

WILEY



A · M · E · R · I · C · A · N
A N T H R O P O L O G I C A L
A S S O C I A T I O N

Cognizing "Cognized Models"

Author(s): Eric R. Wolf

Source: *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 101, No. 1 (Mar., 1999), pp. 19-22

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of the [American Anthropological Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/683338>

Accessed: 19/06/2013 14:03

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Wiley and American Anthropological Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Anthropologist*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

ERIC R. WOLF

City University of New York
New York, NY 10031

Cognizing “Cognized Models”

In his later work Rappaport acknowledged that his earlier efforts had overemphasized organic and ecological functions in the explanation of cultural phenomena. He then distanced himself from both idealism and reductive materialism and set out to understand the complexities of cultural understandings and ritual. Specifically, he shifted from functionalism to formalism in an effort to understand ritual and its language in relation to cultural norms. Ultimately his analysis was implicitly structural, understanding the part as a constituent of an overarching arrangement and in terms of what Althusser would have called “structural causality.” Although his work benefited from this shift from function to structure, Rappaport did not use it to explore the political dimension. However, a holistic ecology such as the one Rappaport essayed must ultimately embrace both political ecology and historical ecology. [*cognized models, ritual, political ecology, structural causality*]

It is a great privilege to take part in this reflection on Roy Rappaport’s contribution to the anthropological enterprise. Throughout his career, he spoke to the basic issues that beset our discipline. His discussions and clarifications are especially important for us at this moment, when many of our guiding paradigms and methodologies are up for grabs.

In these comments, I focus especially on Rappaport’s “operational” and “cognized” models, and their implications. The operational model is one “which the anthropologist constructs through observation and measurement of empirical entities, events, and material relationships. He takes this model to represent, for analytic purposes, the physical world of the group he is studying” (1984:237). It is produced by anthropologists and serves anthropological purposes: “As far as the actors are concerned it has no function. Indeed, it does not exist” (p. 238). Yet for the anthropologist it defines “reality” (p. 239). The cognized model, on the other hand, “is the model of the environment conceived by the people who act in it” (p. 238). It

has a function for the actors; it guides their action. Since this is the case, we are particularly concerned to discover what the people under study believe to be the fundamental relationships among the entities that they think are part of their environment, and what they take to be “signs,” indicating changes in these entities and relationships, which demand action on their part. . . . [pp. 238–239]

Elements of each model may appear in the other, but the two models “need not always be isomorphic or identical” (p. 238). Yet the two models may be compared; and, from the perspective of the anthropological observer/analyst, what is interesting about the cognized model is “the extent

to which it elicits behavior that is appropriate to the material situation of the actors” (p. 239, emphasis removed)—that is, the extent to which it furnishes signals for useful action.

Like many ecologically oriented anthropologists at that time, such as the young Marshall Sahlins, Rappaport hoped to find secure material, biological, or ecological grounding for cultural features. Nevertheless, his conceptual formulations avoided the temptation to think of cultural phenomena as mere mystifications of material causes and relationships. They embodied the recognition that cultural phenomena—“cognized models”—required descriptions and explanations in their own right. Even so, these more carefully phrased arguments soon came under heavy attack. Especially critical was Sahlins, who had reversed his earlier views and now argued that Rappaport had adopted a style of materialism that “allows itself to ignore the distinctive quality of human action as meaningfully organized—that it may proceed to organize meaning as an instrumental mystification of natural reason” (Sahlins 1976:298; quoted in Rappaport 1984:331). In making this attack Sahlins followed a mode of proposing an all-or-none solution to the questions posed, and then demanding unconditional surrender to views that he himself had denounced not very long before.

Rappaport’s response (1984:333–334) was perhaps unexpected. He acknowledged that his earlier efforts had indeed overemphasized organic and ecological functions in the explanation of cultural phenomena. But he did not give in to Sahlins’s demand that anthropology return to the neo-Kantian view that each culture incarcerates its members in a prison-house of distinctive meanings. He argued, to the

contrary, that we should move beyond culturally specific meanings to consider in comparative terms the different kinds of understandings of the cognized world that those meanings support. He did so by developing formal models of cultural understanding and of ritual. This move carries importance for us today, because it holds the promise of getting us across the present divide between “scientists” and “poets.”

Rappaport’s move involved two strategies. One was to develop a morphology of “cognized models”; the other was to assign a key function to ritual in activating these cognitions. Consider, first, his treatment of cognition. Contrary to primarily symbolic or semiotic approaches that focus on tropes in order to define the symbolic configuration of metaphors, metonyms, synecdoches, and ironies in a culture, Rappaport proposed that cognized models exhibited a formal architecture of levels and distinctions, and he tried to show what such an architecture might look like. He did so by offering a hierarchical representation of levels and distinctions in the several orders of understandings that could be recognized in the structure of cognized models. These levels arranged and ranked different kinds of understandings or propositions according to the degree to which they were denotative, specifically referential, instrumental, and empirically testable, or, alternatively, general and lacking in specific referentiality. (This converges with Maurice Bloch’s more recent argument [1989] that cognition that is close to experience—and learned through contact with it—needs to be distinguished from ideology, discourses, and performances that resemble cognition but in fact deny it and subsume it under the aegis of untestable transcendental schemata.) Rappaport’s formal modeling of cognition has the important virtue of recognizing that symbols are not structurally and functionally alike in value and efficacy, but differ in their implications both structurally and functionally according to where they are positioned in the hierarchy of cognition.

The first such level or order of understandings, which Rappaport placed at the apex of his hierarchical edifice, consisted of “ultimate sacred propositions”—in the Maring case, conceptual understandings concerning ancestral spirits. These understandings are conveyed in metaphors of the utmost generality that are at the same time low in specific and instrumental information about the world. They convey or suggest meaning; yet these meanings are not referential but ultimately signify only themselves (see 1979: 156). Because they are general and nonreferential they are “cryptic,” ambiguous, or even “without sense” (p. 156). Yet, Rappaport argues, “the very qualities of such propositions that lead positivists to take them to be without sense, or even nonsensical, are those that make them adaptively valid” (p. 156). Since they are full of meaning but “without sense,” they can “sanctify, which is to say certify, the entire system of understandings in accordance with which people conduct their lives” (p. 119). In consequence, Rappaport

can entertain the idea that “the unfalsifiable . . . yields the unquestionable, which transforms the dubious, the arbitrary, and the conventional into the correct, the necessary, and the natural” (p. 217). Contrary to many critics, this perspective insists that “the map is not the territory,” and the cognized model is not isomorphic with operational “reality.” Culturally cognized models may be adaptive or humanly constructive (the two are not isomorphic), but they can also be or become grossly nonadaptive as well as humanly destructive. We are not in Dr. Pangloss’s garden.

A second level or order of understandings comprised cosmological axioms, “assumptions concerning the fundamental structure of the universe or, to put it differently, to refer to the paradigmatic relationships in accordance to which the cosmos is constructed” (p. 118). In the Maring case such cosmological axioms connected classes of spirits with qualities of the physical and social world, and with modes of action in the world they inform. They differ from ultimate sacred postulates. These are “not fully of this moral world” and can thus remain unchanged in the face of change. Cosmological axioms can and do change in response to external changes in environment or historical circumstances.

A third level in the hierarchical ordering of understandings consists of the “specific rules . . . governing the conduct of relations among the persons, qualities, conditions, and states of affairs whose oppositions are decreed by cosmological axioms” (pp. 119–120). These rules are expressed both in ritual and in the transactions of everyday life, and “transform cosmology into conduct” (p. 120). The understandings surrounding these rules are even more flexible than those surrounding cosmological axioms and can change without challenging the axioms themselves.

A fourth level of understandings deals primarily with digital information, the receipt and distribution of indications of material and social conditions issuing from the immediate everyday world. Finally, a fifth and highly complex level of understandings orders secular knowledge about the everyday world. This fifth level largely deals with the kind of categories of knowledge that interested the componential analysts in the fifties and early sixties.

Developing formal models of orders of understandings in culturally cognized worlds represents one strategy of Rappaport’s argumentation. He then connected this to a second line of argument, this time grounded in the proposition that ritual has a special role to play in that ordering. Rereading Rappaport’s work on ritual made me aware, as I had not been before, of the similarity between his type of argument and that adopted earlier by Marcel Mauss in *The Gift*. Mauss was quite cognizant that the transactions of reciprocity in gifting were embedded in other activities and institutions; thus, he was one of the few writers who recognized that the potlatches of the Northwest Coast were not merely competitive giveaways but were embedded in “total institutions”—in that case, transactions with the dead,

transfers of "soul-stuff" between groups, claims to legitimate descent and succession, and modes of warfare. In Rappaport's words, "Maring liturgical order, and liturgical orders generally, seem far richer in understanding and meaning than social, political, or ecological regulation obviously requires" (p. 116). Yet both Mauss and Rappaport deem it appropriate and rewarding to abstract formal structures from the wider plexus of elements and relations. Mauss's focus was the structure of reciprocity and its effects exhibited in the gift, while Rappaport sought to delineate the regulatory effects of "the structure of ritual" (pp. 174–175).

The Rappaportian model of ritual is a logical construct: "there is at the heart of ritual a relationship that has certain logically necessary entailments. Certain meanings and effects are intrinsic to the very structure of ritual, and ritual thus may impose, or seem to impose . . . logical necessity upon the vagrant affairs of the world" (p. 173). His portrayal of the role of ritual is not intended to be "final-causal"—that is, to locate cause in the functional contributions made by particular elements to the operation of specific systems. It is, rather, "formal-causal" (see discussion in Rappaport 1984:357–361). He defines ritual "as the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers" (Rappaport 1979:175), then strives to exhibit how its various features are bound together through logically intrinsic enchainment into "a concatenation" (1979:175).

To summarize briefly, albeit much too simply, ritual is formal—stylized, repetitive, stereotyped, "earnest" (p. 177)—even when it traffics in humor and banter. It is notably resistant to variation; its formality is taken to be a measure of the efficacy imputed to it. The messages conveyed by ritual combine both "indexical" information about the participants and their conditions in the here and now and "canonical" messages about "the enduring aspects of nature, society, or cosmos" (p. 182) that are encoded in the seemingly invariant aspects of the ritual order. When people take part in ritual performance, bodily and vocally, they signal indexically that they assent to the authority relations stipulated by the ritual and bow to the canonical messages about the enduring order in which humans should find their place. The performance itself represents that order and reminds the participants of it, but it does more than that: it creates or re-creates the social and moral contract laid down by that order. Because that order is its own ultimate signified, finally, its canonical invocation in ritual tends to emphasize its overarching, transcendent "wholeness" rather than segmental interests and concerns. That transcendent wholeness, in turn, is guaranteed, legitimized, and rendered more certain by "the ultimate sacred postulates." These may be neither verifiable nor falsifiable but conveyed to the ritual actors through the words attributed to gods or ancestors.

Rappaport's understanding of the causal effects of this structure as "formal-causal" (1984:357–361) resembles Louis Althusser's arguments (Althusser and Balibar 1970: 186–187) for a "structural causality." Althusser defined this mode of causality as the effects of a combination, structure, or "concatenation" of multiple features, which in concert render possible or probable some kinds of action while limiting or inhibiting others. Such a notion differs sharply from Cartesian concepts of linear causality of determinate cause and determinate effect, and differs as well from German idealist and neoidealist notions of causality where inner spiritual driving forces produce expressive effects. A formal structural-causal concept of this type could be specifically helpful in dealing with the complexities of anthropological subject matter by allowing us to visualize how multiple interacting causes can generate a field of potential consequences and relationships. It is entirely appropriate to be interested in particular elements and particular systems, including symbolic elements and systems of meaning, logically or dialogically established. But there is also a real need for an etic strategy that can analytically identify theoretically interesting and productive formal "structures," whether these be structures of energetic exchanges, reciprocal relations, kinship, ritual, or myth. Indeed, without such analysis, who needs anthropology? Rappaport's thinking has greatly contributed to that project.

Yet a fundamental issue is posed by the notion of "ultimate sacred postulates," which Rappaport left unresolved. Rappaport tells us that these postulates are "deeper than logic and beyond logic's reach . . . devoid of material terms . . . eternal verities" (1979:119). Their main role is to frame cognition, without, however, committing themselves to any particular arrangement of axioms, rules, and categories. "Being devoid of explicit social content they can sanctify everything, including change, while remaining irrevocably committed to nothing" (p. 119). Rappaport's contribution in this regard is his multilevel, multitiered understanding of "cognized models," his comprehension that not all the understandings making up those models carry equivalent semiotic value.

In this there is an apparent paradox and a concomitant difficulty. These ultimate propositions do not present themselves unproblematically either to the anthropologist or to the people in question. As fieldworkers and analysts we construct them out of our protocols on participant-observation and reports; we abstract them from the hubbub of the life that surrounds us in the field. But forming part of that life they are also implicated in it and in its web of cultural knowledge and communication, which includes liturgies. Clearly, the ultimate propositions may endure over very long spans of time, even as their functional connections to the rest of life changes. In Mesoamerica, for example, we see the persistence of sacred paradigms of space and time in the shaping of Mesoamericanist calendars,

even as these calendars are variously deployed to different political ends. In the Europe of the Middle Ages and thereafter, as the French historian Georges Duby has demonstrated (1980), the same medieval tripartition of society into warriors, priests, and cultivators was variously conjugated over the centuries to answer to changing economic and political interests.

Yet I am not persuaded by Marshall Sahlins's lecture on "the native anthropology of Western cosmology" (1996), in which he traces the "ultimate sacred postulates" of the neoliberal free market all the way back to the biblical story of Adam's sin and fall. For Sahlins, the cosmological structure he there identifies owes the enduring continuity of its effects entirely to the force of its formal structural properties. He accords no significance to the relations of power that operated to keep the Augustinian version of the structural paradigm in place, and dismisses as irrelevant to an account of this continuity the millennial power contests over which religious regime would prevail in Christendom (see Bargatzky 1996). Sahlins thus does not consider the possibility that the ultimate sacred proposition about human sinfulness may so long endure because it legitimates oppression by tyrants carried out in the name of upholding virtue and curtailing sin.

I find it unlikely that such ultimate sacred propositions endure through the ages only by dint of their logical integration and aesthetic elegance. Logics and aesthetics are certainly at work in shaping cognized models, but I question whether their imputed sacredness can persist over the centuries without involvement in the workings of power. Sacred propositions are subject to surveillance and censorship, or to promotion and sponsorship by the administrators of power and knowledge who command the "discursive procedures, apparatuses, and institutional arrangements that regulate the 'practice of that knowledge'" (Lindstrom 1990:15). Such grids of power function even in societies characterized by little economic differentiation that yet produce elites of influentials chosen on metaphysical/moral grounds. Thus, Raymond Kelly (1993) shows how the Etoro of southwestern Papua New Guinea select an elite of spirit-mediums on the basis of cultural criteria that accord with Etoro ultimate sacred postulates; in achieving that status, the elite personages are put in a position to sustain the very criteria that underwrote their range of influence in the first place.

At the same time, there is no guarantee that such an elite will forever replicate the same discourses and performances. Fredrik Barth (1987) demonstrates how leaders of initiation rituals among the different local groups of the Mountain Ok of New Guinea produce subtraditional variability in performance and discourse within an overarching framework of historically related ideas and symbols. Barth

characterizes these ritual impresarios as the "Renaissance giants of their society, masters of nearly the totality of their group's culture and controllers of all its sacred lore" (p. 73).

Continuing differentiation of a society into multiple occupational groups and classes is likely to expand the repertoire of cognized models even further, sometimes—though by no means always—with transformative results. At that point the nonadaptive "idolatries," "usurpations," and "oversanctifications" excoriated by Rappaport may work to inhibit change, not because they are morally wrong but because "speaking truth to power" will inevitably gore somebody's ox. This is why a holistic ecology such as Rappaport advocated must become political ecology as well as historical ecology, and indeed must be both at once.

References Cited

- Althusser, Louis, and Etienne Balibar
1970 *Reading Capital*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Bargatzky, Thomas
1996 Comment. *Current Anthropology* 17:416–417.
- Barth, Fredrik
1987 *Cosmologies in the Making: A Generative Approach to Cultural Variation in Inner New Guinea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bloch, Maurice
1989 *From Cognition to Ideology. In Ritual, History and Power: Selected Papers in Anthropology*. Pp. 106–136. London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone Press.
- Duby, Georges
1980 *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kelly, Raymond C.
1993 *Constructing Inequality: The Fabrication of a Hierarchy of Virtue among the Etoro*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Lindstrom, Lamont
1990 *Knowledge and Power in a South Pacific Society*. Washington, DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Mauss, Marcel
1954 *The Gift*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Rappaport, Roy A.
1979 *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion*. Richmond, CA: North Atlantic Books.
1984 *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People*. New, enlarged edition. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sahlins, Marshall
1976 Comment on A. H. Berger, "Structural and Eclectic Revisions of Marxist Strategy: A Cultural Materialist Critique." *Current Anthropology* 17:298–300.
1996 *The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology*. *Current Anthropology* 17:395–415.