

M. Douglas, *Natural Symbols* 1970

be prosecuted for indecency. This range of personal experience can build up a demand for more and more formal symbols of distance and power where a crescendo is held appropriate – and vice versa a diminuendo in symbols of formality on other occasions. The need and ability to switch from the one set of symbols to its contrary is often discussed in terms of reversals. But here I am concerned not with reversal, but with the possibility of a fading out of control, a general défile, and its symbolic expression.

So far we have given two rules: one, the style appropriate to a message will co-ordinate all the channels; two, the scope of the body acting as a medium is restricted by the demands of the social system to be expressed. As this last implies, a third is that strong social control demands strong bodily control. A fourth is that along the dimension from weak to strong pressure the social system seeks progressively to disembodify or etherealize the forms of expression; this can be called the purity rule. The last two work together, so I shall deal briefly with purity first, before illustrating how they dictate the bodily media of expression.

1 Social intercourse requires that unintended or irrelevant organic processes should be screened out. It equips itself therefore with criteria of relevance and these constitute the universal purity rule. The more complex the system of classification and the stronger the pressure to maintain it, the more social intercourse pretends to take place between disembodied spirits. Socialization teaches the child to bring organic processes under control. Of these, the most irrelevant and unwanted are the casting-off of waste products. Therefore all such physical events, defecation, urination, vomiting, and their products, uniformly carry a pejorative sign for formal discourse. The sign is therefore available universally to interrupt such discourse if desired, as the editor of the revolutionary journal mentioned above knew. Other physiological processes must be controlled if they are not part of the discourse, sneezes, sniffs or coughs. If not controlled, formal framing-off procedures enable them to be shorn of their natural meaning and allow the discourse to go on uninterrupted. Lastly, and derived from the purity rule, are two physical dimensions for expressing social distance: one is the front-back dimension, the other the spatial. Front is more dignified and respect-worthy than back. Greater space means more formality, nearness means intimacy. By these rules an ordered pattern is found in the apparently chaotic variation between diverse cultures. The physical body is a microcosm of

society, facing the centre of power, contracting and expanding its claims in direct accordance with the increase and relaxation of social pressures. Its members, now riveted into attention, now abandoned to their private devices, represent the members of society and their obligations to the whole. At the same time, the physical body, by the purity rule, is polarized conceptually against the social body. Its requirements are not only subordinated, they are contrasted with social requirements. The distance between the two bodies is the range of pressure and classification in the society. A complex social system devises for itself ways of behaving that suggest that human intercourse is disembodied compared with that of animal creation. It uses different degrees of disembodiment to express the social hierarchy. The more refinement, the less smacking of the lips when eating, the less mastication, the less the sound of breathing and walking, the more carefully modulated the laughter, the more controlled the signs of anger, the clearer comes the priestly-aristocratic image. Since food takes a different place in different cultures this general rule is more difficult to see at work in table manners than in habits of dress and grooming.

The contrast of smooth with shaggy is a member of the general set of symbolic contrasts expressing formal/informal. Shaggy hair, as a form of protest against resented forms of social control, is a current symbol in our own day. There is no lack of pop-sociology pointing a moral which is fully compatible with my general thesis. Take the general run of stockbrokers or academics; stratify the professional sample by age; be careful to distinguish length of hair from unkempt hair; relate the incidence of shagginess in hair to sartorial indiscipline. Make an assessment under the division smooth/shaggy of other choices, preferred beverages, preferred meeting-places and so on. The prediction is that where the choices for the shaggy option cluster, there is least commitment to the norms of the profession. Or compare the professions and trades one against another. Those which are aiming at the centre top, public relations, or hair dressing, and those which have long been fully committed to the main morality, chartered accountants and the law, they are predictably against the shaggy option and for the smooth drink, hair style, or restaurant. Art and academia are potentially professions of comment and criticism on society: they display a carefully modulated shagginess according to the responsibilities they carry. But how shaggy can they get? What are the limits of shagginess and bodily abandon?

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It seems that the freedom to be completely relaxed must be culturally controlled. What do we make, therefore, of the fact that most revivalist movements go, in an early phase, through what Durkheim called 'effervescence'? Emotions run high, formalism of all kinds is denounced, the favoured patterns of religious worship include trance or glossalalia, trembling, shaking or other expressions of incoherence and dissociation. Doctrinal differentiation is deplored. The movement is seen to be universal in potential membership. Generally the stage of effervescence gives way to various forms of sectarianism or to the growth of a religious denomination. But it is not true that effervescence must either be routinized or fizzle out. It is possible for it to be sustained indefinitely as the normal form of worship. The only requirement is that the level of social organization be sufficiently low and the pattern of roles sufficiently unstructured. We do not have to look for strain, change, deprivation or tension to account for effervescent religious forms. They can be found in steady state religions. Talcott Parsons's definition of the contrast of structured and unstructured helps to identify those tribes which celebrate social solidarity by the greatest abandonment of conscious control.

In a highly structured situation there are a minimum of possible responses other than the ones required by the norms of the situation; adaptation is carefully defined; and usually the situation is not very confusing psychologically.

(Parsons and Smelser, 1956: 236)

The less highly structured, the more the value on informality, the more the tendency to abandon reason and to follow panics or crazes, and the more the permitted scope for bodily expressions of abandonment. We can summarize the general social requirements for ritualism on the one hand and effervescence on the other:

SOCIAL DIMENSION	
A. <i>Conditions for Ritualism</i>	SYMBOLIC ORDER
(i) high classification, strong control	condensed symbolic system; ritual differentiation of roles and situations magical efficacy attributed to symbolic acts (e.g. sin and sacraments)
(ii) assumption that inter-personal relations must be subordinate to public pattern of roles	symbolic distinctions between inside and outside

(iii) society differentiated and exalted above self	symbols express high values set on control of consciousness
B. <i>Conditions for Effervescence</i>	
(i) weak control by grid and group	diffuse symbols; preference for spontaneous expression; no interest in ritual differentiation; no magicality
(ii) little distinction recognized between interpersonal and public patterns of relations	no interest in symbolic expressions of inside/outside
(iii) society not differentiated from self	control of consciousness not exalted

The second case provides the social conditions for a religion of ecstasy as distinct from a religion of control. Ethnographic reading suggests that the attitude to consciousness is not merely neutral, as I have written it here, but that there is a positive affirmation of the high value of consciousness whenever the corresponding social structure demands control of individual behaviour. So we tend to find trance-like states feared as dangerous where the social dimension is strongly controlled. According to my general hypothesis, the inarticulateness of the social organization in itself gains symbolic expression in bodily dissociation. The religious cult of France is material especially suitable to the present thesis. When it occurs at all, the reporting tends to use very vivid language, the ethnographer trying to convey something of ecstasy or fear. The general atmosphere and mood are on record. It is usually quite clear, when France takes place, what the onlookers think about it. Among the Samburu trance occurs regularly, but is not part of religion, no beliefs are connected with it (Spencer, 1965: 263). Among Nuer, it is held to be dangerous; among Dinka it is held beneficial. Trance is a good point on which to test my hypothesis. The prediction is that, as France is a form of dissociation, it will be more approved and welcomed the weaker the structuring of society.

Raymond Firth has distinguished three kinds of trance states. To his classification I will add a fourth class. His series runs from minimum to maximum control by the human group of an invading spirit. First, there is spirit possession in which a human passively loses control to the spirit. The latter is in power. The friends of the possessed person try to pacify it and send it away. Then there is

1 negative - and away
2 combining - spirit medium
to get information

spirit mediumship, in which the invading spirit speaks through the possessed person, and the group tries to get occult information and power from it. Third is shamanism. Here the spirit is to a large extent domesticated and made to do the will of the human host (Firth, 1967: 296). Significantly, perhaps, an entirely distinct category of trance has been omitted. It may happen that the human person loses consciousness, but the state is not regarded as undesirable or dangerous: the onlookers may make no attempt to control and try to use, not to change the state, pacify or send away the invading influence. They assume that it is a channel of benign power for all. This is the positive cult of trance as such. I would only expect it to take place in the main morality cult where social life comes closer to the zero. Let me give two vividly described examples which are worth quoting.

The Western Dinka pay cult to the divinity, Flesh, which manifests itself in a red light. A hymn begins: The Flesh kindles like fire. Yet Flesh confers judgement and truth, it shows itself in a cool heart, peacefulness, harmony and order. Godfrey Lienhardt describes a sacrifice thus:

As the invocations proceeded, the legs of some of the masters of the fishing-spear began to tremble, a trembling which came from the quivering of the upper leg and thigh. This, it was said, was the divinity Flesh, which was beginning to awaken (*pac*) in their bodies.

The divinity Flesh was specially manifested in this quivering of the legs and thighs, which sometimes spreads further to the whole body. The masters of the fishing-spear continued to invoke with the mounting force of Flesh in them. They did not become 'hysterically' possessed, as do those who are possessed by free-divinities. Two young men, members of these spear-master clans though not themselves masters of the fishing-spear, then also began to show signs of the 'awakening' of Flesh in them. They were much less controlled, and their arms and legs were soon trembling violently. One was sitting, one standing, and both gazed blankly before them with their eyes open and turned slightly upwards. It was possible to go up to them and stare closely into their faces without either registering that he saw anything.

Nobody at this stage paid much attention to them; it was said that when thus possessed by Flesh in the homestead, they were

safe, and that if the condition persisted for too long the women would put an end to it by venerating the divinity Flesh in their bodies, giving those possessed by it their bangles, and kissing their hands. Later, women did kiss the hands of these possessed men, but bangles were not offered.

As the invocations increased in speed and intensity an older man became overpowered by the divinity Flesh, and staggered about among the invoking masters of the fishing-spear, slapping and leaning on the bull-calf and jostling people. His behaviour was that of a man who is very giddy. At this stage visiting masters of the fishing-spear were in turn pouring libations of milk from a ring-decorated gourd over the peg to which the calf was tethered. Each made his libation, kissing his own hands before and after handling the gourd of the Flesh, the gourd reserved for libations to this divinity. When one master of the fishing-spear returned from this act of veneration, he told me that his own Flesh was 'waking up', though he behaved with self-control for the rest of the ceremony.

The mounting or awakening of the divinity Flesh in the body seems to be a well-known sensation to all adult male members of spear-master clans. Females do not have it. A Christian Dinka of the Pakwin clan told me that he dared not draw near when a beast was being sacrificed to his clan-divinity, as the awakening of the Flesh in him brought on a sensation of faintness, which might result in his falling unconscious.

(Lienhardt, 1961: 136-8)

The veneration of the divinity Flesh in the bodies of those who manifest it, at least from the ethnographer's viewpoint, is the most solemn religious act of these people.

Here is an account of a possession cult in which the invading spirit is not feared, not pacified or driven off, not made use of as an oracle, nor for healing specific sickness. The visitation of the spirit is respectfully venerated, the presence is sought for its own sake, for an unmediated form of communion between a god and his worshippers.

But what can I say of the social structure of the Western Dinka which would relate their cult of trance to my argument? Nothing but a close examination of grid and group as they apply to these Dinka, and to other Dinka and to other Nilotes in their region, will be relevant. It should turn out that these Dinka are less closely

controlled by social constraints than other peoples sharing the same cultural postulates but differing in their attitude to trance. This I will broach in the next chapter.

After this, it is easy to recognize a rather more ambivalent attitude to trance. According to Lorna Marshall the !Kung Bushmen of the Nyae-Nyae region of the Kalahari desert consider total unconsciousness as dangerous, but intermediate stages of semi-conscious trance they hold to be the proper means of procuring health and blessing. Their ceremonial curing dance is the one religious act which has form and in which the people are united. Its purpose is general: to cure sickness and drive away evil. The men wear rattles, the women clap loudly and sharply.

The clapping and stamping are of such precision that they give the effect of a well-played battery of percussion instruments producing a solid structure of intricate rhythm. Above the percussion sounds, the voices of the men and women weave together in parts, singing the 'medicine songs'... After several dances have been danced the medicine men begin to cure. Almost all the !Kung men are medicine men. They do not all choose to practise, for one reason or another, but there are always several in a band who are active. Medicine men receive no rewards other than their inner satisfactions and emotional release. I know that some of them feel a deep responsibility for the welfare of their people and great anxiety and concern if their curing fails, and a corresponding satisfaction if it prevails. Others of them appear to be less concerned about the people whom they try to cure and more inwardly turned. When the medicine men are curing, all of them experience varying degrees of self-induced trance, which includes a period of frenzy and a period of semi-consciousness or deep unconsciousness. They may become stiff or froth at the mouth or lie still as if in coma. Some of them habitually remain in trance for only a short time, others for hours. One man used to remain in a semi-trance for most of the day following a dance... After the curing has been going on for some time, medicine men begin to reach their state of frenzy. They no longer go around to the people, their spasms of grunting and shrieking become more frequent and violent, their stomachs heave, they stagger and sway. They rush to the fire, trample it, pick up the coals, set fire to their hair. Fire activates the medicine in them. People hold them to keep them

from falling and beat out the flames... they may fall into deep unconsciousness or sink down semi-conscious, eyes closed, unable to walk.

The medicine men who have not reached their full frenzy or who have passed through it attend to those who are in it. The !Kung believe that at such a time the medicine man's spirit leaves his body and goes out... They call this 'half-death'. It is a dangerous time and the man's body must be watched over and kept warm. The medicine men lean over the one who is in trance. They shriek and gurgle. They blow in his ears to open them. They take sweat from their armpits and rub him. Some fall over him in trance themselves and are in turn rubbed and cared for by the others. The women must sing and clap ardently while the man is in deep trance. He needs the good medicine of the music to protect him.

The curing dance draws people of a Bushman band together into concerted action as nothing else does. They stamp and clap and sing with such precision that they become like an organic being. In this close configuration – together – they face the gods. They do not plead, as they do in their individual supplications, for the favour of the divine, all-powerful beings, and do not praise them for their goodness. Instead, the medicine men, on behalf of the people, releasing themselves from ordinary behaviour by trance and overcoming fear and inaction, throw themselves into combat with the gods and try to force them with hurled sticks and hurled words to take away the evils they might be bringing.

(Marshall, 1962: 248–51)

Here, though trance is courted and held to be benign in effect, it is not regarded as altogether safe. Several new intensive studies of other Bushmen bands are now being made. These may give an opportunity for the comparisons within a given social environment which I am hoping will test my thesis. I would ask for study of the positive cult of trance among different Bushmen groups to work out detailed variations along the lines of social control by gird and group. As to the cult of trance itself, I would ask about the way the roles are distributed: whether it is practised by all, by all males or by all females, by specialists chosen by birth or by trained and initiated specialists. About the trance state, I would be interested in attitudes to varying degrees of bodily control and abandonment.

their danger, whether to the person in trance or to others. About the beneficent powers attributed to trance, I would ask how general or how specific they are held to be. I would expect more highly specialized trance roles, more sense of danger in trance, more specific, narrowly defined benefits attributed to trance where social control by grid and group is more intense. Referring back to the diagram of the last chapter, shifts towards zero should allow the body a fuller range of expression for a smaller range of intentions. Its full abandon is made available in this direction.

Where trance is not regarded as at all dangerous, but as a benign source of power and guidance for the community at large, I would expect to find a very loosely structured community, group boundaries unimportant, social categories undefined, or distant control but impersonal rules strong. Take for example Calley's (1965) account of West Indian sects in London. The rule of limiting the comparison to persons interacting in the same social field would certainly allow me to compare their bodily techniques of expression with Pentecostals in Trinidad or Jamaica where they share a cultural tradition. But I should also be able to compare them with the transport workers and others with whom they interact, at work or in pubs and labour exchanges in London. Calley finds that the theory of compensation for poverty and distress does not explain the religious behaviour of West Indians, who were materially richer in London than at home. But his account of these London Pentecostal churches gives a clear picture of the fluid, ever-shifting social units to which individuals were so loosely attached. A founding minister of a new Church had a hard task to maintain a stable congregation. Rivalries easily led to a splitting into two or more groups. The temporary tenure of their meeting-places (ibid.: 107) corresponded to the temporary tie of individuals with their work (ibid.: 140). Calley implicitly makes the comparison with the tendencies to fission and fusion in primitive society. But I shall simply compare their state of social flux with the steady allegiances of the Londoners among whom they lived. For the Pentecostals, as the name implies, the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of tongues, which gives insight, foresight and healing. But, paradoxically, the gift of tongues is recognized by totally inarticulate gabbling of Alleluias. The more he is inarticulate the more proof that the speaker is unconscious and not in control of what is being imparted to him. Inarticulateness is taken as evidence of divine inspiration. So also are 'dancing in

the Spirit', involuntary twirling and prancing, and involuntary twitching and shuddering taken to be a sign of blessing (ibid.: 80-1).

I imagine the English in this same environment spend their Sunday mornings polishing their cars, or neatly trimming their lawns and window boxes, or correctly repeating the Lord's Prayer in unison. Compared with these English, these West Indians are weakly structured in several senses. Their groups are ill-defined: they have no common provenance from a single country of origin, no common organization, amongst themselves their social categories are weakly formed, their allegiance to local groupings undetermined; in relation to the other inhabitants of their London environment they have few close or permanent contacts with the representatives of power and authority. There are few West Indian school teachers, policemen, social workers. By contrast the non-West Indians with whom they come into more than casual contact are more clearly categorized and have more permanent attachments to jobs and homes, and often a more secure relation with the sources of control. On my thesis, it is expected that the London West Indians should favour symbolic forms of inarticulateness and bodily dissociation more than the Londoners with whom they interact. Their religion is not a compensation, but a fair representation of the social reality they experience. If this general correlation between social and bodily forms of control is to be a useful insight, it must be made clear that it does not predict anything about the occurrence of physiologically defined trance states. It is a prediction about attitudes to bodily dissociation and whereas the attitudes can be assessed by the ethnographer, the degree of bodily dissociation has to be taken in the first instance as a construct of the local culture. It would be inconsistent with the whole argument about the culturally conditional experience of the body if we seemed to be asserting something absolute about the place of trance in religion. What I am saying is that the full possibilities of abandoning conscious control are only available to the extent that the social system relaxes its control on the individual. This has many implications for the deprivation approach to religious behaviour. For religious movements which take this form are expressing social solidarity without differentiation: the question of whether this state occurs as a result of deprivation must be considered separately in each instance.

We can add this case to other ranges of symbolic behaviour in which a tendency to replicate the social situation is observed.

Van Genneep (1960) first discerned the common form in all ceremonies of transition. Where the transfer from one social status to another is to be expressed he noted how material symbols of transition were inevitably used and also how the rite itself takes the form of preliminary separation from and re-integration into the community. As this applies across cultural boundaries it is a natural symbolic form. At a more profound level, the social experience of disorder is expressed by powerfully efficacious symbols of impurity and danger. Recently I have argued that the joke is another such natural symbol (Douglas, 1968c). Whenever in the social situation, dominance is liable to be subverted, the joke is the natural and necessary expression, since the structure of the joke parallels the structure of the situation. In the same sense, I here argue that a social structure which requires a high degree of conscious control will find its style at a high level of formality, stern application of the purity rule, denigration of organic process and wariness towards experiences in which control of consciousness is lost.

A friend, criticizing the first version of this argument, reproached me for trying to stand Freud on his head. I am indeed insisting that the social imagery which the body carries be recognized. This is not reversing or taking anything away from psychoanalytic theory but expanding the social perspective in which it is set. Psychoanalysis takes account of a very restricted social field. It makes of parents and siblings the social framework into which all subsequent relationships are slotted. The restriction gives it great theoretical elegance and power. But it is difficult to extend its categories in a controlled way to the wider experience of society. Those who have tried a macro-application of psychoanalytic theory to nations and cultures can interpret imaginatively as they will; anyone else is free to come up with a contrary diagnosis of the same events. Grid and group are offered as tools for describing in a more controllable fashion the way that social pressures reach an individual and structure his consciousness. The vertical distance between zero and the most coherent set of classifications offered by his culture is the range of sublimation possible in it. The span across the diagram from left to right represents the possibilities of frustration for those with the fewest options. A society huddled together in the right quadrant, with strong face-to-face pressure and low classification, will go on stoking the sibling jealousies of childhood. Strong group and strong grid working together will uphold the strength of

paternal authority. It should be interesting to place the classic psychoses upon the diagram. But this is a digression.

The main burden of this chapter is to take up the theme of the book's title. Natural symbols will not be found in individual lexical items. The physical body can have universal meaning only as a system which responds to the social system, expressing it as a system. What it symbolizes naturally is the relation of parts of an organism to the whole. Natural symbols can express the relation of an individual to his society at that general systemic level. The two bodies are the self and society; sometimes they are so near as to be almost merged; sometimes they are far apart. The tension between them allows the elaboration of meanings.

MQO: London: Bantam
and Rockliff, Crescent
Press