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FROM THAILAND

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PENNY VAN ESTERIK

CONTINUITIES AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN SYMBOLISM: A CASE STUDY FROM THAILAND

Since P. E. de Josselin de Jong first proposed that Southeast Asia could be considered a single ethnological area of study and was criticized for the formulation (1965), few attempts have been made to deal with the continuity of Southeast Asian symbols through time or to speculate on the relation between similar structures in different social, political and ecological contexts. To some extent, this reflects a change in theoretical climate away from studies which rely on diffusionist explanations for the distribution of objects or ideas. Such questions are easily reduced to mere ethnographic description – a mapping of the spread of certain objects or symbols throughout Southeast Asia – or untestable speculations on the origin of a particular symbol. Anthropologists may also avoid looking at symbols diachronically by arguing that the meaning of a symbol has been lost through time and it is therefore no longer possible to discover a precise meaning.

In past scholarship on Southeast Asia, there is a long tradition of interest in symbolism expressed by scholars from a variety of disciplines. The most significant resources on Southeast Asian symbolism are detailed studies of particular symbolic domains such as Adam's work on Sumba textiles (1969), or Gittinger's analysis of the symbolism of Indonesian textiles (1979). The house has been treated as a symbolic domain by both Cunningham (1964) and Hicks (1976) in Timor, and Turton (1978) and Tambiah (1970) in Thailand. On the state level, the architecture of capital cities, palaces, and pilgrimage sites has been analyzed as a microcosm of cosmological order by Heine-Geldern (1956), and Mus (1978). Cultural performances such as Balinese dance dramas (Belo 1949), Javanese theatre (Anderson 1965) and Balinese cock-fights (Geertz 1972), provide further contexts for symbolic expression. These

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and numerous other studies clearly demonstrate the richness and complexity of symbolic systems in Southeast Asia.

Many of these studies present a common approach to symbolism; that is, they emphasize the binary opposition of the symbols, recognizing too, the complementarity of the oppositions. Most ethnographers recognize the difficulty in establishing cognitive saliency for symbolic structures, yet critics have asked whether these symbolic oppositions exist in the minds of the people studied or their analysts. Binary oppositions have been interpreted as residues of an underlying double unilateral social organization (cf. Rassers 1959), or as reflections of the natural tendency of the human mind.

More sophisticated versions of symbolic oppositions emphasize how symbolic systems express underlying principles of classification, and how these classification systems are used by a particular group of people. Milner's volume on natural symbols in Southeast Asia (1978) focused on oppositions such as up/down, in/out, male/female and left/right in mainland and island Southeast Asia, and showed how these classifications could be manipulated in social interaction. Yet classification systems, however fascinating they may be, represent only one part of our symbolic competence. More dynamic processes, such as the creation, transformation and continuity of symbols offer equally challenging problems.

Bosch (1960), in his examination of two Hindu-Javanese motifs, the lotus scroll and the aquatic monster, proposes how meanings of symbols change through time. He shows how meanings are embedded in other meanings and cannot be neatly separated. Meanings, then, accumulate through time, although a basic form contains in embryonic state all potential meanings or appearances which may develop in different contexts. Each form of the motif of an aquatic monster, for example, is isomorphic with the basic embryonic form and not necessarily linked to all other expressions of that form. Bosch's argument is important since it avoids the danger of looking for genetic relations or historical continuity between unrelated appearances of a particular symbol in Southeast Asia.

These and other approaches to Southeast Asian symbolism raise two questions which will be addressed in this essay:

1. How are symbols transformed through time?
2. Why are symbols transformed through time?

Symbols and Symbolizing

Let me make explicit my assumptions about symbols and symbolizing. A symbol is any object, act, event, quality or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception; the conception is the symbol's meaning (Geertz 1973a:91). Building on this well known definition, we can add the following working assumptions:

1. Symbols do not occur in isolation but are part of symbol systems. It is

the relation between symbols that is particularly instructive. The interconnections between symbols are patterned both in time and space. For example:

- symbols associated with Theravada Buddhism, such as the *naga* (water serpent), appear in several symbolic domains – myth, ritual, craft products, or architecture.
- objects with symbolic associations may be widely distributed in space, such as the memorial posts found throughout Southeast Asia from Assam to the Celebes.
- objects with symbolic associations are distributed historically through time, and are reinterpreted, transformed or dropped from the symbolic repertoire of a group.

2. Symbols have the capacity to accumulate meanings. This is possible because symbols are themselves interpretations. Since symbolic systems are mental structures, they can be viewed as actively constructed on the part of individuals. Past knowledge and present social interaction influence these constructions. And anything that an individual must interpret, can also be reinterpreted.

3. Since symbolic interpretation is a product of the mental structures of individuals, it will be impossible to circumscribe the precise meanings of a symbol. Wessing views the meaning of symbols as the intersection of the individual interpretations (Wessing 1978:177). Thus, we should look for the relation between meanings, recognizing that the ambiguity, vagueness, or lack of agreement in meanings guarantees their reinterpretation.

4. The more individuals and groups attribute symbolic meaning to an object, the greater the stability that symbol will have, and the greater the resistance to change. We should therefore expect to see linked changes in symbols through time, as new meanings are built from old meanings. These links may give the appearance of cultural stability, but in fact, the meanings are better thought of as accumulating and changing through time.

In the following sections, I will apply these arguments by illustrating how ceramic jars might have accumulated symbolic meanings through time in the area that is now Thailand.

The Substantive Base of Southeast Asian Symbols

The multiple meanings that individuals assign to symbols should relate to each other in some way. One suggestion is that the meanings of symbols are related to the literal meaning of the antecedent object, the idea or thing being used symbolically. In spite of the ability to tie meaning to what Sperber (1975) calls the substantive base of a symbol, it is not possible to define precisely or circumscribe the meaning of any particular symbol (Lehman 1978:184). It is this openness of symbol systems, the lack of agreement between meanings, and, some might

argue, the vagueness and ambiguity of meanings, that guarantees their frequent reinterpretation. Objects that are used as symbols have proper or literal meanings of their own, and these literal meanings are the material out of which symbolic significance arises (Lehman 1978:182).

Consider pottery vessels, a common object in archaeological and ethnographic contexts throughout Southeast Asia. If the meaning of symbols can be related to the literal meaning of the antecedent object, as argued above, what properties of ceramic jars could serve as the substantive base of their meaning – that is, the meaning that derives from the natural and material properties of the objects used as symbols? (Sperber 1975:13).

Jars are made by man. They are not natural objects, but are transformed from raw material, clay, by heating. Pottery making requires substantial knowledge and more than a little luck to avoid costly firing errors. Jars, bowls, or urns can hold solids or liquids and are usually round. They may be analyzed into component parts – lip, mouth, neck, body, and foot – by analogy with the human body. Further, they may be valued for the color and sheen of their glaze or the sound they make when struck.

Jars probably always have had a pragmatic function for food storage, preservation and cooking. This, however, does not detract from their being simultaneously symbols. Solheim divides Southeast Asian pottery into utilitarian and ceremonial ware, noting that there is often a difficulty in assigning certain pottery items to either function (Solheim 1965:255). We might say that jars are simultaneously used and thought about. (Good to think and good to eat from, to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss.)

Let us apply this approach to symbolism to observations and knowledge about specific people living in Southeast Asia at a particular place and time. I will begin with an area in northeast Thailand, in the last millennium B.C., as one context where symbolic activity is evident. I am not suggesting this as a time or place where specific symbols originated, but rather I am grounding these arguments in sites of acknowledged importance for Southeast Asian culture history, Non Nok Tha and Ban Chiang.

What is there in the environment of these people living in the last millennium B.C. that might have served to condense symbolic information critical to the maintenance of their social system? What could be suitable vehicles for conceptions – complex enough to be composed of several salient features, yet capable of condensing or encapsulating certain important ideas?

1. Features of the natural environment such as bodies of water or heights of land may have been significant.
2. The human body could be a prime antecedent object, and often serves as a root metaphor in different symbol systems.
3. Rice, as a primary food substance, probably carried metaphoric

meaning above and beyond its nutritional value, as it does in Southeast Asia today.

4. Certain animal forms, birds such as hornbills, and fish or lizards may have been separated out for symbolic elaboration.

5. House form or settlement pattern could be a potential symbolic model.

6. Products of complex technological processes such as ceramics, textiles, and metals could have carried a heavy symbolic load.

Because of the nature of archaeological evidence, it is the last category – products of complex technological processes – that provide the clearest evidence of elaboration. Marie Jeanne Adam's work on the technical processing of materials in Southeast Asia has provided important insights into the relation between technology and ideology in Southeast Asia. She writes: "Essentially what I am suggesting is that we look at the repetitive and structured techniques of processing materials in daily life as parallels to or possibly models for other activities, in particular, some of those that we call imaginative, projective, or more value-laden, such as ritual and art forms" (Adams 1977:47). Although cognitive structures underlying problem solving in technologies may also underlie aesthetic choices, I am not arguing that technological systems are primary and ideological systems secondary or derivative. Rather, this approach suggests that technological operations must be extensively thought about, and these thoughts may provide analogies for other things which people must think about.

To argue that these products might be vehicles for conceptions, let us first determine if there is any logical way that ceramics, textiles, and metals might have formed a complex or been associated in the past, and secondly, if these associations might have been symbolic.

Ceramics, bronze, and textiles need not be viewed as isolated technological processes, but may be interdependent. Solheim proposed a set of interrelated technological complexes that developed around the eighth millennium B.C.: pottery manufacture, bark cloth manufacture, cordage, and basketry. He points out that much of the Southeast Asian pottery is made with a cord-wrapped paddle similar to the beaters used in the manufacture of bark cloth (Solheim 1969:132). Production of cordage and basketry are easily transferred to the processes of textile manufacture. Van Esterik and Kress (1978) demonstrated how ceramic rollers associated with infant burials at Ban Chiang could have been associated with a variety of decorative functions, including fabric painting.

Similarly, Harrison and O'Connor have discussed the association between iron slag and ceramic sherds from several sites in Borneo. They argue that both ceramic manufacture and smelting require a carefully controlled heat source, and doubt that metallurgical skills could develop without an attendant ceramic complex (Harrison and O'Connor 1969).

Recently, O'Connor has hypothesized that the relation between ceramics and metal is more than a technical association; it is a metaphoric summary of the processes of creation and destruction inherent in mining operations: "the scatter of Chinese high-fired ceramics, earthenwares, and valuable glass in an iron manufactory can be 'read' as atonement for a disturbance of the natural order" (O'Connor 1978:27).

Although it is possible to view ceramics, bronze and textiles as strictly utilitarian products, it is illuminating to view them as capable of extensive metaphoric expansion of meanings for the following reasons. The production of all three is complex and requires a substantial amount of knowledge to produce some degree of standardization. Since the production of metals and ceramics is quite dangerous and problematic, it is likely that these processes were surrounded with some degree of ritual protection. With the expansion of rice farming communities in mainland Southeast Asia by the first millennium B.C., some form of local identification or ethnic boundary marker would have been useful to distinguish otherwise identical groups symbolically. Consider, for example, the importance of textiles as markers of ethnic identity in Southeast Asia today. Further, Solheim has noted throughout Thai prehistory the retention of distinct local pottery styles in sites within 150 miles of one another (Solheim 1972:18). Pottery, then, may have served as a marker of community identity.

The social groups in the Khorat plateau would likely have needed exchange systems to redistribute subsistence goods across ecological boundaries and obtain widely dispersed valuable resources such as tin. Shared symbol systems would likely accompany this kind of social interaction. The pattern in Southeast Asia of one ethnic group producing valued objects for another group still exists today. For example, the Shan produced the bronze drums used by the Karen, and similar transactions occur in the production and distribution of ceramics and silver jewelry (cf. Cooler 1979). Finally, we should note the early and widespread Indonesian pattern of symbolic exchanges in which textiles defined as female goods are exchanged with metal objects (weapons) defined as masculine (Adams 1969; Gittinger 1979). These exchanges are particularly obvious during funerals.

Although jars, textiles and metals have all been proposed as suitable antecedent objects for symbolic elaboration, I will limit the discussion to ceramic jars to illustrate how these objects may have been interpreted symbolically in one area of Southeast Asia, Thailand.

Jars are part of symbol systems and are the aesthetic locus for many groups, both past and present, in Southeast Asia. They are complex objects exhibiting a wide range of discrete attributes and therefore should be suitable antecedent objects for symbolic elaboration. Assuming that they are used symbolically, what is the context in which jars acquire meaning?

Death is an event which calls forth the use of key symbols with maximum power to communicate to bereaved individuals and disrupted social groups. Symbols associated with death, then, must be capable of both private and public interpretation. We might expect rituals associated with death to reaffirm social values and restore order through the use of important symbols. In the following sections, the evidence for the association of jars with death will be reviewed.

Archaeological Context of Jars

By the fourth millennium B.C., the Khorat plateau in northeast Thailand was occupied by settled village rice farmers, who were skilled hunters, excellent potters, and masters of bronze technology. Population expansion in the upland of northwest Thailand among populations practising a broad spectrum hunting, fishing, and gathering subsistence pattern, resulted in pioneer occupation of the rolling piedmont of the Khorat plateau some time prior to 3600 B.C. in sites such as Non Nok Tha and Ban Chiang. By 4000 B.C., the inhabitants were already adapted to village life on the Southeast Asian lowlands (White 1982:21). Both these sites are primarily cemetery sites for which there is a long sequence of dates extending from the fourth to the first millennium B.C. (Bayard 1972, 1980; White 1982; Gorman and Charoenwongsa 1976).

Summarizing from the reports available from recent excavations in the vicinity of Ban Chiang, excavation of the low cemetery mound revealed a ritual pattern of extended burials with extensive grave goods, including bronze axes and moulds, crucibles, bracelets and wire necklaces, iron implements, pottery vessels, animal and human figurines, as well as substantial quantities of animal bone (Higham 1975:247).

In the sites of the Khorat plateau, pottery was clearly associated with rituals surrounding the death of male and female adults, children, and infants. In the early period at Ban Chiang (ca 3600-1000 B.C.) remains of infants – from a seven-month fetus to a two-year-old child – were found in ceramic jars. White suggests that the high proportion of infants a few weeks of age may be an indication of a high infant mortality rate or infanticide (White 1982:24). Adults and juveniles were buried with one or more jars of various styles placed toward the foot or head of the body (White 1982:24). Supine burials continued in the middle period (ca. 1000-500 B.C.). Jars were no longer offered as funerary gifts at the foot or head of the body, but shattered over the bodies before burial. Sheets of broken sherds were found over and sometimes under the burials. White speculates on the amount of labor and resources expended on large, elaborate burial vessels destroyed during each funeral ritual (White 1982:26). At Non Nok Tha, broken vessels described as sherd sheets also accompanied burials (Bayard 1972:123).

In the late period (ca. 300 B.C.-A.D. 200), large elaborately decorated vessels were placed intact on top of the body (White 1982:28). The

painted pottery found at Ban Chiang and other sites in northeast Thailand exhibits designs of exceptional beauty and complexity (cf. Van Esterik 1981, 1979).

Finally, in the more recent levels at Non Nok Tha, jars were used as funerary containers for ashes and remains of cremations much as they are in Southeast Asian Buddhist communities today. And interestingly enough, these iron age communities preferred to make use of jars excavated from the earlier graves (Bayard 1972:127). Elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia, jars were also associated with burials. Many of these sites are not dated or are placed into neolithic or bronze age stages of outmoded Southeast Asian stage models. In mainland Southeast Asia, Sa-huynh pottery, typed from a Vietnamese jar burial site, is generally associated with secondary burials. Solheim has identified this pottery in South Vietnam, Malaya and an island off south Thailand, and notes that it is usually associated with jar burials and “may be related to the large stone burial jars from Tran Hinh province of upper Laos” (Solheim 1969:134). These stone jars of Laos, large enough to hold ten men, are not dated, although they are generally thought to be associated with iron and dated immediately prior to the period of Indianization. The stone jars contain a few bones and teeth, and may have been used in the funeral rites of chiefs, while ordinary individuals were cremated and their ashes placed in earthenware jars (Coedès 1969:20).

In Island Southeast Asia, jar burials are found in the Philippines, Formosa, Java, Celebes, Sarawak, western New Guinea, and East Sumba. Van Heekeren (1957) describes a site in Melolo, East Sumba, where human skeletal remains – usually heads and long bones – were found in jars with additional jars as grave goods.

From the available archaeological evidence we can conclude that jars bear some metaphoric association with death. As containers for bodies, bones, or ashes, they figure in funeral rituals, the meaning of which cannot be determined directly. There is, however, evidence for the association of jars with death extending from the millennium before extensive contact with India.

Ethnographic Context of Jars

In the ethnographic present, jars can be talked and argued about as well as used. The archaeologist does not have access to this level of evidence. But meaning from an ethnographic context cannot be directly transferred by analogy to an archaeological context. We may, however, look for possible links between present and past meanings.

In non-Buddhist Southeast Asia, tribal groups make use of jars in ways that support the hypothesis that jars carry symbolic messages regarding death. P. E. de Josselin de Jong writes that “the jar, the vase, the urn, the pot, are beyond any doubt symbolic of the underworld in South and Southeast Asian cultures” (de Josselin de Jong 1965:288).

Schärer describes the graves of Ngaju of Borneo where upperworld and underworld as a totality are represented as a mountain with a sacred jar containing primeval waters (Schärer 1963:24-5).

From the association of jars with burials, their connection with the underworld is clear. But underworld and upperworld may be conceptually linked through a set of ideas linking jars with creation. The underworld is both the tomb and the womb, allowing jars to be linked to broader concepts of fertility and the rebirth of vegetation (Hicks 1976; Loeffler 1968).

Jars should also be mentioned in relation to their association with feasts of merit, rituals which simultaneously link status in this life with status in the next. Feasting activities among groups such as the Chin, Naga, Kachin and Lamet reaffirm claims to status in this life and validate changes in status, including the most dramatic change – death. In these systems, jars of rice beer may substitute for an animal sacrifice or a human head (de Josselin de Jong 1965:288; c.f. von Furer-Haimendorf 1967).

The process of creating and using pottery may be further linked to the process of human development. The union of masculine rain and feminine soil which symbolizes human conception for the Sumbanese, also produces the potter's clay, which, like a child, is molded into shape and is eventually fired to maturity (Adams 1979:95). For Thai women, this firing was defined quite literally as the fire of maturity, which "roasts" a woman as she lies by it after childbirth (Hanks 1963:71). Continuing the analogy between pottery and human development, a pottery vessel is ritually killed or broken when it accompanies the deceased on the return trip to the underworld. This metaphor adds another potential dimension of meaning to pottery in Southeast Asia.

To summarize, ethnographic examples link jars with both death and creation, and throughout island and mainland Southeast Asia jars may stand for other objects which mark a person's status in this life and the next. Linking this meaning to present-day Southeast Asia, jars may be valued as heirlooms with special properties or powers.

Buddhist Context

Is there a place for jars in the Hindu-Buddhist symbolism of Southeast Asia? Clearly there is and, once again, jars retain their association with death and the underworld. But the Buddhist world is now redefined, expanded and compartmentalized into the thirty-one levels of the Hindu-Buddhist cosmos (King 1964).

Jars may enter the Hindu-Buddhist ideological system through lotus symbolism, a key summarizing symbol encapsulating information about Buddhism most vividly. Jars may substitute for the chief organ of the lotus, the *padmamula*. The substitution is logical since both may contain liquids, and both are round. The liquid in the jar or lotus center is likened

to *soma* or *amrita* and is a source of fertility and goodness. The earthenware jar, containing primeval waters and providing the base for the tree of knowledge, may assume the form of the *padmamula* and certain life-giving, fertility-bestowing soma (cf. Bosch 1960:III, figure 14). This metaphor is linked to the cosmology of the Ngaju, for example, who view jars as the gift (or fruit) of the tree of knowledge. (Note, too, that the Thai word *kot*, for the container for cremated remains, is derived from the Sanskrit *kosa*, which includes testicles as one of its meanings.)

In Buddhist Southeast Asia, jars retain their value as heirlooms and are often presented to Buddhist temples, where antique jars may be seen sitting in dark corners or displayed in glass cases.

Within Buddhist world order, spirits which are capable of disrupting the lives of humans still need to be dealt with. Thai Buddhists deal with these spirits by propitiating them with offerings presented in miniature jars. If they still intrude on the lives of the living, spirits can be exorcised, captured, and buried in earthenware jars or drowned in jars with close fitting lids.

Earlier, I suggested analogies between the process of producing a pot and the human life cycle. This theme can also be tied to a scriptural interpretation found in the *Visuddhi-Magga*, where "the fiery element digests what is eaten and drunk . . . and cooks the body and gives it its beauty of complexion. And the body thus cooked is kept free from decay" (Warren 1969:159). It is in this scriptural source that the potential for analogy with firing pottery is expressed.

The association of jars with death continues in the Buddhist context, where jars function as reliquaries containing ashes or bone fragments of the deceased. These jars may be kept prominently displayed in homes, stored in temple grounds, or buried. But jars no longer are interpreted simply as containers. There is an additional set of symbolic associations attached to jars. Adams has pointed out the association of jars with the processes of fermentation and decay in the decomposition of vegetable dyes, the fermentation of food and drink, and the decomposition of corpses (Adams 1977:42-47). Again, technological processes provide the basis for symbolic elaboration. Buddhists utilize the metaphor of decomposition in a distinctive manner.

For Theravada Buddhists, meditations on death are an important means of comprehending life. The *Visuddhi-Magga* identifies two methods of meditating on death, *asubha bhāvanā* (meditation on foulness) and *maranasati* (mindfulness of death) (Bond 1980:242). *Asubha bhāvanā* meditation utilized bodies in various stages of decay as suitable objects for meditation, reminding the meditator that attachment to the body is a source of suffering. The royal reliquary urns holding the body of deceased kings of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia also focused attention on the body as a stage for decay.

Mindfulness of death comes from recognizing that death is a constant

phenomenon occurring at every moment as the aggregates (composite parts of the body) arise and pass away. The mind then comes to recognize the natural process of decay which is an inevitable part of life and death. Burial urns, as a stage for the breaking down of substances, epitomize the basic process of life – in *abhidhammic* thought, the arising and dissolving of *citta* (or consciousness-moment) in the decay and creation emerging from the jar of life.

Conclusion

Jars, as one element of a symbolic system of considerable antiquity in Southeast Asia, carry extensive symbolic meanings. I have argued that these diverse meanings may be linked to form metaphoric extensions of meaning through time. Jars are receptacles for human bodies, remains from secondary burials and ashes. They are also suitable offerings to the dead, either as complete vessels, sherd sheets, or as votive offerings. From their burial associations, they become suitable symbols of the underworld. Yet the underworld is also capable of interpretation as the source of new life, fertility and vegetation. Underworld and upperworlds are conceptually linked and jars may mark an individual's status in either life. But the process of creating a pot may also provide a model for human conception, growth and maturity, and eventual destruction. Buddhism builds on this symbolic base through lotus symbolism where jars represent the chief organ of the lotus in Hindu-Buddhist iconography, and through their continued association with death as containers for bodies and ashes. This latter function is linked to the meditations on death in Theravada Buddhism and to the nature of reality in *abhidhammic* thought.

The view of symbolism summarized here has important implications for understanding both Southeast Asian culture history and the process of symbolizing. What makes this approach more than “daisy-picking”, as Hildred Geertz called de Josselin de Jong's speculation on Southeast Asian agricultural rites (1965)? If new meanings of symbols are constructed from or linked to old meanings, if meanings of key symbols are easily accumulated and transferred, then there is no need to postulate an “underlying animistic substratum”, or “pre-Aryan stage” to account for symbolic continuities in Southeast Asia. We could dispense with concepts like survivals, cultural lag, and extreme diffusionism, which are no longer defensible in anthropological theory, but which crop up easily in studies of symbolism and material culture. Instead, similarities in symbol systems can be linked to our growing understanding of the cognitive capacities of all humans.

This approach to symbolism also helps account for the spread of Hindu-Buddhist ideology in mainland Southeast Asia. For Buddhism to be readily adopted by populations not organized into state systems, we should expect some degree of symbolic continuity between the belief

systems of Buddhist and non-Buddhist. The existence of symbols whose meaning could be easily transferred would facilitate this process. I have illustrated how jars may have acquired Buddhist meanings through their association with death. Other potential vehicles for conceptual linkages could doubtlessly be found both in Buddhism and in Islam.

We have not yet addressed the question posed in the introduction: why do symbols have continuity through time? We can speculate that the construction of symbol systems is a response to a drive in humans, referred to as the cognitive imperative. This concept refers to the need in humans to order their world into a systematic cognitive whole, requiring the ordering of spatial elements and durational processes into causal sequences (cf. Laughlin and d'Aquili 1974). Patterning of symbols, then, would be selected for in evolutionary terms if it increased the amount of information individuals could process. In fact, the survival of populations would depend on the orderliness of communication, as Rappaport argues: "With symbolic communication, an unlimited variety of messages may be transmitted through the combination of a very small number of basic units, and discourse upon past, future, distant, and imaginary events becomes possible" (Rappaport 1971:261). Geertz argues that meanings can only be stored in symbols, which function to conserve the fund of general meanings which individuals use to interpret their experience and organize their conduct (Geertz 1973b:127).

Symbolic coding is adaptive for several reasons. It facilitates human interaction by conserving time and energy, which can then be expended elsewhere in cultural elaboration rather than in negotiating and maintaining agreement between individuals (Wessing 1978:177). Schneider relates symbol systems to social actions in the following manner: "Culture, which I have defined here as a system of symbols and meanings, I consider to be one important determinant of action, and I hold that social action is a meaningful activity of human beings. Social action requires commonality of understandings; it implies common codes of communication; it entails generalized relationships among its parts mediated by human understanding" (Schneider 1976:198).

This argument can be productively applied to the historical continuity of symbols. Transmission of symbol systems through time and sharing of symbol systems across ecological boundaries would simply be more efficient than starting from scratch. It would be easier to build on an available base and modify that, than construct a whole new symbolic pattern. Thus, new meanings are established with reference to old meanings.

There is a paradox here, which reminds us to tread carefully in the analysis of symbols. For while we expect that meanings of symbols may vary among individuals, and may change through time, we also expect some symbolic structures to be shared through time and across ecological boundaries. This follows from the argument that there is an advan-

tage to social groups who build new meanings from old meanings. Recognition of the tension between conservation and creation of symbols, between individual interpretation and social consensus, should help keep the study of Southeast Asian symbolism dynamic and challenging in the future.

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