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An Introductory Exposition of Symbolic Anthropology

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Abstract: ***The term 'symbol' is extensively used in the space of academics as well as in our everydayness. Symbol is a cultural and/or mental construct that stands for 'something else'. Anthropology as a discourse exercises symbols from multiple theoretical perspectives since its inception as a separate field within anthropology in the late 19s and early 20th century in the logo of 'Symbolic Anthropology' that aimed to explore how and what social matrix and experiences of livelihood were represented in ritual events, construct meaning to those experiences and instigates an orientation to the meaningful social interaction and communication. Through this article, the authors are interested to portray the very basics about symbolic anthropology and the associated dimensions per se.***
Keywords: Symbol, Theory, Anthropology, Social Action, Culture, Discourse

I. THE NOTE

Let us start with the so called definitions of the term-'symbol' i.e. is generally not universal in nature with its changing nature through time; Turner (1975) suggested the properties of symbols – multivocality, complexity of association, ambiguity, open-endedness, primacy of feeling, and a propensity to ramify into further semantic systems – as connected with their dynamic quality…. Symbols can trigger social action and can give personal action form in the public arena….."we master the world through signs, ourselves by symbols". Contrastingly, Peacock (1984) explained symbolic anthropology as- Symbolic anthropology focuses on the interpretation of symbols or symbolic aspects of existence. A working notion of "symbol" and "symbolic" is this: forms or actions whose primary and immediate function, in the context in question, is to express a configuration of consciousness.

It is very difficult to explain and describe the objectives of symbolic anthropology, as the centre of this sub-field of anthropology is 'symbol' that is defined in multiple ways in anthropological, sociological and other literature discourses. Some of the researchers conceptualize symbol as a very materialistic ways-like-image, rituals, festivals, games, in cultural terms and the others grasped it as more psychological, like-dreams and fantasies; for an example Turner (1967) define symbol as- Symbols can be objects, activities, words, relationships, events, gestures, or spatial units.

Though irrespective of the controversies, a 'generalize' and 'materialistic' objectives and functions of symbolic anthropology was promoted by Colby et al. (1981) that are as follows-

A. Focus on surround or associated context as well as on content.
B. Chief goal: interpretation of the significance and structure of the text (or ritual description), i.e., hermeneutics.
C. Focus on inter-domain (metaphoric) linkages within the text, ritual or genre, or cultural system.
D. Interest in ritual and performative sequences and their expressive and emotive consequences.
E. Literary and rhetorical idioms emphasizing condensation and polysemy of meaning.
F. Emphasis on broad eidological structures and on the expression of ethos within them.

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In a very oversimplified sense symbolic anthropology explores the process of symbolization on any aspects of culture in which individual subjects and/or groups assign meaning to address the fundamental enquiries of human living in the materialistic and virtual space of interpretation of events.

There are a countless controversies regarding the orientation of 'symbolism' in anthropological platform. We are trying to reflect a very brief note on the same. Rui]ter (1982) pointed out Levi Strauss opinion to symbolic anthropology i.e. to the development of symbolic anthropology has been fundamental. From the very start he described culture as a system of codes by means of which man communicates. All human forms of social activity - it does not matter which: kinship, classification, mythology, food, art or fashion - are codes or systems of codes in a formal sense.

Further, Spencer (2002) stated that- symbolic anthropology departed from Lévi-Strauss in two important ways. One was a resistance to scientistic methodology, most clearly articulated in Geertz's post-1970 writings. The other was an emphasis on cultural particularism, which had deep roots in American anthropology from the time of Boas, and his successors like Ruth Benedict, but which was at odds with Levi-Strauss's concern with the panhuman roots of specific symbolic structures. If symbolic anthropology is conceptualized as a separate school of thought, then the credit goes to American anthropologists, especially Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner and David Schneider. The materialist views of analyzing the cultures reflects on 'material phenomena' is a major critical point of symbolic anthropology; rather McGee and Warms (2012) promoted that culture is a mental phenomena and thus cannot be 'molded like mathematics or logic'. In this context, Geertz, (1973) was of opinion that- sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world view – the picture they have of the way things in actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order.

Asad (1993) differs from Geertz by saying that-It was not mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth, but power that created the conditions for experiencing that truth. Particular discourses and practices were to be systematically excluded, forbidden, denounced – made as much as possibly unthinkable; others were to be included, allowed, praised, and drawn into the narrative of sacred truth.

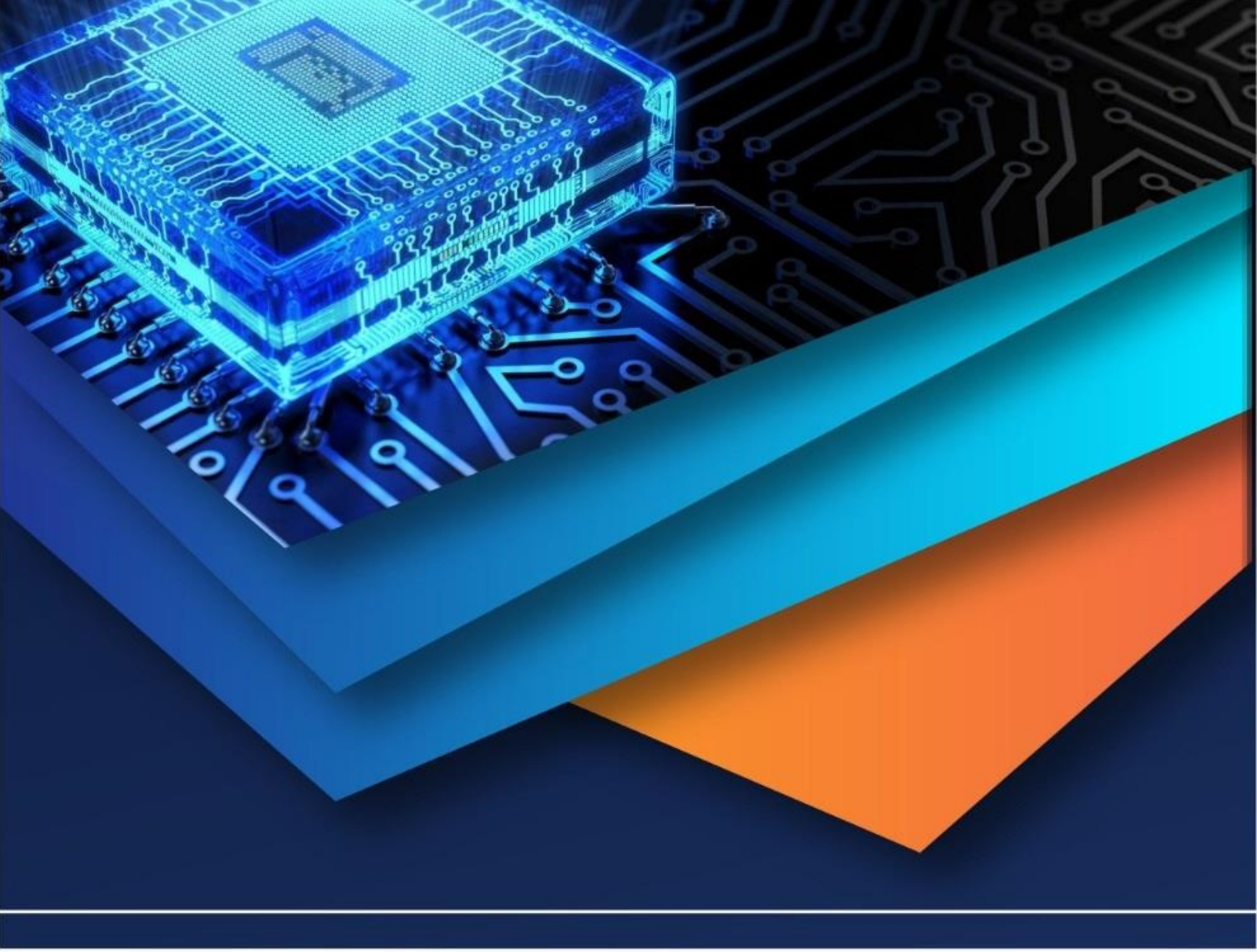
At this juncture the differences between the interpretation of symbol, meaning and practices raise the question of how to develop a critical examination of the 'modernity' of meaningful symbolic systems within the discourse of anthropology. Pierre Bourdieu (1971) bridges to conceptualize religion and its symbolic practices as-'field' to clarify the dynamics of power relations and practices in every symbolic field and the issues concerned concreted his theory of 'habitus'.

Thus came, we are in views that the dimensions of symbolic anthropology is a prolonged historicity and no single theory can sum up the basic objectives of that subfield. The issues of holism, microscopic ethnographic research practices, and intervention of manifold subjective discourses are needed not to bound symbolic anthropology as a separate sub-field of anthropology; rather to open an alternative and open scope on event-wise theoretical interpretations.

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