Big Bird (Baya)

Once there was a little girl, and her mother was very wicked. The girl wanted to get married and her mother wouldn't let her.

But one day, a Gentleman came along, and this girl hid him in a hole and put the *djifna* [mortar] on top.

In the evening the mother comes home and she says: "Someone came in here." "No, no mommy, no one came," says the girl.

The mother says: "I'll rub henna on everyone in the house."

Henna is brought, and the girl comes, and the little dog and the cat, the chickens, the rabbits, all the animals, but not the birds, the jars come, the *tadjin* [spoon] comes, even the pitcher and the sieve and the basket.

But the *djifna* doesn't want to move, the Gentleman is underneath. The girl says: "The *djifna* is too old, it can't walk." She took a bit of henna in her hand, and she went and put it on the *djifna* there in its corner.

Abdellatif Laâbi

A footstep behind the door. Did someone knock? A feeling of having been here before. That January dawn almost a decade ago hovered in the silence and half-shadow of the room. a menace which has been since then an integral part of your metabolism. You're so used to it you do not even react physically. But you react by shriveling inside and straining to listen. it's the same reaction as that of a wild animal who senses its lair is surrounded and whose eyes swivel around in its dark den-like sentinels.

Your eyes renew their pillaging. The ceiling of this room is no higher than that of your cell. You start to look at the patches of damp to pick out or imagine shapes, outlines, animal silhouettes or geographers' maps. There, a small poodle stands on its hind legs and here, the southern tip of africa flanked by the island of Madagascar; further off a pattern that resembles a Rorschach test.

You are now falling back on one of the many habits you learned in prison. The prisoner and the ceiling of his cell. A silent, secret dialogue...

A text

My darling Mummy, my adored brother, my much loved Daddy, I am going to die! What I ask of you, especially you Mummy, is to be brave. I am, and I want to be, as brave as all those who have gone before me. Of course, I would have preferred to live. But what I wish with all my heart is that my death serves a purpose. I didn't have time to embrace Jean. I embraced my two brothers Roger and Rino. As for my real brother, I cannot embrace him, alas! I hope all my clothes will be sent back to you. They might be of use to Serge, I trust he will be proud to wear them one day. To you, my Daddy to whom I have given many worries, as well as to my Mummy, I say goodbye for the last time. Know that I did my best to follow the path that you laid out for me. A last adieu to all my friends, to my brother whom I love very much. May he study hard to become a man later on. Seventeen and a half years, my life has been short, I have no regrets, if only that of leaving you all. I am going to die with Tintin, Michels.

Mummy, what I ask you, what I want you to promise me, is to be brave and to overcome your sorrow. I cannot write any more. I am leaving you all, Mummy, Serge, Daddy, I embrace you with all my child's heart. Be brave! Your Guy who loves you.

The last letter of the young Communist militant, Guy Môquet, who was executed by the Germans on 22 October 1941.

The Treasure (Central European Jewish allegory)

A man from a certain town once dreamed that in Vienna, under a bridge, there lay buried treasure. He traveled to Vienna and stood there by the bridge trying to think what to do. During the day it would be impossible to dig because of the people.

As he stood there, a soldier passed by and asked, "What are you standing thinking about?" The man thought it would be best to tell him the truth. Perhaps he would help him and they could share the proceeds. He told him the whole story.

"I also had a dream," cried the soldier, "and in my dream I too saw a treasure. It was in a particular house belonging to a particular person."

The soldier mentioned the very name of the man's city and the name of the man himself. "There in the cellar lies a great treasure, and I want to go there and take it."

The man returned home, dug in his cellar and found the treasure.

"Now I know that the treasure is with me!" he said. "Except that to find out about it, I had to travel to Vienna."

Another similar text

My dear Melinée, my beloved little orphan,

In a few hours I will no longer be of this world. We are going to be executed today at 3:00. This is happening to me like an accident in my life; I don't believe it, but I nevertheless know that I will never see you again. What can I write you? Everything inside me is confused, yet clear at the same time.

I joined the Army of Liberation as a volunteer, and I die within inches of Victory and the final goal. I wish for happiness for all those who will survive and taste the sweetness of the freedom and peace of tomorrow. I'm sure that the French people, and all those who fight for freedom, will know how to honor our memory with dignity. At the moment of death, I proclaim that I have no hatred for the German people, or for anyone at all; everyone will receive what he is due, as punishment and as reward. The German people, and all other people will leave in peace and brotherhood after the war, which will not last much longer. Happiness for all... I have one profound regret, and that's of not having made you happy; I would so much have liked to have a child with you, as you always wished. So I'd absolutely like you to marry after the war, and, for my happiness, to have a child and, to fulfill my last wish, marry someone who will make you happy. All my goods and all my affairs, I leave them to you and to my nephews. After the war you can request your right to a war pension as my wife, for I die as a regular soldier in the French army of liberation.

With the help of friends who'd like to honor me, you should publish my poems and writings that are worth reading. If possible, you should take my memory to my parents in Armenia. I will soon die with 23 of my comrades, with the courage and the serenity of a man with a peaceful conscience; for, personally, I've done no one harm, and if I have, it was without hatred. It's sunny today. It's in looking at the sun and the beauties of nature that I loved so much that I will say farewell to life and to all of you, my beloved wife, and my beloved friends. I forgive all those who did me evil, or who wanted to do so, with the exception of he who betrayed us to save his skin, and those who sold us out. Lots of love to you, as well as your sister and all those who know me, near and far; I hold you all in my heart. Farewell. Your friend, your comrade, your husband.

Manouchian Michel

P.S. I have 15,000 francs in the valise on the rue de Plaisance. If you can get it, pay off all my debts and give the rest to Arméne. MM

Interpretation Exercises

Write down three possible interpretations of your fieldsite.

