*Equipped with his five senses, man explores the universe around him and calls the adventure Science*

*-Edwin Hubble*

**Question**

On p. 238, Myerhoff asserts that “symbols prevent change and at the same time prevent the accumulation of dissatisfaction with things as they are.” What does she mean here? Please explain how, according to Myerhoff, it might be that symbols can both prevent change and prevent dissatisfaction with a lack of change.

**Answer**

Myerhoff allocates the majority of chapter six to the discussion of the components of religion; she spends equal parts time citing applicable conclusions asserted by esteemed theorists as she does reconciling theory with her experience and the Huichol religion. What follows, then, is the cementing of a concise definition and establishing of purpose for symbols within this religion. In the ultimate chapter, Myerhoff solidifies the ground-up structure of religion – she discusses symbol, ritual and myth, explaining the role of each and how they serve to buttress the complex order required by a group of a religion. Many of Eliade’s themes are present in the theoretical consideration of religion, in particular the discussions surrounding what man requires of religious practices, but the focus lies primarily on ritual and its roles in Huichol religion. The quote that this essay is tasked with interpreting and explicating comes at a moment of clarity in the chapter, but lucidity is granted only after the reader is confronted with ambiguity; how can symbols prevent change and simultaneously prevent accumulation of dissatisfaction with things as they are? The answer lies in the nature of symbols themselves and their role within rituals, myth as well as the religion at large.

An eerie sense of ambiguity lies in the discussion of symbols continued onto page 238, but such is required in order to capture an accurate depiction of what a symbol is. Geertz contains symbols in an ambitiously simple and concise definition; he asserts that symbols are “any object, act, event, quality or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception. That conception is the symbol’s meaning”(230). For a non-expert, this definition is insufficient and relatively uninformative without context. Symbols are not to be thought of as just objects with an assigned meaning, rather, they are a quintessential element of the intellectual tradition with an “emphasis on the ways culture provides the forms and meanings by which men live”(230). They make intelligible large components of a population’s metaphysical construct and values, Myerhoff explains, “A symbol is a concrete embodiment of ‘ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs”(230). They help the individual mimic the ideals within the culture and have a deep rooted effect on values and actions within a society; Myerhoff writes, “Symbols are basically sources of information, ‘models-of’ as well as ‘models-for’ reality; that is, they do not merely *reflect* but actually *shape* other aspects of life. This shaping occurs by inducing a set of dispositions, moods, and motivations provided by the formulation of a conception of the general order of existence”(230). Thus, they serve as the foundation of society itself, both relaying traditions and values inherent as well as offering guidelines for future actions. As both artifacts of memory as well as prescriptive (or prospective) guides for times to come, it becomes evident how symbols can mitigate deviation from certain constructs while simultaneously cleanse the dissatisfaction that arises in historical real time.

Myerhoff’s assertion that one of the roles of symbols is to “prevent the accumulation of dissatisfaction with things as they are” (238), is overtly compatible with the primary purpose of religion presented by Eliade: to make suffering intelligible. In fact, Myerhoff explains symbols in a similar manner, citing them as an intellectual necessity; she writes that “man depends on symbols because he cannot endure a threat to his powers of comprehension” (230). She continues, emphasizing the vulnerability inherent without significant symbols: “severe anxiety accrues when man’s symbols fail him and his sense of lucidity is challenged” (231). Yet, the fibers of societal values seen in symbols can challenge the individual when they are provoked by Freudian desires; accordingly, these vehicles must also be equipped with proscriptive powers, “symbols not only convey meaning and provide motivations but also function in a regulative and constraining capacity”(232), Myerhoff writes, the latter serving as a cleansing mechanism which eradicates historical actions within the society and reestablishes peace. While symbols alone struggle to combat accrued dissatisfaction with the present, their role in ritual and myth is undeniable in such interests; symbols are embodied in rituals, and their meaning can be found in myth, Myerhoff writes, “myths provide the context, settings, explanations of ritual symbols, give them a rationale and postulate their significance”(237-8)OR “Myth provides the fiction, the verbal counterpart of ritual, which is the enactment of symbols”(238) **(CHOOSE ONE QUOTE)**. Through this complex religious infrastructure supported by its foundation in symbols, tension is diffused from societal dilemmas and operational frustrations which have accumulated. Building upon Levi-Strauss’s depiction of myth, Myerhoff highlights the soothing effects that myths allow for, “Myth formulates possibilities which will *not* be chosen; it shows them to be unsatisfactory, leaving behind the feeling that the existent state of affairs, with all its imperfections, is not so bad after all” (237). It is a delicate balance, however, she explains, “Levi-Strauss regards the myth and its symbols as formulating paradoxes without resolving them. The symbols present and at the same time screen those ineradicable features of social and historical reality which cause instability within a society” (237). Such ambiguity provoking reality is rather ubiquitous in the Huichol culture, when analyzed through the heuristic lens of symbols, Maize in particular. While it is certainly not the most sublime source of sustenance, “Tilling the soil has none of the excitement, honor, or prestige connected with every aspect of the deer and hunting” (209), Myerhoff bathetically describes, “Maize is mundane, unpredictable, and tedious” (209). The grudging appreciation towards maize symbolically, “in its personification it is characterized as vulnerable and demanding” (209), yet its nourishing role in barren lands affords the maize an undeniable gravitas; Myerhoff denotes that the spirit of the maize is often depicted as “threatening to leave the people on slight provocation” (209). The story of the maize baby elucidates Huichol sentiment towards maize; this myth relays a tale of neglect and its consequences. It serves as a reminder that “the existence of maize is provisional” (215), and that “monotonous and often taxing demands” (215) of cultivating maize must be met for “maize is our life” (215).

**Conclusion of Paragraph**: while dissatisfaction may arise from the banal reality of life, such feelings are both confronted and flanked by symbols which serve to invoke a recollection of either glorified memories or the awaiting disaster if myopic practices reign.

Symbols’ ability to prevent change is essential to their role in religion theory and abundant throughout the Huichol religion. Of particular significance to this consideration is the role of symbols in rituals; rituals are “the enactment of symbols” (238), and they are said to be a “behavior [that has been] stylized or formalized, and made repetitive in that form” (238). This rigid or crystallized state of rituals allows for them to perform a preservative role within a culture, especially one in a transitory stage. “Rituals occur, significantly, in dangerous situations” (238), Myerhoff asserts; applying especially to the Huichol people whose shift to an agrarian society remains incomplete. The peyote hunt is a ritual which allows the Huichols to “return to paradise” (240), but it is also a reminder of their lifestyle limbo; the ritual mimics the experience that confronted their ancestors and its structure allows the stalwart descendents of the Ancient Ones to temporarily return to unity and stability. Myerhoff summarizes the return to *Wirikuta,* “The peyote seekers, as the First People, left their sacred land involuntarily” (243), emphasizing the liminality inherent in this lifestyle transition. “Throughout their little time [in *Wirikuta*], they are in great peril, despite all their ritual precautions” (246), Myerhoff concludes, asserting that remaining in the homeland longer than prescribed would be “akin to’ uroboric incest’” (247); she explains, “this signifies the individual’s refusal to enter the world” (247), an agenda quite contrary to the well-being of the individual and the community. The ephemeral nature of the pilgrims’ return to *Wirikuta* serves as a preservation of the past, but also a reminder of the present necessities. As such, it makes sense that uroboric danger lingers considering the *symbol* appropriated to uroboros is a serpent swallowing its own tail; in relation to the Huichols, such indulgence may provide temporary pleasure (if you’re Oedipus, a snake/dragon, or simply tripping on Peyote), but is not a sustainable source of nutrition.

**Conclusion**

It can be seen through this examination of symbols and their purposes, oft paradoxical and contradictory, that the fundamental role they play is multifaceted and diverse. Like the mara’akame’s chair, symbols are composed of weak and strong in order to create something sacred and whole. While Myerhoff struggled to translate many esoteric elements of the Huichol religion, her explication of symbols in their culture, as well as in theory, were communicated with immaculate precision. Symbols, in and of themselves, are a universal component in any religion.

**Quote Appendix**

Turner’s work is most applicable for Huichol considerations, in my opinion, because as a people they remain in a liminal phase (shifting from nomadic to agrarian).

“Symbols are by definition multi-referential” (194).

“Turner’s interpretation of the functions served by symbols is anticipated by his observation that they are ‘multi-vocal,’ that is, they stand for many things at once” (194).

Turner points out symbols have three main properties in religion/ritual: “*condensation,* their representation of many things and actions by a single formation; *unification of disparate significata,* the connection of the differing referents because they are associated in fact or thought, and therefore felt to possess analogous qualities; and *polarization of meaning.* By the latter Turner means the existence of two clearly distinguishable poles of meaning encompassed by symbols, one *ideological,* referring to the moral and social principles and norms of the group, and the other *sensory* or physiological, representing basic, universal human characteristics” (196-197).

Myerhoff notes in the preface, “Throughout, I have been most concerned with the questions: How do the deer-maize-peyote symbols and the peyote hunt rituals give meaning to Huichol life? I have not attempted to describe all of the Huichols’ religion or cosmology” (16).

“The *peyoteros* were not ‘acting like’ the deities or impersonating them. There was no place for ‘as if’s’ in the ritual; the participants had been transformed, and for them the experience was immediate and direct, not symbolic” (21 Preface).

“Their way of life is old and distinctive, and outside influences…have changed them remarkably little” (29).

“These people, unlike most Mexican Indians, reveal no evidence of feeling oppressed or conquered, however poor and dirty they may be”(29-30).

“Genuine sacred symbols and the rituals that contain them are boundlessly rich and ultimately unfathomable and inexhaustible, except for a moment at a time. They are alive and full of power and present new possibilities when beheld at different times and by different people. Ramon understood and communicated the sustaining power of his people’s sacred symbols”(51).

“The peyote hunt is at the very heart of Huichol beliefs. Three interrelated purposes are accomplished during that event: the separate symbols, deer, maize, and peyote, are fused into a single entity; the pilgrims retrieve their spiritual and historical beginning”(50).

“Ramon understood and communicated the sustaining power of his people’s sacred symbols”(51).

“In actuality and in myth they do retrace the route of the Ancient Ones. These First People are said to have left their homeland under duress, to have suffered and languished in the mountains until they were led back to Wirikuta by the First Mara’akame, following the original path of their ancestors”(55-56).

“And it is in terms of this ‘incomplete transition’ hypothesis that so much of Huichol ideology in general, and the deer-maize-peyote complex in particular, become comprehensible and can be seen to fulfill an essential function”(59).

“Religion cannot be severed from other aspects of Huichol life”(73).

“To be in accord with one another, with oneself, with one’s customs – this is the state of being a proper Huichol and it is sacred. It is a dynamic condition of balance in which opposites exist without neutralizing each other, a tension between components that does not blur their essential separateness”(74).

“Special sacredness accrues to the combination of weak and strong; thus innocence and vulnerability are treasured and carefully protected by those who are the most powerful”(75).

“The [confession] is the first step toward attaining the ultimate goal of the peyote hunt, the return to innocence and the Paradise of the First Time”(133).

“The combination of deer, maize, and peyote represents a remarkable wholeness. When the Huichols juxtapose them and consider each to be an aspect of the other they are stating that man cannot live without a sense of his past, working for his living, or finding moments of solitary beauty”(227).

“Peyote is neither mundane, like maize, nor exotic and exciting, like deer. It is that solitary, ahistorical, asocial, asexual, non-rational domain without which man is not complete, without which life is a lesser affair”(227).

“In Wirikuta, a vision is attained by the operation of the deer, the maize, and the peyote; with lucidity and power, the symbols accomplish their sacred task of giving significance and order to main’s life”(229).

Symbols are part of the intellectual tradition with an “emphasis on the ways in which culture provides the forms and meanings by which men live”(230).

Geertz definition of symbols: “any object, act, event, quality or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception. That conception is the symbol’s meaning”(230).

Perception v conception. Perception = all the bits of conceptual data. Per means through

Con means together, how do we ut all those pieces of data together to form categories. Defining how categories are delineated is quite more tedious. The concept is the category, but that does not mean it is clearly/concisely defined, that is to say it is able to be interpreted.

“The meanings of symbols can be experienced and apprehended but never fully and consciously understood if they are to remain effective. Because the special purpose of symbols is the encompassing of incompatible, irresolvable sets of referents, symbols must prevent the clear, undisguised recognition of the unsatisfactory nature of present arrangements, social or ideological”(238).

“A symbol is a concrete embodiment of ‘ideas, attitudes, judgements, longings, or beliefs’”(230).

“Symbols are basically sources of information, ‘models-of’ as well as ‘models-for’ reality; that is, they do not merely *reflect* but actually *shape* other aspects of life. This shaping occurs by inducing a set of dispositions, moods, and motivations provided by the formulation of a conception of the general order of existence”(230).

“Man depends on symbols because he cannot endure a threat to his powers of comprehension”(230).

“Severe anxiety accrues when man’s symbols fail him and his sense of lucidity is challenged”(231).

“Symbols consist of opposed poles of meaning – organic or sensory as against social or cultural”(231).

“Symbols not only convey meaning and provide motivations but also function in a regulative and constraining capacity”(232).

“One may view symbols and the rituals in which they are embedded as providing order, meaning, and moral coherence, and at the same time providing regulation and restraint”(233). \*\*\*\*This quote can be incorporated easily to your thesis. Try blending in, too, the concept of Freud’s id and ego dualism.

“In this analysis, then, one sees Geertz and Levi-Strauss stressing the provision of meaning and order through symbols”(234).

“Levi-Strauss feels that myths are not to be regarded as accurate depictions of reality but rather are a means of understanding unconscious categories. Myth formulates possibilities which will *not* be chosen; it shows them to be unsatisfactory, leaving behind the feeling that the existent state of affairs, **with all its imperfections, is not so bad after all”(237).**

“The myth makes paradoxes explicit but does not risk a conscious confrontation between elements which are truly in conflict and cannot ever be resolved. Levi-Strauss regards the myth and its symbols as formulating paradoxes without resolving them. The symbols present and at the same time screen those ineradicable features of social and **historical reality which cause instability within a society”(237).**

“Meaning of symbols can be found in myth, ostensibly. Myths provide the context, settings, explanations of ritual symbols, give them a rationale and postulate their significance”(237-8).

“The meanings of symbols can be experienced and apprehended but never fully and consciously understood if they are to remain effective. Because the special purpose of symbols is the encompassing of incompatible, irresolvable sets of referents, symbols must prevent the clear, undisguised recognition of the unsatisfactory nature of present arrangements, social or ideological”(238).

“A completely safe ritual is dead, and impotent; it is ritualized, reduced to mere form. Such deadening occurs when the symbols contained in the ritual no longer have vital referents, or when the ritual has overwhelmed the symbolic aspect and choked back the danger entirely”(239-40).